

Article 54

Building School Solutions From Students' Natural Resources

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John J. Murphy

Murphy, John J., is a Professor of Psychology & Counseling at the University of Central Arkansas. John is an internationally recognized trainer, author, and practitioner of strength-based brief therapy approaches with young people and school problems, and his work has been featured in the New York Times bestseller, *Switch*, and the videotape training series, *Child Therapy with the Experts*. He is a popular workshop presenter who has provided training and consultation to thousands of mental health professionals throughout the United States and overseas, and more information on his work can be found at www.drjohnmurphy.com

I am more and more convinced that our great problem is taking advantage of what we've got.

—Thomas Merton

One of the core assumptions of solution-focused counseling in schools is that every student has valuable resources that can be applied toward practical school solutions (Murphy, 2008). Instead of focusing on what students lack (deficits), we can build solutions from what they already have (resources). This article describes practical strategies for building school solutions from a variety of naturally occurring resources in the lives of elementary and secondary students.

My father was the first person who taught me the value of using what was available to solve problems. He was very handy and could fix anything around the house. While other parents made regular trips to the hardware store for their projects, Dad rummaged through our garage in search of the right tools and materials for the task at hand. He loved the challenge of finding and using what was already there to get the job done.

Renowned psychiatrist Milton Erickson was another person who discovered the benefits of using available resources to solve problems. Just as my father used whatever was available in our garage, Erickson used whatever was available from clients to construct highly individualized interventions to fit each client's problem. Regardless of the history or severity of the presenting problem, Erickson believed that every client offered valuable resources that could be creatively applied toward therapeutic solutions.

Erickson's "utilization of client resources" is considered by many to be his greatest and most enduring contribution to the world of counseling (Erickson & Keeney, 2006).

The pragmatism of Erickson fuels this article's contention that the indigenous resources of students provide efficient and respectful pathways to school solutions. More specifically, the article describes (a) the empirical rationale and advantages of utilizing students' natural resources in school-based counseling, (b) the process of discovering and applying students' natural resources, and (d) real-world examples and dialogue from counseling sessions involving a variety of students and school problems.

Empirical Support for Building on Students' Resources

Change is the essence of counseling, and our effectiveness as counselors rests largely on our ability to help people make positive changes in their lives. Empirical research on "what works" in helping people change offers useful suggestions in this regard.

Research on Common Factors of Change

The practice of building school solutions from students' strengths and resources is supported by decades of empirical research indicating that positive counseling outcomes result largely from a set of core ingredients or "common factors of change" in the counseling process (Duncan, 2010; Lambert & Ogles, 2004). These core ingredients fall into four major categories: *client factors* (personal strengths, values, life experiences, social supports, resilience, ideas and opinions, and other resources that clients bring to counseling); *relationship factors* (clients' engagement in counseling and experience of respect from the counselor); *hope factors* (clients' expectancy of change and confidence in their ability to improve); and *technique factors* (specific counseling techniques employed by the practitioner). These elements are interrelated, and the enhancement of one factor enhances the others (Wampold, 2010). For example, when students are encouraged to apply their own resources (client factor) they may become more engaged in counseling (relationship factor) and optimistic about the possibilities of change (hope factor). The ultimate success of counseling is determined largely by the extent to which these ingredients are activated throughout the counseling process.

The powerful role of client factors. Of all the common factors of change, client factors are far and away the most powerful according to the research (Bohart & Tallman, 2010; Wampold, 2001). Client factors or "client resources" include everything students bring to the change process such as unique life experiences, strengths, preferences, values, talents, opinions, resilience, and influential people in their lives. In a minute-by-minute analysis of 120 therapy sessions involving 30 clients, Gassman and Grawe (2006) found that focusing on clients' strengths and resources was a prerequisite of effective counseling. These findings confirm the therapeutic potency of inviting students to apply their unique strengths and resources toward solutions to school problems.

Other Advantages of Building on Students' Resources

In addition to helping students initiate changes at school, resource-based interventions enhance the maintenance of improvements because these resources are a natural part of students' lives and are not dependent on the counselor or social services

agency. For example, involving a student's siblings in a school intervention may sustain progress long after formal counseling ends. These resources were there before we came along and they will be there after we leave.

The ecological validity of resource-based interventions not only increases the likelihood that students will implement them after formal services end, but also enhances the cultural sensitivity and fit of such interventions because they are constructed from naturally occurring elements in students' lives. The culture-friendly, client-driven aspects of this approach are very different from the more authoritarian and expert-driven features of traditional models of helping. As Ridley (2005) stated, "While vigorously looking for psychopathology in... minority clients, counselors often miss opportunities to help clients identify their assets and use these assets advantageously" (p. 103). In recommending that counselors acknowledge and build on minority clients' strengths and resources, Boyd-Franklin (2003) noted that African American clients are often more aware of their problems than their strengths. Not surprisingly, this observation is true for most students who are referred for counseling regardless of their ethnicity and cultural background.

Research on empowerment also supports the practice of building school solutions from students' natural resources. For example, the research of Dunst and colleagues (Dempsey & Dunst, 2004; Dunst, Boyd, Trivette, & Hamby, 2002) suggested that students are empowered when they are treated as competent partners in the change process and encouraged to make use of their natural support networks and personal resources to resolve school problems. The next section describes the general process of discovering and applying students' resources to school solutions.

Discovering and Applying Students' Natural Resources

The number of potentially useful student resources is endless and includes areas such as *special interests and talents* (sports, movies, music, mechanical skills), *heroes* (parents, grandparents, siblings, friends, athletes, actors, cartoon characters, and any other real or fictional persons that students look up to and respect); *values* (students' deeply held values and beliefs), *resilience* (ability to withstand and cope with life's difficulties, including school problems), *community supports* (places of worship, social service agencies, and local neighborhood associations), and *solution ideas* (students' opinions and theories about the problem and potential solutions, prior successes with similar problems). Building on these and other resources in the lives of students involves two major steps—discovering the resources and applying them to school solutions.

Discovering Resources

Resources can be discovered by looking, listening, and asking for them. These methods are briefly summarized below.

Looking. In addition to listening and asking questions, we can sometimes identify resources in school files and documents. Vocational interest inventories and teachers' comments on report cards can be helpful in identifying potentially useful resources in a student's life. School files sometimes include information about the student's special interests and talents, and his/her participation in extra-curricular activities such as sports, clubs, and so forth.

Listening. Practitioners can pick up on potentially useful resources by being alert to signs of strength, interest, or excitement on the part of the student. I recall my first meeting with Miguel, a 9-year-old student referred for counseling because of classroom misbehavior. Miguel displayed more behavior problems in the two classes following lunch than any of his other classes. In the midst of our discussion, he said something under his breath that included the word “baseball.” When asked to repeat it, Miguel said that he would do better in school if he was allowed to play baseball for a few minutes between classes. We spent the next several minutes discussing Miguel’s love of baseball. He was truly a baseball fanatic who knew the names and positions of all the players on the city’s major league baseball team. He had been playing baseball since he was 4 years old. Baseball was an exciting and important part of Miguel’s life. We will return to Miguel shortly to illustrate the process of incorporating students’ resources into school-based interventions.

Asking. Most students do not spontaneously share information about their hobbies, interests, heroes, and other such resources unless they are asked about them. Questions for discovering and exploring resources include the following:

- Who helps you the most when you have a problem? What does he or she do that is most helpful?
- How have you kept things from getting worse?
- What do you think might help turn things around at school?

Applying Resources

Once a resource is discovered, we can explore its role in the student’s life and consider how it might be applied toward a school solution. Recall the above example of Miguel, the student who loved baseball. After a few minutes of baseball talk, we discussed how the challenges of school were similar to the challenges of baseball. We also talked about how long the baseball season is and how important it is to not allow a few bad games to ruin the entire season. Miguel agreed to try a baseball approach to his classes. He decided to “step up to the plate” each day and do his best even though he might occasionally “strike out” and make mistakes. Things improved over the next couple weeks and his teacher commented on his impressive turnaround. Miguel’s intervention emerged from his brief comment about a major interest in his life. As a result, he was able to get behind the intervention and do his best to make it work. As illustrated with Miguel, the success of any resource-based intervention depends largely on the client’s ability to accept it and apply it in personally meaningful ways (Bohart & Tallmann, 2010).

Building on Students’ Resilience, Solution Ideas, and Values: Description and Case Illustrations

This section describes three natural resources along with case illustrations on how to help students apply them to school solutions. Since it is impractical to discuss every possible resource that students might offer, I’ve selected three common ones that can be applied with most students and most school problems—resilience, solution ideas, and values.

Resilience

Resilience refers to a person's ability to withstand or overcome adverse circumstances in life. Research verifies that children have a remarkable ability to overcome life's challenges through the use of self-protective and self-righting mechanisms (Brom, Pat-Horenczyk, & Ford, 2009). While some people are more resilient than others, everyone has demonstrated resilience at one time or another. The following questions can be used to explore students' resilience:

- How have you kept things from getting worse?
- Why haven't you given up?
- How do you keep your hope alive in a situation like this?

Resilience-based questions convey our faith in the student's ability to cope with the problem. The most memorable lessons I've learned about resilience were taught to me by the students and families I served in one of the most economically depressed communities in the United States. David's story, which is described next, is one of many such lessons on students' irrepressible ability to bend but not break under extremely difficult circumstances.

Building on resilience: A case illustration. I met David early in his senior year when he was referred by his teachers for failing two classes and periodically skipping school. David's teachers said that he was academically capable of passing all of his classes and that he could make better grades by applying himself and taking school more seriously. David discussed several significant challenges during our first meeting. His father moved away when David was in kindergarten and made very little contact after that. David rotated between living at his mother's and grandmother's house six different times since kindergarten. His mother was investigated several times by social services due to neglect and abuse charges. At the time I saw him, David was working five or six evenings a week at a local restaurant to support himself and his mother. The following conversation occurred at the start of our second counseling session.

Counselor: David, with everything you've had to deal with in your life, how do you resist the urge to give up on school altogether and just quit?

David: Sometimes I think about quitting, but then I think about how close I am to graduating and going to college and stuff like that, and that keeps me going.

Counselor: So thinking about graduating and college gives you some hope?

David: Yes.

Counselor: And that helps you hang in there in school when things get tough instead of giving up.

David: Yes. I almost gave up on school last year, but I'm still here.

Counselor: Yes, you're still here. What's different about the new David compared to the old David?

David described differences between the new and old David, which included a desire to graduate from high school, go to college, and make a decent living. Various aspects of his resilient approach to life were incorporated into practical interventions for improving his school attendance and grades. These interventions were designed in

partnership with David and included self-talk strategies in which he reminded himself how far he has already come, asking his boss for a couple evenings off so he had more time during the week to complete school assignments, and allowing him to tutor a 9th grade student in math because math was his strongest subject.

Like many struggling students, David responded well to discussing “what was right” and “what was working” in his life instead of having to defend himself or rehash all of his problems. He readily accepted and implemented the above interventions—not a big surprise given that they emerged directly from his own natural strengths and resources. Despite continued difficulties at home and school, David successfully passed all but one of his classes, graduated from high school at the end of the year, and made plans to attend a local community college.

This discussion and example is not intended in any way to trivialize or minimize the seriousness of students’ problems such as child abuse, inadequate housing, and unmet nutritional needs, but to demonstrate that in the midst of significant challenges students are always doing something to survive and cope. That “something” is their resilience, and we can help them recognize and apply this ever-present natural resource toward improvements at school.

Solution Ideas

Among the many resources of students, their own solution ideas may be the most underrated of all. It’s not that they don’t have the ideas; it’s that they are rarely asked for them. The following strategies invite students’ ideas and opinions about possible solutions:

- What do you think might help turn things around?
- What could you do that would be really different to change school for the better?
- Since you know more about this than I ever will, I’d appreciate hearing your ideas about what needs to happen to make things better at school.

Students seldom occupy the role of helper or advisor because they are always the ones being helped and advised. As a result, they begin to see themselves as passive participants in an adults-only version of school counseling and intervention. The following questions cast students in the advisor role by tapping into their firsthand experience with the problem and potential solutions:

- What would you say to another 4th grade student who asked what she could do to pay better attention in class?
- If you were the counselor, what advice would you give a student who is struggling with this type of problem?

When placed in the role of an expert or advisor, students often develop new insights and increased accountability in regard their own school performance. It is not unusual for students to think or even say aloud, “I need to take my own advice,” after hearing themselves advise others. The following example dramatically illustrates the benefits of building school interventions from students’ solution ideas.

Building on solution ideas: A case illustration. One of my favorite examples of this strategy involves Molly, a precocious 10-year-old student referred to my colleague

Barry Duncan (Murphy & Duncan, 2007). Molly was referred by her mother for nightmares, reluctance to sleep in her own room, and school avoidance. Molly had just finished seeing her second therapist in less than a year. Her prior contacts in the mental health system resulted in a diagnosis of separation anxiety disorder, a prescription for anxiety medication (Imipramine), and twice-weekly therapy aimed at reducing her anxiety and improving her self-esteem and social skills. All involved parties were frustrated with Molly's lack of improvement, and she was being considered for placement in a school program for students with emotional disorders. Despite the frustration of two failed attempts at therapy, Molly's mother scheduled an appointment to see Barry in a desperate attempt to help her daughter. Something very different happened early in the first meeting when Molly was asked for her ideas and opinions.

Counselor: I have read the reports of your other doctors and counselors, so I already know what they think. Before I ask you anything else, I want to know what *you* think might help make things better.

Molly: You're asking me? Now that's a first.

Molly was surprised and pleased that someone had finally asked for her opinion. After some discussion of possible options, Molly suggested that she could barricade herself in her bed with pillows and several stuffed animals to ward off nightmares and fears. Details of the plan were discussed, such as which animals could be used and how Molly would explain it to her mother. The following exchange occurred one week later at the start of second meeting with Molly.

Counselor: How is it going?

Molly: Just fine. I'm sleeping in my own room.

Counselor: That's great.

Molly: Counselors just don't understand that you also have the solutions for yourself, but they say, "Let's try this and let's try that," and they're not helping. You're like, "I don't really want to do that." Your asking me what I wanted to do with my room got me back in my room. So what I'm saying to all psychiatrists is we have the answers, we just need someone to help us bring them to the front of our head. It's like they're locked in an attic or something.

Later in the session, Molly expounded on her experience of being asked for her opinion and implementing a solution that emerged from her own ideas.

Molly: I feel a lot better now that I came up with the solution to sleep in my own room, and I'm proud of myself. And I couldn't be proud of myself if you told me, "How about if you barricade yourself in with pillows, maybe that'll work." My other counselors never asked me what I wanted to work on. They asked me questions about the subjects that I don't really want to answer. They'd say, "Do this" and "Do that." I didn't want to do it. They weren't my ideas.

The counselor engaged Molly's interest and involvement by requesting her ideas and partnering with her to develop an intervention based directly on these ideas. Although students do not always provide such dramatic solutions, we have nothing to lose and everything to gain by asking for their opinions. Even when they say, "I don't

know,” asking for their input enhances outcomes by strengthening the counseling relationship, increasing student involvement, and conveying respect for their wisdom and experience.

Values

Every student comes to us with unique values that may serve as powerful motivators in building solutions. Sometimes we can pick up on students’ values and beliefs by listening to what they say and how they say it. Most of the time, however, we need to ask questions such as the following:

- What do you value most in your life?
- What do you want your life to stand for?
- What is most important to you?
- What kind of life do you want to have 10 or 20 years from now?

Building on values: A case illustration. She cautiously entered the office, sat down in a chair, and stared at the floor. Monique was a 17-year-old student referred by her teachers because her grades had declined significantly and she had recently mentioned dropping out of school. Monique was in a special education program for students with learning disabilities and had done reasonably well up to this point in the school year. When I mentioned her teachers’ concerns, she put her face in her hands and quietly sobbed. After a couple minutes of silence, Monique said, “I can’t take it anymore. I’m tired of it.” It turns out that she was a frequent target of cruel comments and teasing by several peers. Monique was understandably hurt by the steady barrage of insults, and she responded by avoiding her peers whenever possible. She even tried to sleep in some of her classes to avoid any contact with other students. Dropping out, both mentally and physically, seemed like the best solution to Monique.

In searching for resources that might be helpful to Monique, I asked how she had coped so well up to this point with the teasing and other challenges she faced at school. She perked up a little as she described methods that included talking to her best friend, listening to music, and praying. Of all these resources, Monique became most enthused when she described her strong belief in God and prayer. The conversation proceeded in the following way.

Counselor: It sounds like your faith in God and prayer is very important to you.

Monique: It’s the most important thing of all. I know that God is always there and wants the best for me.

Counselor: And that belief helps you.

Monique: It helps me a lot.

Counselor: How is that helpful to you, Monique?

Monique: It just always helps to know that God is there to help me no matter what happens.

Counselor: So you know that God is there to help you no matter what happens.

Monique: That’s right.

Counselor: You said before that it helps you to pray when things are not going well or when things are bothering you. Have you prayed about the stuff that's been bothering you in school?

Monique: (pauses) I've prayed some, but I should probably do more.

Counselor: I'm not telling you what to do. I was just wondering.

Monique: I know I need to pray more and ask for God's strength and help because I know I should stay in school. It's just hard with these people.

Counselor: It sounds really hard. I think it would be hard for anyone to go through what you have and not think about giving up.

We discussed her faith and resilience for a few more minutes, along with some additional strategies for responding to teasing. The following dialogue occurred at the end of the same counseling session.

Counselor: We've talked about a lot of things here, Monique. I've learned a lot about who you are and what's important to you and what helps you hang in there instead of giving up on school. You strike me as a very strong person with strong values and faith. With all you've been through at school, you're still hanging in there and trying to learn as much as you can and to make a life for yourself.

Monique: My mom always tells me that I can do anything with God's help. That keeps me going. I know God wants me to be as good as I can. If I learn a lot then maybe I can help other people when I get older.

Counselor: You're an amazing person, Monique. Thanks for meeting with me this morning. If it's okay with you, I'll contact your teachers and we'll set up a time for all of us to meet together tomorrow or Friday, and then you and I can meet again next week to see how things are going. How does that sound?

Although Monique did not want to tattle on the other students, she agreed to join me in a conference with a couple of her teachers to inform them about the teasing. When Monique and I met with her teachers the next day, they assured her that they would address the teasing problem in a manner that would not implicate her as a tattler. Monique was visibly moved by their support. She returned a week later to inform me that one student still teased her, but not nearly as often as before. She said that she prayed hard for the strength to handle things at school, and that she felt better equipped to do so. Monique's teachers reported that she was more attentive during class and that she had completed a few more assignments than she had during the previous week.

Monique illustrates how students' deepest values and beliefs, whatever they may be, can serve as useful resources in addressing school problems. Every student has values and convictions that are there for the asking. Helping students connect their values, beliefs, and other natural resources to school performance often increases their motivation, accountability, and investment in school solutions.

Conclusion

Building school solutions from students' natural resources is based on the practical, empirically supported notion that the most efficient route to positive counseling outcomes is often paved by what is already available in the lives of students. Every

student brings a variety of unique strengths and resources to the counseling table—life experiences, special interests, values, resilience, solution ideas, and heroes, to name a few. These resources are there for the asking, and I encourage you to make deliberate efforts to discover and apply them in counseling students of all ages.

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