

Overview

Life Space Crisis Intervention training inspires and equips adults to create positive school climates in which children can become successful. LSCI works! Teachers who complete LSCI training describe significant changes in their perceptions, attitudes, and actions that translate directly into benefits for students in schools. Participants leave LSCI training with a new paradigm, a new skill set, and often both.

In considering how the various concepts of Psychodynamic, Behavioral, Cognitive, Developmental, and Social Learning theories apply to the teaching of LSCI, I began to wonder, “Is the multi-theoretical approach what makes LSCI work?” Searching for an answer through conversations with participants and reflection papers, I wanted to understand:

- Why are teachers willing to commit five days to training?
- What do they need or want?
- What paradigm do they hold as they begin LSCI?
- What did they learn and how will they change?
- What specifically was most meaningful to them?

What I learned will be shared in the context of these multiple theories.

LSCI Training in the Charlevoix-Emmet Intermediate School District

Over 400 people have been trained in Life Space Crisis Intervention by trainers from the Charlevoix-Emmet Intermediate School District (ISD) in rural northern Michigan.

Uncovering what motivates teachers to attend LSCI training brought three basic reasons to light. The first and main reason most participants come is due to the word-of-mouth recommendation of a colleague like Diane, a teacher at the largest high school in our area. Diane shared her reflection paper at a staff meeting. “If there are moments where you wonder “What just happened?” or wish you could push a ‘redo’ button, or if you ever run into difficulty with students for no apparent reason, take LSCI training!” There are now two or three people from this school at most of our trainings!

The second reason many adults attend LSCI is to gain new skills for managing behavior in order to reduce their own stress levels. Classroom management is the number one source of stress for many teachers. The current trend of increasing class sizes, increasing academic expectations, high-stakes testing, and declining district resources in terms of personnel and training dollars, is adding to the stress. More special needs and troubled children are being assigned to the general education classroom than ever before.

Educators, unprepared to meet students' diverse needs, are turning in greater numbers to the ISD for professional development opportunities such as LSCI. Untrained teachers under stress often believe misbehavior occurs for 'no reason', and some even say that they don't care what the reason is, they just want it stopped! Of course there are always some adults who attend training knowing that students have real problems and unmet needs. These teachers already have the right attitude and just need new tools for helping. Sadly, the more common attitude is that classroom disruptions are problems for teachers who simply want instruction to continue for those students who 'want to learn'. Teachers adhering to this old paradigm typically manage misbehavior with negative consequences such as reprimands, detention, or ejecting students from class. Admittedly a temporary fix, adults who believe in the old teacher-centered paradigm still continue to believe punishing students is the answer. With these participants lies the greatest opportunity for change!

The third reason for attendance at LSCI training is due to a few LSCI-trained school administrators who now make sure all of their staff members attend. When handling behavioral issues began consuming a significant part of their school day, these principals became motivated to reduce office discipline referrals. Supporting teachers, not by removing disruptive students, but by helping staff increase their skills through LSCI training, helps achieve that goal. Erica was appreciative:

I've been teaching for twelve years and I felt that I was doing just fine with my current method of disciplining students. Besides, why should a teacher need to take a crisis intervention class? It's not like I teach special education all day.

After sitting in LSCI training for almost an hour, I quickly realized that this class was going to make my job a lot easier!

Throughout the training I kept thinking back on different situations in the previous years of teaching that could have been prevented if I would have had the skills that I now have after going through LSCI training. The first three stages of LSCI will be tremendously helpful in my classroom. I think that using the Drain Off will take care of seventy-five percent of the problems in my classroom! When difficult situations arose in my classroom before, I never really took the time to acknowledge the students' feelings. I now know that affirmation is the key to solving most situations quickly in my room.

Kelly, a middle school teacher agreed when she wrote:

What I found to be most beneficial to me were the first three steps of LSCI and the Conflict Cycle. I think these have changed the way that I approach and handle problems in the classroom.

Kindergarten teacher Kay wrote about the student who said often, "You don't really care about me."

"Of course I do," Kay would patiently reply. "No you don't!" and around it went. Now responding with affirmation, "You seem upset. It sounds to me like you're feeling sad and alone" leads more quickly to resolution.

"I think back at certain situations, and I've been guilty of giving students consequences before I drain them off and got the timeline, which only escalated them," continued Erica. Fewer students are sent to the office as lasting behavioral changes occur. Teachers teach, but also communicate with each other using a common language to support students' social-emotional-behavioral needs. Engaged students learn more than just academic skills.

Teachers often are often effusive when they say LSCI is the best training they've ever had, benefiting them both personally and professionally. One participant, Becky, wrote, "I feel like a magician! LSCI works so well and so quickly on my own kids, I truly feel like I have been given the key to good parenting. My husband and I have four

boys, ages eight and under, so there are many situations that require diffusion and affirmation in our house.” She went on to describe a situation where one child simply wanted someone to listen and allow him the freedom to comply on his own. The parents realized how “terribly bad” it would have gone had the child been pushed into submission.

Referring to the classroom, another participant said:

I will redefine my role to that of preventing problems by being alert to signs that students are in stress. I'll begin affirming, and listening to help students relieve stress and help them solve problems to prevent them from escalating.” Still another defined their new role as an “interpreter: to help students better understand their conflicts after they are past...rather than that of cop, to simply stop them.

Based on conversations and the reflection papers, the underlying reason people resonate with LSCI does seem to lie in the multi-theoretical approach used toward problem-solving and behavioral change. Trainings and programs that rely on a single model, such as Michigan’s Integrated Behavior & Learning Support Initiative (MiBLSi) under the Positive Behavior Support umbrella, relies on applied behavioral analysis. It does offer a systems approach to behavior management that is effective with about 80% of students.

An approach that focuses on surface behavior, tangible positive and prescribed negative consequences misses the mark and is not effective over time with the most challenging children, or with children in crisis. Two Leadership Team members from a local school believe:

We are at a stand still with the behavior portion of MiBLSi because some staff members are looking for a ‘quick fix’ or punitive consequences for undesired behaviors. After attending the LSCI training, we believe LSCI will be a tool to fill this void. It will provide staff with an understanding of why undesired behaviors are occurring along with intervention strategies to address them.”

While behavioral theory reduces complex behavior to simple cause and effect, behavioral techniques like relaxation, use of tangible incentives, rewards, or visual charting can be effective and may be used in LSCI's Stage 5: New Skills. Extrinsic rewards may help students get started on behavioral change, keep from getting discouraged, and make it fun to achieve a goal. Behavioral theory and strategies, although helpful, are insufficient because they address only surface behavior, the tip of the iceberg, not the thoughts and feelings of the 'Inside Kid,' as represented by the larger, underwater portion of an iceberg.

Early in Day One of training, a slide of a large, triangular-shaped iceberg is shown to participants. Behavior is represented by the relatively small tip of the iceberg showing above the surface of the water. Deep below the water line, near the bottom of the iceberg, is the label 'Stress'. How students think about stress is determined by their early experience and conditioning that forms self-concepts and beliefs. Still beneath the water line of our iceberg, 'Negative Thinking' is shown to trigger 'Negative Feelings' that drive up and out of the water as 'Negative Behavior.' This private reality, or private logic, is identified as the 'Inside Kid'. Adults can clearly see the significance of understanding what is beneath and motivating behavior.

The significant premise in LSCI is that behavior is the expression of feelings and feelings are caused by the stream of self-talk (thoughts) about an event. Negative thought springs from paradigms formed by a combination of experience, conditioning, habits, and irrational beliefs. During Stage 4, when an adult is able to refute an irrational belief to which a child clings, the child gains insight into their self-defeating pattern and becomes aware of the possibility of another way of looking at an event, themselves, even the world. When children have trust in an adult, they will be open to accepting the adult's perception and will move toward a more rational paradigm.

The process used in LSCI to help a person change their paradigm is cognitive restructuring and is the core of Cognitive-Behavioral therapy. It is a beautiful thing when a person realizes that the mental-physical state they are in causes them to get the results they are getting, and they have the power to change results by changing their state.

In addition to the “Inside Kid”, we also discuss the importance of understanding the private reality of the ‘Inside Adult’. LSCI training empowers teachers to transform habitual behaviors, beliefs, and thoughts about challenging behavior. Changed thinking leads to changed results. Using the same picture of the iceberg, we show how adult negative thinking about student behavior (“This annoying student is preventing me from teaching my well-prepared lesson!”) leads to negative feelings (hostility, anger) and behavior that is not helpful to the students (humiliation, rejection; modeling poor problem-solving and coping skills). As teachers ask themselves a different question (positive thought), become curious, even fascinated with behavior (positive feelings), they begin to search for clues to meaning (positive behavior) that improves the adult-child relationship and classroom climate. Participant Steve speaks for himself and many others when he laid out some of his beliefs or “presumptions about how people should behave: People should be polite with others; children should defer to adults and comply with their directions; children should be respectful of authorities; threatening physical harm or property damage is wrong or dangerous; responsible adults mustn’t be helpless bystanders but should intervene to assure safety and order.”

I appreciate teachers who will compare their past, untrained thinking and behavior with their new paradigm. “I used to think teachers must demand control by saying ‘oh yes you will’ or other ultimatums even though they were not very effective and only antagonized and escalated a student, making him more upset than before,” Steve continued. Another teacher shared:

[I used to believe] Teachers must force the student into compliance before listening to their side. I see now it only results in increased student hostility and decreases student respect, troubles the relationship and goes nowhere to resolve the problem. Adults who rely on power and anger to stop student’s disrespectful behavior/comments look to the student like just another bully. Rather than shutting down the lines of communication, by reacting, I now increase communication by using ‘I messages.’ I model positive behavior and show respect. I listen.

Middle school teacher Deanna wrote about a withdrawn student:

I assumed he was overwhelmed about missing so much school and having to make up homework/tests by the end of the marking period. If I had tried to establish a Timeline, I would have learned he was returning to school after being taken from his home and put into a residential psychiatric facility, which I only discovered much later.

The multiple theories are masterfully braided together in LSCI to provide a framework for helping adults understand the elements (challenges, private logic, feelings, others' responses) leading to student crisis, the inappropriate and self-defeating ways in which students cope with stress, how adults sometimes contribute to a problem and make things worse, and how adults can strengthen the adult-child relationship, guide children in learning to manage their own behavior and become responsible citizens. Participants, especially those who come with the old teacher-centered paradigm, soon realize LSCI training is about viewing a crisis from the student's perspective. Understanding the differences between the adult and child psychological world is a powerful part of the training for participants.

Developmental theories provide a framework for thinking about how people grow and change over the course of life, socially, emotionally, and cognitively. "Learning about developmental stress gives me an idea of what behaviors may result from what kinds of stress," said an elementary school teacher. "Many students, not just the younger ones, do not know how to communicate what they are feeling or what they want appropriately and often end up acting out their feelings by pushing, hitting, name-calling or yelling." Cognitive theories focus on behavior through understanding thought processes. LSCI teaches that how people think and perceive determines how they understand and interact with the world. The theory of Cognitive Development accounts for the steps and sequences of children's intellectual development, and clearly, children think differently than adults.

While some theories help adults understand what motivates student thought and behavior, others, such as Psychodynamic theory, explain behavior in terms of those thought

processes. The adults' need for careful listening to gain insight is emphasized in LSCI. Defense mechanisms, which are primarily unconscious, serve to protect students from negative emotions. When adults can identify defense mechanisms, they will see student attention-getting, socially inappropriate behavior as ineffective means of coping with distress caused by life challenges.

LSCI participants learn that students get defensive when they are lectured to, feel judged, and do not get to tell their side of the story to someone who is really listening. A juvenile probation officer wrote:

They want to protect themselves, avoid punishment and feelings of guilt. Students shift responsibility and blame onto others by using justification, rationalization, projection, jumping to conclusions, mind reading, projecting. Recognizing defense mechanisms and cognitive traps helps to understand and be able to help students gain insight into their behavior so they can bring about their desired outcomes.

LSCI teaches a useful skill set for decoding and responding in addition to listening. One middle school teacher shared:

With all of the practice and role-playing that we did, I find myself easily starting conversations with students in crisis. I automatically start with the timeline in mind after helping them to calm down. Through affirmations, I let students know that I am on their side and want to listen, not against them trying to get them in trouble.

The skills and strategies teachers learn promote trusting relationships that open youth to learning new ways of coping. "When adults are willing to listen, offer understanding and respect, students can share their concerns because they are willing to trust, sense the adult has their best interest at heart, and problem-solving can occur."

Paradigm Shifts

For many participants, a paradigm shift takes place as they begin looking at their own behavior to see if they are escalating or de-escalating a child with challenging behavior. “Adult job-related stress will be reduced when I stay calm, not making things worse, and first try to see the student’s perspective.” A brief discussion drawn from brain science leading into the Conflict Cycle paradigm introduces the concept of the triune brain and some basics of the survival, emotional and logical brain. Teachers see that even trained professionals sometimes respond in unprofessional ways—with emotion, not logic, when trying to stop student behavior. Describing this and how a fight or flight response in the survival brain can by-pass thoughts and feelings and lead straight to behavior provides adults with a biological explanation for behavior. Changing patterns of thinking and behaving in both students and adults through verbal intervention (using the logical brain) causes physical changes in the brain by building new neuronets, strengthening them through repetition, and weakening those less used.

This biological explanation resonates with many participants and supplements the Conflict Cycle instruction. As a 30-year veteran school social worker described it:

I see now that there are circumstances that evoke from me an unprofessional response that comes from my emotion, not my head. I forget what I otherwise know to do, and my usefulness is reduced to that of an untrained, inexperienced ‘civilian’.

A middle school teacher, Jeff, described himself as being very efficient at using ‘You’ statements and explained that “I divinely felt were needed to change their behavior patterns, without worrying if students were buying in or not, or even learning from me.”

Social learning theory puts learning into a social context and helps adults build more practical skills for supporting behavior change. This theory explains how children learn behaviors by observing and imitating others, such as aggression, and how they can learn new behaviors in the same way. During Stage 5, students are able to see how other students solve problems, how other students benefit from appropriate behavior as positive and negative consequences of behaviors are discussed. Internal or intrinsic rewards, such as a sense of accomplishment, feelings of pride and satisfaction are emphasized. Self-

regulation is promoted by teaching a child to set goals, role-play or practice new behaviors and monitor their own progress. Students build confidence as they experience success. One teacher shared:

I would have loved to have had this training last summer. I really think we could have made more of a lasting impact on these students. Instead of telling them what's wrong with their behavior, I have learned the importance of leading the student to the Central Issue. Instead of telling them what they should do, I have learned the importance of letting the student find their own Insight. I should help them brainstorm solutions, determine pros and cons and let them take ownership in their own course of action.

Summary

In summary, the comments and reflections from teachers indicate that the “Ah-ha” moment comes at different times, and what was most meaningful in LSCI training is as varied as the number of participants. Clearly, through LSCI training, adults do shift to a student-centered paradigm. As they understand a situation from the child’s point of view and recognize the six major patterns of behavior, they see challenging behavior as the child’s way of coping with stress. Teachers with the new paradigm view problems as opportunities for both the child and adult. Once they understand the power of the ‘here and now’ in the life space, teachers see their role as helping make small changes with big results for kids and adults.

LSCI-trained teachers gain self-confidence and feel empowered by having a new paradigm or roadmap to guide them. Equally important, they have new skills for helping children meet their needs in appropriate ways. When adults are able to understand themselves and their role in helping troubled children, they see the advantage to managing their own emotional state, listening more and talking less before, during, and after crisis. They drain off a child’s intense emotions without having to call for the special education teacher or administrator for help. Teachers encourage a child to think logically and calmly tell their story from their own point of view, and are capable of handling crisis situations. One teacher shared:

I now continually assess what I should improve so that I may avoid escalating problems kids face. I look forward to helping kids change self-defeating behavior

patterns and to developing strong relationships with students who need them the most.

Teachers are able to use the six reclaiming interventions to support students by teaching rather than punishing.

Stasha's recent reflection paper provided a multi-theoretical summary as a "Recipe for a Crisis:"

Take our society that inundates its children with adult stresses; add personal feelings, anxieties, memories, disappointments, personal needs and expectations; stir in defense mechanisms denial, escape, and substitution; heat with defensive reactions, alienation, anger, shunning, violence from peers and adults; result is a perfectly created Conflict Cycle; repeat and Conflict Cycle will continue until multiple LSCI sessions have changed the person's paradigm.

LSCI is becoming an important pillar of positive school culture in our schools. Through my role as behavioral specialist and my presence in the local buildings as mentor and coach, I am able to continually reinforce the skills and ideas teachers acquired in training. There is rarely a collaborative team meeting for a student without at least one other LSCI trained person at the table. We use a common language and have a shared paradigm and skill set upon which to develop a functional behavioral assessment and behavioral support plan.

LSCI trained teachers not only understand the student's stress, but also the private logic that drives the child's self-defeating patterns of coping. They have knowledge and skills to use the reclaiming interventions and effect change, not merely manage behavior. As Deanna said:

In summary, I think LSCI training will help me to help all students make lasting changes their behavior. I will use it to help not only my special education students, but my general education students. My team teacher or I will take the time to complete all six stages of the LSCI process with students in crisis. Budget cuts and declining enrollment have forced us to stop teaming, but I will work on

developing a way for teachers to meet on a regular basis to discuss plans so students are supported in achieving their goals.

Darcy adds:

Building relationships will help to lessen problem behaviors in my classroom. I am convinced that this can make a difference that will change the direction of a child's life and improve society as a whole!

About the Author:

Nancy Koehler, MA, has over 30 years experience working with children with special needs, including 12 years teaching children with severe emotional impairments. A behavioral consultant with Charlevoix-Emmet ISD for the past 13 years, she facilitates team development of functional behavioral assessment and positive behavior support plans for students with challenging behaviors. Providing professional development and support to local school district staffs is an important focus of her role. She is a certified LSCI Master Trainer, Senior RAP trainer, NVCPI trainer, and a trainer for Developmental Audit. She may be reached at koehlen@charemisd.org.