

Solution Focus Provides Outstanding ‘Gardening Skills’

A conversation with Judith Mahlmann, school principal, interviewed by Orsi Szabó

Introduced by Tara Gretton

This interview is such an open, honest, and inspiring account of using Solution Focus (SF) across a large vocational college of 1200 students, aged 15-60.

In this interview with Orsi Szabo, Judith Mahlmann, the school Principal, shares the story of how they attended Katalin Hankovsky’s seven-day workshop ‘Learn Coaching for Vocation Colleges’, in the first year of being the Principal at Inge Katz. Since then, ten-fifteen of their staff have attended the training.

What comes across so strongly in this story is the commitment that leaders, teachers, and students have to trust in their own ‘self-efficacy’. Judith adds that everyone at the school should ‘know their self-worth in society’. They should feel, “I am, I can, I may, I want, and I will!”

This wonderful interaction between the Principal and Orsi, the interviewer, leads Judith to share stories highlighting what is important to them at the school; “that each student has the competencies”. The stories also amplify how they listen to students and create opportunities for all the students to connect with and amplify their personal resources every day!

This is a school drenched in the values and assumptions underpinning SF. As Orsi highlights, the team is making a huge difference to society with their commitment to amplifying people’s unique strengths, resources and competencies and empowering them to be experts in their lives.

The Conversation

Inge Katz School is a vocational college of 1200 students aged 15 to 60, with a wide educational portfolio in three main areas: social pedagogy, home economics and healthcare. There are more than fifteen different subjects to study, earning a vocational qualification up to higher degrees such as a Bachelor’s. The school also offers courses for people with disabilities to cope with work and daily life.

How can a big organisation with so many different subjects, teams and greatly diverse students, function in a way that lets students build a strong sense of: “I can, I want, I will”? Principal Judith Mahlmann’s shares her solution-focused reflections about it.

Interviewer: You have used Solution Focus (SF) in the school for almost six years. How can it possibly start and spread in such a big and complex organisation?

I was able to attend in Bremen Katalin Hankovszky’s (Kati) first and now well-established seven-day workshop, “Learn coaching for vocational colleges”, when I was in my first year as a principal in Inge Katz Schule. Almost every year since then, ten-fifteen of my colleagues have attended that training. Our colleagues have a high affinity to solution-focused processes, and half of the staff have already participated voluntarily.

As a Principal, I have three areas for Solution Focus in our college: learning processes, personal development and organisational development.

It spreads underground, using guerrilla tactics. We do not convince teachers by making statements like: “This is how we work here”, but rather by doing things in an SF way.

In my first year as a principal, we had a conference for all the staff, starting with resource gossip in groups of three. They enjoyed it so much that it wasn’t easy to get them back together and continue

with our agenda after this start! We told them that we would love them to gain the positive and encouraging outcomes of this training and that if they liked the experience, they could attend it. Fifteen (out of a hundred) colleagues applied for the training immediately.

Also, our annual staff meeting this year started with a leap to the future by asking: if we imagine ourselves one year ahead in time and look back from there, what motto would we give for this period? How would we know that things had become better?

We also regularly do scaling activities at our conferences: where are we now, and how will we know we have improved as we go on? It is really easy to grasp the concept of this approach.

Interviewer: I've never thought "guerrilla tactics" could be so gentle, fun, and motivating!

All right, sometimes I motivate colleagues in a more "telling" way if I feel the training would be useful for them. But every time I tried to convince someone, it was because I wanted them to get the idea and experience the benefits of it. Fortunately, colleagues who had participated spread the word all the time.

Moreover, students also help us spread the word; they re-teach teachers SF techniques! For example, they say things like: "Ms Müller (name changed) asked us how we are prepared for the upcoming exam on a scale from one to ten. Could we please do something similar with you about this exam?"

Interviewer: Wow! Underground and guerrilla at its best!

The effects are very visible! For now, we all firmly believe that Steve de Shazer is on point, that problem talk creates problems while solution talk creates solutions, so we should spend our time with the latter. We trust that the design of SF is meant for every situation, especially the tough and challenging ones.

For example, I had to talk to a colleague who got adverse student feedback about his sarcastic language. Regular business management courses teach you criticism talk: "This is what happened, and this is not okay. What is your view of the situation?"

With Solution Focus, it looks more like: "Okay, we have this challenging situation. I know you don't want students to feel like this. We have our principles, so let's see how we can find a way to follow them even more, daily?"

This teacher told me he was nervous at first when he got my invitation for a conversation; he knew that it must be because a problem had arisen. But he knew there was no reason to be nervous "I trust that our conversations are always constructive and appreciative". He didn't use the words Solution Focus but has this idea of looking at problems in an SF way.

Though some of my colleagues (including myself) are not fully fledged SF professionals, we all have Solution Focus principles (our knowledge from the workshop) that we can always return and refer to, to broaden the horizon. Also, even when a colleague doesn't apply the principles yet in day-to-day work, we have the language and some tools to face challenging situations in a useful way. If I ask a question, my colleagues can answer and follow this stream of thought productively.

Interviewer: I bet they love to talk to you!

Oh, I am not sure, or definitely not always! But we have this trust in each other and the strong belief that there must be a solution to all of our problems. I appreciate my colleagues telling me that they have a better way of doing things; they just tell me they think there must be a better way to do something, but they don't know what it is yet. This kind of trust works in two directions.

I expect the school leaders and teachers to have trust in their own self-efficacy and that of their students. To know their worth in society. Our school is about teaching knowledge and building social and personal competencies - where factual knowledge is a part of the picture. They will work with and for people; we must strengthen their personalities. We usually say that our school focuses on letting students be confident about their self-efficacy and feel: "I am, I can, I may, I want, and I will".

Interviewer: Knowing their self-worth in society and being confident about their capabilities - sounds really good!

The top school committee has twenty-four members, including eight students and eight teachers. This year twenty students wanted to be on this committee. We also have a students representative who is a speaker for the students at school - twenty-five students applied for this position. They wouldn't want to volunteer if they didn't think they were capable and valuable members of our community of shared responsibility.

This is how I know the staff is doing a great job in their classes: they listen to the students and let them make decisions for themselves. This is why they want to be in these committees and conferences.

Interviewer: Sounds like students feel "They are, they can, they may, they want, and they will!"

We have a one-year course for students from secondary schools who didn't get their desired qualifications. They often think they are in a losing /lost position and don't know how to go any further in their vocational life. Last year we had a Christmas party in the school, and one girl from this group sang a solo - in front of the 500 attendees! This trust in herself and us shows me the great job my colleagues are doing. This would never have happened if my colleagues were only teaching them knowledge... Really listening for students' personalities and creating an opportunity for them to connect with all their resources daily, makes stories like the Christmas singing possible.

That is what is most important for us. We know that every student has the competence to find their way – but sometimes (and that is more often than we would wish), they don't know this about themselves. We aim to empower all students, to make them aware of their competencies, be confident to use them and make them more resilient to face future challenges...

I am really proud to see them gain so much sense of self-worth and confidence – after just a couple of weeks. There was one student with disabilities who had no possible way to get a normal degree and to be allowed to go to university or anything like that. She illustrated the story of our namesake Inge Katz ("Roses in a forbidden garden – a holocaust love story" by Elise Garibaldi, adapted by a teacher in simple language) as well as making many other drawings, and now - guess what - she is studying art at a university! I think she wouldn't have had the idea and the confidence without her teacher who had an eye on her knowledge and the whole person with all her resources.

You know, I have plenty of stories like these...

This reminds me that Steve and Insoo were also working with families presented as "hopeless" by other professionals... Though we cannot know for sure that your uplifting stories and life-changing outcomes have anything to do with Solution Focus, I am pretty sure they have, especially with the

resounding attitude behind it! However, becoming solution-focused is a gradual process, and we never were at level zero.

Teachers here are working with and for people, they have tremendous experience, and they have the right attitude. (I happily undertook the Principal role because I knew this beforehand!) But along with the best attitude and intentions, it is still useful to have more tools that you can use - to have a bigger backpack of practical ideas as you face diverse and challenging situations day by day.

But SF is not only a toolkit for us, it's an approach that strengthens our backbone, nurtures our self-efficacy, and serves as an appreciative language for supporting each other. You can always call a team meeting, counting on the shared assumption that it is always possible to find solutions (and therefore not worthwhile to talk about problems). You can always be sure that you are not alone in the process of making useful changes in difficult situations.

SF also makes teachers more satisfied in their professional lives. We have to have this supporting and enhancing attitude, but not with an overbearing mind. Helping others to do well on their own means making yourself unnecessary sooner or later. Helping to the point where we are not needed is a coaching idea that matches perfectly what we sometimes need to learn.

This is the main idea of our vocational education: to support and coach them to be self-effective in their professional and personal life. To enhance their potential and be their best selves, to be sure they can and do things with a very strong backbone. I try to ensure the best possible working conditions so they can help students to help themselves and do the same with their clients to enhance a sense of self-worth and competence in whatever they do.

Interviewer: Sounds like your team's effort makes a big difference not just for the students but also for society.

It sounds so big as you put it... Usually, I don't think about it that way. But as I mentioned to you (or as I talk with Kati usually), I sometimes wonder: "Am I exaggerating?" Of course, not everything is golden in our school, I don't want to sound like that. Every vocational college is on the way to support students in taking responsibility for themselves and their work. But I am really proud of our school. We have good soil with good seeds, while SF provides us with outstanding gardening skills.