**Solution Focused Special Education (SFSE)**

**Working paper 1.0**

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**Executive Summary**

This is Working Paper 1.0 on Solution Focused Special Education (SFSE). Its aim is to articulate some thoughts around viewing special education through a solution focused lens. It is to be viewed as a document to stimulate discussion and debate to further both mine, and hopefully, others thinking around special education and how it might be re-framed at both a system and practitioner level. The focus of this work is to identify what the benefits are for the students, schools and education systems in moving towards SFSE.

In order to achieve this the paper will examine the:

- **WHAT** – are the challenges within special education as it is generally currently framed, or in SF principles ‘What's broken?’

- **WHY** – viewing special education through a solution focused lens might be a helpful way forward (if you want to read a brief overview of what a solutions focused approach please turn to page 3 of this working paper)

- **HOW** – to move thinking forward through identifying strands with which to examine a SFSE approach

It is not meant in any way to denigrate the many wonderful special educators who support incredible achievements with individuals who have special educational needs, and gain great reward from seeing what are often very small improvements (or is some cases the slowing down of degenerative conditions).

Neither is it suggesting that some (many?) in special education are not operating in effective ways and that they may be operating either deliberately¹, or otherwise through a SF approach. Rather, it is intended to build on the work of these innovative practitioners to share where things are working, and to explore where things might be ‘even better if...’ It is an attempt to begin to reimagine special education in a more solution/strengths/ability focused way at both a system and practitioner level.

This is Working Paper 1.0 and I expect there to be a number of future versions which will draw to a greater extent on others research and views which will obviously be recognised.

I look forward to an ongoing journey of discovery and discussion and encourage you to contact me to join the online SFSE group, and be part of this journey of discovery of what’s working and even better if...

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Introduction

This paper is not intended to be a detailed review of the issues and challenges facing special education. Nor is it intended to promote a more or less inclusive view of education as a whole, although by adopting a SF approach to special education I would suggest that the system may become more inclusive. Instead it is a reflection of my experience of special education over 20 years in a wide range of countries across the world as a teacher, leader and more recently trainer, coach and consultant. It is the product of my background in special education coming into contact with my increasing work in coaching and more specifically Solutions Focused approaches. With an increased understanding of what is meant by taking a SF approach I believe it has a lot to offer those working in special education at all levels.

This working paper is an attempt to initiate dialogue into how we can reframe special education onto more about what individuals can do and achieve as opposed to what they can’t do at both practitioner and system levels.

Special Education – the challenge in being Special

Firstly, it must be recognised that who is identified as having or requiring access to special education, within mainstream and specialist provision, varies within countries never mind across countries. In spite of this there are some commonalities in relation to the way special education is framed within the range of countries I have visited and worked in.

The focus of this paper and subsequent developments is on those students who have been identified as needing additional supports, either through segregated provision or through additional support in mainstream settings.

Secondly, just to name the ‘elephant in the room’ whenever special education is mentioned, as I identified, with Professor Suzanne Carrington, in the online ACEL/Microsoft paper ‘The Future (Special) School’ \(^2\), in an ideal world I would not see special education as separate provision as the needs of all students would be met by their local provision.

Currently, whether placed in mainstream or separate provision, I would suggest that special education is basically a deficit model – what is wrong with the individual – what is special. There are a number of reasons for this:

1. It identifies the problem as lying within the individual as opposed to the system, thereby the system does not need to change – I would see this as the major “broken” bit of special education in relation to one of the key principles of SF ‘If it ain’t broke don’t fix it’

2. It provides a method to allocate scarce resources – the greater the need the more money that goes to the individual (in principle anyway)

Whilst identifying a disability and/or designated learning difficulty may give some clues to initial approaches, in my experience these generally present differently depending on the individual. I propose that viewing individuals, those

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with special education needs in this instance, in terms of what they can do and identifying when they have achieved is much more rewarding and beneficial for all. One of the major issues at a system level is how to allocate funds to support individuals and this has driven the need to identify ‘labels’, so theoretically at least, those with greater special educational needs access greater funding. Therefore the system encourages (demands) the use of assessment approaches that label; encouragingly there has already been some work on solution-focused assessment. Additionally, there has been work on adopting a ‘Capability Approach’ to supporting those with additional needs which warrants inclusion in the discussion around SF approaches to assessment.

Viewing Special Education through a Solutions Focus (SF) lens

In order to get all those reading this to a similar starting point in relation to knowledge of what is SF, I will first share my brief summary of how I see Solutions Focused approaches but would encourage those who wish to know more to contact me for suggested resources.

“Find out what works and do more of it.” Paul Z. Jackson and Mark McKergow

Solution focused approaches originate from solution focused brief therapy developed by Steve de Shazer and Insoo Kim Berg in America in the 1970s and de Shazer’s work has made a great impact in the world of therapeutic change over the past 40 years. Subsequently their ideas have spread resulting in SF practice in many contexts, including social work, child protection, education, and group work, amongst others.

The SF approach values simplicity in philosophy and language and aims to discover “what works” in a given situation, simply and practically. The focus on solutions (not problems), the future (not the past) and on what’s going well (rather than what’s gone wrong) leads to a positive and pragmatic way to work with organisations and individuals.

‘The art of being wise is the art of knowing what to overlook’ William James, American pragmatist philosopher

The SF approach is characterised by a drive for simplicity but in an unusual way. In the normal run of things, people attempt to simplify complicated situations by trying to find the ‘essence’ or defining aspect. One might then expect to use this to find a way forwards, perhaps by finding other similar situations with the same ‘essence’. Often the essence of the situation is seen in the ‘problem’, the thing that we are trying to get away from. SF is not like this at all.

Rather than simplifying by looking for commonalities with other cases, each case is simplified on its own, by following William James’ advice above and overlooking aspects which are not contributing to existing performance. These could well be different each time, and are developed in conversation with the people involved.

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At the highest level, there are three key principles to working in a solutions focused way:  

1. **If it ain't broke, don't fix it.**  
   
   By 'broke', we mean that somebody in the organization is dissatisfied and wants something to be different. We start to work with the people who want something different and are prepared to do something about it - not the others (who may be ambivalent or who do not see any need for improvement).

2. **Once you know what works, do more of it.**  
   
   If you note when the solution is happening already, whether spontaneously, by accident, or even only in part, you have priceless knowledge.

3. **If it's not working, do something different.**  
   
   Although we usually make progress by using tenet 2, just occasionally something else is required.

It sounds simple and it is, but simple is not the same as easy, and it is surprising the lure that problem talk holds - for those who want differences in their lives and organizations, and for those whose job it is to help them.

Paul Z. Jackson and Mark McKergow (2007) have identified that there are a number of key assumptions and principles that underpin solution-focused work:

1. Change happens all the time; our job is to identify and magnify useful change.
2. There is no one right way of seeing the world.
3. A detailed understanding of the problem doesn't translate into a solution.
4. No problem happens all the time
5. The solution's clues are there in front of you; You just have to see them.
6. Intelligent small changes can have bigger impacts later on.
7. It is important to stay solution focused, not solution forced.

**Why view Special Education through an SF lens?**

One of the major reasons is that in my view excellent special education already has many of the key assumptions and principles identified above. Particularly:

- Identifying small steps of achievement
- Focusing on celebrating successes
- All students are viewed from an individual perspective
- Very focused on changes with the student

Additionally, it is now over 20 years that there have been ongoing discussions (arguments) in relation to inclusion and the role (or not) of special education, I

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would suggest now is a time to examine a different approach particularly with the growing demand for significant changes in education as a whole.

“The significant problems we face cannot be solved by the same level of thinking that created them.” Albert Einstein

Whilst not every individual placed within special education may have ‘significant’ problems, whatever that means, I would argue that special education as a practice could be greatly enhanced by exploring it through SF lens, and that a different, SF, approach to viewing ‘special’ is worth exploring at both system and practitioner levels.

The emphasis on ‘solutions’ afforded by the SF lens often leads to a significant shift in mindsets for people being supported and supporting them. I would suggest it becomes even more person centred when working with a strength based abilities model as opposed to a problem, deficit model that special education is currently based on.

Key Elements to SFSE

- Special education is solution focused for individuals being supported and supporting them
- The system supports individuality, success and raises aspirations
- Focus is on individuals abilities and strengths not disabilities or weaknesses
- It is premised on the ‘best interests’ of the individual
- There are tangible benefits for a ‘resource-led’ system

How to move towards SFSE?

I am not suggesting that this is a simple shift. Although I would suggest it is simpler at a school and teacher level than a system level, but without developing thinking as to how this might happen at a system level then schools and teachers are operating to some extent in conflict with the system, which makes it more difficult to sustain and embed.

What I propose is to use an SF approach to guide discussions and further development of this working paper to identify:

- What does the future perfect look like?
- Where is an SF approach being currently successfully used?
- What small changes can be made that will have the biggest impact
- What are the next small steps?

To assist with making this task (feel) more manageable I am suggesting the following strands with which to develop SFSE thinking and sharing of current practice:

- System approach
  - Philosophically

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8 ‘Solution-Focused Support of People with Intellectual Disabilities’ – thesis of John Roeden, Orthopedagoog Baalderborg Groep
9 This is a first go at identifying what might be the key elements of SFSE and is very likely to evolve

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o Financially

- School
  - Leadership
  - Teaching and Learning Processes
    - Assessments
    - IEP’s
    - Supports
      - Students
      - All Staff – professional learning approaches
    - Review Meetings
  - Behaviour Support

Those with particular interests in certain strands will be encouraged to participate in further discussion and development through the online forum.

In relation to the school stands, there are already a number of successful examples to build on, whilst obviously taking into consideration the SF view that every situation is different. With regards to the system approach, this is likely to be more problematic so I would suggest discussion regarding the future perfect and then discussions where assessment and funding approaches can or have been used that promote SFSE.

**Conclusion**

The motivation for writing this paper and connecting with interested individuals within solutions focus and/or special education is the strong belief that a solutions/strengths/abilities (re)focus for special education will bring great benefits for those identified as having special educational needs, and for those supporting these individuals, including the system as a whole.

Furthermore, I see it as an opportunity to move away from the unhelpful duality of special education v inclusion which has been in play for a number of years now and perhaps could be reframed as 21 Century Special Education, although that may be moving into a whole additional area for debate and discussion.

I look forward to an ongoing journey of discovery and discussion and encourage you to contact me to join the online SFSE group, and be part of this journey of discovery of what’s working and even better if.

**About the author**

**Nick Burnett** is an experienced and accomplished Educational Coach, Consultant, and Presenter. He is the Managing Director of Nick Burnett CCP, an accredited coach with Growth Coaching International, Director of Team Teach Asia-Pacific, and, the Asia-Pacific Representative of Northampton Centre for Learning Behaviour (NCFLB). He has run training for well over 2000 people in the last 6 years, presented at a number of conferences, and has written for a wide range of publications, including authoring a book on Leadership and Special Education Provision. He has just published a book on supporting student behaviour Reducing Risk and Restraint in Asia Pacific. Prior to this he was recognised as an excellent leader of an all-age, large Special School Provision in the UK.