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Organisational change: a solution-focused approach

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the effectiveness of a solution-focused approach to organisational change. Planning Alternative Tomorrows with Hope (PATH) is an intervention more commonly applied to individuals. In this study the intervention is used with groups of people working in educational organisations to help manage the change process. The approach allows group members to plan a way forward to manage change. Semi-structured interviews took place with six education officers involved in the interventions. The design of the research study follows an interpretative case-study model, and uses content analysis to identify key factors. Findings show the importance of PATH acting as a catalyst for change, giving a sense of immediacy, and allowing participants to shape their own future. For change to be sustained and be successful it cannot occur in isolation. Based on the conclusions of the research study, a number of issues for professional practice are discussed and considered.

Introduction

Systemic change can be described as dynamic change that occurs in organisations (Blanchard, 2003) including aspects such as policy and practice systems, information systems and how they interact. This allows members of organisations to engage in reflecting, rethinking and restructuring how they organise themselves. It is a cyclical process in which the impact of change on all parts of the whole and their relationships to one another are taken into consideration.

The work of educational psychologists (EPs) has long been recognised in contributing at the organisational level. Farrell et al. (2006) showed how such an approach to working is valued, and shows how EPs understand systems and the relationships between people and within organisations. Detailed within this report (Farrell et al., 2006) is a quote from a director of educational psychology training, commenting on the unique value that an EP can bring to systemic work:

> … EPs are at the core of the interacting systems of school, local authorities, children's departments and families … they have a privileged responsibility across these systems and are able to contribute to the lives of individual, children, and groups and at policy level. (Farrell et al., 2006, p. 75)

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EPs use a range of approaches when working at an organisational level and have contributed to strategic developments of local authorities (LAs). The work of Rhydderch and Gameson (2010) shows how EPs have supported the development of integrated professional practice. Pellegrini (2009) illustrates the application of systemic approaches to educational psychology practice, highlighting the difficulties that EPs experience when attempting to utilise systemic approaches, such as time and capacity, limited training, and how the EP role is often viewed by other professionals.

Cameron (2006) shows that the practice of EPs is evolving in a challenging context, which has impacted upon professional morale; suggesting there is pressure from central and local government to squeeze into new service models, leading to professional self-reflection. Ashton and Roberts (2006) further debate the challenge that EPs have faced in defining professional identity, showing how many EPs find themselves in situations where they feel anxious about the distinctive contribution they could make to schools and organisations. As the practice of EPs has become more multi-agency based, the findings by Nash, Collins, and Loughlin (2003) are interesting; professional anxiety may be a response to the challenge of working with different agencies.

Blurred professional boundaries and a lack of role-clarity create hurdles for multi-agency working. Robinson, Anning, and Frost (2005) show that a key factor underpinning positive professional attitudes is the enhancement of individual professional identity; this helps to positively support the development of successful organisations. Many Educational Psychology Services are moving from an individual casework model to greater systemic work and, to this end, making use of solution-focused approaches in multi-agency work has been highlighted as supportive (Alexander & Sked, 2010). This builds on the work of Sharp (2001) who noted the importance of having a positive mind-set in multi-agency meetings which can be supportive in problem solving.

This article presents findings of the use of a solution-focused intervention to educational organisations undergoing systemic change, based upon interventions undertaken using Planning Alternative Tomorrows with Hope (PATH) (Pearpoint, O'Brien, and Forest, 1995). This approach is traditionally used with individuals, but in this study, the theory and technique have been applied to groups of professionals employed in educational organisations. The use of PATH was considered appropriate as it aims to present individuals with a preferred future, when situations seem to be prevented from moving forward. In complex LA structures, its use seemed highly appropriate.

O'Connell (2007) shows how a solution-focused approach can have a positive dynamic; creating the expectation of change and allowing for different understandings of solutions. LA organisations are complex social situations, and accordingly problems and solutions are ever-present. Kelly (2006) shows a solution-focused approach is relevant as change is always happening; the skill of a practitioner is in identifying when small change can take place and to build on this. EPs working in LAs, with knowledge of systemic interventions, are well placed to undertake this.

Planning alternative tomorrows with hope (PATH)

PATH (Pearpoint et al., 1995) is a process which helps to create a positive future. PATH is a team approach with a graphic recorder and a process facilitator. It creates a graphic record, to help

individuals think creatively. The facilitator asks solution-focused questions in a sequential order with the focus on change, to identify a preferred future.

With the group assembled the facilitator explains the process and sets necessary ground rules, and asks the group to think of a title, or name for their PATH.

There are clear stages of the PATH process:

- Explores and discusses what gives energy to the organisation, what motivates the individuals within the organisation.
- The full process begins at an identified end point. Participants are encouraged to imagine that it is exactly one year ahead and reflect on the imaginary year just passed, "remembering" key events.
- The here and now. The group discuss the organisation and events currently, good and bad. This allows individuals to unburden themselves of difficulties, and supports an atmosphere of trust.
- Identifying allies, or people that will need to be on board in order to achieve the idealised goal.
- The last few stages add a sense of urgency, as goals are made more real. The group imagine it is six months in the future, and will ask what of the goals set one year ahead will have been achieved in half a year.
- Finally the group will be asked what they will have achieved within a month – this tends to commit the group and individuals to immediate action, they are asked what they will achieve within a week, a day, or at the end of the session.

Method

Design

The study took place in the Children's Services department of an English LA. The research drew upon the experiences of professionals who work within many of these services who had commissioned PATH as an intervention for their service or school. The research approach followed a qualitative, interpretative case-study model. Through content analysis of discussions with key individuals involved in solution-focused change, in-depth factors and issues are evaluated.

This research collected in-depth detailed data from interviews. The analysis captured the complexity and unique situation of a number of cases and related experiences of being involved in the solution-focused change process, and what can be learned from a particular situation. The research was carried out using elements from a grounded theory approach to data analysis, within a case-study format. (Strauss and Corbin, 1990).

The participants in the research had taken part in PATH in the preceding months leading up to the collection of the data, and therefore represented as an opportunity sample. The individuals interviewed had made contact to undertake a solution-focused intervention, in order to help support systemic change. The reasons for undertaking the interventions involved issues to do with managing enforced centralised change, or recognising that existing structures were no longer effective. Six separate PATHs were undertaken, with approximately 15 participants in each session, who work for the organisations involved. The sample is representative of organisational aspects of an LA and includes individuals who could be

found in similar roles throughout other LAs in England, and is therefore broadly represent-ative of other authorities. The sample in this study were a deputy head teacher, a special educational needs coordinator, three EPs and a strategic manager. The interviews all took place within a time frame of four weeks.

Ethical issues

A range of ethical issues have been incorporated into the study's research design. The British Psychological Society (BPS, 2009) provides a framework of ethics which was adhered to dur-ing the study. Willig (2001) suggests that in interview situations rapport between interviewer and respondent is crucial, but can impact on ethical and power issues: steps were needed to address this. Respondents were informed that they could withdraw at any time during the interview process: none of the respondents chose to do this. Confidentiality was ensured. This study addressed the following research questions:

(1) What are respondents' perceptions about factors within a solution-focused approach which enhance systemic change?
(2) What factors within organisations allow for a solution-focused approach to be useful?
(3) How important are practitioners' stylistic presentation and interpersonal skills in the delivery of a solution-focused approach?
(4) How does this approach bring about change within organisations?

Data analysis

Exploratory, semi-structured interviews allowed for analysis to be undertaken by coding the responses in order to gather a theme which could be interpreted. An open-ended approach to the analysis was used. A validity check was possible due to research including excerpts of raw data, which gave the participants a "voice" in the written research alongside inter-pretative accounts.

The interviews were transcribed from the recordings, and were analysed so that codes have emerged from the data. A grounded approach has been utilised in order to find core categories that are grounded in the data. This follows the three-step model outlined by Strauss and Corbin (1990).

This allows explanations to be drawn from the interviews and links across the interviews to be made. The interview data provide an inductive understanding of a solution-focused intervention in an educational organisation.

A deductive approach was used to develop the research questions, which were influenced by the existing literature. The research questions informed issues explored in the semi-struc-tured interviews. A combination of inductive and deductive methods were used to collect the data. Through the coding, themed core categories of the data were established.

To support reliability the interviews were recorded, and then transcribed verbatim. All verbal forms of information were recorded and the aim was to maximise validity. Through the analysis of the data and by cross-checking evidence of the themes emerging this was achieved.

Validity in qualitative analysis is undertaken through a consideration of aspects of the data in terms of their depth, richness and the roles of the participants in the study. The study offers a distinctive perspective into organisational systems. Essentially it is an exploration

into parts of a LA and as such gives a rich insight into the challenges, opportunities and difficulties inherent in organisations and systems undergoing change. This study has allowed for an understanding to emerge of how a complex and bureaucratic institution functions.

Results

Each research question will be addressed in turn, and the identified codes which emerged following data analysis will be discussed. Selected quotes from the interviews are used to illustrate the respondents' perspectives and will be illustrative of the analysis and explanation of the code. In the quotations an ellipsis indicates comments relating to the code from different parts of the interview.

Research question one

What are respondents' perceptions about factors within a solution-focused approach which enhance systemic change?

An important aspect consistent across the interviews is PATH acting as catalyst for change, and providing a sense of immediacy and commitment to action.

> An initial feeling of positive aspiration, anticipation, we can do this, we own it, life's going to be better … I thought it was great.

The process was helpful to remove participants from the mundane reality of work, allowing them to be free to explore how things could be different, or their preferred future.

> We do get quite ground down by reality. I thought it was refreshing, energising.

> It emphasises that the people there are part of the problem but also part of the solution of how to galvanise things and generate some enthusiasm and some creativity.

This could be interpreted as creating a sense of urgency; encouraging participants to do what they said they would; and to see things in small manageable achievable steps, as if saying that something has happened makes it easier to see success.

> The development of a preferred future seems important, allowing for opportunities to not focus on where things had gone wrong

> Often you're looking for who's to blame, and why's it gone wrong. It's the sort of default position, isn't it in organisations? We weren't going down that route and that's what I liked about it.

> It was focusing on the future, but it had this other effect of drawing people closer together, to work out the next steps.

Focusing on the negatives, and what is not working, could well have resulted in different outcomes. Additionally the process appears to draw people in and establish a shared way forward.

> I did feel quite empowered – we were going to make those changes.

> It gives you a focus, a direction

An opportunity to discuss negativities, or aspects within their organisations that are not working is seen as a useful element to all of the respondents. This stage seemed important

> Absolutely. But not dwelling on it. We recognise that and then we move on.

> That there is a need to acknowledge the negative aspects, to air them, and quickly move on … people do need to unburden – so I think that was useful … I do think people sometimes feel not listened to if they can't actually air their feelings.

The graphic as a tool to support the change process can be seen as supportive of developing ideas amongst the organisation and is creative

> I thought it was great … it was immediate, we had something visible and tangible.

Indeed the visual graphic product …

> … carried us for quite a while. We had it displayed and we came back to it and we were reviewing, we came back to it twice, but also there were times for example if someone came to my room … I'd be saying. "Look here it is. Do you remember? This is what we did; this is what we worked with."

This led to reflections that there had been a change in the organisation, there was a different perspective, and a different way of working that people wanted to go along with, as others could see that something different had been achieved

> To the outside world we'd achieved something pretty amazing.

Engagement in the process could be interpreted as acting as a catalyst for change. The process seems to give feelings of "positive aspiration" and that by taking part in PATH, things could be better and would be achieved.

Reflections

PATH seems to lift people from the routine nature of their day job. Interestingly, this lifting above the situation appears to allow for an opportunity to see how things could be different. By even temporarily taking themselves away from the situation that they are in, a preferred future can seem to emerge. (O'Connell, 2007; Onyett, 2009).

Allowing an opportunity to vent negative feelings also emerges from the results. Problem talk is a contentious issue in the solution-focused literature (O'Connell, 2007). Interestingly in PATH the "here and now" stage does not take place at the start, by which time a positive atmosphere has been created. The need to quickly acknowledge problems, but then to move on does seem to be helpful. Through acknowledging problems it seems that people have an opportunity to be listened to and heard. The unburdening of difficulties does appear to be useful, but only has a positive effect if something constructive follows (de Shazer, 1985). While this stage is brief, it seems important; to ignore the difficulties might undermine effectiveness.

Research question two

What factors within organisations allow for a solution-focused approach to be useful?

This relates to feelings of where the organisation was at the start of the process, group dynamics during the intervention, and ways in which the organisation has maintained, or kept the intervention going.

Often organisations just seem 'stuck' and unable to move forward, also organisations have history.

> History was passed down to us. I think we also had a situation where there wasn't any respect about each others' roles … there wasn't a working relationship, we had a mountain to climb.

Change can be disruptive:

> … fragmented the team … created divisions … It was very unpleasant …

The hope was to redress team difficulties, to:

> … I suppose eradicate the mess, and the stuff that we were clinging on to.

> We had history but we also were in a situation where 90% of the people in the team wanted to move things forward and change … we realised we were in a good position.

> PATH was emotionally charged at times, because if you remember a couple of people who were close to tears, or were in tears, and that's quite powerful.

Despite this clearly highly emotional feeling, there was hope and relief that having undertaken the intervention

> There was an anticipation that actually things would improve, and there were better times ahead.

> In the PATH process the next steps and the outcomes are there – they're explicit, there's a sense of ownership from the whole group.

Maintenance or development of the intervention from within the organisation is essential for change to be successfully implemented.

> It was instrumental. It was definitely the ignition … a jump start.

The need for maintenance is viewed also as re-energising

> In order to keep momentum … I think that was really positive.

> The whole point really was to give you a focus, a direction and to make you feel empowered.

PATH gives direction and focus, but without reviewing it, or reflecting on what has been achieved it seems possible to lose momentum, and direction.

> Constant change in educational organisations is a factor, there are ever-changing, different priorities that need to be faced. Successful organisations need to be reactive and able to respond well to change.

Reflections

Respondents reflected upon a sense of stasis within their organisation, realising aspects had to change, or that the team felt disparate and divided. Additionally it appears that the intervention was the right thing to do, at the right time. There was a feeling that there was a need to "heal" organisations and respond to difficulties. Having somebody external to lead this seems to be effective, allowing for a fresh vision, with somebody not involved in the problems the organisation is facing. PATH seems to create a "tipping point" for organisations, for change can occur.

Success needs to become embedded within an organisation. Without maintenance of the change process it seems that organisations are at the whim of outside organisational pressures which can limit success.

The change process

Systems culturally co-exist within other systems, and change can be triggered by external factors to the organisations.

Stobie, Boyle, and Woolfson (2005) suggest that when organisations are dependent upon another larger, more powerful system with political power (such as in an Educational Psychology Service in an LA), then change is far more difficult to achieve, and the *status quo* is more likely to be maintained.

The change initiative in this study was "bottom-up"; energy coming from members within organisations who wanted to do something different. The organisations were also trying to change their work practices to encompass top-down initiatives from central and local government. There does appear to be a mismatch when bottom-up change is not reciprocated

and planned for alongside top-down strategy. If change is imposed top-down onto an organisation, this can lead to retrenchment, dissatisfaction, or encourage the organisation to undertake their own change. Change is even more challenging when the wider authority may lack an understanding about the particular identity of a profession (Stobie et al., 2005).

Research question three

How important are practitioners' stylistic presentation and interpersonal skills in the delivery of a solution-focused approach?

This question refers to two stylistic aspects: the style of the presentation and the process; and the importance of, and effect of, the interpersonal skills of the facilitator, and how this affected impact. During data collection respondents commented upon facilitation skills, therefore this seemed an interesting area to explore. The questions were posed openly, inviting a response, but not directing a response, as there are implications here regarding power imbalances.

The feelings were that it was a difficult process, but its distinctiveness as an approach helped to focus upon the future:

> That was hard to do. It was a good thing to do because that's the whole point of PATH isn't it, as a process. I think that was good, it's powerful.

It seems important that somebody from outside the organisation was leading the interventions and the style of the process inspired confidence, and was safe.

> Stylistically the process seems to allow individuals to be creative

> Because of the whole visioning thing … we don't often have a chance to do that, we do encourage children to do it, but I don't think as adults we have the same opportunities to think about our ideal school.

A common theme to emerge from the interviews was the approach of the facilitator, interpersonal skills and how this influenced the process.

> You had the right approach, and personality, that was important. You were objective, friendly … I was immediately reassured, you're obviously very skilled in this approach, highly skilled and that was very reassuring … I just loved watching you … it was useful for me to see someone deliver in such an easy way. I was very impressed I have to say.

> I think it was the first time they felt safe to actually express views that they probably were feeling but weren't able to express before … . There's safety created. You were friendly, calm and not rushing things … obviously open to any kind of viewpoint, and you weren't censoring people.

It appears that this approach can make a difference to the success of the intervention

> You've got to be confident and competent and relaxed about it. It's like all approaches really isn't it, people pick up on that. Definitely that was very important.

Additional process factors were also of importance, such as the issue of the facilitator not necessarily knowing anything about the situation or the dynamic. Through questioning of the group an understanding was established, which helped participants find their own way forward.

Feelings of trust and security are mentioned, and anxieties remained that by undertaking a solution-focused intervention:

> We were going to undo a lot of stuff that we wouldn't necessarily address and put back and that would leave the team feeling more vulnerable, more exposed, more anxious, more frustrated and probably more stressed. You were very reassuring.

Feelings of security appear to allow the group to take risks

> We felt safe in that room with you. It was emotionally charged but it was a safe place to be. Everybody was very complimentary about how you conducted the session, and how supportive and sensitive you were.

> I did feel confident that you knew that – luckily, that you knew what you were doing.

> Open, encouraging and trying to gently encourage people to just suspend belief, just go with it … keep a sense of urgency.

Reflections

An issue to emerge is the interpersonal skills of the facilitator; some of the success of the intervention does seem to be attributed to this. Sioukas (2003) also describes elements needed for effective facilitation of solution-focused interventions, drawing a distinction between facilitation and leadership; effective facilitators "direct traffic" (p. 63), but remain neutral upon what is being discussed, and help synthesise ideas into solutions, ensuring that maximum participation is achieved.

O'Connell (2007) suggests that a skill in being an effective solution-focused facilitator is timing, knowing when to intervene, go slowly and to move forward. O'Connell (2007) also shows that having trust in the actual process will help the facilitator; and to have faith in the individuals to establish their own solutions, and allow for the groups to take risks. An "answer" to difficulties is not imposed – the solutions come from the group, organisations own the intervention and their future.

Research question four

How does this approach bring about change within organisations?

The final question refers to the differing impacts that the intervention had for the organisations. A range of results was mentioned, from personal reflections of changes in relationships to how it gives ownership to the participants; but also wider issues are touched upon, such as systemic change beyond the focus organisation.

> We were being done with, which is quite unusual for us really because most of our lives we're done to

> The PATH process engenders some sense of community – there's something about ownership – an empowerment of the participants in the group.

The change process can be interpreted as quite exciting

> You couldn't hold people back, you couldn't rein them in.

Often organisations had achieved more than the initial focus of PATH

> Many things we've found have been achieved, over and above what was discussed in the PATH. And that's quite encouraging.

"Change as constant" is an issue

> But we haven't stopped changing – we're still changing.

The process often brought people together, allowing them to talk and start working together.

> Our managers would look at it and say isn't this great? I think they could see us achieving something that was perceived to be not achievable.

People began engaging. I think it was really pretty clever … It made us start communicating, we did bond much better.

Reflections

In looking at one element of an organisation, it is apparent that wider change needs to take place in different parts of the system. Top-down LA pressures often affect morale and motivation, with change-attempts grinding to a halt. This suggests that change in isolation in one small part of a larger organisation is never enough, change has to occur elsewhere, across a LA.

It is difficult to contain the focus to one small organisation within a larger structure. Within an LA there are numerous smaller organisations, yet when one small group changes, the need for change to occur elsewhere rapidly becomes apparent; change cannot occur in isolation. If change elsewhere does not take place, this can have a detrimental effect upon the organisation. Change as constant is a common core theme; PATH allowed for a brief feeling of being in control. Throughout the analysis, an important factor to emerge is that of the organisational culture and how this affects and impacts upon the management of change.

Discussion

Solution-focused approaches are increasingly widely used in the practice of EPs (Ajmal & Rees, 2001; Redpath & Harper, 1999; Rhodes & Ajmal, 1995, Alexander & Sked, 2010), though as Stobie et al. (2005) show, evaluative work into solution-focused approaches is relatively scarce; there are very few UK educational evaluations about the effectiveness of solution-focused practice, especially relating to organisational and systemic change.

From the evidence discussed in this study, fostering a "can-do" attitude does seem to be effective, rather than debates around deficits and problems (Walker, 2008). Throughout this study, the use of adopting solution-focused language is highlighted as being important, echoing the findings of others (Bozic, 2004). This offers a professional and practical challenge – how does a professional group of people become able to embrace and promote change, yet maintain an awareness of the impact that this can have on those within the organisation? This study suggests how EPs can embrace change, and support change in organisations, and demonstrates the significance of how a LA also needs to engage in change.

Positive, individual changes did emerge for the organisations. Change was often limited by the extent to which other organisational and outside influences hindered further change. Many of the interventions began with small aims, but change did become contagious. However, given this, it soon became evident that change was needed elsewhere, which was harder to achieve, leading to feelings of frustration; participants can get swept up in a sense that anything is achievable.

The interventions gave a sense of ownership to the organisation whereby individuals felt in control of their future. This reflects ideas put forward by Onyett (2009) that such an approach acts as a "cultural challenge". Allowing a group to see small steps to success is important, it allows participants to stay within their own sphere of influence rather than engaging in discussions outside of their control. Onyett (2009) shows that this will inevitably be systems higher up in the organisation.

One of the major successes of the interventions in this study are that they give a sense of ownership to the organisation, with individuals feeling in control of their future and destiny.

Allowing a group to see small steps to success was seen as important in the present study, and this is reflected by Onyett (2009), who demonstrates that this allows participants to stay within their own sphere of influence rather than engaging in discussions regarding issues that are outside of their control; as occurred in the present study. When this did occur it did lead to a sense of ennui and helplessness as some groups began to see that change elsewhere was needed; this does not appear to be a helpful factor in ensuring success.

For the LA there are other important issues. As Stobie et al. (2005) demonstrate there is a need to be viewed as learning organisations and responsive to change. This cannot, though, happen by accident. A learning point for organisations is that they need to see themselves as living and evolving. Often in complex organisations the idea of shared understanding is missing, change just happens, which can lead to confusion and entrenchment in the comfort of old practice. Leadership and interpersonal skills are also of importance; as shown in this study, the skills of the facilitator seemed to play a role in the success, or not, of a solution-focused intervention.

Nonaka and Takeuchi (1995) draw distinctions between explicit knowledge ("hard" communicable data), and tacit knowledge (beliefs under the level of awareness). Tacit knowledge is very culturally based, highly personal and hard to communicate with others; it is rooted in individual experiences, and ideals and values.

Fullan (2001) shows that successful organisations alter tacit knowledge into explicit knowledge. Change may fail because the process is formalised. Formal planning produces only explicit knowledge, which is inadequate (Fullan, 2001). PATH creates tacit knowledge; knowledge that comes from people inside the organisation, bottom-up knowledge that is culturally-based. PATH invites people inside the organisation to engage in their own values and meanings. Effective organisations listen to this.

The transformation of tacit knowledge into explicit knowledge is of vital importance in developing any learning organisation, such as those outlined in this study, to become responsive to change. "Top-down" strategies are not enough, whereas a purely "bottom-up" strategy can be ineffective as the tacit, cultural knowledge cannot be converted into useful, shared, explicit knowledge.

Conclusion

As suggested by this study, the adaptation of PATH allows organisations to own an intervention. It is something the organisation has created, giving individuals within such groups an opportunity to shape their future. This can have wider ramifications across organisations and beyond the initial focus of an intervention. For change to be successful in any organisation it cannot occur in isolation. By looking at one aspect of change, it becomes apparent that wider change is needed.

The use of PATH gave participants a glimpse into a preferred future; it opened up new ways of viewing their organisation, giving them control of their own development, and a commitment to action. During these interventions pure, tacit knowledge was being created. Such interventions show the strength of organisations. This in itself creates difficulties; the change process is dynamic, and needs to be managed, shared and transformed into explicit knowledge. PATH was the starting point; creating the right organisational culture is critical in achieving positive outcomes.

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