

Working on What Works (WOWW): Coaching Teachers to Do More of What's Working

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Working on What Works (WOWW) was developed by solution-focused brief therapy (SFBT) pioneers Berg and Shilts in 2002 (Berg & Shilts, 2005). After being piloted in urban schools in Fort Lauderdale, Florida, the program has been piloted in other cities, including five schools we have worked with in Chicago (Berg & Shilts, 2005; Kelly, Kim, & Franklin, 2008). In this practice highlight, we share some of our own preliminary findings on how WOWW is helping to improve teachers' perceptions of their classes as being more manageable and how it is helping them to become better teachers.

A PARADIGM SHIFT

School social workers hear a lot of venting from educators about problem students. It is tempting for the school social worker to agree to observe the student and to notice the behaviors mentioned by the teacher, thus paying attention to what the student is doing wrong. What usually follows is a meeting with the teacher to discuss how the social worker will work individually with the child to attempt to "fix" the behavior problems. A persistent question has nagged school social workers: Are we really helping to remedy this situation by opting out of working in the actual learning environment? Although we want to understand the teachers' experience, we also want to encourage them to think differently about their classes and to focus on what is going well or on what is working.

Teachers are integral parts of the school culture that we seek to serve, and we often serve them in collaborative and consultative relation-

ships. Teachers enter schools excited to give their students a love of learning and with the belief that students want to learn. Again and again, beginning teachers report a "love of children" and a passion for teaching as part of their reasons for choosing teaching (Roehrig, Presley, & Talotta, 2002). Yet research also shows that 50 percent of those same excited, idealistic teachers will leave the profession of teaching altogether within five years (National Education Association, 2007). WOWW philosophy includes a list of assumptions about teachers, children, and parents (Berg & Shilts, 2005). The assumption is that teachers want to have a positive influence on students and to feel like good teachers.

We offer the WOWW program as one way to help multiple levels of the school contextual system. It is unlike other classroom approaches whereby the classroom environment is interrupted so that the social worker can explain an intervention and then students can respond to it. In WOWW, the basic tenets of SFBT, such as looking for exceptions to problems and past successes as part of constructing solutions, are revealed in contrast to other more manualized, problem-focused approaches. There is a belief that change is also going to happen. The class is invited to recognize its strengths and to devise solutions to class discipline problems together, validating the students who are already following the teacher's rules and working well with others rather than singling out a few defiant students.

COMPONENTS OF THE WOWW PROGRAM

Educators appreciate that there is no new curriculum to learn and no specific students are

pulled out for the WOWW intervention; instead, the intervention focuses on doing all the work in the classroom, the most natural environment, with all of the students and the teacher present. The WOWW program is grounded in the SFBT approach, with its emphasis on solution-building conversations, scaling, and goal setting. Several recent reviews of SFBT research have shown that this approach produces solid treatment outcomes comparable to other therapy techniques (Kelly et al., 2008; Kim, 2008). There is also increasing evidence that these therapeutic techniques can be adapted successfully to a school context (Kelly et al., 2008). Table 1 shows how the WOWW program sessions are structured, with attention paid to specific SFBT techniques like interviewing for strengths and using scale questions to help the classroom.

The following example from our study is typical of a WOWW discussion, during session 6 in a seventh-grade classroom: Students were observed by the school social worker, acting in the role of coach, as being argumentative and overly talkative during their language arts lesson. Obviously, this behavior was counter to the overall stated desire to have a respect-

ful learning environment. The three specific WOWW behaviors that were chosen by the class to focus on were as follows: (1) being quiet when the teacher or another student is talking, (2) saying excuse me and thank you, and (3) offering to help someone else. Students were asked to evaluate the entire class on a 10-point scale ranging from 1 = poor to 10 = excellent. Most of the students rated the class a six because not everyone was looking at or listening to the teacher during the language arts lesson. The teacher agreed that some of the students had been answering her questions and writing notes as she talked but that there were students who looked as if they could do a better job of listening. Notice that no students are singled out and positive behaviors are highlighted in the rating discussion.

During the next step, the coach asked the class how they could improve their behaviors to reach their goals. Using rating language, she said, "If we agree that we are at a six today, how can we move up to a seven or eight by next week?" Students answered, "Some kids could put away their pencils and stop doodling and others could stop their side conversations

Table 1: WOWW Program: Step-by-Step

WOWW Program Phase	Steps
Phase 1: Compliments phase Weeks 1 through 3: Sessions are about 40 minutes for observation and 15 minutes for feedback. Timing depends on each school's schedules.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Introduce yourself to students, saying something like the following: "I'm going to be visiting your room to watch for all the things the class does that are good and helpful. I will report back to you what I see." 2. Note class strengths by giving group and individual compliments to students and teachers, too. 3. Meet with teacher to discuss observations and for creating classroom goals.
Phase 2: Rating phase (Building the rubric for self-assessment) Weeks 4 through 6: Observe for approximately 40 minutes. Allow 15 minutes for feedback and discussion.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Continue giving positive feedback. 2. Define in behavioral terms, "Best Class in ____ School. (Rubric) 3. Decide on rating method, 1 to 10, 1 to 5, smiling faces, et cetera. 4. Discuss "best" classroom and ask, "What would a 10 look like?" "What would a 5 look like?" 5. Help students and teacher understand rating method and practice rating each meeting. Draw consensus from teacher and class and record results every week. 6. Make prediction for next meeting. Discuss which behaviors on the scale need to improve.
Phase 3: Goal setting Continuing same routine as above WOWW sessions. Weeks 7 through the end of intervention	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Decide with teacher and class which behaviors in the rubric need to improve. 2. Choose only one to two goals. 3. Encourage teacher to rate class at least once a day and post a chart. 4. WOWW coach continues positive feedback, notes strengths, amplifies change, and keeps it interesting. 5. New goals can be added when other goals are accomplished or something needs to be changed. (SFBT basic tenet: Do something different if the therapy is not working!)

Notes: WOWW = Working on What Works. SFBT = solution-focused behavior therapy. Adapted from Berg and Shilts (2005).

unrelated to the lesson.” So the WOWW coach asked, “If we do some of these things next week, where do you think we can be on the 1-to-10 scale next time?”

In addition to the importance placed on getting students to mobilize around their inherent strengths, ample attention is paid to what the teacher hopes to change about her classroom. In the spirit of collaboration, there are whole-class discussions as well as debriefings at another time between the WOWW coach and teacher. Unlike other classroom management models that might try gimmicks or external rewards, the WOWW coaching intervention is interested in teachers and students discovering what small gains they are making and then doing more of what is working to turn those successes into larger gains for the whole classroom environment.

The teacher debriefing times are crucial to maximize the effect of the WOWW program. In these confidential sessions, the teacher is given the same opportunities as the students to reflect on the classroom and to identify his or her own capacities and strengths. Here is an example of a WOWW coach debriefing from the same seventh-grade classroom discussed earlier:

This teacher started giving more positive statements and compliments to her students when they were paying attention to her or when they said positive things to each other. The coach noticed how much the students enjoyed working together in groups and seemed to participate more when the lesson was group directed instead of teacher directed. The teacher appreciated this feedback and said she would try more group lessons. In addition, e-mail notes proved to be a very good tool for continued support and communication with this teacher.

PRELIMINARY DATA FROM PILOT STUDY OF WOWW IN CHICAGO


In 2006 and 2007, the Loyola Family and Schools Partnership Program brought WOWW to five kindergarten through eighth-grade public elementary schools in Chicago. The pilot study described here was conducted with 21 teachers who agreed to participate voluntarily.

A pre- and posttest design was used, accompanied by a brief scale designed by the researchers and completed by the participating teachers. Items on the five-point scale assessed how teachers perceived their own classroom management skills and how WOWW had affected their students’ behavior. Repeated measures *t* tests revealed that WOWW had statistically significant outcomes, indicating its effectiveness as an intervention to improve classroom climate. The findings are summarized as follows:

- WOWW resulted in an increase in teachers’ perceptions of their classes as better behaved [$t(20) = 2.6, p < .01$].
- WOWW resulted in an increase in teachers’ positive perceptions of themselves as effective classroom managers [$t(20) = 1.9, p < .05$].
- WOWW helped to increase the teachers’ views of students as better behaved and their sense that students would also report better behavior [$t(20) = 3.22, p < .05; t(20) = 2.8, p < .05$].

This pilot data ($N = 21$) shows the promise of WOWW as an effective classroom management and staff development program (Kelly et al., 2008). However, the small sample size, lack of a comparison group, and lack of information on the benefits of the WOWW program for other classroom performance variables (for example, test scores, discipline referrals, attendance) precludes an interpretation at this point that WOWW can have a significant effect on the many school performance variables that other classroom management techniques have claimed to address (Marzano, 2003).

Nevertheless, WOWW has an intuitive appeal to school social workers trying to find positive and nonthreatening ways to help teachers and students function better together in a classroom setting. It is a promising new idea that is trying to use the active ingredients of SFBT to have meaningful effects on classroom behavior, teacher resilience, and student achievement. It also fulfills many of Illinois’ social-emotional learning standards within the classroom environment, without the need for learning an entire

new curriculum. It is far too early to say whether WOWW is an intervention that can positively affect such important variables in schools, though it is our hope in 2008 to bring the WOWW program to more classrooms in Chicago and the surrounding suburbs. We hope to study the program in those settings with a larger sample size and classrooms acting as comparison groups. In the meantime, we are training a number of social workers and counselors so that they can work more consistently with the teachers beyond the scope of this research program. 

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