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Counseling Toward Solutions: A Practical, Solution-Focused Program for Working with Students, Teachers, and Parents -Written by Linda Metcalf

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BOOK REVIEW**Counseling Toward Solutions: A Practical, Solution-Focused Program for Working with Students, Teachers, and Parents**

Linda Metcalf

Routledge, 2021, 214 pp, ISBN 9780367640903, £35.99 (pbk); £32.39) (eBook) (Third revision of this book, but the first with Routledge)

Review by Leah Davcheva

 Coach and Solutions Focus Business Professional

“Inside every elder branch, there is a flute – your job is to find it” (Metcalf, 2021, p. 24).

The news about the third revision of Linda Metcalf’s book got me doubly curious. Having been gratefully using her *Field Guide to Counseling Toward Solutions* (2008) with school teams, I was keen to see what the new *Counseling Toward Solutions* (2021) was offering. And secondly, a couple of days before I got the manuscript for review, I met a friend of mine, a school counselor, who was telling me how much her freshly emerging professional community needed resources to support members towards making progress in their work. All throughout the review writing task, I have been trying to imagine what difference the book might make to the practices of my friend and her counselor colleagues should they choose to have it in their hands. What might they be able to do better?

Dr Metcalf describes the audience and purpose of her book as “... school counselors [...] working alongside students, parents, teachers, and everyone on the school campus, engaging them in decreasing misbehaviors, encouraging mental health, and growth mindset” (Metcalf, 2021, p. iii). Herself an all level school counselor, a licensed professional counselor supervisor, former teacher, and author of 11 books and numerous articles, the author supports her readers on their Solutions Focus route and welcomes them to a school world where possibilities are created. Dr Metcalf does so by seamlessly blending together the principles of solution-focused conversations, systemic thinking and narrative therapy techniques.

The author has organized her book around two parts, more or less equally sized, with five chapters in each. *Basics Behind the Approach* is the title of the first part. As the title suggests, the emphasis here is on the fundamental principles of solution-focused work in the domain of school counseling. Notwithstanding the seriousness of the task, her language is simple, ‘theory’ is elegantly accessible, and examples abound. Dr Metcalf’s extensive experience makes for the richness of content, a theory-in-the service-of-practice approach and an unwavering hopeful stance.

In the first chapter, titled *Learning to think with a Solution Focus*, Dr Metcalf focuses on ways of being a solution-focused school counselor. She creates a strong conceptual canvas weaving in the threads of Solutions Focus principles, conversation scripts, case studies, work sheets, and training exercises.

In chapter Two, *Creating Possibilities Through Language*, the author urges school counselors to grasp the role of language in constructing counseling action. She treats her readers to lively accounts from her own practice, e.g. a) working with re-descriptions and new descriptions, to the purpose of replacing the stubborn use of labeling, (b) re-authoring, i.e. encouraging school clients to think of who they wish to be, (c) using presuppositional language to afford an optimistic look into the future, (d) composing powerful questions, and (e) using appropriate language to articulate exceptions so that clues are provided to developing solutions for change. Here is an interesting metaphor about the use of exceptions:

The exceptions are the music of the solution-focused approach. [...] many counseling tasks fail when school clients are asked to do tasks that are new tasks or so foreign to them that they simply do not have the skills to carry them out. [...] letting exceptions become the solutions [...] because the school client has done them before (Metcalf, 2021, p. 40).

Chapter Three, *Solution-Focused Conversations*, abounds in snippets of conversations addressing a variety of critical school situations. The author brings together key notions from the previous two chapters to outline a conversational process involving three solution-focused steps:

1. Find out the best hopes of the school client
2. Design a preferred future with the school client
3. Discover exceptions to create confidence for success

Chapter Four, titled *Reviving Piaget: Helping Teachers to Become Solution Focused*, comes across as strongly persuasive. There is no point whatsoever in leaving teachers out of the counseling loop. Respectfully, yet firmly, the author invites school counselors to consider guiding teachers into “solution-focused land” (Metcalf, 2021, p. 79). Collaboration and admiration for what teachers already know and do are key. By stepping into the worldview of teachers, meeting them there, using their language, counselors are seen as allies in the development of a better context for change to occur.

Applications of the Approach is the title of the second part of the book. Its opening chapter, *Supporting All Students through Challenges*, is my favorite for its explicit and decisive emphasis on working with ‘all students’. Seeing all students, teachers, and parents, regardless of diversities, as persons who have wishes or goals for their life, is a guiding principle for the conversations school counselors hold with them. Less easily visible perhaps, and yet strongly discernable here, is another key message Dr Metcalf sends across about the importance of “coaching the person rather than the issue”. Vital is the honoring what the school client, a competent human being, wants, ‘listening’ to their direction, and letting them drive the process. Demonstrated is the power of the approach to create space for students to develop grit and resolve.

The remaining three chapters of the book are new material. The author has responded to challenges that schools and, indeed, the whole world present. Employing resources from fellow Solutions Focus authors and practitioners, Metcalf offers an abundance of specific coaching scripts with LGBTQ students, those with traumatic experiences, abandonment, or mental health issues, substance abuse. And again, she reinforces the importance of systemic thinking while using the solution-focused approach. The school counselor is more likely to have change noticed and amplified when she enters the system, family or the school team.

I am already recommending Linda Metcalf's new book to all the educators I happen to encounter in my local and wider coaching practices. I investigate possibilities for having it translated into Bulgarian so that school counselors, teachers and parents here start experimenting with her road-map and make their own way into looking beyond problems and revealing the flute inside every elder branch.

References

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The reviewer

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