

The development of solution focused multi-agency meetings in a psychological service

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This article outlines the successful development of multi-agency meetings as part of a staged approach aimed at supporting families and children within the Scottish Highland Council Area. Drawing on the research evidence for the factors which help to make meetings effective, a distinctive meeting structure was developed. This structure is outlined – including the key solution-focused principles which underpin it. Two main evaluations focused on gathering the views of multi-agency partners, head teachers, parents and voluntary organisations regarding the effectiveness of these meetings. Resulting improvements are reported along with a discussion of the limitations and strengths and the future of the meetings.

Keywords: effective meetings; evidenced; Highland Council; multi-agency; solution focused; supporting families

Introduction

The Scottish Executive *Review of provision of educational psychology services in Scotland* ('Currie Report') (Scottish Executive, 2002a) makes it clear that the role of the educational psychologist should include the five core functions of consultation, assessment, intervention, training and research and that these functions should occur at three levels: child and family level, school or establishment level, and education authority or council level. In spite of this, Stobie (2002, p. 203) asserts that 'traditional methods and approaches prevail' in educational psychology practice.

As educational psychologists in Highland moved from individual casework towards more systemic work, an increasing amount of time was allocated to attending multi-agency meetings to support families and children. It was crucial that these meetings were as effective as possible, so various frameworks were considered to underpin multi-agency meetings. The advantages of using the Monsen problem-solving model (Monsen, Graham, Frederickson & Cameron, 1998; Woolfson, Whaling, Stewart & Monsen, 2003) were considered. Barbara Kelly (2006) explored how well the Monsen framework transferred into practice and found that although the framework was effective in some areas, and those areas transferred well, there was less transferability in areas relating to psychological theory and thinking, especially in the formulation of hypotheses and sharing of the problem solving dynamics with stakeholders.

Several studies indicated the efficacy of solution focused approaches in various settings, for example parenting skills (Zimmermann, Jacobsen, MacIntyre & Watson,

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1996) and anti-social behaviour of adolescent offenders (Seagram, 1997). The framework was also shown to work for academic and social concerns among high school students (Litterll, Malia, & Vandrewood, 1995), for solution-focused behaviour therapy in child residential placement (Triantafillou, 1997) and for solution focused groups in schools (LaFountain & Garner, 1996). As the evidence suggests solution focused approaches can be successful over various settings and with different client groups, this method was adopted as the preferred model for multi-agency meetings and for supporting children and young people with varying difficulties in a wide range of different settings. As it was important that the skills of everyone in the meetings were utilised, the solution focused approach was favoured, as it worked well in including all the stakeholders in the generation of solutions and interventions.

The development of this model of solution focused meetings was also influenced by research in a range of other areas.

Sloper (2004) suggests that multi-agency working, with clear aims, rules and responsibilities and agreed timetables between partners results in professionals working together more effectively. Clear protocols, opportunities for informal communication between workers, adequate financial support and timetabling of service developments are also very beneficial (Moran, Jacobs, Bun & Bifulco, 2006). Multi-agency working works best when there is shared vision, respect, communication and accessibility (Carter & Cummings, 2007).

Involving parents in meetings promotes effective outcomes. The rights of parents for involvement in decision-making regarding the education of their children have been increasing over the years, as enshrined in legislation, including The Children (Scotland) Act (Scottish Office, 1995), The Education (Disability Strategies and Pupils' Education Records) (Scotland) Act (Scottish Executive, 2002b) and The Education (Additional Support for Learning) (Scotland) Act (Scottish Executive, 2004). A meta-analysis by Fan and Chen (2001) indicates a relationship between parental involvement and academic achievement, with parental aspiration and expectation for children's educational achievement being particularly important. Nonetheless, parents can still feel excluded from involvement in decision making in aspects of their children's education, as Hanafin and Lynch (2002) demonstrate in their study of parents in disadvantaged areas.

For children, The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations General Assembly, 1989) stated the right of the child to express an opinion and to have that opinion taken into account, and also introduced the child's right to information and to freedom of expression. These principles are now reflected in legislation, including The Age of Legal Capacity (Scotland) Act (Scottish Office, 1991), The Children (Scotland) Act (Scottish Office, 1995) and The Standards in Scotland's Schools Act (Scottish Executive, 2000). Research also suggests that children were able to make a range of suggestions regarding how formal services could be improved so that teenagers would be more likely to use them, including adults listening more sympathetically (Hallett, Murray, Punch & Fuller, 2002).

In a multi-agency solution focused meeting, where a situation may be emotionally loaded for the young person, their parents and perhaps school staff, it is important to be able to acknowledge and act on people's emotions for a successful outcome. Sharp (2001) suggests that relationships, links with parents and links with other agencies in a multi-agency setting are the key to developing the steps to success. Sharp also notes the importance of having the mindset that says problems can be turned into opportunities or that some opportunities arise only because there was a problem.

Recent studies into resilience are encouraging the examination of resilience as a transactional process between the child and his/her environment. Problems can no longer be considered as solely within child, but rather social experiences must be recognised as a critical component of all behavioural development (Sameroff & Fiese, 2000). Therefore the focus should be on changing the social experience of the child or young person.

In the light of the evidence regarding how to create effective multi-agency meetings for all concerned by adopting a solution focused approach, the Psychological Service aimed to create a model for meetings which facilitated meaningful inclusion of parents, children and multi-agency colleagues, using solution focused principles throughout the process.

The local context

In the new millennium the Highland Council Psychological Service started to develop multi-agency meetings using a solution focused framework. The aim of these meetings was to provide co-ordinated support for families as part of the education service's staged intervention process. These meetings were called when initial strategies had been tried but there were continuing concerns for a child or young person. The term Liaison Group (LG) was generally used for these meetings.

Every associated school group in Highland had a core group of professionals; paediatrician/nurse, educational psychologist and senior family liaison officer (social worker) who attended the meetings along with key school staff. This core group of professionals was trained by the Psychological Service in solution focused principles and the specific structure of the meetings. This training varied from whole school events looking at solution focused approaches to small group training for Liaison Group members with mock meetings being used to facilitate understanding of the dynamics. Dates for meetings were co-ordinated among all the professionals at the start of each academic session and professionals formed good working relationships over time.

Structure of meetings

The Liaison Group Meetings may vary according to the situation but they all have certain key elements:

- Parents and the child or young person are always prepared beforehand and debriefed after the meeting.
- The atmosphere is deliberately created to be empathetic and non-judgemental.
- A warm welcome is given to everybody and tea/coffee/juice and biscuits are often offered.
- The facilitator of the meeting gives an explanation of the purpose and process of the meeting.
- The person who had asked for the meeting to be held gives a description of the strengths and difficulties of the child or young person.
- The facilitator, using a flipchart, uses the heading 'The main issues are how to ...' and asks the group what they consider the main issues for the child to be. The facilitator makes sure that the child is included in this. Concerns are framed positively and written in a list under the heading.

- When all the main issues are up on one sheet, everybody in the meeting is given three votes, either using small dot stickers or felt tip pens, and everybody is asked to put their votes for whichever issue they consider to be the most important. All three votes could go to one issue or they could spread votes out whichever way they prefer.
- The votes are counted and the difficulty which was highlighted the most is then written on a new piece of paper on the flip chart with specific wording: 'In how many ways may we help [John to attend school more]?'
- The facilitator then encourages everybody in the meeting to think of ways that will help John, for example, to attend school more. This thinking is helped by asking for exceptions. When does John attend school? What does he like about school?
- This sheet of ideas then forms an Action Plan. Names, and sometimes timescales, are assigned to each of the ideas in the Action Plan.
- A review date is arranged.
- Notes of the meeting are sent out to all attendees. These are deliberately kept brief, only including who attended, the main issues and the action points.
- If appropriate, the action point sheet is rolled up and given to the child or young person to take away, encouraging him/her to feel more responsible and included in the process.
- After the meeting the professional who knows the child best debriefs the meeting with him/her and parents are accompanied to the door and asked how they felt about the meeting and the Action Plan. Any last minute issues can then be clarified.

Principles

Running throughout the meetings are key solution focused principles:

- Effective work can be carried out without understanding the cause of the problem. 20% of the time in the meeting is spent discussing the problem and 80% on solutions. This can only work properly when the explanation of the type of meeting being held has been given to parents and they have had a previous chance to discuss the problem thoroughly. This also applies to all the professionals. Such a theoretical orientation is based on a systems perspective (Bateson, 1972) and social constructivism (de Shazer, 1988; Efran, Lukens & Lukens, 1988).
- Goals are central. When people are asked to give their main concerns, these are collected in a list on a flip chart after the phrase '*the main issues are how to ...*' This starts re-framing the problems into goals.
- No sign-up, no change. Parent and pupil have to be equally included in the group and have an equal voice. This is helped by everybody having an equal vote and a facilitator checking out with parent and pupil throughout the meeting that their views are being accurately reflected.
- End time for the meeting is stated at the beginning and meetings are reasonably short, generally half an hour to three quarters of an hour. Solution focused therapists found that most of the valuable work done in therapy was towards the end of the session, no matter the length of the session (de Shazer, 1985).

- One small change can lead to many other positive changes and can affect other areas of a person's life. This encourages the generation of all types of ideas, even very small ones.
- There are always exceptions to the problem throughout meetings. The facilitator is always looking for exceptions, for example, when *does* the pupil attend again.
- If it works do more of it. Again the facilitator is looking throughout the meeting for what is successful, what is working and how more of it can be done.
- People have a wealth of resources in them to resolve difficulties. So throughout the meeting there is an emphasis on highlighting the child/young person's strengths and using them to look for solutions.

Not all the principles are used all the time and judgement is needed regarding when it is helpful to ask for exceptions, when a little more time is needed to discuss the difficulties and when to focus on what is working.

Some facilitators write the concerns up on the flip chart verbatim whereas others feel that some re-framing at this point can help to encourage a more positive view of the child or young person. For example, if the pupil was described as 'always distracted' it might be helpful to change this from the global statement to something like 'distracted a lot of the time' or even 'how to help him to concentrate', as long as the change still reflects the person's view. The facilitator always checks with the group member that the statement reflects their view accurately before writing it up on the flip chart.

There is considerable skill required to keep all the meeting members engaged and comfortable. The facilitator sets the tone of the meeting and therefore in the solution focused meeting not only needs to be non-judgemental and empathetic but also positive, optimistic and enthusiastic.

Evaluations

Two main evaluations have been carried out over three years. This is in addition to self-evaluations which groups are encouraged to do at least annually. These internal evaluations are structured to look at attendance, training needs, clarity of aims and functions, preparation for children and parents, and process and effectiveness.

Evaluation 1 (2004–2005)

In 2004, a telephone questionnaire was undertaken with all core members of Liaison Groups in one area of Highland, to identify good practice, improvements required and barriers to progress (Highland Council, 2005).

Method

Contact was made with all chairs of LGs in the area, requesting them to identify core members (Chairpersons tend to be Head Teachers or Assistant Head Teachers since meetings often take place in schools). There was a 100% return rate from the Chairs which meant that all Core Group Members were invited to take part in further aspects of the evaluation.

A questionnaire was formulated to access information about core members' experiences of LG arrangements. This questionnaire was structured to reflect each element

of liaison arrangements, from the child's initial referral to the LG through the stages of preparation, process of the meeting and outcomes and evaluation. The questionnaire included some questions to access quantitative data and other semi-structured 'starter' questions to encourage respondents to reflect on their experience as part of the group process.

Throughout December 2004 and January 2005, members of the sub-group used this questionnaire in telephone interviews with core members who had attended any or all of the last three LG meetings. The telephone interview method was chosen to maximise the number of responses in the minimum of time.

One hundred and fifteen questionnaires were completed. Responses were analysed using content analysis. Results were fed back in a seminar, which was open to all core members of Liaison Groups, and for broader access the evaluation was placed on the council website (www.highland.gov.uk/learninghere).

Results

Respondents identified many strengths in the Liaison Group process, most notably:

- good communication;
- effective multi-agency working;
- advantages for families;
- the use of solution focused approaches;
- shared responsibilities and commitment;
- the structure of the meetings; and
- the holistic nature of meetings.

Barriers to effectiveness were identified as follows:

- lack of resources to support some solutions;
- lack of follow up in some cases;
- attendance by professionals;
- time required to attend meetings; and
- lack of training in solution focused approaches.

Three key themes for improvement were identified:

- greater commitment from all involved in the process;
- improvements in the process itself; and
- development of skills and understanding.

Suggestions for routes to improvement were made, based on examples of good practice that were identified, as follows. To ensure greater commitment:

- consistent personnel required to attend more regularly;
- core members needed to take more responsibility for ensuring that follow-up work happened; and
- members needed to agree to gather relevant information in advance of the meeting.

To ensure improvements to the process:

- agendas and invitations needed always to be sent out in time;
- dates for meetings needed to be set well in advance and prioritised by all;
- there needed to be clarity in the process for referral and feedback;
- the action plan should always be completed and circulated to all and should be subsequently reviewed;
- only cases requiring a multi-agency approach should be discussed;
- evaluation should be built into the process;
- groups needed to ensure that meetings really focused on solutions;
- everyone at the meeting needed to be treated equally;
- pupils should be invited whenever feasible;
- parents should always be invited; and
- families should be prepared before the meeting.

To develop skills and understanding, the suggestions were for:

- multi-agency training (for example, solution focused approaches, inclusive practices); and
- regular internal evaluation at group level.

An evaluation tool for Liaison Groups was subsequently developed and made available on the council website. Liaison Groups are now encouraged to self-evaluate annually and to set their own targets for improvements to process and practice as a result of this. Educational psychologists (EPs) also continue to receive and respond to many requests for initial and ongoing training in solution focused approaches.

A further evaluation was undertaken in 2006 to track improvements and to include a wider range of views. It was felt to be particularly important to include the views of parents and children, as these had not been gathered in the initial evaluation.

Evaluation 2 (2006–2007)

In 2006, a further intervention and evaluation project was undertaken with a core group of professionals, parents, school staff, children and parents' agencies in one associated school group cluster (Macleod, 2007).

Method

Minutes from the 2004–2005 Liaison Group meetings in one particular school cluster were used to identify the core group of professionals, parents, school staff, children and partner agencies. A database was also created from these minutes, including who attended and the initial reason for the meeting. Views of school staff, agency personnel, parents and pupils were gathered from the associated school cluster of that year. The school cluster included seven local authority schools: six primaries and one secondary. Semi-structured interviews were used with voluntary and partner agencies and pupils. Questionnaires were used to get views from school staff, core group members, and parents. Also a focus group was held with core group members and parents.

The information from the focus group, interviews and questionnaires was analysed using content analysis and common themes identified.

Results

Positive views:

- Agencies can work well together in Liaison Groups.
- The solution focused approach is useful for generating solutions; it gives a structure to the meeting; helps discussions to be non-judgemental.
- The meetings were well attended.

Areas to be developed or changed:

- Administrative tasks round the meetings were problematic, for example, minutes, notice of meetings, documented staged approach, completing referral forms.
- Action plans were not always followed through, and needed to be reviewed.
- There was a need for parents, pupils, agency and school staff to discuss issues among themselves before the Liaison Group meeting.
- The preparation of parents and children was often felt to be inadequate.
- Genuine involvement of pupils in the meeting was seen as difficult to elicit.

Interventions:

- The database compiled from the minutes was used strategically. For example, it was seen that one particular school often referred children who were deemed to be anxious. Relaxation sessions were organised in the school for a group of pupils who were specifically referred because of anxiety.
- Leaflets for pupils describing solution focused meetings were given to schools.
- Preparation and debriefing checklists were compiled and given to staff responsible for inviting pupils and parents.
- A new referral form which included staged approach information was written. This is being used in the original cluster and has been adopted by another cluster.

Discussion

Summary of findings

Despite much success with this framework there have also been limitations. Although the meeting structure can be easily adopted, the solution focused principles which run throughout the meetings are not always properly understood or adhered to. Despite training in solution focused principles, not all head teachers, paediatricians or social workers were comfortable putting them into practice when facilitating. This has led to most meetings being facilitated by the educational psychologist, which has put heavy demands on the Highland Council Psychological Service's time. However, the role of the educational psychologist has been critical in the effective running of the meetings, as skill and knowledge of emotional literacy, strategies for managing behaviour and solution focused principles were important for successful meetings.

Some schools also over-used the meetings for issues which were not multi-agency and could have been resolved at an education only meeting. This was partly as a result of the success of the meetings.

Solution focused meetings have moved many of Highland Council's multi-agency meetings away from an emphasis on problems, which can leave group members feeling more pessimistic, on to more optimistic, energising types of meeting with action points, agreed to by the pupil and including the pupil's own solutions.

Review meetings give a sense of continuity and accountability with all actions points being looked at again to see if they are working and whether the strategies needed to be changed slightly or discontinued.

With regularly scheduled meetings school staff and core group professionals got to know and trust each other well and communication and collaboration improved. Colleagues felt more connected to each other and offered mutual support. The solution focused approach felt positive and optimistic and these factors in turn helped to build resilience among all the professionals who attended the meetings.

Discussion of findings

This model for solution focused meetings has developed over time as a result of evaluations and underlying research. From the resilience research it is known that a difference can be made by changing social environments (for example, Sameroff and Fiese, 2000), which allows everybody at the meeting the freedom to feel creative about solutions. The core group of professionals meets regularly, shares aims and draws up the timetable of meetings together – all of which has engendered a feeling of trust. The solution focused framework stops the rehearsing of difficulties and allows the group members to focus on the child's positive attributes. This is a more empowering experience for the young person or child. Group members have to be sensitive and empathic, which builds their own emotional literacy. The feeling of generating solutions helps to promote self efficacy.

These meetings were seen to be so successful that they were adopted in other types of settings, for example, team meetings, management meetings and development group meetings. The Highland Council Psychological Service has had many requests for training in solution focused meetings from different parts of the Education Service, and also other agencies and services. Many aspects of the meetings are now regularly adopted in various settings.

Implications for future research

The Highland Council is a Pathfinder Authority for Getting It Right for Every Child (GIRFEC), the developing national model for the delivery of integrated children's services in Scotland. A measure of the extent to which these solution focused meetings have become accepted and integrated into Highland's model of staged intervention is their inclusion in the guidelines developed for GIRFEC in Highland in 2009. When needs cannot be met by a single agency, planning:

can include solution focused discussions within the Service and involving the child and family, to identify and confirm helpful approaches. (The Highland Council Education, Culture and Sport Service, 2009)

It is acknowledged that there is an ongoing need for developments in practice across core groups. Nonetheless, this is a model for meetings which works and which will continue to be used within The Highland Council.

It continues to be a challenge to meaningfully include children. More work needs to be done with focus groups of children who have attended the meetings to discover what the barriers and facilitating factors are to successful inclusion in meetings.

More research into the outcomes for children over time also needs to be carried out to establish the longer-term effectiveness of this method of addressing difficulties.

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