

SOLUTION-FOCUSED
SCHOOLS:
ANTI-BULLYING
AND BEYOND

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CONTENTS

First Foreword	1
<i>Yasmin Ajmal</i>	
Second Foreword	3
<i>Kerstin Måhlberg and Maud Sjöblom</i>	
Introduction	5
1. Towards solution-focused anti-bullying	7
2. Professional Development	30
3. Classroom work	48
4. Responding to incidents	62
5. Peer support groups	76
6. Individual interviewing	99
Conclusion	133
Appendices	135
References	145

INTRODUCTION

This book is about developing a new way of working to address the longstanding problem of bullying in schools. Solution-focused ideas were first discovered in a therapeutic setting for families in the USA by Steve de Shazer and Insoo Kim Berg. Since their pioneering work of the late 1970s and early 1980s, solution-focused ideas have been applied in ever-wider contexts.

As a result of this broader understanding of the relevance of solution-focused practice, we are now seeing the emergence of schools describing themselves as ‘solution-focused’. In a solution-focused school, the staff are able to bring about change by being motivated, not by the need to solve problems, but by the desire to realise the potential of all their pupils.

The solution-focused approach can be used whenever change for the better is wanted, in whatever area. Although this book concentrates on anti-bullying in schools, solution-focused thinking has important applications wherever one wants to encourage positive change. Within an educational context, this could be in raising attainment, improving an area of the curriculum or developing the school as a centre of the community – these would all be commendable. Anti-bullying provides an example of how solution-focused conversations can facilitate change at every level of school organisation. These conversations are powerful and creative in terms of developing supportive, happy and successful schools.

Bullying is a matter of common concern – it figures highly in children’s and parents’ worries, particularly at transition points in schooling. At best, bullying may cause temporary unhappiness in school; at worst it can contribute to serious mental health difficulties. The prime aims of schooling include preparing children for adulthood by fulfilling their potential as responsible and caring citizens and

helping them develop the resilience to cope with the general buffeting and difficulties life has in store.

The values promoted in school are important because they influence the society our children will inherit. Allowing bullying to take place implicitly condones the abuse of weaker members of the school community (including staff and parents) by those who are physically or psychologically stronger. Not only is this detrimental to vulnerable children but it ultimately brutalises some children who bully others and provides them with a false sense of empowerment that they may carry into their adult lives.

The first chapter outlines how solution-focused practice can bring a new perspective to promoting change and make anti-bullying in schools more effective. The second chapter describes how professional development at the whole-school level can support a safe, supportive and friendly ethos, before applying the same principles in the third chapter to working with pupils in the classroom. The fourth chapter introduces more general considerations when responding to incidents of bullying, followed in detail in the fifth and sixth chapters respectively by two different solution-focused strategies – peer support groups and individual interviewing. Examples taken from practice are interspersed throughout the text. Where cases concerning individuals have been described, names and other details have been changed to ensure confidentiality unless otherwise acknowledged.

The aspiration in solution-focused schools is not simply to reduce bullying, but to create an environment incompatible with it. By recognising and nurturing the strengths of all their pupils, including those of friendship and support, solution-focused schools promote these life-skills to the benefit of their pupils' families and the wider community, ultimately contributing to an emotionally healthy society.

CHAPTER I

TOWARDS

SOLUTION-FOCUSED

ANTI-BULLYING

Introduction

This chapter outlines how anti-bullying has so far largely taken a problem-solving approach, following the pioneering work by Olweus in Scandinavia, despite equivocal results. Although ‘whole-school’ programmes usually demand a high level of additional staff input and pupil involvement and may take a year or more to implement, there have been doubts raised concerning their effectiveness. Moreover there is no clear agreement from the research about which elements of anti-bullying interventions reduce bullying, or more worryingly, appear to increase it. This chapter describes how an alternative, solution-focused approach was first discovered and developed in a therapeutic setting and later applied in schools, especially to help pupils with behaviour difficulties. More recently, teachers have realised solution-focused ideas have a wider relevance in schools than simply helping pupils or staff with problems. It is suggested that a solution-focused perspective invites a radically different approach to anti-bullying and provides a means of identifying a more effective way forward.

Traditional anti-bullying campaigns in schools

Bullying has always been a feature of school life but national anti-bullying programmes have a relatively short history. Olweus was conducting research into bullying, particularly in Sweden, when he was asked to work on the first national campaign in Norway in 1983

following public concern arising from the suicides of three schoolboys. At the start of the project, Olweus conducted the first large-scale survey of bullying with questionnaires to 130,000 pupils, aged 8 to 16.

He found that about 15% of students were involved in bullying 'with some regularity', either as bullies (7%) or victims (9%). About 5% were involved, as bullies or victims or both, in 'more serious bullying problems', i.e. occurring about once a week, or more frequently. From this survey he concluded, 'bullying was (and still is, according to more recent and less comprehensive surveys) a considerable problem in Norwegian schools and affects a very large number of students' (Olweus, 1999, p. 32-33). Subsequent surveys of pupils in other countries, including Sweden, Finland, England, USA, Canada, The Netherlands, Japan, Ireland, Spain and Australia have indicated a similar or greater prevalence. Thus within the last 20 years, bullying in schools has become an issue of international concern and countries throughout the world have begun campaigns against bullying, greatly influenced by the first anti-bullying programme of Olweus.

In England for example, the first specific anti-bullying guidance, *Action against Bullying* (Johnstone, Munn & Edwards, 1991) previously issued in Scotland, was circulated to schools in 1992. At this time, the government was already funding a large research project, led by Smith in Sheffield, culminating in advice for all schools, *Bullying – Don't Suffer in Silence: An anti-bullying pack for schools* (DFE, 1994). The *School Standards and Framework Act 1998* made anti-bullying policies a legal requirement of schools and *The Race Relations (Amendment) Act 2000* required any incidents of racist bullying to be recorded. A revised edition of the Sheffield anti-bullying pack was made available to schools in 2000 and in 2002 the government funded the *Anti-Bullying Alliance* and appointed regional co-ordinators to bring together the work of over 60 different organisations.

In 2003 Ofsted, the school inspection authority, issued advice in *Bullying: effective action in secondary schools*. The following year, a high-profile government anti-bullying drive began, including TV, radio and poster advertising with celebrities from the world of music and sport. All schools were encouraged to sign up to *Bullying – A Charter for Action* and hold an annual, anti-bullying week, supported by resources for teachers and co-ordinated by the Anti-Bullying Alliance. In 2005,

new national guidelines, *Bullying: policy and practice*, were issued and *SEAL (Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning)* was introduced into primary schools, including guidance and resource materials on the theme of *Say No to Bullying*. Completely revised government advice, *Safe to Learn* was introduced by the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) in 2007, supplemented in 2008 by guidance on homophobic bullying and bullying related to special educational needs and disabilities. *The National Healthy Schools Programme*, a joint initiative of the DCSF and the Department of Health, also produced guidance, most recently in conjunction with the Office of the Children's Commissioner and the Anti-Bullying Alliance, *Anti-bullying: Guidance for Schools*, in 2008.

This exponential growth in advice and resources for schools has been produced against a background of an equivalent expansion of research into bullying. Much of the early research explored the nature of bullying in schools, on the assumption that the more we know about it, the more we will be able to reduce it. 'First there must be some understanding of what bullying is, and why some children bully others, and why some children are bullied, before you can decide on a course of action' (Rigby, 1996, p. 2).

Consequently, various aspects of bullying have been studied, including the definition of bullying, its prevalence, different types and new forms of bullying, such as homophobic and 'cyber bullying', how bullying is age-related and/or gender related, the possible causes of bullying, negative effects, places where bullying tends to happen and groups that are particularly vulnerable. There is also an increasing interest in gathering children's and young people's own views on all aspects of bullying.

Effectiveness of interventions

All the guidance, resources, research, projects and high-profile anti-bullying campaigns have both raised everyone's awareness about bullying and tried to offer schools effective responses. Nevertheless, despite all this activity in the last 20 years, there does not seem to be any lessening of anxiety about bullying in schools, let alone any perception that bullying is becoming less of a problem. Bullying remains a major

source of concern and continues to feature frequently in education-related publications as well as in the general media.

Recently, some of the most respected researchers in the field have begun to raise doubts about the effectiveness of anti-bullying work. A comprehensive report prepared for the Swedish National Council for Crime Prevention by Ttofi, Farrington & Baldry (2008) reviewed 30 anti-bullying intervention studies worldwide and found only 12 were clearly effective, of which five were by Olweus in Scandinavia. Seven of the programmes had little effect, including one that was actually considered ‘harmful’.

Taking inspiration particularly from Olweus in Scandinavia and the Sheffield project directed by Smith in England, most large projects have recommended a ‘whole-school’ approach. These usually share similar core features, including raising awareness of the problem, typically by devising the school’s own definition of bullying and conducting pupil surveys, followed by wide consultation, staff training and the development of an anti-bullying policy.

Smith and his colleagues reviewed whole-school interventions and found that, ‘Only one program [led by Olweus] yielded significant reductions in victimisation and bullying, while the other 13 yielded either negligible changes or increases on these outcomes’ (Smith, Cousins & Stewart, 2005, p. 744; Smith, Schneider, Smith & Ananiadou, 2004). Unfortunately, others’ attempts to independently replicate the results of the Olweus programme have proved disappointing (Olweus, 2004). Smith et al. concluded, ‘The widespread enthusiasm for the whole-school approach, and its enactment into law in some jurisdictions, can be based only on the perceived urgent need to intervene and on the few studies indicating success.’ They make the ‘cautious recommendation’ that whole-school interventions be continued, ‘...based not on solid evidence that the programmes work, but rather on the logical links between programs and theories about the origins of bullying and because in some instances (and under the most favourable conditions researchers have been able to contrive) they have been effective.’ (their parentheses, Smith et al., 2004, p. 550, 557-558)

Some negative outcomes are often found during or after anti-bullying initiatives, even when the average figures across all the schools

within a project are positive. The uncomfortable finding that there is sometimes an increase in the reported incidence of bullying is usually interpreted as a side-effect of awareness-raising. It is not clear how one can decide whether a deterioration is the result of greater awareness of an existing, previously unidentified problem, or an actual increase in bullying incidents, as Salmivalli et al. (2005, p. 484) point out, 'It is too easy to explain positive effects as being due to the intervention and negative effects (or 'no effects') being caused by students' sensitization to bully-victim problems.' It is even less clear if a subsequent reduction in reported incidence over the longer term is evidence of the effectiveness of an anti-bullying campaign, or the project's negative effect diminishing over time.

Typically, whole-school anti-bullying projects have included recommending extra resources for teachers to use when working on anti-bullying at the classroom level. In the Sheffield project, for example, they recommended theatre groups, a video and a story book, with supporting materials for classroom use. These focused on bullying scenarios and follow-up suggestions to increase pupils' awareness. Although there was some evidence of a reduction in bullying whilst the materials were being used, the effects were only short term and, 'Some project schools found that pupils who are involved in bullying others do not always respond well to these kinds of materials.' The Sheffield team concluded, 'The extent to which these approaches are successful depends on how thoroughly and purposefully they are used. Even then, on their own, they may have little effect on pupil behaviour' (DFE, 1994, p. 41, 45).

The apparent lack of commitment from school staff to engage fully with anti-bullying recommendations has been noted by researchers, although the assumption is usually made that this needs to be overcome. For example, Limber et al. (2004, p. 69) reported that when classroom meetings, 'created particular *angst* among some teachers, who expressed discomfort in engaging students in discussions about (and other activities related to) bullying,' several other professionals offered assistance to enable them to continue.

Peterson and Rigby (1999) sought students' opinions on the effectiveness of anti-bullying activities and found they were generally

sceptical. As one student said, ‘Well, I think no-one really wants to talk about it because that only makes it worse.’

The concern about implementation goes beyond the evaluation of individual elements within interventions. It raises the additional question of how to overcome resistance to anti-bullying projects as a whole (Rigby & Bagshaw, 2003; Salmivalli et al., 2005). When the outcomes are disappointing, researchers sometimes imply that schools should have devoted more time and commitment to it, rather than question the overall strategy (E.g. Limber, Nation, Tracy, Melton & Flerx, 2004; Hanewinkel, 2004). At the same time, it has also been recognised that even schools that produce good results during implementation may have difficulties in sustaining positive outcomes beyond it, in the longer term (Smith, Sharp, Elsea & Thompson, 2004; Galloway & Roland, 2004).

In 2006, the Office of the Children’s Commissioner for England produced a report called *Bullying Today* which summarized the present position. After a thorough review of the evidence the report concluded, ‘Despite the array of policies and practices described, and the promise of reductions for the future, there is actually no indication of whether bullying has been rising or falling overall.’ And yet, as pointed out in the report, the suggestions still offered to schools today remain very much the same.

Following the accounts of major intervention projects from around the world, Pepler et al. (2004, p. 313) concluded that, ‘At this stage in the development and refinement of bullying interventions, the research is not at the point where we can reliably point to specific elements of interventions that are known to be the active and essential elements associated with change.’

So it is timely to consider how recent ideas in facilitating change can contribute to a better understanding of how to identify more effective ways to reduce bullying in schools.

Solution-focused practice

‘Solution-focused’ practice is a whole new and different way of helping people bring about improvement in their lives and in the communities or organisations to which they belong. The development of this way

of working is pre-eminently associated with the Brief Family Therapy Center in Milwaukee, under the leadership of Steve de Shazer and Insoo Kim Berg (de Shazer, 1982, 1985, 1988, 1991, 1994; de Shazer et al., 2007; Berg, 1999; De Jong & Berg, 2008). They are widely acknowledged as the first to clearly articulate the solution-focused approach in individual and family therapy, starting in the late 1970s and continuing until their deaths in 2005 and 2007 respectively.

Most of us can recall a time when someone helped us or we helped someone else, maybe significantly, perhaps even in a single conversation. We may not have been aware of it at the time and in an isolated instance it could be dismissed as just a ‘fluke’, since we cannot know exactly which parts of any conversation were most helpful.

In their research for better and more consistent ways of resolving clients’ problems, de Shazer’s team observed therapeutic sessions closely to discover which specific elements of conversations proved to be the most useful. Once they had identified what worked in bringing about the change their clients wanted, they did more of it. Crucially, they complemented this by stopping doing the things that did not work so well. Their criteria for effectiveness were based on outcomes, both in terms of client satisfaction and the speed of effectiveness, judged by the number of therapy sessions given. They continually reviewed their findings, with different clients and various problems. They published their ideas and conducted ongoing research as they developed and refined their practice (De Jong & Berg, 2008).

By working in this pragmatic and disciplined way, they discovered important and surprising principles about conversations that were successful in bringing about solutions. The findings showed that their work was most effective in eliciting change when they crafted conversations in a way that helped clients concentrate on:

- Describing the preferred future
- Recognising the successful past
- Appreciating existing strengths
- Doing more of what works

Since these features are characteristic of solution-focused practice they will be returned to continually throughout this book. The implications of working in this way are far reaching.

Describing the preferred future

Whereas previously almost all therapy depended upon theories about problems and how therapists could help clients solve them, de Shazer and Berg found that in practice their clients' solutions had no direct or logical connection to their problems. Once this was realized, the therapist's expertise in causes and symptoms or assessment and diagnosis of any difficulties became superfluous and even seen to hinder progress. As a result, they stopped inviting their clients to talk in any depth about their problems. Instead, they found it more helpful to 'stay on the surface' (de Shazer, 1994), asking clients to describe their goal in coming to therapy and formulating questions to discover what their life would be like without the problem. Solution-focused interviewing is 'action-oriented', so in particular, clients may be asked what they will be doing differently and what others will notice them doing once they begin making progress towards their goal.

To illustrate: if a student wants help with a problem of bullying in school, rather than ask for details about the bullying, it is more helpful to ask about how exactly they want their life to be like in school in the future and what precise differences this will make. For example: *When no-one is bullying you, what difference will this make to you? What will you be doing that's different?*

Details about the problem, beyond its absence, are unnecessary to envisage this future. The aim is to get a rich description of what students want to be happening more and especially what they want to be doing differently. The more detailed and vivid this description becomes, the more it acts as a mental rehearsal for future action, so the more likely it is to happen. Put simply, it is more effective in bringing about change to concentrate attention on what is wanted, rather than what is not wanted.

Recognising the successful past

When clients describe what they want instead of the problem, they can usually bring to mind times when there have been exceptions to the problem or where their preferred future is already happening, even if only a little or infrequently. When someone is stuck in a problem, these occasions can remain unnoticed or be dismissed as unimportant exceptions, caused by chance or other factors outside their control.

For example, during a solution-focused interview, one student identified that he enjoyed maths, although he could not think why that might be, other than during these lessons he did not get called names. With deliberate curiosity, he was asked what exactly he was doing differently in maths. He explained that he enjoyed working in a group with other students and concentrating on getting his work done. This recognition of his successful past, in contrast to times when the problem was happening, helped increase his awareness of what was already working for at least part of the time, i.e. being with a group of other students and getting on with his lesson.

‘This process of solution development can be summed up as helping an unrecognised difference become a difference that makes a difference’ (de Shazer, 1988, p. 10). In solution-focused interviewing, these times of relative success are actively sought out and amplified. Recognising the successful past provides clients with the most important source of ideas that can help them become more effective at bringing about their preferred future.

Appreciating existing strengths

As clients talk about the times when they are more successful, their skills and strengths rather than their weaknesses come to the fore. Appreciating and complimenting clients’ own strengths draws attention to what enabled them to succeed, even if only a little bit or for a brief period of time. Compliments are an important part of solution-focused therapy and appreciation is implicit throughout the interview. In subsequent sessions the smallest sign of movement towards the goal is identified and the skills and personal qualities that enabled the client to manage this progress are highlighted and complimented.

Appreciation of existing strengths is made most explicit near the end of a session when recommendations of how to move forward may be considered. In the example given above, the student might be complimented on the skills that enabled him to work well with other students in a group or helped him concentrate on his work. When the student’s appropriate strengths are noticed and complimented, he is more likely to use them again. At this point, skills and strengths are the bridge (De Jong & Berg, 2008) that links the successful past with the preferred future.

Doing more of what works

When working in a solution-focused way, tasks are not imposed on the client. Suggestions about actions the client might take, however, are often made toward the end of a session. These are intentionally small and easily manageable, usually doing more of something that has worked in the past. When suggestions are based on something the client already knows how to do successfully, progress towards the goal is likely to be quicker and more sustainable. In practice, the mere identification of a client's past achievements and existing strengths can motivate them to make progress towards their preferred future.

Taking again the example of the student who did not notice being mocked when he worked in a group, one suggestion could be that he might watch out for other lessons when he manages to work well within a group. There is a good chance that since this has already provided the conditions where he was not called names in the past, it will be effective as a deliberate strategy in the future. What is more, it is a strategy that he can probably follow immediately, since knowing it has succeeded before gives him the confidence he needs to repeat it.

In contrast, when attention is drawn to the problem and by implication to someone's weaknesses, students can often become defensive and resistant to any suggestions for change. De Shazer called resistance the clients' 'unique way of attempting to cooperate' by letting the therapist know a suggestion was not right for them at the time and that the therapist needed to try something different (de Shazer, 1994).

This is not to say that therapists never give advice. Advice in terms of information may occasionally be given but a client is the better judge of whether it is useful to them at that time. In solution-focused practice the relationship between the therapist and client has fundamentally shifted, from one where the therapist's expertise is most highly valued to one where the client's knowledge about their own lives is privileged as the more fruitful source of solutions (de Shazer, 1994). Solution-focused expertise does not lie in knowing what is best for the client and persuading the client to comply. The skill is in 'leading from behind' (De Shazer & Dolan, 2007), in asking questions that will draw attention to and amplify the client's own knowledge and experience about what is helpful.

Thus de Shazer & Berg made their therapeutic conversations ‘solution-focused’ as opposed to ‘problem-solving’. They found the more they managed to become solution focused, the more successful they became. Indeed, once the basic principles were established, good practice became how to apply them most effectively. The approach is elegant both in its simplicity and internal integrity – they encouraged clients to reflect on what they were already managing to do that worked and to do more of it, just as they were continually doing themselves in the development of solution-focused therapy.

Independent research has begun to confirm that this approach is at least as effective as other therapies over a wide range of problems and reaches a satisfactory conclusion more quickly, sometimes in a single session and typically in three to five sessions, without sacrificing longer-term outcomes (Macdonald, 2007). In referrals specifically for bullying, solution-focused interviewing has proved similarly powerful (Young & Holdorf, 2003).

It is possible for motivated people to learn the techniques of solution-focused interviewing in just a few days, and to a skill level where they can use them and see positive results straight away. At first it may seem startling that such a powerful therapeutic approach is so apparently accessible. However, that is not to say it is easy: it requires a major change in general practice and assumptions; it can be hard for people to orientate themselves to it in the first place; and it can prove even more difficult to maintain and develop in their everyday practice. Moreover, becoming solution focused is an ever-continuing journey. Nevertheless, the absence of problem analysis and assessment makes the approach safe, adaptable and suitable for people to use beyond the therapeutic profession.

At roughly the same time as the emergence of solution-focused therapy, a management consultant named David Cooperrider was independently discovering similar principles when helping to bring about change in large organisations (Annis Hammond, 1996). Cooperrider found that concentrating on solving problems within an organisation was not as helpful as creating a vision of the organisation operating at its best, based on articulating shared values and appreciating the existing strengths and good practice. This approach in management consultancy became known as ‘Appreciative Inquiry’. Although these

insights into facilitating change arose in the separate fields of therapy and management consultancy, the principles they share have been recognised. Many specialists in therapy have been able to adapt their skills to professional coaching and consultancy (Furman & Ahola, 2006, 2007; Jackson & McKergow, 2002). What works on the micro-level of therapy is also effective at the macro-level of organisations.

Solution-focused work, whether at an individual or group level or within a larger organisation such as a school, is a means of helping people achieve what they want in their personal or working lives. In order to do this, inquiry is crafted in such a way that it helps clarify how someone's personal or professional life will be different when they become more like the person they want to be, or their organisation becomes more like they want it to be. Solution-focused questions help people to notice how far they have come in achieving this already and what resources they already possess to draw on to make further progress. When they are aware of what their next small sign of progress will be, they are more likely to recognise it and thereby discover how to advance even further. Solution-focused conversations are designed to help people move closer to achieving their potential.

Solution-focused practice in schools

Some of the best-known pioneers of a solution-focused approach in school settings are Molnar & Lindquist (1989), Durrant (1995), Furman & Ahola (1992), Metcalf (1995) and Rhodes & Ajmal (1995). These authors showed with increasing detail, perceptiveness and scope, how solution-focused ideas could be applied to all kinds of problems in schools.

At first, the approach was recommended to help staff and pupils change problem behaviour. Durrant and Metcalf give examples of how solution-focused ideas can be applied to a wide range of behaviour difficulties. Furman produced a children's workbook, *Kids' Skills*, transforming misbehaviour into 'skills to be learned'. Rhodes and Ajmal extended the application to include consultation with teachers about behaviour management, help for children with reading difficulties and organisational work such as planning training for teachers.

Although the majority of solution-focused practice so far has concentrated on helping clients move closer to their preferred future, without attempting to 'solve' problems, it has nevertheless generally been described and used within the context of problems. For example, helping children with behaviour difficulties rather than improving all student behaviour, or supporting children with learning difficulties rather than coaching all pupils to improve their learning.

Once solution-focused ideas were taken beyond the bounds of problem-solving professionals such as therapists and counsellors, and into schools, education staff recognized the relevance of solution-focused ideas for developing good practice for all pupils. Solution-focused principles fit equally well within the inclusive and universal educational context where the presumption is that everyone has strengths on which to build. The school curriculum is designed on the basis of what we want children to learn and can learn, rather than on the knowledge or skills they lack. The great majority of assessment in education is designed to measure how far students have progressed so they can move onto the next step. Even where pupils are identified as having special educational needs, teaching has been moving away from diagnostic testing and remediating deficits since the late 1970s (Ainscow & Tweddle, 1979). The primary aim of schools is to help students fulfil their potential, or move closer to fulfilling it, rather than to solve their problems. At its best, education is a solution-focused endeavour, bringing about positive change in children by building on what they already know and can do, making the most of their abilities to enable them to achieve their preferred futures.

Where there are no problems to solve, and therefore no need of 'solutions', solution-focused practice might more accurately be described as 'potential-focused'. As such, it is relevant for all members of the school community, including staff, pupils, parents and supporting services, since they all have a common goal of realising children's potential. It is a model for all schools, not just for addressing problems in schools, or for schools with problems; it is a model for all pupils, not just for problems with pupils, or pupils with problems. Thus the solution-focused approach can be recognised as having a broader remit. In schools, the possibilities have only just begun for using solution-focused practice to improve professional development, teaching and

learning, academic attainment, partnership with parents, extra-curricular achievements, attendance and behaviour – in fact anywhere there is a desire to maximise potential.

The principles that de Shazer discovered were of a higher order than simply finding solutions to problems. Anyone who wants to promote positive change to fulfil the potential of an individual or organisation, or to help someone ‘do justice to themselves and their own beliefs in a way that gives them pride’ (George, Iveson & Ratner, 1999, p. 28) will welcome de Shazer’s insights into how best to help bring about change.

Solution-focused practice is the means by which goals can be achieved without any need to go searching for problems to solve, or barriers to overcome, and regardless of whether there is a problem or not.

An anti-bullying day in a secondary school

I was approached by a year coordinator in a secondary school who had agreed, on reflection she thought rather hastily, to organise an anti-bullying day for her year group. Having heard that I had been doing anti-bullying work in schools, she hoped I could help. With the day fast approaching, the teacher was worried she had no ideas what to do.

I suggested that rather than her taking responsibility for coming up with the activities, the teachers involved could use their own existing expertise. I mentioned that I had tried to commission a dancer to help in my project, to which she replied, ‘Of course! I’m a dance specialist – that would be no problem for me.’ The theme was anti-bullying with the accent on promoting friendship and cooperation. The only constraint on the teachers was that a discrete piece of work needed to be completed for display or performance by the end of the day.

All the students gathered in the gym (the largest space available) for the last hour of the day when each had a short time to show everyone else the work they had produced. The sports department kicked off by demonstrating collaborative team-building games and their two groups competed to manhandle a bench up, over and around an obstacle course. They also managed to clear the equipment away in double-quick time. Some students recited the poetry and free writing they had composed in the English department. The drama group demonstrated

collaborative activities including ‘hot-seating’. The art students displayed posters they had designed. Other students performed raps they had composed with the help of staff from the music department, and the year coordinator’s group performed their dance.

The students clearly enjoyed the challenge and showed their enthusiastic appreciation for the work the other groups had done. The teachers were equally pleased. The head of the sports department thought the students had derived so much from the team-building activities that he would consider including them more often in the curriculum. The headteacher came to watch the performances and was clearly moved and delighted with the success of the day.

A solution-focused perspective on anti-bullying programmes

The main principles of solution-focused work can predict activities likely to be successful and differentiate them from strategies that are unhelpful or may even be harmful. This applies both to specific elements within programmes and to overall project management, for ‘no matter how good a solution might seem, if it does not work it is not a solution’ (De Shazer & Dolan, 2007, p. 2).

Describing the preferred future

The main assumption underpinning most anti-bullying work so far – expert knowledge about the problem of bullying can help schools to reduce it – implies that on a scale of 1 to 10, where 1 is *the worst that bullying could be in a school*, 10 would be *no bullying*.

In contrast, just as De Shazer found it more helpful to work on clients’ own positive goals and encourage them to describe their future without the problem, solution-focused anti-bullying redirects concentration towards a description of what schools want to be happening when relationships between pupils fulfil their positive potential. On a solution-focused scale of 1 to 10, where 1 is *the worst bullying could be in a school*, 10 would not merely be the absence of bullying, but rather the presence of *a safe, friendly and supportive environment*. Solution-focused practice facilitates and ‘thickens’ a school’s description of the preferred

future, since the more detailed and familiar this description is and the more it is rehearsed, the more likely it is to happen.

Teachers know that giving attention, even negative attention, to any particular behaviour tends to reinforce it. It seems at least feasible that drawing attention to bullying might be a self-defeating strategy. Raising awareness runs the risk of increasing rather than reducing bullying because it focuses attention on the behaviour we want to stop. That unacceptable risk can be avoided by concentrating on raising awareness of what is wanted instead: the preferred future. This is not to ignore the issue of bullying but to address it in the most effective way possible.

Recognising the successful past

Another characteristic of solution-focused practice is the identification of existing success. The phenomenon of not realising the significance of what was already working was noticed by de Shazer. At first, when they began working with a client they made the assumption that the therapist had to initiate change (1988, p. xv). As they developed their practice, they realized that this was untrue and that in fact clients were already doing something that worked before they came to therapy. This insight became fundamental to helping people discover ways of bringing about further improvement: There are always exceptions to the problem. There are always times when the problem is not happening, or is happening less.

Since anti-bullying programmes have generally been thought of as initiating change in schools, the significance of existing good practice has generally gone unrecognised. Mellor (1999) is unusual in drawing attention to the wide and unexplained variations in the level of bullying between schools. In his sample survey in ten secondary schools in Scotland, where varying levels of bullying could not be attributed to other factors such as size of school or pupil intake, the rates of children who reported being bullied in individual schools ranged from 2.4% to 15.4%. Incidentally, none of these schools had an anti-bullying policy. Stevens et al. (2004) found a similar wide difference in their sample from 84 Flemish schools, where levels of bullied pupils varied from 8.5% to 46% in primary schools and from 5% to 29% in secondary schools.

A solution-focused perspective on these surveys would suggest that some schools are already dealing very effectively with bullying. A solution-focused approach is curious about relative success because it is evidence for the presence of effective practice.

Pupil questionnaires contain more evidence of schools' successful work. It has been estimated from the responses prior to any intervention that the incidence of pupils being bullied reduces as they get older by about 15% per year (DFE, 1994; Smith et al., 1999; Olweus, 2004). Understandably, researchers seek ways of eliminating this 'natural' reduction in bullying in order to measure the 'value-added' effect of their programmes. Bearing in mind this average yearly reduction is greater than achieved by most published anti-bullying programmes, and in the absence of evidence to the contrary, solution-focused practitioners would assume that schools contribute to this reduction and would be asking: *What are school staff doing already that helps reduce pupils' susceptibility to bullying as they get older?* This, and other similar questions, helps to identify what works.

Importantly, since solution-focused practice works independently of any theories about problems, solution-focused questions have the potential to be helpful regardless of the validity of any prevailing assumptions. (In fact, the idea that bullying reduces year on year has been challenged [Salmivalli, 2002]). As most theories about bullying and how to reduce it may be subject to contradictory evidence and change over time and cultural context, independence from theory is an invaluable strength of a solution-focused approach. Whether the theory is right or wrong, the acid test of effectiveness is outcome – does it work? For the assumptions behind any enquiry to be helpful, they only need to be both credible at that particular time and place, and sensitive to any signs of success.

Recognising pre-existing good practice provides clues to more straightforward solutions. The sure way to identify effective anti-bullying activity is to search for evidence of it happening in schools. Once recognised, doing more of it is likely to lead to further reductions in bullying.

Appreciating existing strengths

Solution-focused practitioners actively seek and appreciate existing strengths, realising their significance in making progress. As Ajmal writes, ‘People do not change by drawing on their deficits, they use their resources’ (2001, p. 27). Similarly, Galloway & Roland (2004, p. 41–42) point out, ‘the word “development” in professional development implies the importance of building on existing practice with an existing knowledge base. The core tasks of teaching are to create a social climate which pupils value and in which they want to learn, and to create an educational climate which enhances pupils’ learning.’ A successful anti-bullying project is built on teachers’ professional knowledge and resourcefulness in promoting a positive social ethos.

By their very nature, the answers to questions about the skills schools possess, drawn from the evidence of their successes, will be as individual as the personnel at each school and the community it serves. The activities that promote good peer relationships in any school can be remarkably diverse because they also contribute to the wider curriculum. Clubs, field trips, sports, music and drama performances and a host of other activities can all contribute to the social cohesion and ethos of a school. For this reason, it is difficult to create a common package of recommendations that all schools should adopt. Attempts to do this contribute to the variability of outcomes in different schools, even within the same initiative.

When schools deteriorate on key indicators in anti-bullying projects it is evidence that in those schools the pre-existing skills and practice were more effective than the changes that were introduced. Although certainly there may be general ideas about good school practice that are commonly accepted, the details about strengths and skills can be so widely varied that they can only be recognised by appreciative inquiry in individual schools.

Doing more of what works

Solution-focused practice suggests that the smallest steps and the lightest touch that are the most effective at bringing about change. What is more, suggestions are best when they recommend doing more of what is working already. In other words, a solution-focused anti-bullying initiative takes what is already a feature of the school’s success

in reducing bullying, and by appreciating it energises staff to develop it further. Basing any intervention on what schools are already managing to do, extending their good practice by using their existing skills even more, is also the most sustainable way of working.

There is evidence from anti-bullying research that supports the idea that self-reliant projects are more effective. In an interesting and careful study, Stevens, Van Oost & De Bourdeaudhuij (2004) showed that when primary and secondary schools implemented their own anti-bullying programmes, they had better outcomes than schools with outside training and support. Similarly in the Sheffield project, two of the three comparison secondary schools had better key outcomes with their own anti-bullying programmes than most of the schools within the project (Whitney, Rivers, Smith & Sharp, 1994).

A solution-focused perspective suggests that the success of anti-bullying initiatives depends on how far they can tap into the existing skills and strengths available at any particular school at any particular time. When projects build on the knowledge and understanding that teachers have of day-to-day life in their own schools they are more likely to be effective and sustainable.

A solution-focused approach to reducing bullying concentrates on the preferred future of a safe, friendly and supportive school and works with the school's existing resources. Such an approach was adopted in the town of Kempele, Finland, and monitored over an extended period from 1990-98 (Koivisto, 2004). This project paid particular attention to school climate, making it more open, respectful and encouraging, in cooperation with the parents and with pupil involvement. They actively sought feedback from the pupils about what was most effective so they could do more of what worked. The project continued a system of peer support that was already highly valued. Although several training events were arranged for teachers they were given no detailed advice. The programme lasted a year but follow-up surveys continued at two-year intervals which showed that although the campaign was relatively short, the improvement was sustained. Being bullied and bullying others decreased substantially by the first follow-up and remained at more or less the same level throughout the remaining six years of monitoring.

Solution-focused anti-bullying demands a lower level of input because it deliberately moves schools in the direction that the staff identify they want to go and in the way they want to do it. More traditional, high-profile anti-bullying projects require a high degree of effort over a long period. In the absence of a corresponding improvement and with concern about the possible negative effects, staff may withdraw their commitment. Resistance in schools is the useful sign that it needs to be done differently.

In an influential article on school improvement, Hargreaves (2001) noted that, 'Teachers often put considerable effort into making changes with relatively little impact on students, so teachers become frustrated and exhausted.' The challenge is not how to persuade teachers to commit themselves to high-input interventions, but how to identify the lowest level of input that leads to the best outcomes, or as Hargreaves put it, how to 'work smarter, not harder'. A recent annual report from Ofsted emphasised just this:

A key message from this Annual Report is that good leaders know how to assess the support offered; they take what is essential, and they resist all but the right support at the right time. This point is worth emphasising: unless external support is carefully matched to individual circumstances and its impact is rigorously evaluated, it can create more problems and, at worst, slow the pace of improvement. (2008, p. 8)

The success of schools lies along a continuum. Some schools have very low levels of bullying and only need to recognise what they already manage to do well, in order to ensure their good practice continues. Other schools will need to identify exactly where their strengths lie in order to do more of what works. The fewer the existing strengths a school has available, the more essential it becomes to identify and capitalise on them. Solution-focused work ensures the purpose of professional development is appropriate for each school. When approached in a solution-focused way, anti-bullying is a dynamic and rewarding area of positive activity that validates whatever the existing skills are in a school and uses them as resources to reach its greater potential.

Anti-bullying in a Primary School

Following the amalgamation of two adjacent, inner-city primary schools, a group of parents complained to the local press about bullying which they believed was widespread at the new school. They organised a petition to be presented at the forthcoming Annual Governors' Meeting.

The aggrieved parents were given an invitation to visit the school before the Governors' Meeting. It was agreed that all parents should be encouraged to get involved and work with the staff to develop an effective anti-bullying policy and support their children in school.

The resulting *Parents' Anti-bullying Working Party* included all parents who volunteered, pupils from the school council, the deputy headteacher and two local authority support staff (Gail Holdorf, the anti-bullying coordinator, and myself). The working party drafted a very short anti-bullying policy, including several ideas for development that were suggested by different people at the first meeting. Regular newsletters were circulated to all parents, together with an ongoing invitation to join the working party.

By the end of term, the draft anti-bullying policy had been sent to all parents, considered by the pupil council and was ready to go for approval to governors. As the parents had suggested, a fortnightly drop-in was taking place to enable parents to see the local authority anti-bullying coordinator if they wished to talk to someone independent of the school. The deputy head was establishing a playground 'buddies' scheme, just as she had organised in her previous school. A 'Help Box' had been provided for children to request support for any problem they might have, including bullying, and a short training session was provided for classroom assistants in leading support groups for children who felt bullied.

Six months later, the working party had changed its name to the *Pupil Support Forum*. The pupils' school council reported the buddy scheme had been successful and there was also a 'friendship stop' in the playground. No parents had found it necessary to use the drop-in. Children who had taken part in support groups were interviewed on video to record their perspectives, which were entirely positive. Reviewing the records, complaints of bullying had dropped steadily from more than one a week to just one in the previous month.

One year later, the school surveyed all their children, not specifically on bullying, but on whether children were happy in school, including having friends and feeling safe. Advisers from another city came to observe the school's anti-bullying practice and subsequently incorporated it into their own authority policy. Two children were invited to represent the school at a solution-focused conference in Poland, where they answered questions most engagingly about their experience of being in support groups, illustrated by the children's video. (See further in Chapter 5)

Throughout this time of development the focus of the working party was kept firmly on the preferred future of a happy and supportive school and the small but significant steps that were being taken to get there, capitalising on the skills and strengths already available to the school. Within a year the school had shifted its reputation, from one struggling against widespread bullying to being an example of outstanding good practice.

(Thanks to Cathy Byrne, The Parks Primary School, Hull, for permission for this case study to be included)

Summary

Management of change, whether for individuals or organisations such as schools, has so far overwhelmingly used a problem-solving model. Problem-solving and change management have become so closely associated it is sometimes assumed they are the same thing. Solution-focused thinking provides us with a new paradigm for change management that is creative, powerful and fast-acting. At a small group or individual level its discovery originated in 'solution-focused brief therapy' and at a large group or organisational level, it has been called 'appreciative inquiry'.

Regardless of whether a problem exists, when helping to bring about change for individuals or organisations, the principles of solution-focused practice are the same – helping people to notice what works and doing more of it. Effective interventions can be recognised by their focus on:

- Describing the preferred future
- Recognising the successful past
- Appreciating existing strengths

- Doing more of what works

Solution-focused practice offers schools a more effective means to reduce bullying by focusing on their preferred future. The best way of ensuring that anti-bullying does not inadvertently increase the problem is to deliberately concentrate on how schools want their community to be. Whilst concern is focused on the problem of bullying and trying to stop it, attention is diverted from fulfilling the potential to create friendly and supportive school communities. Schools do not have to presume they have 'a problem with bullying' that needs to be solved. By appreciating how anti-bullying is an integral part of teachers' work already and concentrating on the strengths they have available, schools can be more effective by continually developing an ever more friendly, safe and supportive ethos in their own unique context. This book sets out to describe how schools can promote friendship and mutually supportive relationships through solution-focused conversations at a whole-school, classroom and individual level of working.