

The PROMISE Program Case Examples: From Get Tough to Solution Building

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Abstract

Building on the evidence-based solution-focused brief therapy (SFBT) approach, an innovative university and school district partnership has generated alternatives to suspension and arrests of at-risk youth. Previous policies emphasized a get-tough, zero-tolerance approach. The results of these policies were discouraging and especially detrimental to minority youth. Using university-based marriage and family therapy therapist interns trained in solution-focused techniques, the PROMISE program focuses on strengths and successes. Implemented in a large urban school district in the United States, the initial statistics show that the program has been more effective than the previous program utilizing get-tough policies. In the 2013–2014 academic year, the overall recidivism rate of suspended students decreased dramatically compared to the previous year. The percentage of students suspended within the same school year dropped from 50% in 2012–2013 academic year to 8% in the 2013–2014 academic year, with the PROMISE program in place. In this article we briefly describe the changes in school district policy and overall handling of at-risk youth and present three case examples to illustrate the SFBT part of the intervention. The success of the program illustrates the usefulness of solution-focused approaches, both with individual clients (the students) and with organizations (the entire school district).

Keywords: PROMISE, solution-focused brief therapy, at-risk students, suspensions

African American students in the United States are disproportionately targeted for suspension (i.e., temporary removal from school for disciplinary reasons), even after accounting for income and class disparities (Bahena, Cooc, Currie-Rubin, Kuttner, & Ng, 2012). Unconscious stereotypes, historical segregation, and income inequality contribute to this discriminatory pattern (Bahena et al, 2012). This pattern was noted in the Broward County School District as well. In 2013, African American students made up only 40% of the Broward County School District's student population, yet they accounted for 66% of suspensions and 71% of school house arrests (Broward County Public Schools, 2014). Overall, 26,000 children and youth under age 18 were arrested at school in Broward County in 2013 (Broward County Public Schools, 2014). Children and youth who have been arrested are significantly more likely to drop out of school (Mediratta, 2012).

The statistics in Broward County are consistent with those reported by the U.S. Department of Education, Office for Civil Rights (OCR, 2014): There is a disproportionately

high suspension and expulsion rate for African American students nationwide. Throughout the United States, the suspension and expulsion rates are 3 times higher for African American students (16%) than for European American students (5%). According to the report, nationwide African American students represented 16% of enrolled students, but were suspended or expelled at a rate of 32 to 42% (OCR, 2014). Though European American students are suspended/expelled at a similar rate overall (31% to 40%), their enrollment is 51% of the student population (OCR, 2014). This is consistent with the Broward County experience, although in the Broward County School District the disproportion was even worse.

In September 2013, Alvarez summarized the problematic situation then existing in the Broward school district in an article in the *New York Times*:

Faced with mounting evidence that get-tough policies in schools are leading to arrest records, low academic achievement and high dropout rates that

especially affect minority students, cities and school districts around the country are rethinking their approach to minor offenses.

Perhaps nowhere has the shift been more pronounced than in Broward County's public schools. Two years ago, the school district achieved an ignominious Florida record: More students were arrested on school campuses here than in any other state district, the vast majority for misdemeanors like possessing marijuana or spraying graffiti.

The Florida district, the sixth largest in the nation, was far from an outlier. In the past two decades, schools around the country have seen suspensions, expulsions and arrests for minor nonviolent offenses climb together with the number of police officers stationed at schools. The policy, called zero tolerance, first grew out of the war on drugs in the 1990s and became more aggressive in the wake of school shootings like the one at Columbine High School in Colorado. (Alvarez, 2013, para. 1–3)

The PROMISE Program: Background and Description

Solution-focused brief therapy (SFBT) has been shown to be an effective intervention for at-risk youth in schools. Previous studies have examined SFBT with individual students, as well as with entire schools (Franklin, Streever, Kim, & Tripodi, 2007; Lagana-Riordan et al., 2011); the PROMISE program takes the approach a step further by applying the SFBT principles to an entire school district.

Building on the demonstrated success of SFBT in the schools, the Broward County School District, the sixth largest public school district in the United States, recently partnered with Nova Southeastern University's Family Therapy Department in order to develop a solution-focused alternative-to-suspension program (Broward County Public Schools, 2014). The program was designed to ameliorate the effects of this discriminatory and repressive pattern of suspension by getting students back into school more quickly, and without adverse legal consequences. The program follows solution-focused principles of focusing on strengths and resources.

Effective September 2013, Broward County Public Schools instituted an alternative-to-suspension program. They joined other large school districts, including Los Angeles, Baltimore, Chicago, and Denver, in backing away from "get-tough" policies (Alvarez, 2013, para. 1). The Broward alternative-to-suspension program is known as the PROMISE program. PROMISE is an acronym for Preventing Recidivism through Opportunities, Mentoring, Interventions, Supports, and Education. As indicated by the acronym, the basic goal is to prevent students from being immediately referred to law enforcement, but instead being referred to a program offering an alternative experience. This alternative experience is focused on strengths and resources.

The PROMISE program includes time at a separate, designated school; strengths-focused activities with teachers; the opportunity to make up schoolwork, supervised by teachers; and SFBT, provided by Nova Southeastern University graduate interns. Parents and home school officials are also involved with the therapy, participating in solution-focused conversations about positive options for the suspended student. The home schools also receive a written recommendation form, the *Systemic Change in Schools Recommendation Form* (see Appendix), with positive goals and steps for achieving goals. The form was developed to provide a written positive goal statement to file in the student's permanent record, an initiative aimed at changing the pattern of filing only negative incident reports. Thus, every student leaves the program with a positive plan for his or her future and praise for his or her current efforts, all of which is given in writing and entered into the student's permanent record.

The primary purpose of the form is to move the conversation from problems to goals. In doing so, we want to support students by helping them to focus on what they want rather than the problem for which they entered the program. Exceptions are explored by asking the suspended student about successful steps taken in the past or present toward their goals. Then, family and school supports are explored. We do have one section asking about current obstacles; this is a nod to the Mental Research Institute brief therapy school and the roots of SFBT, where one idea was to ask clients about stuck solution behavior. We find that asking the student about obstacles does not detract too much from the overall positive focus of the form and encourages students to voice concerns they may have, but that have not been previously acknowledged—or taken seriously—by the system. The therapist interns do not focus as much on this section, as the main purpose of the form and the sessions is to build solutions. Attending to obvious obstacles that the student reports may be just a small part of the process. Finally, a scaling question is used to help students identify their level of hopefulness about accomplishing goal(s), and to end on a positive note.

Following the example of De Jong and Berg (2012)—who stated that solution-building interviews/conversations involve (a) the development of well-formed goals utilizing the client's point of reference; (b) exploring exceptions, or times when the issue did not occur; and (c) evaluating the client's progress, as defined by the client—we strive to keep our conversations with students focused on their goals, and their strengths and resources. The therapist interns in the PROMISE program only have one to three sessions with each student, so time is of the essence. We find that SFBT as a model allows the therapist to immediately begin the change process. This idea is also supported in the literature; for example, Newsome (2005) found that SFBT has been highly effective in working with at-risk youth in schools. According to Newsome (2005), SFBT can lead to empowerment and the development of a "more optimistic vision of the future" (p. 88) for at-risk students.

Initial Effects of the PROMISE Program

In the 2013–2014 academic year, the overall recidivism rate of suspended students decreased dramatically compared to students in previous years who had not been through the PROMISE program. The percentage of students suspended more than once within the same school year dropped from 50% in 2012–2013 academic year to 8% in the 2013–2014 academic year when the PROMISE program was in place. Not only were school officials impressed by this drop, but it was maintained among the 1,923 students who went through the program in the 2013–2014 academic year. Having seen progress, school officials felt justified in responding in a less punitive manner. School house arrests (i.e., arrests at school by law enforcement) for misbehavior dropped by 58% compared to the academic year 2012–2013. These statistics are available in the PROMISE program manual (Broward County Public Schools, 2014). These changes in numbers of arrests may reflect a trend toward increased optimism among school officials; that is, officials may have felt more able to manage misbehavior without the involvement of police. The case examples that follow illustrate the rapid change that we often see with one to two sessions of SFBT. Further, they illustrate how the solution-focused approach has worked with individual students.

Case Examples

When we started the PROMISE program, it was evident that there was a racial disparity in the number of suspensions. We found that African American and Hispanic students made up approximately two-thirds of the students seen by Nova interns. Of the three cases referenced in this paper, two students were African American and the third was European American.

For these students, SFBT, in combination with the other interventions in the program¹, was effective in a short period of time (one to three sessions). Using SFBT, students were able to identify and concretize their goals in their own words. They were not suspended thereafter, and were able to return to their home schools, without further discipline or arrest.

From Vandalism to Law School Aspirations

Case Example 1. Fifteen-year-old Jonathon² entered the program charged with vandalism; he crashed a golf cart that he borrowed with his friends while at school. Joan a graduate therapist intern trained in SFBT, and the first author of this paper, was assigned to work with him. While exploring the student's goals, and his family's support toward his goals, I (the therapist in this example) discovered a key piece of information that accelerated the process of joining. Jonathon stated that he attended church regularly, and from our discussion surrounding his family and faith,

we realized that church was a key resource for him. Our discussion also revealed that he was of the same faith as I. The student became more relaxed and was eager to share how his faith "kept him going."

Jonathon reported that his main goal was to regain the trust of his parents, as he felt he had let them down by "getting into trouble more than once." He also expressed his desire to study harder, do his homework, and make more of an effort; his ultimate goal was to attend college and later to study law. The stated obstacles that were "in the way of [his] goals" were also directly related to the reason he entered the program. Jonathon stated, "I've allowed friends to influence me." With this in mind, I sought to look for exceptions to Jonathon's description of himself. When asked about current progress toward his goals, Jonathon reported that he had improved several of his grades to date, and was confident he would continue to progress. This was an indication that there had been exceptions, particularly related to him getting poor grades.

Jonathon also shared that he loved to play basketball and felt he was very good at the game. Using his language, I was able to ascertain how he felt he was doing. I used the *Systemic Change in Schools Recommendation Form* (see Appendix) to guide the conversation. I related his experience to basketball and asked Jonathon to rate himself on a scale of 1 to 10: "Jonathan, if you were to think about your goals like a basketball game, where would you be?" He stated that he was currently at a 5, and by managing to not return to the PROMISE program and getting better grades, he planned to be at an 8 or 9 soon.

I met with Jonathon for a second session 2 days later, during which time he remained comfortable sharing and again spoke about his faith as a constant source of support and strength in his life, and as a means of handling stressful situations. I utilized his desire to speak about his faith to introduce the miracle question: I asked him what would be different if he woke up the next day and realized that God had performed a miracle in his life. He responded that he would be doing better in school and getting grades that would get him into law school. He would also no longer be "getting into trouble" and that his parents would be proud of him. Jonathan further stated that he was now more determined to do well in school and not return to PROMISE, and that he knew God would help him with this goal.

After the second meeting, I had the opportunity to speak with Jonathon's mother. I complemented her on her parenting based on Jonathon's descriptions ("the best parents"). She expressed appreciation for the program and my call, and shared her thoughts about Jonathon's infraction. She accepted my recommendation for additional tutoring to help Jonathon with academic challenges. He successfully completed his 3 days in the program and stayed out of trouble ever since. His desire to do something different appears to have been successful.

Comments on Case 1. This case illustrates some of the fundamentals of SFBT, for example the identification of exceptions to the problem (Franklin & Gerlach, 2007). We also believe that the process of asking the scaling question illustrates very nicely what Franklin and Gerlach (2007)

¹ More detailed descriptions of the complete processes and interventions of the PROMISE program will be published in the coming years.

² Client details have been de-identified.

described as concretizing achievable goals, which gives clients something to strive for rather than focusing on the problem. In addition, Connie and Metcalf (2009) described the miracle question as future-focused; it works to encourage the client to visualize a future in which the problem no longer exists.

On the Road With the Band

Case Example 2. James, a 13-year-old boy,³ was admitted to the program for fighting in school. James described his goals as wanting to become a music producer and an attorney, as well as continuing to play basketball. James's past and current steps toward both goals were clearly indicated when he described being in a band. He also had some success in music when he served as a DJ for a few functions, for which he was paid. James beamed when I used this information to compliment him. James also described times when he was able to "weave" his way out of fights by physically moving away from opponents. His ability to sometimes avoid fights was also indicative of exceptions.

Using the *Systemic Change in School Recommendation Form*, I asked James about his progress toward his goals on a scale of 1 to 10. He stated, "I think it's different sometimes," but he believed he was closest to producing music with his brothers. Overall, however, he stated that he was currently at an 8 out of 10 toward accomplishing his goals. James' miracle was to be successful in avoiding fights, to never return to PROMISE, and to be successful in his music production career.

In my conversation with James's mother, I complemented her on her son's ability to clearly articulate his goals as well as his desire to improve and not get into fights. I shared that he spoke very positively about her and her desire for him to do well. She was pleased to hear this and shared her hopes for James. She was also open and interested in my recommendations that James remain in the band, and potentially join a debate team to assist with his goals for a music career and to promote talking/negotiating over physical altercations. From our conversation, James's mother appeared to have a handle on assisting her son to improve his grades and his behavior. She stated that his grades had greatly improved, and that she had incentives in place to help James succeed. James successfully completed the program, returned to school, and joined the debate team.

Comments on Case 2. The initial therapeutic event, when I complemented James on his successes as a DJ and musician, fits well with the description of using compliments as a part of the therapeutic process. The practitioner's awareness of the client's strengths in different areas of his or her life is an ongoing process through the interview. We agree with Franklin, Trepper, Gingerich, and McCollum (2011) that compliments are "another essential part of SFBT" (p. 24). Another way we use compliments is to help parents feel a bit calmer and more open to the possibility that things can go well for their child, despite the current trouble he or she might be in. When parents receive

a call from the PROMISE program, they often jump to the conclusion that it is about something negative. To counter this reaction, the therapist intern intentionally begins the conversation with the parent with a genuine complement about his or her child. This often puts them at ease and in a position in which they are more open to listening and collaborating with the therapist intern on the student's goals.

From Fighting to Building Robots

Case Example 3. Paul, a 10-year-old boy,⁴ was admitted to the PROMISE program for fighting. I was able to join with Paul as he spoke passionately about his love for skateboarding and I shared my own absolute lack of coordination. Continuing our conversation, he described his goals as follows: "I want to go to MIT and learn to build robots when I grow up." His immediate goals were to become a better skateboarder, and to improve his reading grade from a C to B.

Regarding exceptions to fighting, Paul said that his friend Peter sometimes talked him out of fights. He stated that he had also been able to ignore people who tried to pick fights with him at times. Another exception he shared was that he built robots using Legos. Paul was able to return to school and stay out of trouble. His positive goals were shared with his home school and with his mother. His mother was delighted to hear of his interests and felt proud. The home school social worker was also alerted to some of the practical needs of Paul's family, which helped to strengthen the home situation.

Comments on Case 3. SFBT therapists working in schools believe in collaborating with each member of the school's team. In the collaborative process, therapists often ask themselves questions such as the following: (a) "What interventions need to be delivered and how can they be delivered with the most impact . . . and from whom?" and (b) "Who is best to involve in the intervention to get results?" (Franklin & Gerlach, 2007, p. 174). This process is also an integral part of the therapeutic practices of SFBT therapists in the PROMISE program. In the above case, a number of people played a role in supporting the changes in addition to Paul himself, including his mother, extended family, the school social worker, and Paul's friend Peter, among others. Small changes in attitude and behavior on all levels of the system can help to guide the process to positive outcomes.

Conclusions

We are heartened with the positive responses and results attained in just a few years' time—with individual clients and with the school district as a whole. When the idea to replace the get-tough policies was proposed, we did expect to be able to produce significant improvements using the solution-focused approach at the district level. From our perspective, the whole school district was also our client: We set out to help school officials notice the strengths and

³ Client details have been de-identified.

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resources of suspended students, not just see them as behavior problems. One of the most important tools to help this process along was the written recommendation form placed in the school record for each case (see Appendix). The results of this intervention have exceeded our expectations. Our efforts—which were built on the solution-focused model—have helped to bring about systemic change. Students’ hopes and resources have been acknowledged in the larger system, positively impacting the systems perceptions of them, and helping them to succeed in school and in life.

The practical implications of this project are important. It is easy to see in hindsight how well-meant initiatives—for example, the presence of police in schools after school shootings or the implementation of anti-drug and anti-crime policies—paradoxically produce a repressive climate in which young people are increasingly at risk. Such programs and policies produce a climate in which young people cannot not make small mistakes without serious consequences. However, young people will of course make minor mistakes; they will write on walls, be tempted to experiment with drugs, and there will always be a fight or two in the process of growing up. Young people need space to learn from their mistakes, and they need support to move forward in more fruitful ways. The PROMISE program shows that it is possible for school systems to turn around and back out of repressive practices that place the youth they are aiming to protect at greater risk for involvement with the legal system. In a short time, supportive, future-oriented practices were implemented in an entire school district. This serves as an important lesson that changes can quickly be implemented, producing positive results for the entire system.

The initial statistics from the PROMISE program were very promising and we look forward to further analyzing the results and to further describe the processes that were used. We are confident that the systemic approach applied in combination with specific solution-focused techniques and tenants will produce valuable insights and hands-on methods for planning and implementing support programs for at-risk youth. Programs may include the whole system of officials, law enforcement, and school personnel, as well as the child’s family and social network.

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FROM GET TOUGH TO SOLUTION BUILDING

Appendix

SCIS Recommendation Form

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CLIENT/STUDENT INFORMATION	
Client/Student Name _____	
Home School _____	
	Age _____ Grade _____ Gender _____
SUSPENSION INFORMATION	
Alternative Suspension School Name and City _____	
Current reason _____	Length of stay _____
Previous reasons _____	Length of stay _____
SESSION INFORMATION	
Session Day & Date _____	Date _____ Duration _____
Student Goal(s): _____ _____ _____ _____ Successful Past or Present Steps Towards Goals: (exceptions - times when things are working) _____ _____ Family Support Toward the Goal: _____ _____ _____ School Support Toward the Goal: _____ _____ _____ Current Obstacles In The Way of Goal: (as reported by student) _____ _____ _____ Current Progress Towards Goal: (on scale) _____ _____ Recommendations _____ _____ _____ _____	

Therapist signature _____
Degree/license _____
Therapist Name _____
(print) _____

Supervisor signature _____
Degree/license _____
Date _____