

# Solutions in Schools

**Edited by  
Yasmin Ajmal and Ioan Rees**

BT Press

First published March 2001  
Reprinted with corrections May 2004  
Published by BT Press  
618b Finchley Road, London NW11 7RR

© the individual authors 2001

Layout by Alex Gollner

No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the permission of the copyright owner.

ISBN 1 871697 74 3

# CONTENTS

Acknowledgements	5
Foreword <i>by Michael Durrant</i>	6
1. Introducing Solution-Focused Thinking <i>by Yasmin Ajmal</i>	10
2. How to Build Solutions at Meetings <i>by Michael Harker</i>	30
3. From the Impossible to the Solution <i>by Gillian Strachan</i>	45
4. Brief Therapy Approaches with Groups and Families in an Education Support Service <i>by Madan Mall and Bernadette Stringer</i>	60
5. Empowering Students to Empower Others <i>by the ABC Peer Support Scheme at Acland Burghley School, Vavi Hillel and Eliza Smith, Co-ordinators</i>	74
6. Solution Focused Anti-bullying <i>by Sue Young</i>	86
7. Progress Against All Odds <i>by Bryony Howe</i>	97
8. Creative Solutions to Emotional & Behavioural Difficulties in Schools: Working Together for Change <i>by Suzanne Loggie &amp; Jean Day</i>	110

9. Wrapping New Narratives in Golden Paper: Solution-Focused Work with Pupils, Teachers and Parents in Mainstream Primary Schools <i>by Catherine McGlone</i>	122
10. ‘A Thoughtful Process’ <i>by Margaret Kay</i>	135
11. Consultation: a Solution-focused Approach <i>by Patsy Wagner and Elizabeth Gillies</i>	147
12. Developing Secondary Solutions: Educational Psychologists & Schools Working Together <i>by Hugo Stearn &amp; Sean Moore</i>	163
13. ‘Bridges to Babylon’ <i>by Annie O’Leary</i>	174
14. Discovering the Expert <i>by Maggie Stephenson and Hardeesh Johal-Smith</i>	188
15. Solution World <i>by Ioan G. Rees</i>	202
Epilogue	213
Contact Details	214
Where to go next...	216
References	220

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Watching Steve de Shazer presenting a conference several years ago, we wondered what it must be like to have been a part of a team that has developed a way of working that has had such a profound effect on the world and lives of so many people. No writing about solution-focused therapy and thinking would be complete without acknowledging the pioneering work and continued innovation of Steve and his team at the Brief Therapy Centre in Milwaukee.

Our thanks also to Evan George, Chris Iveson and Harvey Ratner, at the Brief Therapy Practice in London, whose interest in providing a context for these ideas in Great Britain gave us all the opportunity to learn. Their continued interest in Education and the desire to promote projects and ideas has been invaluable. True to form, their comments and the time they have given to this book have been characteristically ‘spot on’. Mariama’s ‘behind the scenes’ technological advice and support has also been greatly appreciated.

As for the authors themselves, we are sure none of them will have anticipated the amount of work involved in taking up the invitation to expand into a book what started out as a workshop presentation at a conference. The fact that they have succeeded is a testament to their commitment and belief – and also to the optimism of the people they work with and the work they are doing.

Finally, our gratitude to Tehmeena (Yasmin’s sister) whose knowledge of grammar, ideas about structure and clarity of thought has greatly contributed to the readability of this book.

On a more personal, note Ioan would like to thank his family for their unwavering support in all his solution-focused adventures and John Murphy for inspiring him to stay focused on respect for the child above all else.

Yasmin would like to thank her family and all the people she has met in the course of her work whose ideas, questions, patience and courage has kept her interest alive.

We wish to thank Michael Durrant for his support during the writing of this book and for making an invaluable contribution. His work is an inspiration for all who work in Solution-Focused Brief Therapy around the world.

# FOREWORD

BY MICHAEL DURRANT

Some years ago, I met with a group of educational psychologists in the United States. Despite the stated focus of our seminar as being on Solution-Focused Brief Therapy, the *real* talk of the meeting – the discussions that went on at lunchtime and during the breaks – were all about diagnosis. In particular, there was much discussion and debate about the finer points of differentiating whether a child showed signs of ‘ADD’ or of ‘PDD’. I was intrigued by the extent and vigour of this discussion, particularly since the very fact that these psychologists were attending a seminar on Solution-Focused Brief Therapy suggested that they may not so readily embrace traditional diagnostic concepts. After some time, I asked about the significance of the debate and was told that distinguishing between ADD and PDD was particularly important since, in this district, additional support and funding was available for students with one disorder but not for those with the other!

This experience reminded me of one of the powerful aspects of the school context for welfare and therapy professionals. In schools, our client population is defined very much by particular problems and deficits. Problems are writ large, since problems are the things that set certain students apart from the otherwise undifferentiated mass of the school population. Problems may bring notoriety, problems may bring increased status among peers, problems may bring special attention from a support teacher or problems may bring individual sessions with a psychologist. Most teachers can readily tell you who the ‘problem kids’ are.

Referral for special assistance is often couched in terms that suggest a disorder, condition or illness. That is, students who, for whatever reason, stand out from the rest are given some kind of psychological label. However, in the minds of many teachers, these students are not ‘disordered’ or ‘disturbed’; they are disorderly and disturbing. The boundary between ‘therapy’ and ‘discipline’ is not always clear and the counsellor or psychologist struggles not to be seen just as yet another part of ‘the system’ that is seeking to deliver peace

and conformity.

Cade (1995) suggests that school systems, understandably, easily become caught in ‘more of the same’ escalating cycles when dealing with difficult or challenging students. Recognising that it is the way in which problems, and the students presenting them, are perceived that determines how they will be tackled, he suggests that the school easily falls prey to a self-fulfilling pattern, leading to the point at which ‘teachers cease to see the pupil and see only his or her “reputation” (or diagnosis or label).’ It becomes a screen that stands between them and the pupil such that teachers tend to notice and react mainly to those behaviours and attitudes that confirm that ‘reputation’ (Cade, 1995).

We all know that once we are ‘looking’ for a particular problem or pathology we tend to find it. Rosenthal (Rosenthal & Jacobsen, 1968) showed that teachers’ preconceived ideas about students’ IQs actually affected the students’ performances. When teachers thought of students as being bright, the students tended to perform in ways that supported this. Thus, this view suggests that the behaviour and academic performance of students is connected with the beliefs of teachers and other adults with whom they interact.

Harry Korman, a Swedish psychiatrist, commented about the effect of what we think on what we see. In the midst of a debate about the usefulness of labels such as ‘borderline personality disorder’, he suggested that ‘borderline’ actually means someone who is on the border of being completely well and/or a really nice person. He went on to comment that when he began to look out for examples of that kind of ‘borderline’ behaviour, that is exactly what he began to notice (Korman, 1998).

Against that background, four things strike me about this present book. The book is a collection of examples of professional practice that is radical, is elegant, is dynamic and reflects the influence of a particular group of people.

First, the chapters in this book represent professional practice that is radical. I’m sure that the chapter authors, writing about their own work with students, families and schools, did not consider themselves to be radicals. However, set against the prevailing climate that is problem-determined, these examples of therapeutic work within the education sphere are radical indeed. Take, for example, a seemingly innocuous aspect of the work described by Gillian Strachan. Faced with a student who was chronically refusing to attend school, she introduced a programme that included school work being sent home to the student, since keeping up with the work was important to her. Gillian comments that, previously, she might not have considered this an appropriate or helpful step. One can understand the view that sending work home was contributing to the problem. The girl wants to continue with her work but sending work home is simply reinforcing her school refusal! Instead,

her desire to do her work should be used as leverage to cajole her back to school.

Standard professional practice offers a multitude of reasons why sending work home to a student who refuses to attend is colluding with the problem. However, the psychologist in this case was concerned to discover *what the student wanted* and then to find a way to co-operate with that and harness that in the construction of a solution. Such a stance is truly radical; *radical co-operation*, perhaps or, as Steve de Shazer, one of the founders of the solution-focused approach described the stance, 'radical acceptance' (de Shazer, 1999).

Second, the practice reflected in this book is elegant. The practitioners whose work makes up this volume are pragmatic. In my initial example about diagnosis, the psychologists were concerned first with what would achieve appropriate funding and support for their students. Similarly, the examples in this book are concerned with how to achieve the best possible outcome for all concerned. Many of the examples are elegant but their elegance is not necessarily in the 'purity' of the therapeutic approach. Rather, the elegance of these stories is in the way that the practical and often competing demands of the different parts of the education system are worked with and respected, always with the pragmatic goal of helping things change.

Third, the approach described in this book is dynamic. This is not polished presentations of work that is over. These are not stories in which the authors can sit back, put their feet up and reflect that 'it is finished'. Rather, this book reflects 'work in progress'. These people and their work are learning and growing and changing and evolving. That's another thing that makes these accounts so *real*.

Fourth, the work described in this book reflects the significant and pervasive influence of a particular group of people. Many times throughout the book, writers refer to having been introduced to Solution-Focused Brief Therapy through training conducted by the Brief Therapy Practice in London. Chris Iveson, Harvey Ratner and Evan George (with Diana Iveson and Jane Lethem) caught the Solution-Focused Brief Therapy bug and established a centre of excellence for training and practice in London. As their training activities began to extend more and more widely throughout Britain, one of the areas on which they focused was that of schools and educational issues. They offered a practical and helpful framework for people working within the educational arena that moved completely away from a focus on problems and assessment to a focus on solution and co-operation. Educational psychologists, teachers, social workers and others found this useful. One of the most intelligent things that 'briefthree' (as Chris, Harvey and Evan were sometimes known) ever did was to invite Yasmin Ajmal (one of the authors of this

volume) to join the practice. The addition of an educational psychologist who knew what it was like to use Solution-Focused Brief Therapy within the day-to-day reality of the school setting was a significant step forward. Thus, this volume is testimony not only to the visionary work of the various authors but also to the pivotal contribution of the Brief Therapy Practice to the expansion of Solution-Focused Brief Therapy in real life settings in Britain.

In one of many striking and poignant moments in the stories presented in this book, a young client talks about her experience of therapy and says, 'I liked being listened to in that way.' The stories in this book demonstrate a variety of techniques and a variety of applications of Solution-Focused Brief Therapy within the school setting. Most importantly, they demonstrate what can happen when we are able to put aside our diagnostic frameworks, our normative views of behaviour and our expert opinions about what should work. They show what can happen when we begin to *listen differently* to the people with whom we work.

Michael Durrant

Director, Brief Therapy Institute of Sydney, Sydney Australia

Author of *Creative Strategies for School Problems: Solutions for Psychologists and teachers* (W.W. Norton, 1995).

## CHAPTER ONE

# INTRODUCING SOLUTION-FOCUSED THINKING

BY YASMIN AJMAL

‘I like this life better than my other one.’ (Thomas, aged 14).

**S**olution-Focused Brief Therapy (SFBT) is a means of helping people find ways to create the life that they want. Over the past twenty years the work of Steve de Shazer and his team at the Brief Family Centre in Milwaukee have offered this innovative approach in the field of therapy. Their interest in looking at what works and what motivates people has led to a creative and respectful practice to help people move forward in difficult situations. The interest in solutions rather than problems, the future rather than the past and people’s resources rather than deficits, provides a structure which is encouraging, effective and economical of time and resources.

Over the past ten years these ideas have been taken up by professionals in education and developed in a creative and inspiring way. Ideas first encompassed in a therapeutic setting have been developed into a way of thinking that can fit well into any situation. From working with individuals and groups to whole systems and anti-bullying campaigns, SFBT offers a means of developing constructive and co-operative dialogues with young people and all those who work with them in the school setting.

*Solutions in Schools* is a book for those who use or wish to use SFBT thinking and skills within schools. Those who have contributed are all employed in the field of education and have been interested in relating solution-focused

thinking to their work. The chapters in this book are ‘richly’ different, yet also alike. What we have is an exciting range of accounts representing their thinking-in-progress. None of the authors would claim to have the definitive answers; what they all share is a desire to find a way through, in even the most discouraging of situations. Within a context of tightening resources and time constraints they describe a pragmatic, time-sensitive and cost-effective approach to the discovery of solutions and new possibilities during difficult times. Most importantly they demonstrate how this popular approach is able to offer the hope of change with its respectful, future-oriented and goal-focused emphasis.

## Overview of underpinning philosophy

### **Looking at problems or looking for solutions: what forms the basis for solution-focused thinking?**

I remember speaking to a harassed head teacher who had spent a whole morning trying to get to the bottom of an incident between two boys: why had they fought, what had led up to the incident, who had said what and so on. He was frustrated and tired – not just because he hadn’t got anywhere but also because he hadn’t been able to do all the other things demanding his time. I asked him how he would know that things were improving between the two boys and we then discussed how he could use this to move things forward with them. When I talked to him again he told me that focusing on what would be happening once the problem was resolved, rather than on the problem itself, had created clear pointers for changing behaviour and had moved things on much more quickly. More importantly he felt much more refreshed after discussions with students about incidents – saving his own energy to deal with other things.

Solution-focused thinking is a way of looking at the world, at situations and at people that is associated with change and with hope. Our behaviour is affected by what we believe and our beliefs are affected by our experiences. Thus the basis for change can be located in a difference in how people come to view their situation (‘new viewing’) or through it do something differently (‘new doing’).

Thus the questions aim to orientate people towards a future where the presenting difficulties are resolved. For example:

‘How will you know things have improved in this situation?’

‘What are the minimum signs of progress you will need to see in order to tell things are moving on?’

The past is explored as a source of possible successes which can be built on. Thus small behaviours and ideas can be highlighted and developed to become the basis for significant change. For example:

‘What have you done since our last meeting which has been good for you?’

‘When was the last time that you could have lost your temper and didn’t?’

‘In the past when you have felt things slipping out of your control, what have you done that has helped?’

There is no view of pathology. A certain behaviour or difficulty is viewed as something the person we are working with needs to change and not as a symptom of anything else. This frees up the thinking of the worker to be alert to the possibilities and potential for change. As soon as we start categorising someone what we listen out for and our view of what we hear can be quickly reduced to the options contained within the label.

The process of solution-focused thinking is guided by the following pragmatic assumptions.

1. Students, parents and teachers have capacities to resolve difficulties.
2. Big problems do not need big solutions (Murphy 2000).
3. We need to catch hold of what is already working.
4. It’s important to know where you are heading.
5. Carry on doing what works. If it isn’t working, do something different.
6. A problem is simply something a person wishes to do without.

### **The task of the worker**

The task of the worker is to highlight in conversation what appear to be solution thoughts and behaviours and thus guide the conversation towards a way of thinking and doing that may make a difference. The stance is one of curiosity to ensure that any ideas which emerge are firmly rooted in the thinking and experience of the person or people we are working with. By focusing on small details the attempt is to build up layers of complexity of description in small stages. At the core of any work is the co-operation and relationship between those involved. Thus importance is placed on the feedback we receive (non-verbally, e.g. smiles and shrugs as well as what is said) to help us assess whether the track we are on is a useful one. If a particular question is not answered the worker assumes the responsibility for asking it differently or asking it again. The assumption is that they will be able to answer the question when we ask it in the right way and when it is about something that has meaning to them.

The next section of this chapter seeks to explore these ideas in practice. The first part examines ways of orientating thinking and conversations towards resources and co-operation under the following headings:

- Creating a context of competence.
- What we listen out for and how we listen.
- Activating existing knowledge and skills.
- Seeking out co-operation.
- Retaining a non-judgemental stance.
- Building collaboration – finding out what someone wants as the basis for a discussion.

The second part looks at some of the useful techniques for building solutions. It includes:

- *A future when the problem is resolved.* Looking at questions which open up and develop a description of what a future would look like if there was no longer a problem.
- *Sometimes the preferred future is already happening a little.* Finding out about the exception times when things may already be a little better in relation to the difficulty.
- *How far have we come and how will we know we are moving on?* Using rating scales to look at where people are now and what the next steps would look like.
- *Rounding it all off.* Some ideas about what to include at the end of a discussion.

## **Orientating thinking and conversations towards resources and co-operation**

### **Creating a context of competence**

I can remember sitting on a bus during my first year of teaching after a day at school and sobbing. The last 10 minutes of the day – ‘tidying up’ had been a disaster. I sat and replayed it over and over in my mind. By the time I got home I had a list of defects which would have covered most of the south of England and had convinced myself that teaching was beyond me. I ignored the rest of the day which had gone well and instead reduced my confidence to an all time low.

It is important to relate to the people with whom we are working as being resourceful and capable. It is all too easy, amidst overwhelming difficulties, for us to lose sight of our own and others’ capabilities and resources. However, at

the heart of change is a person's knowledge and belief of their own self efficacy. Therefore questions seek to highlight people's abilities to solve their own problems. For example:

'Tell me about a change you have made' (the message here is 'you are a person who makes changes').

'What did stopping yourself yesterday from hitting out when you were angry tell you about yourself?'

'What sorts of things do you need to be able to do to be a sea cadet?' – 'and which of these can you already do?'

This interest in a person can be established right at the beginning of a discussion. A few minutes getting to know a little about somebody – what they enjoy, hobbies, areas of their lives that are going well – can begin the search for strengths and the development of a perspective where people are seen (by themselves and the workers) as skilled problem-solvers and active contributors to their lives in positive ways. Sometimes it can be useful to use the perspective of others to build up this description, for example asking a parent, 'What is it that James does which you like?' or a student, 'What might your teachers say about you that you have not mentioned?' One student who was in trouble with most teachers liked his history teacher. What he liked about the teacher was his fairness, humour and the fact that he was interested in the students' views rather than just telling them what they should think. When this was developed to think about what the teacher might say about him as a student a whole list of strengths emerged including the fact that he showed an interest, that he was able to state his views clearly, that he was helpful, and that he worked well with other students.

These ideas can be used equally well with groups or with a class. For example, during work with a group of boys in a secondary school brought together because of concerns about their behaviour, the following questions were used as a starting point: 'What do you like?' and 'Tell us about a difficult situation which you think you handled well, which you handled in a way that made you feel good about yourselves'. Similarly, a Spanish teacher related a time when she had wanted to talk to a class about their behaviour during her lessons. She began by being interested in things they enjoyed doing and their favourite lessons in school. The initial reaction from the students was thinly disguised surprise. However she persisted and later described the conversation as the best she had ever had with the class. She was astonished by the group's openness and co-operation. The teacher also commented that she found herself viewing the students more positively.

Listening out for strengths and helping someone to build a helpful description of themselves can be a powerful starting point for change. It starts

the search from a different place and can rekindle belief that change can occur. Even in very difficult circumstances we can help people get in touch with their strengths by asking them how they are coping, how are they managing to get by, how come they haven't given up even when they have wanted to and when they cannot see anything ever being different. For example asking a student with multiple exclusions how s/he managed to hang in and not be permanently excluded gets right to the heart of the matter whilst at the same time focusing on the strengths and resources of the students.

### **What we listen for and how we listen**

The solution-focused approach emphasises the development of a dialogue in which the worker builds on what has been said. The skill is to listen out for anything that might be helpful and to persist, gently, in the belief that the person does bring something positive to their situation.

I was asked to talk with an experienced teacher who had been asked to cover a class for a term. She had previously taught the class for few periods and had found it very difficult.

YA: You say you have been teaching for a long time – what sorts of things have you been doing?

Teacher: Well, I have been working in schools for nearly 20 years.

YA: Gosh, that's a lot of sticking power.

Teacher: I'm basically a class teacher but I've also been a maths post-holder, a language post-holder and worked with children with special needs. Oh yes, and in my last school I covered a deputy post for about 6 months.

YA: So it would seem you have an extensive overview of what goes on in a school. What do you enjoy about teaching?

Teacher: Hmm – sometimes just leaving at the end of the day.

YA: I'm sure. What else?

Teacher: Well I love seeing children settled and learning. Knowing actually that I can teach and I like seeing kids get to know how to do something.

YA: What do you think the children who you have taught would say they liked about what you do?

Teacher: I think some might say they like my enthusiasm and humour and um ... making things exciting. I like to keep a good pace going. That's what bothers me about this class – we keep having to stop and so the creative pace is lost.

YA: Uh-huh. What else might children say they like about you as a teacher?

Teacher: Well I'm very fair and even when I have a go at them I make a point of talking to them about it and will say when I was wrong.

YA: So it seems that you make it very clear to the children through your own behaviour what is right and what is important to you.

Teacher: Yes – well I guess so.

YA: What about this class – what would they say they value about you in the short space of time they have known you?

Teacher: Probably not much.

YA: If you had to guess?

Teacher: Well some might say we do interesting work.

YA: Anything else?

Teacher: That I listen to them.

YA: Uh-huh.

Teacher: And that I try not to punish them all; rather just the people who deserve it.

YA: And what would you say that the class do that you like?

Teacher: God that's a hard one! ... They have some good ideas about things – but there's not enough space for them to get it out.

YA: So they've managed to hang to their creativity even though it hasn't been given a lot of space?

Teacher: I suppose so – I hadn't thought of it like that. There are some children in there who want to learn.

YA: What have you noticed that tells you this?

Teacher: Well they listen and sometimes they have brought in things to show me about what we have been talking about – and that's nice because you think well at least someone was interested.

When the teacher and I first started talking, the worries and difficulties were uppermost in her mind. During the discussion the intention was to acknowledge these and also to find out about other aspects of the situation which might be helpful. There were several times when the teacher's initial response showed that she found the question difficult. Often when people are asked to think about something in a different way they do not immediately know what they want to say. This does not mean they do not have anything to say. At these times the intention was to give her a bit more time by repeating the question or using a prompt such as 'if you had to guess?' The information about the class and her own teaching strengths were also true of her experiences and offered more scope for thinking about the current dilemma.

### **Activating existing knowledge and skills**

Setting up a dialogue which values what a person can do, can be the first step towards helping to activate existing knowledge and creating a context for people to do what they already know how to do.

I was asked to talk with Andrew, a year 11 pupil, who had been diagnosed as having dyspraxia. He was described as someone who couldn't organise himself and with his GCSE exams coming up this was a source of concern for his parents and teachers. When he walked into the room my eyes alighted on the Gunners badge on his football shirt and I asked him about this. He was a keen Arsenal supporter and liked to go to the home games. However, because they are such a popular team, he told me you had to send off for tickets in advance. I asked him how he did this. He told me that he had a yearly planner on his wall and when the fixtures came in at the beginning of the season he would note down when all the home fixtures were to be played. He then went through and put a note two weeks before that to remind him to send off for tickets. After establishing that I was in fact talking with the right pupil(!), I asked him more about how he managed to make this system work. It was a very useful introduction to a more general discussion about organisation which now began from a position of competence and knowledge.

### **Seeking out co-operation**

Finding out about someone, offering the opportunity to show a different side of themselves can also be an important first step in the development of a co-operative relationship. I heard an example from a head of year who was in her office when a student noisily entered. He had been sent out of class to be 'dealt with'. The head of year began by asking him if he could help her organise her desk as the paperwork had got out of hand and was danger of taking over the whole office. The pupil obliged and after a few minutes she thanked him for his help and then asked how she in turn could help him. This question within the framework of mutual helpfulness gave a very different starting point from the one which had existed five minutes previously.

### **Retaining a non-judgemental stance**

In schools there are occasions when you have to deal directly with the problem in line with school policy. Alongside this is the opportunity to work with the student to develop solutions for the future. A powerful way to develop co-operation is to acknowledge people's feelings and views of a situation in a way that is not judgmental. This is not always easy to do – we might indeed have very strong views from our own perspective about what is right and wrong, acceptable or unacceptable. Nevertheless, if we want someone to engage in a constructive discussion where they feel encouraged to speak openly, it is helpful to be neutral about what is being said. If people feel you are judging them they might either clam up or spend time defending their position. When, following a discussion, we ask people what they have found helpful, they often comment with surprise at how open they have been – commonly attributing

this to the feeling that they have not in any way been judged.

People are sometimes worried that they could be seen as condoning bad behaviour or situations. Being non-judgemental is not the same as condoning. One way to be clear about this is through the language used, not by presuming an understanding of what has been said, but rather by consistently checking it out.

For example:

‘So have I got it straight ... you don’t feel that there is anything wrong from your point of view. That other people are on your back and you are fed up with this’.

‘Let’s see if I’ve got this right ... it seems what you are saying is that you feel pretty hopeless at the moment and can’t see it ever being different’.

Also by emphasising the source of the viewpoint: ‘So from your point of view the teachers are just picking on you’, ‘So what is important to you is to stick up for yourself’, ‘So what you think is that he deserved what he got’.

### **Building co-operation: finding out what someone wants as the basis for a discussion**

‘If you don’t know where you are going chances are you will end up somewhere else’ (Steve de Shazer).

Finding a clear goal helps to define areas to work on and ensures people are clear when they get there. Research (Murphy 2000) has shown that work is more effective when it addresses what the people we are working with see as important. Thus the focus for the work is best achieved through collaboration between all those involved. Consider the following example. I was asked to work with Lucy, a year 9 pupil, because she was being asked to leave a number of lessons on a regular basis. She was loud and confrontational with teachers and refused to apologise. The school wanted Lucy to stop arguing with teachers and to be polite and respectful, to settle to her work in class and to talk to teachers if there was a problem.

When I met Lucy she was full of indignation at how she was being treated and felt strongly that she needed to stick up for herself when people were being unfair. I wasn’t sure this was the best time to introduce the school’s goals! Instead I asked her what ideas she had about what she wanted to do when she left school. She was very clear. She wanted to be a beautician and had already identified the qualifications she needed to attend the college of her choice. I was curious about what she was doing at the moment that was helpful to her in achieving this, and what else would need to happen to ensure

she was able to continue on her chosen path. Amongst other things she talked about staying in class. Acknowledging that this was not always easy, various strategies were discussed – including how she could stick up for herself in a way that was good for her. The head of year grabbed me the following week and asked what I had done to Lucy. He described the change as so phenomenal that it could not be ignored by anyone. What I had done was to listen to Lucy's views, identify what was important to her, and work within her own frame of reference.

The following questions may be useful to start the search for the direction in which someone is interested in going:

‘What are your best hopes for this discussion?’

‘What would make this discussion worthwhile?’

‘Imagine you are walking away from this discussion and are thinking, ‘I’m glad I came’. What is it we would be talking about that would have made you think this?’

‘What would need to change as a result of us talking that will tell you this has been worthwhile?’

The stance is one of curiosity, and the assumption that people attend/participate in a discussion for a reason. This reason may be that they want to avoid something such as permanent exclusion, court, or being grounded, and as such this may be their motivation for engaging in a discussion. The following extract illustrates this:

Rachael came into the room with her mother and sat with her body turned away. Her head was bent downwards and her face was hidden by her hair.

Worker: What would make this discussion worthwhile from your point of view?

Rachael: I don't speak to anyone.

Worker: Is that something you would like to change?

Rachael: No, I can sort my own problems out.

Worker: So how come you're here?

Rachael: My mother made me.

Worker: So how come you decided you would do what your mother asked you to this time?

Rachael: I just want people to get off my back.

Worker: And if coming here helped with that would that make it worthwhile?

Rachael: Yes.

When working with students we continually search to locate the co-operative part of someone's behaviour as the starting point. The assumption is that

people usually have a reason for doing things. In the above example the fact that Rachael had attended the meeting suggested there was something she wanted or didn't want.

### **Summary**

In this first section the following assumptions and idea have been explored:

- People are more than just a problem.
- People have the skills, resources and qualities they will need to resolve their difficulties.
- These strengths are an important basis for change and as workers we need to help people remember, discover and find out about them as soon as possible.
- Everybody has their own unique way of co-operating – we need to find this out.
- The basis for any piece of work is to find out what people want. What is their motivation for attending a meeting?
- Our role as workers is to adopt a stance of curiosity about beliefs, views and behaviour, and to create a way of talking that is more likely to lead to change.

## **Building solutions – useful techniques**

### **A future when the problem is resolved**

Future orientated questions are a creative way to look for goals for change. The worker is interested in helping the person they are working with clarify the future they hope to have if the problem is resolved. Rather than becoming bogged down in the details of what **is** 'wrong' the focus is instead on what will be 'right'. The picture promotes a positive expectancy of change and rekindles hope that things can be different. Talking with a mother who felt depressed and hopeless, I asked her if she would find it helpful to think about how she would like things to be. She replied 'Oh yes, it would be lovely to think about my life being good. I think I need that right now to get me through this'.

There are a number of questions that can be used to provide a useful context in which people can think about how they would like things to be. One of the questions most commonly referred to in this book is the 'Miracle Question' (de Shazer, 1988):

'Suppose that tonight while you were asleep, there was a miracle and this problem was solved. The miracle occurs while you are

sleeping so you do not immediately know that it has happened. When you wake up, what is the first thing you will notice that will let you know that there has been a miracle?’

Other frameworks include:

‘If tomorrow turned out to be a good day for you, how will you know your day was going well?’

‘How will you know you have done yourself justice despite the difficulties?’

‘How will you know we don’t need to meet any more?’

When people are asked to think in a future framework it frees their thinking from the limitations of what is not right: the doubts, the difficulties, the reasons not even to try. The clearer the description of a ‘do-able’ future, the easier it is to work out ways of getting there. The more details there are, the more possibilities for change are opened up, the more clues there are about what will be helpful.

For example, one girl who felt isolated and worried about what she said, what she looked like and how others viewed her, talked about joining in with the other pupils in her class more and not always being on the sidelines. Examples of this included walking to school with two friends in the morning and joining in their chatter about what they would do after school rather than only thinking about her studies. By accepting some of the offers she received to go out, she also felt she would have something to add when they examined what had happened the night before under the microscope.

To help build a rich description (Michael White) workers ask about the fine details of what people do, thus locating the future description firmly in the context of their lives at home, e.g. ‘When you wake up tomorrow, what time will that be, what is the first thing that will tell you that the miracle has happened, that things are different?’ Or at school: ‘What is your first lesson, what will be different when you enter the classroom that will tell you that things are different?’

Widening the description to incorporate other people’s perceptions can also be useful. For example, ‘What will your mum notice about you first thing in the morning that will let her know that things were different?’ Or ‘Who will be the first to notice in school? What will they notice?’ Or ‘What will tell your friends that the miracle has happened?’

By drawing in significant people to develop the description, further details emerge. It also places the person in a context of interaction. Thus the question, ‘And how will you know they have noticed things were different?’ encourages the person to further consider their actions from other perspectives.

For example when I asked Gillian (a year 9 student) how her teacher would know that the miracle had happened, she responded that if she had all her equipment with her, her form tutor would probably comment on the effort she was making. I checked whether this was something Gillian would like. She thought she would, and as a result she would probably feel less picked on first thing in the morning. This might make her feel better about settling to her work.

Sometimes people will tell us that they will feel differently: 'I will feel happy'. To draw out more concrete details the worker will be curious about the differences in behaviour that would accompany this. For example, 'If you are feeling happier, what sorts of things will you find yourself doing?' or 'What will be different about the way you do things?'

The more a person can describe in detail what they would be doing if the problem was gone the more real the possibility becomes. So if the first part of a description focuses on something that will *not* be happening, e.g. 'I will not be starting on her as soon as I enter the room' we would find out about what would be happening *instead*, so that the description is something observable and tangible. For example, 'If you are not starting on her, what will you be doing instead?'

### **Catch hold of what is already working (Exceptions)**

No situation is 100% the same as another. There are times when it is better and there are times when it is worse. People often dismiss the better times as flukes or aberrations and yet it is precisely what was happening at those times that may hold the key to significant change.

As the future becomes more vivid so the past can be drawn in. The bits of the past we are interested in are those experiences which highlight capacities which are already there. Consider the following extract: Linda (a parent) arrived at a discussion in a distressed state. She felt she was failing her daughter as a parent by not providing the care she should. Linda wanted to show more concern when Donna was upset about something and not just dismiss her as being a 'drama queen.' I asked Linda if there were any times recently when she felt that she had reacted to Donna in a way that she liked. She replied 'This morning'. Linda already knew how to do what she wanted to do. When Linda thought about what had happened that morning she picked out three things she felt pleased with. First, she had shown sympathy about a sore elbow by kissing it ('Even though I wasn't sure it really hurt, Donna thought it did!'). Second, she had given her own views about a sling Donna had wanted to wear ('I think it is important to be open with Donna. It is important in our relationship'). Third, she had asked Donna what she wanted to do ('Normally I would just tell her'). Donna had gone away happily and Linda felt she had

supported her well. Linda commented afterwards that the discussion had made her think differently and she wrote down her stages for future reference.

Finding an exception can occur in different ways. Sometimes people reflect and comment spontaneously on what they are saying. 'I would feel so much better if he could come in and settle for the first few minutes on the mat. Mind you, he did this on Tuesday – I was really surprised.' We need to listen for and hear these clues which are often buried.

Sometimes the worker can introduce the context for thinking through a general enquiry, such as 'Which small bits of the miracle are already happening?'

Or it can be helpful to pick up a specific detail. For example a student who wants to improve his work might be asked, 'When recently have you felt more able to do the work you are set?'

The skill of the worker is to help someone think about what has already happened in a way that might be helpful in the future. Thinking about 'who, what, where, when, how' can encourage an examination of details which have been overlooked and yet are useful.

Sometimes people describe what has happened as being in the control of someone or something else. In these situations it can be useful to explore at least some small sign of something they did themselves to contribute to the change happening. What we are looking for is an action that can be repeated in the future. For example, 'My first day went OK but people are always nice on your first day' could be developed with 'That's what they did to help you settle in, and what did you do to help?' Or how they responded to the change. For example, 'He came in quietly – well he can if he has a mind to do it' could be explored with 'And when he was coming in quietly what did you then do?'

Where people report no positive changes, the worker can enquire how they have managed to cope and stop things getting from getting worse. Again the aim will be to draw out as much specific detail as possible and to remind people of their strengths and resources in the face of such difficulties.

### **How far have we already come and how will we know we are moving on?**

One of the most accessible and flexible tools are rating scales which are essentially conversational frameworks. A 0-to-10 scale provides the structure to develop a dialogue about how far someone has come, what would be good enough, what the next step would look like, how others would rate their progress, etc. A typical way of using the scale framework is as follows:

'Let's say that 10 is the best things could be and 0 is the complete opposite of this. Where between 0 and 10 would you say you

are today?’

‘What is it that puts you at a 3 and not a 0?’

‘Where on the scale would be good enough? And how will you know you have reached this point?’

How will you know you have reached 1 point up on the scale?

Who else will notice and what will they notice?’

In the above questions the intention is to reinforce bits of the miracle or exceptions that the person is already doing, and to identify the next steps. The smaller and more concrete these steps are, the more likely it is that the pupil, teacher or parent you are working with will experience success. And the motivation to take these next steps is related to how closely the ‘ten’ on the scale represents the goal of the person you are working with.

Any number of scales can be used to map progress in different aspects of situations: learning, behaviour, classroom management, coping with change. It is also common to talk with people about their confidence in maintaining or making the changes they have outlined. This again can be framed within a scale:

‘On a scale of 0 to 10, where 10 represents your total confidence that you will reach your good enough point/next step on the scale and 0 represents that you think there is not a hope, where between 0 and 10 would you say your confidence is at the moment? How come? What would increase your confidence to the next point on the scale?’

Scales seem to offer a structure that makes sense to pupils and enables them to express their ideas in a concrete and tangible form. In the same way the flexibility of movement up and down a scale can help to move away from the ‘fixed’ nature of difficulties and encourage a greater sense of control. I can remember sitting in the office of the Special Needs Co-ordinator (Senco) when we were interrupted by Darren and Tony. Tony stood moving from foot to foot while Darren introduced what they had been doing. A week previously Darren had used a scale with the Senco to think about his behaviour. On returning to class he had decided that Tony’s behaviour needed a bit of ‘sorting out’ and so had drawn out a scale for him to use. At this point Tony stepped forward: ‘Yeah, see, my behaviour is on a 6 today but I reckon I’m going to aim for an 8 tomorrow’.

### **Rounding it all off**

We end where we start. At the beginning of the chapter we looked at the importance of highlighting the strengths and resources of the people we are

working with. At the end of a discussion we would take time to emphasise their skills, qualities and determination, and anything else useful or helpful to them.

Any feedback need not take long but what is said and how it is said can increase the usefulness. Importance is given to the skills, qualities and determination which have been evident in the discussion. Any steps people have already taken will be emphasised and they are often asked to look out for further signs of change and progress:

‘Watch out for times when you are teased and hold back.’

‘Notice what you are doing that moves you up the scale.’

‘Notice times he is more settled in class.’

‘Pay attention to the times she answers you back and you keep your temper.’

### **Summary of words that are useful**

The language we use can have a powerful effect on the context being discussed.

‘How’ rather than ‘why’ focuses on helpful behaviours.

‘When’ rather than ‘if’ sets up an expectation of change.

‘Will’ rather than ‘would’ creates a tangible rather than a hypothetical future.

‘What will be happening (instead)’ rather than ‘what won’t be happening’ replaces a negative with something positive and tangible.

### **Second and subsequent discussions**

The interest is in what has been better between the last discussion and today. The questions seek to highlight the smallest signs of progress and look at how the person could begin to do more of it. Useful questions could include:

‘How did you do that?’

‘What did it take to get that to happen?’

‘What did you do differently – that you liked?’

‘What would it take for that to happen again?’

The description is built up with small concrete details. Asking about what others would have noticed can add rich and useful details and also, if they were pleased with the progress, could be a source of motivation to continue:

‘Was your mother pleased with the letter from your form teacher?’

‘Yes.’

‘Did you like the fact that she was pleased?’

‘Yes. There wasn’t so much stress’

‘What was there instead that you liked?’

‘We ended up having a really good talk about lots of things. We haven’t done that in a long time’

Revisiting a scale can also be a useful way to highlight improvements and to locate next steps. However, it is important to be sensitive to the effort it will have taken someone to make the changes they have. It may therefore be important to explore someone’s confidence in maintaining the changes they have made.

‘What will it take to keep at a 4 for the next week?’

‘How confident are you that you will be able to maintain the changes you have made?’

There are times when there have been no changes or indeed things have grown worse. The worker will need to ensure that they take things slowly, acknowledging the frustration and disappointment and also the fact that despite the difficulties, they have turned up. In some cases this will have taken a lot of courage and determination.

There are several areas of enquiry which might be useful.

1. Breaking down the period into smaller chunks. For example, asking someone to rate each day on a scale, or looking at the different subjects in school. What we would be looking out for are the times when things were maybe a fraction better, as a starting point to explore what was different at those times.
2. Asking people how they have been coping, getting by or stopping things from getting worse can focus on the strengths people have drawn on to get them through the difficult situations.
3. Starting to focus on signs to look out for that would tell them things were starting to improve again, gently rekindling hope that things can be different, however unlikely it might seem at present.

## **Applications to Education**

Schools have offered a unique opportunity to take the principles of solution-focused thinking and apply them creatively in a variety of ways. The educational environment provides flexibility to work with individuals, groups, whole classes, parents and other professionals. It also poses the challenge of time and the need for efficiency, both of which are instrumental factors in guiding the work described in this book. Individual chapters speak to these and other such issues, and in doing so provide useful hints in learning about the application of Solution-Focused Brief Therapy within this unique and

challenging environment.

### **Time**

Part of the tradition of thinking underlying Solution-Focused Brief Therapy is to treat each conversation as if it could be the last. Thus the emphasis is to ensure that there is something useful in each conversation and that the solution-focused ideas also serve us as workers, liberating us rather than forcing us to work in a different way. For example, in schools, any work needs to be cognizant of the fact that school staff have to fit a great many activities into an already crowded day. The challenge may be seen as to make best use of any time that is set aside to deal with a given issue. In Chapter Two the author explores the potential in meetings. He questions the amount of time commonly set aside to look at what has already happened and suggests a change in emphasis which values looking forward. Chapter Three also looks at what can be achieved through a series of short meetings to encourage change. These accounts also relate well to how Steve de Shazer talks about 'going slow in order to go faster' as they illustrate how going at the pace of those we work with can lead to a quicker resolution.

### **Groups**

People do not change by drawing on their deficits, they use their resources. However skilled a member of staff is, in the end it is the students drawing on their own skills that makes a difference, and it is the purpose of any solution-focused interview is to highlight these. Moreover, there has been a lot of interest over a number of years about what students themselves can bring to each other through sharing learning, behaviour and emotional issues with each other. Chapter Four explores the value of students learning from and supporting each other in group settings. Taking as its starting point the influence of peers in affecting behaviour, their work provides a context in which young people can learn from each other's experiences and in doing so reveal possibilities that are salient. Chapter Five gives an inspirational account of how students' resources can be harnessed in peer counselling and peer support as part of an anti-bullying initiative. In Chapter Six the work described has, at its core, valuing the strengths, skills and problem-solving capacities of students. Drawing together groups of students and doing just this can lead to remarkable changes in behaviour and in situations where bullying is a serious cause for concern. The results described speak for themselves.

### **The home/school interface**

In our experience, to leave young people with the major onus and responsibility for change is often too much to shoulder in difficult times. However,

when a young person, their family and the school can work jointly together the likelihood of change is much enhanced, particularly if those involved are able and willing to notice the changes people are making. Increasingly, the involvement of 'parents as partners' is testimony to the welcomed shift in education toward including the home in solution finding. This is reflected in the Code of Practice which states 'If they (parents) feel confident that schools and professionals actively involve them, take account of their wishes, feelings and unique perspectives on their children's development, then the work of those schools and professionals can be more effective' – Special Educational Needs code of Practice (2000 p.11). At times this can challenge professionals and requires sensitive handling. Chapter Seven explores the effect of finding and building on common goals, identifying what works and making the ordinary extraordinary. The attention to the very small signs of progress gives a powerful example of the importance of rekindling people's belief that change can occur. Chapters Eight, Nine and Ten all provide an intensely practical focus and a fund of ideas to open up a dialogue between home and school that values the positive and celebrates the contribution of all involved. Attention is paid to the language and techniques that can lead to possibilities, inviting co-operation where challenging behaviour is concerned.

### **Supporting the wider systems of change**

Finding solutions is usually a shared experience. Supporting the whole school system as a way of supporting individuals and groups of students during the journey of change is an important application of solution-focused thinking. The model provides a clear structure which enhances the move away being an 'expert/advisor' model to one of collaboration. Chapter Eleven looks at how solution-focused questions can enhance the process of consultation and assist schools in doing what they already know how to do. Chapter Twelve is essential reading for all those who are interested in working outwards from individual cases towards intervention at a systems level. In chapter 13 the fruits of a well-established Solution-Focused Brief Therapy support system are described. With great experience and vision, solution-focused ideas are drawn together into a blueprint for establishing an educational counselling service.

### **Effectiveness and students views**

Solution-focused workers are always interested in feedback from the people they work with to determine what has been useful and what to do more of. This enables the worker to get the best possible 'fit' with whoever they are working with, and the better the fit the more useful the work is likely to be. This is taken up in Chapter Fifteen where the following questions are looked at: does Solution-Focused Brief Therapy work with students and what do they

say about it? It provides interesting evidence about what students find useful about the approach and some ideas about how we can use this information in our work. Applying one of the ideas described by children as being useful is taken up in chapter Fourteen, in which an exploration takes place regarding ways of supporting parents, staff and students in between the 'formal' discussions through the writing of letters. The workers use the letters as a way of highlighting what has been useful in a meeting and any ideas people may have had. The feedback about this feedback would suggest the writing of letters has enormous possibilities.