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A Mixed Methods Evaluation of the “Aged-Up” STAC Bullying Bystander Intervention for High School Students

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This mixed methods study assessed the appropriateness of an “aged-up,” brief bullying bystander intervention (STAC) and explored the lived experiences of high school students trained in the program. Quantitative results included an increase in knowledge and confidence to intervene in bullying situations, awareness of bullying, and use of the STAC strategies. Utilizing the consensual qualitative research methodology, we found students spoke about (a) increased awareness of bullying situations, leading to a heightened sense of responsibility to act; (b) a sense of empowerment to take action, resulting in positive feelings; (c) fears related to intervening in bullying situations; and (d) the natural fit of the intervention strategies. Implications for counselors include the role of the school counselor in program implementation and training school staff to support student “defenders,” as well as how counselors in other settings can work with clients to learn the STAC strategies through psychoeducation and skills practice.

Keywords: bullying, bystander intervention, consensual qualitative research (CQR), high school, mixed methods

Researchers have defined bullying as “when one or more students tease, threaten, spread rumors about, hit, shove, or hurt another student over and over again” (Centers for Disease Control & Prevention [CDCP], 2017, p. 7). Bullying includes verbal, physical, or relational aggression, as it often occurs through the use of technology (e.g., cyberbullying). National statistics indicate approximately 20.5% of high school students are victims of bullying at school and 15.8% are victims of cyberbullying (CDCP, National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, 2016). Although school bullying peaks in middle school, it remains a significant problem at the high school level, with the highest rates of cyberbullying reported by high school seniors (18.7%; U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2016).

There are wide-ranging negative consequences experienced by students who are exposed to bullying as either a target or bystander (Bauman, Toomey, & Walker, 2013; Doumas, Midgett, & Johnston, 2017; Hertz, Everett Jones, Barrios, David-Ferdon, & Holt, 2015; Rivers & Noret, 2013; Rivers, Poteat, Noret, & Ashurst, 2009; Smalley, Warren, & Barefoot, 2017). High school students who are *targets* of bullying report higher levels of risky health behaviors, including physical inactivity, less sleep, risky sexual practices (Hertz et al., 2015), elevated substance use (Doumas et al., 2017; Smalley et al., 2017), and higher levels of depression and suicidal ideation (Bauman et al., 2013; Smalley et al., 2017). Adolescents who *observe* bullying as bystanders also report associated negative consequences, and, in some instances, report more problems than students who are directly involved in bullying situations (Rivers & Noret, 2013; Rivers et al., 2009). Specifically, bystanders have been found to be at higher risk for substance abuse and overall mental health concerns than students who are targets (Rivers et al., 2009). Bystanders also are significantly more likely to report symptoms of helplessness and potential suicidal ideation compared to students not involved in bullying (Rivers & Noret, 2013). Furthermore, although bystanders are often successful when they intervene on behalf of targets of

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bullying (Gage, Prykanowski, & Larson, 2014), bystanders usually do not intervene because they do not know what to do (Forsberg, Thornberg, & Samuelsson, 2014; Hutchinson, 2012). Failure to respond to observed bullying leads to feelings of guilt (Hutchinson, 2012) and coping through moral disengagement (Forsberg et al., 2014). Thus, there is a need to train bystanders to intervene to both reduce bullying and buffer bystanders from the negative consequences associated with observing bullying without acting.

To address the negative effects that can result from being exposed to bullying, researchers have developed numerous bullying prevention and intervention programs for implementation within the school setting. Many of these programs are comprehensive, school-wide interventions (Polanin, Espelage, & Pigott, 2012; Ttofi, Farrington, Lösel, & Loeber, 2011). However, findings indicate these programs are most effective for students in middle and elementary school (Yeager, Fong, Lee, & Espelage, 2015). Additionally, a recent meta-analysis indicates that bystander intervention is an important component of bullying intervention; however, few comprehensive programs include a bystander component (Polanin et al., 2012). Further, those programs that do include a bystander component have been normed on children within the context of the classroom setting (Salmivalli, 2010). High school students experience greater independence at school, with less adult supervision in the hallways and at lunch, and move to different classroom locations throughout the day. Thus, there is a need for effective bullying bystander programs and interventions that have been “aged up” specifically for the high school level (Denny et al., 2015).

The STAC Program

The STAC program is a brief bystander intervention that teaches students who witness bullying to intervene as “defenders” (Midgett, Doumas, Sears, Lundquist, & Hausheer, 2015). The STAC acronym stands for the four bullying intervention strategies taught in the program: “Stealing the Show,” “Turning It Over,” “Accompanying Others,” and “Coaching Compassion.” The second author created the STAC program for the middle and elementary school level with the intention of establishing school counselors as leaders in program implementation. The program includes a 90-minute training with bi-weekly, 15-minute small group follow-up meetings, placing low demands on schools for implementation. Findings from studies conducted at the elementary and middle school level indicate students trained in the STAC program report an increase in knowledge and confidence to intervene as defenders (Midgett et al., 2015; Midgett & Doumas, 2016; Midgett, Doumas, & Trull, 2017), as well as increased use of the STAC strategies (Midgett, Doumas, Trull, & Johnston, 2017). Additionally, research demonstrates students trained in the STAC program report reductions in bullying (Midgett, Doumas, Trull, & Johnson, 2017), as well as increases in self-esteem (Midgett, Doumas, & Trull, 2017) and decreases in anxiety (Midgett, Doumas, Trull, & Johnston, 2017), compared to students in a control group.

Development of the STAC Program for High School

The authors conducted a previous qualitative study to inform the modification of the original STAC program to be appropriate for the high school level (for details, see Midgett, Doumas, Johnston, et al., 2017). Based upon data generated from high school students, the authors “aged up” the STAC program by incorporating the following content into the didactic and role-play components of the training: (a) cyberbullying through social media and texting, (b) group dynamics in bullying, and (c) bullying in dating and romantic relationships. The authors also aged up the program by including developmentally appropriate language (e.g., breaks vs. recess) and content, including common locations where bullying occurs (e.g., school parking lot vs. the school bus) and age-appropriate examples of physical bullying (e.g., covert behaviors such as “shoulder checking,” “backpack checking,” and “tripping” vs. physical fights).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to extend the literature by evaluating the appropriateness of the aged-up STAC program for the high school level and to explore the experiences of students trained in the program. Following guidelines suggested by Leech and Onwuegbuzie (2010), the literature review guided the formulation of the study rationale, goal, objectives, and research questions. Despite the need to provide anti-bullying programs to high school students, the majority of bullying intervention research has been conducted with elementary and middle school students (Denny et al., 2015). Although intervening on behalf of students who are targets of bullying is associated with positive outcomes (Hawkins, Pepler, & Craig, 2001), research on bystander intervention programs aged up for high school students is limited. The present authors could find only one program, *StandUP*, developed specifically for high school students. Results of a pilot study indicated students participating in the 3-session *StandUP* online program reported an increase in positive bystander behavior and decreases in bullying behavior (Timmons-Mitchell, Levesque, Harris, Flannery, & Falcone, 2016). The research noted several methodological limitations that limit the generalizability and validity of the findings, including a 6.8% response rate, 22% attrition rate with differential attrition by race and bullying status, and the use of a single-group design.

Thus, the goal of this study was to add to the knowledge on bullying interventions for high school students. Our objectives were to (a) examine the influence of the STAC program on knowledge and confidence, awareness of bullying, and use of the STAC strategies, and (b) describe and explore the experience of high school students participating in the STAC intervention. We were interested in answering the following mixed method research questions: (a) Do students trained in the aged-up STAC intervention report an increase in knowledge and confidence to intervene as defenders? (b) Do students trained in the aged-up STAC intervention have an increased awareness of bullying? (c) Do students trained in the aged-up STAC intervention use the STAC strategies to intervene when they observe bullying? and (d) What were high school students' experiences of participating in the aged-up STAC intervention and using the STAC strategies to intervene in bullying situations?

Methods

Mixed Research Design

A mixed methods design was implemented with a single group of participants who completed the STAC training. We were interested in the influence of the STAC intervention on students' knowledge and confidence, awareness of bullying, and use of the STAC strategies. An additional interest was to understand students' experiences of the STAC training. The purpose of selecting a mixed methods design was to maximize interpretation of findings, as mixed methods designs often result in a greater understanding of complex phenomena than either quantitative or qualitative studies can produce alone (Creswell, 2013). Hesse-Biber (2010) also advocates for the convergence of qualitative and quantitative data to enhance and triangulate findings. Following the guidelines described by Leech and Onwuegbuzie (2010), we chose to supplement the quantitative data with qualitative data to investigate the in-depth, lived experiences of high school students trained as defenders in the aged-up STAC program. Our research design was a partially mixed, sequential design (Creswell, 2009; Leech & Onwuegbuzie, 2010). The quantitative design was a single-group repeated-measures design and the qualitative component included consensual qualitative research (CQR; Hill et al., 2005).

Participants

Our sampling design was sequential-identical (Leech & Onwuegbuzie, 2010), with the same participants completing surveys followed by focus groups. The sample consisted of 22 students

($n = 15$ females [68.2%]; $n = 7$ males [31.8%]) recruited from a public high school via stratified random sampling in the Northwestern region of the United States. Participants ranged in age from 15–18 years old ($M = 16.82$ and $SD = 0.91$), with reported racial backgrounds of 59.1% White, 18.2% Asian, 13.6% Hispanic, and 9.1% African American. Of the 22 participants trained in the STAC program, 100% participated in follow-up focus groups and follow-up data collection.

Procedures

The current study was completed as part of a larger study designed to develop and test the effectiveness of the aged-up STAC intervention. Following institutional research board approval, the researchers randomly selected 200 students using stratified proportionate sampling and then obtained parental consent and student assent from 57 students, for a response rate of 28.5%. The current sample consists of the 22 students who participated in the STAC intervention. The recruiting team included school counselors, a doctoral student, and master's students. A team member met briefly with students selected to discuss the project and provided an informed consent form to be signed by a parent or guardian. A team member met with students with parental consent to explain the research in greater detail and to obtain student assent. Researchers trained participants in the 90-minute aged-up STAC program and then conducted two 15-minute bi-weekly follow-up meetings for 30 days following the training. Students completed baseline, post-training, and 30-day follow-up surveys. Six weeks after the STAC training, team members conducted three 45-minute open-ended, semi-structured focus groups to investigate students' experiences being trained as defenders in the aged-up STAC program. Researchers audio recorded the focus groups for transcription purposes. The team provided pizza to students after the follow-up survey and at the end of each focus group. The university and school district review boards approved all research procedures.

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 SAPPS has established content validity and adequate internal consistency with Cronbach's alpha ranging from .75–.81 (Midgett et al., 2015; Midgett & Dumas, 2016; Midgett, Dumas, & Trull, 2017; Midgett, Dumas, Trull, & Johnston, 2017). Cronbach's alpha was .83 for this sample.

Awareness of Bullying. Awareness of bullying was assessed using one item. Students were asked to respond *Yes* or *No* to the following question: "Have you seen bullying at school in the past month?" Prior research has used this question to test the impact of the STAC program on observing and identifying bullying behavior post-training (Midgett, Dumas, Trull, & Johnston, 2017).

Use of STAC Strategies. The use of each STAC strategy was measured by 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*). Prior research has used these items to examine use of STAC strategies post-training (Midgett, Doumas, Trull, & Johnston, 2017).

High School Students' Experiences. Researchers followed Hill et al.'s (2005) recommendation to develop a semi-structured interview protocol to answer the question, "What were high school students' experiences of participating in the aged-up STAC intervention and using the STAC strategies to intervene in bullying situations?" Researchers developed questions based on previous qualitative findings with middle school students (Midgett, Moody, Reilly, & Lyter, 2017), quantitative results indicating students trained in the program use the STAC strategies (Midgett, Moody, et al., 2017), and a review of the literature (Jacob & Furgerson, 2012). Researchers asked students the following questions: (1) Can you please talk about the personal values you had before the STAC training that were in line with what you learned during the STAC training? (2) Please share your experience using the STAC strategies (*Stealing the Show*, *Turning It Over*, *Accompanying Others*, and *Coaching Compassion*), (3) Can you share how using the STAC strategies made you feel about yourself? (4) How did being trained in the STAC program impact your relationships? (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?

The STAC Intervention

The STAC intervention began with a 90-minute training, which included information about bullying and strategies for intervening in bullying situations (Midgett et al., 2015). Following the training, facilitators met with students twice for 15 minutes throughout the subsequent 30 days to support them as they applied what they learned in the training. During these meetings, researchers reviewed the STAC strategies with students, and asked students about bullying situations they witnessed and whether they utilized a strategy. If students indicated they observed bullying but did not utilize a strategy, researchers helped students brainstorm ways in which they could utilize one of the four STAC strategies in the future.

Didactic Component. The didactic component included icebreaker exercises, an audiovisual presentation, two videos about bullying, and hands-on activities to engage students in the learning process. Students learned about (a) the complex nature of bullying in high school often involving group dynamics rather than single individuals; (b) different types of bullying, with a focus on cyberbullying and covert physical bullying; (c) characteristics of students who bully, including the likelihood they have been bullied themselves, to foster empathy and separate the behavior from the student; (d) negative associated consequences of bullying for students who are targets, perpetrate bullying, and are bystanders; (e) bystander roles and the importance of acting as a defender; and (f) the STAC strategies used for intervening in bullying situations. The four strategies are described below.

Stealing the Show. *Stealing the Show* involves using humor or distraction to turn students' attention away from the bullying situation. Trainers teach bystanders to interrupt a bullying situation to displace the peer audience's attention away from the target (e.g., tell a joke, initiate a conversation with the student who is being bullied, or invite peers to play a group game such as basketball).

Turning It Over. *Turning It Over* involves informing an adult about the situation and asking for help. During the training, students identify safe adults at school who can help. Students are taught to always "turn it over" if there is physical bullying taking place or if they are unsure as to how to intervene. Trainers also emphasized the importance of documenting evidence in cyberbullying cases by taking a screenshot or picture of the computer or cell phone over time for authorities (i.e., school principal and resource officer) to take action.

Accompanying Others. Accompanying Others involves the bystander reaching out to the student who was targeted to communicate that what happened is not acceptable, that the student who was targeted is not alone, and that the student bystander cares about them. Trainers provide examples of how students can use this strategy either directly, by inviting a student who was targeted to talk about the situation, or indirectly, by approaching a peer after they were targeted and inviting them to go to lunch or spend time with the bystander. This strategy focuses on communicating empathy and support to the student who was targeted.

Coaching Compassion. Coaching Compassion involves gently confronting the student who bullied either during or after the bullying incident to communicate that his or her behavior is unacceptable. Additionally, the student bystander encourages the student who bullied to consider what it would feel like to be the target in the situation, thereby fostering empathy toward the target. Bystanders are encouraged to implement Coaching Compassion when they have a relationship with the student who bullied or if the student who bullied is in a lower grade and the bystander believes they will respect them.

Role-Plays. Trainers divided students into small groups to practice the STAC strategies through role-plays that included hypothetical bullying situations. The team developed the scenarios based on student feedback on types of bullying that occur in high school, including cyberbullying, romantic relationship issues, and covert physical bullying (Midgett, Doumas, Johnston, Trull, & Miller, 2017). See Appendix A for the STAC scenarios.

Post-Training Groups. STAC training participants met in 15-minute groups with two graduate student trainers twice in the 30 days post-training. In these meetings, students reviewed the STAC strategies, shared which strategies they used, and explained whether they felt the strategies were effective in intervening in bullying. Trainers also addressed questions and supported students in brainstorming other ways to implement the strategies, including combining strategies or working as a group to intervene together.

Data Analysis

Quantitative. The authors used quantitative analyses to test for significant changes in knowledge and confidence and to provide descriptive statistics for frequency of awareness of bullying and the use of the STAC strategies. An *a priori* power analysis was conducted using the G*Power 3.1.3 program (Faul, Erdfelder, Lang, & Buchner, 2007) for a repeated-measures, within-subjects ANOVA with three time points. Results of the power analysis indicated a sample size of 20 was needed for power of ≥ 0.80 to detect a medium effect size for the main effect of time with an alpha level of .05. Thus, the final sample size of 22 met the needed size to provide adequate power for analyses.

Before conducting primary analyses, all variables were examined for outliers and normality. The authors found no outliers and all variables were within the normal range for skew and kurtosis. To assess changes in knowledge and confidence, we conducted a GLM repeated-measures ANOVA with one independent variable, time (baseline, post-intervention, follow-up), and post-hoc follow-up paired t-tests to examine differences between time points. To evaluate awareness of bullying, we computed descriptive statistics to determine how many participants observed bullying at baseline and follow-up. To evaluate the use of STAC strategies, we computed descriptive statistics to examine the frequency of use of each strategy at the follow-up assessment. The authors used an alpha level of $p < .05$ to determine statistical significance and used partial eta squared (η_p^2) as the measure of effect size for the repeated-measures ANOVA and Cohen's *d* for paired t-test with magnitude of effects

interpreted as follows: small ($\eta^2_p > .01$; $d = .20$), medium ($\eta^2_p > .06$; $d = .50$), and large ($\eta^2_p > .14$; $d = .80$; Cohen, 1969; Richardson, 2011). All analyses were conducted using SPSS version 24.0.

Qualitative. The authors conducted focus groups and employed CQR methodology to investigate participant experiences (Hill et al., 2005). Specifically, CQR was chosen because it uses elements from phenomenology, grounded theory, and comprehensive process (Hill et al., 2005). CQR is predominantly constructivist with postmodern influence (Hill et al., 2005), which was a good fit for the project as we were interested in students' experiences being trained in the aged-up STAC program. Furthermore, we selected CQR because it includes semi-structured interviews to promote the exploration of participants' experiences, while also allowing for spontaneous probes that can uncover related experiences and insights, adding depth to findings (Hill et al., 2005). CQR was well suited for this study because it requires a team of researchers working together to reach consensus analyzing complex data (Hill et al., 2005). Focus groups were chosen because they allow researchers to observe participants' interactions and shared experiences such as teasing, joking, and anecdotes that can add depth to the findings (Kitzinger, 1995). Focus groups have potential therapeutic benefits for participants, including increasing feelings of self-worth (Powell & Single, 1996) and empowerment (Race, Hotch, & Parker, 1994). Additionally, focus groups can be especially useful when power differentials exist between participants and decision makers (Morgan & Kreuger, 1993).

Three team members (the first and second authors and a master's in counseling student) employed the CQR methodology to analyze the data. After the data transcription, each member worked individually to identify domains and core ideas prior to meeting as a group. The team met three times in the next month to achieve consensus. Researchers relied on participant quotations to resolve disagreements, to cross-analyze the data, and to move into more abstract levels of analysis (Hill et al., 2005). The team labeled domains as general (typical of all but one participant or all participants), typical (more than half of participants), and variant (at least two participants; Hill et al., 2005). An external auditor analyzed the data separately, utilizing NVivo qualitative analysis software (Version 10; 2012), and reported similar findings with the exception of a minor modification to one domain, which the team incorporated into final findings. Next, the researchers conducted member checks (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) by emailing all participants with an overview of the findings. All participants who responded agreed the findings were an accurate representation of their experience.

Strategies for Trustworthiness. As recommended by Hays, Wood, Dahl, and Kirk-Jenkins (2016), we used multiple strategies to strengthen the trustworthiness of the study. First, our process was reflexive with continuous awareness of expectations and biases. Prior to conducting focus groups, we discussed and wrote memos about our expectations and biases (Creswell, 2013). To triangulate data, all three analysts were involved throughout the process and in comparing findings among the team. An external auditor was included to provide oversight and increase credibility of findings. Once all researchers reached agreement about major findings, we elicited participant feedback to increase credibility and confirmability of our findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Findings

Knowledge and Confidence

The researchers examined changes in knowledge and confidence across three time points (baseline, post-intervention, and follow-up). Results indicated a significant main effect for time: Wilks' Lambda = .31, $F(2, 20) = 6.85$, $p < .000$, $\eta^2_p = .31$. Follow-up paired t-tests indicated a significant difference in

knowledge and confidence between baseline ($M = 35.68$, $SD = 4.35$) and post-intervention ($M = 40.64$, $SD = 3.11$), $t(21) = -6.52$, $p < .001$, Cohen's $d = -1.46$; and between baseline ($M = 35.68$, $SD = 4.35$) and 30-day follow-up ($M = 40.68$, $SD = 4.10$), $t(21) = -4.96$, $p < .001$, Cohen's $d = -1.06$; but not between post-intervention ($M = 40.64$, $SD = 3.11$) and 30-day follow-up ($M = 40.68$, $SD = 4.10$), $t(21) = -0.05$, $p = .96$, Cohen's $d = -.01$. Findings indicate students reported an increase in knowledge and confidence from baseline to post-intervention, and this increase was sustained at the 30-day follow-up.

Awareness of Bullying

The researchers examined rates of observing bullying at baseline and at the 30-day follow-up to determine if students became more aware of bullying after being trained in the STAC program. Rates of observing bullying increased from 54.5% to 63.6%, indicating that the STAC program raised awareness of bullying.

Use of the STAC Strategies

The researchers examined how frequently students in the intervention group used the STAC strategies at the 30-day follow-up. Among students who reported witnessing bullying (63.6%, $n = 14$), 100% indicated using one or more STAC strategies in the past month. Specifically, 64.3% reported using Stealing the Show, 42.9% reported using Turning It Over, 100% reported using Accompany Others, and 85.7% reported using Coaching Compassion.

Qualitative

Through CQR analysis, the team agreed on four domains with supporting core ideas. All of the domains below are general or typical and endorsed by participants via member checks.

Domain 1: Awareness and Sense of Responsibility. Participants ($n = 8$; 57%) talked about the STAC program enhancing their awareness of bullying behavior and increasing their sense of responsibility to act. Students spoke about some types of bullying being difficult to recognize and that the STAC training helped them become more aware of covert bullying situations. One participant gave an example about being able to recognize types of bullying that can often be overlooked. The student shared, "People look like they're joking around and you . . . ignore it, but now it's like they're not [joking]. You can tell a little bit. I think . . . [the STAC program] brought . . . [awareness] out in us." Students also talked about their experience being able to recognize different types of bullying and being equipped to intervene, as well as becoming aware that their actions can have an impact on others. One participant shared that "learning the different ways you can address . . . [bullying] also helps you realize the different forms it happens in, so it makes you value being aware of what's going on and how your own actions affect other people." Another student also spoke about the connection between being trained to act as a defender and a newfound sense of responsibility and shared that after STAC training, "there's not really a reason to say that you don't want to [get involved] because you're scared, because you know what's happening to the person is wrong and if you can change it, you should." Another participant stated that "there's some others that don't have this training, so we're the ones that should be stepping in if we see it. Everyone should, but . . . we know what to do."

Domain 2: Empowerment and Positive Feelings. Participants ($n = 9$; 64%) spoke about a sense of empowerment and associated positive feelings that came from using the STAC strategies to intervene in bullying situations. For example, one participant stated, "It makes you feel a little bit more empowered because you realize you actually can make a difference in someone else's life or in the whole community at your school or community in general." Students also talked about the STAC program empowering them to make decisions about their friendships. A participant shared,

“I actually told some people I didn’t want to talk to them or be friends with them [because] I can’t be around someone who is making fun of people with disabilities. . . . So, it changed the way I picked my friends.” Some students talked about the association between a sense of empowerment to make a difference in a bullying situation and feeling good about themselves and helping other students. A student said, “I feel like it made us feel good, like we made a positive difference in some way regarding the person that’s being bullied. So it makes it feel like we did something good, like a good deed.” Another student shared, “Somebody actually went to talk to him [ethnic minority student who was bullied] . . . and that was me. It was good to see him happy after he was feeling sad.”

Domain 3: Fears. Almost all participants ($n = 12$; 86%) spoke about how acting as a defender elicited fears related to judgment from peers or creating tension with friends. For example, one student shared, “I have a fear of being judged, which is kind of the thing of bullying. So, I try not to be so active with people at school.” Another participant also talked about fears related to peer judgment and creating tension with friends when utilizing the STAC strategy Accompanying Others by having lunch with a student who was a target of bullying. The student said, “It’s a social fear, or like ‘why are you hanging out with them?’ . . . and it’s kind of tense between you and your other friends because you brought this person that they didn’t want.” Students also talked about fears of making a situation worse. In particular, participants spoke about fears about reporting bullying situations to adults by using the STAC strategy Turning It Over. For example, one participant stated, “When you get teachers involved or your parents . . . [bullying] kind of . . . escalates . . . a lot of kids will avoid going to adults if they can until it gets physical.” However, most participants were encouraged to act despite their fears, and many discovered that the STAC program allowed them to overcome their fears. One participant stated, “I think starting out my biggest fear was that [using STAC strategies] wasn’t going to do anything, that nothing was going to change, but it really did, and I was pretty shocked that I had a positive effect on people.”

Domain 4: Natural Fit of STAC Strategies and Being Equipped to Intervene. Many participants ($n = 10$; 71%) indicated the STAC strategies were a natural fit and equipped them with tools to intervene when they witnessed bullying. For example, one student shared, “Stealing the Show [was a natural fit]. I think it happened during accelerated PE. Someone was making fun of someone’s bench max, and I could tell the person was uncomfortable, so I just made a joke or something and changed the subject.” Another participant spoke about Coaching Compassion: “It’s probably one of my favorite ones because it actually does something in the moment, [and] it actually taught me how I can put out the effort without feeling uncomfortable when doing it.” Further, participants shared that implementing the strategies increased their knowledge and confidence to intervene. For example, one participant shared, “You know when to use them [the strategies] and when it’s not necessary and how far you should go when using them.” The strategies seemed to successfully meet participants at their level of understanding and equip them with more structure and guidance to intervene more confidently and consistently.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to investigate the appropriateness of the aged-up STAC program for the high school level and to explore the experiences of high school students trained in the program. Quantitative data indicated students trained in the aged-up program reported an increase in knowledge and confidence to intervene and an increase in awareness of bullying, and also reported using the STAC strategies when they observed bullying at school. Qualitative data enhanced the interpretation of quantitative findings, depicting students’ experiences being trained in the program and using the STAC strategies.

Findings indicate that participating in the STAC training was associated with an increased awareness and sense of responsibility. Reported rates of observing bullying increased from baseline to the 30-day follow-up (54.5% to 63.6%). These findings are consistent with research showing students trained in the STAC program report increased awareness of bullying behavior (Midgett, Doumas, Trull, & Johnston, 2017). Further, students indicated that once they became aware of covert bullying, they felt responsible to intervene. One explanation for this finding is that participating in the training leads to an increase in awareness of bullying situations, which promotes a sense of responsibility to act. This explanation is consistent with research suggesting that awareness of negative consequences to others leads to an increase in feelings of personal responsibility, which in turn, leads to action (de Groot & Steg, 2009).

Our data also revealed that the STAC training was associated with an increase in knowledge and confidence and a sense of empowerment associated with positive feelings and changes in friendships. These findings are consistent with research showing that when students intervene in bullying situations they feel a sense of congruence, a positive sense of self (Midgett, Moody, et al., 2017), and a sense of well-being (Schwartz, Keyl, Marcum, & Bode, 2009). Researchers also have shown that when bystanders do not intervene, the lack of action leads to guilt (Hutchinson, 2012) and moral disengagement (Forsberg et al., 2014). Further, researchers have found that students have a desire to belong to a peer group with similar values in “defending” behaviors as their own (Sijtsema, Rambaran, Caravita, & Gini, 2014). Thus, it is possible that the confidence and positive feelings associated with being trained to act as defenders extended to feeling empowered to disengage from peers who do not intervene on behalf of targets of bullying.

Results indicated students used Turning It Over the least frequently among the strategies, with only 49% of students using this strategy. This finding is in direct contrast to research with middle school students suggesting Turning It Over is used by 91% of students (Midgett, Doumas, Trull, & Johnston, 2017). Qualitative data revealed that students felt fearful about intervening; specifically, students talked about being afraid that Turning It Over to an adult would make the situation worse. This finding parallels research suggesting that high school students believe adults at school do not handle bullying effectively (Midgett, Doumas, Johnston, et al., 2017) and that when they report bullying to teachers, the situation either remains the same or worsens (Fekkes, Pijpers, & Verloove-Vanhorick, 2005). Coupled with research indicating students are more likely to report bullying when they believe their teachers will act (Cortes & Kochenderfer-Ladd, 2014) and will be effective in intervening (Veenstra, Lindenberg, Huitsing, Sainio, & Salmivalli, 2014), our findings suggest it may be useful to provide teachers with knowledge and skills so that they may effectively support students who report bullying.

Finally, findings indicated that 100% of students who witnessed bullying post-training used at least one STAC strategy and that students experienced the STAC strategies as a natural fit and felt equipped with tools to act in bullying situations. These findings are consistent with prior research indicating students trained in the STAC program report using the strategies (Midgett, Moody, et al., 2017; Midgett, Doumas, Trull, & Johnston, 2017). The most frequently used strategies were Accompanying Others and Coaching Compassion, used by 100% and 85.7% of students, respectively. One explanation for these two strategies being the most natural fit for students is that the formation of peer relationships is an important developmental priority for adolescents (Wang & Eccles, 2012). Accompanying Others allows students to foster relationships in a way that feels natural and altruistic. Also, as adolescents mature emotionally and their ability to empathize grows (Allemand, Steiger, & Fend, 2015), Coaching Compassion can encourage bystanders and students who bully to develop empathy toward targets.

Limitations and Future Research

Although this study contributes to the literature regarding developmentally appropriate bullying interventions for high school students, several limitations must be considered. First, because of our small sample size and lack of control group, we cannot make causal attributions or generalize our findings to the larger high school student population. Although we enhanced the significance of our findings with a mixed methods design, there is a need for future studies investigating the efficacy of the aged-up STAC program through a randomized controlled trial. Further, since our study was intended as a first step in the development of an age-appropriate program for high school, we did not assess decreases in bullying victimization or perpetration. Therefore, future randomized controlled trial studies should include these outcome variables. Another limitation is related to the measures used. Specifically, both awareness of bullying and use of each STAC strategy were measured by a single item, which can result in decreased reliability. Further, although the developers constructed the items to have face validity, there are no studies investigating the psychometric properties of these items in measuring awareness of bullying or use of the STAC strategies. Additionally, our quantitative and qualitative findings were based on self-report data. It is possible that students' responses were influenced by their desire to please the researchers, especially within the context of the focus groups. Thus, including objective measures of observable defending behaviors would strengthen the findings.

Practical Implications

Our findings provide important implications for counselors in both school and other settings. First, high school counselors can implement aged-up bullying intervention programs such as the STAC program. High school counselors can find encouragement in our findings indicating high school students are invested in helping reduce school bullying and that being trained to intervene can be associated with increased awareness and sense of responsibility. Further, findings suggest it might be helpful for school counselors to provide students trained in the program with an opportunity to meet in small groups to foster friendships with peers who are committed to acting as defenders.

Results also suggest that high school students believe reporting bullying to adults may not be an effective strategy. School counselors are well positioned as student advocates to establish anonymous reporting procedures to counteract potential student fears related to being negatively perceived when they report bullying to adults. In all bullying intervention efforts, school counselors should coordinate with administration to ensure success. School counselors can facilitate teacher and staff development to help them understand students' fears related to reporting bullying and provide teachers with necessary tools to help students who report bullying to them. Additionally, although a teacher training would increase the required time and resources needed to implement the STAC program, it may be an important addition at the high school level. In this module, school counselors could educate teachers about bullying and the STAC strategies so that teachers could reinforce the strategies with students. The training would emphasize Turning It Over, explaining to teachers their important role in helping student bystanders intervene when they observe bullying.

Lastly, this study also has implications for counselors working with adolescents outside the school setting. There are negative associated consequences to witnessing bullying as a bystander (Rivers & Noret, 2013; Rivers et al., 2009). In addition, adolescents report not knowing how to intervene on behalf of targets (Forsberg et al., 2014; Hutchinson, 2012), which can lead to feelings of guilt (Hutchinson, 2012). Thus, counselors can empower clients to act as defenders by providing psychoeducation regarding the STAC strategies. They can focus on strategies that clients feel are a natural fit as a starting point. Counselors can encourage clients to share bullying situations they most commonly observe at school and invite clients to talk through how they could use a favorite STAC strategy.

Bullying is a significant problem among high school students. This study provided support for the aged-up STAC intervention as an anti-bullying approach that is appropriate for high school students. Specifically, the STAC program helped students be more aware of bullying, feel a stronger sense of responsibility to intervene, and feel empowered to use the STAC strategies.

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Appendix A

Aged-Up STAC Scenarios

Scenario 1

In the PE locker room, you overhear some girls talking about another girl who is going through a break-up. You hear them call her a “loser” (and some other hurtful names) and gossip about the reasons she and her boyfriend broke up. They also talk about how the girl is not skinny or pretty enough to date the guy.

Scenario 2

For a few weeks during break, you have noticed a group of students stand in the middle of the hallway and “shoulder check” another student as he tries to walk by to get to his next class on the other side of the school. Today, the student is tripped by one of the students standing with a group and something he was carrying was damaged.

Scenario 3

Your friends are hanging out at your house after school, looking through Twitter. One friend decided to follow a girl from school that they do not like and then repost one of her posts making fun of her in a humiliating way. This is not the first time your friend has done something like this.

Scenario 4

You are in the parking lot and suddenly you hear yelling coming from a car that is trying to pull out of a parking spot. You see a guy yelling at his girlfriend that she can’t go to lunch with a certain friend because he saw the text messages they sent last night. You know this happens a lot with this guy, and you’ve been concerned for a while.