

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Strengthening Youth Resilience *via* Social Work Internship Placements within Boys and Girls Clubs: A Process Evaluation

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Abstract: Background: There is a growing mental health crisis among youth in the United States. The objective of the current study was to conduct a process evaluation of Strengthening Youth Resilience (SYR), a unique program aimed at decreasing youth anxiety and depression *via* social work internship placements within after-school programs in three historically underserved communities in a large city in Southern California. The SYR program utilizes the School Social Work Practice Model as a framework for interacting with youth within community settings by providing a tiered system of service delivery.

Methods: Focus group discussions and interviews were used to examine the unique perspectives of social work interns, program leaders, and Boys and Girls Clubs of America (BGCA) staff.

Results: Results emphasized the importance of trust, clear communication, and shared decision-making as a foundation for successful program site integration. Additionally, several unanticipated barriers to implementation arose, including difficulty obtaining informed parental consent to work individually with youth, challenges aligning internship schedules with the fluid structure of after-school programs, and the need for a private welcoming space to work.

Conclusion: In conclusion, the SYR program successfully integrated within BGCA sites and was able to provide support to youth. BGCA sites expressed great satisfaction with the program and were eager to continue and expand upon their collaboration with the local university.

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1. INTRODUCTION

There is a growing mental health crisis among youth globally. These challenges have been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic [1, 2]. One solution to addressing this mental health crisis is to provide therapeutic support to youth in community spaces where they are frequently found. While public schools should be providing youth with counseling and wellness services, the need for these services far outweighs the resources to provide them. According to a Pew Research Center Survey [3], approximately half of public schools in the United States offer mental health assessments and even fewer provide therapeutic support. More specifically, there is only 1 school counselor for every 613 to 787 K-8 students in US public schools [4]. This far exceeds the recommended 250:1 student-to-school counselor ratio by the American School Counselor Association [5]. As such, it is

necessary to develop creative solutions to serve this high-need population. A significant challenge in providing mental health support services to students is a lack of qualified mental health professionals who can provide them. In order to address this need, a large university in Southern California and community partners have created a program to decrease youth anxiety and depression and increase youth resilience by providing therapeutic support *via* social work internship placements within local after-school programs. Research provides a strong rationale for the effectiveness of these types of unique social work internship placements, both for the social work trainees and the clients they serve [6].

1.1. Early Adolescent Challenges

All humans experience a desire to feel connected. In fact, relatedness is considered an essential quality for psychological well-being [7]. This is particularly important during early adolescence when youth are actively engaged in relationship-building and peer connections become increasingly important. Experiencing positive relationships and feeling con-

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ected contributes to early adolescents' academic achievement and feelings of happiness [8, 9]. As such, building a sense of connection through relationships can be beneficial both inside and outside of the classroom.

Although early adolescence is a critical period for establishing a sense of connection with others, it is also characterized as a time of great challenge. In fact, a constellation of experiences interacts during this developmental stage, creating potential barriers to relatedness. These include, but are not limited to, developmental changes associated with puberty [10-17], increasing educational demands [18, 19], and navigating complex social relationships [20-22].

In addition to these very real challenges associated with the "middle school years," many youth also experience adversity within home and community settings, increasing their risk of developing depression and related mental health disorders in adulthood [23]. Specifically, adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) include childhood abuse, neglect, and household dysfunction [24]. Research indicates that poverty is often associated with exposure to ACEs [25] and that youth living in poverty are significantly more likely to experience ACEs than peers [26]. In the absence of protective factors, cumulative exposure to ACEs in childhood creates toxic levels of stress that negatively impact healthy brain development and lead to subsequent health problems, emotional disorders, and cognitive impairments [27].

Globally, youth mental health problems have significantly increased over the last decade [28] and are now the primary contributor to youth disability [29]. Compared to two decades ago, youth are 50% more likely to experience a major depressive episode, and rates of suicide are higher than ever before [30]. In addition, the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated this crisis through disrupted transitions [2], and high levels of uncertainty about many aspects of everyday life have led to increased anxiety and depression among youth [31].

One way to help early adolescents cope with the many challenges that arise during this time in their lives is to support their resilience by increasing their opportunities for connection and relatedness [32]. This is particularly effective when practitioners working with youth employ trauma-informed care [26]. Trauma-informed care refers to a diverse set of practices that aim to provide therapeutic support by acknowledging the impact of trauma, its symptoms, and its effects, while actively working to prevent any further traumatization [33]. Strengthening youth resilience in this way has been shown to reduce the rate of juvenile offending and is linked to greater engagement in academics [34, 35]. Furthermore, every child may need support to strengthen their resilience due to the COVID-19 pandemic, given its positive association with depression, anxiety, and stress [36].

1.2. The Strengthening Youth Resilience Program

The Strengthening Youth Resilience (SYR) program draws from two complementary theoretical models to guide decision-making and program delivery. First, Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Systems Framework [37] guides the program's understanding of human development as an interactive process influencing and influenced by one's immediate

experiences (*e.g.*, adult-child interactions), personal characteristics (*e.g.*, temperament), contexts (*e.g.*, home, school, neighborhood, *etc.*), and time (*e.g.*, post COVID-19). Second, the School Social Work Practice Model [38] provides a framework for interacting with youth within community settings. As such, the SYR program is aligned with the following goals:

1. Provide evidence-based educational, behavioral, and mental health services.
2. Promote a school climate and culture conducive to learning.
3. Maximize access to school-based and community-based resources.

Providing a foundation for all key components of the SYR program, the Practice Model makes a set of critical assumptions. First, academic achievement is linked to home and community environments. Strong community efficacy and healthy home dynamics promote academic achievement in school. Second, school social workers abide by the National Association of Social Workers Code of Ethics and the School Social Work Association of America's Ethical Guidelines to ensure practices are contextually and culturally appropriate. Third, school social workers consider the educational rights of those involved in the setting, including advocating for social and economic justice for all. Finally, data-based decision-making is used to provide evidence-based services.

The SYR program was created to address the growing mental health needs of middle school youth attending after-school programs in historically underserved neighborhoods. The mission of SYR is to improve the health of children and youth through interventions targeting anxiety and depression. The program was created by a university school of social work in collaboration with three local Boys and Girls Clubs of America (BGCA) sites. Funding was provided *via* public-private partnerships between the university and local philanthropic organizations.

Across three BGCA sites, there were four social work interns placed [3 Bachelor's social work (BSW) and 1 Master's social work (MSW); 3 women and 1 man] who were all supervised by one field instructor. Social work interns went to their sites 12 hours per week, but due to the hours the BGCA sites were open (~ 3 pm-9 pm), interns would split shifts across two sites within a one-week period. Each site had a director who was involved in the SYR recruitment as well as facilitating social work interns with space availability and connecting with BGCA adolescents.

The SYR program director collected information on all activities completed by the SYR interns during their participation in the program. Interns met with their field instructors weekly to guide student development toward becoming a professional social worker. These meetings included case reviews, ethics discussions, reviews of education-based recordings required by the university, reflections on practice, discussion on challenges and successes, providing a safe learning environment for growth and development, and expanding interns' intervention repertoire and skill level. Interns provided services *via* a tiered service delivery model.

Tier 1 consisted of universal support for all students (*e.g.*, wellness workshops), tier 2 consisted of more intensive interventions, usually conducted in small groups (*e.g.*, parent information nights, home visits), and finally, tier 3 offered the most intense, individualized treatment to students in greatest need (*e.g.*, intake assessments, individual sessions, suicide risk assessment). During the 2022-2023 academic year, SYR interns completed a range of activities and helped students deal with a variety of challenges, including anxiety and depression from sexual harassment, experiencing a drive-by shooting, violence, and conflictual peer relationships.

The goal of the present study was to conduct a process evaluation of the SYR program that met several key objectives: 1) to better understand the experiences of social work interns, BGCA staff, and university program leaders related to the program; 2) to understand the capacity of the program for achieving its intended outcomes, and 3) to inform program refinement and implementation. The present study has addressed the following research questions:

1. What readiness factors must be in place for the successful implementation of a social work field site placement developed through a community collaboration?
2. What anticipated and unanticipated roadblocks were encountered?
3. How did this impact program implementation and site acceptance?

To our knowledge, this is the first program to provide mental health support within BGCA sites. As such, this study provides a unique example of an innovative university-community program designed to provide a mutually beneficial experience by increasing internship placements for social work students and providing mental health support to BGCA staff and students who are underserved. Further, because this program is the first of its kind, results from this preliminary evaluation stand to benefit other youth-serving organizations by providing lessons learned during the pilot year of the program, particularly as they relate to field site integration.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

2.1. Evaluation Design

The goal of the process evaluation was to determine whether SYR and its component parts were operating as intended and serving the target population. Rather than exploring whether the program had achieved its intended outcomes, the process evaluation focused on program delivery. This approach, often used during the pilot phase of program development, provides detailed information that can be used for program refinement and continuous quality improvement.

Utilizing a qualitative research approach, evaluators conducted a series of focus group discussions and interviews with the SYR program team (*i.e.*, program coordinator, field instructors, social work interns) and BGCA staff. The focus group discussions and interviews were retrospective and included a variety of questions aimed at understanding the utility of the program, program satisfaction, and areas for improvement. The study's principal investigator (PI) gained

approval from the university's institutional review board (IRB) prior to conducting any data analyses or executing any research plans.

2.2. Participants and Procedure

Using a purposive sampling technique, field instructors shared an informational flyer about the research study with four SYR social work interns placed in BGCA sites. Interested students then emailed the study PI and were subsequently invited to attend a focus group discussion. SYR program staff and BGCA staff were emailed directly by the study PI and invited to participate in an interview.

The study PI conducted all focus groups and interviews. At the time of data collection, she was an Assistant Professor with a Ph.D. and 15 years of research experience. One focus group discussion with three social work interns and six interviews with SYR program staff and BGCA staff were completed. This included two undergraduate student interns, one graduate student intern, the SYR program coordinator, two field instructors, one BGCA staff member, and two BGCA site directors ($n=9$). Only the PI and study participants were present during these meetings. All focus group discussions and interviews took place over Zoom and were recorded for later transcription. Focus group discussions and interviews were approximately 1 hour in length. Study participants were introduced to the study PI at the beginning of the academic year. At that time she was referred to as the program evaluator who was interested in understanding the complexities of administering the SYR program during its pilot year. All study participants provided informed consent prior to study participation. One SYR intern never expressed interest in participating.

A focus group discussion was conducted with social work interns to understand their experiences in the first year of SYR program implementation. A set of guiding questions was used to facilitate the discussion (*e.g.*, "Briefly describe how you spent your time? What was a typical day like?"); however, students were encouraged to share whatever they wanted.

Individual interviews were conducted with SYR program staff and BGCA staff to understand their experiences in the first year of program implementation. Semi-structured interviews were conducted using a list of questions to guide the conversation, with most questions prompting participants to elaborate and share details about their personal experiences (*e.g.*, "Was your involvement in the SYR program what you originally envisioned?"). Participants were encouraged to share all the feedback they wanted.

3. ANALYTIC PLAN

The focus group discussions and interviews were transcribed. Next, all transcripts were content analyzed by two investigators. Following content analytic methods as outlined by Rabiee [39], two coders familiarized themselves with the data by reading through responses independently multiple times. In the second step, researchers individually wrote notes in the margins of text containing ideas, codes, or short phrases. Finally, both coders came together to discuss what was agreed upon (including why and how those memos were

representative of the data) and to discuss how those memos would be transformed into themes. This process was repeated until a final codebook was developed that contained the themes representative of the data.

4. RESULTS

Data were categorized into 9 separate themes based on participant responses. These 9 themes were (1) intern site descriptions and differences, (2) SYR importance, (3) SYR program, (4) intern differences, (5) SYR interns' positive experience perspectives, (6) SYR interns' negative experience perspectives, (7) SYR challenges, (8) what worked in the SYR program? and (9) SYR recommendations and future plans.

4.1. Intern Site – Descriptions and Differences

This theme describes each of the three different BGCA sites where interns were placed. The theme differentiates each site according to the staff availability, physical layout, and the population of youth in attendance.

BGCA sites shared multiple characteristics. Membership cost was a commonality among all clubs, particularly the fact that each club was an attractive option due to its affordability. As one participant elaborated:

“But fortunately we’re very cost-efficient, so it’s \$15 for the school year, which is very cost-efficient.” (BGCA Site Director)

BGCA sites also had commonalities in terms of the programs that they administered. BGCA staff described some of the program funding being given from the same administration, thereby requiring them to do a universal program. Despite these similarities, each BGCA site had unique characteristics in terms of the members it attracted, the location, and the physical space available.

BGCA Site 1. Participants described BGCA site 1 as a safe space within the area. The physical proximity to a high school contributes to a looser structure for high school students. Many high school students walked to BGCA site 1 immediately after school. As a result, participants inferred that the youth are looking for an environment that differs from a school classroom by providing a place to socialize with peers.

“So, the teen room, it’s kind of like a hangout. They’re in there, they’re being supervised, but there’s not really a program going on, but the kids still come.” (MSW intern)

BGCA Site 2. While BGC site 1 was described as having a looser structure, BGCA site 2 was described as having a tight program for all its members. Participants highlighted an academic focus at BGCA site 2 with scheduled programming.

“They go through the three rotations, the kids stay with their staff, and I just feel like that’s a little more structured when it comes to behavior management as well.” (BGCA Site Director)

In addition to having youth rotate through different programs, BGC site 2 was also described as having an appealing physical space.

“Versus BGC Site 2 where you have this beautiful gym also but you have I think it’s four specific rooms that they

can work and they haven’t broken them up by age within the room.” (Field Instructor)

Participants also listed an abundance of extracurricular activity options at BGC site 2, such as skating, gardening, and music.

BGC Site 3. BGC site 3 was described as a contrast to BGC site 1 and BGC site 2. While those sites had an established member base, BGC site 3 was characterized as a developing site with varying age groups. Participants also described BGC site 3 as suffering from being understaffed and circulating through new staff members as others resigned. As one director was described:

“He was alone doing everything. He was the doorman, he was the front desk person, he also was the only one that could feed the kids.” (MSW intern)

In light of these challenges, participants emphasized athletic activity opportunities, particularly due to a recently developed indoor basketball court provided by the Stephen Curry Foundation. Although BGC site 3 only operated with two different rooms and the basketball gym, the court was described as a highlight.

Overall, each of the three BGCA sites were described similarly in terms of the cost and universal programs offered. The club sites differed in that BGC site 2 provided scheduled programming related to academic enhancement, while BGC site 1 and BGC site 3 operated from a looser structure. BGC site 2 was also viewed as having the strongest presence of staff, while BGC site 3 in particular did not have adequate staffing. Finally, the geographic location played a part in the site differences in that BGC site 1 was viewed as a space to get away from local gangs.

4.2. SYR Importance

This theme focused on the importance and need for a program, like SYR. Participants described the need for additional mental health resources and the SYR program. BGCA staff felt SYR was important due to the general mental health needs of youth and the lack of trained staff that could provide such resources in an after-school site. Additionally, the impact that COVID-19 had on the clubs and social interaction opportunities for youth was voiced as a strong driver of SYR participation.

“I will say that the program is definitely needed, especially with - like I said, post-Covid and what our members are dealing with. And especially with my site, I think my site definitely will benefit if we can get consistency on the members’ end where they’re able to get all the data taken care of, and we can run the program immediately. But I think the mental health checks are definitely a definite plus and a definite need for our members.” (BGCA Site Director)

Other participants advocated for the SYR program due to reduced mental health stigma.

“Parents are more willing to say yes to this, and educators are more willing to advocate time or appropriate time, and give some physical facility uses to that, like all those things, is like if we could be part of that tipping point that changes that perspective on how students ultimately succeed,

then that would be like the biggest thing.” (SYR Program Coordinator)

Overall, the need for the SYR program was described directly through interest in SYR, or indirectly through the need for mental health resources. BGCA sites expressed a strong desire for the program.

4.3. SYR Program

This theme served to describe the process of the SYR program and the week-to-week activity of interns and staff. The SYR program involved primarily rapport-building and assessment work. For the initial implementation of SYR, BGCA sites were incorporating program components alongside a separate grant aimed at assessing youth mental health. As such, SYR social work interns were tasked with conducting intake assessments with students and then focusing on those identified as most in need of therapeutic support for more intensive one-on-one counseling with a graduate student intern. As one BGC participant elaborated:

“All the youth are to be categorized into either low risk, high risk, track one, track two.... Of those, they want us to work with fifty that are high-risk and concentrate on those 50 the first year.” (Field Instructor)

The intake form included assessing anxiety and depression as well as establishing goals. Once assessments were completed and track 2 individuals were identified, parents needed to complete consent forms for the SYR program to officially begin. Due to constraints in the consent form process, the majority of the fall semester interns spent time building rapport with youth.

Social work interns used their own creativity to build rapport with the youth. BGCA site interns utilized the resources that their club provided.

“So like for Valentine's day, I did Valentine's day grams and I was inviting everybody. I was at [BGC site] that time. So it was with the teens, who are very hard to come by. They just are too cool for school and no, they don't want to join us. But I got a pretty good turnout that time.” (MSW intern)

Overall, SYR interns went through the process of building rapport with youth during their initial integration phases into sites. BGC interns were able to involve themselves in group activities. SYR interns at the MSW level started working in more one-on-one activities as the year progressed.

4.4. Intern Differences

This theme described how the social work interns had different personality characteristics and levels of education. The unique characteristics of each social work intern played into how successful they were at integrating with their sites, as well as how they built rapport with youth.

“You know they gave me a Boys and Girls Club staff-shirt early on. But you know the field instructors made it clear like you're not there to discipline or monitor. And I said, okay, I should probably take this shirt off. Then I don't when they admonished or cussing or play fighting. I don't admonish anybody. I just want them to let them do what they're going to do.” (BSW intern)

They also shared that the unique aspects of interns (such as varieties in age) offered different benefits for the sites. Intern perspectives confirmed a similar notion that some felt more comfortable than others based on experience as a social worker and experience working with children. As for the level of education, BSW (Bachelor's social work) and MSW (Master's social work) students had different capabilities.

BSW students were intended to do more group work, while MSW students were allowed to do group work and one-on-one. Overall, the difference in intern characteristics impacted the services provided to youth.

4.5. SYR Intern Positive Experiences

This theme encapsulated all experiences that the SYR interns described as positive during their time in this program. One of the most common positive experiences from interns' perspective was being able to help build a program in its first year of existence. SYR interns enjoyed being able to have a say in what would benefit the program.

“We're not always going to see the end as social workers. We're not always going to see the end of things or the final results or all the work that you put into something. You're not always going to enjoy that. You're just going to sometimes create the path for your clients, for your participants or members, and you're going to set them up and they're going to go on.” (MSW intern)

Another common positive experience was the relationship between the field instructor for BGC and the intern. Multiple SYR interns working at BGC sites praised the support from their field instructors.

Overall, SYR interns shared positive experiences in terms of supporting the development of a new program. While the initial launch of the program did have challenges, the SYR interns largely viewed these as opportunities for growth. Field instruction was praised for BGC interns.

4.6. SYR Intern Negative Experiences

While there were many positive experiences identified by SYR interns, there were also several negative experiences perceived by the SYR interns. Negative experiences in this theme could be described as roadblocks, challenges, or general aspects of the program that were difficult for the intern to navigate.

One common negative experience was navigating a lack of structure. SYR interns described that a better structure was presented to them during the interview process that did not exist in practice. Interns were expecting to have the ability to do group sessions and individual counseling sooner than they were able to.

“And then I think that's what everyone was hoping too, but none of us expected the forms to take that long to be finalized. So, for my first semester, I did not feel like I learned the necessary skills that I should have learned.” (BSW intern)

Overall, the bulk of SYR intern negative experiences stemmed from having unclear expectations. Interns expressed disappointment regarding their scope of work given

the incongruence between what they expected from the program and what happened.

4.7. SYR Challenges

This theme describes challenges that arose throughout the first year of SYR in BGC sites. Challenges were identified by SYR interns, BGC staff, and other SYR stakeholders. Some of the most notable challenges included a lack of ideal space dedicated to SYR, consent form difficulties, SYR intern scheduling, and understaffed BGC sites.

One challenge that made it difficult for SYR interns to integrate into BGC sites was the lack of specialized space to conduct group sessions and one-on-one sessions. Interns described difficulty finding a welcoming, private space to do their interactive work. Other stakeholders mentioned this as a challenge that was resolved by incorporating the interns into their personal workspaces at sites. One SYR intern described their provided space at a BGC site as:

“It was like a CIA black side like somebody's going to be waterboarded in there.” (BSW intern)

Another challenge that hampered SYR integration in BGC was the need for consent forms to allow SYR interns to work with youth. Administering the consent forms to parents was especially challenging because there were two different forms. After signing the first form, BGC families expressed confusion regarding the need for a second form.

“And I know [SYR] specifically pushed consent a lot, like parent consent, and I think that was a barrier.” (BGCA staff member)

Another overarching challenge for BGC sites was the schedule for SYR interns. BGC Interns were only at their site assignments for three days of the week. This created challenges in how often youth interacted with the interns and thus led to difficulties for some SYR interns in building rapport too. For BGC interns, the scheduling often conflicted with when the youth were out of school and present at the club site. As one SYR intern shared:

“[The Boys and Girls Club site] starts from 2:00 to 6:00. Kids don't come at 6:00. Maybe they start 2:30, 3:00, but then they have to eat, they have their program, and then by the time they have a little bit of time left for us, it's already time to go home. I don't have much time to really do anything.” (BSW intern)

One challenge that was specific to SYR-BGC was dealing with understaffed sites. Having a lower number of staff available made it more difficult to integrate the SYR interns into BGC sites.

Overall, there were a variety of challenges that disrupted SYR integration into sites. Some challenges that applied to school site integration included a lack of dedicated space, consent form issues, and scheduling conflicts. BGC sites specifically was a lack of staff on hand to facilitate a seamless integration of SYR. These challenges explained why SYR was not able to integrate as quickly or as effectively as it was planned upon implementation.

4.8. What Worked in the SYR Program?

This theme highlights what stakeholders, staff, and social work interns described as successful aspects of SYR integration. While there were many challenges that made SYR integration difficult, there were also multiple factors that worked for SYR integration.

One aspect of SYR that BGC staff found to be successful was having social work interns with fearless attitudes. Some specific characteristics of the social workers' fearless attitude included showing their faces to the BGC youth, interacting with them, and being generally involved in whatever activities they could.

“[BGC intern] went and interacted, played basketball with them, and just sat down and talked with them, asked them about their day. It was really helpful and supportive in having somebody like [BGC intern] come in and do that.” (BGCA Site Director)

Another thing that worked for SYR integration into BGC sites was having a collaborative relationship between BGC staff and SYR field instructor. The BGC staff were interested in supporting the SYR program.

“And the directors were like, ok, what is it you need and what can we do to support you?” (BGCA Site Director)

They also explicitly stated their enjoyment regarding the relationship with the SYR field instructor. Specifically, BGC staff appreciated having regularly scheduled meetings to communicate about how SYR integration was going.

“[SYR field instructor] and I meet on a weekly basis and just do a check-in. That was even before I took the lead. So it was definitely a plus. I would debrief [SYR field instructor] on what I'm dealing with on my end and vice versa. I know we work things out. So yeah, [SYR field instructor] is definitely - it's 2 thumbs up.” (Field Instructor)

Finally, SYR head leadership expressed success in simply being able to get the first year of SYR in operation. One of the primary goals of SYR was to create a new opportunity for social work students. By establishing placements for both bachelor and master students, SYR was successful in accomplishing that goal.

“I think my highlight was 2 weeks ago when they're like, alright, we got our groups planned out, I had the interns calendar their groups, calendar their one on ones, their objectives, what they're going to be doing with the youth on those one on the ones and the groups, like everything spelled out.” (Field Instructor)

Overall, SYR integration was most successful when social work interns frequently interacted with youth. This interaction made them more familiar to youth and staff at their respective site, making it easier to build rapport with the community. Furthermore, having strong collaboration between site staff and social work interns, along with site staff and SYR leadership, was beneficial. BGC sites had particularly strong collaboration between staff and field instruction. In the end, the most successful accomplishment in the eyes

of the head SYR leadership was establishing the program in its first year of implementation.

4.9. SYR Recommendations and Future Plans

This theme described what participants suggested could improve SYR in the future. Many of these recommendations were in response to the challenges and negative experiences that were documented earlier.

Strong collaboration between SYR leadership and site staff was a prominent recommendation for the future of the SYR program. BGC staff expressed that they would like to know more specifics about the social work interns' tasks overall as well as during the academic year.

Participants highlighted the benefits of having face-to-face meetings to periodically discuss how SYR integration was going. The biggest recommendation was making sure that consistent communication was in place. BGC staff expressed this recommendation as a continuation of what occurred in the first year.

"It was just consistency across the board, both on the intern side as well as the members because the staff are always consistent as far as support and wanting to help with the program are concerned." (BGCA Site Director)

SYR leadership agreed that face-to-face meetings showed promise in improving SYR-site relations. One topic that could be discussed at such meetings was the informed consent process. Because the SYR program provides services to minors, the need to get parental consent and student assent is unavoidable. As a result, almost every participant mentioned the informed consent process as a critical structure that needs to be efficient in the future. A couple of suggestions were made, such as incorporating informed consent into parent information sessions or creating an online consent form with DocuSign.

"But ultimately like, especially now, with our first consent, everything is on our application. So we're able to get that taken care of, especially if a member is renewing their membership." (SYR Program Coordinator)

Another suggestion to improve SYR was to restructure position titles and clarify the amount of work expected for SYR leadership positions. Many of the head SYR leadership roles were funded as a half-time job, meaning that there was a limit on the number of hours they were expected to work their position. Most leadership positions ended up working past the expectations of their role demands. This was because the implementation of SYR required far more effort than SYR leadership was being compensated for.

"Ideally, yes, it would be a separately funded position, at least a position that wouldn't be added on as additional employment... because they started saying we need funding, and then it was like, well I don't have the bandwidth to try to address that." (BGCA Site Director)

Ultimately, the most frequent suggestions for future improvement were related to collaboration between site staff and SYR. Even with the suggestions for improving informed consent and restructuring the leadership roles, SYR can only have a universally designed program to the extent that social

work interns can successfully integrate into their field site placements. By strengthening the connection between the BGCA and SYR staff and creating intentional opportunities to collaborate and plan, participants expressed the most hope for SYR improvement.

5. DISCUSSION

The data obtained from this evaluation provides evidence that the SYR program was implemented as intended and successfully provided field site placements for four social work interns and provided mental health support within three BGCA sites in historically underserved community locations serving early adolescents in a large city in Southern California. The findings also represent an important first step toward evaluating the effectiveness of the program. The key findings are summarized below.

5.1. Essential Readiness Factors for Program Implementation

Study results emphasize the importance of creating a strong foundation based on trust, clear communication, and shared goals for program success. Trust is essential for readiness. Social work interns want to trust that they are receiving the best quality internship experience. BCGA sites need to trust that the SYR program has their best interest at heart. Finally, the social work program needs to trust that sites have confidence in the capabilities of the interns and the education and oversight they are receiving. A breakdown in any of these areas leads to a lack of commitment, reservation in terms of developing meaningful collaborations, and missed opportunities for mutual growth. This aligns with previous research examining the effectiveness of social work field site placements, and it has been found that the use of evidence-based practice is largely influenced by trust between administrators and staff members [40]. More recent work identifying barriers to social work implementation during the COVID-19 pandemic highlights the social work profession as a work of "togetherness," dependent on trust and cooperation across agencies [41].

Clear communication between the SYR program and the BCGA sites, the BCGA sites and interns, and the SYR program and interns is necessary for successful program integration. Understanding what to expect, both in terms of what interns will be learning and how the site will be served, was voiced by staff at BGCA sites. Interns themselves also requested greater clarity on how they would spend their time week to week. Task clarity is important for social work interns' self-initiative behavior [42], and is consistent with the best practice for what makes field site placements successful, which is frequent multidirectional communication [43]. A formative evaluation of a collaborative field placement focused on supporting the unhoused provided an example of how programs can provide clear communication by implementing a universal learning contract that all partners follow to clarify the goals and expectations for learning, skill development, time expectations, and professional development [44].

The final essential readiness factor necessary for successful program implementation is the development of shared

goals and decision-making. This is consistent with prior research examining facilitators and barriers to social work practice that identified collaboration as a critical facilitator of successful implementation across school and community settings [41, 45]. Specifically, rather than sites granting the SYR program permission to show up and deliver services, working together to identify goals identified by the sites themselves and align those with the program would create a sense of shared responsibility and investment. For example, instead of “top-down” policies that interfere with program delivery, mutual decision-making could take place to achieve the identified goals of both SYR and BGCA sites. This type of collaboration is time-intensive, but it can have a trickle-down effect throughout a site. Specifically, if program leaders show investment in the program, others will follow. Prior research examining student teaching experiences in relation to teacher retention consistently emphasizes administrative support as a critical component of creating a positive workplace climate [46-48]. Additionally, community-based participatory research (CBPR) provides a great example of this, as tensions arise among the expectations of funders, university faculty, and community insiders. Effective CBPR projects work to dismantle power hierarchies and establish true collaborative partnerships [49].

5.2. Anticipated and Unanticipated Roadblocks

As with the first implementation of any new program, it was expected that challenges would arise. This is consistent with other program implementation research [45, 50-52], providing a large impetus for creating institutional readiness assessments before implementing interventions [53]. As such, getting to know sites and the way they function, as well as developing relationships with staff across programs, were expected areas where careful navigation was required. However, there were also several unanticipated challenges that arose.

First, BGCA sites did not have formal procedures to obtain informed parental consent to deliver SYR services. Because the program was not officially part of the club's “business as usual” services, the SYR program and university required that parents be informed of the program and services and provide their informed consent for their child's participation. This was an ethical obligation. This created a lag in timing where social work interns could work directly with students. The consent forms were needed to be developed, parents were needed to be notified, and signed consents were needed to be received. This created confusion for many parents who had already completed consent forms for other services (*e.g.*, grant-funded programming) and, in some cases, prevented students in need of services from actually receiving them. Moving forward, one possible solution could be to host a series of informational sessions at the beginning or prior to the start of the school year where parents can learn about all programs and services available to their child and complete all necessary consent forms at one time, making sure to maximize parents' time where possible. Current research on family engagement emphasizes that parents have a desire to be involved in their child's education and want to support their positive development. However, it is important to note that families experiencing poverty, those who care for children with disabilities, and ethnic minorities report

feeling the most marginalized by their school community [54]. Careful consideration and planning should be done to develop inclusive and individualized opportunities to connect with families.

Another unanticipated roadblock was related to scheduling. This is consistent with previous research examining barriers to school social work practice that has identified time constraints and caseloads as the most significant barriers to implementation and major contributors to secondary stress [45, 55]. Social work interns and site staff had a sense that there was very limited time and availability to actually work one-on-one with students. This was partially due to the need to obtain informed parental consent prior to service delivery, but it was also very closely tied to social work intern schedules and BGCA site conditions. Specifically, each intern was scheduled to spend 12 hours per week as a social work intern. Interns working in BGCA sites split their time across two sites so that each of the three sites had coverage where they had an intern present each day and had access to an MSW student each week who could provide one-on-one services. At the BGCA sites, the hours were constrained due to the nature of it being an after-school program. This meant social work interns had a greater number of shorter shifts, and fewer windows of time to engage with specific students. After-school programs are inherently more flexible than school days, with some students attending only on certain days, only during certain times of the year, or for a short duration (*e.g.*, 1 hour). As a result, the students and staff at the respective BGCA sites felt like there was little consistency among social work interns, while social work interns felt there was a lack of consistency for the students they would see and be able to work with during their shifts. Social work interns have to attend on-campus courses one full day per week as part of their training, so small changes must be made in both scheduling and protocols that could maximize student time on site. Also, increasing the number of interns present at BGCA sites may improve consistency. As implemented, one MSW student rotated across the three sites. Future iterations of the program would benefit from each site having a consistent MSW student so that students (particularly if they only attend the program one day per week) can have access to one-on-one services.

Finally, the last unanticipated roadblock was a lack of safe, welcoming, private space to work with students. Each program site was unique, and each was experiencing its own challenges with space. In one case, a broom closet was repurposed into a private space, while in another instance, the director of the program gave the SYR interns access to their personal office to meet with students. Prior research highlights how the physical environment can affect the emotional state of patients receiving mental health treatment. Important aspects of the environment as reported by patients include sensory elements, such as colors and textures, how easily one can engage without distraction, whether the space is conducive to privacy and connection, and if the participant feels safe, calm, and in control [56]. As such, there is a need to intentionally plan for program implementation within each respective site so that students feel safe and comfortable when working with SYR interns.

5.3. Site Acceptance

In terms of site acceptance, BGCA sites were a strong and active partner in SYR implementation. They expressed a large need for mental health support services and were eager to have SYR interns in clubs providing support to students. For this reason, the leadership formed a strong collaboration and good communication with SYR staff. Many of the challenges that arose were related to the informal nature of after-school programs in general and the scheduling of interns. At the end of the academic year, there was a sense of gratitude for the work accomplished and a strong desire to continue refining protocols and practices to maximize the benefits of the program.

CONCLUSION

Guided by theory and best practice, the SYR program aimed to fill an important gap in access to mental health support for early adolescents in great need of connection and support. The findings from this process evaluation indicate that SYR integration was most successful when social work interns frequently interacted with youth. This interaction made them more familiar with youth and staff at their respective BGCA sites, making it easier to build rapport in the community. In addition, having strong collaboration between BGCA site staff and social work interns, along with BGCA site staff and SYR leadership, was beneficial. BGCA sites particularly contributed to strong collaboration between BGCA staff and SYR field instructor. Overall, the results have emphasized the importance of trust, clear communication, and shared decision-making as a foundation for successful program site integration. Additionally, several unanticipated barriers to implementation arose, including difficulty obtaining informed parental consent to work individually with youth, challenges aligning internship schedules with the fluid structure of after-school programs, and the need for a private welcoming space to work. Despite various implementation challenges, program participants and community stakeholders alike voiced the great value of SYR to implementing the SYR program within BGCA sites, particularly in meeting youth where they frequently are, connecting with them individually, and creating a supportive environment.

LIMITATIONS

Although this study offers novel information regarding the implementation of an innovative social work program designed to support the positive mental health of youth, it is not without limitations. First, this study was conducted in partnership with the College of Health and Human Services at a single university and BGCA sites within a single city. As such, this may limit the generalizability of the findings to other social work programs and community organizations. Second, the demographic information of participants was not obtained in this study, but could be explored as an important predictor of social work intern success in the future. Finally, all data were collected from SYR program leaders, partners, and interns. No data were collected from the youth participating in the program. Therefore, it is impossible to assess the quality of implementation, the prevalence of anxiety or depression among youth served, or the effectiveness of the program. To answer these questions, future research should

collect student-level data from adolescents served by the program and focus on an outcomes evaluation.

IMPLICATIONS

This study may add to growing research evidence across several interrelated disciplines, including social work, community-based participatory research, and developmental science. Social work programs can use the findings of this study to develop school-site integration plans prior to launching a new internship placement. This is particularly relevant for social work programs looking to expand their internship placements to sites with non-traditional hours, such as after-school programs. BGCA sites and other after-school programs interested in establishing mental health support for youth may also use these findings to help establish university-community partnerships in their own communities.

ETHICS APPROVAL AND CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE

Ethics approval was obtained from the institutional review board at California State University, Long Beach.

HUMAN AND ANIMAL RIGHTS

No animals were used in this research. All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of institutional and/or research committee, and with the 1975 Declaration of Helsinki, as revised in 2013.

CONSENT FOR PUBLICATION

Informed consent was obtained from all participants.

STANDARDS OF REPORTING

COREQ guidelines were followed.

AVAILABILITY OF DATA AND MATERIALS

The data and supportive information are available within the article.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

Declared none.

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