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**An Initial Internal Evaluation of the Effectiveness of Life Space Crisis
Intervention in a Sample of ACT Schools**

Kimberley Stone B Psych(Hons)

An Initial Evaluation of the Effectiveness of Life Space Crisis Intervention in a Sample of ACT Schools

During Weeks One to Four of Term 2 2005 Diana Boswell, of the Thomas Wright Institute, provided training in Life Space Crisis Intervention to 18 staff from a sample of ACT Government Schools. The purpose of this evaluation is to assess whether the implementation of this training within the sample schools has been effective in improving student outcomes and increasing staff's capacity to support students with challenging behaviours.

Introduction

Life Space Crisis Intervention (LSCI) is a verbal, therapeutic strategy designed to assist staff in schools to work through conflicts with children and adolescents who display destructive and self-depreciating behaviour. Through a series of six steps LSCI guides teachers and counsellors through conflict or crisis to the desired outcome, using crisis as an opportunity to teach and create positive relationships with students. The method is utilised immediately after a crisis and is intended to help the student gain insight into their emotions, take responsibility for their behaviour, and learn new social skills.

To date, empirical research into the effectiveness of LSCI is limited. Two studies conducted in the 1980's, DeMagistris and Imber (1980) and Naslund (1987), examined student outcomes following the consistent use of LSCI. DeMagistris and Imber (1980) conducted LSCI interviews over a four-week period with eight boys of primary school age. Compared to a pre-test baseline, results showed a significant decrease in the number of crises, along with increases in both attendance and productivity in class. Naslund's (1987) results are less conclusive, indicating that the necessity to conduct LSCI interviews decreased in only 13 of the 28 primary student sample.

More recent research provides clearer support for the effectiveness of LSCI and emphasises the importance of the teacher-student relationship in producing positive outcomes. Dawson (2003) compared student outcomes for a high school using LSCI with one employing more traditional student management methods. Following consistent use of LSCI over a semester long period students were found to have fewer crises and suspensions, better attendance and were able to work in less restrictive classroom settings than students in the other high school. In addition, Dawson (2003) reported that teachers and staff felt more equipped to deal with crises as a result of their LSCI training.

Research by Grskovic and Goetze (2005) provides a closer observation of individual student outcomes following the use of an LSCI interview. In this study, average incidences of challenging behaviours were calculated for four high school students of below average intelligence prior to and following the use of an LSCI interview. Results indicated a significant reduction in the number of challenging behaviours following the use of LSCI. In discussing these changes the researchers hypothesized that the effectiveness of the intervention was increased by the close relationship between the classroom teacher and student.

Results of these four studies suggest that LSCI can be effective in reducing the frequency of crises and number of suspensions, and in increasing student attendance and staff capacity to handle these difficult situations. It appears that a strong student/teacher relationship may facilitate improvements in student outcomes.

Method & Results

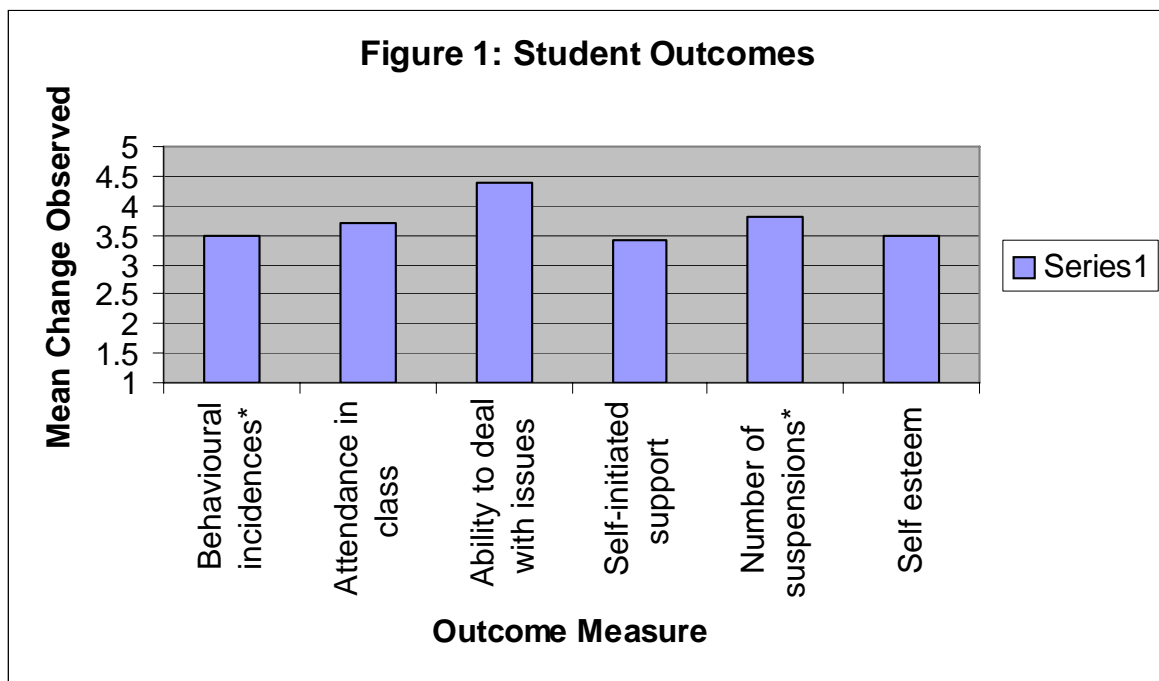
Prior to completing their training all 18 school staff participated in a brainstorming session to discuss the positive outcomes they hoped would result from using LSCI in their school. Identified outcomes could be divided into three areas of effectiveness- those relating to students, to the school and to themselves. These outcomes were used to design a questionnaire and eight focus group topics.

Following the completion of their training staff were instructed to make observations about student, school and personal outcomes during a 24-week implementation period across Terms

Two and Three of 2005. The questionnaire (N=11) was distributed to school staff in Week One of Term Four and was followed by a focus group (N=6) in Week Three.

Results from the questionnaire, which utilised a five-point scale (1=decreased, 5=increased), suggest positive changes were observed for both students and staff. Staff reported that, in total, they had consistently used LSCI with 63 students. Regarding student outcomes the majority of staff reported a decrease in significant behavioural incidences ($\bar{X}=2.4$) and in the number of suspensions ($\bar{X}=2.2$), along with an increase in attendance in class ($\bar{X}=3.7$), in their ability to deal with difficult issues ($\bar{X}=4.4$) and in their self-esteem ($\bar{X}=3.5$). A wider range of responses were received concerning the presence and direction of change in self-initiated support, however results indicate that on average there was an increase on this outcome measure ($\bar{X}=3.4$). Mean responses to these outcome measures can be seen in Figure 1 (below).

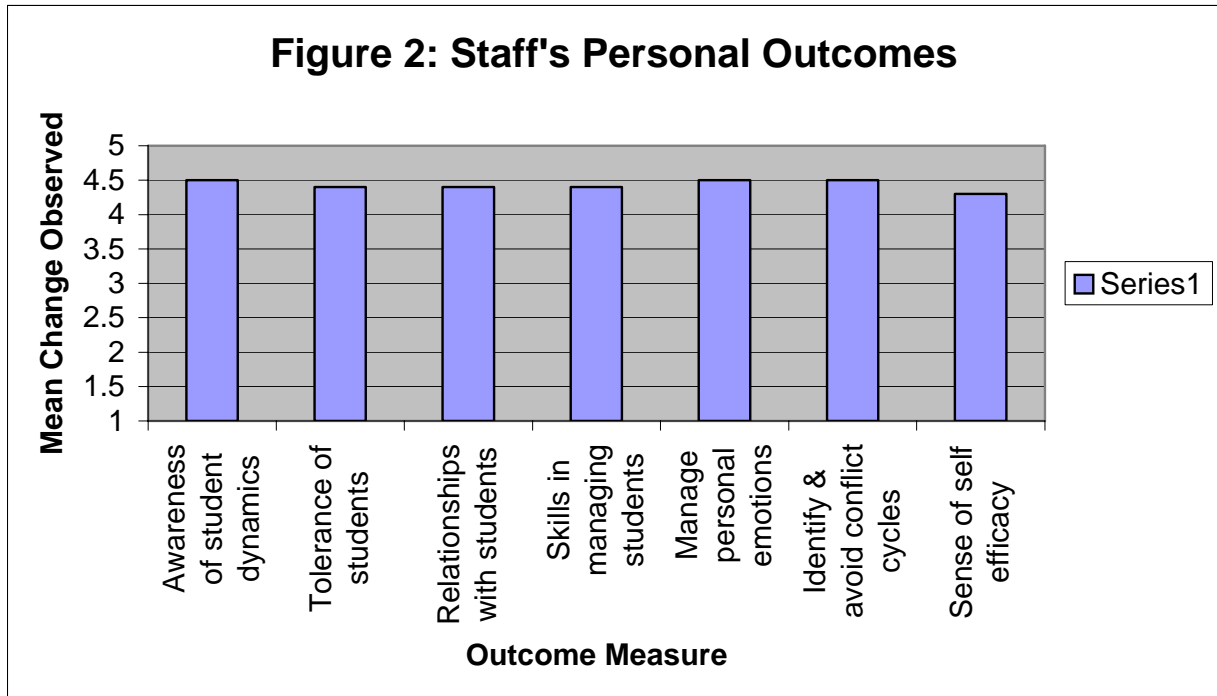
Comments made during the focus group provide more detail. Staff commented that the timeline and conflict cycle were the most useful tools for students and that in general, the drain-off strategy was very effective. Throughout the focus group staff clearly communicated that a lack of time often prevented them from conducting interviews at times of crisis and from using LSCI consistently with the same student. One example of consistent use was discussed, with this student seeking out the same member of staff for support over time and demonstrating a strong positive change in behaviour.



Note: An average of 1 indicates a decrease, an average of 3 no change and an average of 5 an increase.
 *These items were originally worded such that a decrease was a positive outcome, however they have been reverse scored so that an increase is now a positive outcome.

Regarding staff's personal outcomes results reveal the training to have had a strong positive impact on a number of measures. Within the questionnaire each staff member reported an increase in their awareness of student dynamics ($\bar{X}=4.5$), in their relationships with students ($\bar{X}=4.4$), in their skills with managing students ($\bar{X}=4.4$), in their management of personal emotions ($\bar{X}=4.5$) and in their ability to identify and avoid conflict cycles ($\bar{X}=4.5$). The majority of staff also reported an increase in their tolerance of students ($\bar{X}=4.4$) and in their sense of self-efficacy ($\bar{X}=4.3$). Mean responses to outcome measures can be seen in Figure 2 (below). Comments made during the focus group again provide more detail in this area. Each participant reported a strong positive change in understanding of student's psychology and

behaviour as a result of the LSCI training. In addition, all six participants (at the focus group) reported a positive change in their sense of control when dealing with students in crisis; a couple of participants also expressed greater confidence as a result of their LSCI training. The intensive nature of the interviews was discussed and comments were made that conducting the interviews was draining and could lead to burn out when only one staff member was trained in LSCI per school. Other personal issues identified during the focus group were the need for supervision and an opportunity to debrief regularly with others trained in LSCI.



Note: An average of 1 indicates a decrease, an average of 3 no change and an average of 5 an increase.

School outcomes following the introduction of LSCI were also discussed during the focus group. Staff reported mixed reactions to LSCI from other teachers within their schools and stated that due to the attitudes of some the training would not be useful for all teaching staff. Examples of staff sharing their knowledge of LSCI with others were discussed and it was clear that many had communicated certain aspects of LSCI to their colleagues with some positive effects, such as revised classroom practices. Staff appeared to share the general belief that LSCI, coupled with Restorative Justice, forms a strong platform for revising behaviour management policies in schools. The group was informed that one high school has intentions of spending a day looking at how LSCI might inform their policies.

Measures of overall satisfaction within the questionnaire indicate that all but one staff member believed that the use of LSCI improved student outcomes in their school ($\bar{X}=4.2$). Each staff member reported that the use of LSCI had increased their ability to carry out their role within the school ($\bar{X}=4.4$) and all but one indicated that all teaching staff should be trained in LSCI.

Discussion

The purpose of this evaluation was to examine whether the use of LSCI has been effective in improving student outcomes and increasing staff's capacity to deal with crises. Results gained from both the questionnaire and focus group suggest LSCI has had a positive impact within the sample schools, particularly in the area of staff outcomes. Results clearly indicate an increase in staff's capacity to deal with crises as a result of their LSCI training. Students also appear to have benefited from the introduction of LSCI, with the strongest changes observed for their ability to deal with difficult issues and class attendance.

A number of issues regarding the implementation of LSCI in ACT Government Schools have been highlighted as a result of this evaluation, and these will be the focus of the discussion. Firstly, although the results indicate clear personal gains for staff, the need and desire for supervision and support was expressed. Conducting the interviews appears to be draining and involves the application of newly acquired knowledge and skills. Staff trained in LSCI would benefit from regular, formal supervision from experienced individuals and from the development of an informal support network. These activities would encourage refinement of LSCI skills and understanding and should serve to further encourage improved support services for students in crisis.

Secondly, staff reported an increase in disclosures as a result of using LSCI, which led to an increase in the amount of mandatory reporting they were required to complete. This is a pattern that can reasonably be expected to persist if LSCI continues to be used as a tool for students who display destructive and self-depreciating behaviour. Staff need to be prepared for these disclosures and allow for, and be granted, adequate time to fulfil their mandatory reporting responsibilities.

The last issue relates to the contrast between the optimal conditions set out by the Thomas Wright Institute for the implementation of LSCI and those experienced by staff in this study. It can be suggested that conditions which may be essential to the success of LSCI are not replicated within ACT Schools- teachers/counsellors in this study often did not have the time to conduct interviews consistently and/or at the time of crisis, and as a consequence may have been unable to foster their relationships with students and obtain the best outcomes. Previous research, particularly that of Grskovic and Goetze (2005), supports the importance of immediate and consistent use as well as positive teacher/student relationships and it is apparent that these factors were difficult to achieve in the present implementation. In other words, as staff were often unable to use LSCI at the time of crisis and/or consistently they may not have had the opportunity to foster the relationship within the environment specified by the Thomas Wright Institute.

In assessing the school environment experienced by staff, a number of reasons can be proposed for the above issue. Having only one or two staff trained in LSCI within a school almost certainly contributed, and if schools are to fully embrace this method, and maximise any positive outcomes for students, more staff need to be made aware and/or trained in these skills. Existing student management policies and procedures may also have served to prevent the use of LSCI at the time of crisis. Students and teachers alike may benefit from an examination of the compatibility of LSCI with school policy prior to its implementation in the future. The positive changes that occurred for a number of student outcome measures is a very promising result despite the implementation difficulties that some schools encountered.

Recommendations

In order to ensure consistent use of LSCI and enable students to experience the optimal conditions set out by the Thomas Wright Institute the following actions are recommended for the future implementation of LSCI in ACT Government Schools:

1. A minimum number of staff be trained in LSCI per school (greater than two);
2. Before implementing LSCI schools and staff examine their student management policies and procedures to facilitate the effective implementation of LSCI.
3. Schools provide a briefing to all staff and encourage them to attend an introductory session immediately prior to implementation;
4. Schools and their staff set aside adequate time and resources to conduct LSCI interviews at the time of crisis;
5. Schools and their staff anticipate and plan for an increase in disclosures as a result of LSCI interviews; and lastly
6. A formal supervision program and/or a support group be created for staff trained in LSCI.

A further evaluation is required in order to determine, firstly whether these adjustments in schools are feasible and secondly whether the changes enable students to receive LSCI in a way that maximises improvements in their emotional insight, behaviour management and social skills leading to greater involvement and achievement in school. Such an evaluation should also endeavour to collect administrative data on student outcomes, rather than just rely on staff ratings, and continue to examine for improvements in staff's capacity to deal with students in crisis.

Summary

In summary, although the results of this evaluation provide indirect measures of support for the effectiveness of LSCI for students, and are consistent with the pattern of findings from previous research, these results must be interpreted with caution. Given the reliance on staff reports and the acknowledgement of staff that they were often unable to use LSCI consistently and at the time of crisis, further examination of the use of LSCI is needed before any strong conclusions can be made about its effectiveness for students within ACT government schools. Regarding staff outcomes however, it appears clear that training in LSCI provided staff with significant insight into student psychology and behaviour and with a useful framework and tool for dealing with students who display destructive and self-depreciating behaviour.

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