A Study of the Effects of Life Space Crisis Intervention on Troubled Students' Socioemotional Growth and Development

Background

The No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation of 2001 and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEA) of 2004 required educational stakeholders to demand higher academic standards for all students, including at-risk and troubled students. As teachers and schools adapt to the legislative demands of NCLB and IDEA, they are required to focus primarily on increasing academic achievement. Concurrently, social changes in families and communities that have reshaped and sometimes distorted or destroyed the basic parameters for healthy socioemotional development in children and youth (Hersch, 1998).These challenges have left many educators struggling to cope with the diversity of students in the classroom and unable to spend the time needed to understand and meet their socioemotional needs.

Recent incidents of school violence and antisocial behavior suggest that there is a conflict between proposed educational goals of academic excellence and meeting the socioemotional needs of students (Skiba & Peterson, 2003). These incidents also suggest that schools could put themselves in a position of risk if they ignore these socioemotional needs at the expense of other goals (Long, Morse, Fecser, & Newman, 2007). The expectation that educators provide both a safe and effective learning environment for all students has created interest in school-based models that will provide ways of assisting students whose problems and conflicts can escalate into a crisis that could pose serious dangers to themselves and others.

Traditional educational behavior management paradigms rely on punishment and exclusion including suspension and expulsion. These reactive strategies often make the situation worse, creating an adversarial climate that can preclude both learning and safety. Recent research

in the areas of educational psychology suggested, instead, that creating an environment of care and support encouraged learning by promoting academic motivation and reducing risk-behaviors like violence and aggression in adolescents (Catalano, Haggerty, Oesterle, Fleming, & Hawkins, 2004; Hamre & Pianta, 2005; McNeely & Falci, 2004; Wentzel, 2002; Wilson, 2004). This was supported by the work of self-determination theorists who believed that intrinsic motivation and higher quality learning flourished in environments that satisfied the socioemotional needs of feeling competent, having internal self-regulation, and being able to relate to those around them (Vansteenkiste, Lens, & Deci, 2006; Deci & Ryan, 2002; Ryan & Deci, 2000). Brain-based research on learning reinforced the cultivation and maintenance of a positive, nonthreatening learning environment for at-risk students. It stressed that biologically the human brain is designed for survival and that data affecting survival and emotion take priority over data for new learning (Baker, 2007; Caine, Caine, McClintic, & Klimek, 2005; Jensen, 2000a; Sousa, 2006).

For at-risk and troubled students, the focus is often on their stresses and distresses rather than on their educational goals. Therefore, educators need to orchestrate learning environments that are emotionally safe, providing freedom from rejection and intimidation. Life Space Crisis Intervention (LSCI) is a therapeutic strategy that views student problems or stressful incidents as opportunities for learning and growth, assisting students in meeting their socioemotional needs**.** This article summarizes the research on special education teachers' perception of the effects of LSCI on the socioemotional growth and development (sensitivity, awareness, and self-regulation of behavior) of students in three K-12 psychoeducational programs in the state of Georgia.

Life Space Crisis Intervention

LSCI is a strength-based therapeutic discussion model that uses student problems as opportunities for growth and learning. The goals of the therapeutic discussion are to help the

troubled student (a) identify the patterns of thinking, feeling, and behavior; (b) gain insights into the ways that these behaviors are self-defeating; (c) realize that they are responsible for their behavior; (d) develop better ways to respond to their thinking and feeling; (e) transfer this learning to other settings; and (f) learn to trust caring adults and accept their support in times of need. Used as a form of early intervention, LSCI can limit or prevent student crises from escalating, reduce school violence, and increase academic opportunities for at-risk and troubled students by recognizing and meeting student socioemotional needs (Long, Wood, & Fecser, 2001).

Six reclaiming interventions, based on six different self-defeating behaviors, are used to accomplish the therapeutic goals of LSCI. They are:

1. Reality Rub: This intervention focuses on students with errors in perception, tunnel vision about their situation, limit testing, or reaching faulty conclusions about the situation due to irrational beliefs. The goal for the intervening staff member is to help the student gain a more accurate perception of the reality of the situation and understand how they have contributed to the problem.
2. Red Flag: This intervention focuses on students with issues that are either carried-in from an environment other than school, carried-over from a previous class or school-related situation, or tapped-in to a personal issue or prior traumatic event. The apparent over-reaction to a normal and reasonable request or rule can result in a power struggle with staff leading to further rejection and feelings of alienation. The goal for the intervening staff member is to identify the source of the problem and the dynamics of displacement.

3. New Tools: This intervention focuses on students who have the correct attitudes towards staff and school but who lack the appropriate social skills and often present with socially inappropriate behaviors. The goal for the intervening staff member is to identify the error in thinking and/or intentions and teach age appropriate social skills. While all LSCI interventions teach new social skills, this intervention is used only when the student had the right idea but the wrong behavior.
4. Symptom Estrangement: This intervention focuses on students who justify their aggressive and sometimes cruel behavior and show little motivation to change. They often cast themselves in the role of the victim while exploiting others. These students get pleasure from the pain and discomfort of others and are narcissistic, believing that they are doing nothing wrong. The goal for the intervening staff member is to "benignly confront their defenses and irrational beliefs and drop a pebble of a new idea into their pool of irrational beliefs" (Long & Fecser, 2000, p. 95). This is not easy as it is important to expose their self-deception while maintaining a caring relationship. This intervention differs from the others as it is the only intervention where the goal is to increase the student's anxiety a little and have them realize that staff now knows about the issue and will confront them every time it arises.

5. Manipulation of Body Boundaries: This intervention focuses on students who develop self-defeating "false" friendships with a classmate who will exploit them or are set-up or manipulated by a brighter, passive aggressive student. One goal for the intervening staff member is to demonstrate to the student that a friend is someone who is helpful

and caring, not exploitive or manipulative. Another goal is to demonstrate that a passive aggressive student is tricking them into reacting and getting into trouble.

6. Massaging Numb Values: This intervention focuses on students who act impulsively and then feel guilt, remorse, shame, or inadequacy because of their behavior. These students have often been abused, neglected or abandoned and have low self-esteem The goal for the intervening staff member is threefold: (a) to gently make students aware that they have more self-control than they think they have, (b) that mistakes or poor decision can happen without feeling worthless, and (c) that they can strengthen and improve their self-control system.

The Study

This study investigated the perceived effects of these LSCI interventions on three areas of student socioemotional development; sensitivity, awareness, and self-regulation of behavior. The limited amount of existing empirical research substantiated the need for additional research on the effects of LSCI for at-risk and troubled students. This was the first study that had examined the effectiveness of LSCI on student socioemotional development.

The purpose of this quantitative cross-sectional survey study was to identify special education teachers' perceived effects of LSCI interventions on student socioemotional development in three K -12 psychoeducational programs in the North Central region of the State of Georgia.The three centers had a staff of 21 certified teachers and 35 paraprofessionals and a student population of 167 students. All teachers in the study were certified in Advanced Life Space Crisis Intervention and had experience using the intervention strategies in psychoeducational settings.

As no appropriate data collection instrument existed, a survey matrix, based on the desired outcomes of the individual interventions, as determined by the developers of LSCI, (Long & Fecser, 2000) was created. The survey matrix was composed of several columns. The first column listed the six intervention strategies, the second column stated the central issue of each intervention, while the third column provided a check-off spot for the teachers to indicate the intervention used. The fourth and fifth columns listed the outcome goals of each particular intervention and three levels of goal achievement. This last section asked the intervening staff member to rank their perception of effectiveness of that particular intervention on a Likert like scale of 1 – 5, (1 - No self awareness, 2/3 - Emerging, and 4/5 - Insight and Responsibility).

Prior to the study, the newly created survey matrix was piloted to ensure that the individuals in the sample were capable of completing the survey and could understand the questions. Professional staff members in the psychoeducational programs' administration piloted the survey. As the pilot group provided feedback on the survey construction, they were excluded from the study. In addition, as human observations can be inconsistent, inter-observer reliability was established during training sessions provided for all staff prior to the implementation of the survey matrix.

Each time a student in the psychoeducational programs experienced a crisis situation one of the teachers intervened and worked through an appropriate LSCI with the student. Using the data collection survey matrix, student socioemotional development data was collected after each intervention. All intervention records between August and mid-October 2008 were reviewed and data pertaining to the variables of interest were collected. Fifty-four documented crisis interventions occurred in this time period.

Methodology

Each of the three socioemotional aspects of an intervention had a possible score of 5 while the intervention, in its entirety, had a possible score of 15. As there was no existing data on the effects of LSCI on student socioemotional development, a hypothetical mean of 3 was determined. This mean indicated a score of 1 in each studied area of socioemotional growth, an indication that the interventions created no self awareness or socioemotional development in the student.

The difference in the mean scores of student socioemotional development was compared to the hypothesized population mean of three. In addition, the mean scores of each area of socioemotional development studied; sensitivity, awareness, and self-regulation, were compared to the hypothesized mean.

For the purpose of this study it was not the level of effectiveness of interventions that was being studied, but simply whether the intervention was considered effective or not. As socioemotional development is incremental, the intervention was considered effective if the student was making progress. Any score greater than one was considered to be effective. Therefore, this test determined an estimated size of the overall program effect as well as an estimated population mean. As an hypothesis test is affected by both the size of the sample and the size of the effect, the outcome of the hypothesis test may not always provide an accurate indication of the treatment effect. In order to accurately reflect the effect size, a Cohen's *d* was calculated to evaluate the size of the treatment effect.

The Findings

These data, comparing teacher perceived student levels of socioemotional development before and after LSCI, were analyzed using an estimated single sample *t*-test. This two-tailed

analysis, as shown in Table 1, yielded a statistically significant difference, $t(53) = 10.205$, $p = .000$, falling well into the critical region, indicating that student socioemotional development scores did improve after LSCI interventions. To further support the study, each area of socioemotional development studied was also analyzed individually. All three areas, sensitivity, awareness, and self-regulation showed a mean difference increase over their hypothetical mean of 1 as shown in Table 2.

As the overall effectiveness of the interventions was significant, each type of intervention was then examined individually. Five of the six possible types of interventions were documented during the data collection period (a) Red Flag, (b) Symptom Estrangement, (c) Reality Rub, (d) Massaging Numb Values, and (e) Manipulating Body Boundaries. The Manipulating Body Boundaries intervention was only documented twice so it will be excluded from this discussion as there were not enough interventions to draw valid conclusions. However, for the remaining 4 types of interventions, Table 3 shows a significant mean difference increase in each case. The Red Flag, Symptom Estrangement, and Reality Rub interventions all showed medium effect sizes while the Massaging Numb Values showed a large effect size. Bearing in mind that a small effect size, at best, usually occurs in educational research interventions, this would indicate that these interventions could have a substantial impact on student socioemotional development.

Finally, each type of intervention was analyzed by area of socioemotional development, and again a significant mean difference increase is seen in each case (see Table 4). In all cases, there was a medium effect size with the exception of the Massaging Numb Values intervention which showed a large effect size in each area of socioemotional development. For a more exhaustive description of the methodology and data analysis, see the original study (White-McMahon, 2009).

Discussion

The results of this quantitative cross-sectional survey study support the effectiveness of LSCI on the socioemotional growth and development of at-risk and troubled students. According to the teachers in the sample, LSCI interventions had a positive effect on student socioemotional development in a psychoeducational setting. As an intervention tool for troubled students, LSCI creates social, emotional, and environmental support by helping turn crisis situations into learning opportunities for these students. It also provides social templates that encourage students to effectively integrate and process adult modeled social experiences in a safe and caring environment.

Lessons learned in any educational intervention must transfer to immediate relationships in which that student is involved; school, family, peer group, or the community. When teaching gives students practical solutions and coping skills in their naturally occurring setting, transfer is more likely (Brendtro & Shahbazian, 2004). The increases in mean difference as well as the medium to large effects sizes in these interventions suggests that the lessons learned by these students are effective in providing social coping skills. Perhaps, in time and with continued reinforcement, these learned skills will improve the psychosocial quality of their learning experiences and allow them to transfer this learning into other situations.

When considering the socioemotional development of students, emotional resources necessary for creating lasting social support structures, like LSCI, are vital to healthy functioning in society. This is not a new concept. Bronfenbrenner (1995) wrote:

> For more than three decades, I have been citing systematic evidence suggesting a progressive decline in American society of conditions that research increasingly indicates may be critical for developing and sustaining human competence through the life course… At the most general level, the evidence reveals growing chaos in the lives of families, in childcare settings, schools, peer groups, youth programs,

> neighborhoods, workplaces, and other everyday environments in which human beings live their lives. Such chaos, in turn, interrupts and undermines the formation and stability of relationships, and activities that are essential for psychological growth. (pp. 643)

Proactive interventions, like LSCI, not only promote socioemotional development, they also help students develop more adaptive ways to respond to stressful situations which, in turn, could promote an alternative to suspension, reduce dropout rates, improve attendance, and potentially increase academic achievement. Positive changes like these will benefit the students, the schools, and society in general.

The results of this study support the challenge all educators face as they work to fulfill the mandates of NCLB (a) being safe, (b) closing the achievement gap between high and low performing and advantaged and disadvantaged children, (c) preventing at-risk youth from dropping out, and (d) providing delinquent youth with a support system to ensure their continued education.

Recommendations for Further Research

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are made:

1. While the entire professional teaching staff of the psychoeduational programs were used in this sample, the sample (n = 21) tends to be on the small side. Studying the same topic using a larger sample of teachers could further support the findings in this study.
2. This study, looking at teacher perception of student socioemotional development after LSCI, was the first of its kind. Data was analyzed using a hypothetical mean as no extant data was available. Replicating this study using the mean from this data against another set of data would provide more detailed information.

3. This study included the perceptions of certified professional teaching staff. Many psychoeducational schools train and utilize para-professional staff for LSCI. A study comparing the perceptions of professional and para-professional staff would provide further data.
4. The timed nature of this study provided a limited view of the potential of LSCI. This study took place over a 10 week period at the beginning of a school year. Collecting data for a period of a semester or even a full school year would give a much more complete picture of the capabilities of this intervention.
5. This study considered the effects of LSCI on troubled students in psychoeducational programming. While these student are likely to need this type of programming more than the average student in regular programming, all students can benefit from the life lessons and skill development provided by the program. Studies of students in other populations and less restrictive environments would be an extremely valuable addition to the extant research on LSCI.
6. The setting of the study was in the North Central region of the State of Georgia. It would be beneficial for schools in other parts of the country or other countries to complete similar studies to determine if similar effect sizes are found outside the original study setting.
7. The effects of LSCI on areas other than socioemotional development, like academic achievement and/or academic motivation need to be the topics of further study.

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Table 1
Estimated Single Sample t test Analysis

	t score	*df*	*Significance (2-tailed)*	*Cohen's d* (r^2)
LSCI Interventions	10.33	53	.000	0.6680

Table 2
Estimated Single Sample t test Analysis by Socioemotional Area

	t score	*df*	*Significance (2-tailed)*	*Cohen's d* (r^2)
Sensitivity	10.21	53	.000	0.6629
Awareness	9.36	53	.000	0.6231
Self-Regulation	9.27	53	.000	0.6185

Table 3

Estimated Single Sample t test Analysis by Type of Intervention

	t score	*df*	*Significance (2-tailed)*	*Cohen's d* (r^2)
Red Flag	6.35	17	.000	0.7034
Symptom Estrangement	5.48	18	.000	0.6252
Reality Rub	3.16	8	.013	0.5553
Massaging Numb Values	6.44	6	.001	0.8736
Manipulating Body Boundaries	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a

Table 4

Estimated Single Sample t test Analysis by Type of Intervention and by Area of Socioemotional Growth

Red Flag Intervention	*t* score	*df*	*Significance (2-tailed)*	*Cohen's d* (r^2)
Sensitivity	6.26	17	.000	0.6975
Awareness	5.53	17	.000	0.6427
Self-Regulation	6.87	17	.000	0.7352
Symptom Estrangement Intervention	***t* score**	***df***	***Significance (2-tailed)***	
Sensitivity	5.56	18	.000	0.6320
Awareness	4.92	18	.000	0.5736
Self-Regulation	4.03	18	.001	0.4743

Reality Rub Intervention	*t* score	*df*	*Significance (2-tailed)*	
Sensitivity	3.06	7	.018	0.5721
Awareness	3.21	7	.015	0.5954
Self-Regulation	3.06	7	.018	0.5721

Massaging Numb Values Intervention	*t* score	*df*	*Significance (2-tailed)*	
Sensitivity	6.30	6	.001	0.8687
Awareness	4.04	6	.007	0.7312
Self-Regulation	6.30	6	.001	0.8687

Abstract

When educators focus primarily on increasing academic achievement, they have less time to understand and meet students' socioemotional needs. An increase in antisocial behavior, school crises, and the expectation of safe and effective learning environments has created a need for intervention models that address students' socioemotional needs. Few empirical studies have looked at the implementation and effects of Life Space Crisis Intervention (LSCI) and no extant research has examined the effectiveness of LSCI on socioemotional development. The purpose of this quantitative cross-sectional survey study was to examine teacher perceptions of the effects of LSCI strategies on the socioemotional development of troubled students. Participants in the study included 21 special education teachers in three psychoeducational programs in the North Central region of the State of Georgia. Fifty-four critical incidence survey forms documenting the perceived effects of LSCI on student socioemotional development were collected during a ten-week period. These data, comparing teacher perceived student levels of socioemotional development in the areas of sensitivity, awareness, and self-regulation of behavior, before and after LSCI, were analyzed using an estimated one sample t-test. This two-tailed analysis yielded a statistically significant difference, indicating that student socioemotional development scores did improve after LSCI interventions. The results of this study indicate that LSCI helps students develop more adaptive ways to respond to stressful situations. LSCI can be an alternative to suspension, improve attendance, reduce dropout rates, and potentially increase academic achievement.