

**SOLUTION-FOCUSED APPROACH (SFA) IN PSYCHOLOGICAL AND  
EDUCATIONAL WORK WITH CHILDREN  
AND ADOLESCENTS IN SCHOOL**

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**Abstract**

The Solution-Focused Approach has its place in educational practice. It is a method of work that helps the child to cope with a variety of problems, as well as to promote his or her individual development. Its advantages are also seen in group work, conflict resolution and building understanding. In school practice, this approach takes the term ‘Solution-Focused Education.

**Keywords:** *Solution-Focused Approach, education, psychological support.*

**Introduction**

It is hard to be a troubled child when the stress connected with the problems is pushing their limits of their endurance. It is not easy being a teenager. The search for one's own identity, the fear of being unaccepted, the stress associated with what surrounds us, with the present and the future, as well as the observation of the world arranged by adults cause a disturbance in the system of mental resilience. Added to these problems is the school, which is not always an institution that is friendly to students. Sometimes, adults are astonished by this statement. For many adults, school is fine, but that is because they have already graduated. For many young people, it is a time of tension, fears and justified fears. In many cases, the school system is a conglomeration of different environments, sometimes cooperating but also antagonizing each other. That is why, it is more common to talk about

different groups in the school (students, parents, teachers, management) and less often about the school community as a whole.

The assumption is that school should be friendly towards students, parents and teachers. This is possible provided that there is mutual respect, understanding, openness and readiness to listen to the needs of all groups and to work together to create a safe school environment. With regard to children and young people, a safe school environment is one where students feel good, find friends, are respected, listened to, are not afraid and work together. It is a place where young people can count on others in difficult situations and psychological crises. It is also a place where they feel that they are developing, notice the increase in their knowledge, shape new skills and competences; a place where their positive qualities and small achievements are noticed. A student-friendly environment is one in which each student solves their problems on their own, although with the support of others, but also an environment where the group's problems are solved by the group. Such activities are conducive to the development of a sense of agency, responsibility for oneself and one's life, high self-esteem and faith in the future in children and adolescents. The awareness of personal resources and the existence of environmental potentials for solving problems and transforming reality reduces the tension associated with the demands of everyday life, and thus it promotes the overall development of the child. The creation of a safe school environment is facilitated by specific interventions based on a specific philosophy. An example is the solution-focused approach, which provides appropriate convictions and tools for working with children and young people in various areas of school life (education, upbringing and psychological support).

The aim of the article is to present the Solution-Focused Approach and its usefulness in working with an individual and a group of pupils / students at school.

### **1. What is the Solution-Focused Approach (SFA)?**

The Solution-Focused Approach (SFA) is a model (method, trend) of solution-based psychological support. The approach originated in the USA, and Steve de Shazer and Insoo Kim Berg are considered to be its main proponents. The Solution-Focused Approach (SFA) is a method of working with a client based on "searching for solutions to problem situations (regardless of the nature of the problem itself), without referring to the analysis of the causes of a given problem, its nature and its background." (Krasiejko, 2009, p.267). The essence of

this approach is to develop in the client (at almost any age) the motivation that underlies the change process. The Solution-Focused Approach is used both in working with individuals, couples, families and other groups, including the school class and the educational group.

In addition to psychologists, psychotherapists, counsellors and coaches, social workers and family assistants, SFA as a model (method) of working with clients is also used by form masters, teachers and educators (Krasiejko, 2009; Ratner, George, Iveson, 2017; Berger, 2007; Kienhuis, Świtek, 2007).

SFA has established itself in psychological and clinical practice, and in this regard, Solution-Focused Brief Therapy (SFBT) is used on an equal footing with other short-term therapy methods, and its effectiveness is confirmed in support practice. It is effective in reducing behavioral problems (Franklin, Moore, Hopson, 2008; Gingerich & Peterson, 2013), especially in the milder form of disorders (Bond, Woods, Humphrey, Symes, Green, 2013). It is also applied to the work of school psychologists (Stobie, Boyle, Woolfson, 2005).

In Poland, the idea of SFA has been known since the early 1990s and it is an alternative to traditional models of therapy and support work. This approach is present in working with parents with who have experienced the sexual abuse of their own child (Barabas, 2018), in street working with young people who are at risk of exclusion and social maladjustment (Kondraciuk, 2018; Chojnacka, 2020), as well as in the practice of a general practitioner (Cisek, 2018). The method is used in work with people addicted to chemicals and suffering from mental disorders (see Krasiejko, 2009, p. 267; Świtek, 2000; Szczepkowski, 2007; Alacron Arias, Rotberg, 2021). SFA is applied to work with adults and people with drug addiction (Klimkowska, 2018; Szczepkowski, 2007). SFA allows work with an involuntary client, e.g. in a situation of domestic violence, both with violent persons and with persons deprived of liberty (de Jong, Berg, 2007; Lakowska, 2015; Krasiejko, 2009; Świtek 2014; Alacron Arias, Rotberg, 2021). The groups of recipients of interactions in this paradigm are diverse, and the approach itself is quite broad, if we take into account the problems for which solutions are sought.

## **2. Solution-Focused Education (SFE)**

The Solution-Focused Approach is increasingly finding its way into educational practice. We can even talk about solution-focused pedagogics, which provides practical tips for working with children, indicates the importance of a positive attitude towards students and

their parents, and advocates the importance of the language in which we communicate with children and adolescents. Communication brings children and adolescents closer to the goal and solution to their problems (Måhlberg & Sjöblom, 2022). On the school education level, the application of the SFA is as wide as in therapy. The effectiveness of the trend is noticed in the work with parents of students (Parnicka, Świtek, 2016), which is important in educational work and in the intervention and therapeutic process in a situation where children's problems are being solved. SFA is also used in other types of difficulties, e.g. with the problem of aggression among children (Respondek, 2016) and many other difficulties in behavior (Majchrowska, 2020; Majchrowska, 2015; Furman, 2019; Majchrowska, Zubrzycka-Maciąg, 2018; Matyszewska, 2015; Alacron Arias, Rotberg, 2021).

Solution-Focused Education (SFE) is a modern model of school work, an innovative approach to the learning process and everyday work with young people. The model emphasizes the cooperation of all entities in education. The SFE provides practical solutions, using specific techniques in pedagogical and psychological interaction.

SFE helps to change students' attitudes towards learning, improves classroom collaboration, supports the proper development of students, and helps them overcome the problems they face. It provides parents and teachers with knowledge on how to work with students, not only those who cause difficulties (<https://www.letsr.pl/esr/>; Majchrowska, Zubrzycka-Maciąg, 2016). In school practice, SFE can be used in at least 3 contact situations with students:

- psychological and pedagogical support in situations where the student is experiencing difficulties;
- in educational work with the group and the individual in the implementation of the assumptions resulting from the programs and plans (educational and preventive work, solving the problems of the group and the individual), and in undertaking their own activities to improve the group climate and the development of the group;
- in education, when the teacher uses the SFA to motivate the student to learn and encourage his or her own development.

Some of the techniques used in SFA can also be used in didactics (the technique of a miracle, searching for exceptions or resources for creating solutions in an exercise situation – e.g. working with a specific situation). In this way, students can learn not only how to solve

their own problems, but also those of other people, while creating contexts for support activities (How to help? Where to look for resources? What resources?).

For adults, SFE offers a change in the perception of the role of the student and the teacher, and a "jump" of the teacher's attention from what is negative, undesirable in the student's behavior, to what is good, correct and unique in them. Changing the way of seeing a young person and focusing on their achievements, even the smallest ones, is conducive to shaping their sense of agency, building positive self-esteem and self-worth. Showing a student that they can do it, that they can manage, that they have their successes, increases their activity to repeat successes by awakening internal motivation (Zubrzycka-Maciąg, 2019, p. 146). Working with a group of students in SFA is based on "classroom coaching", and this requires teachers to change the way they think about their role and be open to new ways of working and a different form of communication with students. This is possible when, as Zubrzycka-Maciąg (2019) writes, the teacher acknowledges the student's subjectivity, directs his or her attention to his or her resources, and uses the language of dialogue. However, in order for such a change to take place, the teacher must feel himself or herself that he/she is the subject of the educational process (p. 148). This poses the question: Are teachers ready to change?

The general assumptions of SFA are found in solution-focused education. In this approach, students/pupils are seen as people who:

- are experts in their lives, so they make changes themselves, they know what is most important to them, in what direction they want to go, what and how they want to achieve and what and who can help them in this. Being an expert in one's own life does not exclude the need for temporary help from other people, and this help is greater the younger the child is;
- decide for themselves, their goals and actions. A professional (teacher, form master, school psychologist) is a person who makes children and young people aware of certain facts (e.g. personal resources possessed by the student; small but important achievements) and helps to find exceptions and strengthens the sense of agency. It also makes it easier to see the consequences of planned actions, but does not make choices for students (unless we are talking about intervention in the imperative mode);
- have resources, i.e. tools to change their situation and achieve their goals. These resources can be knowledge, skills, competences, certain personal qualities, as well as everything that is within the reach of students and that can help them solve their problems or develop

personally. Resources can also be other people and institutions whose existence and scope of activity the students are not aware of. Then the role of the adult is to make them aware of these resources (cf. De Jong, Berg, 2007, Kosman, 2013, Krasiejko, 2009).

The assumptions of the SFA are being transferred to the field of education. They guide a change in the perception of children and adolescents by adults. They allow us to take the perspective of young people, learn about their ways of seeing the world and sensitize them to their emotions. This allows us to look for solutions together, not to provide them. Handing solutions "on a plate" does not spectacularly motivate to act and solve one's own problems, it does not give a sense of agency and does not teach responsibility. Imposed solutions are rarely acceptable, especially by young people. On the other hand, ideas for change, developed on your own or with the support of others, are easier to assimilate and implement. It is also easier to take responsibility for them and take action in the desired direction. The SFA assumes that:

- nothing is ever always the same, everything is dynamic, changing. In this approach, the student himself/herself, his/her difficulties, but also his/her abilities (which increase with age), as well as the school situation and the situation of the group are subject to change. The teacher's way of looking at the student is also subject to change (e.g. a student is not a person with failures, but someone who has successes in his or her life);
- small changes lead to big changes (the domino effect) through our actions in the environment, but also "incorporating" changes in ourselves (e.g. by changing our approach to other people in order to improve relationships);
- focusing on the positives, the present and the future reinforces the change in the expected direction;
- searching for and identifying exceptions to the problem, suggesting possible solutions (something that worked in the past);
- children and adolescents always cooperate, as long as we are attentive and ready to learn about their way of thinking;
- students have the resources necessary to find a solution;
- students are experts in their own lives, but sometimes they need support (cf. Świtek, 2014, p. 16).

## **Summary**

The Solution-Focused Approach can be characterized by versatility. In psychological and educational practice, it can be used in a variety of ways:

- it can be one of the ways of conducting short-term therapy,
- it can be one of the methods of care and educational work, using the tools and techniques of the SFA in working with an individual person, serving the general development and allowing to look for solutions to problems reported by children and adolescents,
- it can be one of the methods of care and educational work, using SFA tools and techniques in working with a group, used to search for solutions to problems existing in the group, but also to develop the group,
- it can be a method of working with parents/guardians/teachers, aimed at developing educational competences,
- it can be a way of conducting crisis intervention (not in every situation),
- it can be used in working with addicted youth.

The broad context of application of the Solution-Focused Approach makes the method useful in educational practice, especially in the area of support, education and prevention. The essence of the approach is a change in the desired direction, which can be understood as a result of a solved problem, or as an action anticipating the exacerbation of difficulties – when the philosophy of the SFA is applied in school practice, taking into account the student as an individual who is able to take decisions independently.

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