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BOOK REVIEW**Solution Focused Practice in Schools: 80 Ideas and Strategies**

Yasmin Ajmal and Harvey Ratner

Routledge, 2020, 152 pages, ISBN 9781138640221, £88.00 hardback, £18.39 paperback, £18.39 ebook

Review by Guy Shennan

Solution-focused practitioner, consultant and trainer (UK)

One of the success stories of solution-focused practice (SFP) concerns its application in education. One of the main contributors to this success in the UK, unsurprisingly enough, has been BRIEF, the London-based training and clinical center. At the heart of this contribution - and I hope her co-writer of this excellent book will not mind me saying this - has been Yasmin Ajmal. This is the third book concerning SFP and schools that Yasmin (I hope I can be excused the informality and familiarity of using the authors' forenames, as I worked alongside them for some years) has been involved in, the first two being on the indie label of the BT Press (Ajmal & Rees, 2001; Rhodes & Ajmal, 1995), before this step up to the majors with Routledge. The earlier books are well worth seeking out, and yet this is the first one that really does justice to Yasmin's multitude of ideas on applying the approach in schools and her wonderful way of communicating them. Many people will have experienced this by attending one of Yasmin's training courses, and it is welcome indeed that many more will now be able to, via the medium of a book.

In foregrounding Yasmin in these opening comments, I do not mean to downplay the role played by Harvey Ratner, as the partnership is an important one. Much of the value of the book comes from his continuous involvement over more than 20 years with a secondary school (high school) in London, as a counsellor and coach. It also builds on the book Harvey co-wrote on brief coaching with children and young people (Ratner & Yusuf, 2015). There is some overlap between these two books, though what the latest one adds, as well as the exposure to Yasmin's work, is the wide range of applications the solution-focused approach can have in schools beyond direct work with individual children.

Although the book is sub-titled "80 ideas and strategies" - a useful and common marketing device nowadays - it actually contains many more than that. The number refers to the way the book is structured, as it contains eight parts that contain 80 separate sections between them. The first part provides a useful introduction to SFP, and its ninth section, "Adapting SFP to work in schools", constitutes a microcosm of the whole book. It probably contains 20 to 30 useful ideas and strategies on its own, so the sub-title might more accurately have replaced 80 with 2000.

The section includes various ideas about one-to-one work with students, as well as using SFP in everyday situations, with staff, and in the classroom. It also includes transcripts from work with a nine-year-old boy and a conversation with a head teacher, and suggestions for how to develop a five-minute conversation that builds on what is already working. I cannot resist mentioning in passing that the former transcript includes one of my favorite ever solution-focused responses. Freddie had described how he would enter the classroom on a good day, and the practitioner asked about an *instance* of this having happened: "Have you done that before, gone into class like that?" "No", Freddie stolidly replied. Undeterred, the practitioner came back with, "Wow, so that would be a real first".

As well as transcripts, the many real-life examples and stories throughout the book enhance its potential usefulness as a guide to applying the approach. Lots of the ideas come from teachers and other school staff themselves, which is the best evidence for their usability. After the introduction, the other parts include conversations with whole classes, individual work, consultations and meetings, groupwork, and creative adaptations for younger children. Creativity runs throughout the book, including this response suggested for when a student says they are at 10 on the scale: "What will an 11 look like?" Given the penchant for giving questions names, not least at BRIEF (The Best Hopes Question etc.), I am going to call this one The Spinal Tap Question.

One of the effects of the numbering structure is to make the book easy to dip into. Someone coming new to SFP - and the book will be relevant to newcomers to the approach as well as those more experienced in it - would be well advised to read all of Part 1 first. After that, Parts 2 to 6 can be consulted according to the role and interests of the

specific reader. It is probably not a book to read from cover to cover, as I think Parts 2 to 5 in particular might then feel a little repetitive, as the SFP structure and process is set out in a similar fashion in the range of contexts covered. Part 7, being a more extended account and transcript of a piece of work with one particular student, will repay careful study. The final Part 8 is something quite different, and provides a nice coda, focusing as it does on an educational research project Yasmin undertook in Zanzibar with her head teacher husband. Needless to say, they approached this in a solution-focused fashion, and it is an engaging and useful read.

I am very conscious of writing this review for a solution-focused journal. While there is much to learn from this book for existing solution-focused practitioners (and not just those working in schools - I am currently providing training for housing support workers, and I found that reading it was sparking lots of ideas for this), I think the readership who will benefit most from Yasmin and Harvey's book are those working in schools. The best recommendation I can make to anyone reading this review is to buy at least one copy, to give as a present to a teacher you know. If you are working in a multi-agency or multi-disciplinary setting, mention it to the education people you encounter. And help to spread the word from our solution-focused confines to the wider world outside. Let's crank it up to 11!

References

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The reviewer

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