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Student-Driven Interviewing: Practical Strategies for Involving Students in School Solutions

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People are generally better persuaded by the reasons which they have themselves discovered than by those which have come into the minds of others.
—Blaise Pascal

Sociologists propose that school-aged children in Western societies represent a social minority group because they are seen as lacking the ability to solve problems and think for themselves (Mayall, 2002). Adults may, with the best of intentions, exert control in ways that stifle children's creativity and self-confidence. These points apply to young people in general, but are particularly relevant to students with a history of school problems. The ongoing experience of a school problem, coupled with society's disempowering perception and treatment of young people, lead some students to adopt a hopeless and passive perspective on improving their school lives.

This article provides counselors with practical strategies for counteracting the hopelessness and discouragement experienced by struggling students. These methods are part of student-driven interviewing (SDI). SDI is a collaborative approach to resolving school problems by empowering students to take an active role in building solutions. Unlike traditional approaches where the practitioner dictates treatment goals and

interventions with little or no student involvement, SDI explicitly requests and honors student input throughout the helping process. Students are involved in every aspect of their therapeutic care, from formulating goals through evaluating the usefulness of services (Murphy, 2013).

Two core strategies of SDI are covered in this article—creating meaningful goals and building on exceptions and other assets in the lives of students. These strategies are illustrated through case examples and real-life interviews involving a variety of students and problems. But first, we want to quickly summarize the empirical foundations of this respectful, innovative approach to changing school problems.

Research on What Works in Helping People Change

The strategies of SDI are supported by a growing body of counseling and psychotherapy research that provides valuable hints about how change occurs in helping relationships. Based on the analyses of hundreds of studies involving a variety of clients, helpers, and settings, researchers have proposed that successful therapeutic outcomes result mainly from the operation of a few core ingredients or common factors of change (Asay & Lambert, 1999; Wampold, 2010). These ingredients are common to all helping relationships regardless of the practitioner's theoretical orientation or treatment model—hence the term "common factors of change." The four major common factors—and their percentage contribution to effective outcomes—are described below.

Client Factors (Accounting for 40% of Change)

Client factors are the most potent of all elements in the counseling process. This category includes everything students bring to the table when they meet with us—strengths, successes, interests, talents, values, life experiences, resilience, social supports, and other resources. After reviewing hundreds of counseling studies, Bohart and Tallman (2010) stated that the client's capacity for self-healing is the most powerful element of change in helping relationships. Other researchers have concluded that the counselor's focus on clients' strengths and resources is a prerequisite of effective outcomes (Gassman & Grawe, 2006). These findings urge school counselors and others to help students recognize and apply their strengths, successes, and other resources to school solutions. In contrast to diagnostic interviews that emphasize what is wrong and missing in students' lives, student-driven interviews actively seek out students' strengths and resources.

Relationship Factors (Accounting for 30% of Change)

Relationship factors—the second most important ingredient of successful outcomes—include the student's experience of acceptance, empathy, respect, accommodation, collaboration, validation, and encouragement from the counselor. Research has repeatedly verified the strong link between counseling outcomes and clients' perceptions of the therapeutic relationship (Horvath, Del Re, Fluckiger, & Symonds, 2011; Norcross, 2010). While many such studies have involved adults, recent reviews have indicated that the relationship is equally important when working with children and adolescents (Shirk, Jungbluth, & Karver, 2012). SDI translates this research into practical methods for inviting students to formulate useful goals and to provide feedback on the quality of the relationship and the usefulness of services.

Hope Factors (Accounting for 15% of Change)

Hope plays a key role in effective outcomes, though its influence is relatively smaller than that of client and relationship factors. Hope factors include students' self-efficacy—the belief in one's ability to resolve problems and reach goals (Bandura, 2006). SDI enhances students' hope by validating their goals and building on their strengths.

Model/Technique Factors (Accounting for 15% of Change)

This category consists of the counselor's theoretical model and techniques associated with the model. Theoretical ideas and techniques provide useful structure to the helping process; their impact on outcomes, however, is relatively small compared to the combined impact of the other three common factors (Wampold, 2010). The effectiveness of a school counselor's intervention ideas and techniques depends largely on the student's acceptance of them, which helps to explain why no single treatment model has proven superior to others in overall effectiveness with children (Miller, Wampold, & Varhely, 2008). These findings urge us to tailor our ideas and interventions to each student instead of fitting the student to our favorite theories and techniques.

Research on what works in helping people change suggests that the person who is closest to the problem is also closest to the solution. As evidenced throughout the remainder of this article, student-driven interviews provide those who are closest to the problem—the students themselves—with the empowering opportunity to contribute substantially to their own solutions. This is done by creating meaningful goals and building on students' successes and strengths. Let's look at each strategy in more detail.

Strategy 1: Creating Meaningful Goals

Involving students in the formulation of school-related goals enhances their motivation to reach such goals (Miller & Rollnick, 2013). Unfortunately, struggling students are often excluded from the goal-building process because they are assumed to be incapable of contributing. Excluding or minimizing student input is like rowing a boat with one paddle instead of two. Like a boat with only one paddle, our work with a student will turn in circles unless the student is invested in the goal. Techniques for creating clear and meaningful goals include linking students' deepest values to school goals, asking miracle and scaling questions, and accommodating students' language and perceptions.

Linking Students' Values to School Goals

The most important aspect of a school-related goal is its personal significance to the student (Murphy, 2008). Unfortunately, this consideration sometimes takes a back seat to the preferences of teachers, parents, administrators, school counselors—everyone except the student. Regardless of what other people think, a school goal must mean something to students in order to engage their investment and motivation. When working with students for whom school performance holds little intrinsic value or interest, counselors can explore what matters most to them—their deepest values—and link these values to school-related goals. The following questions help link students' values to their school performance:

- Pretend that it is 20 years from now and that your life is just the way you want it to be. Tell me about your life 20 years from now. What are the most important parts of your life story?
- Let's forget about school for a few minutes. If you could be just the kind of person you most want to be, what kind of person is that?
- What do you want your life to stand for? What small step are you willing take at school next week to move you a little bit closer to the life you want?

Asking Miracle and Scaling Questions

The miracle question, a core strategy of solution-focused brief therapy (Franklin, Trepper, Gingerich, & McCollum, 2012), is a fun way to boost hope and create goals by inviting students to describe a problem-free future. Here are a few variations of this strategy:

- Let's say a miracle happens while you are sleeping tonight and this school problem vanishes. What would be different at school tomorrow? What would your teachers notice and how would they react? What would that be like for you?
- Imagine that we are sitting here looking into a crystal ball at a time when this problem no longer occurs at school. What do you see?
- Let's pretend that there are two movies about your life. Movie 1 is about your life with the problem, and Movie 2 is about your life without the problem. I already know about Movie 1, so tell me what Movie 2 would look like. Who would be in it? What would they be doing?

When students answer the miracle question, we can follow up with questions about specific details and behavioral commitments. Here is quick example involving a middle school student named Bridgette, who was referred for counseling due to a recent decline in her school performance and grades.

Counselor: Suppose a miracle occurred one night while you were sleeping and this problem vanished. What would be different at school?

Bridgette: I'd be paying more attention in class and taking notes and doing more work.

Counselor: Which one of these things would you be willing to work on first, even just a little, during the next couple of days at school? [This question keeps Bridgette in control by asking for her opinion on what to work on first. The phrase "even just a little" invites her to focus on small changes instead of the more overwhelming task of changing everything all at once.]

Bridgette: I guess taking notes because it would help my grades.

Counselor: That makes sense. What is one small thing you could do next week to get closer to where you want to be on taking notes? [This question invites Bridgette to make a behavioral commitment toward her goal.]

As seen with Bridgette, miracle questions provide a hopeful context for developing student-driven goals and corresponding behavioral commitments. The chance to focus on a better future is a breath of fresh air for students who are burdened by ongoing school problems. Most students enjoy the playful aspect of the miracle question,

but no single technique works with every student. Some may view it as impractical or silly; when that happens, we can simply accept their response and move on to other goal development strategies.

Scaling questions offer another avenue for helping students develop small, specific goals:

- On a scale from 0 to 100, with 100 being "the best that things could be at school" and 0 being "the worst," where would you rate things at school right now? What would the next higher number look like?
- What will you do differently at school when it moves from a 30 to a 35 or 40? How will your teachers be able to tell you moved up a little?

The next conversation illustrates the use of a scaling question with Michael, a 6th grader referred to the school counselor for classroom behavior problems.

> *Counselor*: On a scale of 0 to 100, where 100 is the very best that things can be at school and 0 is the very worst, where are things in school now?
> *Michael*: About 25.
> *Counselor*: How will things be different at school when it moves to a 28 or 30?
> *Michael*: My teacher and I won't be getting into it all the time.
> *Counselor*: Okay. What else?
> *Michael*: My attitude will be a little better.
> *Counselor*: If I videotaped you with a better attitude, what would I see you doing differently at school?

For students who feel more at ease with numbers than words, scaling questions provide a good way to explore their goals. Scaling also adds a playful element to the conversation, which always helps in working with young people. Whatever the reason, many students respond better to the miracle and scaling questions than they do to more direct, traditional questions about their goals.

Accommodating Students' Language and Perceptions

School goals should reflect key words, phrases, and perceptions of the student whenever possible. Although this point applies to all students and circumstances, the following discussion addresses two situations that are particularly challenging for counselors—when students do not want to participate in counseling and when they believe that their goals take a back seat to those of teachers, parents, or other adults.

Students are keenly aware of situations in which adults ignore their opinions. Instead of calling students resistant or otherwise discounting their perspectives, counselors can meet them where they are by integrating their language and perceptions into goal-related conversations. In working with students who want to "get out of" having to talk with us every week, we can ask, "What needs to happen for you to get out of having to come here?" The following questions invite "reluctant students" to develop goals that respect and accommodate their language and perceptions:

- I know you would rather not be here, so maybe we could work on helping you get out of having to come here and meet with me. Are you interested?
- Would you be interested in finding ways to keep your parents or teachers off your case about school?

- What would convince your teachers/parents that you no longer need counseling?

The SDI techniques in this section enable counselors to collaborate with students in creating personally meaningful goals rather than expecting students to conform to other people's goals, regardless of how well-intentioned they may be. Once school-related goals are in place, we can invite students to apply their strengths and resources toward reaching them. Practical strategies for doing so are discussed next.

Strategy 2: Building on Exceptions and Other Assets

When our attention is focused mainly on students' problems and deficiencies, it is easy to overlook their strengths—strengths that include small successes, special interests and talents, influential people, and other assets that can be applied toward school solutions. Unlike traditional approaches that focus on remediating problems and correcting deficits, SDI encourages students to build on what is "right" and "working" in their lives. This can be done by building solutions on exceptions to the problem and other assets.

Building on Exceptions

Students, teachers, parents, and counselors can become so overwhelmed and discouraged by a school problem that they are unable to notice "exceptions" to the problem. Exceptions refer to times and situations at school in which the problem is absent or less bothersome. Exceptions can be viewed as mini-solutions that are already happening, just not as often as desired. No problem occurs all the time—even though it may seem that way to those who experience it. Because exceptions often go unnoticed, we need to do some digging to find them. The following questions help students to identify exceptions to school problems:

- When doesn't the problem happen at school?
- What is your best class?
- What are some things at school that you would like to see continue happening?

Once an exception is discovered, we can explore the conditions under which it occurred by asking the following questions:

- What was different about that time (referring to the exception) than other times?
- What did you do to make it happen?
- Who was around when it happened? How did they respond? What was that like for you?

Clarifying the conditions and details of the exception lays the groundwork for designing exception-based interventions. For example, details about a class in which the student behaves relatively well can be used to design interventions that incorporate elements of the "exception class" into the student's other classes:

- What can you do to make this happen more at school (referring to the student's behavior and performance in the exception class)?
- What will it take to do more of what you're doing in math class in one or two of your other classes?

- I wonder what would happen if you conducted a secret experiment where you did this (referring to the exception behavior) in one of your other classes and then carefully observed your teacher to see if anything changed between the two of you.

The following excerpt illustrates the initial process of discovering and exploring exceptions with Talia, a 9th grader referred for oppositional behavior at school.

Counselor: When have things been a little bit better at school this week?

Talia: Never. I'm in trouble all the time.

Counselor: That must be really tough, being in trouble so often. Which class do you get in trouble just a little less in?

Talia: Probably science class.

Counselor: How would you explain that, Talia? What is it about science class—or your approach to it—that helps you behave better and get in less trouble?

After obtaining specific details about how science class differed from Talia's other classes—she arrived to class on time, sat closer to the teacher, took more notes, and occasionally did homework—the counselor and Talia explored how she might replicate one or more of these exception-related conditions and behaviors in another class.

Sometimes the best way to resolve a problem is to build on situations in which the problem is absent or less noticeable—referred to here as exceptions to the problems. In addition to interviewing students, we can interview teachers and parents, review educational records, and conduct classroom observations with an eye toward discovering exceptions. This discussion is not intended to diminish the importance or usefulness of traditional problem-focused practices, but to provide counselors and students with an additional pathway to school solutions. The theme of building solutions from students' strengths is continued in the next section.

Building on Other Assets

In addition to exceptions, every student offers other strengths and assets from which solutions can be built. These assets include internal and external strengths such as students' special interests and talents, unique life experiences, spirituality, courage, solution ideas, and influential people in their lives. The process of building on these assets and resources is similar to that of building on exceptions. The first step is identifying such assets through the following types of questions:

- How have you managed to stay with it at school without completely giving up? (courage and resilience)
- What do you enjoy doing outside of school? (special interests and talents)
- What do you think might help turn things around at school? (solution ideas)
- Who do you respect the most in your life? What would he or she advise you to do about this problem? (influential people)

Once we discover a particular asset, we can explore how it can be incorporated into school solutions. For example, when we discover that students have experienced other significant challenges in their lives, we can explore how the resources and strategies that helped them overcome other challenges might be applied in ways that help them

resolve the current school problem. The experience of a serious school problem makes it difficult for students to remember what they already have (resilient attributes and skills) and have already done (previously successful strategies) to overcome other challenges in their lives. Inviting students to discuss strengths and skills that have helped them with previous problems can provide solution ideas for the current school problem. Another advantage of discussing students' assets is that it boosts their self-confidence and hope by reminding them that they may already have what is needed to resolve the school problem. The remainder of this section illustrates the strategy of building school solutions from another vital asset in the lives of students—respected and influential people.

Eric was referred by his 1st grade teacher (Ms. Trent) for "giving the finger" to students and adults at school. The behavior had steadily increased in recent weeks and had reached a point of serious concern. Previous intervention strategies included: (a) ignoring problem behavior, providing extra attention for positive behavior, and requiring Eric to apologize to others when the behavior occurred; and (b) individual student-teacher meetings in which Ms. Trent emphasized the seriousness of the behavior and tried to determine why he was doing it. These strategies were ineffective in changing Eric's behavior, and the problem continued to grow at a steady rate. Ms. Trent counted the behavior for one week with the following results—113 gestures per day with a range of 73 to 134. Everyone was frustrated and puzzled by Eric's disturbing behavior. Given everything that had already been tried, the counselor was determined to approach things in a very different way. Here is what happened.

> *Counselor*: I know that your teacher and mother have talked to you about the finger thing. They care a lot about you, Eric, and they want you to do well at school. I want to know what you want to be different at school.
>
> *Eric*: I told my mom I don't want to get in trouble and lose recess. I try to stop but it just happens. They don't understand.
>
> *Counselor*: Who doesn't understand?
>
> *Eric*: My mom, Ms. Trent, and Mr. Sanders (the school principal).
>
> *Counselor*: Of all the people at school or home, who understands you better than anyone?
>
> *Eric*: Mrs. K.
>
> *Counselor*: Who is Mrs. K?
>
> *Eric*: Her name is Mrs. Klug, but everyone calls her Mrs. K. She's my Sunday school teacher.
>
> *Counselor*: That's interesting. Do you like Sunday school?
>
> *Eric*: (nods "yes")
>
> *Counselor*: How do you know that Mrs. K understands you?
>
> *Eric*: I don't know. She's just real nice.
>
> *Counselor*: How do you behave in Sunday school with Mrs. K?
>
> *Eric*: I'm real good.
>
> *Counselor*: Do you do the finger thing there?
>
> *Eric*: No.

Counselor: That's interesting. How do you resist the urge to do the finger at Sunday school? (This question credits Eric for successful behavior at Sunday school, implies that he is capable of controlling the behavior, and invites him to reflect on how he does it.)

Eric: I don't know. I just do.

Counselor: Wow. That's really interesting to me. Are you going to Sunday school this weekend?

Eric: I go every week.

Counselor: Okay. Do you want to try a little experiment this week?

Eric: (nods "yes")

Counselor: Okay. When you go to Sunday school this week, pay attention to how you control the finger at Sunday school instead of letting it control you like it does at school. Okay?

Eric: Yes.

Counselor: Do you have ideas right now about how you are able to do this in Sunday school?

Eric: (shakes head "no")

Counselor: Well, I look forward to what you learn as you observe how you do this.

The rate of problem behavior at school had not changed when the counselor met with Eric one week later. When asked again how he controlled the finger behavior in Sunday school, Eric shrugged his shoulders and said, "I don't know." As outlined next, the counselor decided to follow up on Eric's previous comments about Mrs. Klug.

Counselor: Remember when you told me that Mrs. K is really nice and that she understands you?

Eric: Yes.

Counselor: It sounds like you really like her and respect her.

Eric: (nods "yes")

Counselor: Have you ever talked to her about the finger thing at school?

Eric: No.

Counselor: Do you know if anyone else has?

Eric: (shrugs shoulders) I don't know. I don't think so.

Counselor: Would you be willing to talk to her, since she understands you better than anyone?

Eric: (shrugs shoulders) I don't know.

Counselor: Would it be okay with you if I talked with her about this and asked if she could join our team to help you take control of this problem at school?

Eric: (nods "yes")

Counselor: That's good, because she sounds like someone we need on the team right now.

The counselor contacted Mrs. Klug and learned that she had known Eric since he was a baby and had been his Sunday school teacher for the past three years. Mrs. Klug was shocked to hear about Eric's behavior and vowed to do whatever she could to help him. This friendly elderly woman spoke about Eric as if he were one of her own children. The counselor knew from Eric's comments that Mrs. K was a respected and influential person in his life—a person who might serve as a valuable asset in resolving the school problem. At the end the conversation with Mrs. K, the counselor asked if she would be willing to talk with Eric in the hopes of improving things at school. Mrs. K. gladly agreed to speak with Eric that same evening or the next day.

One week later, Eric's teacher eagerly told the counselor that Eric made a complete turnaround and had not raised his middle finger one single time during the past three days. The counselor complimented Ms. Trent for her ongoing commitment to Eric and immediately called Mrs. K to tell her the good news and find out what she said to Eric. Mrs. K drove to Eric's house to talk with him in person the same evening she spoke with the counselor. After telling Eric how much she appreciated his polite behavior in Sunday school, she took his face in her hands and told him how shocked and saddened she was by his behavior. Mrs. K went on to say that it was an unacceptable way to represent himself, his church, and his family, and that she expected it to end right now.

The results speak volumes about Mrs. K's influence. His problem behavior at school decreased from an average of 113 per day to 0 and remained there the rest of the year. This was a remarkable accomplishment for Eric and a testimony to the power of influential people in the lives of students.

The strategy of building on exceptions and other assets promotes efficient, student-driven solutions to school problems. In addition to the efficiency factor, the strength-based interventions that emerge from student-driven interviews are more culturally sensitive than practitioner-driven interventions that may bear little resemblance to students' everyday lives (Sue & Sue, 2013). As Ridley (2005) stated: "While vigorously looking for psychopathology in... minority clients, counselors often miss opportunities to help clients identify their assets and use these assets advantageously" (p. 103). Boyd-Franklin (2003) similarly noted that African-American clients generally benefit from strength-based approaches because they are usually more aware of their weaknesses than their strengths. Every student has something (assets) and is doing something (exceptions) that can serve as a building block to school solutions. Student-driven interviewing provides practical tools for discovering and capitalizing on these available strengths and resources.

Summary

Student-driven interviewing (SDI) is a collaborative, culturally sensitive method of conversation in which the counselor partners with the student to develop meaningful goals and strength-based interventions for school problems. Research on what works in helping people change suggests that counseling outcomes depend largely on the extent to which clients are actively involved in building solutions to their problems. This article provides practical strategies for inviting students to actively participate in their own care by developing goals that matter to them and building on what is already working in their

lives. Refer to Murphy (2013) for additional examples and techniques for conducting student-driven interviews with students of all ages.

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