



## Introduction

### *A 360-Degree View of Solution-Focused Brief Therapy in Schools*

Johnny S. Kim, Michael S. Kelly, & Cynthia Franklin

Since its creation in the 1980s, solution-focused brief therapy (SFBT) has gradually become a common treatment option accepted by many mental health professionals (MacDonald, 2007). With its emphasis on client strengths and short-term treatment, SFBT appears to be well suited for school mental health contexts given the wide array of problems presenting in school settings and the large caseloads of most school social workers (Franklin, Biever, Moore, Clemons, & Scamardo, 2001; Newsome, 2005). This second edition is part of the Oxford Workshop Series and presents a “360-degree” view of SFBT in school settings from meta-analytic, intervention research, and practice perspectives.

All the chapters from the previous edition have been updated, and we have added new chapters to further expand the clinical examples demonstrating SFBT techniques. Since publication of the first edition in 2006, research on SFBT in schools has produced several advances that we cover here, including updates on recent systematic reviews and discussion about SFBT listed on national evidence-based registries. This second edition also expands some of the original chapters by adding a Response to Intervention (RtI) framework for schools that may want to use the SFBT approach. And we have added several new clinical chapters called “SFBT in Action.” Selected based on results from the Second National School Social Work Survey, which identified the most common

school-related problems that school social workers encounter in their work, these new clinical chapters further demonstrate ways to use SFBT with students.

The chapters in this book take you through a 360-degree view of SFBT in school social work practice. You will first learn about SFBT itself, from its earliest beginnings in the 1980s to the present day. In Chapter 2, SFBT techniques and why this approach can be applied directly to school social work practice realities are discussed. Additionally, the SFBT theory of change is presented to help explain how these techniques positively affect students. In Chapter 3, the question “Does SFBT really work?” is given a thorough review, including the most recent results from several systematic reviews and meta-analyses on SFBT practice and giving a full picture of the current state of the science in regards to SFBT practice. Chapter 4 provides a brief overview of Tier 1 goals and how SFBT can work within this RtI framework that is popular in schools. Chapter 4 focuses on one such school—Gonzalo Garza Independence High School in Austin, Texas—that the authors have consulted with extensively and that illustrates a solution-focused Tier 1 approach adopting SFBT ideas and principles throughout the entire school curriculum and discipline process. Chapter 5 discusses Tier 2 goals and how SFBT can be applied to targeted groups of students who are identified as more at-risk. It also features a particularly exciting new approach to using SFBT in schools—the WOWW program (“Working on What Works”)—to illustrate how SFBT can be adapted to classroom and small group contexts. WOWW is a teacher coaching intervention designed to increase teacher-student collaboration for better learning environments, and along with a detailed description of the WOWW intervention program in the Chicago area (2007–2012), the promising outcome data from the initial WOWW program are analyzed and discussed. Chapter 6 draws on some of the positive outcomes of the Garza experience to show how school social workers in a diverse array of K-12 school environments have translated SFBT ideas using a Tier 3 approach (intensive individual counseling). And with Chapters 7 through 10 (the “SFBT in Action” chapters), this second edition expands on the practice by identifying four of the most common student problems encountered by school social workers and describing how to apply SFBT techniques to your school practice.

## **In Schools, Solutions Are Everywhere**

Problems abound in school settings. Students are not always ready to learn, teachers are not always sure how to deal with the underachieving and/or defiant student and instead claim that he or she just “doesn’t care,” and parents are at times eager to find someone from the school to blame. The overall school climate provides additional possible stresses, with school violence, bullying, gang activity, and other illicit behavior happening on school grounds while school administrators try to maintain “zero tolerance” for these behaviors on the one hand yet foster a positive, child-centered learning environment to increase academic achievement for all students on the other. And as if all these problems were not enough, the field of education is under pressure from federal, state, and local governments to provide accurate and measurable progress toward yearly goals, a process that has become even more pronounced since implementation of the No Child Left Behind legislation in 2002.

Solutions, however, also abound in school settings. Second graders wake up early and tell their parents that they cannot wait to get to school so they can see their teachers and their friends. Teachers stop in the hallway to tell colleagues about a new project they are excited about starting with their students. In cafes, beauty shops, and church basements, parents encourage other parents to send their own kids to a child’s school because of all the great things that school has going for it. School leaders, in collaboration with local law enforcement, parents, and the students themselves, create zones of safety even for children living in economically distressed and dangerous neighborhoods. All the school stakeholders (teachers, parents, kids, and administrators) welcome higher accountability standards and frame them as an opportunity to foster a more collaborative and high-achieving academic culture.

Schools can be places of solutions, strengths, and successes. School-based mental health professionals (school social workers, school counselors, and school psychologists) have numerous ways to harness the solutions that are already happening in their schools. A database search revealed more than 50 books in print on SFBT, SFBT associations in over 10 countries, and several annual national and international conferences devoted to SFBT. In Chapter 3, we share findings from a meta-analysis of SFBT studies that show solid (though modest) impacts in the current SFBT practice literature. Compared to a more heavily researched approach such as

cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT), SFBT is still developing rigorous outcome studies that demonstrate its effectiveness, but as Chapter 3 shows, this approach is on its way to joining CBT as a practice that has shown some empirical efficacy (Franklin, Trepper, Gingerich, & McCollum, 2012).

We are sharing a 360-degree view of an approach that is still a work in progress and to which additional empirical research, theory, and practical applications are being added each year. In the spirit of evidence-based practice transparency, we do not overstate or play down the available research on SFBT's effectiveness: we share these findings with you and let you join us in assessing how well these findings apply to your own practice style and school context.

### **Why SFBT Is Well Suited to School Social Work Practice**

Problems and solutions, to the thinking of an SFBT school social worker, are always “abounding” in any school context. Indeed, one of the more liberating notions of SFBT is that change is continually happening, which requires our attention to be focused on the small changes that are making potentially large differences in the lives of our clients. What we do with those small, sometimes hard-to-see changes is what make us SFBT school social workers, and it could even make our school contexts become more solution focused in their approaches to the key educational issues of today.

The following short case example demonstrates how the possibilities for change are indeed “everywhere” and how skilled SFBT school social workers can harness change to help clients make big changes in their everyday school behavior. Read the example not only to know about the specific SFBT techniques in action (more on those later), but also to understand how the different members of the client system perceive the intervention being conducted by the solution-focused school social worker and then collaborate with the social worker to help students succeed.

Bonita was one of the first students I met at my first-ever school social work position. She was lost, literally. She had just come to the school as a sixth grader and wasn't sure where her self-contained special education class was. She asked me for directions, and I introduced her to her teacher. The next week, she was in my office, crying about how much she missed her old school and didn't like the older kids at our junior high. She had announced to her teacher, “I hate this school, and I'm staying

at home tomorrow!” While I validated her feelings of sadness and anxiety, I asked if she had noticed anything getting better for her at our school. She said that she still had a good friend from her old school with her, and that they were in the same class together. I asked how she would rank her experience at our school so far on a scale of 1 to 10, with 10 being the highest on the scale. She asked through her tears, “Can you go lower than 1?!” I said, “Sure,” and she said, “It’s a 0.”

I asked what would it take for her to say that being at our school deserved a score of 2 or 3, and she said, “A total miracle.” I then asked her to imagine that just such a miracle had happened that night and to picture the next day, when she was at our school and everything was better for her here. In such a case, what would be the first thing she’d notice that was different? Bonita thought for a while and replied, “I would be able to open my locker by myself.”

It turned out that Bonita had never used a combination lock before, and this had made her feel very anxious as well as inadequate because all the other kids in her class were already doing it without problems. We set a goal of working on her locker combination skills with her teacher, and within weeks, Bonita was smiling and laughing each morning as I watched her walk into school.

Like Bonita, schools themselves are going through their own transition in relation to the utilization of mental health services. Some policy makers and educational leaders call for schools to become “full-service operations,” giving students and parents the mental health, vocational, and English-language training that external community agencies are not adequately providing. Still others claim that school-based mental health is an “extra” service and supportable only to the degree that it produces demonstrable differences in student academic achievement and thus allows students to compete successfully in the global economy. One of our colleagues remembers being told by a local superintendent that he would support our colleague’s SFBT research project only if it made a measurable positive impact on “bottom-line” education issues for his K-8 district (in his case, this meant higher GPAs and increased attendance).

School leaders and parents are right in wanting more from school-based mental health services, and the profession itself has only begun to recognize the need for more transparency with community stakeholders about the

relative effectiveness of the interventions we typically employ in our school practices. This book will equip you with a solid working knowledge of the ideas and techniques behind SFBT, acquaint you with the most current evidence on the overall effectiveness of SFBT, and finally, demonstrate several examples of school social workers making SFBT happen in their particular school contexts. It is our hope that by looking at SFBT from a 360-degree perspective, you will be ready to bring more specific SFBT ideas and techniques into your school in the coming years.

### **Advantages of SFBT in a School Setting**

Why does this approach help in a school setting? Students, teachers, and parents are going to be visible to the school social worker even when they are not being “treated.” In addition to using actual SFBT techniques to access strengths in students, school social workers have a unique opportunity to observe their students handling a variety of other challenges in their day-to-day contact with the school population (Box 1.1).

#### **SFBT Is Strengths Based**

The SFBT approach posits that people have strengths; moreover, SFBT says that those strengths are active, *right now*, in helping clients manage their situation. The issue is not that clients cannot solve their problem without additional training or somehow submitting to the school social workers’ view of the problem. Rather, their own inherent strengths will ultimately be what they use to resolve their problem.

#### **Box 1.1 Advantages of SFBT**

- SFBT is strengths based
- SFBT is client centered
- SFBT makes small changes matter
- SFBT is portable
- SFBT is adaptable
- SFBT can be as brief (or as long) as you want it to be
- SFBT enables practitioners to gain cultural competence
- SFBT can be adapted to special education IEP goals

By not presuming that all clients are inherently in need of some treatment for a particular pathology or dysfunction, strengths-based school social workers are free to see their clients do a variety of things well and to ask questions that help their clients mobilize those inherent strengths to do something about the particular problems they face. In addition, school social workers usually have to document their work with clients by writing reports and case summaries: SFBT gives them ample opportunities not only to focus on their client's strengths but also to incorporate those strengths into their written assessments and other paperwork.

### **SFBT Is Client Centered**

SFBT starts from where the client is at—and sometimes in dramatic and powerful ways, creating contexts in which clients can determine their own goals and decide how and where they wish to make changes in their lives. In school settings, a solution-oriented school social worker may be more likely to notice and respond to what clients, whether students or teachers, are actually asking for and wishing to change. In addition to increasing the likelihood that the clients will implement a particular intervention and maintain progress toward their goals, focusing on what the clients want to change also helps to make the whole referral and placement process in school settings more client focused and thus (hopefully) more effective than standard behavior modification plans, which might not always include the specific goals and wishes of every part of the client system.

### **SFBT Makes Small Changes Matter**

One of the biggest challenges in school social work practice is the common complaint by parents, administrators, and teachers that change brought about for a particular student's emotional/behavioral problems is too slow or too "small." SFBT stands this thinking on its head and asks school social workers to focus on helping clients make small changes and then maintain these changes, the theory being that with those small successes in hand, clients will begin to see themselves as more capable of making larger changes in their lives. Again and again, we have seen this principle play out with students in our school social work practice: by making one part of a problem go away, or by helping teachers see one strength of a student who they had "given up on," larger changes became possible, and the clients went

ahead and made those changes with minimal coaching or encouragement on our part.

### **SFBT Is Portable**

Though SFBT started as and remains a set of techniques rooted in clinical psychotherapy, it can make a difference in numerous other nonclinical school settings. Almost anywhere in a school is a potential site for applying SFBT techniques or ideas: the class meeting where students scale their own behavior and then talk about what they would have to do differently for them to rate themselves higher the next week; the special education staffing conference where parents and teachers describe exceptions when a student does not display a problem behavior in an effort to discover what the learning environment (and student) might do differently to avoid repeating the problem behavior; the playground mediation where students think about how doing one thing differently might change a conflict they are having. All these examples (and many more that you will read about in this book) underline the various ways that school social workers can bring SFBT into their diverse settings and adapt SFBT ideas to their multiple roles within their schools.

### **SFBT Is Adaptable**

SFBT can be folded or nested into other techniques being used by clinicians. Most experienced school social workers we have worked with have characterized their practice approach as “eclectic.” One of the best features of SFBT as a maturing practice approach is its ability to be integrated into other such approaches. Clearly, elements of SFBT fit nicely within a cognitive or behavioral treatment framework. Even practitioners who tend to favor approaches that are based more on discovering how the past impacts a student’s current functioning will appreciate the aspects of SFBT where clients set goals for their own progress and gauge how well they are doing based on scaling questions.

### **SFBT Can Be as Brief (Or as Long) as You Want It to Be**

One of the frequent complaints we hear about SFBT is that it is too surface oriented and too brief to get into the “real work.” This may have been a fair criticism of SFBT in its early stages (when the approach was deliberately defined as being opposed to long-term treatment), but now, SFBT is clearly and easily adapted to single-session, brief, and long-term treatment

processes. The nature of SFBT (the thinking that change is possible and constant) does not mean that clients who have more long-term treatment plans, such as those students in schools who have individualized education plans (IEPs) requiring a year of social work services, cannot benefit from the strengths-based approach inherent to SFBT. In our practice experience, some students we saw on a long-term basis wound up having several distinct SFBTs over the course of the year. The process of helping them was similar, but the issues changed as students learned how to manage one problem and then faced a new one.

### **SFBT Enables Practitioners to Gain Cultural Competence**

All school personnel (school social workers included) are realizing the increasing importance of cultural competence skills in helping them to engage with and teach students from diverse backgrounds. Several recent scholars have noted that one of the main persisting aspects of the racial “achievement gap” is the cultural competence gap that separates white educators from the students of color whom they are trying to empower and teach (Delpit & Kohl, 2006; Ferguson, 2002; Tripod Project, 2007). By emphasizing how clients perceive their problems and how they might devise solutions that fit their own preferences, SFBT appears well suited to help school social workers practice from an approach of cultural humility. In addition, through the example of SFBT pioneers like Insoo Kim Berg, SFBT has always advocated that clinicians frequently adopt “one-down” positions that allow clients to be in charge of their treatment in ways that avoid clients perceiving the school social worker as pushy or domineering. Clinicians who are perceived as authoritarian or interested only in their own particular approach to treatment are often labeled as culturally insensitive by minorities who are receiving mental health treatment (Fong, 2004; McGoldrick, Giordano, & Pearce, 1996; Wing Sue & McGoldrick, 2005), and SFBT clearly offers an alternate way for school social workers to engage clients in clinical work without making them feel forced to adopt the social workers’ worldview. Furthering this idea of cultural humility in the SFBT approach, Kim (2014) describes ways to use SFBT techniques and questions from a multicultural perspective with clients.

### **SFBT Can Be Adapted to Special Education IEP Goals**

For many school social workers, a lot of their services are delivered to students who have yearly goals for treatment, usually expressed through an

IEP. SFBT, along with CBT, is well suited to helping school social workers write those goals and collaborate with their clients to meet those goals successfully. By identifying discrete changes and applying scaling questions, school social workers can easily integrate SFBT thinking into their IEP goals. So far, this area has not been studied empirically, but our contention, from our own school experience, is that the very process of creating IEP goals with students, teachers, and parents in a solution-focused manner enhanced the eventual achievement of those goals by motivating the client system to move toward solutions rather than remain stuck at only talking about the problem.

## Summary

SFBT is well suited to school social work practice and school contexts. A solution-focused school social worker can help students, particularly those who are harder to reach, focus on what's working and how they can change their lives in positive ways. Although not originally created for application in a school context, SFBT is clearly an adaptable, portable practice philosophy that, as we will see, can be used in many diverse school contexts at multiple levels of intervention.

## References

- Delpit, L., & Kohl, H. (2006). *Other people's children: Cultural conflict in the classroom* (2nd ed.). New York: New Press.
- Ferguson, R. (October 21, 2002). What doesn't meet the eye: Understanding and addressing racial disparities in high-achieving suburban schools from The Tripod Project Background. Retrieved August 1, 2007, from [http://www.tripodproject.org/uploads/file/What\\_doesnt\\_meet\\_the\\_eye.pdf](http://www.tripodproject.org/uploads/file/What_doesnt_meet_the_eye.pdf)
- Fong, R. (2004). Immigrant and refugee children and families. In R. Fong (Ed.), *Culturally competent social work practice with immigrant children and families*. New York: Guilford Press.
- Franklin, C., Biever, J., Moore, K., Clemons, D., & Scamardo, M. (2001). The effectiveness of solution-focused therapy with children in a school setting. *Research on Social Work Practice, 11*(4), 411–434.
- Franklin, C., Trepper, T., Gingerich, W., & McCollum, E. (2012). *Solution-focused brief therapy: A handbook of evidence-based practice*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Kim, J. S. (2014). *Solution-focused brief therapy: A multicultural approach*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- MacDonald, A. J. (2007). *Solution-focused therapy: Theory, research and practice*. London: Sage Books.

- McGoldrick, M., Giordano, J., & Pearce, J. K. (1996). *Ethnicity and family therapy* (2nd ed.). New York: Guilford Press.
- Newsome, S. (2005). The impact of solution-focused brief therapy with at-risk junior high school students. *Children & Schools*, 27(2), 83–90.
- Tripod Project. (2007). Background of Tripod research project. Retrieved August 1, 2007, from [http://www.tripodproject.org/index.php/about/about\\_background/](http://www.tripodproject.org/index.php/about/about_background/)
- Wing Sue, D., & McGoldrick, M. (2005). *Multicultural social work practice*. New York: Wiley.

OUP - USA