A pilot study of an adapted social and emotional learning intervention in an alternative school

By: Jonathan Ohrt, Brooke Wymer, Jessie Guest, Christopher Hipp, Donya Wallace, and Jennifer Deaton

Abstract:

Students who attend alternative schools are disproportionally at risk for adverse environmental, familial, and personal experiences that can lead to unrecognized learning problems, low academic achievement, mental health concerns, substance abuse, and legal involvement. Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) programs include evidence-based interventions that increase students' academic and behavioral performance, and improve mental health and well-being. However, there is a lack of literature focused on implementing SEL interventions in alternative school settings. Given the benefits of SEL interventions and the significant needs of students who attend alternative schools, we examined the feasibility of implementing an adapted SEL intervention in an alternative school setting. We present the findings and provide recommendations to improve implementation of future SEL programs in alternative schools.

Keywords: alternative schools | at-risk youth | feasibility | social and emotional learning

Article:

In 2016–2017, the U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), 2018) reported 475,015 students being served in alternative school settings in the United States. According to Sable et al. (2010) alternative education programs are elementary or secondary schools that provide education to students whose specific needs exceed what can be provided in a traditional school setting. Lehr et al. (2004) further defined an alternative school as "a short term intervention program designed to develop academic and behavioral skills for students who have been removed from the regular school" (p. 9). Although alternative schools may focus on a range of student needs, including those who are academically or artistically gifted, many schools focus on who are on the verge of being expelled from the school system

due to disciplinary concerns. Schools that serve students at-risk of expulsion are often referred to as disciplinary alternative education program (DAEPs).

Students who are placed in DAEPs are often struggling with academic failure, antisocial attitudes, and with interpersonal relationships with peers and authority figures (Fuller & Sabatino, 1996). Based on a research synthesis of data from 33 states regarding alternative schools, researchers found that students in alternative schools are at a high risk for behavioral and emotional issues that could lead to being suspended or expelled, low school attendance, and likelihood for dropping out of school prematurely (Lehr et al., 2009). In addition, students in alternative schools are more likely to have experienced problems with learning, adverse environmental and familial experiences, and legal involvement (Lehr et al., 2009). Recently, alternative schools have become synonymous with at-risk youth who have negative behavioral, learning, or academic characteristics (Kim & Taylor, 2008; McNulty & Roseboro, 2009; Rubens et al., 2019).

Researchers have found mixed results related to the effectiveness of alternative schools focused on behavioral concerns. Chiang and Gill (2010) found that students in behavior-focused alternative schools score lower on standardized reading and math tests. Afacan and Wilkerson (2019) also found that middle school students attending an alternative school scored significantly lower on standardized reading assessments. Wilkerson et al. (2016) found that high school students attending alternative schools had significantly lower school attendance and few academic credits. The authors did find that the students had significantly fewer disciplinary referrals compared to a matched sample of students in a traditional school setting.

Alternative schools are designed to be temporary placements that provide targeted academic and behavioral interventions for students (Lehr et al., 2004). Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) programs often improve the academic, behavioral, and overall well-being of children and adolescents. The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL), 2017) outlines the competencies students can gain from SEL programs which include ability to make decisions effectively, engage in healthy relationships, as well as maintain awareness of and ability to manage emotions in pro-social ways. A meta-analysis conducted by Durlak et al. (2011) included 213 social and emotional learning programs implemented in schools, and included 270,034 children from kindergarten to grade 12. Compared to control groups, these programs produced 11% achievement improvements in the children's utilization of SEL skills, along with increased academic and behavioral performance. Jones et al. (2015) completed a fast-track, nonintervention longitudinal study and found significance between aptitude of social and emotional learning skills in kindergarten and personal well-being in young adulthood as measured by educational and professional achievement and overall mental health. Thus, SEL curricular consistently improve children and adolescent's overall academic performance and future well-being (Durlak et al., 2011).

Although SEL programs have been successful, it is important for the interventions to be implemented with fidelity (Durlak et al., 2011). There are sometimes challenges to implementing such programs within the unique structures of school settings. Some barriers to implementation in school settings include but are not limited to: (a) disruption of class, (b) parental consent to

engage in treatment/services during school, and (c) interference with student's coursework (de Anda, 2007). In addition, schools are tasked with meeting the needs of a diverse population of students with very limited resources (Greenberg et al., 2003). Previous researchers have demonstrated that ability to implement SEL programs in traditional school settings (Durlak, et al., 2011). However, alternative schools may face even greater challenges as these schools operate under different policies and serve a more diverse and higher need population of students (Mullen & Lambie, 2013). Further, alternative schools are required to meet the unique academic, emotional, and behavioral needs of students that often can't be met in a traditional educational setting (Sable et al., 2010). Johnson et al. (2016) reported additional factors affecting feasibility in alternative schools including chronic truancy, school mobility, and the inability to obtain parental consent. Considering the strong evidence-base regarding children and adolescent's achievement gains in SEL programs, research surrounding the implementation of SEL programs in alternative school settings is warranted (Slaten et al., 2015). Therefore, the purpose of this pilot study was to explore the feasibility of implementing an adapted SEL program in an alternative school.

Table 1. Strong teens curriculum and weeks implemented in pilot study.

Lesson	Title	Week implemented
Lesson 1	About *Strong Teens:* Emotional Strength Training	1
Lesson 2	Understanding Your Emotions 1	2
Lesson 3	Understanding Your Emotions 2	2
Lesson 4	Understanding Other People's Emotions	3
Lesson 5	Dealing with Anger	4
Lesson 6	Clear Thinking 1	5
Lesson 7	Clear Thinking 2	5
Lesson 8	Solving People Problems	3
Lesson 9	Letting Go of Stress	4
Lesson 10	Positive Living	6
Lesson 11	Creating Strong and SMART Goals	6
Lesson 12	Finishing UP!	6

Strong Teens curriculum

Strong Teens is a social and emotional learning curriculum designed by Merrell et al. (2007c) for high school students in grades 9–12. *Strong Teens* is a component of a comprehensive social and emotional learning curriculum for all ages titled *Strong Kids* (Merrell et al., 2007a, 2007b). *Strong Kids* was developed to increase children's ability to effectively regulate emotions, engage in positive social relationships, and prevent future maladaptive responses to difficult life events (Merrell et al., 2008). *Strong Teens* is a semi-structured 12-lesson curriculum designed for easy implementation by a teacher or mental health professional (Merrell et al., 2007c). A list of the topics covered in each of the 12 lessons is available in Table 1. *Strong Kids* curricula has evidence for increasing knowledge and effective use of social skills, emotional management strategies, and problem-solving capacities (Merrell, 2010). Moreover, it also has demonstrated effectiveness reducing problematic behaviors (Merrell et al., 2008). Though *Strong Teens* has demonstrated benefits for a diverse range of students in a wide variety of general education settings (Castro-Olivo, 2014; Castro-Olivo, & Merrell, 2012; Merrell, 2010; Merrell et al., 2008), there is a dearth of research for implementing *Strong Teens* in alternative school settings. In this

study, we explored the feasibility of implementing an adapted *Strong Teens* curriculum to accommodate the unique needs and structure of an alternative school, while keeping the core elements of the curriculum. The specific research question in this study was: how feasible is it to implement an adapted social and emotional learning curriculum in an alternative school setting?

Method

Design

Feasibility studies focus on one or more of the following areas: (a) acceptability, (b) demand, (c) implementation, (d) practicality, (e) adaptation, (f) integration, (g) expansion, and limited-efficacy testing (Bowen et al., 2009). Feasibility studies are conducted when there are limited studies published regarding use of a specific intervention with certain populations that could potentially benefit from the implementation (Bowen et al., 2009). In this study, we (the researchers) investigated the feasibility of implementing an adaptation of the *Strong Teens* social and emotional learning curriculum in an alternative school setting given the lack of empirical investigations regarding implementation of SEL programming with students in the alternative school setting and the likelihood that implementation of SEL programs in this setting are likely to improve outcomes for this student population (Slaten et al., 2015). We also assessed demand, implementation, practicality, and acceptability of the adapted *Strong Teens* curriculum through feedback from teachers, school administrators, and group facilitators. In addition, we gathered assessment data from student participants, as limited-efficacy testing can occur in feasibility studies to measure intermediate outcomes with limited statistical power (Bowen et al., 2009). Last, we provide details of the specific adaptations made for this population and setting and how this relates to implications for the integration and expansion (Bowen et al., 2009) of this intervention in alternative school settings. To evaluate the intervention, we collected pretest and posttest assessments from students and teachers.

Participants

Upon IRB approval, we recruited high school students who were enrolled in an alternative school within a predominantly rural county in a Southeastern state. The teachers and administrators within the alternative school provided feasibility and implementation feedback in the study. The high school identified for this study was an alternative school setting serving children and adolescents, kindergarten through 12th grade, who have been released from their district school due to truancy, persistent suspensions, or expulsions. The students enrolled in this school come from diverse backgrounds and have had a variety of experiences including trauma exposure, death in families, gang violence, neglect, financial struggles, heightened family responsibilities, as well as emotional and behavioral disorders. Due to the temporary nature of alternative schools (Lehr et al., 2004), enrollment fluctuates throughout the year as students are being suspended or expelled from their district schools at different times, while other students in the alternative school are successfully completing their time and transitioning back to their district school. The teachers, administrators, counselors, and other support staff are highly qualified, but serve in multiple roles within the school due to the unique needs and structure of alternative schools (de Anda, 2007). Therefore, the teachers and administrators within the alternative school provided feasibility feedback in the study.

Recruitment

Students

A total of 40 students' guardians consented for participation in the feasibility study. Out of the initial sample, 32 students actually started the adapted intervention. The participants were between 14 and 18 years old and were attending ninth and tenth grade. The participants identified as: African American ($n = 16$), White ($n = 10$), Hispanic ($n = 3$), Bi-Racial ($n = 1$), and two did not specify. Of the participants, 19 identified as male, 11 identified as female, and two did not specify.

School personnel

Ten school personnel members at the alternative school agreed to complete an acceptability questionnaire. The staff members held the following roles: (a) six teachers, (b) one school counselor, (c) two administrators, and (d) one teaching assistant. The participants ranged in having $5 - 30$ years of experience in their professional roles, as well as $1 - 20$ years of experience in alternative school settings. The school personnel were between the ages of $30 - 55$ years. The personnel identified as being six women and four men with ethnicities including: African American ($n = 2$), White ($n = 7$), and Asian American ($n = 1$).

Facilitators

The facilitators of the adapted *Strong Teens* curriculum were four doctoral students enrolled in a counselor education program. All four facilitators are fully licensed mental health professionals (i.e., three Licensed Professional Counselors and one Licensed Clinical Social Worker) with multiple years of experience working with children and adolescents. All four facilitators have experience leading various psychoeducational and mental health groups. The facilitators identified as one African American female, two White females, one White male.

Adapted intervention procedures

The researchers facilitated an adapted version of the *Strong Teens* curriculum to the 32 students through four small groups (i.e., the students' class). We adapted the curriculum to fit the alternative school context by adjusting the original 12-week *Strong Teens* social and emotional learning curriculum to fit in a 6-week timeframe. We combined lessons due to flow and best fit of the material presented in each lesson (see Tables 1 and 2). We consolidated the introduction and conclusion sections of each lesson into the start and end of the small group sessions. Four counseling doctoral students, each assigned to different small groups of students, met with their groups for 1.5 hours, once a week, for six weeks to implement the adapted manualized curriculum. Participants completed the student and teacher self-report questionnaires and the Strong Teens Symptoms Test (Merrell, 2007) at the first and last small group sessions (week 1 and week 6). We collected demographic information on week 1 and attendance data each week.

Table 2. Strong teens lesson components included in fidelity checklist.

Component	Title	Modification
1	Review	Combined
2	Introduction	Combined
3	Pretest	Completed Week 1
4	Focusing Activity	Combined
5	Lesson Topics	Completed Week 1
6	Key Terms	
7	Activity A	
8	Activity B	
9	Activity C	
10	Activity D	Included in Lessons When Time Allowed
11	Activity E	Included in Lessons When Time Allowed
12	Posttest	Completed Week 6
13	Putting It All Together	Combined
14	Closure	Combined

Measures and limited-efficacy testing methods

In order to complete limited-efficacy testing to measure intermediate outcomes (Bowen et al., 2009) of the adapted *Strong Teens* curriculum, we used the assessments provided in conjunction with the curriculum prior to the start of the intervention and after the intervention concluded. Students completed the Strong Teens Symptoms Test (Merrell, 2007) and the SEARS-Adolescent Short Form instrument. Teachers completed the SEARS-Teacher Short Form. We conducted dependent *t*-tests using SPSS 24 to assess intermediate outcome data.

Strong Teens Symptoms Test

The Strong Teens Symptoms Test (Merrell, 2007) is a 10-question, Likert-type test (0 = Never True and 4 = Often True) measuring emotional distress; higher scores indicating higher levels of emotional distress. Each student in the groups completed the symptom test prior to the first session and after the final session evaluating the students' level of symptomology of social, emotional deficits.

SEARS-Adolescent Short Form

The original SEARS-A for is a 35-question, self-report instrument completed by adolescents ages 13–18, including 4 empirically derived scales measuring; (a) self-regulation, (b) social competence, (c) empathy, and (d) responsibility (Merrell, 2011). For this study, we used the companion short form that includes 12 representative items of the general constructs measured by the full-length version. The SEARS-A short form has acceptable reliability at .82, high correlation with the full-length form at .94, and a strong test-retest reliability after 2-weeks of .84 (Nese et al., 2012). The SEARS-A Short form was used as pre/posttest measure as it was given to the students in the group facilitation of the curriculum prior to the first session and after the final session.

SEARS-Teacher Short Form

The original SEARS-T form is a 41-question, self-report instrument completed by the teachers spanning all grade levels including the same 4 empirically derived scales as the SEARS-A measuring; (a) self-regulation, (b) social competence, (c) empathy, and (d) responsibility (Merrell, 2011; Merrell et al., 2011). The SEARS-T short form reports a strong reliability at .93, high correlation with the full-length form at .98, and a strong test-retest reliability after 2-weeks of .90 (Nese et al., 2012). The SEARS-T Short Form was used as a pre/posttest measure as it was given to the teachers in the group facilitation of the curriculum prior to the first session and after the final session.

Adapted intervention fidelity

We used the fidelity checklists included in the *Strong Teens* curriculum for facilitators to monitor their fidelity implementing the adapted intervention (Merrell et al., 2007c). Facilitators tracked the percentage of material they were able to cover and documented completion at the end of each session to provide further detail regarding whether the intervention could be implemented as planned (Bowen et al., 2009).

Adapted intervention feasibility

We assessed the feasibility of implementing the *Strong Teens* curriculum in the alternative school by analyzing data from the interventions and feedback from alternative school staff and intervention facilitators. We collected data regarding recruitment, retention, and attendance throughout the intervention to measure practicality of the adaptation and implementation (Bowen et al., 2009). In addition, the attendance that was collected at each session was analyzed to assess what percentage of sessions the participants attended during the intervention, and the number of participants who were actually retained until program completion. Moreover, we used a Likert-scale questionnaire to evaluate school staff members' acceptability implementing an SEL intervention in the setting. Further, we incorporated the intervention facilitators' perceptions of the feasibility of providing the interventions in an alternative school to further provide information about implementation and practicality (Bowen et al., 2009).

Acceptability

Acceptability questionnaire

We created a 5-question, Likert-scale (ranging from 1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree) questionnaire to collect feedback from the teachers, staff, and administrators within the alternative school about the perceived importance, demand, practicality, and benefits of implementing (Bowen et al., 2009) social, emotional learning interventions within an alternative school setting. We solicited staff, teacher, and administrator feedback upon completion of the adapted implementation of the *Strong Teen*s curriculum. A doctoral student provided the staff, teachers, and administrators with a pencil and paper, 5-question survey to gather information regarding importance, feasibility, and benefit of implementing a social, emotional intervention

within the alternative school setting. The questionnaires were completed with a 100% response rate.

Curative climate instrument

We used the CCI (Fuhriman et al., 1986) to obtain information from students about their perceptions of the helpfulness of the therapeutic factors present during the group experience while participating in the *Strong Teens* curriculum. The CCI consists of 14 questions with Likert-scale responses ranging between 1 (not helpful) to 5 (extremely helpful). The CCI has three subscales, which are considered therapeutic factors (Fuhriman et al., 1986): Cohesion (5 questions), Catharsis (5 questions), and Insight (4 questions). These factors, specifically cohesion, are related to positive outcomes in counseling groups (Burlingame et al., 2011).

Results

Adapted intervention feasibility

Recruitment

Recruitment took place at an alternative school in a predominately rural county in a Southeastern state. The students recruited for participation in the adapted interventions were identified to be in grade levels nine through twelve. At the time of the adapted SEL intervention, there were 40 students enrolled in grades 9–12 at the alternative school. All 40 of the students' parents/guardians consented to the students' participation in the group *Strong Teens* curriculum. However, eight students never participated (i.e., withdrew or transferred from the school) in the group intervention, which resulted in a total of 32 student participants who started the adapted intervention. Of the 10 staff members recruited to complete the acceptability questionnaire, all 10 staff members participated.

Retention, attendance, and program completion

Seventeen students out of 32 dropped out prior to the final *Strong Teens* session. Accordingly, 15 students remained at the end of the *Strong Teens* curriculum, resulting in a 47% completion rate among students who started the group. Out of the 32 participants who attended the group *Strong Teens* curriculum, 13 participants completed 1–2 sessions, 13 participants completed 3–4 sessions, and four completed five sessions. Two participants completed all six *Strong Teens* sessions.

Adapted implementation fidelity

The four *Strong Teens* group facilitators in this study completed the fidelity checklists after each session. Table 2 lists the components of each lesson that are included in the fidelity checklist for all 12 lessons. Due to modifications made to the curriculum (as seen in Table 2) for feasibility in the setting, there were specific parts of the sessions that were combined (e.g., review, introduction, focusing activity, putting it all together, and closure sections) and therefore, were only counted in the fidelity checklist once for the combined sessions. For activities A–E, there

was often not enough time to complete all activities during combined lessons; thus, facilitators often implemented A–C and included D and E if time allowed. Based on these modifications and time limitations in the alternative school setting, the group facilitators were able to fully cover 67% of the components for each lesson, 24% of the components partially, and were unable to cover an average of 9% of each lesson.

Acceptability

Feedback from school personnel

We include the results of the staff questionnaire in Table 3. The staff member responses to the questionnaire reflect highly favorable perceptions of the importance and demand (Bowen et al., 2009) of SEL interventions with students in the alternative school setting. The staff believed that incorporating this type of intervention in alternative school would likely benefit student well-being and academic performance. The staff also expressed willingness to allow class time for this type of intervention. Though not provided in Table 3, the staff answered questions about what format SEL interventions would likely be most practical (Bowen et al., 2009) in this setting. The majority of the staff reported that they believed the integration (Bowen et al., 2009) of SEL interventions would likely be most appropriate for individual or small group settings in alternative schools, rather than classroom and large group settings.

Table 3. Perceptions of SEL interventions in alternative school programs questionnaire results.

Prompt	Disagree n (%)	Agree n (%)	Strongly Agree n (%)
It is important to address social and emotional learning with students.		2 (20)	8 (80)
I currently address social and emotional topics with students in the classroom.	1 (10)	4 (40)	5 (50)
It is feasible to allow counselors to utilize some of my class time to implement emotional learning interventions with my students.		1 (10)	9 (90)
I believe social and emotional learning would benefit my students' overall well-being.			10 (100)
I believe social and emotional learning interventions would benefit my students' academic performance.		1 (10)	9 (90)

Note. $N = 10$. Strongly disagree is not included in the table because there were no strongly disagree answers to any of the prompts by any of the participants; however, it was an option provided for response within the survey.

Social and emotional learning group facilitator questionnaire

The group facilitators completed a Likert-scale questionnaire (see Table 4) that included questions about their perceptions of the implementation of the adapted *Strong Teens* social and emotional learning curriculum in the alternative school setting. The group facilitators all either agreed ($n = 1$) or strongly agreed ($n = 3$) that the curriculum was easy to implement in the alternative school setting and believe it was well-received by the students who participated in the intervention. The group facilitators all strongly agreed ($n = 4$) that the social and emotional learning curriculum worked in a group format. The group facilitators also believed that the adapted *Strong Teens* curriculum was feasible to complete in the timeframe that was allotted each week, given the practicality of the modifications that were made to implement it in a shorter timeframe (Agree $n = 3$; Strongly Agree $n = 1$). Last, the group facilitators believed the

intervention benefited the overall well-being of the students who participated in the alternative school setting (Agree *n* = 2; Strongly Agree *n* = 2).

Table 4. Social and emotional learning group facilitator questionnaire.

Question	Agree *n* (%)	Strongly Agree *n* (%)
Q1: The social and emotional learning intervention was easy to implement in an Alternative School setting.	1 (25)	3 (75)
Q2: The social and emotional learning intervention was well-received by the students in the Alternative School setting.	1 (25)	3 (75)
Q3: The social and emotional learning intervention worked well in a group format.		4 (100)
Q4: The social and emotional learning intervention was feasible to complete in the timeframe allowed in the classroom each week.	3 (75)	1 (25)
Q5: I believe social and emotional learning intervention benefited the student participants' overall well-being.	2 (50)	2 (50)

Note. N = 4. Strongly disagree and disagree are not included in the table because there were no strongly disagree/disagree answers to any of the prompts by any of the group facilitators; however, these were options provided for response within the survey.

Feedback from Strong Teens group facilitators

We used open-ended questions to obtain anecdotal feedback from the group facilitators about their experiences with the adapted curriculum implementation in the alternative school setting. The group facilitators described both the benefits and challenges they observed during their interventions with the youth. The facilitators felt supported by the teachers who allowed time for the interventions to be implemented in the classroom. However, the facilitators met some challenges when teachers stayed in the room during the intervention. Each facilitator described significant student engagement when it was their time to be heard but one facilitator identified the potential lack of freedom to speak freely with the presence of the teacher in the room. All of the group facilitators described their ability to observe the preliminary impact the adapted intervention had with the youth; however, barriers of attendance in this setting provided a significant challenge regarding the practicality of completing group homework assignments, program fidelity, or covering all of the skill-building material. be transferred into their daily lives.

Logistical suggestions from group facilitators to increase the acceptability, practicality, and integration (Bowen et al., 2009) within this setting included having more time with the youth and adding a follow-up session to the end of the program. The group facilitators felt it was helpful to use the "Running Short on Time?" section of the lesson outlines to decide where to end the session if time did not allow completion of each activity (e.g., completing activities A–C and moving to closure activity). Due to lack of consistent attendance, group facilitators found the "Review" sections at the beginning of each session helpful to give students exposure to material when not present in the prior week; though group facilitators shared that students rarely completed the homework worksheets. The students benefited from sharing ways that they generalized the material in their environmental contexts during the previous week during review. The group facilitators believed that the focusing activities were useful for creating a calming environment prior to beginning the session. The group facilitators discussed challenges with completing the discussion of key terms and definitions at the beginning of the sessions, as

students appeared to have difficulty focusing on the information in the way it was presented in the handouts. However, the group facilitators spoke highly of the activities included in each lesson because they provided active learning and skill building opportunities for students, as well as a chance for students to discuss how the skills could be transferred into their daily lives.

Limited-efficacy testing measures

The facilitators reported that the assessment measures were brief and easy to distribute during the course of the intervention. The student self-report measures were not time consuming and did not distract from the focus of the intervention. The students were able to complete the assessments without any challenges within a short period of time. The teachers were also able to complete the assessments without any challenges. The teacher observations forms were easy to understand and could be completed in a timely manner.

Student acceptability

We used the CCI to assess students' perceptions of the group related to cohesion (closeness to the leader and other members of the group), catharsis (release of emotions), and insight (learning about oneself in the group). The minimum total response for each participant for the Cohesion and Catharsis subscales is five with a maximum of 25. The minimum total response for each participant for Insight is four with a maximum of 20. There were 16 student participants who completed the CCI. The means of student responses for each subscale were: Catharsis (14.06), Insight (11.38), and Cohesion (15.19). These totals are lower than previous wellness-oriented psychoeducational groups (e.g., Ohrt et al., 2013). These findings are not surprising, considering the low attendance and retention rates in the group. It is likely that the moderate responses regarding the helpfulness of therapeutic factors in the group setting may have been related to low attendance throughout the intervention. Considering the lack of continuity with other class members, students may have had fewer opportunities to build comfort and trust with each other. Students may have felt uncomfortable sharing personal goals or receiving feedback about their progress and learning in the group.

Intermediate outcomes

In order to complete limited-efficacy testing to measure intermediate outcomes (Bowen et al., 2009) of the adapted *Strong Teens* curriculum in the alternative school setting, we conducted paired samples t-tests to assess students' emotional distress, self-regulation, social competence, empathy, and responsibility. We found no significant pretest to posttest differences on the SEARS-T ($p = .45$), the SEARS-A ($p = .572$), or the Strong Teens Symptoms Test ($p = .100$).

Discussion

Feasibility

Acceptability and demand

Recruitment of high school grade-level student participants at the identified alternative school was successful with all 40 students' parents consenting for the participation of their child in the intervention. One reason for successful recruitment in the setting may be attributed to the support of the teachers, administration, and the school counselor for the SEL intervention. The questionnaire completed by staff members regarding their perceptions of implementing an SEL intervention in the alternative school supports the buy-in of the staff for the SEL intervention due to the perceived benefit for the students.

Another reason for successful recruitment may have been the investment and commitment of the school counselor in ensuring the intervention was provided to the students. The lead researcher on this study had previously developed a strong professional relationship with this school counselor due to collaborative efforts to increase access to mental health interventions in the alternative school. It is likely that the collaborative relationship with the alternative school, lead researcher, and the university increased the feasibility of the support of the staff at the alternative school for implementation of the SEL intervention. Further, the school counselor made contact with each child's parent to explain the benefits of the intervention and ask them to consent for their child's participation. It is likely that this personal contact in addition to sending the consents home for the signature, increased the likelihood that the parents would agree to their child's engagement in the intervention. Given that disruption of class time and having parental consent are often barriers to practice-based research in school settings (de Anda, 2007). Incorporating collaborative relationships with alternative school staff is recommended prior to attempting to implement intervention research in the setting.

Implementation, adaptation, and practicality

Attendance and retention rates were very low in this study. Some of the barriers that contributed to the low attendance and retention rates included but are not limited to: (a) rules and guidelines in the setting, (b) scheduling conflicts, (c) student transience, (d) student environmental stressors, and (e) behavioral disruptions leading to suspension or expulsion. The scheduling in the alternative school was also a barrier to attendance during the intervention. The intervention was incorporated on the same day and time each week. Facilitating the intervention during the first period in the morning may have prevented students who came in past the start time from attending. Implementing the intervention during the first period of the day was more challenging due to the processes before the students enter the school in the morning to ensure dress codes and no possession of unrestricted items. For example, students had dress code checks and to go through a metal detector prior to entering the school in the morning. Concerns of staff sometimes arose with students during these checks (e.g., clothes not meeting the dress code, bringing in restricted objects) that led to the students having to meet with administrators during the first period to address the concern. Therefore, these students were unable to participate in the intervention. One recommendation for improving attendance is providing incentives for attendance and participation during the group (e.g., party/event for those who attend a certain number of sessions, providing low-cost candy and/or school supplies for incentives to participate during the group). Another recommendation would be to review attendance records and attempt to plan the intervention on days during the week/times during the day with the highest attendance of students. In addition, it might help to find out which weeks would be most feasible for the school semester schedule and plan the intervention according to when the most time could be

allotted for the intervention. Furthermore, practitioners may consider incorporating motivational approaches (e.g., Motivational Interviewing) to improve attendance when implementing SEL interventions.

Retention during the intervention was low, possibly due to the nature of the challenges that youth in alternative schools face. One of the primary reasons for low completion of the group SEL intervention was due to behavioral issues leading to expulsion and suspension of students during the intervention (e.g., groups of students making threats, physical altercations between students, verbal altercations with staff). Another significant issue that arose was transience of students who relocated to other school districts due to familial/environmental stressors, students dropping out completely, or students being incarcerated by juvenile justice entities. Therefore, some students quit attending school completely for various reasons during the semester that the intervention took place and were unable to complete. Youth in alternative school settings have difficulty with interpersonal relationships with peers and authority that may lead to behavioral/emotional concerns that can lead to legal system involvement, suspension and expulsion without intervention to increase effective coping (Fuller & Sabatino, 1996; Lehr et al., 2009). Moreover, youth in alternative school settings have environmental and familial stressors, which make it difficult for them to actively engage in the school environment (Blanchet-Cohen & Salazar, 2009; Iwasaki et al., 2014). Therefore, a recommendation for working with students in this setting would be to set manageable and achievable outcomes for the intervention, as well as lowering burden on the students by providing short-form assessments/questionnaires that are not overwhelming. Furthermore, intervention implementers must be flexible, creative, and attend to building trust and a strong alliance with the students to increase motivation for attendance and participation in the group.

Lessons learned from implementation

In this study, we realized the importance and the feasibility of conducting research in an alternative school setting, more specifically, implementing a long-term SEL intervention in an alternative school setting. During our planning period, we consulted with school personnel and concluded a continuous 12-week intervention would not be feasible to implement based on the school holiday schedules and with the fluctuating enrollment patterns of alternative schools. Therefore, we shortened the curriculum to six weeks by combining various lessons. However, we did not expect for such high absenteeism from the students during those six weeks. Students in this alternative school setting frequently arrived late or missed school completely; some due to transportation issues, truancy, or continued issues with suspension; thus making it difficult to provide the full SEL intervention to all the students and to collect feedback or data to illustrate the effectiveness of the intervention. However, when the students were present for the SEL interventions, they were engaged and participated if incentives were provided. In addition, we learned that students were often more interested in sharing their life stories in relation to the various social-emotional topics for that day but were not as engaged in the practice of various coping skills. For example, many students were eager to share what makes them angry or sad and often shared detailed experiences from their lives but were a bit resistant to attempt the coping strategies and reported not practicing them between weeks. Therefore, it is important to provide enough space and time for students to share their stories and select a later time in the day to

come to the schools to provide the intervention to increase participation, student interest, and attendance rates.

Limited-efficacy testing

Overall, it is challenging to make inferences about the intermediate outcomes of the adapted intervention in the alternative school setting given the low attendance and retention rates. However, there were no statistically significant changes in self-reported emotional distress, or teacher or self-reported: (a) self-regulation, (b) social competence, (c) empathy, or (d) responsibility for the students who completed the intervention.

Integration and expansion

Bowen et al. (2009) describe integration and expansion as being two of the main foci of feasibility studies. Integration is considered the degree to which a new intervention can be integrated in a current system in terms of cost, sustainability, and suitability. Expansion involves assessing whether an evidence-based intervention can be successful in additional settings and populations (Bowen et al., 2009). Given the results of this feasibility study, there is promise for SEL interventions to be suitable for further implementation and testing with youth in the alternative school setting. This feasibility study offers insight into ways that further implementation studies could be successfully completed to continue to assess the efficacy of the intervention in this setting.

Preparation for completing SEL intervention studies in alternative school settings require building collaborative relationships with key stakeholders (e.g., administrators, school counselors, school social workers, teachers) in order to enhance acceptability and demand (Bowen et al., 2009), as well as reduce potential barriers such as gaining parental consent and permission to use class time (de Anda, 2007). Alternative school settings are likely impacted by limited resources in serving a higher needs population (Greenberg et al., 2003; Mullen & Lambie, 2013). Therefore, many alternative schools may welcome intentional collaborations with Universities and practitioners who may desire to integrate sustainable SEL interventions in this setting. Considering the acceptability and demand for youth in the alternative school setting, SEL intervention implementation may need to include incentives for participation, completion of homework, and attendance (e.g., additional school privileges, school supplies, treats, parties/events). In addition, adaptations to SEL interventions should be made to best meet the unique needs of youth in this setting and increase the likelihood that the SEL intervention will produce positive outcomes (Bowen et al., 2009).

This feasibility study highlighted the need for specific adaptations that may be necessary in the alternative school setting. Implementers should review attendance policies and records to plan the intervention at days and times that are more highly attended, as alternative school settings may have varied attendance policies (Mullen & Lambie, 2013) and students may have chronic truancy (Johnson et al., 2016). Moreover, school schedules should be reviewed to ensure the number of weeks needed to complete the SEL intervention are possible without frequent disruption and breaks (de Anda, 2007), which would likely enhance the efficacy of the intervention.

Other adaptations that may increase the likelihood that the SEL intervention implementation would be successful would be for facilitators to incorporate motivational techniques (e.g., motivational interviewing), as well as a focus on building strong rapport and relationships (e.g., building trust, flexibility in allowing time for youth to share current feelings and experiences within an empathic environment) with youth in alternatives school settings to improve attendance, acceptability, and outcomes. Youth served in alternative school settings have experienced environmental and familial stressors that make it difficult for them to fully engage in their academics and have healthy relationships with peers and those in authority, which can lead to emotional and behavioral concerns, juvenile justice system involvement, and premature school dropout (Lehr et al., 2009). Therefore, use of motivational and relational techniques in the implementation of SEL interventions with youth in this setting should be considered for increased youth engagement. In addition, the burden of the SEL intervention on youth in alternative school settings should be considered in the adaptation (e.g., manageable timeframes for maintaining attention and focus, achievable goals and outcomes, short-form assessments, offering the intervention in a confidential setting) to increase satisfaction and long-term engagement of youth receiving the intervention. Given the potential for SEL interventions to improve academic and behavioral outcomes, as well as the overall well-being of youth in alternative school settings (Durlak et al., 2011; Jones et al., 2015), as well as the recommended adaptations derived from this feasibility investigation, it is vital that SEL intervention implementation be expanded and integrated into this setting for further evaluation of efficacy.

Limitations

A primary limitation of this feasibility study is that it was conducted in a single alternative school. Other schools may have different policies and procedures that could affect various aspects of implementation. A limitation in the present study that is similar to previous research was the high attrition rate of participants in the study (Kenyon et al., 2012). Another limitation of the study could have occurred as a result of the logistics school specific policies. The classroom teacher was required to remain in the room during the interventions. As a result, students may have censored their responses to process questions associated with their experiences in and outside of the school setting for fear of how their statements may be assessed. Further, students may have remained silent concerning some topics of discussion for fear of breaching confidentiality of their classmates.

Conclusion

In this feasibility study, we identified multiple challenges that could hinder our ability to implement SEL interventions within the alternative school setting. Although students and parents were willing to participate in the intervention, attendance and attrition appear to be primary barriers to intervention implementation. This is not surprising considering the multiple challenges faced by this population and is consistent with previous literature. Future researchers and practitioners should consider attendance policies at the school or integrate interventions (e.g., motivational interviewing, participant support) to help improve continued participation. Some of the school policies and procedures that are unique to the alternative school setting also served as barriers to study implementation. Practitioners who implement structured interventions

and researchers who seek to implement larger scale studies will need to carefully plan for and navigate the logistical challenges of the alternative school setting. The school personnel appeared to be largely supportive of the intervention. We recommend that researchers build collaborative trusting relationships with school staff to help gain buy-in for research studies in this setting. Further, the adapted version of the curriculum was feasible to implement within the structure of the school.

References

Afacan, K., & Wilkerson, K. L. (2019). The effectiveness of behavior-focused alternative middle schools for students with disabilities. *Behavioral Disorders*, *45*(1), 41–52. https://doi.org/10.1177/0198742919846619

Blanchet-Cohen, N., & Salazar, J. (2009). Empowering practices for working with marginalized youth. *Relational Child and Youth Care Practice*, *22*(4), 5–15.

Bowen, D. J., Kreuter, M., Spring, B., Cofta-Woerpel, L., Linnan, L., Weiner, D., Bakken, S., Kaplan, C. P., Squiers, L., Fabrizio, C., & Fernandez, M. (2009). How we design feasibility studies. *American Journal of Preventive Medicine*, *36*(5), 452–457. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.amepre.2009.02.002

Burlingame, G. M., McClendon, D. T., & Alonso, J. (2011). Cohesion in group therapy. *Psychotherapy*, *48*(1), 34–42. https://doi.org/10.1037/a0022063

Castro-Olivo, S. M. (2014). Promoting social-emotional learning in adolescent Latino ELLs: a study of the culturally adapted Strong Teens program. *School Psychology Quarterly*, *29*(4), 567–577. https://doi.org/10.1037/spq0000055

Castro-Olivo, S. M., & Merrell, K. W. (2012). Validating cultural adaptations of a school-based social-emotional learning program for use with Latino immigrant adolescents. *Advances in School Mental Health Promotion*, *5*(2), 78–92. https://doi.org/10.1080/1754730X.2012.689193

Chiang, H., & Gill, B. (2010). *Student characteristics and outcomes in alternative and neighborhood high schools in Philadelphia*. Mathematica Policy Research.

Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL). (2017). *What is SEL?* Retrieved February 15, 2020, http://www.casel.org/what-is-sel/

de Anda, D. (2007). Intervention research and program evaluation in the school setting: Issues and alternative research designs. *Children & Schools*, *29*(2), 87–94. https://doi.org/10.1093/cs/29.2.87

Durlak, J. A., Weissberg, R. P., Dymnicki, A. B., Taylor, R. D., & Schellinger, K. B. (2011). The impact of enhancing students' social and emotional learning: A meta-analysis of school-based universal interventions. *Child Development*, *82*(1), 405–432. https://doi.org/10.111/j.1467-8624.2010.01564.x

Fuhriman, A., Drescher, S., Hanson, E., Henrie, R., & Rybicki, W. (1986). Refining the measurement of curativeness: An empirical approach. *Small Group Behavior*, *17*(2), 186–201. https://doi.org/10.1177/104649648601700204

Fuller, C., & Sabatino, D. (1996). Who attends alternative high schools? *The High School Journal*, *79*(4), 293–297.

Greenberg, M. T., Weissberg, R. P., O'Brien, M. U., Zins, J. E., Fredericks, L., Resnik, H., & Elias, M. J. (2003). Enhancing school-based prevention and youth development through coordinated social, emotional, and academic learning. *The American Psychologist*, *58*(6–7), 466–474. https://doi.org/10.1037/0003-066x.58.6-7.466

Iwasaki, Y., Springett, J., Dashora, P., McLaughlin, A., & McHugh, T. (2014). Youth-guided youth engagement: Participatory action research (PAR) with high-risk, marginalized youth. *Child & Youth Services*, *35*(4), 316–342. https://doi.org/10.1080/0145935X.2014.962132

Johnson, K. E., Morris, M., Rew, L., & Simonton, A. J. (2016). A systematic review of consent procedures, participation rates, and main findings of health-related research in alternative high schools from 2010 to 2015. *The Journal of School Nursing*, *32*(1), 20–31. https://doi.org/10.1177/11059840515620841

Jones, D. E., Greenberg, M., & Crowley, M. (2015). Early social-emotional functioning and public health: The relationship between kindergarten social competence and future wellness. *American Journal of Public Health*, *105*(11), 2283–2290. https://doi.org/10.2105/AJPH.2015.302630

Kenyon, D. B., Kubik, M. Y., Davey, C., Sirard, J., & Fulkerson, J. A. (2012). Alternative high school students' physical activity: role of self-efficacy. *American Journal of Health Behavior*, *36*(3), 300–310. https://doi.org/10.5993/AJHB.36.3.2

Kim, J., & Taylor, K. A. (2008). Rethinking alternative education to break the cycle of educational inequality and inequity. *The Journal of Educational Research*, *101*(4), 207–219. https://doi.org/10.3200/JOER.101.4.207-219

Lehr, C. A., Moreau, R. A., Lange, C. M., & Lanners, E. J. (2004). *Alternative schools: Findings from a national survey of the states*. University of Minnesota, Institute on Community Integration.

Lehr, C. A., Tan, C. S., & Ysseldyke, J. (2009). Alternative schools: A synthesis of state-level policy and research. *Remedial and Special Education*, *30*(1), 19–32. https://doi.org/10.1177/0741932508315645

McNulty, C. P., & Roseboro, D. L. (2009). "I'm not really that bad": Alternative school students, stigma, and identity politics. *Equity & Excellence in Education*, *42*(4), 412–427. https://doi.org/10.1080/10665680903266520

Merrell, K. W. (2007). *Strong Teens Symptoms Test* [Measurement instrument]. https://strongkids.uoregon.edu/unittests/strongteens.pdf

Merrell, K. W. (2010). Linking prevention science and social-emotional learning: The Oregon Resiliency Project. *Psychology in the Schools*, *47*(1), 55–70. https://doi.org/10.1002/pits.20451

Merrell, K. W. (2011). *Social and emotional assets and resilience scales (SEARS)*. Psychological Assessment Resources.

Merrell, K. W., Carrizales, D. C., Feuerborn, L., Gueldner, B. A., & Tran, O. K. (2007a). *Strong kids—Grades 3–5: A social-emotional learning curriculum*. Paul H. Brookes Publishing.

Merrell, K. W., Carrizales, D. C., Feuerborn, L., Gueldner, B. A., & Tran, O. K. (2007b). *Strong kids—Grades 6–8: A social-emotional learning curriculum*. Paul H. Brookes Publishing.

Merrell, K. W., Carrizales, D. C., Feuerborn, L., Gueldner, B. A., & Tran, O. K. (2007c). *Strong teens—Grades 9–12: A social and emotional learning curriculum*. Paul H. Brookes Publishing.

Merrell, K. W., Cohn, B. P., & Tom, K. M. (2011). Development and validation of a teacher report measure for assessing social-emotional strengths of children and adolescents. *School Psychology Review*, *40*(2), 226–241.

Merrell, K. W., Juskelis, M. P., Tran, O. K., & Buchanan, R. (2008). Social and emotional learning in the classroom: Impact of Strong Kids and Strong Teens on students' social-emotional knowledge and symptoms. *Journal of Applied School Psychology*, *24*(2), 209–224. https://doi.org/10.1080/15377900802089981

Mullen, P. R., & Lambie, G. W. (2013). School counseling in disciplinary alternative education programs. *Journal of School Counseling*, *11*(17). http://www.jsc.montana.edu/articles/v11n17.pdf

Nese, R. N. T., Doerner, E., Romer, N., Kaye, N. C., Merrell, K. W., & Tom, K. M. (2012). Social emotional assets and resilience scales: Development of a strength-based short-form behavior rating scale system. *Journal for Educational Research Online*, *4*(1), 124–139.

Ohrt, J. H., Robinson, E. H., III, & Hagedorn, W. B. (2013). Group leader development: Effects of personal growth and psychoeducational groups. *The Journal for Specialists in Group Work*, *38*(1), 30–51. https://doi.org/10.1080/01933922.2012.732982

Rubens, S. L., Miller, M. A., Zeringue, M. M., & Laird, R. D. (2019). Associations of bullying, victimization, and daytime sleepiness with academic problems in adolescents attending an alternative high school. *The American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, *89*(4), 508–517. https://doi.org/10.1037/ort0000305

Sable, J., Plotts, C., & Mitchell, L. (2010). *Characteristics of the 100 largest public elementary and secondary school districts in the United States: 2008-09* (NCES 2011-301). U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. Government Printing Office.

Slaten, C. D., Irby, D. J., Tate, K., & Rivera, R. (2015). Towards a critically conscious approach to social and emotional learning in urban alterative education: School staff members' perspectives. *Journal for Social Action in Counseling & Psychology*, *7*(1), 41–62. https://doi.org/10.33043/JSACP.7.1.41-62

U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics (NECS). (2018). *Digest of education statistics*. Retrieved from https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d18/tables/dt18_216.20.asp

Wilkerson, K. L., Afacan, K., Perzigian, A. B., Justin, W., & Lequia, J. (2016). Behavior focused alternative schools: Impact on student outcomes. *Behavioral Disorders*, *41*(2), 81–94. https://doi.org/10.17988/0198-7429-41.2.81