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4-1-2017

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The Phenomenological Experience of Student Advocates Trained as "Defenders" to Stop School Bullying

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Abstract

We investigated lived experiences of student-advocates trained in a brief, bystander bullying intervention program to stop bullying as "defenders." Personal values, taking perceived risks, implementing bullying intervention strategies, and positive sense of self were core themes with a textural-structural description helping define student' experiences. Implications and future research are discussed.

Keywords: bullying, bystander, defenders, STAC, school counseling

Bullying is a major public health problem for youth with a variety of negative associated consequences for all students involved (Center for Disease Control and Prevention, 2015). However, in some instances bystanders can experience more problems than victims or perpetrators (Rivers, Poteat, Noret, & Ashurst, 2009). Although bystanders are often successful when they act as "defenders" on behalf of students who are victims of bullying (Gage, Prykanowski, & Larson, 2014; Hawkins, Pepler, & Craig, 2001; Salmivalli, Voeten, & Poskiparta, 2011), most of the time bystanders do not intervene because they report not knowing what to do (Forberg, Thronberg, & Samuelsson, 2014; Hutchinson, 2012). As a result, bystanders can experience guilt (Hutchinson, 2012) and cope through moral disengagement (Forberg et al., 2014). This incongruent response is an impediment to healthy personality development (Rogers, 1959). Therefore, there is a need for bullying prevention and intervention programs to equip bystanders with strategies that can serve as a vehicle for congruent expression when they witness bullying. The purpose of this study is to investigate how student-advocates trained in the STAC program to act as "defenders" give meaning to their experience. Learning about student-advocates' process can deepen our knowledge of how to effectively train bystanders to intervene in bullying situations. The STAC program is a brief, bystander bullying intervention program, which stands for "stealing the show," "turning it over," "accompanying others," and "coaching compassion."

The Problem of Bullying

Bullying is a form of interpersonal violence, 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). According to recent survey data, one in four students grades sixth through twelfth report being bullied at school (U.S. Department of Education, 2015). However, the prevalence of bullying is likely to be higher because students underreport bullying behaviors, with only 36% of students reporting being a victim of bullying at school compared to 64% of students who do not report being bullied (Petrosino, Guckenburg, DeVoe, & Hanson, 2010).

Humanistic ideologies are deeply relational (Scholl, McGowan, & Hansen, 2012; Task Force, 2004) and recognize individuals require opportunities to experience unconditional positive regard, empathy, and congruence to develop an integrated and healthy personality (Rogers, 1959). To develop self-esteem and realize their innate self-actualization tendencies, adolescents must first feel a sense of safety, affiliation (Maslow, 1968), and trust (Scholl, et al., 2012). Therefore, being involved in bullying as a victim or perpetrator can impede healthy development (Juvonen, Wang, & Espinoza, 2011; Nielsen, Tangen, Idsoe, Matthiesen, & Mageroy, 2015; Renda, Vassalo, & Edwards, 2011; Rueger & Jenkins, 2014). However, students who witness bullying as bystanders also experience related difficulties. Bystanders report high levels of distress from being exposed to bullying (Janson, Carney, Hazler, & Oh, 2009) and emotional discomfort (Cowie, 2011), including a sense of confusion, isolation, and stuckness (Hutchinson, 2012).

When students witness bullying, they also report feeling a decreased sense that people are trustworthy and fair (Carney, Jacob, & Hazler, 2011). In some instances, bystanders report greater problems than students directly involved as victims or perpetrators. For example, bystanders are at a higher risk of substance abuse than students who are victims, while being at greater risk of anxiety, depression, and hostility than students who bully (Rivers et al., 2009).

Bystander Roles

Students who observe bullying can behave in different ways in response to witnessing a bullying incident. These responses have been categorized as bystander roles that include "assistants" who actively and directly help the bully victimize a target, "reinforcers" who laugh at or simply witnesses the situation, "outsiders" who do not take sides and often disengage or walk away from the group in order to dismiss the situation, and "defenders" who intervene and/or console the target of bullying (Salmivalli, Lagerspetz, Björkqvist, Österman, & Kaukiainen, 1996, p.15). Of these roles, only the "defender" is associated with a decrease in bullying behavior. Researchers have found when bystanders intervene or defend the victim, bullying behavior decreases (Gage, Prykanowski, & Larson, 2014; Salmivalli, Voeten, & Poskiparta, 2011).

Even though when bystanders act as "defenders" they are often successful in decreasing bullying behaviors, many bystanders do not intervene (Hutchinson, 2012). When students witness bullying, they assess the situation to determine level of seriousness and threat (Forberg et al., 2014), and report they do not know what to do to stop bullying; therefore, they do not intervene (Forberg et al., 2014; Hutchinson, 2012). While students do not endorse passive bystander responses, they have positive feelings for bystanders acting as "defenders" (Gini, Pozzoli, Borgini & Franzoni, 2008). Acting as a "defender" is associated with increased sense of responsibility toward victims (Pozzoli & Gini, 2010) and commitment to intervene (Karna et al., 2011). Further, intervening on behalf of victims can serve as a buffer against bullying by decreasing anxiety and negative perceptions of peers (Williford et al., 2012) and increasing bystanders' self-esteem (Authors, under review). In contrast, when bystanders respond passively to bullying, they feel guilt (Hutchinson, 2012) and cope through moral disengagement (Forberg et al., 2014). Therefore, it is important for bullying programs to train bystanders to act as "defenders," which can serve as a buffer against exposure to bullying and protect against negative feelings associated with passive bystander responses.

School-Based Bystander Intervention Programs

Comprehensive, school-wide programs are considered a best for practice in bullying intervention (Bradshaw, 2015). However, these programs can be difficult to implement because they require significant resources and time commitment from schools (KiVa Antibullying, 2014; Menard & Grotpeter, 2014; Salmivalli & Poskiparta, 2012). Additionally, although a recent meta-analysis indicates bullying programs incorporating bystander interventions are effective (Polanin, Espelage, & Pigott, 2012), bystander interventions remain understudied (Bradshaw, 2015; Polanin et al., 2012). Therefore, there is a need for brief, cost-effective bystander programs that do not place a high demand on schools. Preliminary evidence suggests these types of programs can be effective in equipping bystanders with knowledge and confidence to intervene and increasing self-esteem in upper elementary students (Authors, 2015; Authors in press; Authors, under review).

The STAC program has been studied as a brief, bystander intervention that focuses on relational aspects of peer interactions to equip students who witness bullying to act as "defenders." The program was adapted from "CARES," the bystander intervention component of Bully-Proofing (Garrity, Jens, Porter, Sager, & Short-Camilli, 2004). In the STAC program, students who witness bullying are taught strategies they can utilize to intervene on behalf of victims. Counselor education graduate students conduct a 90-minute training at the school and follow-up with students through monthly meetings (see for further details, Authors, 2015). There is preliminary evidence the STAC program is effective at teaching middle school students (Authors, 2015) and elementary school students (Authors, in press, Authors under review) to identify different types of bullying, the intervention strategies taught, and increases students' confidence to act as "defenders." In a recent randomized control trail (Authors, under review), sixth grade students in the intervention group reported an increase in self-esteem.

The Current Study

Previous studies provide preliminary support for the STAC program as a promising brief, relational approach equipping students to act as "defenders." No study to date, however, has investigated the process through which students trained in the STAC program give meaning to their experience intervening on behalf of victims. Therefore, the aim of this study is extend the literature by investigating the lived experiences of student-advocates trained to act as "defenders" utilizing the STAC strategies. Learning about the experience of student-advocates can provide helpful information to deepen our knowledge of how to effectively incorporate bystanders in bullying prevention and intervention programs, which can protect bystanders from problems associated with responding passively to bullying. To address this aim, we conducted in-depth interviews with five students attending a boarding high school for at-risk students who were trained in the STAC program.

Research Context

The defining element for this project was to house the study in an environment where student-advocates could utilize the STAC strategies. The first, third and fourth authors conducted interviews as each participant was exposed to everyday situations where bullying occurred. Each participant witnessed bullying and integrated new knowledge regarding how to act as a "defender." The academic coordinator at the school selected students who were part of the student council to participate in the study. These students were selected because they demonstrated success in both academic and therapeutic programs, adherence to the school's rules and values, as well as maturity and positive communication skills. Student council members acted as representatives for the student body and were involved in student affairs, including rules, extracurricular activities, and daily activities. Therefore, these students were considered leaders who could have a positive influence on peers.

After students were selected, the academic coordinator briefly met with each one to discuss interest in being trained as a student-advocate. All selected students expressed interest in being part of the training. The academic coordinator contacted parents to provide consent for students to participate. After parents provided consent, the academic coordinator discussed the project in greater depth with students, and collected student assent. We obtained approval for all study procedures from the Institutional Review Board from the two affiliated institutions.

Counselor education graduate student trainers taught participants the STAC strategies "stealing the show," "turning it over," "accompany others," and "coaching compassion." All the strategies are interpersonal in nature, which is consistent with the relational nature of humanism (Scholl et al., 2012) and aim to foster empathy, congruence, and unconditional positive regard (Rogers, 1959). The first strategy, "stealing the show" involves student-advocates utilizing humor to disperse the peer-audience witnessing the bullying situation. Students are encouraged to act in a manner that seems natural and congruent with their personality. The goal is for the student who is bullying to no longer be the center of peer attention. An example of "stealing the show" includes a student teasing a peer by making fun of his name in front of a group of students. A "defender" intervenes by making an appropriate and funny joke. Everyone's attention, including the student who was teasing his peer, turns away from the student who was targeted. Everyone laughs at the joke and the situation is defused. The next strategy, "turning it over," involves informing an adult about the situation and asking for help. During the training, student-advocates identify safe adults at school who can help. Student-advocates are taught to always "turn it over" if physical bullying is taking place, to print out evidence of cyberbullying and bring it to an adult at school, and to "turn it over" to an adult if they are unsure as to how to intervene. For example, a "defender" sees a demeaning posting on social media about a classmate. The "defender" prints out the posting and brings it to school the next day to show the school counselor. The school counselor can document the incident or take appropriate action consistent with school policy on bullying.

The STAC strategies go beyond diffusing the bullying situation in the moment. The third strategy, "accompany others" involves student-advocates reaching out to the student who was victimized to communicate what happened is unacceptable, he or she is not alone, and the student-advocate cares about the student who was a victim of bullying. This strategy focuses on the "defender" communicating empathy to the victim. For example, during recess, a "defender" observers a group of girls intentionally excluding a peer by putting her down and walking away laughing. The "defender" approaches the student who was left out and invites her to hangout. The "defender" communicates the manner in which the other girls treated her was unacceptable, and that she is cared about and not alone at school.

Just as "accompany others" furthers the intervention with the student who was bullied, the last strategy, "coaching compassion" involves gently confronting the student who bullied a peer either during or after the incident to communicate that his or her behavior is not acceptable. Additionally, trainers teach student-advocates to encourage the student who bullied to consider what it would feel like to be the victim in the situation, thereby fostering empathy toward the victim. Trainers encourage student-advocates to implement "coaching compassion" when they have a relationship with the student who bullied or if the perpetrator is in a lower grade and student-advocates believe the perpetrator will respect them. For example, a "defender" is having lunch in the school cafeteria with a friend. The friend intentionally trips another student who walks by and then laughs at the student. After the incident, the "defender" talks with his friend and asks him what he believes it would feel like to be in the target's shoes. The "defender" also shares a story about when another student intentionally embarrassed him and its negative impact.

Trainers conducted the STAC program at a boarding high school for at-risk youth. The program included a didactic and an experiential role-play component (Authors, 2015). The didactic component included an audiovisual presentation with information about bullying and the STAC strategies followed by small group exercises to engage student-advocates. The experiential component consisted of student-advocates practicing the STAC strategies through role-plays. At the end of the program, each student shared a favorite STAC strategy, signed a "bullying stops with me" petition, and received a certificate of participation. After the program, the two trainers met with student-advocates at school for 45-minute monthly to offer support and brainstorm ways to effectively utilize the strategies. During these meetings, trainers were intial about creating a safe envrionment where student-advocates could share their thoughts and feelings about becoming a "defender." Trainers focused on being genuine in their relationship with student-advocates, communicating empathy, and fostering optimism, trust, respect, and care. These characteristics of the STAC program are consitent with educational invitation, which is a humanistic approach to combating interpersonal school violence (Purkey & Novak, 2008; Stanley, Small, Owen, & Burke, 2013).

Methodology

Phenomenological approaches share in the exploration of how people make sense of and transform lived experiences into consciousness (Patton, 2015). Through phenomenological reduction, we were able to explore the essence of being a student-advocate equipped with bullying intervention strategies in an environment where bullying occurs more frequently than in traditional school settings (Lester, Mander, & Cross, 2015). We employed Moustakas' (1994) methods of transcendental phenomenology to develop a textural-structural description of lived experiences of participants. From this methodological perspective, researchers are interested in the objective nature, as well as participant subjective understanding of the phenomenon under investigation. Researchers are responsible for creating a safe interpersonal space for participants' unique perspectives and intentionality behind their actions to emerge. Epoche, phenomenological reduction, imaginative variation, and synthesis (Moustakas, 1994) guided researchers' inquiry process.

The research question for this project was: "What is the experience of being a student-advocate trained in the STAC program at a high school for at risk youth?" We focused on participant perceptions of their direct experience being a student-advocate by utilizing methods grounded in transcendental phenomenology to extract meaning from the phenomenon. We concurrently explored textural (i.e., nature of phenomenon) and structural (i.e., meaning) dimensions to develop a phenomenological view of student-advocates lived experience.

Researchers

We came together as a research team because bullying is a critical mental health issue impacting youth across the United States (Center for Disease Control and Prevention, 2015). We came into this project with varying levels of knowledge about bullying, intervention strategies, the STAC program, and expected outcomes for student-advocates trained to act as "defenders." The first author was involved in developing the STAC program and has completed multiple quantitative studies on the program. The fourth author was previously involved in the program as a counselor education student trainer. The second and third authors had no prior involvement with the STAC program. However, they had clinical experience working with clients involved in bullying, which shaped their perspectives of the phenomena. From a post-positivist philosophy, we wanted to understand the essence of the experience and meaning student-advocates constructed from being involved in a bullying situation. Collectively, we valued the direct involvement of participants in giving meaning to their experience and were interested in furthering the literature by learning how to equip bystanders to intervene when exposed to bullying.

Participants

All participants were attending a privately owned, ranch-style therapeutic boarding school for at risk boys in the Northwestern United States. The school provides early intervention for boys ages 10 through 15 years old experiencing behavioral difficulties, or who are not responding adaptively to social pressures of public schools. These students are considered at risk because they engage in a variety of internalizing and externalizing behaviors, utilize maladaptive coping strategies, and often struggle with mental health problems such as mood and substance use disorders. Youth who have been involvement in the justice system, present with suicidal or homicidal ideation, psychotic disorders, personality disorders, gang involvement, or conduct disorder are not, however, considered well suited for this school.

Participants consisted of five males ranging in age from thirteen to fourteen. All adolescents identified as White and were from different regions of the United States. Two participants were from the Northeast and the other three were from the South, West, and Northwest. Four of the five students completed the 90-minute training conducted by two counselor education students who were not part of the research team. One participant was not present for the initial training and the academic coordinator taught him the STAC strategies at a later time.

Role of the Researchers

Researcher roles were defined by the transcendental phenomenology approach (Moustakas, 1994). According to Moustakas (1994) researchers must act with intentionality from the very beginning of the project. Initially, researchers must let go of beliefs and judgments that may bias what is spoken about during the interview process: "From the Epoche, we are challenged to create new ideas, new feelings, new awareness and understanding" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 86). Throughout the project, we acted together to check each other's biases and past knowledge of constructs defining the phenomenon. Our role shifted after the initial findings were in place as we abandoned the Epoche. At this point, we utilized our collective knowledge of bullying, counseling, and personal experiences to help define the analysis. By following this format, we were able to be intentional about our goal to develop a picture that captured the essence of student-advocates experience.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data collection and analysis was intertwined in developing a textural-structural description of the phenomenon. We followed the processes outlined by Moustakas (1994) and included Epoche, phenomenological reduction, imaginative variation, and synthesis. Moustakas described Epoche as preparing oneself to derive new knowledge, while setting aside prejudices and predispositions as a manner to look upon experience as if for the first time. According to Moustakas (1994), researchers must attempt to free the study from beliefs and a priori knowledge that may hinder open, receptive, and unbiased listening (Moustakas, 1994). The development of the research team lent itself well to check each member's biases as we developed questions and began the interviewing process.

We collected data through audio recording interviews that lasted between 30 and 50 minutes during both rounds. The first, third, and fourth authors conducted the interviews in a private setting at the participants' school. Upon completing each round of interviews, the third and fourth authors transcribed the data. To begin the process of answering the research question, the following interview question was developed: "What has it been like for you to be an advocate and use the STAC strategies?" In an effort to maintain consistency between interviewers, we created an additional prompt: "Can you think of a time you used a STAC strategy and what was that like?" After the initial interviews were completed, the first, second, and third authors individually coded each of the transcripts focusing on how participants described the elements of their experience as well as how each student-advocate experienced intervening in a bullying situation. We coded the data by line-by-line analysis of the transcripts and extracting consistent themes present in participants' experience. We relied on each other to view the descriptions and perceptions of the participants from many different angles, while reflecting and comparing them until we arrived at a succinct picture of the thematic nature of the phenomenon. After we completed the first round of coding and discovered the initial textural dimensions, the first, third, and fourth authors interviewed participants for a second time to enrich the textural description. To obtain further depth and understanding, we asked participants the following questions: 1) "Could you tell me more about the concerns you have with getting involved in a bullying situation?" 2) "How did using the strategies impact the way you feel yourself?" 3) "Did you see a difference in how others perceived you through this time and specifically instances of intervening?" 4) "How did your involvement using the STAC system

impact your connectedness to your peers?" 5) "How did your connection with others impact your willingness to engage in the bullying situation?" 6) "What is the importance in using these strategies and why you?" 7) "How do you personally stop bullying?" and 8) "What personal values came up for you during this experience?"

We completed the second round of interviews, transcription, and analysis in the same fashion as the first round of interviews. During the coding, the first, second, and third authors discovered further depth within the experience and began to look for possible meanings through imaginative variation. Again, this consisted of reviewing transcripts from all participants and extracting consistent themes and meaning drawn from their experiences. As such, we developed the structural description of the experience. The final step was to synthesize the meaning and essence of the phenomenon being studied. We integrated findings into a unified statement around the textural and structural descriptions of the phenomenon.

Strategies for Trustworthiness

We utilized multiple strategies to strengthen the trustworthiness of the study. Essential trustworthiness strategies in phenomenological studies include thick description, triangulation of data sources, and member checking (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). We utilized prolonged engagement, procedural adherence, and continuous memo writing to provide structure for a thick description to develop. Within these activities, triangulation could occur across data sources and team members. Patton (2015) identified four approaches to triangulation including checks for consistency between qualitative sources, utilizing mixed quantitative-qualitative methods, comparing results between multiple data analysts, and gaining perspective across differing theoretical lenses. We utilized three of these triangulation strategies. Through procedural guidelines outlined by Moustakas (1994), the first three authors coded the interviews looking for consistent themes across participants. The second author utilized qualitative analysis software (NVIVO 10) to ensure consistency and representation across all participants. We participated in coding meetings where the three coding authors discussed themes that emerged and checked each other for potential bias. Finally, we utilized triangulation to gain perspectives across differing theoretical lenses. Patton noted that triangulation of theory allows for an understanding of how differing assumptions and premises might affect findings. In the case of this research, the first author had intimate knowledge of bullying theory while the other authors conceptualized from theoretical models outside of bullying literature. Finally, the third author conducted a concluding focus group with the original participants, which served as a member check. Participants confirmed the textural-structural description was consistent with their experience being trained in the program.

Results

The analysis culminated in a textural-structural description of student-advocates experience. The major themes that emerged from the analysis were 1) personal values, 2) taking perceived risks, 3) implementation of the STAC strategies, and 4) positive sense of self. Each participant contributed to the development of these themes and provided descriptions reflecting the essence of their experience. Participants also provided insight regarding how they made meaning of each construct and how different elements of their experience worked together to form a robust description of what it meant to them to be a student-advocate trained in the STAC program. To protect participants' identity, we utilized pseudonyms when describing their experience.

Personal Values

From the analysis, it became evident that participants brought a set of personal values that defined the intentionality behind their behavior as student-advocates. Participants had driving beliefs regarding how to act toward others and how to respond during bullying situations. Josh captured this by stating: "we're all like supporting each other and… we're always there for each other when we need it." As Josh continued to describe his personal values, he spoke about a sense of personal responsibility regarding his role as a "defender." He stated that intervening when another student is the victim of bullying is "kinda not my job but like my obligation to do." Austin also highlighted he valued the sense of respect he experienced as a result of intervening in bullying situations. Austin spoke "when I see people stop with what I do, I have respect for them. Other people then have respect for me and.victims have respect for me and it's just like this whole mutual respect."

Although personal values emerged as a key theme, student-advocates reported a need to overcome personal fears to act in congruence with their values. For example, Eric noted: "So it made me feel good that I helped him, but I sort of just like, not get involved in that…" Just as Eric spoke about his hesitance to become involved in a bullying situation, other participants also spoke about having to overcome fear to act as a "defender."

Taking Perceived Risks

The fear that each participant spoke about with regard to involving himself in a bullying situation was coded as taking perceived risks. For example, Jackson recalled an instance he made a decision to step in and act as a "defender" when a group of students were teasing a peer. Jackson stated "I try to step in and then they are like what are you going to do about it and they call me names or they get all up in my face." Austin was clear about being aware of taking a perceived risk and said: "I always go in with caution." In addition to the perceived risks of getting involved in a bullying situation, Eric also spoke about an internal conflict regarding managing his relationship with both the perpetrator and the target of bullying when deciding whether to intervene. Eric spoke about this as: "I didn't want to make enemies, but I also wanted to help the person." Eric also spoke about this perceived strain by stating: "….stressful, because you have to manage two different perspectives, or more perspectives, you know?"

When student-advocates were in the process of making a decision to act as "defenders," they were processing information and weighing potential risks against their need to act out in a manner congruent with their personal values. Participants talked about overcoming perceived fears and deciding to engage as a "defender" utilizing the STAC strategies.

Implementation of STAC Strategies

The STAC program provided participants with four bullying intervention strategies they could utilize as a "defender." All participants spoke about their ability to learn the STAC strategies and identified a preferred strategy for a given situation. This was particularly salient as the primary purpose of the STAC program is to equip student bystanders to intervene on behalf of victims when they witness bullying at school. Josh spoke to the straightforward nature of the intervention strategies. He said "it just kinda made it really easy to understand, so …when you're in a situation where you see somebody being bullied you…are like 'well I have these options,' they're really concrete." Other participants expressed similar sentiments, for example, Jackson stated the training provided "a lot of helpful information."

Additionally, each participant described utilizing a preferred STAC strategy for specific bullying situations. Austin described a typical bullying scenario he encountered and the STAC intervention strategies he utilized: "Some of the kids were calling another kid names, like making fun of him, and…, I was able to you know just distract the attention, like, to something else, just switch it over. And then I was able to talk to the kid and it just, it worked really well. After speaking about utilizing the strategies "stealing the show" and "accompany others," Austin also spoke about his feelings after intervening and noticing the perceived effect of his actions on the student who was targeted. He said "It felt kinda nice to, you know, he looked like he was happy about it." Austin's statement speaks to how implementing the STAC strategies seemed to connect with student-advocates sense of self.

Positive Sense of Self

Overwhelmingly, participants spoke about experiencing a positive sense of self after succeeding in helping students who were being bullied. Jackson said: "It felt good cause I helped another kid out. It feels like…I'm kind of making a difference in someone's life." Sawyer spoke about this in terms of looking back in time on his involvement when he is older. Sawyer noted: "I can look back on when I'm older and say wow,…I never knew how I was capable of doing this." He also went on to state: "It makes me feel like I've accomplished something." Participants 3 also described his experience acting as a "defender" positively in terms of being capable of "making a difference in someone's life." In addition to feeling a positive sense of self associated with acting altruistically as a "defender," participants also spoke about how intervening became second nature to them. For example, Austin spoke about this as: "I mean it feels really good. And because you know just this morning, someone was making fun of someone and I'm… able to just hop in there like not even thinking." Student-advocates also spoke about their desire to be helpful to others by implementing the STAC strategies. This desire to help by intervening on behalf of students who are targets looped back to participants' initial core values, which were in place prior to the STAC training. This congruent action led to the textural-structural description for the experience.

Textural-Structural Description

We chose congruent engagement to represent the textural-structural description of the phenomenon investigated. Not only did the participants talk about the four themes described above, they also discussed how being a student-advocate melded the themes together. The underlying meaning of the experience revolved around relationships, including relationships with each other, relationships with peers who were perpetrators, and relationships with peers who were victims. Further, the nature of relationships seemed to be a common thread throughout student-advocates experiences as "defenders." The participants' relationship with the students involved in the bullying situation (both the perpetrator and the victim) seemed to determine whether the student-advocate decided to intervene, or instead, call on peer student-advocate with a stronger relationship with the students involved to intervene. For example, Austin stated: "I am willing to engage in pretty much all of the situations but it certainly a little easier when you know it's just, your friends in there like you have a relationship with some of the people." Furthermore, the student-advocates relationships with one-another was also strengthened from acting as "defenders." Josh spoke to this by stating: "we're all supporting each other and that…we're always there for each other when we need it." From this relational lens, a picture emerged that described how each theme connected the entirety of the student-advocates experience. Figure 1 illustrates how the differing themes came together allowing student-advocates to experience a sense of congruent engagement when they acted as "defenders."
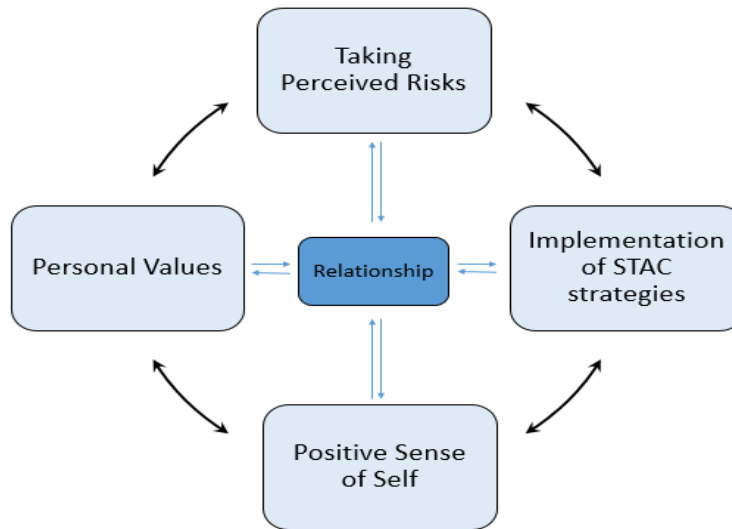

Figure 1. Textural-Structural Description

Personal values of the participants were linked to taking perceived risks to act as "defenders." Sawyer talked about valuing acting as a "defender" to create positive change rather than just witnessing bullying as a passive bystander. He stated "But then I just realized that there's … nothing happening when you are bystanding. It's better when you are upstanding." Josh echoed this sentiment about feeling an intrinsic desire to take perceived risks to stop a bullying situation. Josh stated "Well I usually feel nervous just cuz the people who are bullying can be kinda intimidating sometimes. So I just tell myself 'well like I have to do the right thing here, because just, like, my obligation.'" In their statements, participants spoke about taking perceived risks intentionally along with their desire to act congruently with their personal values.

While student-advocates' personal values were associated to their decision to take perceived risks, student-advocates decision to intervene was connected to their experience implementing the STAC strategies. For example, Austin stated: "the first time I tried the STAC program, I had a lot more fear…even with all of the learning I did the STAC program, the learning itself doesn't really eliminate the fear, but…actually using it eliminates the fear." Thus, participants spoke about the STAC strategies as a vehicle by which they could engage in a bullying situation as a "defender." Austin further noted: "Like a lot of other stuff you just step in and say "don't do that" sometimes that makes you a target…. And…the way this is designed,…you don't become a target at all." Participants' feelings of vulnerability regarding becoming a target as a result of intervening was connected to the indirect nature of some of the STAC strategies such as "steal the show." Josh talked about this by stating:

> yeah usually my main concern is that if I get involved…I can become a target for trying to defend the person that was being bullied. But I think STAC kinda helps with that, cuz it makes a lot more indirect, so it doesn't seem like I'm really trying to…intervene,…if I used…steal the show then…they don't…. really get mad for….telling a joke….

It became clear that a positive sense of self was associated to implementing the STAC strategies and personal values. Participants drew meaning from the congruent meshing of values and action. Eric stated this simply: "strategies made me feel helpful and important." Austin described feeling like he had succeeded as a "defender" and walked away from intervening with positive feelings: "afterwards I went away feeling content and happy cuz the person listened to me and I'd been able to…put my point out there and I was glad they had listened." As participants spoke about feeling a positive sense of self from acting as "defenders," they also described how personal values were a part of a positive sense of self. Jackson spoke about this: "It's made me want to do more for others. Not just myself." Josh also shared about this theme by stating: "I just kinda see myself as doing more things for other people now that I use the STAC strategies instead of just being lazy. I actually feel like 'Hey I help other people instead of just helping myself.' Josh also noted: "I learned that I value how other people are feeling a lot more, because I…make myself more…privy to that."

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to explore the lived experience of student-advocates trained in the STAC program to act as "defenders." During in-depth interviews, students at a boarding high school reflected on the meaning of their experience utilizing the STAC strategies when they observed bullying within the context of their school. Four major themes emerged: 1) personal values, 2) taking perceived risks, 3) implementation of the STAC strategies, and 4) positive sense of self. Additionally, results revealed a congruency cycle when student-advocates intervened on behalf of victim of bullying.

The first theme in our findings was personal values. Student-advocates talked about their driving beliefs regarding how to act toward others and respond during bullying situations. Student-advocates discussed feeling a sense of personal responsibility to intervene on behalf of victims. This finding builds on previous studies in which bystanders who act as "defenders" also report increased commitment and personal responsibility toward victims of bullying (Gini et al., 2008; Karna, et al., 2011; Pozzoli & Ginni, 2010). This can increase civic engagement and serve as a first step for creating positive social change and shifting school climate.

The second theme was taking perceived risks. Student-advocates talked about being cautious in their decision to engage as a "defender." They also shared feeling afraid of being targeted and making enemies. Previous studies also found bystanders assess bullying situations for threat prior to making a decision on how to respond (Forberg et al. 2014). Additionally, this finding suggests that being exposed to bullying can decrease students' sense of safety, which according to Maslow (1968) must be present prior to adolescents developing self-esteem and moving toward self-actualization.

The third theme was implementation of the STAC strategies. Student-advocates talked about the applicability of the STAC intervention and identified a preferred strategy that seemed to align with their personality and perception of self. This theme is important because of the negative ramifications associated with bystanders not intervening on behalf of victims (Forberg et al., 2014; Hutchinson, 2012) due to not knowing what to do. This finding suggests that training bystanders in the STAC program can equip them with knowledge and skills to act as a "defender." While this finding builds on previous studies indicating the STAC program increases students' knowledge of the intervention strategies (Authors, 2015, Authors, in press, Authors, under review), it also extends the literature by suggesting students utilized the STAC strategies when they observed bullying at school.

The fourth theme in our study was positive sense of self. Student-advocates talked about feeling good about themselves when they acted as "defenders." They also discussed feeling like they made a difference, experienced a sense of accomplishment, and that the interventions became second nature to them. This is consistent with previous studies that also found students who intervene as "defenders" experience positive emotional outcomes (Authors, under review, Williford et al., 2012), which can potentially serve as a buffer against witnessing bullying.

Finally, an overall congruence cycle emerged appearing to reflect that despite potential risks, student-advocates utilized the STAC strategies, which served as a vehicle for congruent expression, as opposed to moral disengagement. Acting congruently was associated with strengthening personal values and a positive sense of self, which supports fundamental tenants of humanistic philosophy that congruent expression fosters healthy personality development (Rogers, 1959). Further, we found interpersonal relationships were a determining factor in student-advocates decision making regarding how to best intervene on behalf of victims, consistent with the deeply relational nature of humanistic ideology (Scholl et al., 2012; Task Force, 2004).

Limitations and Future Research

Although this study adds to the literature by furthering our understanding the mechanisms involved in equipping student bystanders to intervene as "defenders," certain limitation must be noted. The first limitation is the restricted demographic diversity of the participants. Although the participants represent different regions across the United States, all student-advocates identified as White, male adolescents. Thus, there is a need for future studies investigating the lived experience of students in more diverse settings trained in the STAC program. A second limitation is the number of participants in our study. Although the researchers achieved coding saturation, inclusion of additional participants may have provided richer explanations within the textural-structural description. A third limitation is that one of the participants was unable to attend the initial training provided by counselor education student trainers and was trained by the academic coordinator. This may have diminished the richness of his descriptions.

According to Moustakas (1994) the essence of the experience under investigation in a phenomenological study is never totally complete and only reflects a particular time and place for participants. Throughout the investigation, it became apparent that there may be a sequential nature to how student-advocates come to understand their role in bullying and what, if any, interventions they utilize. Future qualitative studies can build on the findings of this study and investigate the process that unfolds utilizing a grounded theory approach (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). Furthermore, future quantitative studies can investigate the relationship between personal values, taking perceived risks, implementing the STAC strategies, and positive sense of self, including randomization of participants and a control group allowing for causal inferences of variables.

Implications for Counselors

The results of this study can provide important implications for counselors regarding how to train bystanders to intervene in bullying situations. Counselors can teach clients who witness bullying the STAC strategies as a vehicle to intervene congruently. By empowering clients with knowledge and skills to act as "defenders," counselor can fight against beliefs that impede healthy development in adolescents who have been exposed to bullying such as people cannot be trusted, are likely to treat others unfairly, and will be not helpful or offer support when needed (Carney, Jacob, & Hazler, 2011). By increasing adolescents' social capital (Purkey & Novak, 2008) and empowering clients to act as "defenders," counselors can create systemic change by combating interpersonal violence. Counselors can help clients learn prosocial ways of interacting with peers during bullying situations that can connect them relationally and increase their trust in a system that is fair (Carney et al., 2011).

Conclusion

This study investigated how student-advocates trained to act as "defenders" give meaning to their experience utilizing the STAC strategies, so we can learn how to better incorporate bystanders intervening on behalf of victims in bullying situations. We found personal values, taking perceived risks, implementing the STAC strategies, and positive sense of self emerged as core themes. Additionally, a congruency cycle also emerged highlighting the importance of relationships in intervening. Overall, training students in the STAC program appears to be a promising approach to bullying intervention that can be implemented with significantly fewer resources than comprehensive school-wide programs that equip students to act as "defenders."

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