

Educational Psychology in Practice

theory, research and practice in educational psychology

ISSN: 0266-7363 (Print) 1469-5839 (Online) Journal homepage: <https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/cepp20>

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To cite this article: Emma L. Brown , Emma Powell & Adele Clark (2012) Working on What Works: working with teachers to improve classroom behaviour and relationships, Educational Psychology in Practice, 28:1, 19-30, DOI: [10.1080/02667363.2011.639347](https://doi.org/10.1080/02667363.2011.639347)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/02667363.2011.639347>



Published online: 01 Mar 2012.



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Working on What Works: working with teachers to improve classroom behaviour and relationships

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The Working on What Works (WOWW) approach, which is based upon Solution-focused Brief Therapy, was implemented in a mainstream primary classroom over a 10-week period. The focus was on improving behaviour and relationships in class. Results demonstrated an improvement in teacher ratings for targets set by the class teacher compared with baseline. Pupils also set, and rated themselves on class targets. Observation of pupils, and their class-ratings, demonstrated a positive impact for these targets. Longer term follow-up suggested that this positive impact was maintained. It is concluded that WOWW had a positive impact on behaviour and relationships within this classroom.

Keywords: solution-oriented; solution-focused; classroom behaviour; classroom relationships; Working on What Works

Introduction

Sheldon and King (2001) suggest that normal human functioning cannot be accounted for within a purely problem-focused frame of reference. Sheldon and King argue that such a focus is too restrictive, and one reason why psychologists know so little about human thriving and how to encourage it. Over the past decade, some educational psychologists (EPs) have become increasingly interested in adopting an explicit focus on solutions when working with children, young people, families and schools. In particular, Solution-focused Brief Therapy (SFBT) is an approach which is being used by EPs (Stobie, Boyle, & Woolfson, 2005).

SFBT is a therapeutic approach developed by de Shazer and colleagues which focuses on change and hope, investigating solutions to problems, rather than analysing the problem itself (cited in Ajmal, 2001). Rees (2008) and Ajmal (2001) state that an EP working in a solution-focused/oriented way will be applying the following principles: identifying the client's strengths; exploring exceptions to the problem situation (to build on what is already working); exploring the goal state; investigating who can help in reaching the goal state; identifying the first step towards the goal state, and generally facilitating thinking about possible solutions.

There are a number of examples of solution-focused methodologies being used effectively with individuals (for example, Franklin, Moore, & Hopson, 2008; Strachan, 2001), in meetings with groups of professionals (for example, Harker, 2001), with families (for example, Mall & Stringer, 2001), and with schools (for example, Stearn & Moore, 2001).

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The principles of SFBT have been adapted and incorporated into a variety of approaches. One practical application of these principles in the classroom is the Working on What Works (WOWW) approach (Berg & Shilts, 2004, 2005).

WOWW originated in Florida from a discussion about an individual pupil being taught by Shilts's wife. A solution-focused discussion between Shilts, his wife and Insoo Kim Berg led to an observation by Shilts and Berg in the classroom and positive feedback to the child whose behaviour was causing concern (highlighting positives from observation, for example, concentrating on work, being polite). This relatively minor intervention had a considerable impact on the young person and led Shilts to trial a wider approach of observation and positive feedback in the classroom and school. This led to a decrease in absences, improved academic outcomes and a decrease in referrals to counsellors. Berg and Shilts developed the WOWW approach from this initial intervention, incorporating more solution-focused elements in the process (Shilts, 2008). Berg and Shilts (2005) state that their model emerged through repeated observations of what worked and what did not work, removing the elements that did not work and developing those that did.

WOWW focuses on the solution-focused principles of: looking for exceptions to problem situations (times when the problem situation is less problematic, or the problem does not exist); working on what already is working (maintaining and building on existing good practice); and believing that change is constant and inevitable and that professionals should always be looking for small, positive changes which can be built on to bring about bigger change – the “snowball effect” (Berg & Shilts, 2004).

WOWW is described as a practical tool to help solve everyday problems in the classroom (Berg & Shilts, 2004). It aims to build positive relationships between the teacher and pupils through collaborative goal setting and team working. Berg and Shilts (2005) outline the process of the WOWW programme, which has three key stages:

- Stage one: Observation (three weeks) (Kelly, Kim, & Franklin, 2008). The WOWW “coach” (someone external to the classroom) observes the class looking for positive things to feedback to the pupils and class teacher (CT). Following the observation each pupil is given individual feedback about one positive thing the observer noticed. Berg and Shilts (2005) state time should be taken to give the CT his/her feedback after class.
- Stage two: The WOWW coaches facilitate discussion to set collaborative (teacher and pupil) classroom goals (around weeks four/five). These goals are then scaled by the pupils and CT on a scale from one to 10. The rating provided should take into consideration the class as a whole, rather than individual pupils. The class is asked what it would take to move one point up the scale.
- Stage three: Regular scaling of classroom success and amplifying (Kelly et al., 2008). The goals set in stage two are the focus of observer feedback during the remaining WOWW sessions. Between sessions the CT should work with the pupils to scale themselves daily to amplify change (by highlighting progress to be built upon).

At each stage observation should be once weekly, lasting around 40 minutes, with 15 minutes for feedback (and discussion from stage two onwards) (Berg & Shilts, 2005; Kelly & Bluestone-Miller, 2009).

Evidence base

There are currently few published studies reporting on the effectiveness of WOWW (Berg & Shilts 2004, 2005; Kelly & Bluestone-Miller, 2009). Initial findings suggest WOWW has the power to influence positive change. Berg and Shilts (2004, 2005) provide case studies of the WOWW approach being used with positive results in classrooms. For example, Berg and Shilts (2005) describe how a year long WOWW intervention resulted in positive changes in teachers' perceptions of: pupil behaviour (some students thinking before they act, being calmer and more on task); respect toward the teacher (being polite); and student's pride in their work as assessed through teacher discussions and coach's observations. The authors note that this project took place over a year which is a big time commitment for the coaches. It is questionable whether Educational Psychology Service (EPS) models of service delivery would be flexible enough to support weekly intervention over this time period if an EP were to act as a coach.

Kelly and Bluestone-Miller (2009) report that in a pilot study of WOWW (with 21 teachers in five schools), results indicated an increase in teachers' perceptions of their classes as better behaved, of themselves as effective classroom managers, and an increase in the teachers' sense that pupils would view themselves as better behaved. No reference is made in this study to the time frame for intervention. While this study reports positive findings, the results are based solely on teacher perceptions on a five point rating scale. It is questionable whether such a limited rating scale allowed sufficient variability in ratings over time. Further, there are no data regarding how pupils experienced the approach, pupils' perception of change, or evidence of longer term impact. Thus the three published studies to date have limitations; however the results suggest that adopting the WOWW approach led to positive change, and therefore it is worthy of further investigation.

In Scotland Moray EPS and Inclusion Support Outreach Service have introduced WOWW as part of a wider drive toward Solution Oriented Schools (Bruce, Mackintosh, & McDonald, 2009). Bruce et al. evaluated the approach in seven classrooms, where the approach was used for 10 weeks. In a change to the standard Berg and Shilts (2005) method, positive feedback was provided to the teacher in the presence of the pupils. No rationale was provided for this alteration in the procedure. Semi-structured focus groups were held with 77 pupils. Results indicated that pupils generally rated WOWW sessions as positive, and enjoyed hearing the feedback (both to themselves, and to their teacher). In addition the majority of pupils suggested their class had improved as a result of the programme, and they now regarded their teacher in a more positive manner. Responses from teacher questionnaires ($N = 7$) revealed that WOWW had benefitted both their own practice, and their perception of the behaviour/attitude of pupils. Teachers also reported that hearing feedback about themselves was primarily positive. The authors note that the questionnaire provided to teachers afforded the opportunity for rich qualitative data to be obtained. One limitation to this study is the lack of longer term evaluation. It is unclear whether the positive impact was sustained after the intervention had completed.

The current study

The current study emerged through consultation with a head teacher and CT (third author) around the relationships between, and behaviour of, pupils in a primary one/two composite class (aged 5–6 years). It was agreed that WOWW would be an

appropriate intervention to target the areas of concern in the classroom. The work also fitted well with the local, and national drive to embed solution-oriented practice into classrooms.

The aim of the project was to improve the behaviour and relationships in the class through collaborative working with school staff and pupils.

Methodology

Participants

The 25 pupils who participated in this project were aged between five years one month and six years three months at the time the project commenced. Written permission for participation was obtained from the parent of each child prior to the project commencing. Adult teaching staff included the CT, a pupil support assistant and a deputy head teacher who covered the class during the CT's non-class contact time. A behaviour support teacher also worked with the class for one hour weekly, with a focus on social skills. The head teacher was supportive of the project throughout, and was a key participant in planning the approach, and in supporting the CT.

The coaches/facilitators were the first two authors of this paper, the school's designated EP, and an assistant EP for research.

Process and data collection

The approach followed the format set out by Berg and Shilts (2005), with the adaptations made by Bruce et al. (2009) being incorporated (teacher feedback in class, intervention over 10 weeks). At a planning meeting with the head teacher and the CT, the CT provided information about what she hoped would be achieved through participation in WOWW. This information was translated into four targets and recorded on a Target Monitoring and Evaluation (TME) form (adapted from Dunsmuir, Brown, Iyadurai, & Monsen, 2009). The CT rated the class on a scale from one to 10 on the four targets set (baseline rating). This rating was based on her perception of the proportion of time the target would be met in class, and/or the proportion of pupils in the class who would regularly meet that target. In line with solution-oriented scaling, the CT was also asked to provide information about where she would like the class to be on the 10 point scale when the project was completed (expected rating).

During the initial period of observation (weeks one to three), the focus of observation and feedback was on the four targets set by the CT during planning. At the end of week three the coaches, in collaboration with the CT, asked the class to set themselves goals/targets to work toward. The class agreed three targets which were then each rated on a scale from one to 10 (with some visual support). A discussion followed about what would help the class to move up the scale. The CT consolidated the pupils' understanding and experience of using the targets and scaling over a two week period when the observation/feedback could not go ahead due to illness of the EP. The class scaled themselves daily for each target, and the CT reminded them of the targets regularly throughout the day. During weeks 6 to 10 of observation/feedback the weekly sessions re-commenced, with the focus being on the class targets and scaling.

Throughout the 10-week period, observations were recorded by the WOWW coaches using an observation schedule where each child's name was noted alongside space for the observation, and a space to indicate which target was being met in the observation recorded.

Following the 10-week intervention the coaches met with the head teacher and CT to evaluate the project. The CT was asked to reflect on the original four targets, and to provide a rating on the 10-point scale, based on her perception of where the class were at the end of the project (actual rating). Qualitative data was also gathered through semi-structured interview at that time. This interview asked the following:

- What have you noticed?
- What has worked particularly well?
- Who else has noticed?
- What could have been done better?

Next steps were agreed during that meeting.

It was agreed that evaluation with pupils would take the form of informal discussion and ratings three weeks post-intervention.

Longer term follow-up data was collected 12 weeks post-intervention, with the CT again reflecting on where the pupils were in relation to the original four targets she had set pre-intervention (long-term actual rating). The longer term follow-up rating for target four was collected approximately 18 weeks after the project had ended.

Teacher ratings

The four targets set by the CT were:

- (1) Create an ethos of the class as a team working toward positive goals
- (2) Pupils show respect toward adults in the classroom
- (3) Improve positive relationships among peers within the class
- (4) Improve listening skills during whole class teaching

The CT rated the whole class on each of these targets at four points in the process. These ratings are displayed in Figure 1.

Results

The following section describes the data collected through a variety of methods.

As shown in Figure 1, the ratings for each target increased from baseline to actual. For target one, the class met the expectations of the CT (expected rating) immediately post-intervention. At longer term follow-up (long-term actual rating), the class maintained the positive improvements noted immediately post-intervention (actual rating), and in some cases (targets one and two), had improved further. At longer term follow-up the class was rated as exceeding the teacher's expectations with regard to target one, and meeting her expectations with regard to target two. For the remaining targets, while the ratings improved, they did not reach the level expected by the CT at baseline.

Qualitative information

During the initial evaluation meeting the CT provided qualitative data via an informal semi-structured interview. Salient points from this interview were

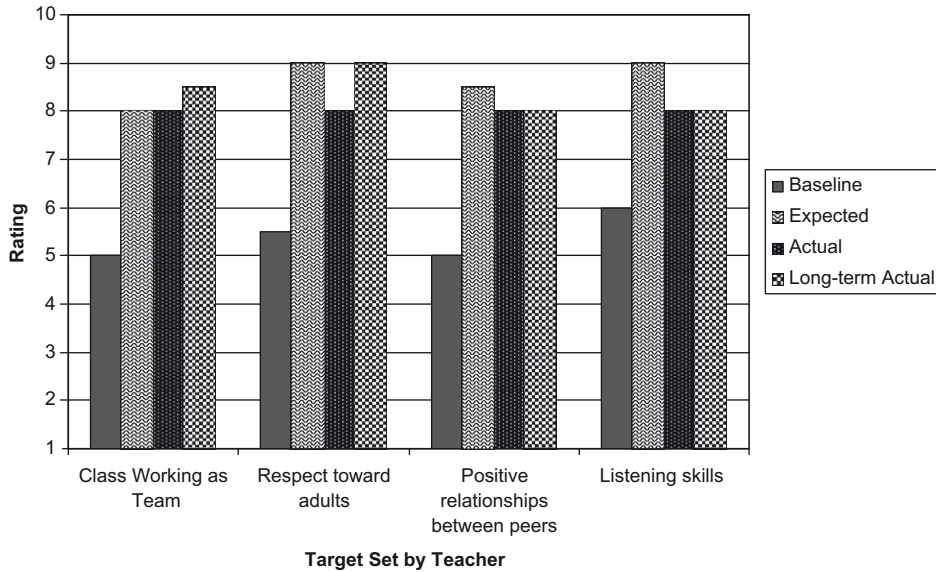


Figure 1. Teacher ratings at baseline, expected, actual and long-term actual for targets set by teacher.

summarised by the WOWW coaches and clarified with the CT to be a true representation of the interview and her thoughts. When asked what she had noticed in the classroom throughout the WOWW project, the CT commented that WOWW had benefited every pupil in the class, with all pupils appearing motivated to work toward their goals. Furthermore, the CT commented that WOWW helped the class identify what individual children were doing well, and there was said to be more togetherness about the class, with pupils appearing more willing to help each other out rather than “tell tales”. The CT reported that the intervention had a positive impact on the amount of quality time she could spend with the class. However, at times when the class had more freedom (for example, drama and gym), the impact was reported to be less.

When asked what had worked particularly well, the CT suggested that the pupils had responded particularly well to the individual feedback from the coaches, and to the wall display she had made which named individual children who had worked particularly hard to meet class targets over the week. She also commented that having specific targets to work towards worked well.

The coaches then asked if any other people had noticed the positive impact of the project. The head teacher, depute head teacher, behaviour support teacher and pupil support assistant were said to have noted improvements in the behaviour of the class as a whole, or individuals within the class. The head teacher commented that for one particular pupil there were fewer difficulties in the playground and dining room, and fewer difficulties reported for the whole class in the playground. The pupil support assistant had noted that she was not having to respond to negative behaviour in the class, or the playground, as frequently as before.

Pupil evaluation

At the end of the third observation session the class had set itself three targets:

- To be polite
- To put your hand up
- To be helpful

Figure 2 shows the ratings the pupils gave the class for each of these targets at the end of week 3, and at the end of week 10. An increase in ratings was evident at week 10 for all three targets.

The WOWW coaches had discussed with the CT and head teacher the most appropriate method of gathering the views of the pupils. Pupils were familiar with non-verbal rating as part of self-assessment, and therefore it was agreed to follow this approach in pupil evaluation. Three weeks post-intervention, pupils were asked to indicate non-verbally how well they thought the class had done in relation to the targets. Pupils were asked to put their thumbs up if they thought the class was now meeting the target all of the time, thumbs across if they thought the class was meeting it some of the time and thumbs down if they thought the class never met the target. Table 1 shows the percentage of pupils who voted in this way for each target.

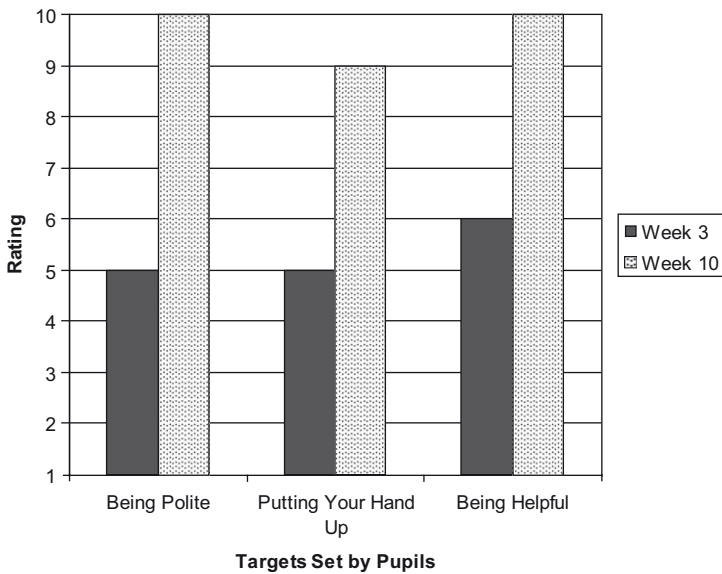


Figure 2. Pupil ratings on targets at week 3 and week 10.

Table 1. Percentage of pupils voting by target ($N = 25$).

	Thumbs up	Thumbs across	Thumbs down	No response
Being polite	88	12	0	0
Putting your hand up	33	59	0	8
Being helpful	56	32	8	4

In discussion the WOWW coaches also sought pupils' views as to what helped them meet their targets. Pupils stated that learning about the targets had helped them (for example, what it means to be polite), and that the poster on the wall had been helpful. One pupil stated they had helped each other with the targets (for example, by telling the CT when they had noticed another pupil being polite/helpful or putting their hand up).

Observation

While conducting the classroom observations during weeks 1–10 the WOWW coaches noticed that the process of identifying positive feedback for each pupil became quicker and easier as the amount of observable target-related behaviour appeared to increase. Whilst this information was not formally documented, the authors discussed this informally throughout the project, and the observation fits well with the improvements noted by the CT and pupils.

Discussion

Overall the evaluation of the WOWW approach was positive. The CT's ratings suggested that the class had improved as a whole with regard to the original targets set. While the class had not achieved the CT's expected ratings in regard to some targets, it had made real progress in comparison to ratings at baseline. For all targets the perception of the CT was that positive change had been maintained for a period of 12 weeks post-intervention. The pupils also noted positive change with regard to the targets they set themselves at week three of the project. The pupils' final, non-verbal, evaluation of the project demonstrated they were able to identify areas of strength within the class (for example, being polite) versus areas which they still had to work on (being helpful). The WOWW coaches reflected that "being helpful" was the target for which they found it most challenging to find examples of goal-directed behaviour. It was agreed at longer term follow-up that perhaps the timings of observations (start of the school day and after lunch) did not provide the coaches with optimum opportunity to observe "being helpful".

The findings from the current project contribute to the evidence base that exists around WOWW as a solution-focused classroom approach which can impact positively on pupil behaviour, relationships and respect in school (see also Berg & Shilts, 2004, 2005; Bruce et al., 2009; Kelly & Bluestone-Miller, 2009).

Factors contributing to positive outcomes

The authors reflect that a number of factors contributed to the success of this intervention. These include:

- *Sign up and commitment from CT, school staff, and WOWW coaches.* The authors reflect that the combination of weekly feedback from WOWW coaches, and consolidation work from the CT were critical factors in the success of the intervention. The CT reflected that the weekly feedback sessions with coaches were fundamental to the results achieved, and enabled the children to become more aware of their behaviour and consider how each could individually improve. The CT commented that giving the children

individual feedback allowed them to listen to each other's feedback, and highlighted and modelled the positive behaviour expected of them in the classroom. The CT suggested this was something which would have been difficult to achieve in the classroom without the help and support of the EP and assistant EP for research. The WOWW coaches reflected that the weekly feedback was also an opportunity to model how to provide positive and specific feedback around the targeted behaviour to teaching staff. The WOWW coaches also reflect that the consolidation work conducted by the CT in between weekly visits kept the intervention fresh (for example, a poster to display the names and actions of pupils who had worked particularly hard to meet a target during the week) and added value to the project. The CT suggested that the support of the head teacher contributed to her confidence in implementing WOWW. The commitment of the classroom staff, head teacher and WOWW coaches was a primary factor in the success of the project and is an example of the solution-oriented principle of "No sign-up, no change" (Rees, 2008, p. 171).

- *Pupil ownership.* Berg and Shilts (2005) stress the importance of children owning solutions and signing up to change rather than complying with adult led instructions and targets. Berg and Shilts (2004) suggest that when it is the child's choice s/he is more motivated and wants to perform better. The targets/goals set by pupils were consistent with the criteria set for good goals by Berg and Shilts (2005) (that is, concrete, measurable, simple, realistic, achievable, participative, collaborative and social). The successful pupil target/goal setting and outcomes are a further example of the solution-oriented principle: "No sign-up, no change" (Rees, 2008, p. 171). The daily involvement of pupils in both target rating and sharing their observations of each other meeting the class targets could be said to be a further example of the pupil ownership of the targets set.
- *Enjoyment of pupils.* The authors perceived that the pupils enjoyed participating in the WOWW approach, and this was crucial to the success of the project. To confirm this perception, three weeks post-intervention the WOWW coaches asked the pupils to indicate (via thumbs up, thumbs across or thumbs down to indicate "enjoyed all the time", "enjoyed some of the time" and "never enjoyed it", respectively) how much they had enjoyed taking part in the project. Eighty-four per cent of pupils indicated they had enjoyed the project all of the time, with 16% indicating they enjoyed it some of the time.
- *Collaboration in the classroom.* In line with the Bruce et al. (2009) alteration to the WOWW feedback procedure, the CT and pupil support assistant were given positive feedback in relation to the targets in the classroom alongside the pupil feedback. It could be said that this engendered an ethos of collaboration and cooperation within the classroom, with everyone in the classroom working towards the same goals. Rees (2008) states that "Co-operation enhances change" and Berg and Shilts (2004), highlight that for both teacher and student to succeed they must cooperate with each other and one cannot succeed with the help of the other.
- *Target setting.* The authors reflect that the use of the TME form was particularly helpful in identifying targets which were the focus of the initial classroom observation and positive feedback (weeks one to three). This targeted feedback was a deviation from the Berg and Shilts' (2004, 2005) methodol-

ogy which suggested that initial observation and feedback should be non-specific. However, this approach highlighted existing exceptions in pupil behaviour in relation to the CT's targets, whilst providing a model of positive behaviour expected of pupils in the classroom.

The authors reflect that other factors may have contributed to the positive improvements observed in the classroom. These include the ongoing work of the behaviour support teacher and/or the natural maturation of the pupils over the 10-week period. However, the CT had tried a variety of approaches in the five months pre-intervention, with minimal impact on whole class behaviour. Thus it appears that WOWW offered a unique contribution to resolving issues around classroom behaviour and relationships.

Limitations of current study

Whilst overall the project was perceived to have a positive impact on the behaviour and the relationships within the class, the authors reflect there were some limitations to this study which should be considered when using and evaluating the WOWW approach in the future.

The authors acknowledge limitations of the data collected in that it was largely qualitative, and based on self-report and perceptions rather than objective and standardised measures. Quantitative data were limited to that gathered through the rating scales. Cohen, Manion, and Morrison (2005) state that validity and reliability can be addressed in qualitative research through triangulation of data and the objectivity of the researcher. The WOWW coaches were in complete agreement across the 10 weeks of observations with regard to perceived improvements in behaviour and relationships in the class, and these perceptions were triangulated with the perceptions of school staff and pupils. It should also be noted that the qualitative data triangulated with the quantitative data. However the authors acknowledge that the conclusions drawn may have been supported by the addition of structured observations pre- and post-intervention. In regard to data collected from pupils, the authors acknowledge that alternative methodologies might have been used (for example, focus groups, questionnaires); however it had been considered that non-verbal ratings and full class discussions were most appropriate for the pupils' age and stage of development, and were familiar to the pupils.

Whilst the project was effective in changing perceptions of pupil behaviours and relationships, it could be considered that one limitation of the project was the lack of parental involvement. In their review of the SEAL (Social Emotional Aspects of Learning) programmes Humphrey et al. (2008) suggest that programmes targeting these areas could be more effective if parents are active participants. With regard to the WOWW approach, parents could be involved in reinforcing positive goal related behaviours outside of school. This was noted by the CT during the initial evaluation meeting.

With regard to implementation of the WOWW approach with this age group some difficulty was encountered with introducing the concept of scaling. Whilst the WOWW coaches tried to make the scale more accessible to this young age group by incorporating visual supports, the pupils initially found it challenging to grasp the concept of scaling. The CT revisited scaling daily, in a number of ways, until the pupils became proficient and were able to independently rate themselves

realistically, explaining their ratings and how they could improve. The authors reflect that the WOWW approach is flexible and can be adapted to suit pupils of all ages and abilities [see also Kelly and Bluestone-Miller (2009) who describe evaluation of the approach being used with Kindergarten through to eighth grade pupils].

Next steps

At the initial evaluation meeting some next steps were collaboratively agreed. In particular the CT agreed to continue reviewing the targets on a daily basis, and set new targets in collaboration with the class as they became confident in maintaining their positive performance on the initial targets. The CT also intended to continue with the WOWW poster in class, and to introduce a positive reward system for the whole class specifically related to working hard.

At the longer term evaluation meeting, at the end of the academic year, it was agreed that the ongoing reference to the targets had helped settle the class after the Easter break, and although the pupils had now set new targets, they were maintaining their positive performance on the initial targets. In the next academic year the class will be split into new class groups, thus it will not be possible for a direct continuation of the approach. However, the EP intends to liaise with both the original CT, and the new CTs, to ensure that information about “What Worked” (that is, target setting/scaling, verbal and visual positive reinforcement, pupil involvement) is shared. The CT reflected that the time and effort she invested in the approach were worthwhile, and have provided her with knowledge and understanding of the WOWW principles, which she will use again.

It is also the intention of the EP and CT to disseminate the findings from the project to all school staff, some of whom have expressed interest following observation of the positive impact of this project. The findings from this study are being shared within the wider local authority, and nationally, with schools and EPSs, through presentations at conferences, training events and written communication to contribute to the evidence base for solution-focused approaches and WOWW in particular.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the WOWW approach had a positive impact upon the behaviour and relationships of all pupils within the primary one/two class. All staff involved in the approach found the experience enjoyable and useful, and the majority of pupils stated it was enjoyable for all the time. These findings strengthen the evidence base for the use of solution-focused approaches within the classroom and the WOWW approach in particular. The results suggest that collaborative working between classroom staff and EPs can be an effective catalyst for change when subscribing to solution-oriented principles such as: “If it works do more of it”; “A focus on future possibilities and solutions enhances change”; “People have the necessary resources to make change possible”; “No sign-up, no change” and “Co-operation enhances change” (Rees, 2008, pp. 170–171). Although the project was time consuming, the authors reflect that leading this project was an effective use of EPs time and resources as it is a good example of early intervention, and may have a longer term impact on the teaching and learning of that group of pupils, and on groups of pupils working with the CT in the future.

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