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Abstract

The purpose of this mixed method study was to examine the appropriateness of a brief, bullying bystander intervention (STAC) adapted for a middle school in a low-income, rural community with a predominantly White and Hispanic student body. We were also interested in understanding the experiences of the students who participated in the intervention. Quantitative analysis suggested that students gained knowledge about bullying, increased their confidence to intervene in bullying situations, and used the STAC strategies to intervene in bullying behavior. Analyzing the qualitative data using Consensual Qualitative Research methodology ([CQR] Hill, 2005) revealed four domains in which students a) reported using the STAC strategies across multiple contexts and settings, b) spoke about fears related to intervening in bullying, yet intervened despite those fears, c) described emotional benefits experienced after participating in the intervention and while using the STAC strategies, and d) reported stronger interpersonal relationship after participating in the STAC intervention. This study extends the literature by providing preliminary support for a brief, bystander intervention adapted to address the need for culturally relevant bullying interventions for low-income, rural, ethnically-blended schools.

Keywords: bullying, bystander intervention, STAC, cultural adaptation, middle school

Bullying is a significant problem for youth in the United States. Researchers have defined bullying as repeated, aggressive, and unwanted behavior within peer relationships, typically characterized by a significant imbalance of power between the perpetrator and target (Olweus, 1993). While national statistics suggest 21.2% of students age 12-18 report being targets of bullying at school (Center for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2018), a recent study found that less than 31% of students reported bullying incidents (Hicks, Jennings, Jennings, Berry, & Green, 2019), suggesting that prevalence rates are actually higher than national statistics may suggest. Additionally, 70% - 80% of students report witnessing bullying as bystanders (Demaray, Summers, Jenkins, & Becker, 2014; Jones, Mitchell, & Turner, 2015). Although bullying is a significant problem for youth beginning as early as pre-school and continuing through high school, bullying reaches its peak in middle school (CDC, 2018).

Negative Consequences for Students Associated with Bullying

Research suggests that students who have been a target of bullying or who have observed bullying as a bystander experience a variety of negative consequences. Students who have been targets report increased psychological problems (Copeland, Wolke, Angold, & Costello, 2013; Nielson, Tangen, Idsoe, Matthieson, & Mageroy, 2015), somatic symptoms (Van Geel, Goemans, & Vedder, 2016), and academic difficulties (Rueger & Jenkins, 2014). While the majority of researchers have focused on investigating the negative consequences of bullying for the targets, there is a growing body of literature that demonstrates students who witness bullying also report a wide range of mental health risks including internalizing problems, substance use, hostility, anxiety, and paranoid ideation (Rivers, Potat, Noret, & Ashurst, 2009). Research also indicates witnessing bullying is associated with problems such as sadness (Janson, Carney, Hazler, & Oh, 2009), helplessness (Janson et al. 2009, Rivers & Noret, 2013), isolation and guilt

(Hutchinson, 2012), depressive symptoms (Authors, 2019a), and suicidal ideation (Rivers & Noret, 2010; Rivers & Noret, 2013). Additionally, researchers have found that observing bullying as a bystander is associated with mental health symptoms, even when controlling for the effects of bullying victimization (Authors, 2019a; Rivers et al., 2009).

Bullying Among Hispanic Students and Students in Low-Income and Rural Communities

Studies suggest that students from ethnic and racial minority groups experience elevated rates of bullying with more severe outcomes than their White classmates, particularly in low-income schools that lack diversity (Agirdag, Demanet, Van, & Van, 2011; Juvonen, Nishina, & Graham, 2006; Vitoroulis & Georgiades, 2017). Further, compared to White students, Hispanic students report increased rates of physical bullying and bullying-related injuries during middle school (U.S. Department of Education, 2015). Additionally, self-reported trauma levels for students who repeatedly witness bullying as bystanders are higher among Hispanic and other minority students compared to White and African-American students (Janson et al., 2009). One explanation for these differences may be explained, in part, by Hispanic students' exposure to biased-based or race-related bullying (Walsh et al., 2016). Hispanic students who report being a target of bias-based harassment are at higher risk of negative health outcomes including depressive symptoms (Cardosa, Szlyk, Goldbach, Swank, & Zvolensky, 2018). Further, race-based bullying among low-income Hispanic students is associated with a multitude of negative outcomes including academic and social/emotional difficulties (Espinoza, Gonzales, & Fuligni, 2013), health concerns (Rosenthal et al., 2013), and substance use (Forester et al., 2013).

Hispanic students also report experiencing lower levels of safety in school communities that lack diversity or where biased-based bullying is prevalent (Vervoort, Scholte, & Overbeek, 2010). For example, in schools with a predominantly White and Hispanic student body, Hispanic students report lower levels of school safety than White students (Bradshaw, Sawyer, & O'Brennan, 2009; Voight, Hanson, O'Malley, & Adekanye, 2015). Additionally, the prevalence rates for missing school due to safety concerns are higher among Hispanic students (9.4%) compared to White students (4.9%) (CDC, 2017). Further, several studies suggest that students in rural, low-income schools experience higher rates of bullying than students in schools located in urban areas of higher socioeconomic status (Evans, Smokowski, & Cotter, 2014).

Culturally Appropriate Bullying Interventions

Because approximately 15.3% of the public schools in the US are classified as multi-ethnic with predominantly Hispanic and White students (Kena et al., 2016), research is needed to identify culturally appropriate interventions for schools with this demographic profile. Although there is empirical support for comprehensive, school-wide bullying interventions (Tofti & Farrington, 2011), these programs are often inaccessible or culturally inappropriate for schools in low-income, rural communities with diverse populations (Evans, Frazier, & Cotter, 2014). Comprehensive, school-wide programs require significant time and resources from schools (Menard, & Grotzinger, 2014; Peguero, 2012) posing barriers for implementation. Further, most studies that evaluate the efficacy of anti-bullying programs have been conducted in urban, predominantly White schools (Espinoza et al., 2013) and may not be appropriate for students in ethnically blended schools in rural areas (Evans, Frazier, & Cotter, 2014). In particular, many bullying interventions do not focus on race or ethnic-based bullying, limiting the potential impact of these programs for students who experience biased-based bullying (Espinoza et al., 2013).

Additionally, the majority of bullying interventions focus primarily on students who are targets or perpetrators, neglecting the role of the bystander (Polanin, Espelage, & Pigott, 2012). Bystander interventions, which train students to act as "defenders" (Salmivalli, Lagerspetz, Bjo"rkqvist, O'sterman, & Kaukiainen, 1996), are an important factor in reducing bullying (Polanin et al., 2012; Porter & Smith-Adcock, 2011). Researchers have found that bullying decreases when bystanders intervene on behalf of targets (Padgett & Notar, 2013; Salmivalli, Voeten, & Poskiparta, 2011; Salmivalli, 2014). Many students, however, report they lack the skills to intervene (Forsberg, Thronberg, & Samuelsson, 2014). At schools in which comprehensive, school-wide programs with a bystander component are implemented, students report a decrease in victimization and anxiety relative to students at control schools (Williford et al., 2012). These findings suggest that training students to intervene as "defenders" may decrease both victimization and the negative consequences associated with witnessing bullying.

The STAC Intervention

The STAC program is a brief, stand-alone bystander bullying intervention developed to train students to act as “defenders” on behalf of targets of bullying (for details please see Authors, 2015). STAC is an acronym that stands for four bystander intervention strategies: “stealing the show,” “turning it over,” “accompanying others,” and “coaching compassion.” The STAC program was originally developed for predominantly White middle schools in urban settings (Authors, 2015). The program includes a 90-minute training with a didactic component and experiential activities followed by two, bi-weekly, 15-minute small group booster sessions. Prior studies indicate students trained in the STAC program report increased knowledge and confidence to intervene (Authors, 2015; Authors, 2016; Authors, 2017b; Authors 2017d) and utilize the STAC strategies to intervene in bullying situations (Authors, 2017d; Authors, 2017e; Authors, 2018a; Authors, 2018b). Further, researchers have found that students trained in the program report a reduction in bullying perpetration (Authors, 2017c; Authors, 2018b) and victimization (Authors, 2018b). Additionally, results of a series of randomized controlled studies demonstrate the efficacy of the STAC intervention in improving socio-emotional functioning, including decreased depressive symptoms (Authors, 2019b), decreased anxiety (Authors, 2017d), increased self-esteem (Authors, 2017b), and increased psychological sense of school belonging (Authors, 2019b). In qualitative studies, students trained in the program have described feeling a positive sense of self (Authors, 2017a) and empowerment (Authors, 2018a) when intervening in bullying using the STAC strategies.

Cultural Adaptation of the STAC Intervention

In response to the growing need for relevant and accessible interventions in ethnically-blended, rural, low-income schools, the researchers adapted the STAC program to be culturally appropriate for this population (Authors, 2019a). The cultural adaptations to the STAC program included: a) infusion of culturally relevant language; b) inclusion of culturally relevant bullying experiences and training goals; c) examples related to culture and ethnicity; and d) training delivery consistent with cultural values and norms. Specifically, researchers used the term “defender” instead of “advocate” throughout the training, recruited ethnically diverse, and bi-lingual graduate student trainers who spoke English and Spanish. Further, trainers were encouraged to be intentional about fostering connections with and between students to promote relationship building. Trainers divided students into smaller groups than the original intervention for experiential activities to help students feel more comfortable engaging in discussions, as well as to promote rapport among students. Based on data from focus groups (Authors, 2019c, the researchers revised the didactic component of the training to include types of bullying (i.e., spreading rumors, physical bullying, and name calling) and reasons students bully (i.e., physical appearance, racist attitudes, and language) that were specific to the target school. Additionally, the researchers modified role-plays to reflect content and types of bullying students talked about experiencing. Preliminary findings support the cultural validity of the adapted STAC program, demonstrating that students perceived the adapted program to be relevant for students attending their school and that the language and examples were reflective of what they observe at their school (Authors, 2019c).

The Current Study

The purpose of this study is to extend the literature on bullying interventions for student in ethnically-blended schools in low-income, rural communities by evaluating the appropriateness of the culturally adapted STAC intervention and exploring the participants experience in the program. To achieve this aim, we used a mixed-methods research design to answer the following research questions: (a) Do students trained in the adapted STAC intervention report an increase in knowledge and confidence to intervene as “defenders?” (b) Do students trained in the culturally adapted STAC intervention use the STAC strategies when they observe bullying? (c) Were there differences in outcomes between White and Hispanic students? and (d) What were students’ experiences participating in the culturally adapted STAC intervention and using the STAC strategies to intervene in bullying situations?

Methods

Mixed Research Design

Researchers used a mixed method design to collect data from students who participated in the 90-minute, culturally adapted STAC program. We measured students’ knowledge and confidence before and immediately following the training and assessed students’ use of the STAC strategies at a 6-week follow-up. We also conducted focus groups at the 6-week follow-up to understand students’ lived experiences acting as a “defender.” We chose a mixed method

design to gain a deeper understanding of students' experiences being trained in a culturally adapted intervention that would only be partially explained by quantitative or qualitative data alone (Creswell, 2013). Qualitative data enhanced and supplemented quantitative findings. We used a partially mixed, sequentially-nested design (Leech & Onwuegbuzie, 2010). We collected quantitative data using a single group repeated measures design and employed CQR (Hill et al., 2005) to analyze the qualitative data.

Participants

Researchers recruited students from one low-income, predominately White and Hispanic middle school in the northwestern United States. The school was located within a rural community with a population of approximately 11,636 residents and an economy driven by agricultural and farming industries (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). Further, 18.2% of the community's residents fell below the poverty line and approximately 70% of the school's population qualified for free or reduced lunch. Our sampling design was sequential-nested (Leech & Onwuegbuzie, 2010), with a subgroup of participants completing both the follow-up survey and the focus groups. The sample for the quantitative study ($n = 63$) included 36 females (57.1%), 26 males (41.3%), and one student who identified as other (1.6%). Participants ranged in age from 11-15 years old ($M = 12.5$, $SD = 1.0$), with reported ethnic backgrounds of White ($n = 34$, 55.4%) and Hispanic ($n = 29$, 44.6%) reflecting the school's student population. A subset ($n = 23$) of the quantitative sample was selected to participate in a qualitative focus group interview. The qualitative sample included 15 females (65.0%) and 8 males (35.0%) with reported racial backgrounds of White ($n = 15$, 65.0%) and Hispanic ($n = 8$, 35.0%).

Procedures

The current study was part of a larger study designed to develop and evaluate the culturally adapted STAC intervention (Authors, 2019c). Researchers used a stratified sampling procedure, randomly selecting 360 students by ethnicity and grade. The researchers obtained active parental consent for 140 students (38.9%) and randomly assigned 75 students to be trained in the culturally adapted STAC program. Of these 75 students, 63 (84%) participated in the 90-minute training and completed the baseline assessment and immediate post-training survey. At the 6-week follow up, 55 students (87%) completed a quantitative follow-up assessment and a subset of 23 students participated in a qualitative focus group. Two counselor education students (i.e., a doctoral and a masters student) conducted three, 45-minute, semi-structured focus groups. The researchers audio-recorded the focus groups for the purpose of transcribing the data verbatim. The team provided participants with a "pizza party" as an incentive after the 6-week follow-up. The university's institutional review board and the school district approved all study procedures.

Measures

Knowledge and Confidence to Intervene. The researchers used the Student-Advocates Pre- and Post-Scale (SAPPS; Authors, 2015) to measure students' knowledge of bullying, knowledge of the STAC strategies, and students' confidence to intervene in bullying situations. The questionnaire is comprised of 11-items rated on a 4-point Likert scale ranging from a 1 (*I totally disagree*) to a 4 (*I totally agree*). Examples of items include "I know what relationship bullying looks like," "I know how to reach out to the student being bullied," and "I feel confident in my ability to do something to do something helpful to decrease bullying at my school." All items were summed to produce a total scale score. The SAPPS has established content validity and internal consistency with Cronbach's alpha ranging from .75-.81 for middle school students (Authors, 2015; Authors, 2016; Authors 2017d). Cronbach's alpha for this sample was .78.

Use of STAC Strategies. Students rated the use of each STAC strategy using a single item. The items are rated on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (*never*) to 5 (*more than 5 times*). Students were asked, "How often would you say you have used these strategies to stop bullying in the past month?" (a) Stealing the Show; (b) Turning it Over; (c) Accompanying Others; and (d) Coaching Compassion. This scale has been used to measure use of the STAC strategies use in previous studies with elementary school (Authors, 2017b), middle school (Authors, 2017d), and high school (Authors, 2019d) students.

Participants' Experience. Researchers conducted focus groups to investigate students' lived experiences participating in the culturally adapted STAC program. The researchers used Hill et al.'s (2005) recommendations to develop a semi-structured interview protocol to answer the following question: "What were students' experiences participating in the culturally adapted STAC program and using the STAC strategies to intervene in bullying situations

in a predominantly White and Hispanic middle school located in a low-income, rural community?” The team developed the interview protocol based on a review of the literature and findings from previous studies (Authors, 2017a; Authors, 2017e; Authors, 2018a). Questions and prompts included: 1) Please share about your experience using the STAC strategies.; 2) Can you think of ways you used the strategies to intervene in situations that had to do with race-related bullying?; 3) Can you share how using the STAC strategies made you feel about yourself?; 4) How did being trained in the STAC program affect your relationships at school?; 5) Can you please talk about your fears related to using the strategies in different bullying situations?; and 6) Overall, what was it like to be trained in the STAC program and use the STAC strategies?

STAC Program

Students participated in a 90-minute training to learn to act as a “defender” in bullying situations (for details please see Authors, 2015; Authors, 2019c). Following the initial training, students participated in two, bi-weekly, 15-minute booster sessions to review the strategies, share their experiences using the strategies, and brainstorm ways to be more effective.

Didactic Component. The didactic component included ice-breaker exercises, an audiovisual presentation, and hands-on activities to engage students in the learning process. Based on participant feedback from a pilot study (Authors, 2019c), students learned about (a) reasons students bully (e.g., physical appearance related to clothes and shoes, racist attitudes, and language barriers); (b) different types of bullying; (c) characteristics of students who bully, including the likelihood they have been bullied themselves, to foster empathy; (d) negative associated consequences of being a target bullying; (e) bystander roles and the importance of acting as a “defender;” (f) perceived barriers to acting as a “defender”; and (g) the STAC strategies used for intervening in bullying situations described below.

“Stealing the show.” “Stealing the show” involves using humor to interrupt a bullying situation. “Defenders” are trained to interrupt bullying situations by telling jokes or stories, therefore, getting the attention off of the bullying situation and target.

“Turning it over.” “Turning it over” involves getting help from an adult to help intervene in bullying situations. Students are trained to “turn it over” anytime they witness physical bullying, cyberbullying, or any type of bullying they do not feel comfortable directly intervening in. During the training students identify safe, trusted adults that they can go to for help.

“Accompanying others.” “Accompanying others” involves befriending and offering support to the target of bullying. Students are taught to approach and comfort the target of bullying by asking if they need help, inviting them to spend time together, and/or communicating that the bullying they are experiencing is not acceptable.

“Coaching compassion.” “Coaching compassion” involves gently confronting the student who was bullying. Students are taught how to safely approach the student who was bullying and engage in a conversation aimed at raising awareness about the impact of bullying and developing empathy for targets of bullying. The “defender” is also taught to communicate that bullying behavior is never acceptable and encourage the student who is bullying to change their behavior.

Experiential Component. Students participated in role-plays to practice each of the four STAC strategies in small groups. Trainers provided students with scenarios based on students’ reported experiences with bullying at a low-income, rural, predominately White and Hispanic middle school (Authors, 2019c). Scenarios comprised different types of bullying (e.g., spreading rumors, physical bullying, and name calling), including ethnic and race-based bullying (e.g., use of derogatory language directed at a students’ ethnicity or race and excluding students based on ethnicity or race), and teasing based on physical appearance and perceived socioeconomic status. In small groups facilitated by masters in counseling students, participants practiced utilizing all four STAC strategies. This training component concluded with each group presenting a role-play. After each presentation, the facilitator provided students with feedback.

Data Analysis

Quantitative. The research team conducted a priori power analysis with G*Power 3.1.3 program (Faul, Erdfelder, Lang, & Buchner, 2007). For a repeated measures analysis of variance (ANOVA), results of the power analysis indicated we needed a sample size of 34 for power of ≥ 0.80 to detect a medium effect size for the main effect of time with an alpha level of .05. For a chi square, we needed a sample size of 50 and 32 students for power > 0.80 to detect a medium or large effect size, respectively, with an alpha level of .05. For an independent sample *t*-test, we needed a sample size 52 students for power > 0.80 to detect a large effect size with an alpha level of .05. Of the 55 students who completed the 6-week follow-up surveys, 42 reported witnessing bullying in the past month. The sample size met the requirement to provide adequate power for the ANOVA and chi-square analyses, but not for the independent sample *t*-tests. Thus, we dichotomized the STAC strategy frequency items into a categorical variable by classifying “never” as not using the strategy and collapsing the remaining response choices as using the strategy. Creating a dichotomous variable allowed us to analyze the adequately powered chi square analyses.

Prior to conducting statistical analyses, the researchers examined data for outliers and normality and all variables were within the normal range for skew and kurtosis. The researchers conducted a General Linear Model (GLM) ANOVA to test for significant changes in knowledge and confidence across time and by ethnicity. The two fixed effects were Time (baseline; follow-up) and Group (White; Hispanic). To evaluate the reported witnessing bullying and reported use of the STAC strategies, we computed descriptive statistics to examine these variables at the follow-up assessment. We then conducted a series of chi square analyses to determine differences in witnessing bullying and reported use of strategies between White and Hispanic students. The authors considered analyses significant at $p < .05$. We controlled for Type 1 error by using the Holm-Bonferroni procedure (Holm, 1979). The authors used partial eta squared (η^2_p) as the measure of effect size for the ANOVA and the phi coefficient (Φ) for the chi square analyses with the magnitude as follows: Small ($\eta^2_p \geq .01$; $\Phi = .10$), medium ($\eta^2_p \geq .06$; $\Phi = .30$), large ($\eta^2_p \geq .14$; $\Phi = .50$) (Cohen, 1969; Richardson, 2011). All analyses were conducted using SPSS version 24.0.

Qualitative. The researchers utilized CQR (Hill et al., 2005) to analyze qualitative data describing students’ experiences participating in the culturally adapted STAC program. The team utilized CQR because it is a rigorous methodological approach that utilizes elements from phenomenology, grounded theory, and comprehensive process analysis (Hill et al., 2005). This approach was a good fit for this project because it allows for spontaneous follow-up questions and probes among participants that often uncover nuanced experiences, adding depth to participants’ description. Because we were interested in describing the unique experiences of students who participated in the adapted STAC program, the constructivist nature of CQR provided a platform for students to describe while making meaning of their experiences. Additionally, CQR requires a team of researchers to reach consensus when analyzing complex data.

The team followed Hill et al.’s (2005) recommendations for employing CQR. A doctoral student transcribed the interviews verbatim, and a faculty member, doctoral student, and master’s student analyzed the data. All team members had previous experience conducting qualitative research. Team members analyzed the data individually identifying domains and core ideas before meeting to discuss initial findings. During the first meeting, each analyst wrote down their initial domains on a note card to provide a visual representation of the data. The team met three times over the course of one month to achieve consensus on domains and core ideas. The team resolved discrepancies by relying on participants’ quotes. The team provided the data to an external auditor and the team incorporated the auditor’s minor revisions into the final results.

Trustworthiness

The team utilized several strategies to increase trustworthiness as recommended by Hays, Wood, Dahl, & Kirk-Jenkins, et al. (2016). We used reflexivity before collecting data to develop awareness and monitor personal biases and assumptions. Prior to data collection, team members completed a memo (Creswell, 2013), recording assumptions related to bullying within the context of this particular school setting, the cultural characteristics of the participants, and/or beliefs about the impact of the training. The team discussed the content of the memos throughout the data analysis process to decrease the impact of our assumptions and expectations on the interpretation of the data. The researchers provided the data to an external auditor with expertise in qualitative research to increase the credibility of our findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Findings

Knowledge and Confidence

Table 1 shows the means, standard deviations, and statistical contrasts for knowledge and confidence. As seen in Table 1, only the main effect for Time was significant ($p < .001$), indicating all students reported a gain in knowledge and confidence from baseline to immediate follow-up. The interaction effect Time x Ethnicity was not significant, indicating no significant difference between White and Hispanic students at the immediate follow-up.

Use of the STAC Strategies

At the 6-week follow-up, 73.7% ($n = 42$) of students reported witnessing bullying in the previous month. Results from a chi squared analysis indicated no significant difference for witnessing bullying between White (66.7%) and Hispanic (81.5%) students, $\chi^2(1) = 1.61, p = .21, \Phi = .17$. Of the 42 students who reported witnessing bullying, 95.2% reported using at least one STAC strategy to intervene, with no significant differences between White (90%) and Hispanic students (100%), $\chi^2(1) = 2.31, p = .13, \Phi = .24$. As seen in Table 2, results indicated Hispanic students used the strategy “stealing the show” more frequently than White students, with no significant differences between White and Hispanic students for the other three strategies.

Qualitative

We identified four domains and associated core ideas: (1) awareness and implementation, (2) barriers to intervening, (3) emotional benefits, and (4) strengthening interpersonal relationships.

Domain 1: Awareness and Implementation. Students ($n = 11$ [47.8%]) spoke about an increase in awareness about bullying and reported using all four strategies to intervene across multiple settings and contexts. Students spoke about utilizing all four of the STAC strategies, but most commonly utilizing “turning it over” and “accompanying others.” One student shared:

So there was this girl who was in my neighborhood she was pushing me and... telling me to stop being a weirdo... And I told my mom that she was bullying me and then she threatened me and then... my mom told her mom to let her know that she needs to stop because if this keeps going on she's going to go there and she's going to talk to the girl.

Another student shared:

Today in science these two boys were making fun of the girls because of her race and she was working on her test and she started crying because she didn't get to test and because the boys were calling her names. So I went to go talk to her and I helped her on her test.

Students also spoke about utilizing the STAC strategies at home, with siblings, and at the

Park. For example, one student stated:

I was taking my sisters to the park... and we saw this little kid like maybe eight, seven at most, just sitting there getting verbally bullied by a group of [students]... about my age, height, build, all that. So I did the “stealing the show”... I just walked over there and started cracking jokes and being a goofball and the little kid, he, he seemed to enjoy it. He was laughing and smiling and trying to create jokes himself it was kind of sweet.

Domain 2: Barriers to Intervening. Although some students discussed fears as a barrier for intervening, many students used the STAC strategies despite their fears ($n = 9$ [39%]). For example, students spoke about the fear of retaliation as a barrier for intervening in bullying situations. One student shared “[I am afraid] to do stealing the show because I don't know what the bully will do. If he would do something to me... or punch someone... Stealing the show can be scary.” However, despite fears of retaliation, many students talked about feeling like they can use the STAC strategies to intervene. One student shared, “Coaching compassion [is scary] because I'm afraid they might start bullying me, but then after the training I felt like I could use that.” Another student talked about her experience using a strategy despite feeling scared, “It's a little scary to use the strategies, but I feel happier that I helped somebody and got rid of the bullying.”

Domain 3: Emotional Benefits. After using the STAC strategies students ($n = 13$ [56.5%]) reported feeling good about themselves, confident, and feeling like they could better recognize bullying and make a difference at their school. Several students spoke about their newfound awareness of bullying and confidence to intervene, for example, one student shared:

It kind of makes me feel like I guess equipped. I know what to do in certain situations and... it helps me to see bullying more because at first I'm like 'oh I don't think that there's that much bullying in the school,' and then once I actually paid attention to it I was like, 'oh, okay there is some' and then I can use some of these strategies and that gave me a little bit of a confidence knowing I can help out with this.

Another student shared:

I can recognize it [bullying] a little bit better and so that helps me feel a little bit more confident in being able to use the strategies that I've learned rather than kind of guessing and thinking how I can help the people instead, but now I have different strategies to use.

Many students shared that being trained increased their knowledge of bullying and confidence to make a difference. One student indicated, "I'm normally very hard on myself... but these things [knowledge gained in the training and using the strategies] make me feel like, hey I'm not so bad, I've tried to help people in the world." Another student shared, "I feel great and I feel awesome because of doing this training I've realized how I can see what type of bullying it is, I know how to deal with it, I feel more confident."

Domain 4: Strengthened Interpersonal Relationships. Students ($n = 10$ [43.4%]) reported that since participating in the training and using STAC strategies they are making new friends, building stronger relationships, and becoming more discerning in friendships. One student shared:

I feel like the relationships with your friends have been stronger because if you help them out they don't just see you, they'll never forget that you helped them. And they don't just see you as a friend but somebody you can trust.

Several students also spoke about discerning between healthy and unhealthy friendships. One student shared, "I've been realizing which ones are the toxic relationships and which ones are not..." Some students also spoke about making new friends after utilizing strategies. For example, a student shared, "I think I've made more new friends since I kind of accompanied them and I feel good about the relationships."

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine the appropriateness of a brief, bullying bystander intervention (STAC) adapted for a middle school in an ethnically-blended, low-income, rural community. We were also interested in understanding the experiences of the students who participated in the intervention. Overall, quantitative data indicated both White and Hispanic students responded positively to the adapted STAC intervention, reporting an increase in knowledge and confidence, as well as use of the STAC strategies. Qualitative data supported these findings, providing examples of how students experienced the training and how the training impacted their decision to intervene in bullying. Students also shared how the training positively impacted their emotions and peer relationships.

Consistent with prior research with middle school students (Authors, 2015; Authors, 2017d), quantitative data demonstrated an increase in knowledge, confidence, and use of the STAC strategies post-training. Qualitative findings supported these results, suggesting students were better equipped to identify bullying and felt empowered to intervene. Further, consistent with prior qualitative studies (Authors, 2017a), although students indicated they often felt nervous about intervening, they discussed having gained the confidence to intervene despite feeling scared. Students also expressed that the STAC training had a positive impact on them emotionally and interpersonally. These findings are consistent with research demonstrating that the students trained in the STAC program report decreases in internalizing symptoms (Authors, 2019c, depression, and an increased sense of school belonging (Authors, 2019b). Based on qualitative findings, it is likely that increased confidence and the decision to intervene may have been impacted by the positive emotional effects of the training, coupled with the development of new friends and stronger relationships. Adolescents with support from friends are more likely to engage in defending behaviors (Evans & Smokowski, 2015).

A total of 73.7% of students reported witnessing bullying at the 6-week follow-up, which parallels national statistics suggesting 70% to 80% of students witness bullying (Demaray et al., 2014; Jones et al., 2015). Of the students who reported witnessing bullying, 95.2% reported using at least one STAC strategy to intervene, which is consistent with research that indicates middle school students trained in the STAC program utilize the STAC strategies to intervene in bullying situations (Authors, 2017b; Authors, 2017d; Authors, 2018a). Although students reported using each of the four STAC strategies, White students reported using “stealing the show” significantly less (50%) than Hispanic students (86.4%). This finding is not consistent with prior research conducted in a predominately White middle school, in which 89% of students reported using “stealing the show” (Authors, 2017d). One explanation for the lower rates of use of this strategy by White students in this sample may have to do with the “stealing the show” practice scenario used in the culturally adapted STAC training. The practice scenario included an example of biased-based relational bullying directed specifically at a Hispanic student. Thus, it is possible that White students felt less connected to the example than Hispanic students. When an intervention is grounded in the experiences of the target cultural audience (Barrera, Castro, & Steiker, 2011) and is high in cultural relevance, increased responsiveness and participation from that audience is more likely (Castro, Barrera, & Martinez, 2004).

Limitations and Future Research

While this study provides support for the culturally adapted STAC program, there are several limitations to consider. We did not include a control group for this study and as such, we cannot determine that changes in knowledge and confidence and use of STAC strategies are due to the STAC training. Also, we did not control for other factors, such as school-wide behavior initiatives, bullying policies, or school climate, further limiting the study’s internal validity. Furthermore, we relied on student self-report for quantitative and qualitative data collection, which may have been impacted by social desirability. Student responses, particularly in the focus groups, may have been influenced by their desire to please the researcher or impress fellow peers. Thus, observation and/or teacher reports, and inclusion of a social desirability measure would strengthen future studies.

Practical Implications

This study provides important implications for school counselors and counselors working with adolescents in rural, low-income, Hispanic communities. Not only did students learn to intervene in bullying situations, they also talked about experiencing positive emotional outcomes and developing supportive relationships when acting as “defenders.” These findings are encouraging for school counselors because they have the opportunity to train and empower students to act as “defenders” using the STAC strategies. Through implementing the culturally adapted STAC program, school counselors can help students become aware of and equipped to intervene in bullying situations that are specifically relevant to low-income, rural, ethnically-blended schools. Additionally, it is important for school counselors to assess for feelings of isolation, fear, and low self-esteem, in students who have been involved with or witnessed bullying. Counselors working with adolescents from low-income, rural communities should also be aware of the associated impacts of bullying on adolescents and be equipped to empower clients to address these issues. Counselors can help clients develop self-efficacy and confidence to intervene in bullying situations by providing information about bullying, discussing how to identify bullying at school, and introducing and practicing the STAC strategies through mock scenarios or role-play activities during sessions.

Conclusion

Bullying is a significant problem for middle-school students, particularly students in rural, ethnically-blended schools in low income communities. This study provides preliminary support for a culturally adapted STAC program that is appropriate for this type of school setting. Specifically, both White and Hispanic students who participated in the program reported increased confidence to intervene and utilize the STAC strategies post-intervention. Further participating in the intervention was associated with an increase in awareness about bullying, intervening as “defenders” despite fears, emotional benefits, and developing healthy relationships with peers.

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Table 1

Descriptive Statistics and Statistical Contrasts for Knowledge and Confidence to Intervene by Ethnicity

	White	Hispanic	Total	Time				Time x Ethnicity			
	(<i>n</i> = 34)	(<i>n</i> = 29)	(<i>n</i> = 63)	<i>WL</i>	<i>F</i> (1,62)	<i>p</i>	η^2_p	<i>WL</i>	<i>F</i> (1,62)	<i>p</i>	η^2_p
Knowledge and Confidence				.32	127.43	<.001	.68	.95	1.19	.28	.02
Baseline	35.15 (4.67)	33.16 (4.73)	34.23 (4.56)								
Immediate Post	40.44 (4.78)	39.59 (4.35)	40.05 (4.57)								

Note. WL = Wilks' Lambda.

Table 2

Number of Students Reporting Use of Strategies by Ethnicity and Statistical Contrasts

Strategies	White (<i>n</i> =20)		Hispanic (<i>n</i> = 22)		$\chi^2(1)$	<i>p</i>	Φ
	Reported Yes	Reported No	Reported Yes	Reported No			
Stealing the Show	10 (50%)	10 (50%)	19 (86.4%)	3 (13.6%)	6.48*	<.01	.39
Turning it Over	14 (70%)	6 (30%)	15 (68.2%)	7 (31.8%)	0.02	.90	.02
Accompanying Others	16 (80%)	4 (20%)	18 (81.8%)	4 (18.2%)	0.22	.88	.02
Coaching Compassion	14 (70%)	6 (30%)	15 (68.2%)	7 (31.8%)	0.02	.90	.02

**p* < .05