

## A Study of LSCI in a School Setting

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*This study explores the effects of Life Space Crisis Intervention (LSCI) training on school personnel and the students they serve. The goal of the study was to evaluate how LSCI was being used by staff and whether interventions reduced school-wide disciplinary referrals. Results showed that LSCI was used frequently by trained school personnel from both special and alternative education and regular education settings. LSCI-trained educators were less likely to use coercive student management strategies, and referrals for common misbehaviors declined. Focus group responses demonstrated improved teacher-student relationships and a proactive approach to addressing student problems. The results suggest that personnel from all departments can benefit from LSCI as a means to improve interactions, reduce coercive discipline methods, and decrease referrals for disciplinary action.*

A recent survey sponsored by the U.S. Department of Education's National Center for Education Statistics found that among classroom teachers with three or fewer years of experience, only 54% felt that they were well prepared to manage student behavior in the classroom (Lewis, Parsad, Carey, Bartfai, Farris, & Smerdon, 1999). Many teachers feel ill equipped to address their students' psychosocial needs (Merrett & Wheldall, 1993) and must learn strategies "on the job." The current climate of "zero tolerance" could potentially fill this gap and give rise to more punitive discipline—a strategy that does not make schools safer (Skiba & Peterson, 2000). Alternatively, reclaiming or restorative schools adopt a philosophy that is student-centered and promotes a positive school climate (Baker & Bridger, 1997; Farner, 2002; Long & Fecser, 2001; Skiba & Peterson, 2000).

One positive approach to problem students is presented by Life Space Crisis Intervention (LSCI) (Long, Wood, & Fecser, 2001). LSCI is a competency-based approach to communicating with students who are experiencing emotional, psychological, or behavioral disruption in personal ecology or "life space" (e.g., family, friends, school, etc.). School personnel become more aware of the causes of conflict

cycles and gain specific strategies to manage crises more constructively (Long, Wood, & Fecser, 2001). School personnel who feel that they have the skills to deal with students in crisis are less likely to refer the student to a counselor or principal (Baker & Bridger, 1997). The goals of this study were to 1) explore the impact of LSCI training on performance of school personnel, and 2) evaluate how exposure to LSCI strategies impacted student behavior.

### *Purpose of the Study*

Unlike previous studies that focused only on the effects of LSCI on student behavior, this study also evaluated the effects of LSCI on those who were trained. Participants were teachers, aides, counselors, and administrators from a rural Pennsylvania middle school and high school who volunteered to receive LSCI training.

The first objective of this study was to explore whether LSCI was a viable skill for various staff in the school setting. Most prior studies focused on educators who work with special populations of disruptive students (Dawson, 2003; DeMagistris & Imber, 1980; Grskovic & Goetze, 2005; Naslund, 1987). Staff in this study came from across the school system including regular education, special educa-



tion, alternative education, school resource officers, counselors, principals, and other staff. We were interested in evaluating the frequency and scope of LSCI interventions employed by this diverse staff. We also studied the type of LSCI intervention used with students presenting behavioral issues.

The second objective of this study was to evaluate whether LSCI strategies for addressing misbehavior would reduce the need for referring students to the principal for disciplinary action. Since LSCI offers a proactive, rather than reactive, approach to communicating with students, it was expected that LSCI training would result in more constructive strategies for addressing misbehavior. For example, in a recent study by Dawson (2003), male junior high school students in a special education classroom with LSCI trained teachers were compared to students in another special education classroom without trained teachers. Students in the LSCI classroom experienced fewer crises, fewer suspensions, and better attendance by the end of the school year. These findings suggest that when educators feel capable of addressing students' needs themselves, students are more likely to remain in the classroom, feel a sense of belonging, and make academic gains (Baker & Bridger, 1997). Such students are less likely to be referred to the principal for disciplinary action (Hughes, Barker, Kemenoff, & Hart, 1993).

The final objective of this study was to evaluate the effectiveness of LSCI as a training tool from the perspective of the staff participants. We created a focus group format to allow them the opportunity to share their experiences with LSCI and express their opinions about the usefulness of LSCI in their work with students throughout the school, not just those who are troubled. These issues were examined in depth among a volunteer cohort of faculty, staff, and administrators in a small rural school district.

## Method

### Sample

Participants were school personnel from the middle school and high school of the DuBois Area School District. DuBois is a rural community in west-central Pennsylvania that serves 2,400 students in one middle school and one high school. Training for LSCI was offered for a cohort of 38 school personnel beginning in the summer of 2003. Since the middle

school and high school employ a total of 201 individuals, 19% of the employees were trained. While only a minority of the total personnel was trained, this was the first cohort in a multi-year training. The final sample of 37 participants provided complete data.

The staff sample included 19 females and 18 males. The average age of the staff who participated was approximately 40 years with 17 (43%) participants with 9 or fewer years of experience. Almost all were White or non-Hispanic (95%) with 61% of the participants having obtained a bachelor's degree and 39% a master's degree.

### Measurement and Procedures

Prior approval for the research procedures was received from the Penn State University Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects. LSCI was a five-day training that began prior to the start of the school year (three days of training) and concluded by the end of the fourth week of classes (final two days of training). All school personnel from the middle school and high school who volunteered for LSCI training were asked to participate in the study. The following objectives were evaluated:

*Implementation of LSCI.* School personnel were asked to complete an LSCI report after each LSCI intervention. This brief form asked participants to record the type of LSCI used, the stages of the process that were completed, the intensity of the crisis (on a scale from 1 to 5, low to high intensity), the length of the intervention in minutes, and a description of the incident (cf., Naslund, 1987). In a mid-school-year assessment, LSCI participants reported that they completed a formal LSCI report 56% of the time following an LSCI. Time constraints limited their ability to complete the reports; however, 437 reports from 31 participants were submitted over the course of the school year.<sup>1</sup>

*Strategies for Misbehavior.* Prior to training and again at the end of the school year, participants completed the Attribution Inventory (Poulou & Norwich, 2000). Participants were asked to read a vignette about a disruptive child in the classroom and respond to a variety of questions about the use of specific strategies to address the misbehavior. Cooperative strategies were evaluated using a seven-item scale measuring interventions such as rewarding prosocial behavior, counseling with the student, and involving the child in classroom activities.



Reliability coefficients for the scale, using Cronbach's alpha, were adequate at both the pre-assessment ( $\alpha = .78$ ) and post-assessment ( $\alpha = .86$ ). Coercive strategies were evaluated by two additional questions, one on the use of punishment and another on the use of threats.

*Discipline Referrals.* Discipline referrals were assessed in two ways. First, LSCI participants were asked to complete a brief feedback questionnaire every two months throughout the course of the school year. One of the questions on the feedback questionnaire asked them to estimate "From 0% to 100%, on average, how many LSCI interventions resulted in a referral to someone else (e.g., counselor, principal)?" Although it was a subjective evaluation of disciplinary referrals, this question tracked the effects of LSCI on referral decisions. Second, the descriptions of the incidents that were recorded on the LSCI report forms provided information on the types of incidents that were addressed. The reported incidents were compared to the record of discipline referrals from each school to determine if referrals declined for the types of problems addressed through LSCI.

*Participant Feedback.* Participants were asked to participate in one of two focus groups at the end of the

school year. Half participated in a morning session and the other half came to an afternoon session. Both groups were asked questions which included: What was the most important impact of LSCI on your values as an educator? What sacred cows (beliefs about school discipline or misbehavior that are difficult to change) have been done away with? They were asked to give an example of a significant impact of LSCI on a student. The focus group was conducted by the LSCI trainer and participants were allowed to interact with one another, share ideas, and offer conclusions based on group discussions. Their responses were evaluated by the principal investigator and grouped into common themes.

## Results

### *Implementation and Common Issues Addressed by LSCI*

The first objective of this study was to evaluate how LSCI was being implemented by the trained school personnel. There were 437 reports returned over the course of the school year, an average of 14 reports for each of the 31 participants who returned report forms. The average intensity of the issues that were

**Table 1: The Six Types of LSCI Interventions, Most Common Issues Addressed, and Personnel Most Likely to Use Intervention**

Type of Intervention	Common Issues Addressed	Personnel Most Likely to use Intervention
Reality Rub: To correct misperceptions	Failure to complete assignments Difficult peer relationships Personal/emotional issues Problems with teacher/principal	Alternative/Special Ed. Teacher Principal Regular Ed. Teacher
Red Flag: To address power struggles and outbursts	Personal/emotional issues Difficult family issues Difficult peer relationships Disruptive classroom behavior Hostile behavior directed at student	Alternative/Special Ed. Teacher Principal Staff
Symptom Estrangement: To confront unacceptable behavior	Failure to follow instructions Cutting class Personal/emotional issues	Alternative/Special Ed. Teacher Principal
Massaging Numb Values: To build values and encourage self-control	Personal/emotional issues	Alternative/Special Ed. Teacher Regular Ed. Teacher
New Tools: To teach new social/interpersonal skills	Follow-up on previous LSCI Academic issues Hostile behavior directed at student	Regular Ed. Teacher Alternative/Special Ed. Teacher Principal
Manipulation of Body Boundaries: To expose exploitation by peers	Hostile behavior directed at student Difficult peer relationships	Staff



discussed during the LSCIs was 3.24 on the 5-point scale and the average duration of an LSCI was 26 minutes. This varied with job role from 37 minutes among school counselors to 24 minutes among classroom teachers and aides. Table 1 on page 97 provides a summary of the type of interventions, the issues commonly addressed, and the school personnel most likely to use the intervention.

By far the most common issues addressed with LSCI were non-school related issues which included: personal/emotional issues, family relationship issues, and peer relationship problems. Other typical school misbehaviors were addressed to a lesser degree; for example defiant/disruptive behavior (14% of incidents) and fighting/threatening/bullying other students (10%).

The most common LSCI interventions used were the Red Flag (39% of the time) and New Tools (27% of the time) interventions. The Red Flag intervention is designed to address imported emotional problems attributable to events outside of the immediate context (Long, Wood, & Fecser, 2001). A typical scenario would include a student who “explodes” in the classroom as a result of an earlier argument with a parent or peer. Classroom teachers and aides in the special education or alternative education classrooms were most likely to confront these types of issues, although principals and other school staff also used the Red Flag intervention.

Regular education teachers reported that they most often used the New Tools intervention, which is

designed to teach new social/interpersonal skills to students in order to change inappropriate behavior (Long, Wood, & Fecser, 2001). When New Tools was used, the most common issues addressed were academic issues (e.g., failing in class, discouragement about performance on a test) and hostility directed at the student by other students (being called names). New Tools was also commonly used when the interviewer was following up on a previous LSCI.

LSCI provides the option of using up to six stages of intervention. Analyses were run on the typical number of stages completed during an LSCI (see Table 2). The average number of stages completed was four, with special/alternative education teachers and principals completing more stages on average (four stages) than regular education teachers and other school staff. The first three stages, Drain Off, Timeline, and Central Issue, were the most common stages completed, each being used over 75% of the time. The last stage, Transfer of Learning, only occurred about 30% of the time.

### *Management Strategies and Disciplinary Referrals*

This study evaluated whether participants showed changes over time in their strategies for managing student misbehavior, and whether LSCI implementation resulted in changes in disciplinary referrals. In the first test, scores from the Attribution Inventory were subjected to a paired t-test to evaluate changes in mean scores over time. The score for each variable from the pre-assessment was compared to the score for each

**Table 2: The Six Stages of the LSCI Process and Average Percent of Completion**

Stage/Description	% Complete
<i>Drain Off</i> : De-escalation to drain off the student's intense feelings while controlling one's counter-aggressive reactions.	76%
<i>Timeline</i> : Obtain and validate the student's perception of the crisis.	77.9%
<i>Central Issue</i> : Determine if the crisis represents one of the six patterns of self-defeating behavior that are addressed by one of the six types of LSCI interventions.	79.8%
<i>Insight</i> : Determine the student's specific pattern of self-defeating behavior for personal insight and accountability.	67.4%
<i>New Skills</i> : Teach the student new social/interpersonal skills to overcome their pattern of self-defeating behavior.	60.3%
<i>Transfer of Learning</i> : Help the student generalize new social skills and behaviors.	29.7%

\*Definitions from Long, Wood, & Fecser, 2001.



variable at the post-assessment. Statistically significant results indicate a difference in mean scores that is unlikely to be due to chance. Table 3 below provides a summary of this data. Statistically significant changes in mean scores occurred for participants' use of punishment as a strategy to manage misbehavior. As seen in Table 3, participants were less likely to report the use of punishment at post-assessment.

Follow-up analyses on both the cooperative and coercive management strategies were performed to evaluate for differences by gender (male versus female) and years of experience (nine or fewer years versus ten or more years). Results showed that the mean scores for the use of threats to manage misbehavior were significantly lower for males at post-assessment. When tests were run separately by years of experience, mean scores for the use of punishment to manage misbehavior were significantly lower at post-assessment for those with nine or fewer years of experience. The follow-up analyses suggest that student management strategies were more likely to change for males and those with nine or fewer years of experience.

To examine disciplinary referrals, bi-monthly feedback questionnaires from the participants were analyzed to evaluate the frequency of referral following an LSCI. On average, participants reported that an LSCI resulted in a discipline referral about 17% of the time. Additionally, we examined the LSCI incident reports and identified the most common issues that were addressed in an LSCI that might otherwise have been referred to the principal for discipline. The most frequent were failure to complete assignments, failure to follow instructions, defiant behavior, disruptive classroom behavior, and fighting. Discipline referral records were evaluated to determine whether there were changes in referrals for these

problems over time. Records from the middle school showed that school disciplinary referrals for disruptive classroom behaviors and failure to follow instructions declined by over 50% from the previous years. However, referrals for defiant behavior, fighting, and failure to complete assignments remained about the same. At the high school, disciplinary referrals for major class disturbance and failure to follow instructions declined about 20-25% from the previous years, while referrals for fighting declined almost 75% (See Figure 1 on page 100). On the other hand, referrals for defiant behavior increased from the previous years. Overall, discipline referrals were down among the common behaviors that were addressed by LSCI.

### Participant Feedback

The final objective of this study was to evaluate the perceptions of the participants of the efficacy of LSCI as a tool to assist them in their ongoing interactions with students. When asked about the most important impact that LSCI had on their own values as educators, participants noted the training encouraged them to take time with their students and better understand their problems. As a result, participants felt "less stressed in the classroom," "calm," "more accepting of students' negative behavior," "patient," and "more willing to question than assume." Many also noted that they were better able to control their feelings of anger and their struggles to take control. Rather, they realized that "it's about the students and how to help them." Overall, participants reported that they began to treat students with more respect. They avoided overreacting to disruptive behavior and became more proactive in addressing student needs.

Strongly held beliefs were challenged as a result of training and experience with LSCI. Participants identified several entrenched beliefs such as: "behavioral problems have to end up with the building principal," "some kids can't learn," "it must be 'my way'," "students must be punished for bad behavior," and "only guidance counselors can talk to students about problems." Such beliefs were replaced with: "don't take things to heart—understand who owns the problem," "teacher and student should work together as problem solvers," "be proactive rather than reactive," "all behaviors have an understandable cause," and "detention is not an answer for all problem students." One participant

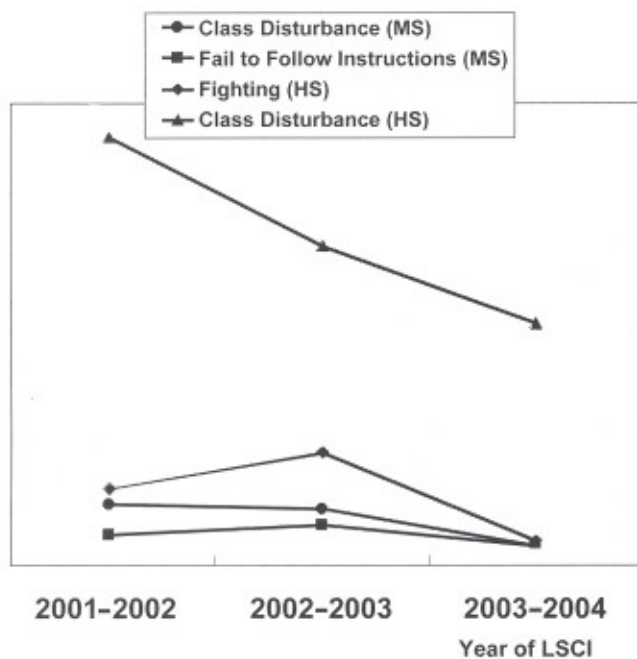
**Table 3: T-tests for Differences in Mean Scores for Pre- and Post-Assessment of Cooperative and Coercive Management Strategies**

Variable	Pre-test Mean (SD)	Post-test Mean (SD)	t-value
<b>Strategies</b>			
Cooperative	4.29 (.53)	4.38 (.67)	.60
Punishment	2.71 (.79)	2.26 (1.01)	2.02*
Threats	2.17 (.92)	1.86 (.88)	1.36

\* p < .05

a p < .10





**Figure 1.** Disciplinary referrals for the DuBois High School (HS) and Middle School (MS) from the 2001-2002 school year to the current school year, 2003-2004.

described a change in the school atmosphere from punitive to therapeutic, especially among the building principals who were LSCI trained. These statements suggest a significant change in the perception of problem students from one of control and punishment to one of cooperation, responsibility, and proactive discipline. As a result, most participants commented that they had fewer "write-ups" (detention or suspension) and were much less likely to send students to the principal until after they attempted to resolve the problem by initiating and participating in an LSCI with the student.

Participants were asked to identify how LSCI had significantly impacted students. The predominant theme was that of a growing sense of trust and honesty between participants and students. Several participants noted that students were beginning to see them as "safe" and were willing to come to them when they were having problems. Others noted that there was a greater willingness among the students to accept responsibility for their behavior. Although defensive at first, the LSCI process would often result in the students understanding their role in the matter and taking personal responsibility for the consequences. Several participants reported that students expressed gratitude for the adults' willingness to listen and help with crisis situations. Such expressions provided a level of personal satisfaction for the educators. They stated that the credit should go to their training in LSCI.

## Conclusions

The results from this preliminary study are promising. Based on reports submitted by trained school personnel, LSCI was used quite frequently by individuals in all departments of the school. Previous research tended to focus on the effective use of LSCI only among special education teachers and aides, those who directly work with students who have been identified as "disruptive." However, this study suggests that personnel in various roles can benefit from training. In fact, regular education classroom teachers were just as likely as special educators to use LSCI. They only differed in the type of intervention typically used.

Most common among special education classroom teachers was the Red Flag intervention, which was used frequently for important personal, family, and peer relationship concerns that resulted in deeply emotional reactions. A Red Flag intervention is most appropriate because it specifically addresses emotional outbursts, attempts to identify the source of the emotions, and teaches problem solving skills. Long, et al. (2001) speculated that the Red Flag interventions would be most common in urban schools. However, the results of this study suggest that it is also prevalent in rural schools.

Among regular education classroom teachers, the New Tools intervention generally focused on academic concerns among students as well as issues of self-confidence. Interestingly, the New Tools intervention was designed to specifically target social and interpersonal skills, not academic skills. That classroom teachers used New Tools for academic issues is curious. It could be that classroom teachers found that the New Tools intervention could easily be adopted into their discussions with students regarding academic concerns. If this is the case, and given the frequency with which New Tools was used for academic concerns, the findings suggest that New Tools training scenarios could be broadened to include academic skills.

The findings of this study also suggest that most school personnel did not complete all six stages of the interview on a regular basis. More commonly, participants completed the first three of the six stages. Among LSCI's six stages, the first three can be considered the diagnostic stages (Drain Off, Timeline, and Central Issue) while the last three can be considered the therapeutic/reclaiming stages (Insight, New Skills, and Transfer of Learning).



School personnel may feel more comfortable with the diagnostic aspects of the interview and less comfortable with the therapeutic aspects. However, the inability to complete all six stages did not appear to affect the success of LSCI. Based on the survey responses, coercive student management strategies declined over the course of the school year. It may be that by taking the time to communicate with students in crisis, regardless of the number of stages completed, the teacher reinforced a positive working relationship with the student. Once a working relationship is established, the conversation can continue at a later time. For example, in this study, regular education classroom teachers spent the least amount of time conducting an LSCI but were more likely to report using LSCI as a follow-up. As Long, Wood, & Fecser (2001) state, "Lasting change seldom happens with a single LSCI. Think of LSCI as a series of interventions between you and the student" (p. 82).

Focus group responses suggest that, overwhelmingly, school personnel felt that their training and experience with LSCI helped them to improve their relationships with students. They noted that their strongly held beliefs about the causes of student disruptive behaviors were challenged and replaced by beliefs that all students are students of promise. The change in beliefs was accompanied by improved teacher-student interactions that were characterized by trust, honesty, empathy, patience, tolerance, and responsibility. As a result, participants were less reactive and more proactive in meeting the needs of students.

Finally, all of these important changes were accompanied by a significant reduction in disciplinary referrals from the previous school years. Participants reported making referrals less than 20% of the time following an LSCI, and school-wide data showed significant declines in several areas including fighting, disruptive classroom behaviors, and failure to follow instructions. However, the high school did experience an increase in referrals for defiant behavior. This may have occurred because of the subjective nature of referral classification decisions. It may be that classroom teachers and other personnel were selecting the broad classification of "defiance" to identify the behaviors in question when previously they may have selected other categories. Notwithstanding, the overall decline in disciplinary referrals in the categories that were common for LSCI interventions represents a notable change in referral decisions by school personnel.

In conclusion, it should be noted that this was an exploratory study and the research design did not allow for the examination of a causal link between LSCI and the results noted above. Other unexplored variables could have influenced the results in this study. Likewise, much of the data was based on self-report information collected from the LSCI trained educators. As with any self-report measure, the responses are subject to bias. Given these limitations, however, it is encouraging to note that significant changes were evident over the course of the school year. It seems clear that school personnel can be taught to address students' needs in a way that can improve interactions, reduce coercive disciplinary strategies, and decrease referrals for disciplinary action. This study offers preliminary evidence for the efficacy of LSCI as a promising approach for training school personnel in cooperative strategies for student engagement and future research should continue to explore other aspects of the teacher-student relationship that may be impacted by LSCI.

#### NOTE

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