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Half-Full or Half-Empty: What Is Your Lens?

by Brandie Oliver, Butler University

Have you ever taken time to reflect about the words that we use to describe student concerns? What is the name of the team used to discuss student academic and/or behavior challenges at your school? Commonly we call these teams the “problem solving” teams. Although good intentioned, what message may we be sending by starting our conversation or placing our focus on “the problem” rather than starting our conversation on the strength of the student?

A key part of effective work with children is to make their **strengths** and **abilities** more evident to them and the adults in their lives. ¹Early and ongoing identification of these resources and strengths forms the basis of each child’s unique solutions to their problems and develops resilience. Using a solution-focused approach is all about working with the child’s strengths no matter what the circumstances might be. It is an approach that views the child as capable and resourceful with the ability to change.²

How can you shift the discussion or as some say, flip the script? Using a solution-focused approach will turn your time and energy from trying to answer “why” this problem is occurring to “what” are some possible solutions to address the presenting challenges. The discussion will quickly change to highlight the resources, strengths, and skillsets the student brings to the classroom that can be strengthened so s/he is equipped to address the identified challenge. Have you ever asked a student, “Why did you just do that?” and received the blank, bewildered stare? As frustrating as that response may be, cognitive development may limit the student’s ability to comprehend insights about the presenting problem or the student may not yet have a strong sense of self-awareness to be able to answer that question. By focusing and enhancing a student’s strengths, educators can expand self-awareness and build confidence in the student’s abilities to be problem-solve and address future challenges.

Below are two solution-focused strategies that can be added to an educator’s toolbox to help shift the discussion to target student possibilities rather than getting stuck in what isn’t working.

1. Exception finding – a way of reframing the view of the problem by asking when it happens less or less intensely. It is likely that this problem is not occurring in other classrooms, times of day, locations, etc. When we explore this question, the team can discover times when the student is being successful and demonstrating strengths.

2. Rating scales – a means of ascertaining the perception of the problem area at present, to identify what’s going well (no matter how small) and focus on where the student/teacher/team/family wants to go (helps when setting goals). When scaling, it is important to have student input and to utilize the student’s strengths when thinking about moving upward on the scale. Teachers are part of this process and can reinforce positive support by adding strengths they see in the student and how these strengths will be used to move up on the scale.

Example of Exception-Seeking Questions for a Teacher ³

- “When was the last time you noticed the student sitting still in his seat?”
- “What was going on in class at the time?”
- “Where was he sitting?”
- “Who was there?”

Example of Rating Scale for a Teacher

- The student indicated she is wanting to move from a 5 to a 6 (Using a scale from 1 to 10-- “1” being not confident at math skills at all, “10” being very confident)
- What strengths does the student possess that will help achieve this step?
- How can I help highlight these strengths in my classroom?

Our language is important when we use the solution-focused approach. It is important to be intentional about our word choice. Below are just a few tips and starters that help you stay on the solution-focused pathway.

Useful Language Skills

- “Yes... And” (Not “Yes...But”)
- “Tell me more about...”
- “I can see you are giving a lot of effort today”
- “Yet” (remembering growth mindset)

Looking at student challenges through this lens helps build connections, relieve tensions, and provide growth opportunities. Your school counselor has unique training in this area too. If interested in this topic or if you would like additional information, ask your school counseling program to provide a professional development training for your school staff.

¹ Berg, I.K., & Shilts, L. (2004). *Classroom solutions: WOWW approach*. Milwaukee, WI: Brief Family Therapy Center Press.

² Connie, E. & Metcalf, L. (2009). *The Art of Solution Focused Therapy*. Springer Publishing: New York.

