

Executive Summary: A Quasi-Experimental Evaluation of Lions Quest Skills for Adolescence in Two Middle Schools



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OVERVIEW

Program implementation of Lions Quest Skills for Adolescence began in the intervention school in September 2016 during the first week of school and continued through May 2018. The school used a 28-week model taught in Social Studies classrooms. This model limits the number of lessons in Unit 4, however the Unit 4 lessons that were not covered by the Social Studies teachers were covered by the health teachers. Main program implementation took place one time per week, 30-40 minutes during Social Studies for Grades 6-8. In total, nineteen teachers/staff in the intervention school received formal Lions Quest training.

During the 2016-17 school year, the comparison school began the initial planning for implementation of Lions Quest Skills for Adolescence during the following year, however, due to changes in leadership and competing priorities, the district ultimately decided that the comparison school would not participate in the study beyond Year 1. As a result, data were not collected from the comparison school in the 2017-18 school year and they did not implement the program. Given this change, the research team and Lions Quest Program leadership decided to collect additional data from the intervention school in Year 2 with a focus on learning more about implementation. Expanded data collection included expanding the number of focus groups, classroom observations, and key-informant interviews. The following sections provide a summary of key findings from analyses of the Year 1 and Year 2 data.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS--QUANTITATIVE

Student and Staff Surveys

Students were surveyed at two time points during each school year (2016-2017 and 2017-2018) using the Conditions for Learning Survey, developed by American Institutes for Research (AIR), which includes questions grouped into the following scales: Safe and Respectful Climate, Challenge, Student Support, and Peer Social and Emotional Learning.¹ In Year 1, students receiving the Lions Quest Skills for Adolescence program (the intervention school) reported statistically significant improvements in their perceptions of school climate, specifically in their perceptions of physical and emotional safety and peers' social and problem-solving skills relative to students who did not receive the program. In Year 2, there were no statistically significant changes from fall to spring in student perceptions of school climate. However, in Year 2 student perceptions of school climate did not show a statistically significant decline as they did in the control school in Year 1, suggesting a maintenance effect in the Lions Quest school in Year 2. Moreover, as shown in Figure 1 below, for those students who were stable in the sample in the intervention school across both Years 1 and 2 (i.e., they were in 6th grade in Year 1 and in 7th in Year 2 and completed the student surveys), we saw a statistically significant increase from fall of

¹ American Institutes for Research Guidelines for Using AIR's Conditions for Learning Survey.

Year 1 to the end of Year 2 in their perception of Challenge, or their view that they are listened to, cared about, and helped by teachers and other adults in the school.

Figure 1

Student Survey Scale Means—Stable Sample Across Years 1 and 2 (Intervention School)

<i>Fall Y1 - Spring Y2 (paired t-test)</i>					
	Fall Year 1	Spring Year 2	Change	p	n
Safe and Respectful Climate	2.54	2.51	-0.02	0.3690	302
Peer Social and Emotional Learning	2.56	2.52	-0.04	0.0982	302
Challenge	2.61	2.75	0.14	0.0001	302
Student Support	2.41	2.36	-0.05	0.1540	302

Stable = 302 Year 2: 189 Grade 7, 113 Grade 8
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Staff surveys were also conducted at two time points during each school year. These surveys were also based on the Conditions for Learning Survey described above and included the SEL Beliefs Scale.² As with the results reported above for student perceptions, staff perceptions of school climate saw greater increases in Year 1, with statistically significant improvements in their perceptions of Peer Social and Emotional Learning, Student Support, SEL Instruction, and Support for SEL. In Year 2, only Student Support showed a statistically significant increase. However, as shown in Figure 2 below, for those teachers who were stable in the sample across the two years of the study (from the end of spring of Year 1 to the end of spring of Year 2), we see statistically significant improvements across all five scales in the staff survey.

Figure 2

Staff Survey Scale Means—Stable Sample Across Years 1 and 2 (Intervention School)

<i>Spring Y1 - Spring Y2 (paired t-test)</i>					
	Spring Year 1	Spring Year 2	Change	p	n
Safe and Respectful Climate	1.81	2.25	0.44	0.0076	40
Peer Social and Emotional Learning	1.98	2.51	0.53	0.0033	40
Student Support	2.46	3	0.55	0.014	40
SEL Instruction	3.29	4.22	0.93	0.0012	40
Culture/Support for SEL	2.95	3.88	0.93	0.0004	40

Stable = 40

Across student and staff surveys, Year 1 demonstrated promising findings in the intervention school. While we cannot make causal inferences based on these data, it is plausible that several contextual factors may have influenced these findings, for example, the intervention school’s pending transition from a middle school to an elementary school in the 2018-2019 school year. Data from key informant interviews and focus groups are likely to provide additional insight and will be included in the final report/case study.

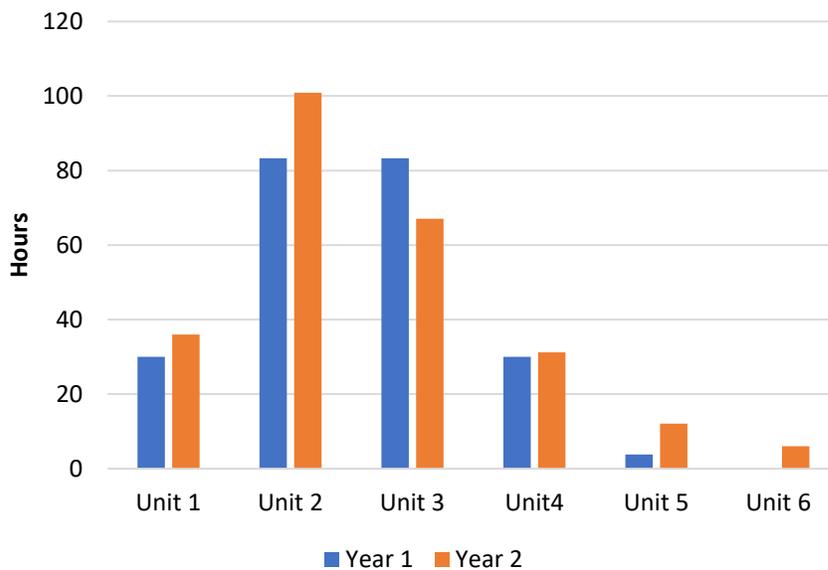
² Brackett, M. A., Reyes, M. R., Rivers, S. E., Elbertson, N. A., & Salovey, P. (2012). Assessing teachers’ beliefs about social and emotional learning. *Journal of Psychoeducational Assessment, 30*(3), 219-236.

Implementation

Implementation quantity and integration were measured using weekly implementation logs completed by teachers. As illustrated in Figure 3 below, in each year of implementation, the percentage of time teachers reported spending on each unit declined across the school year. Teachers reported spending the most time on Units 2 and 3, and the least time on Units 5 and 6. Of note, fewer logs were turned in during the spring in both years. While we cannot make causal inferences from these data, there are several factors that may have contributed to the decline in time spent per unit and number of logs submitted including the heavy standardized testing schedule in the spring semester, which requires substantial preparation and administrative time.

Figure 3

Number of Hours Spent on Each Unit



Classroom Observations

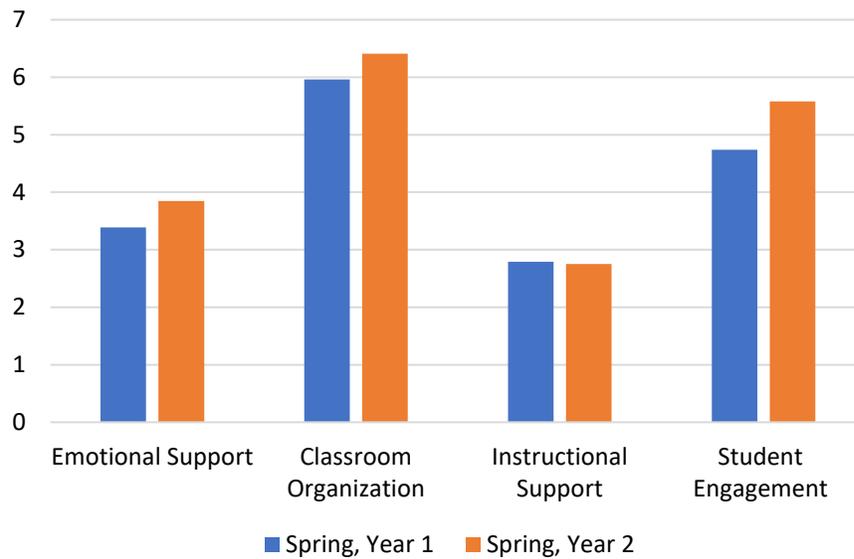
Observations were conducted during the spring of each year using the Classroom Assessment Scoring System, which includes four domains: Emotional Support, Classroom Organization, Instructional Support, and Student Engagement.³ As illustrated in Figure 4, three of the four CLASS domains – Emotional Support, Classroom Organization, and Student Engagement - showed statistically significant gains from spring of Year 1 to spring of Year 2 at the intervention school, while Instructional Support showed no statistically significant change. These tests are not tests of the causal effect of the program, although program effects may be responsible for changes and differences.

³ Pianta, R. C., Hamre, B. K., & Minz, S. (2012). Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS). Manual Upper Elementary.

Figure 4

Classroom Observation CLASS Means by Domain—Intervention School

Domain	Intervention 2017 Mean (SD)	Intervention 2018 Mean (SD)	Change
Emotional Support	3.39 (1.06)	3.85 (1.11)	0.46*
Classroom Organization	5.96 (1.05)	6.41 (0.60)	0.45*
Instructional Support	2.79 (1.20)	2.75 (0.95)	-0.04
Student Engagement	4.74 (1.33)	5.58 (0.91)	0.84*



SUMMARY OF FINDINGS—QUALITATIVE

Qualitative data were collected via fifteen focus groups and key informant interviews during the study period. At the intervention school, focus groups were conducted in spring 2017 with 6th, 7th, and 8th grade students, two groups of teachers (social studies and other mixed subject area teachers), and a key informant interview was conducted with the principal. At The comparison school in spring of 2017, focus groups were conducted with 7th and 8th grade students, and a key informant interview was conducted with the vice principal as a representative of the comparison school administration. In the second year, in spring 2018, focus groups were again conducted at the intervention school at each grade level, sixth through eighth, and three focus groups were conducted with teachers: one with mixed subject area teachers, one with sixth grade teachers, and one with social studies teachers. Thematic content analysis through a combination of etic and emic coding using Nvivo software was used to analyze the information from the focus groups and interviews. The focus of this work was to capture more detailed information about implementation of Lions Quest *Skills for Adolescence* and to better understand what works in implementation and where there may be opportunities for improvement.

School Differences

While the comparison school and the intervention school serve very similar student populations and are in fact, next door to one another, a couple of contextual factors are worth noting. At the time our study began, unlike the intervention school, the comparison school was just coming out of state receivership and awaiting a leadership change. The comparison school was presented with the opportunity to participate in this study following the intervention school's interest in adopting the program. As noted in the study design, it was expected that the comparison school would receive the program one year later than the intervention school.

Given the limited data from the comparison school and the fact that they did not implement the program, the following sections focus on qualitative findings from the intervention school.

Implementation Successes

Findings from the qualitative data suggest that school staff and students had positive perceptions of the program. The principal noted positive differences in the dynamics between students and teachers. At the end of Year 1, the principal commented:

"I do see some changes in teachers. I see the teachers are allowing students to have voices in class, so I like that. Some of the activities that are embedded in the program allows the teachers to kind of allow the students to be more active participants, and I like that."

Teachers also saw positive changes in students' feelings of safety in school that they attribute to the program. One teacher says:

"I get the feeling, that this year the kids feel very safe in their classroom, you know. And they seem to feel safe with coming and telling us whatever happens, you know, at least for the most part. I'd say if you'd have to say 100%, no, but maybe 95% of them would definitely come to tell you Ms. ____, Ms.____, Ms.____ this is what happened. You know. And then we take care of it. So I think there's a safety net there."

Many teachers remarked that they appreciated Lions Quest as a "door opener" to conversations they would not otherwise have: "they all want to tell you about their own personal perspective, and then it goes on and they ask questions [...] it allows you to open the door to these conversations. Typically you don't have a door opener."

Students also reported enthusiasm for various aspects of the program. They liked the role-plays, as well as the discussions and activities that felt relevant to their lives, including those regarding social connection and interaction in difficult or complex situations. One eighth grader remarked how he liked how the activities address real-world situations:

"I like the activities. And I like how you have to put yourself into the situation that they give you. Like, for example, if it asks you a question about what would you do if someone was being bullied. You get to put yourself into that situation as if it was real. And you get to answer the question, like how would you do in real life."

Students discussed how Lions Quest allowed them to socialize and interact positively with classmates outside of their regular friend circles. One seventh grade student explained how he made a new friend through a Lions Quest activity:

“I realized we had a lot in common, because we play with each other and I got to know her, and it turns out that she was a good person to be around. She has a positive energy that was good for us.”

Another seventh-grade student remarked on the positivity and connection that the class feels as a whole after doing Lions Quest activities:

“Every time we do a Lions Quest we all walk out with a positive attitude. It gets us, you know, happy I guess, because sometimes if we do it, we do activities where we’re all in a group then we see the joy and we see people laughing and, you know, they’re happy, but we’re still learning. So then there’s this activity where you have to like, you’d have a yarn ball and then you throw it around the class. [...] And it’ll show the connections between you guys, every time you get the ball, you had to say something about you. It feels nice.”

These are important positive signals about the program as a whole and underscore some of the positive trends in the school climate survey data described above, as well as the positive shifts in both teacher and student perceptions of the program between the first and second year of our study.

Implementation Challenges

The qualitative data also suggest that school staff and students experience some challenges and barriers to implementation. These barriers fall into four broad categories and include (1) lack of staff buy-in; (2) questions about the specific implementation model; (3) the desire for more support and training; and (4) concerns about program fit.

Buy-In

The qualitative data suggest low teacher buy-in at the intervention school. Specifically, teachers were concerned about time constraints and competing academic priorities as well as program relevance, both in terms of cultural and contextual relevance, as well as developmental appropriateness. Teachers also anticipated low parent engagement.

Implementation Model and Allocated Time

Related to buy-in, teachers overwhelmingly had concerns about the implementation model. The intervention school decided to use a 28-week model, in which the curriculum would be taught primarily by social studies teachers once per week during a forty-minute block. School leadership and teachers, both social studies and other subject area teachers, noted that this was not ideal for several reasons. As indicated by staff, this model isolated the program to social studies classrooms and did not provide adequate support for integration into other classrooms and school contexts. Social studies teachers also brought up time constraints, with one teaching remarking, “From our perspective, to take away 20% of your school year, is a terrible amount of time.” Teachers overwhelmingly felt that the program had fallen on the responsibility of the social studies teachers and that there was little collaboration across teachers regarding implementing the program.

Teachers also raised specific challenges tied to time and behavior management. Specifically, they worried that the lessons themselves and the prep time needed to teach them were time consuming. Teachers indicated that the books were not always easy or relevant and extra time was needed to adapt material and prepare PowerPoints or handouts. Teachers also discussed behavioral issues such as losing time during transitions and dealing with individual students who tended to derail Lions Quest lessons for the rest of the class (“one kid who disrupts the whole flow”). Behavior management challenges were also expressed by students who mentioned classmates disrupting lessons by talking, using cell phones, or otherwise not participating.

Training and Support

Teachers also raised issues related to training and support, noting that they generally needed more training and more planning time. Teachers discussed how they felt that the training could have been clearer and more directly focused on their own preparation for teaching the material, rather than on becoming familiar with the program in general. We interpret this to mean they would have liked more training time to be allocated to practice and perhaps to making a plan for implementation in their classrooms. Specifically, teachers indicated that they would like more internal collaboration and planning. The principal commented, “[Teachers] didn’t get a chance to look over the curriculum, and share the curriculum with colleagues and say, Hey, what does that mean? How does that lesson work?’ They didn’t get a chance to do that.”

Some teachers’ negative comments also suggest that they lacked confidence, buy-in, and base-knowledge about teaching social and emotional learning. For example, one social studies teacher said, “Well, I did the one on feelings, and there’s only so much I can do with that. And I mean, and I’m not even trying to be just a dopey guy either... How do I talk about feelings, man? There’s only so much I can sell, you know!”

Contextual Fit

Another perceived barrier to successful implementation was teachers’ perceptions that the program did not necessarily fit the needs of their student population. Teachers in both years of the program reported that they had to make adaptations to the curriculum based on race, ethnicity, class, background, and the maturity of content to make it more relevant to their students. One teacher commented, “I try to come up with my own examples and stuff like that. Because some of it ... it doesn’t relate to our kids. It’s very middle class and our students are not middle class.” The burden of adapting the content to be more relevant to the student population was reported to be an additional source of teacher stress on top of the other time-related challenges discussed above.

Cultural sensitivity and relevancy were often brought up by teachers as something lacking in the program. This includes the need to show more diverse students in program materials and include stories/scenarios that are representative of the diverse ethnic backgrounds, cultures and life experiences of the students. The principal makes the point of saying that the program is working for what it intends to work for, developing universal social and emotional skills, but it sometimes feels as though it isn’t working to meet the *students’ actual needs in this school*. For example, students in in this study must navigate incidents of serious community violence every day, a topic which is not directly addressed by the program. In the context of exposure to community violence it is understandable that teachers report the program to be “irrelevant” to students’ specific needs and experiences. There is a

general sense across participants that the program was designed for a different student population from theirs: one that faces less community violence and subsequently copes with less trauma.

SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The data illuminate several key findings that are aligned with what we know more broadly in the field of social and emotional learning and implementation science. To begin, well-implemented, universal approaches to social and emotional learning do result in improvements in relevant student and teacher outcomes as well as in classroom practice. But implementation is typically variable and there are key lessons that if addressed can result in more robust and sustained impacts. We list these below in the form of recommendations.

- Program planning and buy-in is important for successful implementation.
- Social and emotional learning must be prioritized and integrated.
- Adults need ongoing support and training, including building their own SEL skills, and when learning a new approach they need time to practice, plan, and collaborate.
- Social and emotional learning should be developmentally and culturally aligned to the needs of students (and adults) and should be integrated across settings, including school, home, and community.
- Students are more likely to benefit from social and emotional learning when it is embedded across settings and throughout daily interactions.
- When implementing SEL with a population that has faced trauma and other adversity, special care must be given to selecting relevant and appropriate curriculum, strategies and resources.

Many of these recommendations for future programming stem from the need to create more buy-in at various levels. The training itself could benefit from being restructured to prioritize teacher buy-in, program clarity, and to create a sense of community and shared responsibility among implementing teachers.

Finally, we recommend that future programming be more culturally sensitive and contextually responsive. Dedicated time specific to contextualization should be included into the planning period. If time is taken at the outset of the program to get to know the school, the community, and the student needs (whether SPED students, recent immigrants, students facing trauma, etc.), then the lessons and the training could be adapted to more carefully meet the specific needs of the population. Responding to the student populations' social and emotional needs through a more culturally responsive and targeted approach, could allow the positive aspects of the Lions Quest program, which were celebrated by staff, students and teachers alike, to have an exponentially greater impact on student- teacher- and school-level outcomes.

Taken together, the data highlight the need for programs and strategies that are flexible and adaptable to the needs of the context in which they are used. As demonstrated by the quantitative findings, we are likely to see some broad improvements in positive outcomes when using a sequenced and prescribed approach to social and emotional learning. However, an approach that is also flexible, adaptable, and easier to integrate into daily practice may further grow and sustain these positive outcomes.

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