

Using Solution Focused Brief Therapy with adolescents in a mentoring context: a qualitative case study

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Research Portfolio

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ABSTRACT

On a particularly balmy Christchurch evening in March 2012, I attended a parent information evening for my son at his school. As he was embarking on his first year of the National Certificate of Educational Achievement, we were highly attentive. The message was clear, to improve his chances in this highly competitive environment, he would need to work hard to improve academically. This sounded reasonable however, what if he had no idea of what academic improvement means; or what if he knows what it means, but doesn't know how to go about it. Later, we discussed these concerns with his Dean and were told of the academic mentoring scheme that the school provides. This we were told, would improve his motivation, improve his self esteem and most of all, improve his results. Later that term, my son attended one session of academic mentoring that his school provided. I was curious and asked him to describe his experience. Unfortunately, there was to be only one session. He felt being 'told what to do' was not congenial with what he wanted from the programme and the fact that nobody seemed interested in 'what I already know works', meant he and the academic mentoring programme parted company. This experience opened up many questions and lead me to consider what does work in successful academic mentoring programmes? Could Solution Focused counselling offer a practical alternative to current practises because of its focus on what is working rather than what is not? The realities of life in a New Zealand high school, mean that teaching, mentoring and counselling needs to be efficient and responsive to the unique challenges of working with adolescents. One such efficient response is Solution Focused Therapy. The philosophy behind this theory is a practical fit with academic mentoring, for three reasons; its focus on solutions rather than problems, its brevity and change can be immediate. Therefore, the subject of this research is academic improvement, specifically, the role that a student's perception of their own ability plays in contributing to academic improvement. The enquiry falls within a social constructionist's lens, as the findings rely on the views and voices of participants in terms of how life experiences have developed, enabling perceptions to emerge. The findings from this research portfolio reveal that students' perceptions on their own academic ability can be enhanced through the use of Solution Focused Therapy. The groups expected to benefit from the findings include; high school students, teachers, counsellors as well as others who are interested in features that influence student success in a high school setting.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

In my fourteen years as a classroom teacher I have met very few students who do not want to achieve. There appears to be an intrinsic desire in most young people to want to increase their knowledge, their skills and their future. So what gets in the way for some of our students? What happens to this innate enthusiasm?

For many teenagers who present for counselling in a school environment, self esteem is low and as a consequence of this, academic achievement and success is a low priority. Through this research portfolio, my aim is to find out whether Solution Focus interviewing can turn this around and equip students with skills that will aid them in improving their own academic success. The title for this research portfolio came from a quotation from one the participants during an interview and it is this, thinking differently and looking at things differently that is at the core of Solution Focused Therapy. In De Jong and Berg's (2008) preface of *Interviewing for Solutions* they state:

"It offers a set of basic skills...first they are intended to assist the client in developing a vision of a more satisfying future. Second, they direct both client and practitioner toward a deeper awareness of the strengths and resources that the client can use in turning vision into reality."(p 8).

So to interpret this into my words, I view Solution Focus interviewing as a method to unleash the potential of New Zealand students by a style of counselling that promotes achievement through ownership, awareness and responsibility.

The core business of New Zealand schools is to provide a safe environment where students can work towards national qualifications: From the ministry's own website:

Policy and Strategy

"The Ministry's policy and strategy efforts result in laws to improve education for all. Work in progress includes improving social and academic outcomes for all students by focusing on factors making the biggest difference to student learning; helping schools better determine their curriculum, teaching, learning and assessment; and promoting the effective use of information and communication technologies in NZ schools."

For me, the underlined words form a large part of my rationale for this study.

Counsellors in schools have been around since the late 1960s. Section 77 of the Education Act requires that all school boards provide a safe physical and emotional environment for students. In many ways my research is exploring the counsellor as a mentor in providing the safe emotional environment that the act stipulates. Mentoring from the Greek word, meaning enduring, is defined as a sustained relationship between a youth and adult or older peer. Through a continued involvement, this adult offers support, guidance and assistance to the younger person. There are already a number of academic mentoring schemes that schools run both for high and low achieving students. However I was unable to find any school that was using Solution Focused Therapy to underpin a mentoring programme. Solution Focused Therapy is widely practised. The model has been used effectively with a variety of mental health issues. Instead of trying to understand the core of the problem, the model focuses on times when the problem occurs less. The conversations become focused on instilling hope through identifying exceptions, that is those times when the problem occurs less rather than dwelling on the problems themselves. As mentioned earlier,

counsellors in a school environment often encounter students with low self esteem.

Through a social constructionist's lens, our view of the world is as the name would suggest, socially constructed – our own in-built perception of ourselves and the world around us.

Therefore, the primary purpose of this study is to explore how using a solution focused approach, can affect students' own perceptions about their academic ability.

In chapter one I introduce the context, and rationale for this project. In chapter two I explore relevant literature, particularly literature related to academic improvement and mentoring. My methodology, guided by procedures of qualitative and case study research and the procedures I used in this project for data collection and analysis are described in Chapter three . I then describe each 'case' in chapter four and discuss my findings, conclusions and limitations in chapter five. Chapter six contains the consent forms and reference list.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

The review of the relevant literature is intended to give a brief overview of current literature in areas relating to this study. My intention is not to provide an in-depth history of the origins of Solution Focused Therapy but to provide a sense of how this study uses Solution Focused Therapy in a different facet, that being, academic mentoring. My objective is that this research will attempt to add to the understanding of how Solution Focused Therapy can be used in conjunction with academic mentoring. My aim is to enquire about how the use of scaling and exception questions as well as compliments based on the Solution Focused Therapy model, impacts upon a student's perception of their ability to improve academically.

Definition of the key terms:

Students' in this study, refers to senior students enrolled at a specific Christchurch High School, undertaking levels' one, two and three of the National Certificate Educational Assessment. All students at this level were eligible for selection into the study.

Perceptions: Oxford's Tenth Edition Dictionary defines perceptions as, 'the way in which something is regarded, understood, or interpreted'.

Academic Improvement: There are many definitions of this term but the commonality between them all, is that academic improvement is 'measured success'. For the purposes of this study, it is important to clarify that the measurer of the success, is the student. They may choose to describe this as both tangible and or intangible .

Solution Focused Counselling: This therapy focuses on what clients want to achieve through counselling rather than focussing on the problem that made them seek help. The approach focuses on the past only in order to begin conversations about strengths and past successes.

This review examines three streams of literature:

1. What influences students' perceptions of their own academic ability.
2. What is known about causal links with academic improvement.
3. What is known about clients' experiences of Solution Focused Therapy.

Students' Perceptions of their academic ability

The research suggests that students' perceptions of their academic ability are influenced by a number of factors.

One of these major influences is the effect of external factors, named by Zepke, N. Leach, L. Butler, P. (2011) as non-institutional factors. Their study used a forced choice questionnaire given to 1246 first year New Zealand University students. The aim of the study was to gauge the influence of non-institutional influences on their perceptions of their academic success. (non-institutional influences defined as emotional difficulties, personal health problems, demands of employment, and needs of dependants). Overall the study showed these factors as having a 'moderate' (p 237) influence. Other data showed that teachers and students' own motivation was of much greater significance. When students are affected by health, family, work or financial issues they become less engaged in their studies which in

turn leads to lowered perceptions of their own academic success. If students are preoccupied with 'non-institutional influences' academic success becomes a much lower priority, which in turn effects their own perceptions of their ability. Zepke, Leach & Butler's study also highlights external factors that contribute to a student's lowered perception of their ability to improve. When one thinks about any New Zealand high school on any day of the year, the unspoken- non institutional factors that would be impacting upon all students would be vast. Therefore how much does this contribute to a student's perception of their academic ability? Zepke, Leach & Butler also mention the effect that non institutional factors have in lowering students' self efficacy. This is an important factor to consider in this research.

Another way of viewing perception is through a social constructionist lens. Burr (2005) describes social constructionism as ' what exists is what we perceive to exist'. (p 10). From this perspective, therefore, a perception would pertain to what exists is what we perceive to exist. Therefore a student's capacity to measure their own ability to complete tasks and each goals is fundamental in how they perceive themselves. This view allows us to see the impact this might have on how they see themselves and the world around them and the contribution this makes in their self efficacy. As a classroom teacher, this idea resonates as it never ceases to amaze me how varied students' perceptions are of their academic ability. In this research I wanted to explore how much do non-institutional factors and self efficacy influence student's perceptions of their academic ability. How much of this can be changed by looking at things in a different way with the help of solution focused therapy?

Bandura's (1997), definition of self efficacy perceptions as "beliefs in one's capabilities to organise and execute the courses of action required to produce given attainments" (p.3).

Bandura's research tells us that students' perceptions of self efficacy are most commonly gained through "mastery experiences" (p.8), i.e because I succeeded last time in a similar task, there is no reason why I can't this time as well. However they can also be acquired through "vicarious learning" (p. 10), watching people of a similar perceived level as themselves complete the task and lastly through "persuasion" (p. 11) someone we trust convinces us we can perform this task if we apply reasonable effort. The implications of Bandura's research means that students with high self efficacy perceptions, will tackle their learning with confidence and determination and at the other end, those students who present with low self efficacy perceptions are likely to avoid their learning or give up easily. Another interesting aspect to Bandura's research is the suggestion that students' perceptions of their own abilities can be increased when students focus on what the task teaches rather than worrying about potential failure. Enjoying the ride rather than focussing on the destination.

However if, as Bandura found, a student has only experienced academic failure, it is much more difficult to change student perceptions to focus on the learning experienced.

Bandura's findings are supported by Edman, J.L. (2008). His research looked at whether there was an association between student perceptions and academic success amongst 475 college students who responded to a questionnaire on this topic.. Edman found a lack of relationship between academic success and academic ability among both African American and Caucasian students surveyed. One of the explanations offered by Edman for these results are ineffective motivational goals and inauthentic high school academic feedback. Both Edman and Bandura, highlight that knowing what motivates us is clearly a key determiner in improving one's perception of being able to improve academically. Low self

efficacy therefore is a barrier to improving motivation and academic perceptions. Bandura's research would suggest it would be useful for teachers and counsellors to consider ways within their practice, to address low self esteem.

Again this raises the question through the Social Constructionist's view point. Are the students in this study perceiving this view point and not as Burr (2005) reminds us to be, "ever suspicious of our assumptions about how the world appears to be". (p. 10). Of course this is over simplification on my behalf, however the implication that perceptions can be changed, is the important factor that Burr presents. De Jong & Berg (2008) " Social Constructionists emphasise that shifts in client perceptions and definitions occur in contexts – that is, in communities. Consequently, meaning making is not entirely an individual matter in which clients develop private meanings (including solutions) without regard to others." (p 344).

Kecskemeti, (2013) adds another dimension on perceptions by discussing the way we teach and assess and how this impacts on students' perceptions of their academic ability. She reminds us that when counsellors use a not knowing stance, the client will be viewed as a "meaning generating being" rather than an "information-processing machine", (p 48). This is relevant when thinking about how the New Zealand Curriculum assesses our students. Kecskemeti again tells us that rather than measure what else students may know, the current curriculum subjects have more to do with information processing than making meaning. Therefore what is the impact of this on students' perceptions of their academic ability? Are the successful students those who can process the information well and by default, the unsuccessful students those who cannot?

Perhaps of most interest to my study is the work of Daki & Savage,(2010). In this quantitative study, the researchers evaluated the effectiveness of using Solution Focused Therapy in helping struggling readers improve their academic, social and emotional functioning. Based on a questionnaire, all fourteen participants reported enjoying participating in the study however of interest is that the use of Solution Focused Therapy did not lead to improvement in their intrinsic reading motivation. Participants linked the enjoyment of reading in the role of mastering reading, something all fourteen participants felt they were not able to do. This would suggest, perceived improvement comes from confidence in a student's skills, rather than an intrinsic/extrinsic aspect, i.e students will start to perceive their own abilities once they have some 'tools' to move towards mastery of a skill. Daki and Savage found that the children's responses to Solution Focused Therapy intervention improved their perceptions of their general intelligence and their reading and writing skills. While the study only involved fourteen participants, the research when considered with other Solution Focused Therapy outcome literature, provides support for the success of Solution Focused Therapy, techniques in improving students' own perceptions of what they are capable of.

To conclude, students' perceptions of their own academic ability are complicated. External (non institutional factors) clearly play a large role in how a student behaves and what priority they place on academic work and seeking change. Much of this is beyond a counsellor's or mentor's realm to influence. Finding out what motivates students however, is within an individual's domain as is an ability to raise self-efficacy levels. Focussing on the learning that is achieved on the road to the end goal also improves academic perception. This literature suggests that providing an environment that generates confidence in

students, is one way of effecting change and improving students' perceptions of their own academic ability.

What we know about the causes of academic improvement

Researchers suggest a number of factors that influence academic improvement. Maslow, (1970) for example suggested that in order to function, people required certain needs to be addressed. He also suggested that emotional needs could only be addressed after physical needs had been satisfied. This led to his well documented hierarchy of needs, suggesting that needs function within a hierarchy arranged in the following order:

1. Physiological needs – sleep, thirst etc
2. Safety needs – freedom from anxiety, danger etc
3. Love needs – acceptance from parents, friends, teachers
4. Esteem needs – confidence in one's ability
5. Self-actualisation needs – creative self-expression, satisfaction of curiosity.

In a school environment, Maslow's hierarchy implies that students who come to school tired and or hungry are unlikely to be engaged in their learning. Similarly students who feel anxious or rejected are unlikely to take the intellectual risks involved in gaining-- new understandings. As Zepke, Leach & Butler suggested , these factors (non-institutional) play a large role in students' ability to improve academically.

So what are the factors that make the biggest difference to student learning? Skinner and Davis (2005) suggest that empowering students, leads to more effective engagement. They define empowerment in this context as providing students with choices in their assessment.

This increases the probability of them choosing to engage in the assigned work.

Furthermore, choices as to when certain classroom tasks are completed also leads to academic engagement. (p. 394-395).

A public perception (and a point of difference that many independent schools maintain and market) is the difference class sizes can make; lower student to teacher ratio is better.

Hattie (2009) however, disputes this. His research found little or no impact on academic success with class size. He maintains that it is the quality of the teacher that has a far bigger effect on raising student achievement. (p 54). In Hattie's trials, teachers did not change the way they teach in front of thirty students or twenty. Hattie advocates for investment into teacher training and professional development to effect change in students' motivation levels leading directly to academic improvement.

This leads to consideration of the role motivation plays in academic improvement. There are many theories and guidelines around motivation. Edward Deci's and Richard Ryan's (2002) Self Determination Theory states that motivation action may be either self determined or controlled. "Intrinsically motivated actions require no separate motivating consequences; the only necessary reward for them is spontaneous interest and enjoyment that we experience as we do them." (p 84). Deci and Ryan extend this by suggesting that students will be more likely to experience intrinsic motivation in school environments that satisfy three innate psychological needs: 1. Autonomy – being able to decide what to do and how to do it (supporting Skinner and Davis). 2. Competence – developing and implementing skills for controlling the environment. 3. Relatedness – affiliation with others through interactions. Therefore learning environments which do not provide these conditions, will mean the students' motivation will be primarily extrinsic. Deci and Ryan suggest, learning

environments that operate at an extrinsic level will do little to change a students' perception of their own academic ability.

Csikszentmihalyi (1993) researched what intrinsic motivation felt like when working on a challenging activity and coined the phrase 'flow'. He came up with eight features of flow which summarised the experiences of being totally absorbed. Concentration on the task rather than any goal, grade or reward. For a period of time we focus fully on the undertaking, refining our strategies, developing our skills and enjoying a sense of control and accomplishment. However in a classroom setting, providing an environment that causes intrinsic motivation sounds ideal but when delivering a compulsory curriculum, a one size fits all, could be unattainable. A more attainable goal in motivating students might be to find ways to make their academic activities meaningful and worthwhile. This research encouraged me to think about the difficulty of working in this way within the confines of a compulsory curriculum.

Much of what we know about motivation comes from the expectancy x value model, (Wigfield & Eccles,2002). This model measures two types of effort that people are willing to use on a task. 1, The extent to which they expect to be able to perform the task successfully, and 2, The degree to which they value opportunity and the rewards involved in carrying out the task. Therefore in a learning environment, students will not invest effort in tasks they believe they cannot succeed in nor will they invest effort in tasks they do not enjoy and that do not lead to valued outcomes even if they know they could complete them successfully.

Tough (2012) identifies some key attributes that he believes can be taught which make the biggest difference in students' ability to succeed academically: Grit (tenacity), conscientiousness, thinking, optimism. According to Tough, students 'learn' best when the

feedback they receive causes them to 'think' of alternative strategies and change habits/systems/strategies that have not worked for them in the past. Cognitive flexibility (an ability to see alternative solutions to problems). Cognitive self control (the ability to inhibit instinctive responses and instead choosing a more effective one). (p 125).

Thinking is now one of the key competencies from the Ministry of Education and they define it as follows: Thinking is about using creative, critical, and metacognitive processes to make sense of information, experiences, and ideas. These processes can be applied to purposes such as developing understanding, making decisions, shaping actions, or constructing knowledge. Intellectual curiosity is at the heart of this competency. Students who are competent thinkers and problem-solvers actively seek, use, and create knowledge. They reflect on their own learning, draw on personal knowledge and intuitions, ask questions, and challenge the basis of assumptions and perceptions.

How does this sit alongside the vision for academic improvement laid out by the Ministry of Education? "The Ministry's policy and strategy efforts, results in laws to improve education for all. Work in progress includes improving social and academic outcomes for all students by focusing on factors making the biggest difference to student learning; helping schools better determine their curriculum, teaching, learning and assessment; and promoting the effective use of information and communication technologies in NZ schools." Ministry of Education, (2013). The Ministry's Statement of Intent 2008-2013 identified that having all young people engaged, participating and achieving in education, is a strategic outcome. It acknowledged that these factors are optimised by challenging and supporting students in complex and wide ranging contexts. Five key competencies have been identified as important to learning:

1. Thinking
2. Using language, symbols and texts
3. Managing self
4. Relating to others
5. Participating and contributing.

Changing a student's perception of their own academic ability is closely aligned with these key competencies and would therefore play a major role in improving the Ministry's objective of engagement, participation and achievement in education.

Hughes, Burke, Graham, Crocket and Kotze (2013), site the key competencies from the current New Zealand Curriculum as having much in common with school counselling. In their article they maintain that counselling offers students the opportunity to learn in much the same manner as the key competencies are aiming to develop. The purpose of Hughes's research group was to investigate how school counselling contributed to students' development of the key competencies. Over a five week period, three counsellors documented student concerns brought to them and the perceived key competencies that arose from them. "If we take the example of managing anger, in session one the counsellor might explore with the client how anger is impacting on his or her class work, relationships with friends and family and involvement with sport –the key competency of participating and contributing. In session two, building on learning, insight and motivation gained from session one, the focus might be on mindfulness strategies....that the student can employ – the key competency of thinking. In session three, those strategies might be built on by learning further ways to respond to others that are appropriately assertive – the key

competency of relating to others.” (p. 9). Hughes’ implications as he wrote. “ We believe that school counsellors must continue to find ways to show that our difference from teachers in our professional relationship with students is something to be valued, protected and celebrated, if for no other reason that because of the important contribution it can make to achieving a school’s core mission and to students’ learning for life. (p.14). The idea that a school counselling department can add value to students’ ability to tackle their academic pursuits is exciting. So often the counsellor is seen as acting at a distance from the classroom curriculum. Hughes’ research shows the positive benefits of bringing the Ministry’s key competencies into real life situations.

To conclude, academic improvement comes in a large part from a student’s own ability and desire to improve (intrinsic motivation). Learning environments that foster curiosity, play a part as does providing choice in tasks and assignments. Providing opportunities for students to engage in reflection also contributes to academic improvement. Students who can use the key competencies in and out of the classroom will be in a much greater position to manage and change their own perceptions of themselves.

What is known about client’s experiences of Solution Focused Therapy.

Before we explore experiences of Solution Focused Therapy, it is important to explore exactly what Solution Focused Therapy is. Solution Focused therapy is an approach to counselling based on solution-building rather than problem-solving and was developed at the Brief Family Therapy Center, Milwaukee , in the United States by Steve de Shazer and Insoo Kim Berg. The solution-focused approach developed from their observations of interventions that seemed to lead to a positive change for clients.

Perkins (1999) comments that "Solution Focused Therapy takes a major departure from problem-focused orientation in psychotherapy.....most therapies see clients coming into therapy with problems seeking help: solution focused therapists see clients coming in with solutions seeking expression." (p.1). Therefore in Solution Focused Therapy, clients are regarded as the experts on their own lives and they will find the solutions they need (with the therapist's questioning expertise). Solution Focused counsellors adopt a not knowing approach however their expertise comes from the type of questions they choose to ask that help the client become the expert in discovering their own solutions.

The core techniques of a Solution Focused Counsellor

1. Looking for previous solutions

Solution Focused Counsellors have learned that most people have previously solved many problems and probably have some ideas of how to solve the current problem. To help clients see these potential solutions they may ask, "What did you or others do that was helpful in the past?"

2. Present and future-focused questions verses past-oriented focus

The questions asked by Solution Focused counsellors are interested in the present or on the future. This reflects the basic belief that problems are best solved by focusing on what is already working, and how a client would like their life to be, rather than focusing on the past and what isn't wanted. For example, they may ask, "What will you be doing in the next week that would indicate to you and other that you are continuing to make progress?"

3. Compliments

Validating what clients are already doing well, and acknowledging how difficult their problems are encourages the client to change while giving the message that the counsellor has been listening and cares. In Solution Focused therapy, compliments are often conveyed in the form of appreciatively toned questions of "How did you do that?" that invite the client to self-compliment by virtue of answering the question.

4. Inviting the clients to do more of what is working.

Solution Focused counsellors invite the client to do more of what has previously worked, or to try changes they have brought up which they would like to try. For example, "How is that working for you, or "Is that something you would like more of?"

5. Scaling Questions

Scaling questions invite clients to employ measuring and tracking of their own experience, in a non-threatening way. Scaling and measuring are useful tools to identify differences for clients. Goals and progress towards goals are often facilitated by subjective measuring and scaling.

6. Exception Seeking Questions

Solution Focused Counsellors look to identify when the problem is less severe or absent for clients. The counsellor seeks to encourage the client to identify these situations and maximize their frequency. What happened that was different? What did you do that was different? The goal is for clients to repeat what has worked in the past.

7. Goal Setting

The setting of specific, concrete, and realistic goals is an important component of Solution Focused Therapy. Goals are formulated and amplified through Solution Focused conversation about what clients want in their ideal future.

For this portfolio it is important to look at research that explores the success of Solution Focused therapy as this forms the framework for my case study descriptions. Finding research specifically on clients' experiences of Solution Focused Therapy proved difficult. Nonetheless, the two most noticeable studies were conducted at the Brief Family Therapy Centre in Milwaukee (de Shazer 1986 & 1991). These studies measured clients' own perceived change from the feedback they provided at the conclusion of their final counselling session. The first study reported a success rate of 72% and the second study reported a success rate of more than 80% based on clients' feedback. These results are based on clients' evaluation of goal achievement and positive changes they associated with the therapy sessions they received. Two other more recent studies Ferrington (2011), and Gingerich & Peterson (2012) reflect similar positive results to de Shazer. Gingerich & Peterson (2012). 74% of their sample study, reported significant positive benefit from Solution Focused therapy. Of the forty three studies, fourteen involved child academic problems. Four of these looked specifically at academic outcomes. Solution Focused therapy had a marked impact on improved grade point average as compared with the no treatment group. Ferrington's (2011) study suggests that Solution Focused therapy may enhance academic performance in students who have the prerequisite skill to complete assigned work, but frequently do not attempt to do this work. The results of this study may prove to

be useful for practitioners who are in need of empirically based interventions". (p.77). For my own qualitative research, this is a valuable example.

These feelings are emulated in Burns & Hulusi's (2013) article on the use of a Solution Focused therapy approach in bridging the gap between a Birmingham secondary school in the United Kingdom and their learning centre. This came about after it was felt the current learning centre was working in isolation and a more holistic approach was piloted using Solution Focused therapy in the classrooms to enhance students' achievement. While the study did not include a formal evaluation from the students involved, their perceptions of the Solution Focused therapy approach were documented in their rating scales. These scales invite clients to put their observations, impressions and predictions on a scale from 1 to 10. All students in this study reported increased satisfaction with their progress towards their preferred future and an increase in the confidence to effect change.

While a number of research articles indicate that Solution Focused therapy helps promote positive change in clients, there is a growing body of research that suggests that the relationship (rather than the counselling approach) is the most important contributor to positive change. McKeel (2008) supports these findings and concludes that Solution Focused Therapy is an effective approach for many clients but as a word of caution notes that clients view the relationship with their therapist as more important than any specific techniques used. Similarly Metcalf, Thomas, Duncan, Miller & Hubble (1996) state that the client / therapist relationship is the strongest predictor of progress. In their study with six couples aged twenty five to sixty five and their therapists (who had practised Solution Focused therapy for at least two years). Couples were asked "what was it that occurred in the therapy process that you found most helpful?" (p 337) and each therapist was asked,

“What did you do in the therapy process that seemed to help change occur?” (p 337). The therapists credited their clients’ change to, “noticing exceptions, pointing out differences and focussing on what works as well as reinforcing and complimenting client competencies and successes.” (p.345). The clients noted, “the positive nature of the therapists’ comments and the focus on what worked, but five of the six couples noted relationship factors as well.” (p.345). Interesting to note that the client/counsellor relationship is such a strong factor as Carl Rogers has always maintained the importance of the therapeutic relationship.

To conclude, what works in Solution Focused Therapy is the client’s perceptions of success and change in their lives with the majority of studies reporting increased client satisfaction. Brevity of sessions is also another success factor that clients enjoyed. Solution Focused Therapy is also successful in the positive approach in focussing on what works and complimenting clients’ successes, however it is noticeable from the literature that a large factor in Solution Focused Therapy is still the client therapist relationship. The question that this raises for my own research is how much of this last factor (client/counsellor relationship) is connected with the client’s perception of success, i.e, because the client improved their academic results, did this change their view of the therapeutic relationship and in the reverse, if the client saw no change or a negative improvement in their academic results, would this impact on their perception of the success of the counselling?

In this literature review I have examined the research on academic improvement and noted the support for the influence of such factors such as motivation and self esteem. I have also considered the ways in which students’ perceptions of their academic ability contributes to their feelings of self efficacy and, possibly, motivation. This enabled me to consider how

these findings contribute to Ministry of Education policy documents in which teachers are encouraged to focus on key competencies. Since I am a counsellor in a high school, my main interest is in ways that counselling may contribute to perceptions of academic improvement for school students. In this literature, I therefore explored the research that supports the role counselling, and one specific approach to counselling, Solution-focused counselling, may play in helping students feel better about their academic improvement. I have noted that this has not been examined in a New Zealand context and that there was little evidence of Solution Focused therapy research conducted in the area of academic mentoring. For this reason, the research question for my enquiry is:

How are students' perceptions of their ability to improve academically, described during their experiences of Solution Focused counselling?

CHAPTER THREE

METHODOLOGY

If you want to understand the way people think about their world and how those definitions are formed, you need to get close to them, hear them talk and observe them in their day-to-day lives". (Bogdan and Biklen p.35).

Here, Bogdan & Biklen (2007) reveal that interpretivist and social constructionist understandings are essential for understanding the way people think about their world. Since I wanted to focus my research on understanding how students experience solution-focused counselling, when considering their perceptions of academic improvement I found it important to consider how we construct our understanding. For this purpose, social constructionism provides a useful tool. Vivien Burr (2005), states:

"Social constructionism insists that we take a critical stance towards our taken-for-granted ways of understanding the world including ourselves....the assumptions that the nature of the world can be revealed by observation, and what exists is what we perceive to exist. Social Constructionism cautions us to be ever suspicious of our assumptions about how the world appears to be". (p. 10).

Furthermore, Burr suggests that it is only through our regular interactions with people that our own versions of knowledge become cemented (p 12).

According to W.L. Neuman, (2006), a qualitative researcher is able to adhere to social constructionist principles. *"Observing things from the participants' point of view and then constructing meaning, is the goal of an interpretive researcher"*(p 53).

One form of qualitative research that is conducive to research on counselling, is case study research. John McLeod (2012), lists the following features of Qualitative case study research :

“There are four factors that help to explain why case studies have been and remain, critically important in relation to the task of building a knowledge base for therapy. First, case studies offer a form of narrative knowing. Second, they provide an efficient way of representing and analyzing complexity. Third, case studies generate knowledge-in-context. Finally, case studies are an essential tool for understanding practical expertise in action.” (p.8).

Sharan Merriam (1988) describes the relevance of case study research this way:

“Investigators use a case study design in order to gain an in depth understanding of the situation and its meaning for those involved. The interest is in process rather than outcomes, in context rather than a specific variable, in discovery rather than conformation.” (p.7)

Case study research fits with the way we make sense of the world through a social constructionist’s lens. Vivien Burr (2005), reminds us of this when she states:

“ the assumptions that the nature of the world can be revealed by observation, and what exists is what we perceive to exist, Social Constructionism cautions us to be ever suspicious of our assumptions about how the world appears to be...it is through the daily interactions between people in the course of social life that our versions of knowledge become fabricated.” (p. 3).

These descriptions of the ways in which social constructionism contributes to qualitative research of case studies fit with the purpose, and process of my intended research. Social

constructionism is a basic tenet of solution-focused counselling, and case studies are considered an effective way to examine the effects of counselling.

Beneath the case study umbrella, there are a number of types. Case studies in education tend to draw from other disciplines for both method and theory, in particular, anthropology, sociology, psychology and history. Some are descriptive, some interpretive, and some evaluative; all distinguishable by their end product. For my own research I originally selected a pragmatic approach. The key idea guiding a pragmatic approach is best explained by John McLeod (2012):

“The key idea in pragmatism is that it is not satisfactory to regard knowledge as consisting of a set of abstract ideas; instead, knowledge is more appropriately understood as a capacity to take effective action within a specific context.” (p.94).

John Dewey (1859-1952) is widely considered one of the founding fathers of pragmatism. His approach suggested that knowledge and the way in which we all acquire it, comes through our actions. As an educationist and a researcher, this makes sense to me. Biesta and Burbules (2003) describe Dewey’s philosophy in this way:

“Through our constant transactions with our environment, through our continuous attempts to maintain a dynamic balance with our environment, we develop patterns of possible action, which Dewey calls habits. The acquisition of habits, of possible ways to respond to and transact with our environment, is basically a process of trial and error....in the act of knowing and hence in research, both the knower and what is to be known are changed by the transaction between them.” (p 11).

Theory and practice therefore will run side by side as I take a pragmatic approach. Dewey referred to these two areas as science and common sense. Using a pragmatic approach also takes account of the ever changing world in which we live, what was relevant last decade may not be today and visa versa. Pragmatism allows the researcher to explore possible lines of enquiry and to change and modify the research because the very act of problem solving is a process of enquiry in its own right.

In my research, I intend to explore what is happening for my clients, and for me. This means that I will be both a participant and a researcher. From this dual position, I envisaged that a pragmatic approach would allow me to monitor both what is happening within my interviews (data collection) and what is happening (to me, the clients or to the process) outside the interviews (reflexive interrogation of the data) so that I can bring this to further dialogue with the client as the therapy proceeds.

I intended to use the adapted Peterson (1991) model as a template for the case study reports to ensure a disciplined inquiry was followed and rigor maintained. However once I began to write up my case studies, I found the pragmatic approach was not a comfortable nor a practical approach for presenting my data. Much of the rich description did not fit within the confines of the pragmatic model and would have had to have been left out. On discussion with my supervisor, it was decided that I would present my findings as descriptive case studies instead. I was reminded of Bogden and Biklen's (2007) advice "*Often the researcher steps back to ask if I do it this way, what am I missing? What am I gaining. The more aware you are about the ramifications of the choices, the better chances you have to choose wisely.*" (p 68).

Almost twenty years ago, Clarkson (1995), in her examination of the future directions for counselling psychology, recommended that therapeutic practice should not be separated from rigorous and constant research. *“That a qualitative research project such as a disciplined and methodologically informed case study is not something to be carried out once in a lifetime for the purposes of thesis requirements, but that it needs to become a way of working, to be conducted with every client, in every session, for as long as a clinician is working in the profession.”* (p.203-204).

Clarkson’s comments remind me that the case study method is particularly well suited to making sense of the process of change in therapy. Every client forms a unique ‘case study’ that a counsellor reflects and makes reflexive interactions with, on a daily basis. Clarkson prompts me to view this research as part of a lifelong tool to my own counselling practice.

METHOD

Qualitative Research Question:

How are students’ perceptions of their ability to improve academically, described during their experiences of Solution Focussed counselling?

In order to investigate this research question, I intended to ask a selection of counselling clients if they would be prepared to be part of a study in which I was examining the link between counselling/mentoring and academic improvement. I needed first to gain ethics approval from the University of Canterbury Human Ethics Committee. I then needed to gain permission to conduct the research from the rector of the College, from each student and from their parents.

Gaining access to Research Participants.

Having received permission to proceed from the University of Canterbury Human Ethics Committee, I then approached the rector of the College to gain her permission to conduct the research. Once this was gained, I approached the senior Deans from the school (levels 11, 12 and 13) and asked them to select students who they felt may benefit from one on one mentoring. My requirements:

- I did not teach them nor had I taught them previously.
- I was not involved with them through the choir or rowing (my co-curricular areas)
- There was a gender balance.
- In their (the Deans') opinion, the selected students would benefit from being involved.

A primary ethical consideration for me was that of participant voluntary involvement. Berg (2001) notes that volunteer participants may be manipulated by the researcher into volunteering especially when the teacher researches their student. Since I teach at this school, I wanted to avoid the possibility that students may feel obliged to participate because of my dual role at the school. My research design therefore, endeavored to address the possible misuse of the power relationship between student and teacher by ensuring the students were not presently nor had been previously students I have taught or was involved with as a teacher or in extra-curricular activities.

I next approached the head of senior college and asked if I could interview him about the existing mentoring programme the school ran. He then invited me to sit in on a mentoring interview with a Year 13 male student. I took notes however, I did not record this interview as I did not have requested permission.

Once a group of students was identified by the Deans, I then invited them to participate in my research project. I met with them in person and then an information letter was sent to them and their parents (see Chapter 6). Five students and their parents agreed to participate.

Students involved in the interviews were aware that the interviews were recorded and that they were able to withdraw from the research project at any time. Their names have been changed and those of any members of staff that the students mention, are not used, nor is the name of the school.

It was made clear to students that the involvement in the research project was voluntary and that there was to be no coercion from me to be involved at any time. The students were ensured confidentiality for all information given and anonymity throughout the process.

Students were interviewed in an office next to my classroom and all five participants agreed to using this room. The office is private and is located on the fourth floor of the main classroom block. Interviews took place during students' study periods, Physical Education and on two occasions, during English periods. All interviews were recorded on my own computer and then saved into a password accessed folder. The interviews will be used for this research project only and deleted once the University timeline requirements have been met.

Characteristics of participants:

Participant	M/F	Year Group	No of counselling sessions
John	M	Year 11	Five
Jack	M	Year 11	Five
Lily	F	Year 11	Five
Jacqui	F	Year 12	One
Paula	F	Year 13	One

Compiling Interview Questions:

At the beginning of my research , I drafted and finalized a list of interview questions based on the literature I had reviewed and the solution focus training I had undertaken. I then consulted with a fellow post graduate research student who suggested I might find some of the questions too structured and that I might want to adopt a more flexible approach. This reminded me of Bogdan and Biklen (2007). *“Traditional researchers speak of the design of a study as the product of the planning stage of research. The design is then implemented, the data collected and analysed and then the writing is done. While qualitative researchers have stages, the work is not as segmented. Design decisions are made throughout the study – at the end as well as the beginning.”* (p 55).

I then considered a semistructured approach to my interview questions. This was in keeping with Bogdan & Biklen’s(2007) view that *“Good interviews produce rich data filled with words that reveal respondents’ perspectives. Transcripts are filled with details and*

examples. Good interviewers communicate personal interest and attention to subjects by being attentive....qualitative interviewing is more like a conversation....the goal of understanding how the person you are interviewing thinks is at the centre of the interview” (p 105, 106).

I then considered how this would fit with my chosen model of Solution-focused counselling.

The Interviews

As a case study approach was used and the research question aimed to gain an understanding of the participants' perceptions, interviews were used. Lofland and Lofland (1995) define interviewing as *“a guided conversation whose goal is to elicit from the interviewee rich, detailed materials that can be used in qualitative analysis”*(p 18). I was very interested in collecting rich and detailed material therefore using an interview method appeared most appropriate for my case study research. The type of interview used for data collection in this research was semi-structured. This type was chosen for its flexibility in allowing me to make use of a standard format to maintain some uniformity in the questions asked but at the same time, allowing the ability to clarify and seek elaboration when needed. Bogdan and Biklen (2007) *“ The interview is used to gather descriptive data in the subjects' own words so that the researcher can develop insights on how subjects interpret some piece of the world.”* (p 103).

Five participants who volunteered to take part in the research were interviewed. Individual one to one interviews were adopted and these lasted from forty five minutes to one hour and ten minutes. For personal reasons, two of the five participants withdrew from the research after the first interview. For the remaining three, I conducted four interviews per

participant, running from May 2013 until just prior to exam leave, in early November 2013.

In the first interview all participants were given a journal and then asked to respond to the following scaling question and secondly, they were asked to respond to the open question:

'What did you discover about yourself today?' in their journals:

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

1= I have no confidence in my ability to make changes

10= I am fully confident in my ability to make changes

They were then invited to write down any other thoughts and feelings they might have in relation to our discussions. This formed part of their 'homework' which in Solution Focused therapy comes from formulating feedback based on information gathered during the interview. These are either behavioral suggestions, for example, "because you said you work better when you sit near the front of class, it could be useful to you to look for opportunities to do this in every class" or observational suggestions, for example, "because you said some days you are more focused than others in the classroom, it could be useful to notice what is happening on the days when you are feeling more focused". The participants then brought the journals to each subsequent interview and these formed the start of our next interview. My reason for inviting the participants to keep a journal was to deepen my understanding of their perceptions and to be curious about any changes the participants were noticing about themselves. Bogden and Biklen(2007) refer to journals and diaries as "personal documents" (p 133). They go on to say, " The quality of this material varies. Some provide only factual details such as the dates meetings occurred. Others serve as sources of rich descriptions of how people who produced the material think about their world. " (p 133). And it was this

‘thinking about their world’, that my research was interested in and why I invited the participants to record their thoughts and perceptions.

Solution Focused Therapy:

As the name suggests, the focus of Solution Focussed Therapy is on solution-finding rather than problem analysis. This objective means that the counsellor and client give most attention to the present and the future desires of the client, rather than focusing on the past experiences. The counsellor encourages the client to imagine their future as they want it to be so that the counsellor and client collaborate on a series of steps to achieve that goal. At all times the client is regarded as the expert. This form of therapy involves the counsellor asking a number of questions that help the client describe his/her vision, and remember his/her skills, resources, and abilities that may be used to attain his or her desired outcome. This is another reason for selecting the semi-structured interview process where my questions were guided by those commonly used in Solution-focused counselling to help a client self-direct the content.

Questions that were asked at each interview:

1. What would you like to achieve from this session? (goal seeking question)
2. What’s been better since we last met? (pre-supposition that things are better)
3. What are you doing differently? (pre-supposition that change is inevitable)
4. Who else has noticed these differences and how do you know? (recognition that relationships are key to helping clients move towards their preferred future)
5. How could more of that happen? (helping the client use agency)
6. Scaling question asking participants to rate their confidence in their ability to make changes. (Scaling enables clients to see movement, improvement)

7. What did you discover about yourself today? (encouraging self reflection)

Within these questions I was particularly interested in the students' descriptions when using three of the key interventions of Solution Focused Brief Therapy: 1. The Exception Question, 2. The Scaling Question and 3. The use of indirect compliments.

The Exception Question:

In Solution Focused Brief Therapy the assumption is, that the intensity of problems fluctuates constantly. There will always have been situations in which the problem was less intense and when things were better. These situations are identified and analysed by both the counsellor and the client because they will often help the client to find ideas to solve the problem. An example of how exception-seeking questions may be asked is: "Are there times when the problem does not happen? When was this? What was different? How did you make that happen?"

The Scaling Question:

The technique of scaling questions originated more or less coincidentally when a client, in a second session with Steve de Shazer, answered to his question how he was doing: "I've almost reached 10 already!" de Shazer began to play with the idea of using numbers to describe one's situation. This started the development of the scaling question used in solution-focused therapy. Scaling questions ask a client to point to a number between 1 and 10 that reflects their current situation and their preferred situation. Clients' answers to these help the counsellor help the client move towards developing goals. For example if a client describes their current position as a 4, they are then invited to describe what life would be like if they were at a number further up the scale.

Complimenting

Complimenting indirectly means inviting the other person through a question to describe what was good about what he or she has done and what has worked well. An example of an indirect compliment is: "Wow, how did you manage to finish that task so quickly?". You might also call such kinds of questions 'affirming questions'. It is also possible to include the perspective of other people in indirect compliments. An example may be: "What do your colleagues appreciate in how you work?" An advantage of complimenting through questions is that you activate the other person. Also, there is less chance that he or she will feel embarrassed or will turn down the compliment ("It was nothing special"). Instead, you challenge the other person and make him or her reflect ("Actually, how did I do that.... let's see.....?").

Therefore I adopted the idea that while the use of solution focused questions would be at the core of my interviews, the ability of the participants to tell their story was more important than them only answering a list of predetermined questions.

Data Organization

Each interview was reviewed within forty eight hours of recording and the answers to the solution focused questions transcribed within the following week. My own reflections made after each interview were also reviewed and topics of interest highlighted. Prior to the next interview with each participant, the previous recording, transcribed notes and my own reflections were re-read. The subsequent interviews evolved in part, due to this process. I continued with the solution focus questions at each interview however I was aware the reflection formed another path that was followed in the preceding interviews. I often became curious about certain answers that I noticed in viewing the recordings and followed

up on these at our next session. Early on some obvious major codes emerged as described by Bogdan and Biklen(2007).

1. *Perspectives held by subjects*: Often these involved the participants' views in their teachers, school and parent expectations.
2. *Activity*: What the students were doing
3. *Event*: Shared situations
4. *Strategy*: Various techniques the students employed
5. *Relationships*: Social roles, positions
6. *Narrative*: What are the students choosing to tell me about their life.

I also began to code my own reflections and myself during the interviews:

1. *Curious*: What stands out.
2. *Assumptions*: What is said that I expected to hear
3. *Difficult*: What's not working
4. *Helping*: What's helping

As the interviews progressed other sub codes emerged and I was relieved to be reminded from Bogdan and Biklen (2007) that "*having a scheme is crucial: the particular scheme you choose is not.*" (p 184). Because in the early stages I felt uneasy at my own ability to find anything of worth, I kept waiting for magic things to appear in the data collection stage and must admit to feelings of disappointment when this didn't seem to be happening. However as the research progressed, so too did I and by believing in the process, some informative information began to emerge. Gilgun (2005) "*By remaining flexible and open in their thinking as well as challenging their assumptions, they will gradually come to appreciate the*

perspectives that qualitative approaches offer. Simply being open to the experiences of informants can lead researchers to new perspectives. “ (p 48).

Research dilemmas and their resolution

The first dilemma I considered was around my role as a counsellor participant and researcher. The participants who agreed to take part in my research did so knowing that they would be attending counselling as well as agreeing to participate in this research. Therefore I had two primary purposes; one being to collect data and the other, to counsel the participants. Bogdan & Biklen (2007) remind me: *“ who you are to the various subjects and what that means to them is important to try and figure out when negotiating fieldwork relations as well as for interpreting the data you gather.”* (p. 94). Therefore gaining the participants’ trust was an important aspect in the design of my research. Carl Roger’s person centred counselling approach, Jones-Smith, (2012) considers that : *“certain attitudinal qualities which exist in the personal relationship between the facilitator and the learner yield significant learning”*.(p. 244) These qualities are just as applicable to a qualitative research approach. I resolved this dilemma by insuring that the counselling needs of the clients would take precedence over my research needs. I was also mindful of Bogden & Biklen’s(2007) advice to be” non-disruptive and non-interfering with what people do”. (p. 87), hence I decided to conduct all data collecting sessions in the familiar environment of the participants’ school.

My second dilemma was how to monitor counselling and research progress. The participants had all been selected on the basis that they could benefit from one on one academic mentoring so it was important to find a method whereby I could determine that

there was evidence of their improvement. I found the guidance of McLeod (2012) helpful.

He suggested the following process :

1. *Understanding the participants' context (what are their perceptions on academic improvement?)*
2. *Guiding conception explained*
3. *Assessment of the participants' problem, goals, strengths and history*
4. *Formulation and treatment plan (solution focused therapy)*
5. *Course of therapy*
6. *Therapy monitoring and use of feedback information*
7. *Concluding evaluation of the process and outcome of the therapy*
8. *References. (p.95)*

My third dilemma was about how best to record the changes that I was making in my counselling/mentoring/researching as a result to collecting client stories. Taking guidance from Bogden and Biklen (2007) to consider *broad exploratory beginnings, [then] move to more directed data collection and analysis*". (p. 59) I resolved that interviews conducted at the beginning of the research would differ from those conducted at the end. I also considered the writings of McLeod (2012) with reference to the changes that would happen to me. *"The process of writing has the potential to motivate the therapist to be self-reflective, conceptually clear and in other ways thoughtful in the therapy and to pay closer attention to the actual, subtle and complex processes taking place"*. (p. 115). For this reason, I wrote reflexive notes following each interview and used them as part of the research data. Keso (2009) states that *"A process of reflexivity calls a researcher to question*

and re question her choices over and over again.” I found this advice most helpful during my analysis.

RIGOR

As a participant /counsellor, I am aware of the collision that these two roles can present.

For example Bogdan and Biklen (2007) state, *“becoming a researcher means internalizing the research goal while collecting data in the field...if what you are doing does not relate to collecting data, you take that as a warning that you may be slipping out of role.”* (p 93).

Because at the same time that these participants had agreed to be part of my research, they were first and foremost coming to see me hoping to gain something of use. The credibility approaches I used in this study consisted of gaining ethical approval, gaining participants, parents’ and the school’s consent, to conduct the research. All interviews with the participants were recorded and all conversations around solution focused questions were then transcribed. Finally as I became extremely familiar with the recordings and sections I transcribed, I was able to place each in the context of each interview and begin to gain an all-inclusive understanding of what took place in each interview, avoiding taking sections out of context. This I believe demonstrates the credibility of my research findings.

CHAPTER FOUR

CASE STUDIES

As stated previously, this study involved five participants all of whom were students at a Christchurch High School studying towards a National Certificate of Educational Achievement qualification. They were selected by their Dean based on the Dean's assumption that they could benefit from academic counselling. The case studies themselves have been presented under the following chronological headings:

- **Getting Started** – what was discussed in the first interview,? What was discovered and what was helpful?
- **Moving towards a goal** – what was the participant wanting to achieve? What motivated them? How was Solution Focused therapy helpful?
- **Achieving the goal** – what were the participants noticing?
- **Later Sessions** – how were the participants using the new information they were discovering about themselves?
- **Summary of Learning** – Had the participant's perceptions shifted, if so how and what part did Solution Focused therapy play in this shift?

Participant 1 – John.

John is a Year 11 student who described himself as a “hard working middle of the road student”. When I asked him what he hoped to gain by being part of this research, he said, “I want to get better grades and make Mum and Dad proud”. John has a busy life being involved in numerous sports teams and also the A band pipe band. As the band has a planned trip to Scotland in August, John said this was another reason he was keen to be involved with the research as he was already worrying about how he was going to juggle his school work and the extra band practices that were going to be happening in the lead up to the trip.

Getting Started

When I asked John had he noticed any change since he was invited to join the research and now, he said *“Yes, I think I’m more focused, I’m trying to concentrate in class more, yeah I think I feel more motivated”*. When I then asked John what does that motivation look like he thought for a long time and then said, *“ when I feel motivated I choose to sit by myself in class and do the work, I really like to sit with my friends but I know I do no work when I’m with them, yeah just doing the work.”* I then asked John a scaling question to discover his confidence in achieving his goals this year. He placed himself at a 7. We then explored what would be happening if he moved to an 8. This is some of what he described:

“I’d be thinking about my goals on a regular basis, say like, once a week instead of just the days I meet with my tutor.”

“At an 8 I’d set achievable goals cause I think one or two of them are not going to happen, I mean, I can’t see me crossing the line on Excellence endorsement and now Mum and Dad know I’ve set that as a target, I feel a bit, well, annoyed cause now they’re on my case.”

“I’d also be asking for help from other people, like family, friends, you know, and maybe get some tutoring”

On watching the recording of this interview, I became aware of John’s facial expressions and posture when he discussed certain topics. When he mentioned his annoyance at Mum and Dad knowing about the goal of excellence endorsement that he had set with his tutor, his shoulders visibly lowered. By contrast, when he talked about his selection in the A basketball team and the touring band to Scotland, he leant forward across the table and smiled. The same physical reaction was gained when I complimented him on his ability to describe what his motivation looked like. My decision to point out what I was noticing to John was based on Dewey’s advice again, in that we must act in order to find out whether a certain response is appropriate for a given situation in which we are engaged in.

Moving towards a goal:

When interviewing John it quickly became apparent how motivated he was in his favourite subject of music. Here is how he describes it:

“It’s the subject I wake up in the morning and think about and get excited about, yeah, it’s probably what I want to do when I leave school, you know, music of some kind, it’s where I put most of my time into, it’s a good class too, I learn a lot from it, I get motivated from each class.”

From this, I became interested in what was behind John's motivation and whether this would have any impact on his perception of his academic ability. In my reflection notes from interviews with John I commented on the obvious change in his demeanor depending on the academic subject he was discussing.

"In Economics I have to sit down and write down notes, it's kinda interesting, I suppose but I hate having to just sit down for an hour and mostly write, like he puts a load of notes on the white board to copy, then he starts yakking and I can't focus on what he's saying cause I'm getting the notes written, so I don't really know what's happening, so yeah a bit annoying, yeah Economics, not a fave...not great."

LR *"What would motivate you in Economics?"*

"Hmmm, not sure really...different teacher, ha, no, I guess it's just it's so boring, I don't think I'll ever use it, hmmm, I'm not sure....maybe if he got us doing stuff, like, well I don't know, maybe we could design something cool, that would be mint....not gonna happen though."

LR *"If it could happen, I mean, If you could design something in economics, what would it be?"*

" Well I could play my music and...maybe we could design a band from the other musos in the class, there are three others who all play stuff...that would be great"

LR *"From what you've said John, you clearly love to create, that excites you. How do you think you could use this ability, transfer this skill of yours to Economics?"*

Long silence *"not sure really, haven't thought about it cause Eco isn't a creative kind of subject, well Mr B, sure isn't, ha, na...I'm not sure really."*

LR *“if being creative was what you did in economics how would that change your confidence in making improvements in this subject?”*

“If I could write music in eco, I’d be stoked”

Even at this early stage, I became aware that basing my questions on the solution focus principle that John was the expert was important. It would have been very easy for me to jump in and ‘tell’ John the clear differences I was hearing but that puts me in the position of ‘expert’. While it is not obvious in the transcribed conversation, John’s long period of silence when I asked him how he could use his creative skills in economics, showed me he was clearly thinking about the reasons behind why he liked music over economics (in his journal he wrote about this). In subsequent interviews, he said this was the first time he had realized this about himself. This then led to more discoveries for John about his perceptions on how he could improve academically. In my opinion, solution focus counselling gave John agency in his new found awareness. This highlighted for me the writings of De Jong and Berg (2008) that *“To work within a client’s frame of reference, you must assume a posture of not knowing. You must ask for, listen to and affirm the client’s perceptions.”* (p 55)

Achieving the goal:

Because one of the assumptions in solution-focused counselling is that clients work towards achieving their preferred future outside the counselling session, homework tasks are encouraged by the counsellor. In order to formulate a useful homework task, it was important for me to consider the three elements of homework formulation: compliments, bridge and relevant task, sometimes noticing (observational) when things are better, sometimes doing (behavioural) something that has already been identified as helpful. In

considering a homework task, I considered that John's perception of his ability to improve academically appeared to come in subjects where he could create and his confidence level was lower, in subjects where he perceived no possibility of creating. I considered that it would be helpful, therefore, for John to explore how he could find ways to be creative in subjects where he felt less confident. Because John already knew what motivated him in certain subjects, music and workshop technology, his goal became how to find ways to create in other subjects. Based on his descriptions of what it was like for him in Economics and English, John appeared to be a passive learner as opposed to being involved and fully engaged in music and workshop technology. Finding ways to channel his creative energy in his less favoured subjects then became his goal. Furthermore, my next step for John was to find exceptions in English and Economics where by, he was being creative and in turn, changing his perception of his ability to improve in these less favoured subjects.

John's homework then became noticing times in English and Economics when there could be opportunities to become creative and also noticing what other motivated students in these classes were doing.

Later Sessions:

Using solution-focused questioning, at subsequent interviews we explored what we had identified as useful things to notice.

LR "What are you doing differently as a result of our last session"

John "Well, it's been weird...I mean I'm trying a few things in eco and maybe it's the topic, we're looking at McDonalds as a franchise and how it all works and stuff and it's actually

really interesting. I've been thinking about it a bit, so that's the weird stuff cause I never think about eco, oh and we get to go there next week, mint."

LR "you mentioned you've been trying a few things, what exactly?"

John "well, it's more, I don't know, it's more I'm kind of listening and I guess, it's more I'm thinking about the stuff old B balls is telling us and cause it's about maccas, I'm interested I guess."

LR "because you discovered in our last session you are often motivated by situations where you can create, is that in any way relevant to your interest in this topic on McDonalds?"

John "you know I was thinking about that a bit last night when I was writing in the journal you gave me, sorry I've only made one entry this time, but I wrote about how seeing Maccas as such a cash machine, makes me think about maybe I could start something like a maccas, ha, and then, I thought it's the fact that maccas is like where I practically live."

LR" so you're interested in this economics topic because it's familiar?"

John "yeah, yeah, I guess so"

LR "so what does that tell you about what interests you?"

John "that I love maccas?, ha, no, well I suppose I'm interested cause it involves me, well not me exactly, but it's part of my life. It's the first time anything's come up this year in B Ball's class that has got me talking...and I guess, thinking."

From here we went on to explore that John had discovered another motivator, that when a subject interests him, he naturally thinks about it and becomes engaged.

LR: "has anyone noticed these changes, your change in interest in Economics?"

J: "not sure really, may B Balls has, he'd never say though, dunno."

LR: Anyone else?

J: Na, nope don't think so.

When I then asked John a scaling question about his perception of his ability to improve in economics if all the topics were of interest to him and/or he could be creative, with 1 being no possibility of change and 10 being every chance of change, he placed himself at a 7.

Edward Deci's and Richard Ryan's (2002) Self Determination Theory states that motivation action may be either self determined or controlled. "Intrinsically motivated actions require no separate motivating consequences; the only necessary reward for them is spontaneous interest and enjoyment that we experience as we do them." (p 84)

Clearly for John, spontaneous interest has lead to engagement in Economics in the particular unit of work based on a McDonalds' franchise. At a subsequent session with John when we discussed the new found engagement with economics when the class was studying the McDonalds' model, I asked him:

LR: "How could more of that happen?"

J: "Not sure really, it probably won't happen again, cause I don't think we'll be looking at any other franchises. But it would be awesome if we did."

LR: "Sure, but John how could you make your engagement and enjoyment of economics happen more, because hearing you talk about the McDonalds' empire, you were clearly

enjoying yourself and you seem to have learnt a lot. Your face really lights up when you talk about it.”

J: Laughing, yeah, it's been a cool topic....I'm not sure really. Dad says I just need to suck it in and get on with it. But maybe it's more about finding a way to like what B Balls tells us, do you think?

LR: Is there a way of using what you have discovered about yourself into subjects like Economics and Science?

J: Hmmm.....Not sure exactly what you mean?

LR: Because you said you really enjoyed Economics when it was about 'part of your life', do you think you could look for other ways Economics and Science could be more about what is going on in your life, more relevant.

J: Yeah, I guess I could, spose, not really sure though. How would that work?

LR: Do you think it could be a good idea to begin with starting to notice how your current topics in Science and Economics could be relevant?

J: Makes sense...yeah like I could try and think how does this relate to me. Hmmm, yeah, sounds like it could be a goer.

From this discussion and one further interview with John, he decided noticing times when the subject matter of Science and Economics was something he could relate to, became a goal. During the course of a further session, John also realized that he needed to create relevance, when at first things didn't appear that way.

J: In maths I've really had to think hard, you know, like how can algebra be relevant. But then it was Mr K who told the whole class about how it's just a matter of problem solving. I thought about this and yeah, it kinda is and I like stuff like that.

LR: So how would you describe what you are doing differently?

J: Well not so much different, well, maybe it is...I dunno but it just seems to be more better when I think about what we're doing and how it can help me.

LR: Help me? How do you mean?

J: Well....it helps me when I can put some of the stuff into what I know, you know? Like all that genetic stuff about eye colour and lobes, before I wouldn't have thought too much, but after what you and I have been talking about, I kept trying to think of how it...came up for me. Funny about the red head stuff...you know they're a mutation...sick.

LR: So how has that been useful?

J: It just makes it less boring, cause I'm thinking about me.... I guess.

LR: So how is that helpful to you, do you think?

J: Hmmm, helpful, well I don't hate Shirl and B Ball's classes anymore, oh and that's right, I forgot to tell you, I have changed where I sit now in both classes and that's good...I'm closer to the front with Shirl and right at the front with BBall.

John's journal reflected more of these thoughts about how his engagement levels had risen once he was cognizant of what happened to his learning and engagement once he looked for ways to make the content more applicable to him. His obvious sense of enjoyment in classes he previously disliked appeared to be another positive change.

In the final interview, John's confidence in his ability to improve his academic ability stayed at a 7 however he did state both in his journal and to me in the interview that he was enjoying Economics and parts of Science more. He was even considering taking Economics at Year 12. Another positive that John shared was that he no longer left his Science and Economic's homework and study to last, in fact some nights John said he was choosing to do it first, even over Music, which he thought was a good thing.

Summary of Learning:

John's perception of his ability to makes changes in his approach to his studies did change as a result of my questioning using a solution focused approach. While he didn't indicate a higher score when given a final scaling question to rate his ability to improve academically, he did describe an altered view of subjects he previously disliked in a much more favourable light. These small steps created a ripple effect for John and I was often left wondering, how much were the changes he made after the first interview to do with the continued solution focused line of questioning and how much was this to do with John's own sense of empowerment, which is a solution-focused assumption.

John's 'readiness for change' was high when I first began interviewing him. Every interview when I asked him:

What would you like to gain from this session. He always responded with a tangible goal.

Interview 1: *I want to know how I can get better results and manage my time better.*

Interview 2: *I really liked noticing what other smart people in the class did, I'd like to have something else a bit like that to try out.*

Interview 3: *Maybe we could look at some of the stuff I've written in my journal, cause some of it I remember we talked about before the holidays and I can't really remember it.*

Interview 4: *Yeah, I want to know about Eco for Year 12, I mean it's got way better and yeah, I'd like to talk about that.*

Summary of John's changes that led directly to changes in his perception of his own academic ability:

- John's discovery of what motivated him.
- Forming his own academic goals
- Discovering and acknowledging his strengths.

Summary of what I noticed about myself as a counsellor that led directly to changes in John's perception of his academic ability.

- Remaining curious about what motivated John in some areas of his academic classes and not others.
- Noticing John's body language and discussing this with him.
- Maintaining a 'not knowing' approach.
- Using scaling and exception questions and compliments.

Participant 2 – Lily.

Of all the participants, Lily seemed the most keen to be involved with the research. In the first interview she told me she works hard but doesn't get great results. Being dyslexic, Lily said school had always been "a pain" but now she was in Year 11 she felt she really needed to work hard. When I asked Lily what she hoped to achieve by being involved with the research, she said while she wasn't too sure what was involved, she was really hoping she would make improvements with her school work.

Getting Started:

When I asked Lily whether she had noticed any change since she was invited to join the research and now she said:

L: Na, don't think so, I struggle with study, I struggle with just sitting down, I find it hard to get motivated. I just don't understand lots of the stuff we have to do, so I just sit and...I dunno, sit and doodle or yarn...sometimes text..ha (laugh). I do want to do well this year, get level 1, but, yeah, I do struggle.

This provided us with the context for her goal setting. She finds it hard to get motivated, does not understand material and, therefore lacks confidence. For this reason, I used a scaling question and invited Lily to plot her confidence levels in achieving her goal of NCEA level 1. She placed herself at a 3. Using the solution-focused technique of having the client visualize how they would be acting when they could move up the scale, I chose, to explore with her what she would be doing and feeling if she moved to a 4.

L: I'd email my teachers more, get extra help. I do get extra tuition in Eco, but I don't get it. I'd study things I don't understand....ask questions in class...research maybe...try harder...more effort.

LR: That's a great list Lily, can you tell me what I would see when you were trying harder and making more effort? (Compliment and encouraging the client to hear their own version of what they would be doing when things are a bit better)

L: I'm quite a slacker...I have no motivation, I have all these goals but, yeah (laugh), I don't follow up. I guess you would see me being more positive about myself, cause I often give up easy, easily.

Moving Towards a Goal:

Lily appeared to be low in confidence and when she talked about her results to date, she appeared deflated. It seemed important to Lily that I knew she did try, but giving up seemed to have become a habit. I needed to encourage Lily to find a time when she had experienced success [Exception Question] and, by using solution-focused questions, amplify what she did.

LR: tell me about a time when you didn't struggle with motivation.

L: Hmmm.....(long silence), not sure. I can't really remember. Nothing really....(very long silence) Oh I was kinda motivated to do my speech and drama at my old school. Yeah, it was fun...I did it from I think year 3, to year 8. I enjoyed it heaps and I was quite motivated to perform. I don't know why I stopped.

LR: How did you make yourself motivated in speech and drama?

L: Well I got a couple of distinctions....no wait, I think I got a high distinction in year7, I'll check with Mum but yeah, I really liked getting that. When I got those high scores, I liked that...I felt proud.

LR: So how did you get those fantastic results?

L: I kept reading my part over and over, dad would test me and then read it again. I did the exams with my best friend Sarah, so we would test each other too...yeah, saying my lines, reading them over, that's it really. I had to know them off heart, off by heart and so you just had to.

LR: So what I'm hearing is loads of preparation Lily?

L: Yeah...yeah lots.

LR: So how would you compare your preparation for one of your Trinity Speech and Drama examinations and the Economics internal you were talking about earlier?

L: Na...I didn't understand it, I felt like we hadn't learnt it. It just jumbled my head. No idea at all. I didn't even understand what I had to do.

LR: So what would help Lily, in you feeling like you did understand what to do?

L: Well, I should have gone over it with my tutor but last week when he came, I'd forgotten my folder, in my locker....yeah so that was a bummer. But even when I'm in class I think I get it and then when I go to do it on my own, I don't. I hate that.

LR: Yes I know Lily and you're right, it is always frustrating when we don't understand something. Do you think there is anything you did when you were preparing for your Trinity

exams that would be helpful to you when you have an internal, or homework, or even class work that on first reading, is hard to comprehend, understand?

L: Not sure, I seem to struggle with most stuff...you know I'm dyslexic?

LR: Yes I do Lily and that must be challenging at times. You obviously have some great strategies in coping. Reading those scripts for your speech and drama can't have been easy for you. That tells me a lot about you Lily, you're clearly a determined young woman when you put your mind to something.

L: (Smiling)...thanks.

In my reflection from this interview, I was aware of how Lily seemed unable to transfer these skills she talked about when we explored an exception to failure, rather she saw this success as quite separate from academic achievement. She seemed to have the desire for change but appeared ill equipped to make the transference.

Fearington's 2011 study came to mind when I reflected on my first interview with Lily

"Motivating underachieving students can be challenging. The current study suggests that SFBT may enhance performance in students who have the prerequisite skill to complete assigned work, but frequently do not attempt to do this work. The results of this study may prove to be useful for practitioners who are in need of empirically based interventions".

(p.77)

Lily appeared to have not experienced much success during her high school years to date.

Her story was rich in details about "struggling" and "not understanding" and "not worth the bother". Solution Focus questions needed to be aimed at finding exceptions to these failures Lily so vividly described. Interestingly when she did tell me about the Trinity Speech

and Drama success, her face became animated and she said she “felt proud” and “liked getting high distinction”. Lily therefore seemed motivated by achievement and mastery over a skill. She described the confidence she felt when she knew her piece before delivering it during the speech exams. By contrast, her description of her failed Economics internal was, disjointed, vague and she sounded deflated. I gained a deep sense of distancing by Lily from herself to the Economics internal, she didn’t understand it nor did she own it. Despite the difficulty Lily was having describing times in high school when she had experienced success, I thought it would be useful to persevere with exception seeking questions. This is in keeping with Solution-focused thinking that, we can all find exceptions when encouraged.

Therefore helping Lily discover ways that she felt she could gain mastery over certain subjects became a goal. To do this, I needed to look more closely at previous experiences of Lily’s success and amplify what exactly it was that Lily did that worked. Lily is the expert and I thought that solution focus questioning was going to help Lily make the necessary changes she was keen to implement. When thinking about Lily’s readiness for change, I was noticing her need to change but less of the willingness to invest the necessary effort. In my reflection notes, I had scribbled ‘what would she be prepared to give up?’ Lily talks of an active social life with a busy weekend schedule in catching up with friends and parties. As a solution focused practitioner, I needed to think of a way to show Lily how having the desire to change needs to be supported by a plan of ‘how’ that will happen. For Lily this was going to mean sacrificing some of the time she was giving to socializing over studying.

LR: How could you use some of that determination when tackling Economics?

L: Ha (laughing), not sure...it’s just so hard. Maybe I could look at old exam questions with my tutor? Miss J told all of us who failed that we should do that.

LR: How would that help?

L: Well, that last internal, the wording was like nothing we had looked at before...I mean it was fine when Miss J, went over it, but when I was actually doing it....I hadn't a clue, nothing so I couldn't do it....so if I go over a few old papers with Tom (tutor), that might help a bit.

LR: Lily I think that sounds a very good idea and because you said you struggled with the wording, going over past exam papers might make some of those words and terms more familiar, do you think?

L: Yeah maybe...I hope so.

LR: Because you mentioned earlier that you often give up easily, what do you think will help you not give up quite so easily, especially when things get a bit tough?

L: Not sure....(silence)...I just need to do it I guess.

At the end of this first interview with Lily, I asked her what she had discovered about herself today.

L: I'm not sure, but it's been fun...it's made me think about my results and I liked talking about my Trinity exams. Maybe, not giving up when I struggle, cause I do do that a lot and I just switch off, but maybe, as you said, spending more time, like the prep for Trinity, might help, ha (laughing), it's worth a shot.

Achieving the Goal:

For the purposes of recording, I needed to place the chairs carefully and I noticed at the start of every interview, Lily placed her own chair further away. When we explored exceptions to Lily's perceived failure, she didn't appear noticeably different in terms of facial

expressions or posture. On one occasion, as mentioned above, Lily did smile, in my opinion naturally when I complimented her, however I became much more aware of a nervous laugh that she used throughout our sessions. Much of Lily's descriptions were about past failures and I became acutely aware of the personal nature of what she was describing. A key to ensuring therapeutic change occurs, is building a trusting relationship. Jones-Smith (2012) in discussing Carl Roger's 'unconditional positive regard' maintains; "It is the therapist's acceptance of the client that promotes the client's acceptance of self."

(p 235). Therefore it was important that no judgement was made on my behalf and that Lily felt respected and valued in all of our interviews if she was to move towards her desired goal.

Lily had identified to me and to herself that she was motivated by past success and demotivated when she continued to fail, to a point where to avoid failure, Lily would give up.

LR: What's been better since we last met? [Pre-session change question]

L: I just got an Excellence for the visual thingy, can't remember the standard number, in English. I'm actually doing OK in English. Sometimes when I feel I don't do well, I do and then when I feel I went OK, I bum out. Eco is going good, got a merit for that last internal I finished over the holidays...stoked with that one.

LR: Wow, Lily you've had some great results, how does that feel?

L: Good, yeah...really good.

LR: How did you go about getting those grades, were you aware of doing anything different?

L: Def in English, I really worked hard, ha (laughing), well for me I did. Cause it was a thing we got to write and re write as much as we liked, I did a bit, quite a bit of that and Mrs W was a help.

LR: Fantastic Lily, now tell me about what you did in Eco.

L: I don't know, I understood it, it felt relevant. It was about people in restaurants, McDonalds and stuff and my Dad owns restaurants and I've kinda always grown up, been around him, you know, so it made sense.

LR: How was It, being relevant and making sense. useful to you?

L: Not sure really....it was interesting and I liked the stuff about marketing and image and shit, sorry, stuff. Dad talked to me about it too and that now with the rebuild lots of old restaurants have to like sort themselves and build up their image again cause, before like, when they were all in one place, well lots of them in the strip, it was easy but now cause they're all over Christchurch, it's harder. That's why Dad is not sure if he'll open up again.

LR: Gosh Lily, hearing you talk about your Dad's business, you are clearly interested in what he does, yeah?

L: Yeah, a bit, yeah, but it was just useful for my eco internal, cause I could add some stuff about all of that.

LR: So bringing some previous knowledge to a new topic was helpful? (amplifying client's useful strategies)

L: Definitely...and fun.

LR: Can you think of another time Lily when you've used some past experience or knowledge, or information to an assignment and it's been helpful?

To this Lily's answer was no. Again, I was curious about Lily's inability to make that transference of experience without my prompting. In my reflection notes, I wonder if this is another form of safety for Lily. To say she doesn't know has worked as a coping mechanism for a very long time. It avoids obvious failure. Just as Alison Jones (1991), found in her study of a single sex girls' high school in New Zealand during the 1980s, what happens in some classrooms tends to benefit some groups of students more than others and that just like some of the students Jones observed, Lily applies certain type of avoidance tactics to cope with school. While this is interesting to consider, as a Solution Focused practitioner, this only serves to remind me that, I must remain curious but must not start to interpret why clients do what they do. My interest must remain in helping clients such as Lily discover the strengths she has, rather than focusing on the opposite.

Later Sessions:

Lily's homework at the end of each session became noticing her own behaviours that helped her feel more positive.

LR: Ok Lily, I agree with you that reminding yourself of your recent fantastic grades is important, especially when you begin a new internal and because you said it gives you confidence, I suggest you spend some time each week, mentally ticking off how many Merit and Excellence internals you have already gained this year...how many Merits?

L: 14...I think, yeah and 4 Excellence credits.

Lily liked the feeling she gained when she did well in her internal assessments and also the feeling she had when she understood the task. Bringing her own prior knowledge to tasks, also helped. In my own reflection from my sessions with Lily, I became aware how Lily judged herself as a person by the grades she was achieving at school.

L: I don't have the brains for maths, cabbage maths is even beyond me, I hate it and I suck.

Summary of Learning:

Therefore ensuring Lily was complimented about changes in her own perception and how she managed to do this became important. Judging herself against her NCEA grades seemed to lower her confidence. Lily had built up a long held habit of avoiding or not completing tasks she prejudged she would fail. Because of this, Lily's resilience levels were low too and it was going to take a lot of intervention, much more than I could give in this research project to work on that with Lily. Having said that, there were sufficient changes in Lily's habits for me to judge that solution focus questioning had helped change her perception of how she could improve academically. In the final scaling question, Lily described her ability to improve academically, at an 8 (where 1 equates to no chance of improving and 10 equates to every chance of improving). A big jump from the three, she described in June. Although Lily often said she wanted to make the necessary changes, her actions often spoke otherwise. And while she did rate her ability to improve academically as a result of our interviews, I was still left wondering whether she would. Her high school history of experiencing failure has clearly had a lasting impact. For example, in every interview when I asked her:

What would you like to gain from this session. She seemed unsure.

Interview 1: *I'm not sure really, maybe some help with study maybe.*

Interview 2: *I don't mind, just whatever.*

Interview 3: *I'm easy, whatever suits you.*

Interview 4: *Um, maybe you could help me choose my Year 12 subjects.*

Her inability to even decide how she would best like to make use of our sessions, I believe was a reflection of her own low self-esteem. As Maslow suggested, Lily will always struggle given that an essential need (esteem) is lacking. Unlike John, Lily did not appear to have gained any sense of empowerment from our sessions.

Summary of Lily's changes that led directly to changes in her perception of her own academic ability:

- Detailed conversations about previous examples of success (academic and non-academic) in Lily's life.
- Using past experiences of success in new situations.
- Discovering and acknowledging that mastery of skills and subject relevance were important to her learning.

Summary of what I noticed about myself as a counsellor that led directly to changes in Lily's perception of her academic ability.

- Amplifying Lily's description of success and complimenting her on things that matter.
- Remaining curious about Lily's low self esteem.
- Maintaining a respectful stance at all times.
- Maintaining a 'not knowing' approach.
- Finding exceptions to detailed descriptions by Lily of her failures.

Participant 3 - Jack

Jack is a Year 11 boy who claims he has “never really fitted in at (names the school)”. He says he has a small group of friends who all like to ‘game’ (on line and computer gaming). He dislikes the compulsory sport his school “makes him do” and while he complies by signing up to one, he never attends. He believes his parents sent him to this school because they thought it would “sort him out”. Jack lives alternate weeks with each parent and “hates” the moving backwards and forwards. As a student, Jack describes himself as “OK” and even though he was streamed into an A band class for Years 9 and 10, he believes he is happy to just “get over the line”. When I asked Jack why he agreed to taking part in this research he thought it would possibly get him out of some classes and also, “keep Mum and Dad off my back”.

Getting Started:

When I asked Jack whether or not he had noticed any change in his work habits or productivity levels, he said, “*No, nothing, nothing at all*”.

This is in keeping with his described rationale for participating – both reasons do not involve his agency. We then moved on to discussing Jack’s year to date. I asked Jack questions about himself that would tell me more about him. Even at this early stage of interviewing, I gained a sense of reticence from Jack. He had agreed to participate in this research, but, as I was unsure of his willingness to engage I spent the first session building alliance (define). We talked about lots of things unrelated to school work.

LR: It must be tough moving each week between Mum and Dad’s places?

J: Yeah it is, I hate it. In fact I told them both I'm over it...not that they said much, I just hate feeling like...just...moving all the time, it sucks.

LR: What would you prefer Jack?

J: Just to be at one house...don't care which, well...maybe Dad's, on a good day ha. He can get fired up but...mostly he's Ok. Mum just nags.

LR: Have you discussed this option with them?

J: Well, kinda. I mean they know I hate it but...I dunno, any way, only two more years then I'll be out of there.

LR: It's a hard one Jack, because both your parents clearly love you and want the best for you.[relationship statement] It's never easy [affirming client affect]. Are there times when it doesn't suck? [inviting consideration of an exception]

J: (Heavy sigh), oh yeah, for sure, I mean I know all that about what they want for me, bla bla. Yeah sometimes it's OK (the moving) especially if I've had an argument and I know I'm heading to Mum's and they kinda always make a fuss of me, which is OK I guess. Mum's internet sucks and she is getting on to it but yeah, I dunno.

I decided that it would be important for Jack to realize I was empathetic to his situation and that should he wish to discuss it at any time, he knew he could. Establishing a relationship with Jack was fundamental and in hindsight, I was glad I spent this time first. As the interviews progressed, we did spend a lot of time talking about things happening in Jack's life which were impacting on school.

Moving towards a Goal:

When we did move on to Jack's goals for level 1 NCEA, he said Merit endorsement. I then asked Jack a scaling question to discover his confidence in achieving his goals this year. He placed himself at a 6. This allowed me to encourage him to consider what would be happening if he moved to a 7. This enables him to hear himself envisage a better place and describe some of the behavior he could engage in to reach that place. This is some of what he described:

J: I'd be sleeping more, so I could concentrate in class. I wouldn't be doing graphics, I hate that Mr G, he's an absolute faggot...he's got it in for me, always.

LR: Didn't you choose graphics?

J: Well I did and I didn't. No other subjects appealed so Dad put down graphics cause I'd done it in Years 9 and 10.

LR: I see. So what else would you be doing if you moved up to a 7?

J: School wouldn't be so boring.

LR: What would it be instead? [classic solution-focused question]

J: Fun I guess, (long silence), maybe some choice in what we did, you know, there's none of that.

LR: Tell me some more about that.

J: Well I really hate the way all the stuff we do is just thrown at us and there's no kinda way we get a say in what we do. I liked that about intermediate, we were always given stuff that

we could choose from, so you know, like I would be able to find something that I liked, well there's none of that with NCEA bullshit (sorry), NCEA.

LR: That's interesting Jack, because you're right, NCEA is fairly prescriptive...you're told what to do. What is it about choosing what you do, that appeals to you?

J: Well... I dunno know, I just....maybe it's the idea that I can kinda do it my way, a bit, make it mine more. Not sure really.

LR: Do you think you were more engaged, more into the task, the project, when you got to choose?

J: For sure, and really proud of it. I remember doing this cool robotics thing that we more or less did from scratch, it was a Science thing and there were loads of things like that. Now, well, it's zip.

LR: Wow, that does sound cool and I'd imagine, with all that freedom to design, plan and implement your ideas, you would be fairly motivated, were you?

J: Gosh yes, I remember my group for that robotics thing, we all used to come to school early to work on it, man...wouldn't happen here.

LR: When you think about that robotics project Jack, what was it that motivated you enough to want to come to school early?

J: It was fun, and we weren't told what to do...yeah just allowed to do it how we want.

LR: Are there any times in any of your classes this year, when you get some freedom similar to what you have just described, even just a small amount?

J: Nope.

I wrote in my reflection journal after this interview that I was unsure how much of Jack's fondness for his intermediate years was influenced by his perceived life now. His parents separated at the end of Jack's Year 8, so his changed living arrangements coincided with his entry into high school. Nonetheless, this discussion gave me some insight into what motivates Jack. I noted the need to tap into those feelings he experienced then, into his school life now. I also noticed how much his body language changed when he talked about his robotics project. From very little eye contact and animation, his face lit up and he smiled. He leant forward and began to use some hand gestures when explaining it to me. Prior to this, Jack sat almost hunched in his chair with his hands placed in his lap.

Achieving the Goal:

Therefore while the main conception for this research was always using solution focused questioning, for Jack it became apparent the use of the particular solution-focused question, the exception question, was going to be of benefit to him. He isn't enjoying school and has a tendency to generalize that everything 'sucks'.

In interview two, I began with: *What's changed since we last met?*

J: Not much really.

LR: Anything at all?

J: I think about doing study more. I still don't do it, but I think about it.

LR: Where do you think that change is coming from Jack?

J: I dunno know. I guess I do want to get good results. Also I want to get good results so I get a new computer.

LR: So is there a reward attached to your results? Have Mum and Dad said something?

J: Yip

LR: What sort of computer?

J: Anyone I like.

LR: Gosh, that sounds exciting Jack, is that something you're really keen on?

J: Yeah kinda, I mean I want the computer, just less keen on doing the work to get it, but maybe.

LR: We talked last time about noticing some things, do you remember? (Jack nods), Have you noticed anything about yourself when you feel more motivated than at other times?

J: Yeah, well if I have no internet I do some work but if there's internet, well no.

LR: Are there times when you don't have internet?

J: Yeah, at Mum's, it can be a bit erratic and not worth the bother.

LR: So what have you been noticing about those times?

J: Well when I'm really bored I'll do some.

LR: Great. Have you noticed any change as a result?

J: No not really.

LR: Which for some people could be frustrating, is that the case for you?

J: No...I mean, I'm probably kidding myself about actually doing any work, I'm bone lazy and there's not much in it really. I'll get my 80 credits, no probs but ah...it's all just.... a big yawn.

LR: You said the promise of a computer was motivating you a bit. Is there anything else?

J: Impressing my parents, more rewards and a sense of accomplishment after I do really well at something.

This last comment really stood out and at the time Jack said it I was rather surprised and therefore curious at my own reaction. Up until this point he had not indicated in any way that he sought his parents' approval, therefore to hear him say it mattered, was interesting. At the time, I wanted to find out more about this but given I was still establishing a relationship with Jack, I chose not to explore this at this point. Instead, I asked more about his 'sense of accomplishment' comment.

LR: Tell me about a time recently when you have felt that.

J: In a game that I play they released new servers in New Zealand and Australia and when we got transferred our ranking went way down, I got put at bronze and then I climbed out of bronze to silver and yeah....

LR: That felt good?

J: Yeah.

LR: That's a great example Jack. Can you think of something similar to do with school life or school work?

J: When I got my first Eco (Economics) internal back, Excellence. It felt so good. I was just expecting Achieved and yeah...

LR: You liked that feeling?

J: (nods his head).

LR: Is that something you want more of?

J: I do, but without effort, like, I dunno, I do the work for Eco in class but I rarely do it outside of class. I'm happy with the grade I get, if it's Excellence, great, if it's Achieved, fine. If I get these grades without trying, that's all good.

LR: On reflection, when you think about that Excellence you got in Eco, can you pin point why you were able to get Excellence. What is it about Jack that enabled him to do that? [checking client agency with respect to an exception]

J: Um..(long silence). I enjoyed it. I was probably sleeping more and eating more.

LR: Anything else?

J: Nope.

From here we explored exactly what it was that Jack enjoyed about the Eco internal. He described an assignment that allowed him to learn about a certain theory and then apply it to a real life setting he was familiar with. He chose the building industry. From Jack's description, it was clear he enjoyed the small amount of autonomy this assignment allowed

him. When I pointed out the similarity albeit on a far smaller scale, to his robotics task at intermediate and this assignment, he did see a small connection between what it was about both these tasks that excited him. After this discussion Jack wrote in his research journal that he enjoyed learning this about himself and that he felt he should try and target internals that allow him as much freedom of choice as possible. He also wrote about how he thinks he does his best work when he is at his Mums. Some of this has to do with limited internet as a distraction but also, he doesn't like Dad's new partner and described in his journal, that "I'm less angry at Mum's house". Clearly Jack has a lot to deal with caused through the separation of his parents and his feelings about it. As an only child, Jack has no siblings to share his thoughts with and when I did ask him whether he ever discussed any of this with his friends, he very quickly said, 'no'. Exploring with Jack what it was that motivated him, then became my goal because I thought he wanted the rewards that being more motivated allowed him to achieve.

Later Sessions:

In a subsequent Interview, we began with a scaling question that asked Jack to place himself in terms of obtaining his goal of achieving NCEA level 1 with Merit endorsement. He placed himself at a 7. As this was a shift up the scale from when I had previously asked this question, I was curious to find out what had contributed to this change.

LR: So Jack, tell me more about that 7, what are you currently doing that places you there?

J: I've been doing some maths with my step mum and I've got my head around a few things.

LR: Ok, describe that to me, maths was always such a mystery to me.

J: We go through the booklet and sheets we've been given in class and I've learnt a few things I didn't know before, yeah, it's good and helpful.

LR: Great, good.

Jack then described other study techniques that he'd been using that he thought were making a difference to the way he was feeling. In his descriptions, he liked learning and remembering new things.

LR: We've talked before Jack about what you believe motivates you and last time we explored how when your task involves your own input, you like that and it motivates you, is that still the case?

J: (He nods)

LR: So given that the last month has been full of study and exams, have you discovered anything new about the things that motivate you?

J: Achieving my goals and like getting better and stuff.

LR: That's interesting Jack. There are lots of theories on motivation but one of the things I've discovered, come across in my readings are two very clear areas of motivation when it comes to the classroom. One is, some students like to master certain skills, that's the thing that spurs them on and the other is competitiveness with other students or with themselves, you may know someone who finds when they get a strong grade in one task, they want to repeat it in the next and so on? Of course, many people are a combination of both.

LR: So what about for you Jack, are either of those areas something you can relate to?

J: Not the working, competing with others, nah, that's not me, or competing with myself, but yeah, I do like learning stuff, new stuff. That's probably why I like ICT (Information computer technology), cause we're always learning stuff I don't know already. I like to be on top of it, do it really well...yeah so that makes sense.

LR: What about in a subject like English?

J: I do like to know what my next steps are, in the marking thingy...she (Mrs P) always writes what we need to do next and I do always read that stuff, yeah, hmmm, Lot's in the class just chuck it, but I hold on to it.

LR: So if you get an essay back today and you get a Merit, will you be motivated to work on the feedback given to move to an Excellence?

J: Probably not.

LR: What about if that same essay came back as a Not Achieved?

J: Yeah, I would.

LR: So what's behind that motivation?

J: Not getting in the crap with my parents and the feeling I guess. It's been drilled into me that if you don't pass at school you'll end up living on the streets or something, that's not necessarily true, I know, but yeah, I think about it. It's also shameful to fail at stuff, yeah I'd hate to be around in January if that happened, yeah (NCEA results come out in January).

Summary of Learning:

In this discussion Jack had some firm ideas on what motivated him and what didn't.

Competing with others certainly wasn't a factor and yet nor was improving to an Excellence level. A fear of failing was a factor. Jack had a strong understanding of his credit tally and what his next steps were. As the interviews progressed with Jack, I could see that while his perception of his ability to improve wasn't changing, it was more that Jack himself was interested in any technique that helped him in understanding how much energy he had to expend to get the necessary 'pass' grade. My opinion from interacting with Jack was that his desire to gain NCEA with Merit endorsement would happen despite any planned intention of his behalf. His desire to change was not evident. He clearly saw no need to invest the necessary effort other than just enough to avoid the 'shame' of failure. Jack's perception of his ability to improve academically did not change as a result of our sessions together because he placed no importance on it.

When I asked Jack at the beginning of each interview what he would like to discuss he always replied in the same way: "*I don't mind, just whatever*". Jack has a lot to deal with in his personal life and school work and improvement appear a low priority.

Summary of Jack's changes that led directly to changes in his perception of his own academic ability:

- Describing his experiences of success (both academic and non-academic)
- Discovering what motivates him.
- Discovering and acknowledging his enjoyment of activities that foster autonomy.

Summary of what I noticed about myself as a counsellor that led directly to changes in Jack's perception of his academic ability.

- Showing an interest in Jack's life outside school.
- Maintaining a respectful and empathetic stance at all times.
- Maintaining a 'not knowing' approach.
- Finding exceptions to Jack's descriptions of not being motivated.

CHAPTER FIVE

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to observe how the students in this study described their perceptions of their ability to improve academically, during their experiences of Solution Focused counselling and from this, discovering whether or not using a Solution Focused philosophy could improve the approach taken to academic mentoring. My objective was to specifically notice what the participants found helpful. Secondly, in this study I wanted to observe how each student described the origins of their motivation and in turn, how this did or didn't affect their academic engagement. As a researcher/counsellor, I was interested in the descriptions the students gave that came from my solution focused questions (as the counsellor) and noticing any changes to the students' perceptions about themselves as a result (as the researcher).

Perceptions held by participants:

Academic ability

While each student had different perceptions, all three had very clear perceptions about their own academic ability. All three could articulate exactly where they saw themselves and without prompting from me, each gave me their construction of their own academic ability:

John: *Hard working middle of the road student.*

Lily: *I kid myself I'm a hard worker, but I'm not really.*

Jack: *I'm more than capable, but can't be bothered.*

This description provided me (and them) with a guideline or baseline so that at the end of my research, I would be able to ask them if they saw a change in their ability to improve academically as a result of our interviews together.

Confidence in ability to improve academically

When I asked each student to describe their confidence level in improving academically and achieving their NCEA related goals, they responded by scaling themselves out of ten (where 1 equates to no confidence whatsoever and 10 equates to complete confidence:

John: 7

Lily: 4

Jack: 6

Outcomes for each student

Jack

Jack indicated from the start that he was not motivated to improve academically. For him, his school life was about doing 'enough' to pass and 'keep his parents off his back', but no more. Furthermore, he considered that any quality credits he got (Merit and Excellence) were 'flukes' rather than a result of any planning. However, the unspoken non-institutional factors that Zepke, Leach & Butler (2011) discussed, clearly had a big impact on Jack's perceptions of his ability to change. The emotional difficulties that he described, in his living arrangements with his separated parents appeared to be having an influence over his desire to improve.

Jack: I really hate Mondays...they're the pits. Packing my bag and remembering everything for the next week sucks, so yeah, I've definitely noticed I'm off the page on Mondays."

Where Jack did show interest and change in his perception was in the discussion about what motivated him. Edman's (2008) study highlights that knowing what motivates us is clearly a key factor in improving one's perception of being able to improve academically. For Jack, he described liking the fact that, following our solution-focused sessions he became aware of being motivated by learning a new skill (mastery), having some sense of agency (choice) and as a result he felt more confident picking specific NCEA standards to target. He stated that this was a change in his thinking.

Jack: "Since we've been on about this thing with me and liking learning new....stuff, you know....I've actually found it kinda useful."

With this new found knowledge about himself, Jack was now deliberately choosing NCEA standards within each subject that a) gave him more choice or b) provided an opportunity for mastering a new skill. While Jack described both of these options as limited, he did describe feeling more positive about some subjects where this was possible. Skinner and Davis (2005) maintain that providing choice can be an empowering factor for some students. In Jack's case, he certainly described becoming more engaged when choices were made available to him.

Jack's shift is interesting and the case notes demonstrate the value of using solution-focused thinking and questioning to help client's shift their perceptions. It would have been easy for me to 'tell' Jack what I thought was best for him to do to improve his grades, but I chose

rather, to let him discover this for himself. Using Solution Focus techniques enabled me to let Jack be the expert in his own life and this is something he then described as positive.

Lily

Like Jack, Lily too changed her perception when she became aware of the importance she placed on mastering a new skill. Bandura's (1997) research found that students' confidence levels go up when they experience mastery. This then has a ripple effect, as students believe that because they accomplished a new skill last time, they may repeat this at a subsequent time. Bandura also explains that students' perceptions of their own abilities specifically rise when they focus on what the task is teaching them rather than dwelling on potential failure. Lily's constant description of how she struggles and has a habitual 'giving up' attitude shows this fear of failure was very real for her.

Kecsmkemeti (2013), validates Lily's chosen stance by criticising the New Zealand curriculum as it only assesses how students process information rather than assessing their ability to make meaning. Lily described in detail her constant struggle with processing content that she just did not understand or have any past experience to use for sense making. As a result, Lily constantly judges herself by her failure at school (and this contributes to her feeling of low self esteem). Kecsmkemeti reminds us that until we change the way we assess what students know, students like Lily will continue to fail.

Like Jack, Lily, too, appeared to shift in confidence when she realized how important finding relevance in what she had to learn, was to her. When she described her success in an Economic's internal test on a subject she was familiar with, she became aware that this

happened to a large degree because of the past experience and knowledge she brought to this task. With this test, she was able to make meaning and understand the content through bringing prior knowledge to the task. Lily's realization of the effect of this did shift her perception of improving academically.

Lily: "That food resource internal in Eco really surprised me...like I kinda started to back myself cause I did actually know a bit about it....yeah I liked that."

Using this knowledge, Lily then went on to describe a change in her focus and like Jack, she made conscious decisions to target certain standards; those she knew she would have a good base knowledge to draw upon.

John

Of all three participants, John had the most confidence in his ability to improve. A naturally assertive student, John appeared to have a high self efficacy perception. Bandura (1997) states that students with this quality, will always approach their learning with greater confidence and purpose than those with lower self efficacy perceptions about themselves. John likes to do well and his readiness for change is high. Like Lily, John described particular times in his much loved music classes where he became so engrossed in learning a new piece of music or writing a new piece, that he lost all sense of time. Csikszentmihalyi (1993) devised the term 'flow' to describe this experience. In music, John was often fully immersed in the task with no thought about the desired grade. For John, he described a great sense of enjoyment when this happened to him.

John: Why can't all subjects be like that...man it would be a breeze."

Any task that allowed him room to create, often saw Csikszentmihalyi's 'flow' come into play for John and as a result made his academic work more meaningful.

When, through solution-focused questioning, John reflected on this and looked for other opportunities to create, he described his school day as far more gratifying. Like Jack's need to look for choices that gave him autonomy, John described a sense of empowerment in discovering his need to create, and knowing he needed to find opportunities to make this happen, his overall perception of how he could improve academically shifted.

John: "It's actually easier than I thought, you know, looking, finding ways to have some fun and design and play a bit with the internal...I'm much more up front about asking if I can do some of it, or change it (the internal) to the way I'd like to....some of my teachers are up for it, old Bung features, no...no way, but that's OK."

Summary - Solution Focus questioning and its impact on academic perceptions.

All three participants learnt something new about what helped them:

- Enjoyment of tasks that allow creativity
- Mastering a new skill
- Tasks that used prior knowledge and or experience
- Tasks that allowed some freedom and autonomy
- Finding relevance in a task

In order for the participants to discover this about themselves, the following solution focused questions proved the most helpful:

- How could more of that happen?

- What are you doing differently?
- What did you discover about yourself today?
- Is that something you want more of?
- Because you said (description of what they found helpful/enjoyable) how could you use that in (another subject).

By thinking about responding to these questions, the participants were able to ascertain for themselves what was going to work for them and by default, this increased their perceptions of their ability to improve academically.

Academic Improvement:

From the outset, my research focus was about what worked in improving academic outcomes as defined by each individual. In this research, all three participants equated academic improvement with higher NCEA grades. Success at school is measured by what NCEA grades you get, and similarly, for these students, intelligence, ability and success is defined by the type of grades you obtain in NCEA.

The Ministry of Education states in its own vision for New Zealand education that all schools must focus on: *“factors that make the biggest difference to student learning.”* (Ministry of Education, 2013). So what are they?

Motivation

Deci and Ryan’s (2002) theory of intrinsic motivation states that three psychological needs, need to be met before it will occur; autonomy, competence and relatedness. For Jack, his desire to have choices within his learning was a huge part of his motivation (autonomy), as was his enjoyment of mastering a new skill (competence). Lily also became motivated when

she felt competent in a new task. On the reverse side, both Jack and Lily described their feelings of no motivation and lack of engagement when these needs were not met. John described his feelings of high motivation when he was totally absorbed in a task and to a lesser degree than Jack and Lily, less engaged when these needs were not being met.

Wigfield and Eccles's (2002) expectancy x value model which measures the effort people are willing to use on a task supports the descriptions these three participants made about their own levels of motivation. Lily, especially, chose to not attempt tasks because she did not believe she could succeed. Jack, too, often did not value the opportunity enough to warrant expending any extra energy on them in order to gain a quality grade simply because he did not value it. Therefore for students such as Jack and Lily, motivation levels will not change until:

- the value they place upon the task changes.
- their ability to risk failure, alters.

This last point is important, risking failure. Failure helps us learn, as infants this was how we learnt to walk, we fell over a great deal but we mastered it soon enough. To lose the confidence to try something in the knowledge we could fail, is when our learning stagnates and hearing Lily's descriptions of giving up on such a regular basis, made me understand the importance of what Paul Tough (2012) identified as grit. Students such as Lily will only change this pattern once they can find their own strategies for finding alternative approaches. The cognitive self control that Tough defines as the ability to inhibit instinctive responses (in Lily's case, giving up), and seek more effective solutions, will play a big part in changing her motivation levels. As a result of my case-study research I consider that solution Focus questioning can help highlight this aspect of motivation.

- The use of the scaling question allowed Lily to visualize an alternative scenario from the usual 'giving up'.
- Helping clients find and describe what they did during exceptions to the norm (in the case of Lily and Jack exceptions to the norm of having no motivation) helps them explore alternatives.
- Asking Lily, Jack and John to describe what they have noticed about themselves when they are motivated helps them consider that these times might be more achievable than they think.
- Asking them to consider what other people in their lives have noticed, helps heighten their awareness of their impact on others, and the importance of meaningful relationships for their motivation.

Experiences of Solution focused counselling.

Each of the three participants was interviewed four times. In the final interview, I asked them the same scaling question that I had asked in interview one, *How confident are you of your ability to improve academically?* The following figures describe their responses.

First Interview:

John: 7

Lily: 4

Jack: 6

Fourth Interview:

9

8

7

These figures are not statistically meaningful, however, it appears that each client has shifted to a place where they feel more confident about their ability to improve academically. While it is tempting to attribute this shift to my use of solution focus questioning I am mindful of McKeel's (2008) conclusions that clients will always view the relationship with their counsellor far more importantly than any specific techniques. As a counsellor/researcher I was able to establish a strong rapport with all three participants and this aspect must be taken into consideration.

Lily: "It's kinda nice to be taken seriously, Mum and Dad think they do, but nah..."

John: "I feel a bit embarrassed but, yeah, I hadn't thought about it like that before, it feels good."

Furthermore, there were some specific areas of interest that the participants described in their final interview which they found particularly helpful:

- The changes they all noticed very early on. *Lily: "Noticing when I begin to feel weird in class has been useful, it's so often when the next assessment date is given or talked about."* This supports Thompson and Littrell's (1998) study that also spoke of the positive changes that were noticed very quickly into the study.
- Also, even after the first session, Jack noticed that he liked not being told what to do, instead being encouraged to work out what was best for him by himself. He said in the final session: *Jack "you know when we talked about me getting agro when Mr M kept on at me, well it's strange how just kinda watching myself, has made a difference...does that make sense?"* Again this supports Thompson and Littrell's findings.

- John made mention of liking the fact that at the conclusion of each interview, he went away with something to try (noticing things about himself, looking for other opportunities to create and noticing what other successful students did in the classroom).
- Lily made mention of enjoying being complimented on her successes. She said this made her think she could accomplish things. She also liked remembering and talking about past successes.

Jack said he felt listened to, which he described as an important factor when he considered making positive changes.

Jack: "Well, I like the fact you listenand don't lecture me."

LIMITATIONS

Although the findings from this case study research are encouraging, they are far from conclusive. Given the small sample size, the degree to which the findings can be generalized is limited. While other mentoring counselling (with other students) was occurring at the school, this was not included in this study as a comparison. It is important to note that issues such as the timing of the case study interviews, the maturity of the students and other environmental factors may have influenced the outcomes. In addition the tracking of additional interventions (meetings with tutors, teachers, their Dean, Head of Middle and Senior School, sport coaches and parent teacher interviews) could have been monitored to fully assess and evaluate the gains attributed to Solution Focused Therapy. To summarise; as with any research, this study has limitations to consider. First, the research sample was drawn only from one high school, in Christchurch. The results from this study, therefore, provide only a model on which to base further research and cannot be applied to the

general populations of other New Zealand High Schools. Second, only three case studies were described and analysed in detail, therefore, the results of the analysis may not accurately reflect the perceptions of the whole population from this school. Finally, it must be noted that the makeup of this school changes every year due to both Year 13 completion, attrition and admission fluctuations. In order for the learning and recommendations (based on this study) to remain usable, the perceptions of this school population would need to be re-evaluated after every few years. This would ensure that any changes within the school population are reflected in appropriate changes in the interventions that are offered to the academic mentoring programme. If patterns within certain populations can be discovered through this continued evaluation, however, then it may be appropriate to establish general perceptions to provide a preliminary structure on which to frame future changes using Solution Focused therapy as a template for this school's academic mentoring programme.

CONCLUSION

Underlying the origins of this research was always the belief that solution focused techniques could be used in an academic mentoring framework. People often emphasize their difficulties, their failures and their inability to make changes. Solution focused practitioners open up the possibility of a different view, drawing attention to strengths and positive change. The founding proponents of solution focus methodology, de Shazer and Berg claim that change can come from doing things differently, viewing what you are doing in a different way, or maybe both. Most importantly, the choice of the direction of this change lies with the client.

The research findings in this study, support the social constructionist's view point, that the social construction of life comes from conversations, narratives and discourses. Emerging from this is that, the creation of meaning involves a social creation of new realities, making language the 'currency' of finding meaning. Therefore a counsellor who works through a social constructionist lens will be interested in how people make assumptions and give meaning to their problems. Using this lens to inform practice will encourage clients to consider alternative views (constructions) of their ability to improve academically.

Another area of interest that this study has brought forward pertains to the use of the case study research and its synthesis with good reflexive practice. While interviewing the students involved in this study, I was acutely aware that first and foremost the students had agreed to the research knowing that they would be involved in academic mentoring. As the descriptions evolved so too did my process. McLeod (2010). " From this initial understanding the practitioner arrives at a case formulation of the presenting problems and a resulting treatment plan of how his or her work with the client might proceed. As the therapy does proceed the practitioner monitors what is happening. If the client's goals are not being achieved, the process returns to further dialogue with the client, leading to reformulation of the therapeutic tasks." (p 95). As the counsellor/researcher, I was constantly reflecting and taking reflexive action based on what the clients were describing. In other words the case study approach was not static, nor did it impose abstract ideas, rather the knowledge was generated (and acted upon) within each clients' individual situation.

The results of this case study research suggest that Solution Focused Therapy can be effective in changing students' perceptions of their academic ability. It has convinced me

that the philosophy behind this method fits so well with academic mentoring. All of the three students who described their academic perceptions discovered things about themselves that led directly to a change. Finding out what motivated them, discovering their own strengths and transferring past successes into new situations, all led to this change. Furthermore, the process of conducting this research meant that my confidence in my ability to use solution-focused questions effectively increased. This, in turn, led to a stronger effect of the use of Solution Focused Therapy with clients who wanted to improve their academic ability. Given the importance of students' success in school to their overall adaptation during adolescence and beyond, these findings would support further research into solution focus methods being used as part of schools' academic mentoring programmes. Although much further research is needed, this study shows evidence of case study research that supports positive changes in students' perceptions of their own ability to improve academically.

CHAPTER SIX

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HUMAN ETHICS COMMITTEE

Secretary, Lynda Griffioen
Email: human-ethics@canterbury.ac.nz

Ref: 2013/19/ERHEC

20 May 2013

Liz Riley
School of Health Sciences
UNIVERSITY OF CANTERBURY

Dear Liz

Thank you for providing the revised documents in support of your application to the Educational Research Human Ethics Committee. I am very pleased to inform you that your research proposal "How can solution focus therapy influence client's perceptions and experiences of their academic success" has been granted ethical approval.

Please note that this approval is subject to the incorporation of the amendments you have provided in your emails of 11 and 17 May 2013.

Should circumstances relevant to this current application change you are required to reapply for ethical approval.

If you have any questions regarding this approval, please let me know.

We wish you well for your research.

Yours sincerely



25th May, 2013

Information for students

I am currently completing my Master of Counselling at the University of Canterbury and am currently interested in investigating strategies to improve academic success. To that end, I would like to invite you to participate in my present study. If you agree to take part you will be asked to do the following:

- Take part in regular counselling sessions involving discussions around your academic progress.
- Complete a written reflection journal after each meeting with me.
- Complete short surveys (Outcome rating scales) on the counselling sessions you will be participating in.

Please note that participation in this study is voluntary. If you do participate, you have the right to withdraw from the study at any time. I will take particular care to ensure the confidentiality of all data gathered for this study and ensure your anonymity in all written presentations of my findings. All the data will be securely stored in password protected computer files and a copy of the findings will be made available should you wish to have one.

The results of these findings may be used to revise and improve our academic mentoring programmes here at _____

If you have any questions about the study, please contact me (details above). If you have a complaint about the study, you may contact the Chair, Educational Research Human Ethics Committee, University of Canterbury, Private Bag 4800, Christchurch
(human-ethics@canterbury.sc.nz).

If you agree to participate in this study, please complete the attached consent form and return it to me in the envelope provided by the end of term.

I am looking forward to working with you and thank you in advance for your contributions.

Yours sincerely

Mrs Liz Riley

25th May, 2013

Dear Mr and Mrs

As you are aware your son/daughter has been asked to be involved in the College's academic monitoring scheme and I have been nominated as their monitor. I have spoken with _____ and they have agreed to be involved however it is important that you are made aware of the study I am completing

As well as teaching English at the College I am currently completing my thesis for my Master of Education and my area of interest is academic achievement. As part of this, I am seeking permission from both you and _____ to be involved in my research.

My goal is to observe how academic success and improvement is achieved using a solution focus methodology. The benefits to _____ will be a clear idea of what it is that they do that effects change in their academic success.

The information that _____ would be sharing will form the basis of my qualitative study and would be read by my academic supervisor and a panel of markers. All names and situations will be changed to preserve complete anonymity for St Andrew's College and _____. Secondly, many of the interviews will be recorded for the purposes of extracting a transcript; these will be kept confidential and secure and then deleted on completion of my thesis.

_____ participation is completely voluntary and he/she may choose to withdraw at any time.

Canterbury University require their own consent form to be completed but this will not be sent to you until term 2. I intend to meet with _____ before the end of the term then begin regular meetings during _____'s study class in term 2.

Should you wish to discuss this further, please contact me via email or cell phone.

I am very much looking forward to working with _____

Yours sincerely

Liz Riley



Telephone: +64 3 3518287

Email: eriley@stac.school.nz

Parental Consent

- I have been given a full explanation of this project and have been given an opportunity to ask questions.
- I understand what will be required of my child if he/she agrees to take part in this project.
- I understand that my child's participation is voluntary and that they may withdraw at any stage without penalty.
- I understand that any information or opinions that my child provides will be kept confidential to the researcher and that any published or reported results will not identify my child or family.
- I understand that all data collected for this study will be kept in locked and secure facilities at the University of Canterbury and will be destroyed after five years.
- I understand that my child will receive a report on the findings of this study

I understand that if I require further information I can contact the researcher, Liz Riley . If I have any complaints, I can contact the Chair of the University of Canterbury Educational Research Human Ethics Committee. By signing below, I agree to participate in this research project.

Name: _____

Date: _____

Signature: _____

Email address: _____

Please return this completed consent form to Liz Riley in the envelope provided by the end of term 2 2013.

University of Canterbury Private Bag 4800, Christchurch 8140, New Zealand.
www.canterbury.ac.nz

4th April, 2013

Dear (Rector's Name)

As we have previously discussed, I would like to work with a group of five students from _____ as participants in a research thesis. This thesis is a requirement of a Master of Counselling degree at the University of Canterbury, which I am currently undertaking. I am working under the supervision of Professor Judi Miller, a senior lecturer in the Health Sciences department at Canterbury University.

My research aims to discover what influence Solution Focus interviewing can have in an academic mentoring programme and whether or not it can change the perceptions and experiences of academic improvement from the students' perspective.

As discussed with you last term, _____ have nominated five students. If they and their parents agree to participating I will meet with them for five sessions over terms two and three, during their study periods. The sessions will be videoed and only viewed by myself.

The aim of this research is to investigate how a students' perception of their academic success can change by using a solution focussed approach. Central to this method is concentrating on what a student already knows works for them and motivates them. My hope is that students will learn how to tap into skills they already have, to effect positive change in their academic careers.

No findings that could identify any individual participant will be published . Since data must be stored for at least five years according to University regulations, anonymity of both the school and the participants is assured as I will systematically use pseudonyms to identify the school and the individuals. Students, whose parents agree to let them participate , can withdraw their child at any time. It is my hope that the results of these findings may be used to revise and improve our academic mentoring programmes here at _____

If you have any questions about the study, please contact me (details above). If you have a complaint about the study, you may contact the Chair, Educational Research Human Ethics Committee, University of Canterbury, Private Bag 4800, Christchurch. Students and their parents have also been notified of the complaints procedure.

human-ethics@canterbury.sc.nz).

For further clarification you are welcome to contact my supervisor Judi Miller by email:

judi.miller@canterbury.ac.nz

Yours sincerely
Mrs Liz Riley

