

Resilient Warriors: A Mixed Methods Investigation of an Expressive Arts-Based Resiliency Small Group Intervention With Rural Children

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Abstract

Upper elementary students in a Title I rural school participated in an expressive arts-based resiliency small-group intervention entitled Resilient Warriors (RWs). This mixed-methods study revealed positive changes in participating students based on teacher ratings on the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire. We also found four qualitative themes that emerged from student group interviews: (a) learning resiliency strategies and skills, (b) growth, (c) enjoyment and fun, and (d) future recommendations. We discuss the study implications, limitations, and future recommendations.

Keywords

expressive arts, resilience, Resilient Warriors, rural schools, Title I

Introduction

Children living in rural communities face significant disparities in the prevalence of mental health problems and access to mental health care compared with their urban peers (Kenney & Chanlongbutra, 2020; Morales et al., 2020). The COVID-19 outbreak contributed to the mental health disparities between rural and urban youth (Masonbrink & Hurley, 2020). School counselors in rural areas play a unique role in addressing students' increased social/emotional needs and enhancing their well-being by offering group counseling interventions (Boulden & Schimmel, 2022). Supporting such interventions, more than 50 years of research on resilience in youth has indicated a range of protective factors associated with adaptation in conditions of adversity (Dvorsky et al., 2021; Masten & Motti-Stefanidi, 2020). Incorporating expressive arts into group counseling to promote resiliency skills in children may offer a unique approach with a range of creative, low-cost tools for rural school counselors. Therefore, this study introduces *Resilient Warriors* (RWs), an expressive arts-based resiliency program (Ermis-Demirtas et al., 2023), examined as a small-group intervention in a group of rural children with elevated needs at a Title I elementary school in the Midwestern United States.

than their urban counterparts (Kenney & Chanlongbutra, 2020). They may be more likely to have a parent with poor mental health, report greater numbers of adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), and live in a neighborhood with more limited resources (Crouch et al., 2020). Moreover, the risk of suicide is markedly higher among rural youth aged 10–14, with suicide rates almost four times higher compared to urban youth (Morales et al., 2020). Rural children also face significant barriers that limit their access to quality mental health care, namely, problems with accessibility and availability of mental health providers and lack of insurance with mental health benefits (Health Resources and Services Administration [HRSA], 2017). HRSA (2017) identified 61% of the areas with a shortage of mental health professionals as rural areas. Access to lethal means, both geographical and social isolation, and stigma for help seeking are among other candidate explanations for the significantly greater rates of suicide and mental health problems in rural youth (Hoover & Mayworm, 2017).

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Rural Children's Mental Health and COVID-19

Rural children in the United States experience more acute mental health problems and worse mental health care outcomes

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the preexisting conditions for mental health disparities and other challenges posed by living in a rural community have exacerbated mental health issues, especially internalizing problems (Masonbrink & Hurley, 2020). The anxiety associated with COVID-19, coupled with social isolation and disconnection from routine due to social distancing practices and school closures, resulted in a heightened sense of loneliness, distress, anxiety, and depression among rural children (Summers-Gabr, 2020). Due to this unexpected and forced transition, rural children may not have had adequate academic resources, social support, home learning environment, a reliable internet connection, or even nutrition, which may have led to lower educational attainment, contributing to educational disparities between rural and urban children, especially for those in poverty (Masonbrink & Hurley, 2020).

The Role of Schools and School Counselors in Rural Areas

In rural areas, the school system is a significant factor in students' access to mental health resources as the primary learning and social environment for most children, providing or linking students and their families to mental health services and support (Hoover & Mayworm, 2017; Huber et al., 2016). Schools are generally the first platforms where children display mental health problems (Blackstock et al., 2018). Multiple studies have emphasized the importance of professionals in school settings accurately identifying and addressing mental health concerns, primarily through prevention and early intervention, and linking students and their families to appropriate treatment providers (Girio-Herrera et al., 2013; Huber et al., 2016). With their training and position in schools, school counselors play a crucial role in supporting students' social/emotional growth while working to enhance their academic and career outcomes (American School Counselor Association [ASCA], 2019). Especially in rural communities, school counselors are often the only accessible and qualified mental health support for youth (Boulden & Schimmel, 2022). Using a strengths-based, preventive approach, school counselors develop and deliver a comprehensive school counseling program with evidence-based, tiered services that promote social/emotional well-being and positive mental health in students (ASCA, 2019). Promoting students' social/emotional competence is an integral part of the school counseling program because peer interactions, relationships, and behavioral characteristics have all been linked to elementary students' attitudes toward school (Kwon et al., 2014). School counselors' comprehensive support is particularly important for rural students living in the most vulnerable areas with limited access to quality mental health support (Hoover & Mayworm, 2017).

Resiliency and Group Counseling

School counselors in rural areas can benefit from resiliency theory to address children's elevated social/emotional needs.

Resiliency theory offers a positive approach to student mental health, highlighting their intrapersonal strengths, well-being, assets, and optimal functioning (Masten et al., 2008), all of which align with the strengths-based youth development perspective. This approach also supports the essential role of school counselors by facilitating students' social/emotional development and future success (ASCA, 2019). *Resilience* is defined as the capacity to adapt to new circumstances and cope with adversity (Griffith, 2019; Masten et al., 2008; Zolkoski & Bullock, 2012). The process of healthy adaptation and coping results from the utilization of available resources at the individual level (e.g., effective coping skills and help seeking), relational level (e.g., having a secure relationship with a caregiver), and community context (e.g., support from the community); all these protective factors help foster resilient functioning in children (Fenwick-Smith et al., 2018). Thus, the healthy coping process may not be a static characteristic of an individual but instead relies on the interaction between intrapersonal, interpersonal, and contextual influences (Masten & Barnes, 2018). While acknowledging this dynamic interaction among these factors, research has illustrated that promoting intrapersonal resilience can serve as a protective shield for children as they move through life (Fenwick-Smith et al., 2018). Further, research has revealed specific intrapersonal attributes associated with resilience and that these attributes can be learned (Gilham et al., 2013). These research findings also support the potential and responsibility of schools to build resilience in children starting in the early years (Masten & Barnes, 2018).

School counselors are uniquely positioned to offer targeted interventions to teach resiliency skills, especially to students needing additional support. Further, providing interventions to foster resilience seems crucial in the current climate, considering the mental health disparities socioeconomically disadvantaged rural children experience coupled with the mental health burden of COVID-19 (Crouch et al., 2020; Masonbrink & Hurley, 2020; Masten & Motti-Stefanidi, 2020). One practical and efficient interventions that school counselors utilize is small-group counseling to maximize their capacity to serve students. Small-group counseling is an essential direct service for students and positively impacts students' academic, career, and social/emotional development (ASCA, 2020). Given the shortages of school counselors in rural areas (Wimberly & Brickman, 2014), group counseling allows access to a larger number of students with increased social/emotional difficulties (Rose & Steen, 2014). Enforcing a positive relational experience and providing a community of trust and support (ASCA, 2020), group counseling also helps students find a sense of belonging as they identify with other students who have similar presenting concerns (Chupp & Boes, 2012).

Promising empirical research extolls the impact of school-counselor-led small groups on students' social/emotional development. For example, Beasley (2020) found that using a small-group intervention decreased negative student behaviors and increased positive social time during lunch and recess for

the participants. Students who are positively engaged in school have been shown to have higher attendance and better academic outcomes compared to their peers (Kwon et al., 2014), thereby indicating the benefit of small groups in supporting students' social/emotional and academic growth. Further, Ohrt et al. (2014) determined that a small-group counseling approach with at-risk students promoted their self-regulation and perceived competence. Similarly, Rose and Steen (2014) focused on fostering interpersonal skills and resiliency in a group of minoritized children using the Achieving Success Everyday group counseling model. After eight group sessions, participants reported feeling empowered and supported to apply the resiliency skills they learned throughout the process. In another study, Gibson and colleagues (2018) examined the effectiveness of a school-counselor-led, small-group intervention for African American middle school boys. They found that group participation improved students' social/emotional skills, such as positive attitude and self-discipline. These results may prove the positive connection between the use of small-group counseling and the development of targeted skill sets in youth.

Expressive Arts-Based Resiliency Programming

Utilizing expressive arts to teach resiliency skills to children in small groups presents a unique approach that influences participants' socioemotional and academic development. Expressive arts include visual arts, music, dance, movement, and drama and offer numerous innovative tools (e.g., use of metaphors) to help students explore and process their experiences and promote their well-being (Gil, 2011; Kim, 2015; Sitzler & Stockwell, 2015). Facilitating playful and experiential engagement and expression in children via art and metaphorical language, this innovative approach reinforces creativity and imagination, contributes to a sense of safety, and paves the way for emotional exploration (Gil, 2011; Kim, 2015; Sitzler & Stockwell, 2015). For example, research supported the positive impact of expressive arts-based interventions (e.g., drawing, journaling, movement, music) on self-awareness, emotion regulation, and acceptance in youth (Coholic & Eys, 2016). Expressive arts have also been used to teach children abstract concepts (e.g., using finger traps to illustrate the concepts of acceptance and resistance; Ruskin et al., 2017). Further, Coholic et al. (2020) reported that using expressive arts to facilitate a mindfulness intervention promoted children's engagement with the program because children consistently recognized art activities as their favorite component. Given this powerful effect, school counselors are encouraged to incorporate expressive arts into their comprehensive school counseling program as a creative outlet.

A growing body of evidence supports implementing expressive arts-based resiliency programs (Forrest-Bank et al., 2016; Kim, 2015; Sitzler & Stockwell, 2015). Scholarly literature suggests that expressive arts-based programs with resiliency themes positively influence youth's mental health, strengthening intrapersonal resources and interpersonal

relationships, and alleviating stress and internalizing problems (Lindsey et al., 2018; Wood et al., 2013). However, much of the research on expressive arts-based resiliency programs and their impacts on mental health problems has focused on youth in clinical and community settings (e.g., Forrest-Bank et al., 2016; Sitzler & Stockwell, 2015). School counselors can find creative ways to integrate an expressive arts-based resiliency program into their school counseling program in pursuit of student outcomes similar to those in results revealed in clinical and community settings. Likewise, school counselors can consider leading expressive arts-based small groups as a targeted intervention to promote resiliency within socioeconomically disadvantaged rural elementary students needing additional support.

Purpose of the Study

This mixed-methods study aimed to investigate the usefulness of a research-informed, expressive arts-based resiliency program called *Resilient Warriors* (RWs; Ermis-Demirtas et al., 2023) with upper elementary-age students in a Title I rural school setting. Two general research questions guided our activities:

1. To what degree is the 10-week RWs program associated with changes in participating students' strengths and difficulties rated by their classroom teachers?
2. What do participants perceive as salient intrapersonal and interpersonal experiences related to completing the RWs program?

Method

Mertens (2018) proposed that embedded design provides a flexible strategy for answering research questions associated with the impact of interventions involving uniquely quantitative and qualitative research questions and data sets. Therefore, in this study, we implemented a preexperimental, embedded, mixed-methods research design with a single group of participants to synthesize distinct methodological considerations related to quantitative and qualitative data collection, analyses, and interpretation (Mertens, 2018).

Participants

Study participants were 19 third-, fourth-, and fifth-grade students with internalizing issues (e.g., anxiety) who attended a Title I rural elementary school in the Midwest region of the United States. The students were divided into two small groups based on the school schedule. One group comprised 8 third-grade students, while the other had 3 fourth-grade and 8 fifth-grade students. Regarding students' sex assigned at birth, the third-grade group involved two boys and six girls; the other group consisted of three boys and eight girls. Within the third-grade group, participants were ages 8 ($n = 5$) and 9 ($n = 3$), with

a mean age of 8.38 ($n_{\text{group}} = 8$). Students in the fourth- and fifth-grade group had a mean age of 10, with ages of 9 ($n = 2$), 10 ($n = 7$), and 11 ($n = 2$); ($n_{\text{group}} = 11$). School records indicated that two participants identified as biracial and the remaining students as White ($n = 17$).

Instruments

This study used the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ) Teacher Form (Goodman, 2001), a widely used screening tool for assessing child mental health problems (Stone et al., 2010). In the last 2 decades since its development, it has been used worldwide in low-, middle-, and high-income settings (Stone et al., 2010). The SDQ Teacher Form is a 25-item measure that teachers use to evaluate positive attributes and risk symptoms regarding the behaviors of students aged 4–10. The measure generates a total difficulties score; five subscale scores for emotional symptoms, conduct problems, peer problems, hyperactivity/inattention, and prosocial behavior; and an overall impact score. Research has shown theoretical and preliminary empirical support for combining the SDQ's hypothesized emotional and peer subscales into an "internalizing" subscale and the hypothesized conduct and hyperactivity subscales into an "externalizing" subscale (alongside the fifth prosocial subscale; Goodman et al., 2010). Goodman and colleagues (2010) indicated advantages to using the broader internalizing and externalizing SDQ subscales for analyses in low-risk samples while retaining all five subscales when screening for disorders. Given that the sample of this study involved low-risk students, we administered the SDQ (a) internalizing subscale (SDQ-IS; Item 16: "Nervous or clingy in new situations, easily loses confidence"), (b) prosocial subscale (SDQ-PS; Item 4: "Shares readily with other children, for example, toys, treats, pencils"), and (c) impact subscale (SDQ-I; Item 33: "Do the difficulties put a burden on the class as a whole?"). These three subscales involved a total of 20 items. Stone et al. (2010) reported acceptable internal consistency reliability for SDQ-IS ($\alpha = .68$), SDQ-PS ($\alpha = .82$), and SDQ-I ($\alpha = .85$).

Intervention

RWs is a research-informed, 10-week, expressive arts-based program designed to build resiliency in upper elementary students (Ermis-Demirtas et al., 2023). This program was previously tested in a classroom lesson format and found to promote resiliency and well-being among rural upper elementary students ($n = 46$; Ermis-Demirtas et al., 2023). In this present project, the program was offered to small groups as a targeted intervention in a Title I rural elementary school by the second author, a school counseling intern at the time of this study. The second author delivered each 45-minute session once per week for 10 weeks during lunch and recess hours. Students received personal arts and crafts supplies to participate in the art

activities (see Table 1 for a summary of each session's topic, goal, materials, and process).

Procedure

We secured institutional review board approval from the first author's university and the participating school district. The building school counselor and school counselor intern, the second author of this article, informed teachers about the current study and requested their referrals via email based on students' social/emotional difficulties displayed in the classroom. Teachers referred 23 students for various reasons, including their need to build healthy coping skills and social skills to enhance their capacity to participate in class activities while effectively dealing with internalizing issues associated with anxiety, adjustment, emotion regulation, self-image, and interpersonal relationships. The building school counselor and school counselor intern invited students identified through teacher referrals to the information sessions about this study. They presented the group in a positive light and as an opportunity for growth. Students were invited to participate but had the option to decline. They also distributed a single-page flier for students to take home with the consent form for their parents to sign. Nineteen students with parent consent and child assent forms were invited to complete a brief demographic questionnaire, and teachers completed a preintervention administration of the SDQ measure.

Third-, fourth-, and fifth-grade students in two small groups completed the 10-week RWs program. The week following the program's conclusion, participants were asked to participate in a focus group interview, and teachers completed a postintervention administration of the SDQ. The second author conducted three focus group interviews—one with third-grade participants ($n = 9$), one with fourth- and fifth-grade participants ($n = 8$), and one with the remaining fourth- and fifth-grade participants who missed the initial focus group interview ($n = 2$)—to explore the phenomenon of how the intervention was interpreted and internalized. Focus groups were chosen as a practical strategy over individual interviews due to time constraints and the developmental characteristics of children at this age. Focus group data were audio recorded with a digital recorder to capture the participants' lived experiences in their own words. The second author assigned participants a number to secure their confidentiality. The interview protocol was grounded in a phenomenological framework and consisted of open-ended questions about participants' thoughts, feelings, and reactions to the intervention. Each interview lasted approximately 45 minutes and was guided by the questions in Table 2.

Data Analyses

For quantitative data analysis, we performed paired-sample t tests to identify statistically significant differences in scores on the SDQ-IS, SDQ-PS, and SDQ-I, with significance limits adjusted using the Bonferroni correction ($\alpha/k = \text{adjusted alpha}$; $.05/3 = .017$). We computed effect size (d) to estimate the magnitude and direction of changes from pre- to post-test using

Table 1. Resilient Warriors Program Intervention Overview.

Topic	Goal	Materials	Process
Session 1: Adversity and resiliency	Students will define the concept of resilience and draw the resilient warrior they want to be.	Paper, drawing materials	Students learned the definitions of adversity and resilience, were introduced to the secret powers of resilient warriors, and completed a <i>Bridge Drawing</i> activity.
Session 2: Goal setting	Students will understand and visualize achieving personal goals.	SMART goal template, paper, drawing materials, <i>Vision Board</i> , scissors, glue	Students explored the importance of goals with an <i>Alice in Wonderland</i> quote, designed SMART goals with a <i>Wheel of Fortune</i> activity, and then created inspirational <i>Vision Boards</i> (Degges-White & Colon, 2015).
Session 3: Emotional competence	Students will identify and express feelings.	Paint, paper, <i>Feelings Heart</i> template, music	Students completed a <i>Color Song</i> and painted a <i>Feelings Heart</i> . The discussion focused on expressing feelings and identifying individuals to share the feelings.
Session 4: Problem solving	Students will identify problems and differentiate between ones they can and cannot control.	Rock, Play-Doh, paper, drawing materials	Students completed a <i>Rock versus Play-Doh Problems</i> activity and a <i>Hand Drawing: In or Out of My Control</i> activity to explore how to release tension and control what they can.
Session 5: Decision making	Students will practice solving various problems.	<i>Problem Solving Tree</i> template, pencil, <i>Nursery Rhyme Problems</i>	Students used a <i>Problem Solving Tree</i> and completed a <i>Nursery Rhyme Problems</i> activity (Griffith, 2019) to practice solving problems in partners.
Session 6: Positive outlook	Students will define and practice optimism as compared to pessimism.	<i>Bright/Sunny or Dark/Stormy</i> template, outlook words and images	Students completed a <i>Bright/Sunny or Dark/Stormy</i> activity (Griffith, 2019) to contrast optimism and pessimism and created a <i>Positive Outlook Poster</i> .
Session 7: Coping	Students will identify and practice coping strategies.	Mandala template, coloring materials, yoga video	Students explored the metaphor of grabbing an umbrella when it rains and the <i>RAIN</i> coping strategies.
Session 8: Coping, continued	Students will continue to identify and practice healthy coping strategies.	<i>RAIN</i> template, paper, affirmation words and images	Students continued exploring the <i>RAIN</i> coping strategies in this session.
Session 9: Social connection	Students will identify their own social support network.	Paper, drawing materials, felt, string, pipe cleaners, scissors	Students created <i>Cards of a Classmate's Strengths</i> to support others and a <i>String of Hearts</i> (Karst & Wyss, 2019) to reflect on their own support system.
Session 10: Personal strengths and termination	Students will identify their personal strengths, skills, and qualities that help build resilience.	Paper, drawing materials, graduation certificates	Students reviewed the resilient warrior qualities and created <i>Personal Resilience Shields</i> composed of their personal strengths. All students received a graduation certificate.

Watson et al.'s (2016) guidelines: .20 for small, .50 for medium, and .80 for large.

For qualitative data analysis, we applied initial open and axial coding, using constant data comparison until saturation and no additional data emerged. The second author transcribed the data verbatim, and both authors individually analyzed transcribed data using open, line-by-line coding to identify units of meaning. This first step of coding constituted initial open coding, as Patton (2015) described. The second step of data analysis focused on axial coding to categorize and confirm emerging themes (Patton, 2015). After developing individual themes and subthemes, we met together to discuss similarities and differences that surfaced after analysis of the words and phrases. Collaboratively, we developed four overall themes, each with subthemes.

Within the research team, the first author, who identifies as a professor, clinical mental health counselor, and former school

counselor whose work has been primarily with children and adolescents, designed the RWs program. The second author, a master's student in school counseling at the time of the study, delivered RWs. To promote fidelity within the qualitative processes and accuracy of the qualitative data, we applied the following trustworthiness methods in this study: bracketing, member checking, use of a coding team, and involvement of process observers and external auditors (Patton, 2015).

Results

Changes Associated with Resilient Warriors and Scores on the SDQ

Findings from the paired-samples *t* test revealed a significant decrease in teacher-reported student internalizing problems (SDQ-IS),

Table 2. Group Interview Questions, Themes, and Subthemes.

Group interview questions	Group interview themes and subthemes
(a) What was it like for you to be in the program?	Learning resiliency strategies and skills
(b) What did you think about the lessons?	(a) Adaptive coping
(c) How did these lessons make you feel about yourself?	(b) Problem solving
(d) What did you learn?	(c) Social competence
(e) What stood out to you the most about the lessons Why?	(d) Expressing emotions
(f) What was your least favorite part?	Growth
(g) Do you know more about how to approach difficult situations, adversities?	(a) Positive self-concept
	(b) Self-regulation
(h) Have you used any of the ideas and skills you learned outside of school?	(c) Understanding shared experiences
	(d) Future outlook
(i) What may have changed for you after attending this group in how you think or feel about yourself, how you cope with difficulties?	Enjoyment and fun
	(a) Social connection
	(b) Expressive arts
(j) Is there anything else about your experience with these lessons that you would like to share with us?	Future recommendations
	(a) Logistics of the program
	(b) Continuation of the program

more specifically emotional symptoms and peer problems, at the end of the intervention ($M = 4.68$, $SD = 3.49$) when compared with ratings before RWs ($M = 8.74$, $SD = 3.69$), $t(18) = 6.50$, $p < .001$, $d = 1.49$ (95% confidence interval [CI] [0.82, 2.14]), indicative of large effect size. The paired-samples t test also supported the depiction of RWs as associated with changes in students' prosocial behaviors over time. When accounting for the Bonferroni correction, the t test was statistically significant, $t(18) = 4.65$, $p < .001$, $d = 1.07$ (95% CI [0.49, 1.63]), indicative of large effect size. The increase in the teacher-rated SDQ-PS scores from preintervention ($M = 6.88$; $SD = 2.10$) to postintervention ($M = 9.11$; $SD = 1.19$) represents an increase in students' prosocial behavior. Further, while accounting for the Bonferroni correction, findings from the paired-samples t test indicated a statistically significant decrease in students' teacher-reported impact scores (SDQ-I) from preintervention ($M = 3.32$, $SD = 1.74$) to postintervention ($M = .94$, $SD = 1.35$), $t(18) = 6.73$, $p = .001$, $d = 1.53$ (95% CI [1.08, 2.05]), indicative of large effect size. The SDQ-I scores revealed that teachers observed fewer difficulties in students that interfered with their learning, friendship, and classroom activities as an outcome of their participation in RWs.

Salient Experiences Associated With Participating in Resilient Warriors

The participants in each interview described increased understanding and growth in their resiliency strategies and skills, including adaptive coping, problem solving, social competence, and expressing emotions. As an outcome of this program, participants reported improved self-concept, self-regulation, future outlook, and understanding of shared experiences. Four main themes emerged from the qualitative analysis: (a) learning

resiliency strategies and skills, (b) growth, (c) enjoyment and fun, and (d) future recommendations.

Learning Resiliency Strategies and Skills. This theme reflected participants' descriptions of resiliency strategies and skills and included data on participants' increased knowledge and understanding of adaptive coping, problem solving, social competence, and expressing emotions. For example, Participant 17 stated: "I learned how to calm down and bounce back."

Adaptive Coping. Students' reports convey adaptive coping as the ability to recognize healthy coping strategies helpful in dealing with difficult situations (e.g., sibling disagreement, divorce, bullying). Participant 10 learned "some strategies that would help me be less stressed when I have problems and fix the problems." All students referred to at least one adaptive coping strategy RWs introduced. Participant 19 brought up "brief deep breathing and grounding" to help deal with stress. Participant 8 pointed out the strategy "changing the environment" to utilize when faced with a problem they cannot solve:

Before this group, I would not walk away from my problems. I would try to fix them, and something bad would end up happening, and after this group, if I have a problem and I do not think I could solve it, I just walk away.

Further, five students specifically recalled the RAIN metaphor for coping strategies. Participant 13 described: "When it is gonna rain, you can get an umbrella ... that can help you solve your problems."

Problem Solving. Fourteen out of 19 participants referred to the problem-solving concepts RWs introduced, such as identifying problems in and out of our control. Some participants

recalled the rock and Play-Doh analogy, such as Participant 16: “When we had the rock and Play-Doh problems ... the rock problem you cannot get rid of; the Play-Doh problem, you can just shape it and get rid of it.” Some participants communicated benefitting from understanding the distinction between Play-Doh problems that we can control and rock problems that we cannot control. Participant 11 reported: “I have always felt like every problem I have is a rock problem, but I figured out that a lot of them were just a Play-Doh problem.” Some participants indicated their application of the rock versus Play-Doh problems metaphor when solving problems or seeking help. Participant 10 shared: “Is this a Play-Doh problem? Because I might just be able to pick the best decision. Or is this a rock problem? I may not be able to [myself].” They continued:

When I wake up in the morning, and I have a problem on my mind and whether it's a rock problem or a Play-Doh problem, and I finally decide, well, this is a Play-Doh problem ... I wipe it to the back of my mind and say, “It is all going to be fine. I can try to figure this out.”

Like Participant 11 “feeling more like a problem solver,” participants presented an increased understanding and ability in problem-solving skills.

Social Competence. Most participants discussed learning social skills that helped them engage in meaningful interactions with their peers and group leader and communicated the importance of seeking support when encountering difficult problems. Participant 1 stated: “It [the program] helped a lot with our social skills.” Similarly, Participant 3 described social skills they learned as an outcome of participating in the program: “I learned how to get along with people ... I am better at making friends than just being lonely.” Participant 9 highlighted how their increased awareness regarding their self-resources helped them get along with others: “I feel more calm when I talk to people that are sometimes mean.” Regarding seeking social support, Participant 17 shared: “I learned to talk to people to figure out if they can help me with my problems.”

Expressing Emotions. Most of the students described the importance of expressing emotions rather than keeping them in and discussed diverse strategies emphasizing art-based techniques to express emotions in a healthy way. Participant 12 stated, “You can be resilient, and you do not have to hold your feelings, your problems in.” Participant 13 expanded on this: “Tell other people your feelings, and do not just leave them in.” Regarding expressing emotions in healthy ways, Participant 8 shared: “One of my favorite things before this was crafting, so using crafting to express my emotions ... was super fun.” Participant 11 reported:

I use coloring a lot. A lot of times, when I am sad, when I color, all I do is that I color my mood and I erase it, and I color the opposite mood of what I want to be now. And that helps me out a lot.

Growth. This theme included the positive changes participants experienced in self-concept, self-regulation, future outlook, and understanding shared experiences. As a result of participating in RWs, all students referred to personal growth, and several recognized positive changes within the group. For example, Participant 11 indicated a shift in their mindset from “I cannot be a problem solver” to “I can solve a lot of my problems.” Participant 10 noticed growth in the group: “The resilience in the group, and how much they changed in it, because all we were working towards that [resilience], and I felt like all that helped to make us be better.”

Positive Self-Concept. Overwhelmingly, participants referred to a positive change in how they feel about themselves, including feeling more satisfied with who they are, having more confidence in their abilities, and reporting increased positive mood. Participant 2 referred to self-growth: “They [the lessons] made me nicer than I was.” Participant 12 pointed out a perception of increased capability and strength: “They [the lessons] made me feel stronger because I realized I could be better at more stuff if I thought about it and not just say ‘no’ or ‘I cannot do it.’” Similarly, Participant 10 echoed a growth in self-reliance: “They [the lessons] made me feel more independent like I could do ... more than I used to be able to.”

Self-Regulation. While recalling healthy coping strategies introduced in RWs, most participants recognized how they actively used these coping skills to manage emotions and stay calm under stress or exasperating circumstances. Participant 19 pointed out how coping skills helped them manage stress: “Before, I would probably just stress for a while and stay stressed. But now, I feel like I can ... control it better.” Participant 8 echoed this sentiment with managing frustration: “I learned to be resilient. Before this lesson, I was frustrated, but now, I have learned how to calm myself down.” Participant 2 provided a specific situation in which she utilized the breathing strategy to calm down:

When my sister usually plays with my toys ... I get so frustrated at her. When I was doing this group, she was playing with my toys and broke one of them. I was about to scream, but I holded it in. I wanted to burst at her, but then, I was like, “Stay calm.” I took some deep breaths and then [I said], “Why don't we just go downstairs?”

Understanding of Shared Experiences. In addition to growing personally, students recognized that they were experiencing shared realities with others in the group. Seven of the 19 participants referenced a new understanding of what they had in common with the other students. For example, Participant 8 reflected:

Before [this group], I felt special in a bad way, but now I do not feel alone. Before the program, I thought I was the only one that had super big problems. But now that I am in this program, I am realizing that there are more people that are like me.

Participant 3 described: “I thought I was the only one that ... got lonely. And then I met all these people; I thought I was alone, but now I feel like I am not.”

Future Outlook. Students reported increased optimism toward the future. Their comments revealed that they see themselves using the resiliency skills from this program in their lives, potentially helping them handle problems better in the future. Participant 9 stated, “This was amazing. It was life-changing, and I am so going to use it in my life.” Participant 10 shared: “It really helps you look forward to life.” Some students specifically communicated growth in their confidence concerning the future. For example, Participant 19 felt “more confident for the future” and stated, “Problems; I feel like I can handle them better,” while Participant 12 described a change in thinking:

Mainly how I think if I can do something or not. I always think I can do something; I can try better next time. I am not going to think I cannot do it at all because I failed the first time. That is what I changed.

Others reflected changes in perspective. Participant 19 stated, “Instead of being a bit more pessimistic, I feel a bit more optimistic,” and Participant 9 posed the example: “If there is ever a problem in your way ... say the problem is a wall, you can never climb over it. You grab a rope, and you climb over it. You figure out a solution.”

Enjoyment and Fun. The enjoyment and fun theme centers on students’ references to simply taking pleasure in the program. All 19 students commented on enjoying RWs. While tearing up, Participant 11 shared: “Resilient Warriors was the best thing I ever chose to do. And I just loved it. If you ever come back here again, I for sure am doing the club again.” Two subthemes emerged that reflect enjoyment and fun: social connections and expressive arts.

Social Connections. Students enjoyed RWs by meeting new people, making friends, and connecting with the leader. Thirteen students mentioned this subtheme numerous times. Participant 11 reflected: “I loved it because I met a lot of new people,” while Participant 13 expanded: “This [RWs] made me more happy because I got more friends ... friends are good and fun.” For some participants, the social connection stood out the most, as noticed in Participant 8’s and Participant 5’s responses to the question regarding their favorite part of the program: “the people in the group” and “getting to know all the people,” respectively.

Expressive Arts. Another way students had fun in the program was through their expressive arts experience. Although only 10 of the 19 students referenced the use of arts, they mentioned it twice as often as the subtheme of social connection. Some students’ reports revealed they enjoyed the crafts (e.g., coloring, bracelets, creating things, use of materials). Participant

8 remarked: “One of my favorite things ... before this was crafting. So, using crafting to express my emotions was super fun.” Participant 7 stated, “The crafts stood out to me the most because they were really fun.” Other students’ reports pointed toward enjoyment of activities (e.g., dancing, breathing, reflecting). Participant 4 liked “coloring a lot and dancing,” and Participant 18 had fun with “coloring, Play-Doh, breathing, strategies.”

Future Recommendations. Fourteen of the 19 students offered recommendations for the future implementation of the program. Students’ responses pointed to the elements they liked or disliked and would change, revealing two subthemes: program logistics and continuation of the program.

Program Logistics. Student responses offered recommendations to change two elements of program administration. Three students recommended including more participants based on what they were enjoying. Participant 3 remarked, “I would change to have more people in it so I could make more friends.” The one logistic students disliked was associated with offering the program during the lunch and recess hours, and nine students recommended finding another time of the day. Participant 13 expressed the sentiments thoroughly: “So my least favorite part was the time of it because I like to get my fresh air outside and play with my friends, and I hope that you can change the time of it.”

Continuation of the Program. Reflections on the group interview questions also revealed that students would like to expand the program. Six students advocated for continuing the program. They seemed to enjoy the program, as observed when Participant 3 expressed, “If we could stay here, I would stay here for the rest of my life.” They also desired to explore the themes further. Participant 19 proposed, “I think there should be maybe another program, or maybe we elaborate on some of this stuff.”

Discussion

Research suggests that rural youth, especially those with socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds, experience a higher rate of mental health issues and suicide than their urban counterparts (Blackstock et al., 2018; Kenney & Chanlongbutra, 2020; Morales et al., 2020). Despite this, rural youth are less likely to access mental health services (Huber et al., 2016), indicating a significant gap between the mental health needs of school-aged rural children and their access to quality mental health care. These mental health disparities between rural and urban youth continued to grow during COVID-19 (Masonbrink & Hurley, 2020), presenting tremendous challenges to rural youth’s mental health and well-being (Dvorsky et al., 2021). Although environmental stressors can contribute to children’s susceptibility to mental health problems, promoting resilience can offer opportunities to increase their capacity for positive adaptation and healthy

coping in the face of adversity (Dvorsky et al., 2021). With this in mind, this mixed-methods study explored a single group of participants' experiences associated with receiving *Resilient Warriors*, an expressive arts-based, school-based resiliency program (Ermis-Demirtas et al., 2023), at a Title I rural elementary school in the Midwestern United States. We also sought to determine whether students who participated in RWs as a small-group intervention experienced increased prosocial behaviors and fewer internalizing issues as rated by their teachers. The preliminary findings offer promising implications for the relationship between RWs, participant experiences, and their strengths and difficulties. The independent and subsequent analyses of qualitative and quantitative data resulted in conceptualizing participant experiences with RWs. This conceptualization relies on the assumption that the content of RWs was perceived in unique ways that may have promoted rural children's understanding of resiliency strategies and skills, growth in positive self-concept, self-regulation, understanding shared experiences, future outlook, and enjoyment and fun. These qualities may contribute to decreasing internalizing issues and increasing prosocial behaviors in rural children living in low-income households. This conceptualization appears consistent with previous literature indicating a relationship between intrapersonal and interpersonal resources that foster coping with adversity, well-being, self-esteem, and peer relationships (Ermis-Demirtas et al., 2023; Wood et al., 2013) and that alleviate internalizing issues (Bosgraaf et al., 2020).

Interviews with participants revealed four themes portraying the growth-oriented lived experiences of socioeconomically disadvantaged rural elementary students who completed RWs. The first theme indicated an improvement in participants' knowledge and understanding of resiliency strategies and skills emphasized within RWs, including adaptive coping, problem solving, social competence, and expressing emotions. More specifically, most participants pointed out that RWs taught them how to recall the RAIN and umbrella metaphors to apply adaptive coping strategies (e.g., deep breathing, grounding) in dealing with stressful situations (e.g., COVID-19), discern problems they can control from the problems they cannot control through the use of rock versus Play-Doh problems analogy (e.g., COVID-19 was brought as an example of a problem we cannot control, and students generated actions that they can control, such as wearing a mask), seek help and support when encountering difficult situations, and express emotions in healthy ways via the use of art. These qualitative findings align with the RWs targeted outcomes and appear consistent with the previous literature depicting a positive relationship between resiliency-based art making and emotional expression, social competence, healthy coping, and resilience (Ermis-Demirtas et al., 2023; Forrest-Bank et al., 2016; Sitzler & Stockwell, 2015). These findings also support the didactic use of expressive arts to teach children abstract concepts (Ruskin et al., 2017). For the second theme, growth, participants indicated positive changes in their self-concept,

self-regulation, future outlook, and understanding of shared experiences. Participants reported greater confidence in their capabilities and strengths, increased active usage of adaptive coping mechanisms to regulate their emotions and remain calm under stress, greater levels of awareness about shared experiences, and increased optimism toward the future. These personal growth experiences are consistent with positive psychology and strengths-based approaches to youth development, particularly resiliency-based art making (Griffith, 2019; Masten et al., 2008; Zolkoski & Bullock, 2012). From a positive psychology perspective, character strengths are hypothesized to function as a protective factor that promotes resilience during adversity. These findings also align with the existing research outcomes indicating positive effects of resiliency-oriented expressive arts interventions on stress reduction, mood regulation (Lindsey et al., 2018), and self-esteem (Wood et al., 2013). Promoting these positive qualities in children through RWs could also have facilitated coping with uncertainties associated with COVID-19 (Dvorsky et al., 2021). The third theme, enjoyment and fun, indicated participants' experiences connecting with others and enjoying the process via arts and crafts. Consistent with previous research findings illustrating children's increased enjoyment and engagement with the intervention due to the use of expressive arts (Coholic et al., 2020), this theme supports the positive outcomes of using small groups in school counseling, offering enjoyable social time and mutuality for the participants (Beasley, 2020). Last, within the fourth theme, future recommendations, participants shared their feedback to change two elements of the program administration and advocated for the expansion and continuation of the program.

We conceptualized the three thematic experiences of RWs—learning resiliency strategies and skills, growth, and enjoyment and fun—as contributing to fostering prosocial behavior and mitigating internalizing problems. Supporting the study hypothesis, the results indicated positive improvements from the pre- to post-test scores on the SDQ-IS, SDQ-PS, and SDQ-I, as rated by teachers. These results also validated using RWs in promoting prosocial behaviors and alleviating internalizing problems and difficulties in socioeconomically disadvantaged rural children. More specifically, teachers observed a significant decrease in students' emotional symptoms, such as worry, nervousness in new situations, somatic complaints, and unhappy or depressed mood, alongside peer problems, including difficulty getting along well with peers and adults and making friends (Stone et al., 2010). Teachers also reported a significant decrease in students' impact scores (SDQ-I), indicating fewer student difficulties, especially with peer relationships, learning and engagement in class, and classroom activities. These findings appear consistent with the existing evidence that resiliency-oriented, art-based programs offer positive effects on the most pressing mental health concerns of youth with elevated needs, including stress reduction and mitigation of internalizing symptoms (Lindsey et al., 2018). Teachers also reported a meaningful increase in students' prosocial

behaviors, which include sharing, volunteering, and being considerate of other people's feelings (Stone et al., 2010). These results align with the literature recognizing the positive impacts of resiliency-based expressive arts programming on children's peer relationships (Wood et al., 2013).

Implications

School counselors interested in strengths-based, creative-arts-informed interventions might find the study results encouraging and view the program as a viable method for working with groups of upper elementary students with elevated needs to support their adaptive coping, personal growth, and resiliency. Given the evidentiary support, the delivery of RWs may serve as an early intervention activity to teach young students key resiliency attributes, which could also contribute to alleviating their internalizing problems. For school counselors lacking resources to purchase and implement commercially available small-group interventions, having access to no-cost materials with promising results may facilitate delivering such services. Suggested lesson plans and accompanying Google slides, list of materials, and activity sheets can be obtained by contacting the lead author. RWs lessons may be integrated within a larger upper elementary curriculum emphasizing social/emotional development. School counselors may deploy lessons as a time-limited, more targeted intervention in small groups that would benefit from a more intensive focus on the RWs components, such as adaptive coping and problem solving. In this practice, we encourage school counselors to adhere to the themes and qualities of RWs to create a culture and common language among students. Further, school counselors can collaborate with teachers and parents by creating activities and follow-up methods outside the intervention for the retention, application, and meaningful reinforcement of concepts.

As with our example, utilizing standardized tools to gauge student social and emotional functioning and academic performance can provide school counselors with valuable observations that help track student progress and inform appropriate intervention. Assessment of relevant student outcomes at regular intervals is an integral aspect of evaluating the effectiveness of RWs (Ermiş-Demirtas et al., 2023). For school counselors lacking resources to purchase measurement tools, the SDQ, also employed in this study, could be used in school settings as a sound, free-access instrument that measures a range of internalizing and externalizing outcomes. Further, school counselors can review Ermiş-Demirtas and colleagues' (2023) study wherein they used instruments to assess positive outcomes, including resilience and well-being in children.

These results may also have implications for prevention and early intervention programs. For example, participants in this study talked about the sense of community they developed and the fun they had sharing with one another and completing the expressive arts-based activities with resiliency themes. This could be encouraging for those who intend to implement small-group early intervention and prevention programs in their settings, as

they suggest ways of making the experience more meaningful and enjoyable. Participants also provided recommendations for improving the program for future student cohorts, focusing on the logistics and continuation of the program. First, given students' suggestions to include more group participants, school counselors may consider offering RWs as a classroom lesson to all students or involve more students in small groups. Second, school counselors may find a time other than the lunch break to deliver RWs because most participants discouraged the use of lunch time. Last, given that students voiced a strong desire to remain in the RWs program, school counselors might consider expanding RWs beyond 10 lessons.

Limitations and Future Recommendations

Our study presents several limitations. First, the study design did not involve a comparison group; thus, future researchers may implement true experimental designs to explore causal relationships associated with RWs. Second, our quantitative analyses depended on teacher-reported data collected via a Likert-type instrument; we encourage researchers to collect other data, such as behavioral observations or office referrals, to support the utility of RWs. Third, our sample size was small ($n = 19$) and comprised predominantly White participants, limiting the representation of diverse samples. Future research with larger, more diverse samples could contribute to a more nuanced understanding of the effect of RWs concerning culture-based variables. Fourth, although we involved process observers and external auditors to promote the accuracy of the qualitative data analysis, different researchers may have found varying outcomes. Incorporating individual interviews also might have resulted in further crystallization of our presented themes. Thus, future researchers may implement methods facilitating greater agreement among participants.

Conclusion

This mixed-methods study offers compelling support for using RWs as an expressive arts-based small-group intervention with elementary students to foster their resilience, especially among those living in more vulnerable areas, including rural and socio-economically disadvantaged settings. We encourage school counselors to find innovative ways to integrate RWs into their programs to build intrapersonal resources and interpersonal sources of strength within rural children and promote their adaptive resiliency strategies and skills that may facilitate their effective coping with adversity. This is especially relevant today, given the mental health burden of COVID-19 (Masten & Motti-Stefanidi, 2020).

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