



FRESH START



Guidance on narrative and solution focused methods to promote engagement in education for students attending Pupil Referral Unit/Alternative Provision

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Fresh Start: Guidance on narrative and solution focused methods to promoted engagement in education in students attending Pupil Referral Units/Alternative Provision

The Fresh Start project is for teachers and other education professionals, such as mentors, working with individual students. The aim of the Fresh Start intervention is for students to become re-engaged in their education. This document provides detailed guidance for practitioners about how to use this approach to support students.

The Narrative and Solutions approach to helping students become re-engaged with education was developed from the Excluded Students' Life Story Project funded by the Nuffield Foundation. This document should therefore be read in association with the final project report entitled: Report and Recommendations for Education Professionals working in School and Pupil Referral Unit/Alternative Provision (<https://studentnarratives.wordpress.com/>).

BACKGROUND

This intervention is based on an approach which uses Narrative Psychology and Solution Focused methods to work with individual students in school and Pupil Referral Units/Alternative Provision (PRU/AP) in particular. This approach is based on narrative psychology and solution focussed thinking (Ajmal & Rees, 2001; Durrant, 1995; Milner & Bateman, 2011) which makes the following assumptions:

- That we internalise narratives about ourselves which have a strong influence on what we think and do.
- That we assume the narratives we have internalised to be a true story about the kind of person we are;
- That we can change this personal narrative by helping students to reflect on their time at school, highlight their strengths, and helping them to engage in new ways of behaving so that they begin to construct a progressive narrative about themselves as learners.

Students who could benefit from the intervention

The intervention is designed for students with the following characteristics:

- Students with no other substantial SEN besides Social, emotional and behaviour difficulties.
- Students whose attendance is very good to excellent
- Students that are not on the extreme end of the continuum of displaying behavioural difficulties
- Students with a relatively stable home situation

Practical Considerations

Prior to delivering the intervention the following practical issues should be considered:

- The need for a quiet undisturbed room to be used every week (a classroom may not be the best place)
- The need to have the time set aside with no disturbances allowed
- Plan the meetings well in advance in the same place at the same time

THE PROCESS

Meeting with Parent/s and Student (at school or at home)

The purpose of the meeting with parents and the student is:

- To talk about the parent/s' own experience of school and how this may have influenced their thinking
- To clarify what the parent/s and the student would like him/her to have achieved at school
- To explain what the intervention involves and that it will require the parent/s' support
- To address any concerns the parents or the student may have about the intervention

Session 1: Setting the scene and obtaining the student's story of his/her life at school

Setting the Scene

Setting the scene involves the following:

- Describing the purpose of the intervention (to improve his participation in education) and how many sessions you intend to have and for how long.
- Clarification of roles: You explain your role and the students' role in the intervention. You make it clear that you are only here to help and that the student needs to play an active role in bringing about change.
- Explaining that participation is voluntary and that the student should commit to attending the meetings and engage in some activities in-between sessions to help them achieve the aims of the project.

The student needs to understand:

- That you are working together to help him/her become more involved in learning
- That s/he has to be prepared to try things out in-between meetings
- That you will not be telling him/her what to do
- That any actions are agreed upon between yourselves.

The Student's Educational Life Story

The student is asked to talk about their life at school from when they started primary school to the present day. As this is a substantial story the student needs to break the task down into life phases or chapters. It is up to the student to decide how s/he would like to separate the life story into chapters. Here it is helpful to draw a timeline (starting with reception class to the present) on which the student can indicate major life events (e.g. moving house and changing school) and separate the story in section or chapters. For instance, if nothing substantial happened and s/he enjoyed his/her time at primary school then s/he may wish to make this into one chapter called “My happy time” or simply “primary school”. Please note that most students do not remember a great deal from key stage 1 when they 15-16 years old.

Once the educational life story has been separated into chapters the student is asked to talk about his/her memories of each life chapter. You also need to ask the student to provide examples of good and not so good experiences of school at that time. Make sure that you keep a record of the good and the difficult experiences either by recording the interview (with the student’s consent) or noting down what the student says about each life phase. In particular it is important to keep a detailed record of any positive times and strengths the student has. For instance, some students talk about how well behaved they were at primary school or in year 7 at secondary school.

After the session: You need to write a summary of the student’s narrative before the next session when you share the narrative summary with the student and make any necessary changes. See appendix 1 for an example of a narrative summary.

Talking about what is going well: Before you talk about his/her current experience of school, you share the narrative summary with the student and make any necessary changes. In this session you talk about his/her current life at school with a particular focus on what is going well for him/her. You amplify those areas of school life where s/he is making progress or which are less problematic. The aim of this exercise is to collect information about the young person’s strengths and for him/her to start appreciating some of his/her strengths.

Identifying what the student would like to change: After talking about what is going well the student is asked about what s/he would most like to change. For instance, this may be getting to school on time, staying focused in maths lessons, or staying in class. The current situation is discussed in some detail and the student is asked what it would be like if the issue was resolved.

What the student is already doing right (noting exceptions): In almost all cases the student is already doing some of the things that s/he needs to do more of. Indeed the way forward often requires doing the right thing more often. Moreover, when things are going well it is often not reflected upon. It is considered to be an exception which is ignored, when in fact it provides very helpful information on how to improve the situation. There are two ways in which you can identify qualities and skills the student already has been using, albeit sporadically and to a limited extent.

1. Looking at different periods and situations: Examining different periods in students’ recent past can provide important information for future action. The student is asked how things were last term or last month and if s/he was performing better or worse at that time. For instance, if on the one hand s/he was performing worse (and s/he has improved) from

last term then you can ask what has helped him/her to improve. You then need to obtain as much detail about what has helped him/her to improve as possible. On the other hand, if s/he was performing better in the past (and things have become worse) then you can ask about what was so different in the past that things were better then. What is important to recognise here is that either way – an improved or a poorer performance in comparison to last term - will provide important information on what may help the student to improve her performance in the future.

2. **Asking Scaling Questions:** The use of scaling helps you and the student to focus on what s/he can do to further improve his/her performance. The student is asked a scaling question in which s/he is asked to place the current level of his/her performance on a scale of one to ten. It is best to draw a scale from 1-10 (see below) and for the student to indicate on this scale their current level of performance. Then you should proceed as follows:

The student is asked to think about where they are now on a scale of 1-10. Where 1 is the lowest possible level and 10 is highest level they could achieve. The student may for instance place herself or himself at about level 4 (see below). You congratulate him/her (as s/he is not at level 1, 2 or 3) and ask why s/he is at level 4 and not at levels 2 or 3. This is a very important part of the process as you are making the student aware of what s/he is already doing right and what s/he needs to do more of. All of this information needs to be highlighted and recorded as it informs the agreed on actions the student is going to take. Please note that it does not matter a great deal where the student places him/herself as you are using the line as a tool to encourage a change in behaviour. If the student does place himself/herself at level 1 (which has actually never happened to me) then I suggest reminding them of different periods when things are not so problematic. They may also place themselves at level 1 to let you know how hopeless they are current feeling.

Once you have both examined in some detail what the student is already doing well, you switch to asking the student what s/he can do to move up one level up on the scale (e.g. from level 4 to level 5). By concentrating on taking one small step you are allowing for a moderate amount of change to be considered rather than the student being overwhelmed by attempting to move up to level 9 -10 straightaway. Again you make a record of the suggestions the student has made. You may also ask the student to do the recording of possible actions as this does increase their involvement and ownership of future actions. It is best to write the suggested actions down so that they are seen by both of you and you can talk about them in more detail. It is important to examine the details of any proposed action to clarify what it looks like on the ground, whether it can be implemented and what support the student may require.

At the end of the session you and the student agree on which actions the student will take before your next meeting. The actions can vary from simply observing oneself and reflecting one's action or engaging in new behaviour (e.g. sitting in a different part of the class). The actions may also include you talking to some of the students' teachers about providing some form of additional support, or that you and the student will look at the work the student has produced for a particular subject in the next session.

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
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After the Session: You send a summary of the meeting and the agreed actions to the student and his/her parents and relevant teachers (if you both agree that his would be helpful). The summary of the meeting should contain, what is going well, what the student would most like to change, where s/he placed herself on the scale of 1-10 and what actions you have agreed upon so that the student can move up one level. See Appendix 2 for an example of a summary to be sent to the student and then to his/her parents.

Sessions 3-6+: Reflecting on current events, reviewing progress and improving or changing the intervention

The content of these meetings is more flexible than session 2 as it depends on the issues you are addressing and the relationship you have with the student.

The aims of these sessions are:

- a) for the student to describe and reflect on (in other words provides a narrative) of what has been happening in the last week
- b) to review the progress which has been made since last week and agree upon new actions.

Talking about and reflecting on what has been happening: In the first part of the session the student describes and reflects on what has been happening during the course of the week. Here the student needs to be encouraged not simply to provide a factual narrative but to also provide information on what people (including him/herself) may have been thinking and feeling at the time. In other words to provide reasons for one's own action and the actions of other people. So you may ask the student:

- 1) Why s/he thinks s/he behaved/responded in this way
- 2) What s/he was feeling at the time and how this may have affected his/her behaviour
- 3) Why another person behaved in this way
- 4) What the other person may have been thinking and feeling at the time to explain their behaviour.

It is important to help the student reflect in this way on both positive and negative events which occurred in the recent past. You should also aim for the student to achieve some kind of insight and resolution in relation to negative events.

Review progress and agree on new action: When discussing progress it is helpful to use the 1-10 scale as this helps to focus on the progress that has or has not been made and what needs to happen next.

When discussing progress it is also important to obtain as much detail as possible so that an informed conversation can take place. Moreover, if you are focussing in on a particular

subject area then it will be helpful to look at the work that has been done and to discuss it in detail with the student.

Agree upon actions that need to take place next which may involve yourself, the student and some of his/her teachers.

At the end of each session you summarise the progress that has been made (with reference to the scale of 1-10), the issue which were discussed and the agreed upon actions.

Please note: In any of these sessions you may also decide to focus on a new issue which the student wishes to address. This may be because the student has made sufficient progress or s/he wishes to concentrate on something else. In either case you will need to start with a scaling question and then agree upon actions (see Session 2)

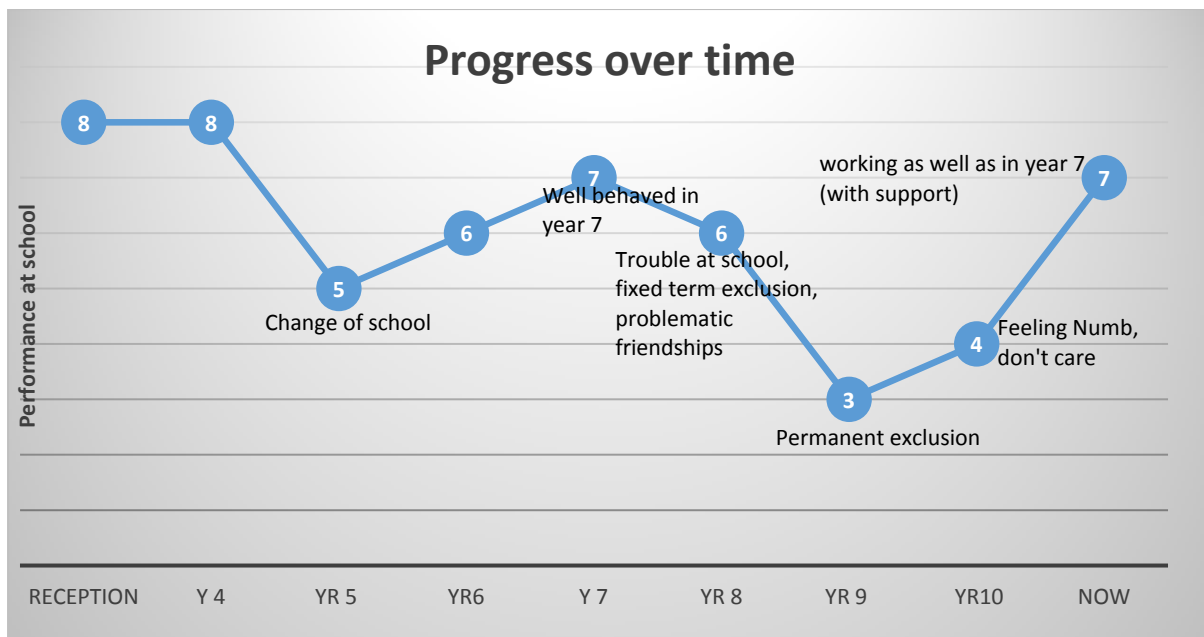
After the session: send an email to the student and his/her parent/s summarising the progress which has been made and future actions.

Finally, it is also helpful to hold a review meeting with the parents and the student after the 3rd or 4th session. It is very important to hold this meeting in any case: when things are going well or when they are not going so well.

Final Session: Review of the progress that has been made and bringing the intervention to an end

In the final session you and the student should look at the narrative summary which you and the student created after the first session. The student is encouraged to think about how they have changed from how they were in the past and the progress they have made. The aim is for the students to come away with a progressive narrative about themselves as learners. The process of reflecting on and interpreting past events involves:

- a) Slowly re-reading the narrative summary (completed in session 2/3) and asking the student not only to reflect on the events that occurred but also to think about how s/he has changed since those times and what s/he has learned from his/her experiences. For instance, s/he may say how s/he is now much more thoughtful and reflective than s/he was then or how s/he now gets on much better with his/her teachers.
- b) The student is asked to summarise his/her life at school. For this it is helpful to draw a timeline graph (see below for an example) on which s/he can indicate his/her well-being and engagement with education or performance at school over time. On the graph the student may also indicate where s/he would like to be in 6-12 months' time.



Final Meeting with Parent and Student

The purpose of this final meeting with the student and their parents is to review the progress that has been made and to bring the intervention to an end. Moreover, the purpose of the meeting is to explain how the school, the parents and the student may continue to work together in the future. This meeting usually takes place at school.

FURHER READING

- Ajmal, Y., & Rees, I. (2001). *Solutions in schools: Creative applications of solution focused brief thinking with young people and adults*. London: Bt Press.
- Durrant, M. (1995). *Creative strategies for school problems: solutions for psychologists and teachers*. London: Norton.
- Milner, J., & Bateman, J. (2011). *Working with children and teenagers using solution focused approaches*. London: Jessica Kingsley.

APPENDIX 1

Example of a narrative summary: Jane's Story

The Good years (Primary School)

Jane went to Greenside Primary school. At primary school the work was relatively easy, she had lots of friends and the teachers were polite and they rarely shouted. At primary school Jane was well behaved and she “never got into any trouble”. Even when Jane broke her arm she continued to attend school, she liked it that much. Jane also made good progress at primary school and she thinks that her ability was about average.

In sum, Jane was a successful student at primary school and she loved going to school.

Some good and bad times (secondary school)

After primary school Jane went to Archway Comprehensive School. She was well behaved in year 7 and was doing well at school. She started to misbehave in year 8 and in year 9 her behaviour got much worse. Jane would talk in class when the teacher was addressing the class and if teacher asked her to be quiet she continued to talk. Then when the teacher shouted at her she would not like it and shout back or walk out. Jane would “lose it” when a teacher shouted at her. Jane would also keep on talking or walk out of class if the teacher did not help her within a few minutes but kept on helping other students. .

What Jane enjoyed at school was being with her friends and she also liked English lessons. The teacher was cool and she was good in English. However, she was not doing well in most of the other subjects and Maths was particularly problematic.

At some point Jane realised that she would be excluded if she continued in this way but she made no effort to improve things. Jane now thinks that she behaved in this way because she was bored. Moreover, she was part of a troublesome group and she wanted to impress the other girls in the group. She did stuff that she would not have done by herself.

In the end there was a managed move and Jane transferred to Riverside PRU towards the end of year 9. There was no single incident it was just that she kept getting into trouble. Jane holds herself responsible for the “exclusion”. She thinks that the school had given her a lot of chances but she continued to misbehave. At the time she did not think that being excluded was such a big deal but she also wishes she was still at mainstream school.

Riverside PRU

Jane is very positive about Riverside PRU. She thinks that she has learned a lot since she came to the PRU. However, she still finds it difficult to stay in class. She gets out of certain lessons to hang out with her friends. At Riverside the teachers and mentors know about each student so it is much easier to get on with them. You can sit in a room with a teacher and have a proper conversation with them.

Looking back Jane thinks she has changed. She is not as bad as she used to be. She rarely gets into trouble. What she thinks has made the difference is being in small groups, teachers knowing you personally and having time for you. Jane also thinks that she has changed in that she has become more mature and able to think for herself.

Appendix 2

Example of Email which may be sent to student after your second meeting: Letter (attached to email) sent to Edward

Dear Edward,

It was a pleasure to talk with you yesterday about what is going well for you and what you would most like to change. Following our meeting I thought it best to summarise what we talked about and what I think we agreed.

What you are particularly enjoying at school are the practical lessons such as ICT, Art and Sport. You like all the creative and practical subjects best. In addition, you felt pleased about your participation in Black History month. The school asked you take part by reading out a poem about Martin Luther King. The whole event went extremely well and you felt happy (proud) with the contribution you were able to make. You also enjoyed the event as it gave you the opportunity to perform alongside some of your friends.

You are doing well in your coursework, although you are also aware that you can do better. In particular, you enjoyed creating a portfolio on M.C. Escher. It seems that you like being given the opportunity to work independently and to be creative. You also told me that you work well in class when there is a calm atmosphere and that you have made substantial progress in Maths, which I don't think is one of your favourite subjects.

You told me that you are not yet sure what it is you want to do when you leave school. You may either go to college or take an apprenticeship (to become a plumber?). Ideally you would like to do something creative with music, such as becoming a rap artist. In any case it seems that in the future you would like a job which allows you to be creative, preferably in the area of music.

Then we talked about what you would most like to change at present and you told me that you would like to come in on time. At present you often come into school very late, even though, you are acutely aware of how important it is to be at school. On a positive note, you are already improving as your attendance was worse last year. The main reason for this improvement is that you are very aware of how important Year 11 is for your GCSE results.

On scale of 0 – 10 (0 = never being at school on time and 10 = always being at school on time) you gave yourself a 5.5. We then talked about what you were already doing get to school on time and what you may do to improve your attendance further: to get from 5.5 to 7.00. After some discussion we agreed on the following actions:

- 1) Going to bed earlier. At present you may go to bed at 12.00 or 1.00 am. You need to go to bed earlier than this. Hopefully when you get up earlier you will also feel more tired in the evening.
- 2) At present there is long time gap from when you get up to when you leave the flat to go to school. This can be improved upon by you preparing the night before (which you are already doing some of time). This includes having a shower and getting your clothes ready.
- 3) For staff, and in particular Jim and Andrew to notice when you come in on time.

- 4) For you and Jim to set a target for your on-time attendance (e.g. from 60% to 75%). I suggest that you set this target for the next two weeks (starting on Tuesday, 19th November). I will talk to Alex about this.

Best wishes

Copy of the letter was also sent to Edward's mother. (After having sent a copy to Edward and having obtained his permission). In the email I also let the student know that he can get in touch with me to talk about things before the next scheduled meeting.

Acknowledgement

I would like to thank the Nuffield Foundation for funding the research on which these guidelines for intervention are based. The Nuffield Foundation is an endowed charitable trust that aims to improve social well-being in the widest sense. It funds research and innovation in education and social policy and also works to build capacity in education, science and social science research. The Nuffield Foundation has funded this project, but the views expressed are those of the authors and not necessarily those of the Foundation. More information is available at www.nuffieldfoundation.org

