Lighthouse Community School

An In-Depth Look at Successful Strategies Used with At-Risk Students

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Introduction

The Lighthouse Community School (LCS; https://www.lys.org/services/lighthouse-community-school/) is located in Cincinnati, Ohio, and is a unique charter school operated through the collaborative effort of Lighthouse Youth Services and the Cincinnati Public Schools. LCS has been in operations since 2000 and serves at-risk students from Grades 6 to 12, ages 13–21 years.

The enrollment at LCS is approximately 60 students, but that number can vary throughout the school year and also from one academic year to another due to the volatile nature of the students' lives. The graduation rate varies year to year and can range from one to nine students, and all students receive free lunch (Lighthouse Community School [LCS], 2018).

Teachers and support staff (counselors, intervention specialists, etc.) all realize that the basic needs of health and safety of the students must first be met before any significant academic learning can occur. The tenets of a trauma-informed care (TIC) model have been presented to the faculty to better prepare them with strategies that work effectively with this traumatized student population.

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This article addresses how the TIC model connects at-risk youth to LCS. The model is defined as an organizational structure with a treatment perspective, which includes recognizing, understanding, and responding to the effects of all trauma types (Earls, 2018). We focus on at-risk youth because "failure to address mental health difficulties (MHD) early in life affects individuals' long-term functioning and well-being, and may also generate significant societal costs related to increased health care usage, unemployment, and antisocial behaviors" (Anderson et al., 2019, p. 9).

Additionally, we focus on the phenomenon of student dropout, which has been increasing in our society. It is important that teachers, support staff, policymakers, and researchers find strategies to address this problem and help all students learn and reach their fullest potential.

Literature Review

At-Risk Students

The growing number of at-risk students in American schools is a serious issue facing educators everywhere. The term *at-risk* is often used to describe students or groups of students who are considered to have a higher probability of failing academically or dropping out of school (Tas, Selvitopu, Bora, & Demirkaya, 2013).

While this may affect students in all demographic areas, it is especially serious in urban schools where an estimated 40% of the student population may exhibit some indication that they will not complete their academic program (Burrus & Roberts, 2012). Kilgus, Taylor, and von der Embse (2018) stressed the importance of identifying at-risk students. They mentioned that early identification plays a major role in any prevention-oriented delivery service. Kilgus et al. noted that schools can use universal screening to accomplish early identification, and that educators can utilize different universal screening approaches, such as titration and triage, in the early identification process (Kilgus et al., 2018; Shinn, 2010).

School Dropouts

Dropping out of high school has been linked to negative consequences and can cause long-term economic hardship and affect health and family functioning (Dupéré, Dion, Levanthal, Archambault, Crosnoe, & Janosz, 2018). The term *dropout* refers to "students who were enrolled in grades 10, 11, or 12, but left school without graduating" (Köller, 2001, p. 6698).

Azzam (2007) conducted a study for the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and identified three major reasons why students drop out of school: being bored with school programs, missing too many days and being unable to catch up, and spending too much time with people who are not interested in school. While the students surveyed blame themselves for their actions, they suggested that schools need to be more engaging by providing real-world experiences in experiential learning.

Furthermore, the student dropouts indicated a need for improving the school climate, making it is more supportive and helpful to them. They indicated it

is important for students to find at least one adult in the building with whom they can relate. The report suggested a multipronged approach to dealing with the dropout problem (Azzam, 2007).

The high school graduation rate is decreasing in Ohio, and high schools and professionals are working hard to prevent at-risk students from dropping out of high school. There is a definite need to modify practices. Some schools have tried providing alternative programs within the school, while others have created separate alternate schools. These have included vocational schools (Hill, Campbell, & Gross, 2013), instead of charter schools, that provide part or all of the typical academic offerings, but where teachers teach in unique ways with sensitivity to the emotional needs of the students.

Trauma-Informed Care

TIC is a new paradigm for organizing public mental health and human services delivery (Hopper, Bassuk, & Olivet, 2010). Earls (2018) posited the impact of trauma on families and children and referred to TIC as "an organizational structure and treatment perspective that involves understanding, recognizing, and responding to the effects of all types of trauma" (p.109).

Earls highlighted "that trauma survivors can be re-traumatized by well-meaning caregivers and community service providers" (p. 109). Therefore it is critical that positive factors be promoted and the impact of trauma be understood in order to develop a supportive and compassionate community.

The most successful schools for dealing with at-risk students view student engagement as an essential component for effective teaching so that students feel motivated to learn and complete their high school experience (Oehlberg, 2008). Teachers and other school personnel see their role as critical in establishing this engagement and making learning meaningful. One such approach for all school personnel working with at-risk youth is the proven TIC model (Oehlberg, 2008).

A preponderance of at-risk students face traumatic life experiences on a frequent basis. Trauma is defined as "an event, series of events, or set of circumstances that is experienced by an individual as physically or emotionally harmful or threatening that has lasting adverse effects on the individual's functioning and physical, social, emotional, spiritual well-being" (SAMSHA, 2012, p. 2). Traumas involve issues such as parental dysfunction, homelessness, drug and alcohol addictions, and violence.

To address these challenges and keep students engaged in learning, teachers, social workers, counselors, and other school personnel must be prepared with an arsenal of effective strategies that address the physical and emotional needs of the at-risk youth. "Regardless of the root of the trauma, those working in a capacity to support children can benefit from gaining a deeper understanding of how trauma affects child development and what intervention efforts have been effective in helping children heal" (Walkley & Cox, 2013, p. 124).

The TIC model encourages students to set realistic goals and participate in multisensory and sensory-based activities/programs to help accomplish these goals (SAMSHA, 2015). Children experiencing trauma are often misdiagnosed as having special education needs such as learning disabilities or behavioral disabilities or attention deficit disorders (Downey, 2007).

Traumatized children/youth may be unable to trust adults, such as school faculty, due to an inability to see them as protective figures (Lieberman, Chu, Van Horn, & Harris, 2011). According to Becker-Weidman (2006), "Trauma-attachment disordered children have internalized a negative working model of the world, adults, relationships, and themselves" (p.147).

The ability of the teacher to connect with such youth and to develop a positive attachment is essential to the process of recovery from traumatic events (Brunzell, Stokes, & Waters, 2016; Lieberman et al., 2011). To assist in recovery, traumatized youth should be given many chances to "explore, play, and learn" in a supporting, accepting environment under the guidance of a trusted adult (Gregorowski & Seedat, 2013). This includes multisensory activities such as dance, music, sports, and meditation (Brunzell et al., 2016; Gaskill & Perry, 2012). In addition to these activities, the LCS has also incorporated cooking, yoga, gardening, and art therapy.

Lighthouse Youth Services

LCS has had a strong presence in Cincinnati since its inception in 1969 as an agency that effectively works with families in crisis, homeless youth, and young adults experiencing great trauma in their lives (LCS, 2018). The agency provides a wide array of services, including behavioral and psychiatric care, home services to families in crisis, residential treatment facilities and independent living facilities, support to the juvenile justice system, and foster care and adoption.

The Lighthouse Youth Services (LYS) mission is "to advance the dignity and well-being of children, youth and families in need." Founded by the Baptist Women's Fellowship, this organization continues to grow in the services it provides, including the recent addition in 2015 of A Place to Call Home, which will provide shelter and care for youth and homeless and young adults (LCS, 2018).

The LCS is an extension of LYS; it is a significant endeavor that furthers the outreach of the mission. As a charter school located in a high-crime neighborhood within the city limits of Cincinnati, LCS operates as its own school district with its own school board.

However, as part of the larger Cincinnati Public School District and LYS, consultation and cooperation among all the agencies exists and is an important component to the overall success of the school (Trauth, 2017).

Any parent or guardian can enroll a student in LCS based on any of the following admission criteria:

- a family in conflict; or
- a child placed in out of home care by a government agency (note: of the 2014–15 student enrollment 50% resided in out of home care); or
- a child in the juvenile system or other public system; or
- a Lighthouse Youth Services client; or a child expelled or suspended more than once in the school year; or
- a child on an "emotionally disturbed" IEP (note: of the students enrolled typically 90% have this special education designation); or
- a child at least one grade level behind; or a child in crisis that interferes with academic progress in a traditional school setting (LCS, 2018)

The school's philosophy includes the belief that students learn best when they use academic concepts and skills to solve real-world problems within a caring, structured environment. The students need challenging work to facilitate their learning and must see their education as a way to foster civility, good citizenship, responsible behavior, and self-reliance. The TIC model attempts to meet each student at wherever he or she is in life.

An example of this belief is a young lady who came to LCS after being removed from her neighborhood school for excessive

truancy, inattentive behavior, and sleeping in class. Her circumstances were that she was coming to school as best as she could from a home where her mom and dad were extreme addicts and had both overdosed, resulting ultimately in the father's death.

Upon enrollment at LCS, her physical and emotional needs were first addressed before any academic expectations were made. She was allowed to rest and develop a sense of safety in this new school environment. After about six weeks, she began to participate in class lessons and to make academic progress. She graduated from high school the following spring rather than adding to the roll of dropouts, a future she would have had without the interventions of LCS (Kroner & Mares, 2009).

With the overall goals of dropout prevention and high school graduation, the LCS faculty works diligently to meet each student's needs both on an emotional level and an academic level. The faculty consists of three academic teachers, one physical education teacher, one social studies/urban agriculture teacher, one counselor, five intervention and student support specialists, two instructor assistants, one principal, one superintendent, and interns from two local colleges. The students' emotional well-being is as significant as their academic mastery. Students are never removed from this school for noncompliance reasons but rather interventions are put in place to rebalance their progress in school (Trauth, 2017).

In addition to the faculty, volunteers are always a welcome addition and include representatives from local universities, churches, and businesses as well as interested individuals. Contact with the school's volunteer coordinator allows talents and interests to be best matched to the needs of the school (Trauth, 2017).

Training in Trauma-Informed Care

The faculty has received training in TIC to increase their knowledge of effective strategies when working with the emotional needs of severely traumatized youth. The trauma certification received by many employees at LCS has come from the National Institute for Trauma and Loss in Children (NITLC).

Certification can be purchased from the NITLC Web site, where they describe their mission as "creating positive experiences that all children and families and communities flourish." They specialize in residential community-based educational and professional training programs that build on the strength of the children, adults, and families and communities around the world (Starr.org, 2019).

Most of the students at LCS face frequent traumatic events in their lives, such as parental substance abuse, homelessness, food insecurity, and overall threats to their daily health and safety. Various sensory-based interventions, as part of the TIC approach, are included in the curricular offerings. These include cooking, yoga, art therapy, and horticulture. Students have the opportunity to engage in these activities throughout the school day under the guidance of the teachers, the counselor, and the intervention specialists. A typical school day consists of six bells, each one hour long.

Urban Agriculture

One of the classes that is taught at LCS is Urban Agriculture. The students spend some time in the garden, weather permitting, and other class time is devoted to the care of the chickens and learning about gardening. Other class periods are typical academic classes of core subjects (Trauth, 2017).

The Urban Agriculture class is an example of the multisensory approach that has proven to be effective for at-risk students. The students at LCS have developed an urban garden on the school grounds. STEM skills are part of the curriculum, but the students are also learning practical, nonacademic skills, such as community engagement, work ethic, responsibility, and care for other living beings.

After taking care of their own personal needs, the students also learn to care for others and develop an appreciation for the value of life (Skovolt, 2001). The work that is necessary to maintain this horticulture program requires the students to use skills far beyond what is mastered in the academic portion of their school day. The students are involved in hands-on, real-world learning where they are given the opportunity to incorporate what they have learned in the classroom and apply it practically.

Gardens

The garden began in 2008–2009 with two raised garden boxes and a chicken coop constructed by the students with adult supervision. A shed, tables, and benches have been added, and the garden has greatly expanded. Hydroponics has also become part of the gardening experience. "In a hydroponic system, a plant is placed in a solution composed of soluble nutrients and water as opposed to soil" (Palande, Zaheer, & George, 2018, p. 482). The addition of chickens and their egg production has been a major highlight for the program and a tremendous therapeutic asset.

The students provide great care and attention to these animals. One troubled young man came to school every day to spend time in the coop with the goal of having the chickens jump on him and sit on his lap so that he could "talk" to them. The care of these animals requires intense participation by the students.

The students also learn how to recycle the garden refuse into feed for the animals, use the manure as fertilizer for the garden, and manage pest control. The students are given the opportunity to create chicken tractors to use in the gardens while producing them for sale to the general public. Taking care of the chickens requires year-round attention.

After establishing the garden on school property, there has been expansion to other vacant land around the school grounds. Community members have also come to the school to learn about gardening skills for their own personal gardens. The crops at the school typically include tomatoes, peppers, eggplants, collard greens, herbs, and so on.

In an attempt to make the school garden self-sufficient, waste from the school and neighbors is collected and placed into a compost bin. Rain barrels that were donated by Coca-Cola serve as one of the main water sources for the garden. Also, volunteers from General Electric help the students by serving as mentors and friends.

The garden provides year-round experiences from bed preparation and crop planting to sowing starter seeds, weeding, watering, and fertilizing during the growing season. Harvesting the crops and preparing the soil for rest during the winter complete the farming cycle. But more importantly, this urban agriculture endeavor teaches cross-curricular academic skills in every subject while also providing therapy and skills for job preparation.

The "soft skills" students learn include persistence, attendance, initiative, being on time, coming early/staying late, working independently, planning, organizing thoughts, completing tasks, asking questions, problem solving, maintaining eye contact, and customer care. Since most of the students do not have role models at home, they are learning these skills at school.

Incentive charts are used, and students receive gold or silver coins depending on the task(s) completed. For example, students receive one silver coin for cleaning

up materials to five silver coins for weeding in or around a bed to one gold coin for moving mulch or five gold coins for cleaning the chicken coop. This incentive system seems to motivate the students and get them more involved in tasks related to gardening (Trauth, 2017).

The students prepare and sell their produce, ranging from 1,000 to 1,500 pounds, at local markets. They donate some of their food to community residents and keep some for their personal consumption. The students also use some of their produce to learn new cooking techniques and follow recipes so as to cook and eat more nutritious food, follow a more balanced diet, and create a healthier lifestyle (Trauth, 2017).

Garden Support

The gardens are supported from a variety of sources. School funds are allocated as part of the mathematics/science curriculum. Grants from nonprofit organizations, ranging between $2,000 to $7,000, have provided monies to purchase soil and other materials. Donations from companies and agencies, such as Home Depot, local nurseries, and the Madisonville Neighborhood Council, further support the growth and development of the gardens. A small revenue stream has also been created from the sale of the produce, chickens, soil, and so on, at various locales around the city.

This gardening program has created a strong bond between the community and the school. For example, in cooperation with the community council, the school received $1,000 to build benches for the bus stops around the town. These were constructed by the students and installed one Saturday by volunteers and students. Additionally, community youth who are not attending the LCS have also become involved in the gardening effort, especially in the summer months. Sometimes they receive a gift card or a small payment for their involvement.

Recommendation

LCS has future plans that include the construction of a fence around the property, acquiring some adjacent land, and constructing a greenhouse on a nearby lot. The school's therapists also see increased opportunities for student interactions as the program grows.

It is important that at-risk youths are given more attention to help them survive effectively and decrease the pattern of school dropouts. It is equally important that our society be educated about the benefits of TIC and urban agriculture. Also, there is a need for more research to be conducted in this area. For example, future studies should explore the impact on at-risk youth and the effects of using different gardening techniques over a longer period of time. Additional future research might consider studying various forms of trauma to better understand at-risk youth.

Conclusion

This urban agriculture program has become a vital component of the sensory-based therapeutic interventions used with these traumatized youths. The students, throughout this program, have seemed to enjoy participating in gardening, but more importantly, they seem to be responding through more open dialogue about their life experiences. There is an understanding that no A grades will be given just for hard work but rather that hard work will lead to achieving As. This philosophy is changing the mind-sets of the students as they approach their education in an entirely new way.

The LCS represents an example of the impact of TIC on the lives of at-risk youths. Sensory-based programs such as the urban agriculture experience are proving to have a successful impact on traumatized students by giving them alternative opportunities for self-expression and development of coping skills within a real-world context.

At-risk students come to school with a myriad of problems that necessitate adoption of alternative strategies for teaching. While the problem of at-risk students exists in many schools, it is acute in urban schools, where a significant number of students come from homes with serious issues that cause trauma in their lives.

Schools must be creative and willing to change their instructional focus from the typical teaching of academic subjects to a multipronged approach that addresses the emotional needs of trauma-affected students. TIC provides a multisensory and experiential learning approach for addressing emotional and social needs of such students while providing academic education in a more sensory-based environment.

LCS incorporates alternative experiences for trauma-affected students that have strong components of horticulture and hands-on learning as well as arts, yoga, and many other alternative experiences. Students are assisted in raising crops of common vegetables in the school's garden, involving all steps from planning to harvesting and selling their produce at the local market. In addition, the students raise chickens on the premises and sell eggs while using the refuse to fortify their gardens. Many of these activities require year-around involvement, including over the summer months.

This provides a successful path for trauma-affected students to not only gain self-esteem but also to become motivated to learn academic subject matter. Most students in this school graduate with successful completion of their high school education. The outreach of LCS has also created an integral bond with the local community council, resulting in reciprocal benefits across the school and city.

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