Reviews

RESEARCH REVIEWS

Jessica Cashman, Kate Munro and Lisa Wyburd are all students of the Master of Teaching (School Counselling) course at the University of Sydney. They have each completed a Bachelor of Psychology (Honours) and come from a range of professional backgrounds ranging from support work within London primary schools, student support in an Australian high school, drug and alcohol counselling and research support work in hospitals. Jessica, Kate and Lisa are all novices in the use of SFBT. However, they recently had the opportunity to attend the second Australian and New Zealand Solution-Focused Conference in Sydney where they were introduced to the wide range of applications of SFBT and its strengths as an approach in many different settings. This has since inspired them to further investigate the different ways in which SFBT can be utilised in their future roles as school counsellors to benefit students and wider school communities as a whole. The articles reviewed follow this theme and cover a variety of concerns found in schools and how SFBT can be utilised to address these concerns and support students.

Lagana-Riordan, C. , Aguilar, J. P., Franklin, C. , Streeter, C. L., Kim, J. S., Tripode, S. J. & Hopson, L. M. (2011). At-risk students' perceptions of traditional schools and a Solution Focused Public Alternative school. ***Preventing School Failure: Alternative Education for Children and Youth,*** **55(3), 105–114.**

This US study investigates the use and effectiveness of SFBT as a framework in supporting at-risk students as part of a whole-school environment. At-risk students make up a large proportion of the student population in the US, with these students often facing significant problems such as school

drop-out, teenage pregnancy, drug and alcohol use and criminal activity (National Center for Educational Statistics 2007; Aloise-Young & Chavez 2002). Kleiner, Porch, & Farris (2002) reported that the development and use of alternative schools has increased dramatically in the US over the last 15 years to cater for the needs of at-risk students who, for a variety of reasons, were unsuccessful in traditional schooling. Kelly, Kim, & Franklin (as cited in Lagana-Riordan et al., 2011, p. 106) have also demonstrated that the educational flexibility offered by alternative schools has led to better educational outcomes and increased graduation rates for at-risk students within these settings. The purpose of this current study was to explore the educational and social benefits that a Solution Focused Alternative School (SFAS) could offer at-risk students as opposed to traditional schools. The authors also felt it was important to provide these students with an opportunity to express their opinions and perceptions around attending a SFAS through the use of qualitative research methods.

The SFAS in this study was opened in 1998 and possessed eight major characteristics that aligned it with a SF framework. These included:

1. Emphasis on building upon students' strengths
2. Attention to individual relationships and student progress
3. Emphasis on student responsibility and choice
4. Trust in students' evaluations
5. Focus on students' potential for success rather than past difficulties
6. Reliance on goal-setting activities
7. Celebration of small steps towards success.

The student population of the SFAS at the time of the study stood at 374 students, with a sample of 33 students ranging from 16 to 19 agreeing to participate in semi-structured qualitative interviews as part of the study. The interview questions

explored areas such as the students' relationships, their experiences in attending an alternative school as compared to their experiences in their previous schools, and whether attending the SFAS has enabled them to succeed and overcome any negative personal experiences.

A case study approach was used to analyse the qualitative data with a number of themes emerging. Overall the results indicated that the students perceived many shortcomings in their previous experiences in traditional schools and demonstrated positive perceptions of their experiences at the SFAS. The main themes identified in relation to the students' experiences in traditional schools contributing to their lack of success included:

- Poor teacher/student relationships
- Rigid discipline and rule structures
- Judgemental and deficit-focussed attitudes
- A negative overall atmosphere within the school both regarding peer relationships and teacher regarding student relationships.

The students were able to recognise the pressure that teachers were often under in traditional schools with large class sizes and rigid management, and acknowledged that this would have had an effect on their relationships with teachers.

Alternatively, the main themes that emerged with regard to the students' experiences in the SFAS revealed:

- Highly positive student/teacher relationships
- An expectation of maturity and responsibility on students
- Greater understanding and empathy from the teachers towards the students' unique social situations
- Better peer relationships fostering a more supportive environment as a whole.

The students felt that the teachers at the SFAS were able to give them more individual attention, flexibility and understanding with regard to their specific learning and social

needs. The students felt that the expectation of maturity and responsibility gave them ownership of their own goals and actions which then extended beyond the classroom. The students also expressed that the overall environment at the SFAS was very different to their previous schools in that teachers and peers held a positive, future-focussed attitude based around each student's strengths and potential.

There are numerous implications that can be drawn from this study with regard to how schools can implement facets of a SF framework to better support at-risk students as well as the student population as a whole. This article provides a detailed range of suggestions and practical strategies that can be used in all schools to best support students in relation to the qualitative results found in this study. The authors have also ensured that the strategies employed within the SFAS are presented in a manner that can be transferable to traditional school settings, which is a highly positive facet of this article. Although this study has a limited scope in that it only investigates one SF school setting (the authors have found few SF programs in existence in schools), it has clearly demonstrated a range of educational, social and wellbeing benefits from their attendance. In my future role as a school counsellor, it is my hope to support students and teachers as well as support the school environment as a whole. The findings and strategies discussed in this study could provide school counsellors, along with teachers and school executive staff, with some practical foundations that might support schools to move towards a more positive, strengths-based, SF framework to support at-risk students and the student population as a whole.

References

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Kvarme, L. G., Aabø, L. S. & Sæteren, B. (2013). "I feel I mean something to someone": solution-focused brief therapy support groups for bullied schoolchildren. *Educational Psychology in Practice*, *29*, 416-431.

Approximately one quarter of Australian children aged 9 to 14 report being bullied every few weeks, and up to one in ten students report engaging in bullying behaviour (Cross et al., 2011). Both bullying victimisation and perpetration can have negative impacts on students' overall wellbeing (Hemphill et al., 2011; Perren et al., 2010). Research shows that programs aimed at reducing bullying in schools are most successful when they are targeted at both the individual and school environment level (Farrington & Ttofi, 2009). Students may be protected against bullying through peer support and friendship (Kendrick, Jutengren, & Stattin, 2012). Hence, one way in which bullying behaviour may be addressed in schools is through the use of targeted support groups for individuals experiencing bullying.

The aim of Kvarme, Aabø and Sæteren's 2013 study was to examine the experience of a SFBT support group for both bullied students and their peers. The study employed a qualitative design involving individual and focus group interviews. A total of 19 children aged 12 to 13 were included in the study. Three students identified as experiencing bullying at school, and the remaining 16 students participated in the support groups. The aim of the first support group session was to develop empathy for the victim of bullying. Subsequent support group sessions focused on identifying any improvements that had been made since the last meeting and suggestions for how to improve the situation further.

The results from individual interviews with bullied children

revealed that the bullying stopped after the student received help from the support group. Further, the bullying had not recurred three months post-intervention. Qualitative analyses of the interview data revealed three main themes; students' perceptions of school changed from them feeling frightened to feeling safe, from feeling isolated to feeling included, and from being invisible to being visible. Results of the focus group interviews revealed that support group students experienced positive feelings such as friendship, trust and social inclusion. The support group also reported an increase in self-confidence and self-esteem. Further, students from the support group reported improvements in their classroom-learning environment following the intervention. Despite these positive improvements, a small number of support students reported conflict, bullying by the victim, fear of being unpopular, and social exclusion following the intervention.

In reviewing this article it is evident that SFBT support groups may be used as an effective tool for reducing bullying in schools. As well as the effects noted, there were additional effects within the classroom, with students reporting improvements in the environment of their classes and their learning experiences. Within the Australian school context, the development of SFBT support groups is something that could be implemented by the school counsellor, in liaison with teaching staff and parents. Bullying is a key referral question for school counsellors. By working with the bullied student and their peers to create a focussed SFBT support group, the counsellor may be able to facilitate positive change for individual students, their peers, and for the school as a whole.

It should be noted that this was an exploratory qualitative study with a relatively small sample size. Further, no control group was employed in the research design. Hence, the results of this study must be interpreted with caution. Nevertheless, it provides an important starting point for future research into the use of SFBT support groups for reducing bullying in schools. Future research should explore the effects of an SFBT support group in comparison to a control group. Quantitative methods, such as the use of psychometric pre- and

post-intervention measures, should be employed to examine the effects of the intervention in conjunction with students' subjective perceptions of the support group. Further, SFBT techniques should be examined in the broader context of whole-school policies and procedures. Overall, this study provides a promising starting point for the use of SFBT to target bullying within school settings.

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Daki, J. & Savage, R. S. (2010). Solution-focused Brief Therapy: Impacts on Academic and Emotional Difficulties. *The Journal of Educational Research*, *103*, 309–326.

Remedial reading interventions, which target phonological awareness and other reading related-skills, have been shown to be efficacious for most young students with reading difficulties (Denton, Fletcher, Anthony & Francis, 2006). However, across many studies, an average of 5% of students continue to experience reading difficulties beyond their primary years (Torgesen, 2002). Daki and Savage note that these children experience behavioural, attentional and socio-emotional difficulties. For example, this population are at a higher risk of developing depression and anxiety (Kavale & Forness, 1996; Wilcutt & Pennington, 2000).

Group therapy, cognitive-behavioural approaches and self-directed learning have shown some efficaciousness in addressing these academic and non-academic needs. However, Daki and Savage note that the results vary, with a lack of focus on efficacy for students with reading difficulties. They aimed to extend the research on the role of SFBT to support the motivational, social and emotional needs of students for whom reading difficulties persist beyond primary years.

Identifying methodological shortcomings, the authors chose a randomised control trial (RCT) experimental design with the 14 students ranging from 7–14 years of age matched on chronological age and randomly assigned to either the SF intervention program or a control condition consisting of homework help. The children already attended remedial reading programs at two learning centres in Montreal and ranged from no specific learning diagnoses to diagnoses (co-morbid in some cases) of dyslexia, ADD/ADHD, or an intellectual disability. Additionally, measures of the students reading skills, motivation, self-perception and socio-emotional functioning were taken before and after the intervention, with students participating in two pre-test assessment sessions, six program sessions and two post-test assessment sessions.

The SF program incorporated a number of the main tenets of SFBT, namely discussion of exceptions, framing and discussion of a miracle question and scaling. Discussion of "what's better", reflective of the strengths-based nature of SFBT, was also a mainstay in all of the sessions. Daki and Savage incorporated a number of creative tasks in the SF program (e.g. working with pictures, or making collages), because some of the students were too young to benefit from exclusively verbal interventions and it also provided visual representations of goals and strategies for the children. The control group received help with their maths and science homework, with the research assistants running this condition instructed to avoid reading with the children or engaging in reading related discussions. However, on reflection it was noted that participants in the control condition were found to participate in literacy activities (rhyming games, spelling) for 25% of the program. Despite this accidental participation in literacy activities in the control condition, the SF approach was noted to be "superior to the homework support condition in addressing the needs of students with reading problems" (p. 320).

The SFBT intervention generated larger effects than the control condition in the majority of measures. These large effect sizes were consistent over both the academic and socio-emotional measures. For example, students in the SF group showed improvement in listening comprehension and reading fluency with large effect sizes, despite the SF condition not incorporating a literacy skills training component. Daki and Savage posited that this improvement in literacy scores could be attributed to the development of meta-cognitive skills, a by-product of SFBT with its focus on reflective questioning. With reference to reading motivation, the SF group improved in their competence beliefs and social supports. The SF group displayed improvements in their self-perception of their general intelligence, reading and writing skills relative to their control counterparts. Self-appraised behaviour, conduct and physical attractiveness also increased, with effect sizes again large. Finally, psycho-emotional functioning within the SF

group also improved with students reporting a gain in attitudes to school and teachers along with a decrease in anxiety.

While it must be noted that the external validity of this intervention may be limited due to the small sample size, range in age and co-morbid diagnoses of students, I agree with Daki and Savage that such findings indicate that the "SF approach can be used effectively with struggling readers" (p.322). Furthermore, this study's findings are promising and quite powerful support for the use of SF interventions within the school microcosm. It is here where the school counsellor, the 'expert' on SFBT, can act as the guiding force for the practical implementation and success of such interventions. The results of this study suggest that the supplementation of a remedial reading intervention combined with a number of SF sessions would lead to the improved development of essential learning skills, gains in confidence and engagement and the further enhancement of existing programs. Furthermore, SF techniques such as focusing on strengths and pursuing personally meaningful goals would serve well to be implemented within both the school and home environment for this population of students. Parental involvement is particularly key, with reading experiences within the home noted as important in the development of reading skills (Baker, 2003 as cited in Daki & Savage, 2010). The findings and implications discussed in this study provide the school counsellor, as well as teachers and parents, with efficacious and practical foundations to address both the academic and non-academic needs of students with enduring reading difficulties.

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