



By **Kerstin Mählberg**, **Maud Sjöblom** and **Mark McKergow**

Solution Focused Education

Remember times when you've had difficult pupils in your class and were at your wits end. Nothing seems to work and everything you do makes things worse. If you would like to find out about a practical new approach that's working with some of the most difficult pupils in the country, read on...

The country concerned is Sweden. We (Kerstin and Maud) are involved with the FKC Mellansjö special school near Stockholm. The school offers treatment for around 30 pupils between the ages of 7 and 16 with various school-related problems, who have been persistently excluded. Our pupils stay for two or three terms before returning to the normal school system. As you can imagine, we have some of the toughest pupils in the Stockholm area, and they require careful handling!

We work with a methodology called Solution Focused Education (SFE). This permeates every aspect of the school, from teaching strategies to counselling, to dealing with parents. We developed SFE from the Solution Focused Brief Therapy method, which we were using with good effect for treatment.

This provides a wonderfully positive and pragmatic framework – all staff are very skilled in the approach, which offers some fascinating alternatives to conventional teaching methods. This approach is now being used in schools all over the world, including the UK. Indeed, it now forms part of the DFES national strategy on managing behaviour (see references for more information).



A two-pronged approach

In SFE we build solutions together with the pupils, instead of the more traditional way where the teacher is supposed to have all the answers to every problem. SFE consists of two main prongs: a solution focused approach and a conversational methodology. This gives us ‘two steady legs’ to stand on.

The solution focused approach

When something is wrong, it’s important to examine the problem closely and understand it, so we know what to do next. Or is it? This approach – what we call ‘problem focus’ – is the opposite of a solution focused approach. It is normal and logical, and works well at fixing your car. But does it work as well at fixing your pupils? We don’t think so.

Taking a Solution Focused approach, we move quickly away from the problem to examine something much more interesting: what we want to happen, otherwise known to us as the solution. Once we know and agree about what’s wanted, we can start to look for it happening already, to find out more about what helps it to happen, and how we can take small steps to build on what is helping already.

This sounds very simple, but it is remarkably effective when applied skilfully. The idea leads us to several practical strategies to use in the classroom (see table on page 54).

Focus on resources

In our experience, teachers often pay attention to the pupil’s lack of knowledge e.g. spotting spelling mistakes. We think that focusing on the pupil’s competence and ability is an invaluable aid to our teaching; being told what he is doing well helps the pupil get closer to his goal. When we let the pupil do more of what he already is good at, he will start to succeed and his self-confidence will grow. When he is self-confident, it is easier to try something new.

By focusing on what works and by talking about it a lot and often, you will find that things improve. When people discuss what works, this discussion

is naturally accompanied by a positive mood change and the brain receives positive signals, which often leads to behaviour that is even more positive. Moreover, when we tell the parents about all the good things, they will support their child even more and virtuous circles arise.

Focus on positive change

Sometimes we act like detectives, searching for tiny changes and improvements. This change is then emphasised to make it visible to everyone. Then we encourage the pupil to do more of the same.

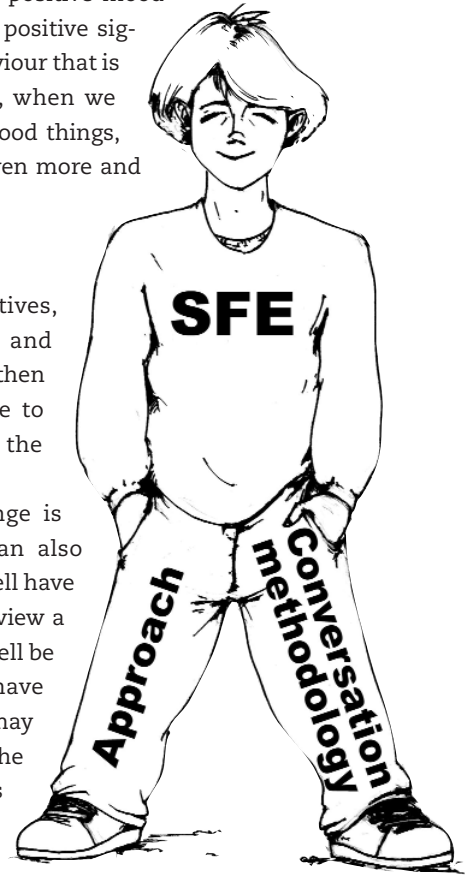
When we accept that change is natural and inevitable, we can also assume that something may well have improved when we come to review a problematic situation. It may well be the case that some things have deteriorated, but other things may also be better. It is here – on the improvements – that we focus our attention.

Focusing on what works is to us a much more enjoyable way of working. Moreover, it is not only fun to us, but we can also see how pupils and parents are happier when they are in school.

Conversational methodology

We find the use of creative questions (sometimes known as process questions), to be an important communication tool for the teacher. With creative questions, we set the listener’s internal dialogue in motion. New perspectives are envisaged and worked through, and thoughts are finally articulated through speech. More of the brain’s cognitive functions are stimulated.

The purpose of creative questions is to gain greater access to the thoughts, attitudes and emotions of pupils, than simple ‘yes’ and ‘no’ questions



Solution Focused Education – two steady legs to stand on



Stepping from problem focus to solution focus



Maud Sjöblom has worked as a teacher at FKC Mellansjö since 1985. She is a special educationalist and has a supervisor's degree.



Kerstin Mählberg is the Headteacher at FKC Mellansjö special school. She has worked there since 1986, has a Headteacher's degree and is also part of the FKC leadership group. Contact her via kerstin.mahlberg@fkc.se and find out more about FKC Mellansjö at www.fkc.se.



Mark McKergow is a consultant, speaker and author who has pioneered the use of solution focused approaches in management. Contact him via mark@mckergow.com

Kerstin and Maud are co-authors of *Solution Focused Education* (ISBN 91-631-2943-4), published in English in 2004 and available from Teaching Expertise at £13.99.



Problem Focus

- What's wrong must be fixed
- What is the problem?
- Analysis of what's wrong
- Failures
- Victim
- Isolated (blamed)
- Hopelessness / despair

Solution Focus

- Finding what's working leads to progress
- What do we (all) want?
- Focus on preferred future
- Successes
- Survivor
- Partnership (empowered)
- Expectation of change

– closed questions. Since 'why' questions often lead to resistance, we prefer to use creative questions that are more likely to keep the dialogue flowing. It is important to reflect on what type of questions we use and what type of response these questions might elicit. The quality of the question determines the quality of the response.

Goal-setting questions

- What do you want to explore?
- What is important for you when you are working with your classmates?
- What would you like your future to be like?

Participation is a key word nowadays. One way to involve pupils is to encourage them to set their own goals, using creative questions; to elicit what they want to get out of their schoolwork and ultimately what they want to achieve in life.

Scaling questions

- On a scale from zero to ten, where ten is "the thing we want", where are you today?
- How come you are that high and not lower? What else?
- What would take you one point up the scale?

Scaling is one of the most valuable tools in SFE. One example of its usefulness is when we want to encourage the pupil to take his first small step towards his own goal. Our experiences are that it is important for the teacher to focus on finding out what the pupil is already pleased about, whatever scaling he chooses. Quiet pupils feel more comfortable when we ask them only to answer with a number. Then it does not involve the expectation that the pupil needs to talk a great deal, and for this reason, it is less demanding. While this is quite true, the question still triggers the reflective process.

Most pupils find it easy and fun to answer scaling questions. Sometimes we use the classroom walls as measuring instruments. For pupils (and teachers) who tend to see everything in black and white, this type of scaling makes it clear to them that there are many ways of describing what exists

between zero and ten, what's already going well and how we can build on that with a small step.

Future-oriented questions

Asking questions about the future and making it alive in the present, means that the pupil is actively influencing and constructing his own future. One question we often pose in the morning to our pupils is, "Imagine it is time for you to go home and you are feeling satisfied with your day. What have you been doing during the day?"

These future-oriented questions share the same purpose of encouraging pupils to reflect on and describe their ideal situation. Once our minds have constructed a positive image of the future, the possibility of living it becomes so much greater.

In this short article we can only present a few of the practical strategies resulting from the shift from problem to Solution Focus in education. There are many more ideas in the references suggested below. **TEX**

References:

You can download notes on using Solution Focus as a positive approach to managing behaviour at:

www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/primary/publications/banda/940075/ba_cpdcd173305modb.pdf

Yasmin Ajmal and Ioan Rees, *Solutions In Schools: Creative Applications of Solution Focused Brief Thinking with Young People and Adults*, BT Press, London (2001)

Paul Z Jackson and Mark McKergow, *The Solutions Focus: The SIMPLE Way to Positive Change*, Nicholas Brealey Publishing (2002)

Linda Metcalf, *Teaching Toward Solutions: A Solution Focused Guide to Improving Student Behaviour, Grades, Parental Support and Staff Morale*, Crown House Publishing (2003). Available from **TEX** price £19