



Picturing preferred futures:

Using case studies to investigate solution-focused approaches to school improvement

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Aims of the project

This study investigated the application of solution-focused methods to the area of school improvement. Solution-focused practice involves:

- establishing what a 'preferred future' might be; and
- identifying ways in which this is already happening.

The purpose of the study was to identify:

- the amount of staff collaboration and co-operation in all aspects of school improvement, particularly within teams, to build a sense of ownership;
- whether or not the involvement of staff in their own personal development, through mentoring and modelling, built on strengths as well as issues for development; and
- the extent to which the specific tools of solution-focused working were used.

Dimensions of the study

The study involved three UK schools and a school in Sweden which all practise solution-focused approaches to school improvement to varying degrees.

Summary of main findings

Investigating the use of a variety of solution-focused methods, provided evidence to support the importance of:

- school leaders demonstrating a belief in staff by allowing them the opportunity to find their own solutions to issues;
- recognising the strengths of staff in order to provide school leaders with opportunities to find positive solutions in collaboration with them; and

- school leaders and their staffs adopting a framework for collaboration that gives staff a number of 'skills' in managing team and department interactions.

Background and context

Schools spend a lot of time investigating the causes of perceived underperformance within areas of the school and then set about rectifying those problems. Could it be that by developing an approach which focuses on goals rather than problems, we could better spend our energies?

“Clearly both problems and solutions do exist. However it is not always the case that they are connected or dependent on each other.”
(Mahlberg 2005)

Research has located solution-focused working within the context of strategic leadership, learning-centred leadership and distributed leadership models. It argues that the gap between the leader's vision for the school and the commitment of all staff to achieving this vision is where many organisations become 'culturally unstuck'. All the schools within this study had developed their own approaches to closing this gap with different interpretations about how solution-focused working could help them do so. They all felt that the solution-focused approach, based on constructive dialogue and goal-setting at an individual and group level, could give them a number of tools to enable staff to be involved in designing and achieving their school leader's and their own vision.

It is also clear that tools alone are less effective if they are not applied within a positive culture. Within an education system focused on analysis of pupil performance results and league tables, many staff are fearful of being identified as failing. One of the issues facing school leaders is how to foster a culture of success where staff are confident to put their 'head above the parapet'. This study set out to explore how different school leaders and their staff achieved this.

Teaching processes and strategies

The use of four specific solution-focused tools was fundamental to the success of the approach. These tools were evident in varying degrees in the different school contexts:

Exception finding – identifying those times when success was achieved. Using this tool as a structural part of team meetings was found to be effective in helping identify strategies for future success rather than analysing failure.

Celebrating progress – recognising the small steps taken to achieve the overall goal. People at all levels of responsibility felt that recognising the little things they have done towards strategic whole school goals helped those goals to stay alive during the year. Schools felt that frequently revisiting these goals during team meetings secured a greater commitment to their achievement.

Scaling – using scales to measure progress towards goals. This was felt to be very important for allowing staff to take ownership of their progress and improvement. Where scales were used frequently in staff meetings to identify ‘where on the scale are we now’, ‘where do we want to be’ and ‘how do we get there’; staff felt not only a sense of ownership of the goal but that they had a direct influence on achieving it.

Picturing preferred futures – goal-setting to identify where you want to be in 12 months’ time. Where schools adopted this approach to goal-setting it appeared that not only did the goals become clearer but that all staff felt positive towards their achievement rather than negative towards perceived failures to date.

The findings

The study identified the following key features of successful solution-focused approaches:

Commitment and collaboration

Staff in the schools within the study recognised the need for the leadership team to be committed to adopting a solution-focused approach. Staff felt that the use of many of the tools for encouraging their contribution can quickly be negated if they believe their contribution is not appreciated; they risk criticism or the leadership team is paying lip service to consultation. Having a member of the leadership team driving school improvement in a solution-focused way appeared to be a successful approach to incorporating personal and team goals into school improvement. Staff collegiality in the decision-making process led to a greater diversity of ideas for all aspects of school improvement. Where staff were able to develop their own solutions to the issues facing them and the school as a whole, it was clear that they felt a greater commitment to those solutions.

Valuing relationships

One of the overriding themes identified by all those we interviewed was the perception that peer relationships had improved in their school and there was a greater sense of shared purpose. The solution-focused tools seemed to foster an ethos of commitment to improvement, alongside productive relations between colleagues, which are necessary for the tools to be effective. Staff stated that they had a greater sense that their efforts and successes were appreciated by other members of staff. Whilst feeling valued was difficult to quantify, staff used phrases such as “we enjoy working here”, “I feel I am accepted as a person” and “staff are happy to come to work” kept reoccurring throughout the interviews with staff at all levels of the four organisations.

Research methods

In each school we carried out a series of semi-structured interviews with staff from varying levels within the school. Interviews offered us the opportunity for analysis and reflection about the involvement of the interviewee in whole school improvement,

team participation and personal development. In particular, through the interviews we explored the extent to which the tools of solution-focused working had been used by staff and head teacher.



Conclusion

The findings drew us to a number of conclusions including:

- Where the leader demonstrated a belief in their staff’s ability to tackle problems by offering them the opportunity to find their own solutions to issues, their commitment to improvement appeared to be greatly enhanced
- Recognising the strengths of staff appeared to allow school leaders opportunities to build positive solutions in collaboration with them
- Solution-focused tools offered teachers and school leaders a framework for collaboration and gave staff a number of ‘skills’ in managing team and department interactions
- Solution-focused working formalised opportunities for staff to feel their contributions were valued and enhanced relationships in a mutually supportive school ethos
- All three elements of commitment, tools and relationships were found to be successful in bringing about school improvement, but all three in partnership gave the greatest potential for success

Suggestion for further reading

Måhlberg, K. and Sjöblom, M. (2005) *Solution Focused Education for a happier school* published by Måhlberg & Sjöblom, distributed in the UK by Solutions Books

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