

# Introducing SF: Learning Lessons from the Field

The Shift from Problem Solving to Solution Oriented Therapy  
in a Child Welfare Organisation

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## Abstract

*This paper explores the journey of our team of social services personnel as we shifted from problem-focused-deficit-oriented to SF strength-based work. This change in paradigm was difficult for a few workers and threats of abandonment were heard amongst them. This paper presents some lessons learnt on what is important when a new method such as SF is introduced in a child welfare organisation from the perspective of a team member.*

## Introduction

Whilst it is generally accepted that to be an effective practitioner, a social worker needs to work from a theoretical base, historically social workers have exhibited a reluctance to embrace theory. Research has been considered irrelevant, obscure, abstract and untranslatable in terms of direct work with clients. Some practitioners have gone so far as to believe that becoming too theoretical will cause a social worker to lose touch with the realities of social work. This leads to social workers not benefitting from the clarity that theory can bring to practice and we end up with a split where sides are drawn up: the anti-theoretical or the theoretical and the anti-intellectual or the intellectual within our profession. Jones (1996) states that this hostility within social workers can be linked to the peculiarities of British social work education:

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“British social work education is also unique in its anti-intellectualism and its hostile stance to the social sciences. Since 1975 there has been an ongoing process of theoretical stripping-out of the social work curriculum. In its place students are increasingly confronted with a mish-mash of methods, skills and values teaching, often lacking in any coherence.” (Jones, 1996, cited in Trevithick, 2000, p. 12).

This is the setting in which we embarked on our journey of being trained in the new methodology.

### **The beginning**

In January 2012, after an exciting and energetic recruitment process for this new Adolescent Intervention Service, approximately twenty social service employees were brought together to experience our first taste of SF. In addition to that twenty personnel were individuals from other established services within Essex County Council, bringing the total to approximately thirty, plus individuals being trained in this method. For many this was their first exposure to this kind of intervention, some of us had some working knowledge and I had received some “brief” 2-day training in this method. We started with enthusiasm in January, then we slipped into a sea of uncertainty between June and July 2012. Our July training session could be viewed as mutiny on the bounty, with the sailors ready to overthrow the admiral. Many questions were asked and as we progressed some answers were beginning to come from our administration. A sense of competency was emerging in the workers’ practice and by the end of the first year, March 2013, evidence of the effectiveness of the work was starting to show.

## **Lessons learned from the implementation of the model**

The implementation of the model evoked the following issues:

1. How was the decision made as to the chosen methodology of intervention? Was there consultation with academia to provide research input from inception to identify the evidence base for using this approach with this population?
2. Complementary to the introduction of SF was the model of supervision which would be used by the managers. Consistency in the delivery of SF supervision by all managers was important. Although all managers received training in SF, not all of them applied SF in supervision.
3. Ensuring fidelity to the intervention and consistency at all levels, i.e. consultation, supervision, leadership, meetings and case discussions. The presence of SF as a golden thread being fed through from the highest level in the organisation to the lowest rung was essential. Critical to the success and generalisation of this method within our service was the organisational behaviour to grow the knowledge/expertise within our service. During the initial implementation of the intervention there was some role confusion when working with families due to the free flowing method of tasks instead of having tasks specific to roles. This led to the assignment of Primary and Secondary workers with specific tasks assigned to each role. This provided transparency for the families receiving the support.
4. We needed to develop SF tools for collecting information, tools that supported the decision making process. The process of developing and implementing these tools began during the first year and continued into the second year. They had the purpose of measuring the impact of small changes on the family functioning, the effectiveness of the worker's intervention and to serve as a guide for further improvement.

The chart below represents a comparison of the different perspectives that impacted the implementation of SF.

<b>Solution Focused</b>	<b>Local Authority</b>
Solution Focused	Problem Focused
Strengths	Deficits
Future Focused	Past Focused
No recording of sessions	Mandatory recording of sessions
Need to find alternative ways of working	Resistant Family
Client as expert	Worker as expert
Seeking to find exceptions	Seeking to find repeated incidents
Listening	Telling
Client led	Legislation led
Externalise the problem (the problem is the problem)	Internalise the problem (the person is the problem)

5. As an Agency who tends to be risk averse, introducing SF meant having to come out of the seat of power and balance out the relationship with the family and respecting and acknowledging that we were not the expert in the families' lives but they were.

### **Next steps in implementing SF**

The next steps that are being implemented by the Service are:

- the development of an evaluative instrument to measure how well the workers applied their new skills to supporting their families,

- to consider how flexible the workers are and their ability to change and work with families,
- change in the workers' language when interacting with or discussing the families,
- collaboration with universities,
- greater use of technology,
- continued support for practitioners using the model, and
- development of a road map for work for the practitioner, yet remaining faithful to the SF model.

## **Conclusion**

The use of SF as an intervention when working with families in a child welfare setting empowers not only families but also practitioners. The families become an active member in their treatment plan. The practitioner because of the inclusive empowering nature of the intervention loses the power of being the expert on the family's lives. A shift in the practitioner's thinking and actions occurs; they become respectful in their interaction with the families and engage in active listening. Key to the success of this intervention is in-depth training prior to working with families, as the danger exists that unskilled practitioners will revert back to their familiar style of intervention, resulting in a blending of interventions. The continued development of workers and leaders as SF practitioners will result in the consistent delivery of the service and create powerful outcomes for our families.

## **References**

- Trevithick, P. (2000). *Social Work Skills: A Practice Handbook*. Buckingham, UK: Open University Press.

**Marva Furlongue-Laver** received her Bachelor of Arts degree in Human Relations from Pace University New York and a Master of Science in Social Work from Columbia University. Her almost 30 years of social work practice have engaged her in programme development, therapeutic interventions in psychiatric facilities working with co-morbid diagnosis and supervision. She developed a program for students with emotional behavioural disability in Florida, practised social work in the UK for 4 years, first as a senior practitioner in a frontline child welfare team in Essex County, and then as a Team Manager in a Secondary Team, preventing young people from entering the care system through the use of strength-based intervention. She has now returned to the USA and is working in Miami Schools supporting youths that were in residential placement in their transition into a community-based education programme. [flaver98@yahoo.com](mailto:flaver98@yahoo.com)