

# A Critical Review of Teachers Using Solution-Focused Approaches Supported by Educational Psychologists

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This paper offers reflections on teachers using solution-focused approaches in schools, supported by Educational Psychologists (EPs). The paper provides an outline of the development of Solution-Focused Brief Therapy (SFBT), its assumptions and its limitations. Literature describing its application in schools by teachers and the evidence of its effectiveness is reviewed using a Critical Appraisal Skills Programme (CASP) checklist. A discussion about the appropriateness of this tool is also examined, leading to further discussion relating to evidence-based practice and practice-based evidence. The paper concludes that it is very difficult for EPs to judge the strength of the evidence base for solution-focused approaches since this judgement is affected by the epistemological position a person takes.

*Keywords:* Solution-Focused Brief Therapy (SFBT), teachers, schools, Critical Appraisal Skills Programme (CASP), evidence-based practice (EBP)

## Introduction

The literature regarding SFBT in schools is well documented (Ajmal & Rees, 2004). However, the majority of studies report on individual interventions, without discussion of wider systemic work, which is at odds with the systemic underpinning of SFBT (O'Connell, 2007). This gap in the literature provides the rationale for this paper, which will focus specifically on EPs supporting teachers using SFBT approaches. The reason for focusing on teachers is that teachers have significantly more contact with children and young people (CYP) than EPs. This paper will first outline the development of SFBT and how EPs use solution-focused approaches in their work. Next, the main limitations of taking a solution-focused approach are considered. A literature review will then attempt to judge the effectiveness of solution-focused approaches as used by teachers, supported by EPs. The discussion then outlines key implications for EP research and practice from the review, followed by a discussion of the merits of evidence-based practice and practice-based evidence for investigating solution-focused working. The paper concludes with a discussion of the limitations of the judgements made in the literature review and the author's reflections. In what follows, note that "client" refers to anyone receiving a service such as SFBT; "SFBT" refers to solution-focused brief therapy as a therapy or one-to-one structured intervention; "solution-focused approaches" refers more loosely to using SFBT approaches, such as thinking and speaking in a solution-focused way that could be applied in a variety of situations; and "working systemically" refers to working at an organisational level, such as working collaboratively with school staff.

## Solution-Focused Brief Therapy

Ajmal (2004) describes SFBT as an approach that can be used to help people build the life they want. It was founded by Steve de Shazer and his team of family therapists in the USA in the 1980s (de Shazer, 1991). This team realised that they did not need to fully understand a client's problem to help them make a positive change to their lives (O'Connell, 2007). Instead, they noticed that focusing on "what works" and the client's current strengths had a more positive impact (de Shazer, 1991). O'Connell (2007) describes SFBT as a philosophical theory rather than a therapeutic approach. It takes a social constructionist position, arguing that reality is formed through social interactions and negotiations, which are also affected by our choice of language. As a consequence, SFBT does not provide a theory of human behaviour or personality but, instead, is a way of thinking and speaking guided by a set of assumptions:

- Treat people as experts in their own lives
- People have the capacity and resources to resolve difficulties
- Work with the person, not the problem
- Explore the person's preferred futures
- Explore what is already working

These assumptions enable practitioners to look at their surroundings and at people in a way that focuses on hope and change (Ajmal, 2004).

## Solution-focused Approaches and Educational Psychology

Over the last two decades, solution-focused approaches have been taken up by numerous professionals, including EPs, and this has been used as a therapeutic approach but also as a more general approach to problem-solving with a CYP and the adults who work with them. One reason for its popularity is that it nurtures and focuses on CYP strengths, which helps them realise that they can manage their problems and learn how to cope with future ones (Terjesen, Jacofsky, Froh & DiGiuseppe, 2004). Another reason for its popularity is that, within a time of austerity, a solution-focused approach offers EPs a cost-effective, time-sensitive and pragmatic approach to their work (Ajmal, 2004). It is also pragmatic as it has a variety of tools associated with it that an EP can use to support people. One of these tools is looking for exceptions. De Shazer (1991) suggests that practitioners should discover the times when the client is successful and what resources they used to make it successful, for example:

- *“When was the last time that you felt like you were losing your temper, but didn’t?”*
- *“What did you do that helped?”*

Another tool used is, exploring the client’s preferred future. The client is asked what it would look like and together they would think of ways to utilise the client’s resources to move towards that future (de Shazer, 1991). The practitioner does this by using a range of solution-focused questioning skills and elicitation techniques (Cane, 2016), for example:

- *“How will you know when things have improved?”*
- *“How will you know when you don’t need to work with me anymore?”*

These tools can be utilised by EPs in a number of ways, including:

- working individually with a student (Cane, 2016)
- building solutions in meetings (Harker, 2004)
- working with families (Mall & Stringer, 2004)
- empowering students (Hillel & Smith, 2004)
- preventing bullying, consultation with school staff and parents (Wagner & Gillies, 2004) and
- group consultation with teachers (Nugent et al., 2014).

## Educational Psychologist Working Systemically

Educational psychology and solution-focused approaches share the principle of systemic working. Most educational psychology services (EPSs) now take a more systemic approach to their work to avoid the “within-child” medical model of working (Pellegrini, 2009). This is supported by

Prilietensky, Peirson and Nelson (1997), who argue that fire-fighting at the individual level is ineffective in solving a long-term problem. This is also in line with solution-focused approaches because SFBT originated as a family therapy, where families are viewed as systems (Cane, 2016). De Shazer (1991) highlights that if any one part of this system changes, it can have a ripple effect on other aspects of the system. With that in mind, if EPs work with school staff and other adults who work with CYP their work should have a much wider impact. When EPs take a solution-focused approach, effective systemic working means working in collaboration with school staff and other key adults to encourage and empower them to find and create solutions to support the CYP they work with. Beaver (2011) supported this approach by suggesting that for change to happen in an individual it is important for the systems around them to recognise and reward small changes, and thus, if an EP supports a CYP in isolation of their systems, their effort might not bear fruit. Therefore, by working systemically, EPs can use but also share solution-focused approaches with the CYP’s key adults. Instead of the traditional approach of removing pupils from the class for individual intervention, this paper looks at EPs working collaboratively to support teachers using solution-focused approaches in more systemic ways.

## Limitation of Using Solution-Focused Approaches

Despite all the strengths of using solution-focused approaches, there are a number of limitations that need to be considered to enable practitioners to use solution-focused approaches appropriately and effectively. Here, we will just touch on some of these, including discussing clients with English as an additional language (EAL), learning difficulties or with families who have been monitored due to child protection concerns.

Firstly, in the UK in 2011 the number of people with English as their main language was 92 per cent, except in London where the proportion was much lower (CENSUS, 2011). *Because* SFBT is rooted in a social constructionist epistemology, this position suggests reality is socially constructed through our interactions and thus the language we use. This is important for EPs to consider when working with people whose first language is different from their own, because if reality is communicated through language then it is likely that the client would be better able to communicate this reality in their first language. Working via a second language might make it harder for the client to describe their preferred future and/or set goals for themselves. The whole process might also be too onerous for the client working through a second language and thus becoming a less useful process for them. However, this does not mean SFBT cannot be used with people with EAL. Moosa, Koorankot and Kalorath (2017) showed how they used solution-focused art therapy with refugee children with little to no English with positive

results. However, more research is needed in this area to support these findings.

Another limitation of SFBT is that some of its main assumptions make it less accessible to clients with significant learning difficulties, for instance: the client is considered an expert regarding his or her own situation; the goal of the theory is defined by the client; and the client has the resource and competences to resolve difficulties. However, Roeden, Bannink, Maaskant and Curfs (2009) argue that SFBT is attractive for clients with intellectual disabilities because it focuses on their particular skills and focuses on empowerment thus on competence and resources. Roeden et al. (2009) go on to argue that SFBT can be tailored to clients with intellectual disabilities by simplifying language and modifying the intervention to the client's specific needs. However, it is important to note that there is very little research into the effectiveness of SFBT applications with clients with intellectual disabilities to support this.

Finally, with regard to child protection, a systematic literature review (Department for Education [DfE], 2011) of SFBT was conducted after the death of "Baby P" in Haringey in 2009, where SFBT was being partially used within children's social care services. The review concluded that although focusing on the strengths of parents is important, SFBT is not appropriate with parents in the protective phase of child protection enquiries. One of the main reasons given for this is that in SFBT the client is "the problem holder". However, in statutory social work, the problem holder is, in effect, the local authority, not the parents. The review states that in high-stakes work any approach or intervention used should not compromise any ongoing work to safeguard children but should come with mandatory training and supervision (DfE, 2011). This review highlights the importance of checking the appropriateness of using solution-focused approaches with a supervisor if the case is not clear cut or there are high stakes involved. This section has highlighted just some of the limitations of using a solution-focused approach that an EP would need to consider when deciding if it is appropriate to use solution-focused approaches.

### **Rationale for Using Solution-Focused Approaches in Schools**

The use of solution-focused approaches in schools is well documented, particularly using individual interventions (Ajmal & Rees, 2004). (O'Connell, 2007) states that it is also a good match for schools as it is simple, practical and can be a time-limited approach. An account by Redpath and Harker (1999) showed that EPs use solution-focused approaches in the following four ways in schools:

- individual work with pupils
- consultation with teachers
- group work and

- training.

However, all the approaches discussed here were EP led and did not focus on training or disseminating solution-focused approaches to schools for staff to use themselves. Although research seems to suggest that solution-focused approaches in schools generally have positive findings, most of these studies report on individual interventions, without discussion of any wider systemic work. Therefore, this paper looks at how solution-focused approaches can be used systemically, with a focus on teachers using solution-focused approaches, supported by EPs.

## **Literature Review**

### **Background and Purpose**

To critically review the use of solution-focused approaches used by teachers in schools, this literature review used the Critical Appraisal Skills Programme (CASP) Qualitative Checklist (2018). The qualitative research checklist was chosen as all the studies had a qualitative component to them. Attempting to judge the quality of research can be subject to bias, and so this checklist guided the author's judgements. However, two of the studies also had a quantitative component, and this element of the studies was not assessed by a checklist, giving an opportunity for bias to be introduced. The review question for this literature search was what is the effectiveness of teachers using solution-focused approaches in schools?

### **Method Used to Identify Literature**

A computerised search for literature on several databases (Academic Search Complete, British Education Index, child development and adolescence studies, CINHAL, Education Research Complete, ERIC, PsycINFO and Teacher Reference Centre) was conducted from the 12<sup>th</sup> to the 14<sup>th</sup> March 2018 using the following search terms and synonyms of these terms: "solution-focused" AND "Educational Psychology" AND teachers. Initial screening of titles excluded articles that were unrelated, and a total of 21 articles remained. Then the full-text articles were examined to check they met the inclusion criteria of:

- a) a study as opposed to a review
- b) focused on EP practice
- c) from a peer-reviewed journal
- d) UK based article and
- e) published in the last ten years.

Overall, three articles met the inclusion criteria. These articles were then used to conduct a citation search using Scopus and Google Scholar, this yielded an additional paper.

### Solution-focused Approaches Used By Teachers

Overall, four papers met the inclusion criteria for this literature review, and they will be discussed in chronological order below. The CASP Qualitative Checklist (2018) was used to aid the critique of this review. The checklist recommends using the following judgements for each question:

- Yes (which indicates a strength of the research methodology)
- No (which indicates a weakness in the methodology) and
- “Can’t tell” (indicating that there was not sufficient detail in the paper to make a judgement).

The author added one more judgement, “partially/satisfactory”, to indicate that appropriate methodology had been used but maybe not effectively, appropriately or sufficiently. The findings from the literature review will then be discussed in relation to EP practice and research with a discussion about the appropriateness of evidence-based practice and practice-based evidence in this area.

Simm and Ingram (2008) used solution-focused action research to develop the use of solution-focused approaches in four primary schools over a year. The authors were two EPs who worked collaboratively with four SENCOs and one teacher. Realist interviews showed that participants used solution-focused approaches successfully in various ways:

- introducing change
- working with individual children and parents
- working with groups and classes
- meetings
- target setting
- writing individual education plans and
- teaching pupils how to use solution-focused approaches.

This paper highlights how solution-focused action research can be used successfully to develop teachers’ use of solution-focused approaches in schools in a number of ways. With regard to the CASP checklist, the author judged this study to have five strengths, four areas that were satisfactory and one area of weakness, namely the relationship between researcher and participants in this paper have not been adequately discussed. The researchers did not critically examine their own role specifically in relation to the data collection process. Consequently, it is likely that research bias might have affected the results.

Doveston and Keenaghan (2010) investigated teachers’ and EPs’ experiences of using a solution-focused consultation framework to support teacher colleagues to promote effective interpersonal relationships in the classroom using solution-focused approaches. They used semi-structured interviews and questionnaires to elicit participants’ experiences of using the framework. Some of the main findings

were that participants valued learning the psychological underpinning of consultation, and they felt that there had been improvements in classroom behaviour as a consequence of the consultation approach with a colleague. Doveston and Keenaghan (2010) state that these findings, therefore, have implications for initial teacher training and continuing professional development. However, it is important to recognise that although this investigation has highlighted the usefulness of solution-focused consultation, this is based on only five participants’ subjective opinions in one geographical area. Therefore, it could be argued that Doveston and Keenaghan (2010) should take more caution in making such generalisations from such a small subjective sample. Overall, based on the CASP checklist, this study was judged to have no strengths, seven areas that were satisfactory, one area of weakness and two areas where it wasn’t possible to answer due to limited information given in the paper, such as whether ethical considerations had been taken into consideration.

Brown, Powell and Clark (2012) explored a solution-focused approach called “Working on What Works” (WOWW) where two EPs (also two of the authors) coached a teacher to use solution-focused approaches with her class. The aim was to improve relationships and behaviour in a primary school classroom in Scotland. The results were positive, showing that the teacher and pupil ratings improved compared to baseline over ten weeks. The authors reflected on the factors that contributed to the programme’s success, which included: staff commitment, pupil ownership, enjoyment of pupils, collaboration in the classroom and target setting — many of which being key features of taking a solution-focused approach. This paper contributes to the evidence base for solution-focused approaches and WOWW. However, the quality of this paper must also be considered. With regard to the CASP checklist, the author judged this study to have six strengths, three areas that were satisfactory and one area where it was not possible to answer as the information was not given in the article, which was “had the relationship between the researcher and participants been adequately considered”. By not discussing this in the paper it could be suggested that Brown et al. (2012) have not critically examined their own role in the investigation, and therefore it is likely that bias and influence would have affected the data collection and interpretation. Another point to note is that the CASP checklist did not have questions judging the quality of a quantitative research approach, and therefore the critic of this study is limited by the authors’ own experience and knowledge to critique a quantitative paper.

Similar to Brown et al. (2012), Fernie and Cubeddu (2016) used the WOWW approach to enhance classroom behaviour and relationships. Trainee EPs were used to coach a primary school class teacher to use solution-focused approaches with the class. Quantitative results showed that both the teacher’s

and students' ratings of behaviour and relationships improved; qualitative data also supported this. Fernie and Cubeddu (2016) concluded by recommending that EPs could help schools implement the WOWW approach at a strategic level, by training staff to become WOWW "champions". As with the previous study, this study contributes to the evidence base for solution-focused and WOWW approaches used by teachers in the classroom. However, a limitation of this study is that it implies a causal effect of their results, but without controlling for confounding variables all they can claim is that the WOWW approach correlates with improved classroom behaviour and relationships. This is particularly important to note with this study because the relationships between the trainee EPs/researchers and participants were not considered. Thus, it could be argued that bias and influence could have affected the results. With regard to the CASP checklist, this study was judged to have five strengths, four areas that were satisfactory and one area that was not considered, mentioned above.

## Discussion

### Implications for Educational Psychology Practice and Research

Considering the popularity among EPs in using solution-focused approaches in and with schools (Atkinson, Bragg, Squires, Muscutt & Wasilewski, 2011), little research has been conducted looking at its use by teachers. The literature search was also complicated because of the variety of different populations and areas that were examined. Despite this, all the studies that met the inclusion criteria reported positive findings and highlighted a number of useful points for EPs when considering using solution-focused approaches collaboratively with teachers. For instance, Simm and Ingram's (2008) participants felt that by taking a solution-focused approach they had been effective in embedding change at a number of levels in their school. The response of teachers, using a solution-focused consultation with colleagues in Doveston and Keenaghan (2010), was also positive, with one participant stating that through this approach she had promoted more effective learning in her colleagues' classroom. Finally, Brown et al. (2012) and Fernie and Cubeddu (2016) found that the solution-focused approaches had a positive effect on classroom behaviour and relationships.

Other useful findings included information EPs would need to consider when setting up similar interventions. In terms of practicalities, Simm and Ingram's (2008) study revealed that school staff found solution-focused working complex and required more training and time from their EP than had been expected. This is an important finding since EPs need to be mindful of the initial time and costs required for embedding solution-focused approaches in schools. Doveston and Keenaghan (2010) highlighted that when teachers

use solution-focused consultation with their colleagues this approach does not work if it is done with their line manager, who would be responsible for performance management. However, in small primary schools this isn't always possible, and thus this approach might not be appropriate. Another useful observation was made by Brown et al. (2012) with regard to parental involvement. The class teacher in their study suggested that parents could be involved in reinforcing positive goal-related behaviours outside of school. Finally, Fernie and Cubeddu (2016) recommended that future teacher-led solution-focused intervention should have a greater emphasis on ensuring the willingness and confidence of the class teacher, thus helping to ensure an improved implementation of the intervention within the classroom and the wider school context.

Regardless of positive findings from the reviewed studies, there are a number of common limitations that need to be contemplated. Firstly, all four studies failed to consider the relationship between the researchers and participants in terms of the influence and bias that could be introduced. This is particularly surprising since all the studies' authors also participated in the intervention in some way, and all the studies used qualitative methodology to seek the subjective experiences of the participants. Another commonality among the studies is that they all recruited small samples using opportunity sampling. Although these are not necessarily limitations in themselves Doveston and Keenaghan (2010) implied that their findings could be used to suggest changes to initial teacher training policy and curriculum; however, this would not be substantiated based on their sample size. Finally, all four studies suggest to their readers that there might be a causal effect of their results by their use of language. However, none of the studies in the review controlled for confounding variables, nor did they choose an appropriate methodology, sampling method or data collection to enable them to imply this. This finding is supported by Stobie, Boyle and Woolfson (2005), who found that although claims were made about the effectiveness of solution-focused approaches in schools, there were few evaluative studies. This highlights the need for EPs to assess the validity of implied claims in research articles, a call for researchers to be upfront and clear about their findings and a need for more evaluative studies.

This review also highlights a number of gaps that future research should consider. Firstly, future research could consider collecting follow-up data so more can be known about the perception and/or effects of solution-focused approaches over time. This review also indicates the lack of a strong evidence base in this area and that, to establish this, more rigorously designed research needs to confirm its effectiveness. However, Fox (2003) would argue that EPs mainly come from a social constructionist rather than positivist epistemological position; therefore, taking a more practice-based approach to research might be more appropriate. Evidence-

based practice (EBP) and practice-based evidence (PBE) will be discussed further in relation to educational psychology in the next section.

### **Evidence-based Practice versus Practice-based Evidence in Researching Solution-focused Approaches**

Although the literature review has shown a number of positive findings, the author then went on to draw cautious conclusions due to the rigour of the study's methodology. Therefore, with regards to solution-focused approaches used by teachers, there seems to be only emerging or preliminary support. However, EBP originated from the field of medicine, where decisions have to be made based on a hierarchy of research methods, with randomised controlled trials being near the top, and correlational and descriptive non-experimental designs being near the bottom. It is important to note that in education what constitutes good research is less clear (Fox, 2003). The American Psychological Association, Presidential Task Force on Evidence-based Practice (2006) argues that evidence base incorporates both research and professional expertise, recognising the diversity in context and populations that EPs work with. Gingerich and Peterson (2013) support a more qualitative and descriptive methodology for research looking into solution-focused approaches, arguing for its practical value because it can describe the intervention and its context with transparency; readers can then judge the appropriateness of the outcome measures in relation to the context and populations they themselves work with. Cane (2016) goes one step further by arguing for a rejection of EBP and instead using PBE. She claims that PBE can establish "what works?" and "how solution-focused approaches create positive outcome" rather than "does it work?". McKee (2011) supports this approach, arguing that, congruent to solution-focused work, PBE can focus on the change process and what is best for the client at that time and in those circumstances. Cane (2016) reminds us that in SFBT the client is the authority on the usefulness of the therapy. This implies that if researchers gather participants' scaling scores and subjective experiences this would give a more valid and ecological picture of solution-focused approaches than strong EBP would.

### **Reflections and Limitations**

Following on from the above point, a limitation of this paper, therefore, is that the CASP checklist might not have been the most appropriate tool to use when researching solution-focused approaches in education. Hence, suggesting that the evidence base here is stronger than just "emerging" or "preliminary" support. Following on from that, it could then be argued that the review question might not have been suitable for investigating solution-focused working. In line with Cane's (2016) perspective, maybe the review question should have instead focused on "what works?" and looking

at the change process and what is best for the client (McKee, 2011). Another limitation of this paper is the use of two very similar studies in the literature review; with hindsight, it might have been more appropriate to exclude one of the WOWW studies (Brown et al., 2012; Fernie & Cubeddu, 2016) as they had similar findings and drew very similar conclusions. Also, although WOWW is based on SFBT, it does have its own unique features, thus making it difficult to judge if the findings came about due to taking a solution-focused approach or due to something discrete about the WOWW approach.

Moving on to reflections, casework in educational psychology traditionally follows the process of assessment, formulation, intervention and evaluation (Health and Care Professions Council, 2012). However, in the studies we have reviewed, only intervention and evaluation have really been discussed. O'Connell (2007) questions the distinguishability of assessment, formulation, intervention and evaluation but also the need for assessment and formulation at all when taking a solution-focused approach. O'Connell (2007) claims that when using solution-focused approaches, assessment isn't relevant because solution-focused approaches can be used with anyone, with any issue. Corcoran and Pillai (2009) support this by arguing that assessment tends to be problem-focused, so for SFBT this would detract from the strengths and solution-focused approach. With regard to formulation, which can be defined as using psychological theory to build a working hypothesis to explain the client's difficulties (Johnstone & Dallos, 2014b); Johnstone and Dallos (2014a) question the use of formulation with some therapeutic approaches. For instance, with solution-focused approaches there isn't a need to understand the problem to find solutions (Beaver, 2011). Instead, resources and future hopes are identified which could be deemed as the assessment/formulation/intervention process, indistinguishable from each other (O'Connell, 2007). Therefore, although only the intervention and evaluation process of the above studies were described, this is well-suited to a solution-focused approach to working.

Another reflection is that there are psychologists who argue for social constructionist position preferring PBE but also a positivist position preferring EBP. However, Fox (2003) highlights that EPs also change their position depending on the situation. He gives the example of "inclusion", where an EP from a social constructionist position will try to uphold their client's right to be included in a mainstream; however, that same EP might then take a positivist position when working with a stakeholder who argues for a child to be educated in a special school. This position switching could apply to EBP and PBE when researching solution-focused approaches. This makes it very difficult for EPs to judge the strength of the evidence base for solution-focused approaches since it appears that this judgement resides with

whoever is reading an article and the position they take, not only epistemologically but also on the approach itself.

### Conclusion

This paper has discussed the development of SFBT and the use of solution-focused approaches by EPs. The paper also considered some of the main limitations of taking a solution-focused approach, including its limited ability to be used with people who have EAL, learning difficulties and with families who have been monitored due to child protection concerns. The literature review looked at EPs supporting teachers using solution-focused approaches systemically, and the studies revealed positive findings and implication for research and practice, including the importance of:

- high-quality solution-focused training for teachers
- teachers choosing to be involved with solution-focused working and not coerced
- and involving parents.

There was also a discussion about the strengths of the evidence base and whether taking a social constructionist or positivist epistemology affected this judgement. Finally, future research could use more rigorous methodology and look at the long-term impact of teachers using solution-focused approaches, supported by EPs.

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