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## Research Associate Report

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# Picturing preferred futures

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

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## Background

Clearly both problems and solutions do exist. However it is not always the case that they are connected or dependent on each other. (Mahlberg and Sjoblom 2004)

If you ask any member of staff how they would like their school to be, many would picture a school with good quality teaching and learning taking place, young people behaving well, where pupils and staff felt valued and staff had the time and capacity for developing their teaching and their contribution to school as a whole. The key question for most of us, however, is how do we get from here to there? Using the principle that focusing on the 'there' will bring about more positive change than focusing on the 'here', a solution-focused approach may provide schools with a series of strategies to enable staff to develop the steps for achieving their preferred future.

Much of school improvement work is currently based around addressing issues raised by the process of school self-evaluation. This model – 'What do you know?', 'Where are the "problem areas"?', 'Do you know why they exist?', 'What are you doing about it?' – is a standard educational review model and has much to commend it. However, some schools have found that this model may lead to the apportioning of blame for 'poor' results and a resultant feeling of failure for staff. Perhaps if, as school leaders, we did not have to spend time, effort and energy trying to undertake this form of 'Freudian' analysis of why a school is where it is, our energies could be channelled instead into exploring ways to identify and achieve a preferred future. This is not to negate the importance of detailed analysis of performance and nor does it fly in the face of accountability; it simply recognises that we do not always have to 'solve' the problem in order to achieve a solution.

Building on some of the principals of solution-focused counselling could allow the potential development of a solution-focused leadership approach to provide a structure that allowed staff to recognise current achievements and to develop strategies for improvement within a 'solution-developing cycle'.

The starting point of the research study was, therefore, 'How can staff commitment to school improvement be sustained and developed in a way that does not make them feel under the microscope of potential "failure"?'.

### What is the solution-focused approach?

In very simplistic terms the approach has three principles:

- If it's not broken don't try to fix it
- Do more of what already works
- If it doesn't work do something different. (Jackson and McKergow 2002)

The solution-focused model offers an approach that engages people in the process of moving forward towards jointly identified goals through a range of key techniques. It focuses on those occasions when things worked better, instead of dwelling on questions about perceived problems, and provides a collaborative way of identifying clear future goals and the key steps to their achievements. It uses four clear and distinct strategies within a counselling dialogue of:

- *exception finding*: identifying times when the problem or issue did not occur or those departments that do not experience the issues faced by other subjects in a school;

- *celebrating achievements and progress*: clearly stating and recognising even the smallest steps towards achieving identified goals;
- *scaling*: the use of rating scales ('On a scale of 1–9 where are we in meeting our aim currently?') to help clarify successes to date ('Anything above 1 means something is going right!') and to recognise what we need to do to reach the next point of the scale;
- *goal setting (picturing a preferred future)*: clearly naming and quantifying the goal as an end point, understood by all responsible for achieving it.

This approach could provide some strategies for school leaders in their quest for effective and collaborative school improvement. All school leaders face the challenge of securing commitment to jointly developed goals and the development of a solution-focused approach could have a great significance and relevance in informing the debate. While this study does not set out to provide a blueprint for leadership or to provide another leadership style, it comes from a desire to identify strategies for school improvement based on genuinely secured commitment to solutions both within schools and for the school as a whole that do not rely on deficit models of problem analysis. Based on case studies from a range of educational contexts and dialogue with experts in both education leadership and solution-focused work internationally, the study should therefore have a direct relevance to school leadership, whatever its context.

## Methodology

The research uses case studies from special, primary and secondary schools as well as a school in Stockholm which, although set within a different education context than those found in the UK, still provides a very relevant example of solution-focused work within education. The research was supplemented by professional dialogue with 'recognised experts' in the field of solution-focused counselling and leadership from the UK and across Europe to develop a theoretical underpinning to the practical responses found within the case study schools.

When investigating the application of the approach to school improvement work within schools, it was necessary to identify those who had been involved in pilot programmes incorporating solution-focused counselling and pupil-based work into their schools. One of the biggest barriers faced in completing the study was the fact that solution-focused school improvement is a new area of development and therefore there were no practical examples where the approach had been applied completely. The case study approach adopted therefore examines where techniques employed in pupil counselling work have been applied to group, department and whole-school situations.

The study aims to establish through case studies the perceived effects and benefits of adopting the approach through the school, in order to test a general hypothesis that the adoption of a solution-focused approach has or has not led to the achievement of the projected outcome of greater staff commitment to school improvement.

### The research approach

Using Bassey's approach to the 'theory seeking/theory testing case study' it was possible to identify what has worked in the implementation and adoption of the approach and therefore to identify what may work in other school contexts:

At the heart of solution focused work is constructive professional dialogue and indeed some may say the *purpose* of solution focused working is the dialogue itself. To use a phrase from one of the originators of Solution Focused work, Insoo Kim Berg "the action is the inter action". (Bassey, quoted in Mahlberg and Sjoblom 2004)

Therefore a semi-structured interview approach was adopted. This allowed for:

- identification and analysis of key issues
- a degree of reflection on the part of the interviewee
- interaction and dialogue within the interview
- a standardised framework for transcription and analysis.

### The research process

The process undertaken was as follows:

- Investigation into what exists in the area and what is already known in similar fields
- Interviews and dialogue with recognised leaders in the field
- Interviews with staff at leadership, team leader and teacher levels within the school to establish:
  - the involvement of all staff in whole-school improvement planning
  - the involvement of all staff within their teams

- the involvement of all staff in their own personal development.

Semi-structured interviews were based around three blocks of questioning:

- The degree of staff collaboration and cooperation in all aspects of improvement work, but particularly within teams
- The involvement of all staff in their own personal development through mentoring and modelling built on strengths not issues for development
- The extent to which the specific tools are used for:
  - scaling and exception finding within staff and school improvement
  - recognising small-step achievements to facilitate staff motivation by celebrating progress
  - clarity of 'goals' to enable ownership of progress.

## **The schools**

### ***School A: Secondary special school, Stockholm, Sweden***

The school describes itself almost uniquely as fully 'solution focused'. It is a special school for approximately 20 pupils aged between seven and 16 with various educational and behavioural difficulties. Pupils attend the school for a period of up to 18 months before returning to their 'home' school to continue their mainstream education. The school had operated as a therapeutic community until the early 1990s when the teaching staff attended training on solution-focused counselling. Since then the school has operated the approach within education as well as therapy and has become one of the few solution-focused schools internationally; senior staff have developed an international reputation for the development of the solution-focused model at all levels of school organisation and pupil interaction.

### ***School B: Primary school, Hull***

The school was created in 2002 following the merger of two separate primary schools. It serves approximately 300 pupils aged three to 11 and services a very large housing estate north west of Hull city centre. With almost 40% of special education needs pupils on roll, the school faces a number of challenges and, for this, among other reasons, the school became involved in solution-focused work almost from its opening, when the headteacher introduced some of the concepts she had used in her previous headship. Since then the leadership and staff teams have incorporated both the philosophy and ethos behind the work as well as using solution-focused counselling with individual pupils.

### ***School C: High school, Clydebank***

The school is a mainstream secondary school catering for approximately 900 pupils aged between 11 and 18. The school became involved with a project called 'Solution-orientated Schools' in 2004 that looked at developing a solution-focused ethos among staff and pupils within a mainstream environment. In its initial introduction solution-orientated work was undertaken primarily for learning and behaviour support with individual students. However, this quickly spread to the running of a staff support team and throughout the school as a whole. The work is driven by the deputy head and now underpins and supports the ethos and working of the school.

### ***School D: 4–16 behaviour and learning school, Dover***

This is a special school for students aged five to 16 with behaviour and learning needs. It was recently (2005) re-designated from a school for complex learning needs, having taken that title when the client group of moderate learning difficulty pupils had changed considerably. The researcher was the deputy headteacher with responsibility for school improvement planning at the time of this present study. The headteacher had used solution-focused counselling through his career from his days as a deputy headteacher in a residential school in London, and was keen to develop the philosophy as a support structure for staff and pupils to meet changing client need. Formal training was undertaken in 2003 in partnership with the BRIEF Therapy Practice in London, during which all staff undertook two days of training on the development of a solution-orientated approach. Since then the school has initiated a number of structural changes in order to incorporate solution-focused leadership theory and activities within its school improvement work.

## Literature review

The leader should concentrate on methodically and thoroughly exploring what the desired situation looks like. It is not a case of wiping the problem away or pretending it doesn't exist, instead it makes use of a dialogue to build solutions together. (Mahlberg and Sjoblom 2004)

Many of the principles familiar to educationalists, such as 'strategic', 'learning-centred' and 'distributed leadership' are also present within a solution-focused leadership model. Indeed, examination of many leadership styles and approaches allows these common strands to be identified. Davies (2005) identifies a key element of *strategic leadership* as a focus on its people and their interaction, their shared beliefs and values and their commitment to the commonly held values and beliefs.

The challenge is in enabling everyone in the school to make their own contribution towards creating the shared, desired future. (Davies 2005)

Strategic leadership focuses on the importance of a single leader in enabling given processes to work effectively within a school. In that sense strategic leadership models a focus on leaders themselves and their capacity for long-term direction and vision.

The concept of *learning-centred leadership* (NCSL 2003) focuses around modelling, monitoring and dialogue as the three main tools for enabling leaders to make a difference within organisations. It recognises that leadership is both contextualised and distributed, with its prime purpose being the provision of a sense of direction. Southworth (2004) recognises that learning-centred leadership utilises formal collaboration between staff to bring about an effective learning community and as such uses its methodology to produce a commitment to organisational development.

The concept of staff empowerment lies at the heart of most theories of educational leadership, and the same is true of the solution-focused leadership model. It can be argued that both learning-centred and strategic leadership provide theoretical support to the concept of effective school improvement being reliant on securing staff commitment to jointly agreed goals. Where the methodology differs with solution-focused leadership is that the solution-focused model enhances the nature of the 'dialogue' to the extent that it formalises staff interaction to produce a goal-orientated philosophy within the school.

*Distributed leadership* means multiple sources of guidance and direction. It focuses on how leadership practice is distributed among formal and informal leaders. In this sense distributed leadership is a form of collective agency incorporating the activities of many individuals in the school who work at mobilising and guiding other teachers in the process of instructional change. (Spillane, quoted in Davies 2005)

Within the distributed leadership model engaging people in leadership activities is at the heart of school improvement and organisational development. Much of the literature available indicates that greater involvement at all levels in the process of goal setting and review would increase staff capacity for contributing to whole-school goals through the empowerment and ownership of those goals. Collaboration and collegiality are themselves seen as significant factors in effective school leadership. While this may lead to a belief that simply by 'distributing' leadership, commitment can automatically be secured, distributing leadership must be done within a contextual framework and school ethos that allows for the devolving of responsibility and authority, but more importantly of trust. This trust must be developed through confidence in each other, in all levels of

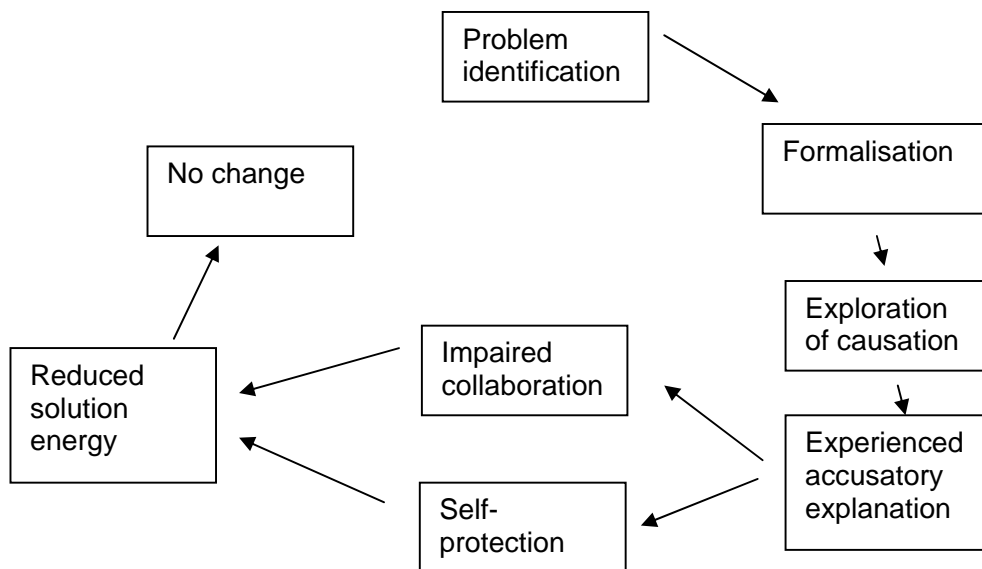


leadership, and can only be encouraged through the development of an ethos of open, honest and constructive dialogue.

There are similarities between the solution-focused approach and that of appreciative inquiry (Cooperrider and Whitney 1999). Both approaches rely on using dialogue to identify ways of solving perceived problems and on a structural and cultural change of attitude throughout the organisation to effect change. Whereas appreciative inquiry uses terms like giving 'life' to an organisational system, the solution-focused approach has a tendency towards greater simplicity and more practical tools to bring about change. The two approaches can therefore be seen as similar in intention but different in practice.

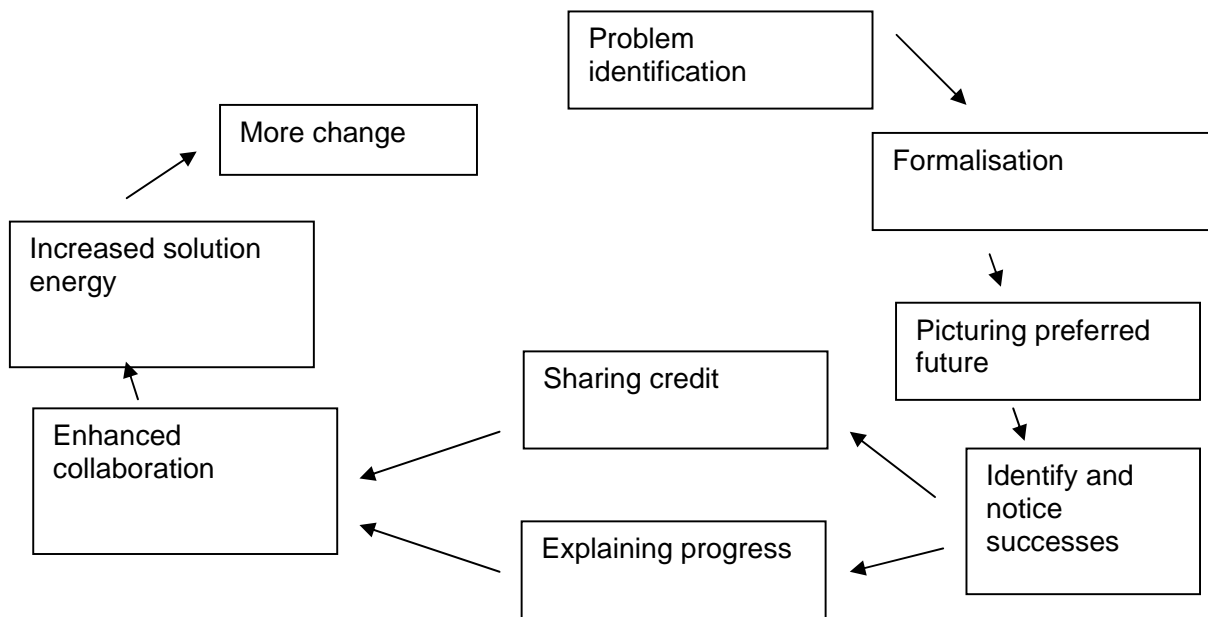
The gap between the leader's vision and the group's commitment to achieving the vision and indeed their sense of ownership of the vision is where many organisations become culturally unstuck.

Furman and Ahola (2007) have described cyclical models that contrast a *problem-maintaining cycle* with a *solution-developing cycle* of school improvement. In the 'vicious' problem-maintaining cycle, focused around the exploration of causation that in turn can lead to a culture in which accusations of blame can occur, many staff may experience feelings of self-protection and then a desire not to collaborate and work with colleagues.



For example, if a school wants to raise attainment within a particular Key Stage, it could be important to look at the differences in the attainment of the same cohort of pupils in different curriculum areas. The simplistic identification of the 'problem' subjects where pupil performance is less than other areas would then cause the teacher or subject leader within these subjects to show a tendency, quite understandably, to defend their practice. Within that environment it would be very difficult to engender collaboration and identify strategies for use across the Key Stage and therefore utilise the strengths of all the team to generate a strategy for improvement.

However the 'virtuous' solution-developing cycle encourages staff to work collaboratively towards a jointly held goal. It then becomes easy to perceive a situation where small-step successes are noted, success is shared and enhanced collaboration towards the jointly identified goal is evident.



Using the example above, raising attainment across a Key Stage can be achieved through identifying those areas where the cohort is performing better and understanding why this occurs, followed by an opportunity to investigate the possibility of doing more of what works in that area across the whole Key Stage. Areas that are 'under-performing' would not be subject to an in-depth investigation; it is simply taken as read that performance is different and the team set about identifying ways of raising attainment, sharing practice and collaborating. The culture and ethos of the team or school is as important as the process itself.

This solution-developing model serves to clarify the process of solution-focused leadership within the context of identifying solutions without apportioning blame. It forms the background model to the strategies used within the formal processes adopted by the case study schools.

How leaders lead is not the question here. The issue is what leaders can do to develop a solution-orientated culture within the school to empower staff towards continual school improvement, and the case studies suggest some key elements that have been found to be successful in this respect.

## **Findings**

The case study schools provide a cross-section of designation and age range from among those schools involved in solution-focused work. During the interview process with representative staff of these schools, a number of common themes arose and while each school placed a different emphasis on each theme, with regard to school improvement work these themes were clearly identified as being essential components to the success of solution-focused leadership within the school. Findings are therefore presented within the themes of the responses rather than in direct response to the three areas of questioning within the initial methodology. This approach should give a more comprehensive response, while maintaining the theme of the interviews.

### **Staff collaboration and cooperation in all aspects of improvement work, but particularly within teams**

#### ***School A***

The headteacher places a strong emphasis on the need for all staff to work within peer teams to examine the question of 'What are we going to do different as a school, team or department to better meet the needs of our pupils?'. "By asking questions we keep the communication and collaboration alive and the key to this is allowing staff to build their own solutions. Being a leader who asked questions also means that you have to trust staff in their abilities to solve situations" (headteacher). In addition the school directors firmly believe in the school's strength being dependent on its teams' strengths. To this end, team-building meetings form a major part of performance management and staff development within the school and all staff are aware that their contribution within these meetings is an indicator of their commitment to the ethos and values of the organisation.

Meetings start with a high profile confirmation of what has gone well since the last meeting in terms of the goals set. Staff throughout the school feel that working within non-judgemental teams enables them to feel more positive about their working life. Understanding that others have the same frustrations and difficulties in meeting the goals set at the previous meeting and allowing solutions to be suggested in a non-judgemental way allows them to feel that not only was the team helping them but also that they were making a contribution to the school working more effectively. The school has adopted the principles to the extent that all processes within the school are solution focused and therefore all staff interactions follow the same principles. Staff need to be fully committed to the principles and therefore there is a very supportive induction process. However, there is also an acceptance that working at the school will not suit everyone and staff are supported in moving on if they believe it is not for them.

#### ***School B***

The headteacher states that one of the core principles in working with middle leaders and teams within the school is empowering staff to bring in change. Doing this within team meetings needs much understanding of common language and principles and therefore the headteacher has frequently revisited solution-focused principles. Without formalising the processes she is committed to staff "feeling safe to fail"; this means that she has had to develop the emotional intelligence of the school as a whole. To this end she suggests that collaboration can only be successful if staff are comfortable in discussing problems and happy to accept that they potentially have the solution. This is

reflected through the school and the staff interviewed. The feeling was that working towards preferred futures within teams is something that is done quite naturally and that decisions were being made more effectively because people within the school were using a consistent approach (that is, a solution-focused approach). The deputy head confirmed this: "There's a positive approach to everything because the staff take it (solution focused) on board, it's not just a coincidence that the staff will take on new things it's because of the can-do culture within the school".

### ***School C***

The headteacher took up the principles of solution-orientated schools following some training undertaken by one of the deputies. Building on his belief that empowering staff enhances their ability to bring about change, he has worked closely to ensure that the teams focus on what works rather than focusing on what has gone wrong. He recognises that a keen aspect of leadership is that of providing direction, but also that if that direction has collegiality as a key principle then collaborative working can be an effective staff development and school improvement tool. The school recognises where 'pockets' of staff are working very effectively and that one of their key tasks in the future is to develop the approach across all departments. They feel that this culture change has to be supported by genuine collegiality.

From the school's perspective there is a genuine groundswell of interest from staff in incorporating solutions-orientated work and strategies into their departments. The school recognises that they have not fully incorporated solution-focused tools within staff meetings and all departments do not operate in this way. The solution-orientated schools approach came into the school through pastoral support systems focused on pupils that has grown into an effective strategy within some aspects of school improvement. The school has been recognised within the local education authority as being a leader in the way it works with staff on an individual basis and the support it gives to allow staff to develop their own solutions within their own spheres of responsibility. Staff have recognised in themselves and their departments that they have the authority to make decisions and to deliver results. "The sense of purpose I have throughout the day makes me a much more effective teacher as does knowing I have a colleague that I could go to and we [can] have a discussion", said one teacher. This reflects on the ethos within the school and suggests that the principles introduced by the school leadership are starting to have an effect on the way in which staff view their role in school. It was even indicated that staff look forward to pastoral support team meetings each week.

### ***School D***

The leadership team believe that they have incorporated much of the philosophy and approach of the solution-focused work without necessarily embedding the specific strategies within the model. The head is clear that enabling staff to contribute to daily decision making as well as strategic school direction has enabled the school to move successfully through a period of re-designation and to its last (2006) successful, 'outstanding' Ofsted inspection. While team meetings do not follow solution-focused strategies, the assistant headteachers who run the meetings do incorporate collaborative decision making within them. "It's actually about valuing people and allowing them to make a contribution without fear of being put down by colleagues or leadership", said one. The deputy head has introduced whole-school improvement planning based on individual responsibility for achievement and standards within subjects. This culminates in a whole-school improvement planning day where the results

of the school as a whole and individual subjects are analysed in respect of successes over the year, using a wide range of audit and evaluation tools. Within the joint whole-school improvement planning day, many solution-focused tools are used in order to highlight the issues, and staff feel involved in setting whole-school improvement targets. Staff feel that the opportunity to contribute to the direction of the school has made them more confident in their ability to manage the process of re-designation of school type. The headteacher places a strong emphasis on clarity and communication in order that all staff feel they are in a position to contribute to key leadership decisions.

## **The involvement of all staff in their own personal development through mentoring and modelling built on strengths, not issues for development**

### ***School A***

When undertaking their individual performance meetings the school directors place a strong emphasis on people's contribution within the team meetings. In fact, the first question of the performance meeting is 'What do you contribute to the organisation's goals and visions?'. The school has developed a principle (that has been presented at an international solution-focused conference) that they term 'coaching from behind'. This involves empowering staff to make decisions within their own working environment and that of the teams to which they contribute. It involves asking questions rather than telling staff what to do. Being a solution-focused school means that all aspects of staff interaction are affected by the solution-focused approach. Within the school this means that not only pupil counselling but also staff mentoring are done along very clear solution-focused guidelines.

The school views pedagogy as not what the teacher says or does, nor what the pupil learns, but more as an activity that is shared. This generates an approach in which mentoring and staff development engender the use of a positive dialogue in achieving solutions. Staff feel positive towards their relationship with their managers and were able to give examples of where change was possible through a constructive positive dialogue with school leadership. The school leadership team view is that they act as a model for the solution-focused approach in all they do, and that there is no divide between the time they are 'leading' and the time they are 'supporting' staff. Formal performance management is supported by frequent mentoring meetings where staff are encouraged to reflect on what has been going well in their role, as well as 'What are you going to do differently today to better meet pupil challenges?'.

### ***School B***

The headteacher stated that a key to success in her interactions with staff was the use of solution-focused language to translate 'problems' into 'solutions'. She believes that the question, 'How do you want it to be?', is a powerful starting point to individual mentoring situations. The school has no formal structure to its mentoring processes in terms of solution-focused tools and models. However, they see a clear link between the approach they have adopted and the nature of the meetings where staff are comfortable within their solution-focused discussions. The headteacher feels that a positive solution-focused approach was instrumental in securing staff commitment during the period immediately after the merger of the two constituent schools and the formation of the school. What came clearly through interviews with staff across the school was that performance management, while not formally solution-focused, did involve many 'preferred futures' questions. The emphasis in the meetings was on 'Where do you want

this to lead and how we going to get there?', which allows in their view a clear a transition into targets for improvement.

### ***School C***

One of the key messages coming through interviews with staff at all levels was the clear leadership of the deputy headteacher's approach. Within all his staff and pupil interactions he was felt to be a powerful catalyst for change through his modelling of a solution-focused approach. Staff feel that the modelling provided has given them the confidence to develop the approach themselves; without that clear leadership and commitment from the leadership team, they feel that the strategy would have had a limited impact. Staff feel that the adoption of the approach in mentoring meetings has been a positive initiative and that it has resulted in staff feeling involved in decision making about their own and the school's development.

The school is proud of its role as a pilot on coaching and mentoring of staff within an initiative by the Scottish Executive, and its involvement has been a direct result of its positive work within the solutions-orientated school programme. The school has developed a monitoring policy built around peer support as well as leadership team mentoring. This allows staff to seek solutions to issues from each other as well as from the leadership team and therefore it is felt to enhance the work done within formal training around solution-focused conversations. The school feel that mentoring has therefore become part of staff development and staff involved in the process feel more positive towards development conversations. The deputy head engages staff in solution-orientated discussion in performance management conversations and has initiated training across the whole school (including role-play and DVDs) to train other staff in the skills required. It was noted during the interviews that some staff feel that the approach could be less effective where staff are not committed to a collegiate approach. The staff feel that frequent and regular mentoring meetings and highlighting successes achieved may be necessary for some staff to believe in and adopt the approach. The school plans to formalise solutions orientation into department meetings once all department heads have had training. However, the school perceives that it is the philosophy that is important alongside formal training, and it believes that if the approach is to succeed staff need to be committed to empowering colleagues through mentoring.

### ***School D***

The school has changed its use of directed time to devolve responsibility for both curricular and pastoral initiatives and pupil standards and achievement to all staff within the school. This is supported through frequent mentoring meetings from the deputy and assistant head teachers. This is as a direct result of the school's desire to develop a solution-focused approach to its work with individual staff. Subject improvement and standards within subjects in terms of pupil achievement are now part of a year-long agenda that is evaluated within support meetings throughout the year. Staff state that although this makes them 'more accountable', they appreciate the authority this gives them to initiate strategies for improvement. The mentoring meetings held each term allow staff to inform the school leadership of successes and to work collaboratively on jointly identified improvement areas. Formal performance management is couched in solution-focused language in order to reflect the commitment of the leadership team to solutions rather than analysis of problems. Staff state that they view the process positively rather than one of performance 'appraisal'. The assistant headteachers state that the frequent mentoring meetings on both pastoral issues and those of the quality of teaching and learning are beneficial on an individual teacher basis and also beneficial to

their ability to work on departmental improvement issues. Staff state that this positive approach to what can potentially be controversial issues is extremely positive and that they value these meetings, feeling that a particular strength of the assistant heads is their capacity to 'listen' rather than 'instruct'.

### **The extent to which the specific tools are used: scaling and exception finding within staff and school improvement**

#### ***School A***

The headteacher was very clear in her belief that the use of the four clear and distinct strategies of exception finding, celebrating achievements and progress, scaling and goal setting (picturing preferred futures), are fundamental to the school's success. One key message from the interviews was that the tools used in a solution-focused way are directly applicable to whole-school working. Scaling in particular was felt to be very important in allowing staff to take ownership of their progress and improvement. The scale is 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?'.

A key message from the directors was the necessity to have confidence in using the scale and not to attempt its introduction in a half-hearted fashion. If staff perceive a lack of confidence in the tool, they believe that the tool becomes less effective.

The headteacher and her staff felt they were able to begin to identify the small steps needed to achieve their overall goal through the use of scaling and that using a scale in school improvement goal setting allowed staff to see progress being made towards goals by their work on a daily or weekly basis. This concept of using scales to recognise achievement and also to set preferred futures was seen by all staff as a vital tool. Over time staff at the school have become familiar with and excepting of the use of scales, and indeed of all the tools of the solution-focused approach, and are comfortable with their use. Staff commented on their appreciation of the use of exception finding, that is, identifying those times when success was achieved, as a structural part of their regular team meetings, their individual mentoring meetings and their contribution to whole-school improvement.

It must be noted that the school in its current format has been in operation for a number of years and therefore all staff within the organisation have 'signed up' to this as a methodology for individual and school improvement. The directors did recognise that staff not committed to these principles and the use of these tools were therefore unlikely to be able to function within the school as a whole.

#### ***School B***

The school's leadership team have taken the approach that the specifics of the tools can be adopted and adapted to meet the needs of specific school improvement issues. The use of scales to assist staff in identifying their own starting position on a specific issue has been used within staff meetings and individual staff mentoring.

It is felt by the leadership that exception finding facilitates staff focusing on the positive aspects of their achievements rather than where they may have a problem. They have used this particularly in the days and weeks following the opening of the school as a strategy for developing some whole-school approaches to difficult issues facing them at the time. The staff perceive that they still focus on 'what works' in formulating policy and

strategy, although they feel that this is not done formally using the 'tools' of solution-focused work. The deputy head recognises that within staff meetings it has been used sparingly and adapted rather than as a structural, formal part of the meeting. The deputy head also expressed the view that it was the adaptation and flexible use of both scaling and exception finding that led to their success when they were used. Indeed, there were reservations expressed at the concept of restricting meetings to a formal structure based around the tools.

### ***School C***

The school has adopted the solution-focused approach to planning team meetings. There is a formal agenda that allows for both scaling and exception finding, although the terminology has not been adopted. Staff are clear that the meetings in which this has been adopted, the pastoral team meetings, are run more time efficiently. Team meetings are felt to be more focused, with less problem-orientated discussion. A need was recognised within meetings for a 'sounding board'; this is now planned into the structure of the meeting so as not to allow degeneration into what could be a critical/negative open forum. The leadership team are proud to have been commended on how well meetings operate and are looking to extend the use of the set agenda (incorporating scaling and exception finding where appropriate) to all department meetings. In this way it is hoped that the good practice coming from the solution-focused work will build into all decision-making forums. One clear message, however, was that the model cannot simply be 'lifted and dropped into a meeting' without staff being happy with the principles of solution-focused working.

### ***School D***

The leadership team have introduced the use of scaling to whole-school improvement planning during the focused day, involving all staff. Staff are comfortable and familiar with the use of scaling in this environment and are now able to use it not only as a future planning tool but also as part of the evaluation process of success in achieving school improvement goals. Formal scales have been used to evaluate training sessions and for the staff to judge both their starting point and progress in understanding some key concepts involved with the school's re-designation. There is a plan to use both scaling and exception finding more formally during the mentoring meetings. However, some staff have expressed a reservation in believing that this may be a restriction rather than an enhancement. The leadership team believe that if introduced, the staff will take easily to increased formalisation to their professional conversations. The informal use of exception finding within departmental improvement meetings and within the setting of the departmental improvement plan is believed to be common practice by staff without necessarily applying the title. Staff are able to explain the process by which they identify 'what works' and their exploration of how they can apply that to current issues without necessarily being conscious of the fact they are undertaking a formal solution-focused activity. The headteacher has identified the tools not being used consistently and has stated this as being the principal difference in his view between adopting solution-focused tools and what he has sought to do, which is to adopt a solution-focused approach.



## **Recognising small-step achievements to facilitate staff motivation**

### ***School A***

Formal staff meetings always start with recognising the successes noticed by staff colleagues of things done well during that week. The leadership recognises that this short session ensures that each meeting starts with a positive statement. The team's aims and goals are frequently revisited during the meeting and the facilitator (manager) is able to structure the meeting, recognising any achievements towards the overall goal. Within the school day, staff see a need to celebrate their pupils' achievements, and also place a strong emphasis within staff meetings on celebrating their colleagues' achievements. The school directors also recognise, however, that a key component of staff working together is that they do not always have to agree with each other. It is the management of that 'disagreement' within a solution-focused methodology that allows potential solutions to be explored and further recognition of things that have gone well so far. In this way the team are able to recognise small-step achievements rather than focus time and energy on agreeing and examining the potential problem. Staff retention is seen as important in order to promote stability within the school, which is essential given the type of pupils with which they deal, and they therefore seek every opportunity to maintain staff motivation through team-related activities. All members of staff, from leadership to support staff, are engaged in team-building meetings on a fortnightly basis. Part of this process is to develop staff commitment to each other that is perceived as essential in achieving the organisation's goals.

### ***School B***

All staff interviewed at the school praised the leadership for the positive feedback given frequently at both formal meetings and during the course of the school day. It was commented that despite sometimes difficult situations staff felt positive as to their success, which they noted as being due to the positive and consistent feedback given by the leadership team. The headteacher is clear that staff motivation to resolving the issues facing the school at its outset was key to the successful way those issues were resolved. That motivation was due in part to the high-profile recognition of small-step achievement within staff meetings and even school assemblies. Moreover, staff recognised and responded well, despite occasional embarrassment when their achievements were given recognition among their peers. The leadership team often give formal opportunities during the course of the year to evaluate progress towards school improvement plan targets based on small-step achievements. The headteacher sees this recognition as important in making staff feel valued and by the same token that valuing staff leads to increased commitment on their part towards the overall direction of the school.

### ***School C***

The leadership team have a policy of different staff taking the lead among their peers on different initiatives. They perceive that this allows staff recognition for the work they are doing and also to feel valued as a member of the team, contributing to overall goals. The core professional purpose of solution-orientated schools is that of valuing the contribution of all, and therefore the school prides itself on recognising the achievements of its pupils and staff alike. This is validated in talking to staff, where the consistent message is given that there is frequent personal recognition from the leadership team. The school recognises that, with respect to school improvement priorities, it is sometimes difficult for staff to see the 'big picture'. They seek, therefore, to identify

smaller tasks and therefore smaller successes in achieving the overall aim within school improvement evaluation during staff meetings. It is recognised that successfully acknowledging individual achievements does not always need to take the form of formal activities and the staff at the school interviewed see recognising achievement as an integral part of their working day and value the leadership team for this. The leadership team acknowledge that some staff are not yet fully comfortable with the principles of solution-focused working, and that there are pockets within the school where this positive peer recognition ethos is not yet fully established. However, they do recognise their own small-step achievements towards making the school fully solution orientated.

### ***School D***

Regular feedback is given at the school on success from both individuals and teams in achieving many of the aims identified at the year's outset. This is done through information sharing during briefings and more formally within staff meetings. Staff 'ownership' of areas of the school improvement plan means that the staff must also have their achievements within those areas recognised, and the school utilises all opportunities to 'share the credit' for work done. The school provides an opportunity for pupils to recognise their achievements each week within assemblies and staff are encouraged to state exactly what pupils have achieved in their subject, be it work or behaviour. This has now developed to the extent that pupils can comment on staff achievement and their teaching during the week, and staff use this forum to publicly thank and support each other in front of the pupils. This indicates, and it is recognised by staff interviewed, the way in which the school values all the members of its community and has become a more emotionally literate community. Informal recognition by the headteacher of staff contribution to the school improvement plan and team goals is felt by the staff to be extremely important in recognising their impact on school development.

### **Clarity of 'goals' to enable ownership**

#### ***School A***

During the regular mentoring meetings staff are involved in recognising their part in progress made to meeting their own and the school's aims. Within mentoring meetings staff are encouraged to set themselves goals, recognising in their view that staff-formulated goals are more likely to be achieved than leadership-led ones. The school aim is for the pupils to achieve their goals. Philosophically, this makes a bold statement of the importance the school places on goals and targets. The school perceives the setting of short and long-term goals in conjunction with their pupils as being at the heart of the education process. All staff are clear about the importance of goal setting in achieving aims and see their own goals towards the school aims as being the focus of their improvement work during the year. Goal setting is always done as a collaborative process between individual staff and leadership and also within team meetings. The leadership team perceive that goals developed in a collaborative way are far more effective than those not 'owned' by the staff. When working within teams, opportunities to identify how team goals can contribute to overall goals are always examined to ensure clarity of the focus of improvement work being undertaken. A solution-focused philosophy is at the heart of all the work within the school and goal setting is no exception. The school perceives that when staff have identified the solution there is much more satisfaction when it is achieved. The leadership team clearly see their role as one of working with staff to identify solutions (goals) and to facilitate staff achieving them rather than solving problems staff may bring. All staff interviewed see the school's

aim as being to enable all staff to achieve their goals. There is therefore a very high commitment towards school improvement as both a product of, and a purpose for, personal development.

### ***School B***

The school's leadership team is the clear link between evaluation in the school self-evaluation framework and the setting of targets within the school improvement planning process. Moreover, by focusing school improvement planning on clear development areas and goals the headteacher believes that it is possible to harness staff energy towards joint goals. In addition to this, the leadership team believe that incorporating development targets for staff through performance management meetings makes it possible to ensure that the work of individuals is contributing towards the jointly set goals of the whole school. Regular meetings have been set up through the year to revisit the whole-school goals and progress towards them, and it is clear through interviews with staff that these are perceived as both useful and developmental. School improvement goals and targets are displayed prominently for all staff as visual reminders of the direction the school is travelling in during the year.

### ***School C***

"Goals matter. Without them how do we know where we are going, and how will we know if we have got there?" This statement by the headteacher indicates a clear commitment to the role of goal setting in school improvement. The tone in the statement also indicates his commitment to the concept of targets being part of a process of improvement needing constant re-evaluation, and that school improvement is part of a process that involves all staff. The leadership team perceives school improvement as what the school is doing about the issues it faces, and places a positive emphasis on how the staff would like the school to be. This gives an ownership to the preferred future of how they would like it to be rather than a 'blame storm' as to why they are facing their current issues. All staff see this as a powerful message about the ethos of the school. Performance management meetings and mentoring meetings through the year focus on individual goals and revisit them to identify progress towards them. The leadership team have adapted solution-orientated schools materials in order to pose the question, 'What would you like to achieve?' as a key element in the process. The deputy headteacher has identified that giving teams responsibility and authority is a key element in their generation of ideas and commitment to achieving them. Moreover, he believes the reverse is also true and is clear that if staff feel goals are being imposed on them there is a danger that they will perceive them as just another initiative for them to implement and therefore they never really generate commitment towards their achievement. By ensuring that subject development plans include a jointly agreed solution-orientated target staff are encouraged to see that the work they are doing in this respect is contributing to subject development and to whole-school development. Staff have commented that by clearly identifying the role of solution-orientated work within subject plans and the whole-school improvement plan they were able to see the role this methodology is playing in school improvement. As a result of this they felt that commitment was being made by the leadership team to achieving a whole-school orientation and stated that they felt supported in launching new initiatives and methods of working within the framework.

## ***School D***

Subject leaders at both primary and secondary level (known as subject partners) meet frequently to identify their own goals in terms of subject improvement and feel that the resultant delegation of autonomy alongside delegation of responsibility has given them a greater opportunity to identify and achieve their own subject goals. Subject partners are given time through the year to work on their own agenda, improvement plan and goals and the contribution that that subject is making to overall school improvement. Within the whole-school improvement planning process, achievement and standards in subjects are analysed by peers in a positive and supportive manner with strategies that have achieved success for particular groups being shared rather than apportioning blame for 'under-achievement'. The school improvement plan itself is seen by leadership and staff alike as the combination of the subject plans rather than a tier of planning sitting on top, which is owned by the leadership team alone.

By giving staff evaluations from all stakeholders, and whole-school audit information and the opportunity for honest evaluation of school development, the leadership team facilitate the formulation of the whole-school improvement plan alongside staff who share the same knowledge base. This is perceived to allow staff a greater ownership of school improvement issues and is seen to secure a greater commitment on their part to achieving the goals within it. The headteacher comments with some pride that during both Investors in People assessment and the recent 'outstanding' Ofsted inspection, that all staff were able to clearly answer questions on the strategic direction of the school, in spite of this being during a period of re-designation and a changing client group. Both Investors in People and Ofsted commented positively on the school's use of collaborative working, linked to target setting, and the commitment of all staff to achieving the school's goals.

## Conclusions

One of the key findings of the research has been that while many schools have incorporated solution-focused work in their pastoral support systems and also many have introduced pupil counselling on an individual basis, there are far fewer who have attempted to incorporate the methodology into *all* aspects of the running of the school.

Only School A in Sweden, that describes itself as offering solution-focused education, is a reliable model of the incorporation of the principles into all aspects of planning and operation. Because School A is operating as a therapeutic community within a different educational system there is a need for caution in making generalisations as to the potential application of its systems to schools in this country. However, it does appear clear that there are similarities in its operation to the manner in which the case study schools in this country are operating. It is therefore possible to begin to draw some implications from the work that are applicable even in part to schools in this country, whether they are primary, secondary or special. Indeed this is evidenced in the way that the other three schools in the research have taken the principles of solution-focused work, applied them alongside their existing ethos and values and incorporated some of the tools into the way in which decisions are made.

There are common themes from within the case studies that are supported by current leadership thinking and that may have a direct relevance and application to schools and school leadership. These can be stated as the following key principles.

### Commitment and collaboration

Schools seeking to ensure that all staff commit to the strategic elements of school improvement must ensure that the ethos within the school is supportive to self-evaluation, reflection and target setting. Where schools are seen to encourage the development of collaborative working between staff, subjects and departments, it has been apparent that these teams developed common goals and strategies for meeting pupil need alongside goals and strategies for achieving school priorities. By providing opportunities for collaborative working schools have found that teams have developed their own solutions to given issues in a creative and cooperative way, and this being the case, staff have appeared more committed to achieving the success of those solutions.

Creating a culture where staff feel confident in 'putting their head above the parapet' without fear of being put down from peer colleagues or school leadership staff comes from working together in positive team interactions and the solution-focused approach develops this methodology as a way of working.

All schools within the study reflected on the need for leadership team commitment to the adoption of a solution-focused approach. The use of many of the tools for encouraging staff contribution can quickly be negated if staff believe that their personal contribution is not appreciated or, moreover, they risk criticism for their work. Having a member of the leadership team 'driving' school improvement in a solution-focused way appears more successful in incorporating personal and team goals into the school improvement process. The reverse is also true that without leadership team commitment there is little likelihood of any strategies, tools or approaches becoming successful.

Schools have found that staff collegiality in the decision-making processes has led to a greater degree of collegiality in meeting pupil need and a greater diversity of suggestions and ideas for all aspects of school improvement. The concept that a

solution-focused school is one in which all staff are learners, prepared to investigate and attempt new strategies and approaches to ensure pupil success, is one that sits comfortably with the notions of learning-centred and distributed leadership. Staff should therefore be constantly engaged in their own processes of goal setting within this, through mentoring throughout the year, formal performance management or indeed, as a result of department or team planning.

Leaders need to allow staff to develop their own solutions to the issues facing them and also to those issues facing the school as a whole. This requires delegation of autonomy alongside delegation of responsibility. Staff devising their own improvement plans and targets are clearly more likely to work toward their success, and the same is true of staff being instrumental in devising whole-school improvement targets.

### **Applying solution-focused tools in a supportive ethos**

All schools in the study identified that the success of the implementation of solution-focused methodologies was reliant on both the application of formal solution-focused tools and the prevailing school ethos. Where schools already demonstrate commitment to staff and to staff development it appeared easier to implement the tools and strategies of the solution-focused approach. All schools were very clear to identify the need for an adaptation of the strategies to fit the particular context and circumstances of the school and that it was impossible to simply lift a model and drop it into a range of school contexts.

None of the schools in the study identified the solution-developing cycle as instrumental in their philosophy and their implementation of a solution-focused approach. They all recognised, however, the components within it as being of vital importance to the success of the approach within the school. When issues are identified in school self-evaluation, it seems apparent that there is a greater degree of success in moving those issues forward where schools engage in a positive dialogue rather than 'blame storming'. This in itself is neither new nor revolutionary but appears to be a way in which a solution-focused orientation can provide a format for that positive dialogue. There is no suggestion from any of the schools in the study that it is the only format or approach that may be applicable. Indeed all schools reflected on their philosophy and ethos as being the most essential components in providing a positive environment in which all staff could make a contribution.

School A are clearly the most solution-focused of the schools in the study, and they identified the need to use the tools discreetly and in clear and structured meetings, while appreciating the need for a philosophical commitment to the principles of the solution-developing cycle, in order to enhance the effectiveness of solution-focused working. The school's commitment to solution-focused working is such that it believes that the misuse of the specific tools would make them less effective and that if the tools are used consistently, staff become familiar and accepting of the format.

Where this school differed from the others was in its ability to operate almost independently from the mainstream educational environment and from other schools and structures; it therefore has a greater capacity for changes to the way in which staff approach their work and their commitment to the principles of solution-focused education. The fact that it is a small, independent organisation allows a good deal of flexibility in the way in which it operates. The UK study schools all identified the philosophy that permeates through the whole of the school as being as important as the formal tools used to create it, and that a solution-developing approach is important to all

aspects of school life and more significant than the adoption of a series of tools and strategies.

What is apparent is that the strength of the system is in its transparency and its commitment to the organisation's people. Without that commitment it becomes potentially, as was succinctly stated by a member of staff within one of the schools, "just another management tool for cynical staff to pay lip service to". This study indicates that a close mutually supportive relationship between ethos and solution-focused systems is very effective in securing commitment to school improvement.

### **Valuing relationships**

One of the key principles that was a theme throughout all interviews was that of staff feeling valued and that their contribution was important to the school as a whole. Phrases such as "we enjoyed 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 all four organisations. One of the overriding common themes from all those interviewed was the notion that by incorporating solution-focused methodologies to team and department meetings and interactions, staff appeared to believe that staff relationships had improved alongside a greater sense of shared purpose within their work. In addition staff also stated that they had a greater appreciation of the work and successes of other staff members.

Unsurprisingly, staff who feel valued and enjoy a positive working relationship with their colleagues and the school's leadership appear to demonstrate a greater commitment to the success of both their teams and the school as a whole.

Staff were clearly stating that having their achievements recognised enhanced their sense of well-being and enjoyment in their work and the use of the solution-focused orientation had been perceived to have brought about improved commitment to finding solutions to issues facing the school.

It seems clear that using solution-focused systems that highlight success, celebrate achievement and involve staff in identifying clear goals for improvement, has a positive effect on staff attitude and approaches to their work. However, it would be rather simplistic to suggest that this is the only methodology that can produce this result.

### **Commitment + tools + relationships = success**

Where the leader walks the walk and believes in the staff, commitment to improvement appears to be greatly enhanced. Recognising the strengths of the staff allows the school leader opportunities to build positive solutions based on them. Solution-focused working also allows staff to feel valued, which in turn leads to commitment to those valuing them and to the organisation.

Solution-focused tools also allow a framework for collaboration and potentially give staff a number of 'skills' in managing team and department interactions and can highlight the potential for the use of a solution-focused approach within school improvement work.

It is clear from the successful practice of the schools studied that any of the three elements of commitment, tools and relationships in isolation may be successful in bringing about school improvement. However, all three in partnership give the greatest potential for success.

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