



NARRATIVE SOLUTIONS: HELPING YOUNG ADOLESCENTS TO RE- ENGAGE WITH THEIR EDUCATION

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Guidance on narrative solutions intervention to promote re-engagement with education of young adolescents at secondary school

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Narrative Solutions Overview

The Narrative Solutions involves teachers or other education professionals, such as mentors, working with individual young adolescents (13-14 years old) attending secondary school. The aim of the intervention is for students to become re-engaged in his/her education.

Background

The purpose of the Narrative Solutions intervention is to re-establish adult guidance and support at this crucial time of a young person's life at school. More specifically, the intervention is based on the following socio-psychological approaches and theoretical assumptions:

- A narrative psychological approach which assumes that adolescents internalise autobiographical stories about themselves, based on their past experiences, which then have a strong influence on what they think and do
- To connect adolescents' narratives about school and their education to their lives outside of school so that it becomes relevant to them and is supported by their parent/s.
- That with adult guidance adolescents can change the stories adolescents have created about themselves by helping them to reflect on their time at school, highlighting their strengths, and re-contextualising their learning so that they are able to construct progressive narratives about themselves as learners.

Kind of Student who should take part

- Students with no other identified special educational needs besides displaying social, emotional and/or behaviour difficulties and disengagement from education.
- Students whose attendance is relatively good
- Students with a relatively stable home situation

Practical Considerations

- Need a quiet undisturbed room to be used every week (a classroom may not be the best place)
- Need to have the time set aside with no disturbances allowed

- Have the meetings set up well in advance in the same place at the same time every week

The Intervention

Meeting with Parent/s and Student (at school or at home)

The purpose of the meeting with parents and the student is:

- To talk about the parent/s' own experience of school and how this may have influenced their thinking
- To clarify what the parent/s and the student what they would like him/her to have achieved at school
- To explain what the intervention involves and that it will require the parent/s' and the student's support
- To address any concerns the parents or the student may have about the intervention

Session 1: Setting the Scene and Obtaining the Students Life Story

Setting the scene. This takes place before the intervention to share information and address any outstanding issues. You need to provide the adolescent with the following information:

- The purpose of the intervention (to improve his participation in education) and how many session you intent to have and for how long.
- Clarification of roles: You explain your role and the students' role in the intervention. You make it clear that you are only here to help and that the student needs to play an active role in bringing about change.
- That participation is voluntary and that the student needs to commit to attending the meetings and engage in some activities in-between sessions.

The student needs to understand:

- That you are working together to help him/her become more involved in learning
- That s/he has to be prepared to try things out in-between meetings
- That you will not be telling him/her what to do

- That any actions are agreed upon between yourselves.

The Student's Educational Life Story. The student is asked to talk about his life at school from when s/he started primary school to the present day. As this is a substantial story the student needs to break the task down into life phases or chapters. It is up to the student to decide how s/he would like to separate the life story into chapters. Here it is helpful to draw a timeline (starting with reception class to the present) on which the student can indicate major life events (e.g. moving house and changing school) and separate the story in section or chapters. For instance, if nothing substantial happened and s/he enjoyed his time at primary school then s/he may wish to make this into one chapter called "My happy time" or simply "primary school". Please note that most students do not remember a great deal from the first two or three years at primary school.

Once the educational life story has been separated into chapter the student is asked to talk about his memories of each life phase. You also need to ask the student to provide examples of good and not so good experiences of school at that time. Make sure that you keep a record of the good and the difficult experiences either by recording the interview (with the student's consent) or noting down what the student says about each life phase. In particular it is important to keep a record of any positive times and strengths the student has and also to record any recurring patterns of behaviour. An example of a positive time may include a period at primary school when the student got on well with his/her class teacher. An example of a recurring pattern may include the student being influenced by and wanting to impress the other children and therefore getting into trouble or relying on strong personal relationships with his/her teachers to get them out of trouble at primary school. Later on it is important that the student is made aware of these patterns as it these recurring and almost automatic sequencing of behaviour that you are wanting to break.

You need to write a summary of the student's narrative before the next session. You share the narrative summary with the student and make any necessary changes depending on his/her comments. The narrative summary should provide the student with a coherent narrative of his time school and highlight positive periods in his/her school life and recurring patterns of behaviour. Please see [Appendix 1](#) for an example of a narrative summary.

Session 2: Talking about what the student is doing right, what s/he would like to change, how s/he may be able to do so and what action s/he will take

Talking about what is going well. Before you talk about his/her current experience of school, you share the narrative summary with the student and make any necessary changes. In this session you talk about his/her current life at school with a particular focus on what is going well for him/her. You amplify those areas of school life where s/he is making progress or which are less problematic. The aim of this exercise is to collect information of the young person's strengths and for him/her to start appreciating some of his strengths.

Identifying what the student would like to change. After the conversation about what is going well the student is asked about what s/he would most like to change. For instance, this may be getting to school on time, staying focused in maths lessons, or staying class. The current situation is discussed in some detail and the student is asked what it would be like if the issue was resolved.

What the student is already doing right (noting exceptions). In most cases the student is already doing some of the things that s/he needs to do more of. Indeed the way forward often requires doing the right thing more often. Moreover, when things are going well it is often not reflected upon. It is considered to be an exception which is ignored, when in fact it provides very helpful information on how to improve the situation. There are two ways in which you can identify qualities and skills the student already has been using, albeit sporadically and to a limited extent:

- 1. *Looking at different periods and situations.*** Examining different periods in the student's recent past can provide important information for future action. The student is asked how things were last term or last month and if s/he was performing better or worse at that time. For instance, if on the one hand s/he was performing worse (and s/he has improved) from last term then you can ask what has helped him/her to improve. You then need to obtain as much detail about what has helped him/her to improve as possible. On the other hand, if s/he was performing better in the past (and things have become worse) then you can ask about what was so different in the past that things were better then. What is important to recognise here is that either way – an improved or a poorer performance in comparison to

last term - will provide important information on what may help the student to improve his performance in the future.

2. *Asking Scaling Questions.* The use of scaling helps you and the student to focus on what s/he can do to further improve his performance. The student is asked a scaling question in which s/he is asked to place the current level of his performance on a scale of one to ten. It is best to draw a scale from 1-10 (see below) and for the student to indicate on this scale his/her current level of performance. Then you should proceed as follows: The student is asked to think about where s/he is now on a scale of 1-10. Where 1 is the lowest possible level and 10 is highest level they could achieve.

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
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The student may for instance place her or himself at about level 4. You congratulate him/her (as s/he is not at level 1 or 2) and ask why s/he is at level 4 and not at levels 1 or 2. This is a very important part of the process as you are making the student aware of what s/he is already doing right and what s/he needs to do more of. All of this information needs to be highlighted and recorded as it informs the agreed on actions the student is going to take. Please note that it does not matter where the student places her or as you are using the line as a tool to encourage a change in behaviour.

Once you have both examined in some detail what the student is already doing well, you switch to asking the student what s/he can do to move up one level up on the scale (e.g. from level 4 to level 5). By concentrating on taking one small step you are allowing for a moderate amount of change to be considered rather than the student being overwhelmed by attempting to move up to level 9 -10 straightaway. Again you make a note of the suggestions the student has made. It is best to write the suggestions down so that the student can see them as well and you can talk about them in more detail. Indeed it is important to examine the details of any proposed action so that it is clear what they involve and what they look like when they are being implemented.

At the end of the session you and the student agree on which actions the student will take before your next meeting. The actions can vary from simply observing oneself and reflecting

one's action or engaging in new behaviour (e.g. sitting in a different part of the class). Most importantly, you check that the agreed upon actions can be implemented by the student and that s/he is motivated to do so. The action may include:

- That the student tries out behaving differently in a specific lesson or context (e.g. not joining in with disruptive behaviour or being influenced by other students)
- You talking to some of the students' teachers about particular issues (such as providing additional support or simply paying more attention to the student)
- The student bringing to the next session some of the work s/he has been doing and for them to carry out this work whilst you talk informally about what they find difficult about the subject or the class in which they do the work. These issues can then be reframed to look at what they are doing well in that subject / class or in other subjects and transfer those skills to this subject or class. to the class context.

After the Session. You send a summary of the meeting and the agreed actions to the student and his parents (and relevant teachers if you both agree that this would be helpful). The summary of the meeting should contain, what is going well, what the student would most like to change, where s/he placed her or himself on the scale of 1-10 and what actions you have agreed upon so that the student can move up one level. Please see [Appendix 2](#) for the kind of information you may send to the student and his/her parent/s.

Sessions 3-6+: Reviewing progress and improving or changing the actions taken

The content of these meeting is more flexible than session 2 as it depends on the issues you are addressing and the relationship you have with the student.

The aim of these sessions

- a) is for the student to describe and reflect on (in other words provides a narrative) of what has been happening in the last week
- b) To review the progress that has been made since last week and agree on new actions to be taken before the next session.

Talking about and reflecting on what has been happening. In the first part of the session the student describes and reflects on what has been happening during the course of the week. Here students need to be encouraged not simply to provide a factual narrative but to also provide information on what people may have been thinking and feeling at the time. In other

words to provide a detailed narrative, which includes reflecting on the thoughts and emotions which supported his/her own behaviour and the actions of other people. So you may ask the student:

- 1) Why s/he thinks s/he behaved/responded in this way
- 2) What s/he was feeling at the time and how this may have affected s/he behaviour
- 3) How come another person behaved in this way
- 4) What the other person may have been thinking and feeling at the time to explain his behaviour.

When focussing on a specific subject you may also mentor or coach the student in the area of the curriculum which they wish to improve. In other words you do some of the work they are doing in class with them to help them gain confidence and identify more accurately what the expectations are for the next session. This also creates a context for the student to discuss the any concerns and provides an activity within which to reflect on his/her responses and approaches to dealing with difficulties (e.g. giving up at a relatively early stage). Often students find it easier to talk to adults when carrying out an activity rather than in face to face discussions. This also creates a positive *scene* for the students to draw on and build their confidence to attempt new targets in that lesson. Please see [Appendix 3](#) for a case example.

In conclusion, it is important to help the student reflect in some detail on their experiences in class and to become aware that they are able students who can, once again, become successful learners.

Review progress and agree on new action: When discussing progress it is helpful to again use the 1-10 scale as this helps to focus on the progress that has or has not been made and what needs to happen next.

When discussing progress it is also important to obtain as much detail as possible so that an informed conversation can take place. Moreover, if you are focussing in on a particular subject area then it will be helpful to look at the work that has been done and to discuss it in detail with the student.

Agree upon actions that need to take place next which may involve yourself, the student and some of his teachers.

At the end of each session you summarise the progress that has been made (with reference to the scale of 1-10), the issue which were discussed and the agreed upon actions.

Please note: In any of these sessions you may also decide to focus on a new issue which the student wishes to address. This may be because the student has made sufficient progress or s/he wishes to concentrate on something else. In either case you will need to start with a scaling question and then agree upon actions (see Session 2)

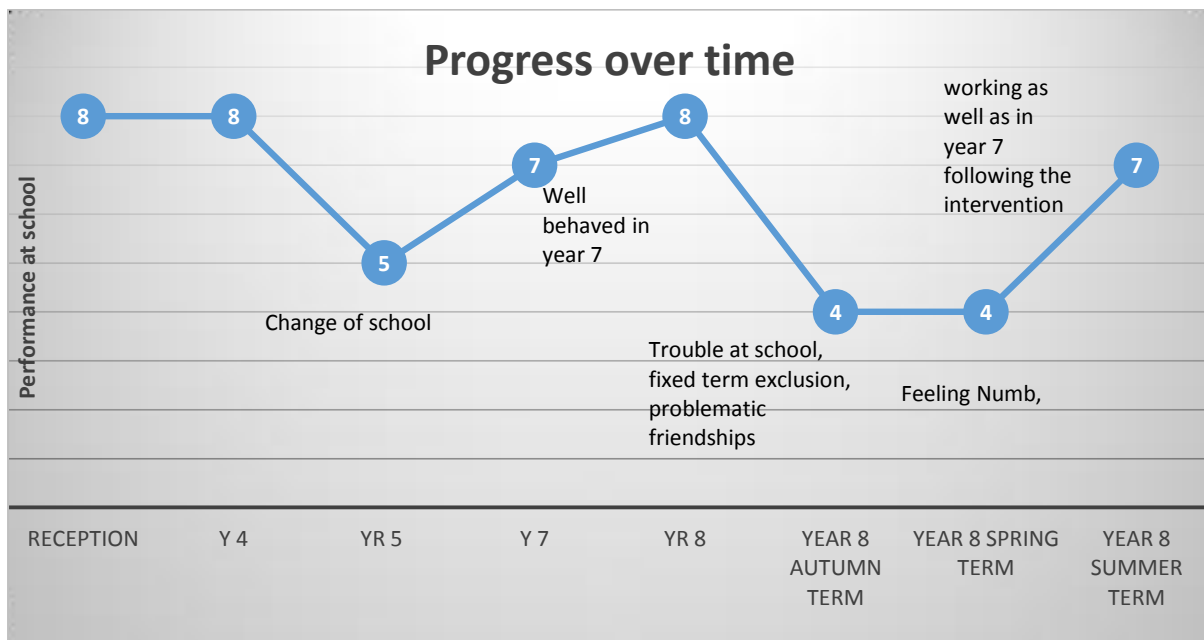
After the session: send an email or text to the student and his parent/s summarising the progress which has been made and future actions. This summary note is much shorter than the information sent to parents and students after session one.

Finally, it is also helpful to hold a review meeting with the parents and the student after the 3rd or 4th session. It is very important to hold this meeting both, when things are going well or when they are not going so well.

Final Session with the student: Review of progress made

In the final session you and the student again look at the narrative summary which you and the student had created after the first session. The student is encouraged to think about how s/he has changed from how s/he was in the past and the progress s/he has made. The aim is for the student to come away with a progressive narrative about her or himself as a learner. The process of reflecting on and interpreting past events involves:

- a) Slowly re-reading the narrative summary (completed in session 2/3) and asking the student not only to reflect on the events that occurred but also asking him/her what s/he thinks s/he may or may not have learned from that experience. In essence, what the student is being asked to do is to make sense of memorable life events in relation to her or himself now. In most cases this will also include the student having to explain how s/he has changed from the person s/he was in early adolescence. For instance, s/he may say how s/he is now much more thoughtful and reflective than s/he was then or how s/he is much less easily influenced by his peers.
- b) The student is asked to summarise his life at school. For this it is helpful to draw a timeline graph (see below for an example) on which s/he can indicate his well-being and engagement with education or performance at school over time. On the graph the student may also indicate where s/he would like to be in 6-12 months' time.



Final Meeting with Parent and Student to bring the intervention to an end

The purpose of this final meeting with the student and his parents is to congratulate them on the progress that has been made and to bring the intervention to an end. Moreover, the purpose of the meeting is to explain how the school, the parents and the student may continue to work together in the future. This meeting usually takes place at school.

Further Reading

O'Connell, B. (2005). *Solution-Focused Therapy* (2nd edition) London: Sage.

Ajmal, Y., & Rees, I. (2001). *Solutions in schools: Creative applications of solution focused brief thinking with young people and adults*. London: Bt Press.

*Durrant, M. (1995). *Creative strategies for school problems: solutions for psychologists and teachers*. London: Norton.

**Milner, J., & Bateman, J. (2011). *Working with children and teenagers using solution focused approaches*. London: Jessica Kingsley.

Milner, J., & O'byrne, P. (2002). *Brief Counselling: narratives and solutions*.

Appendices

Appendix1: John's Narrative Summary of life at school

John was a 13 year old boy in year 8. He provided the following narrative summary of his time at school at our first meeting.

I live with my Mum, and two older brothers one of whom has now left home. I don't see my dad. I went to the nursery at Redfern Primary School. I remember quite a lot from nursery and I still have some friends from nursery. I spend a lot of time playing with the blocks and I remember that there was a toy bulldozer which every wanted to play with.

In reception I struggle with Maths mainly because I started school later than most of my friends. Most of my friends were ahead of me. I enjoyed looking at books and reading in reception. The year 1 and 2 were quite good. We did a lot of PE, which I like, and we had really good teachers. We had the arts teacher who let us keep making different things and I was good at Art. My maths was also improving. In year 1 and 2 my behaviour was not that bad. I only got into trouble for being chatty and not working.

Then in year 3 I did not like the teacher. She was very strict and she was a shoutie teacher. She would make you stay behind. However, she did make us grow up and she did help me with my maths. So I think being strict can be good. I was also quite well behaved. Then in year 4 I was not as well behaved as in year 3. I found it difficult to work in class and much preferred on working on my own as in class I would get very easily distracted. I also acted big to impress others and because I had an older brother in year 5.

In year five I continued to act big, which meant, for instance, pushing other people around. Also when playing football I was more aggressive than before. I did the big I am with other kids in my year. I think that I pushed other people around not to get pushed around yourself. Also, I do not like losing. So when I lose I get frustrated and angry sometimes.

In year six I was quite well behaved because of the SATs tests. I stopped acting so big and preferred to work on my own. I work best on my own. I would summarise my time at primary school by saying that primary school was good and that I struggled a bit to stay focussed on my work. I could be easily distracted by other kids and sometimes I would distract them. I

was similar to other boys at the school. Also, I would get annoyed but then I would calm down quite quickly and do the work.

Transfer to Secondary School

Year 7: A little unfocussed. We now had a lot of freedom and my older brother would tell me to stand up for myself. Other kids made me act out and I was all gassed up. I was on report a lot of the time I found it quite difficult to cope with all that freedom and I now realise that you have to manage the freedom out. I was also messing about get attention and to make other people laugh. I did however behave well for certain teachers (for instance, Mr ..) and then in other lessons everyone got away with it. They were messing about a lot in year 7.

Year 8: Now I am a bit better behaved. My mum had a chat with me at home. She took away my phone made me go to bed early. The autumn term was good. It was good because I did not want to have a bad year again. But I still have still got problems in some of my subjects and especially in Maths.

The recurring patterns in this narrative are the extent which John is influenced by other pupils and his apparent need to prove himself. The positive signs are that he can work hard and behave well in class when he needs to do so and he seems to work well on his own. He is also able to calm down quite quickly. Moreover, he also appears to be quite self-aware of what it is that is often causing him to misbehave at school.

Appendix 2: email/text sent to John

Here is an example of a text sent to John after our second meeting

Dear John,

It was a pleasure to talk with you yesterday about what is going well for you and what you would most like to change. Following our meeting I thought it best to summarise what the talked about and what I think we agreed.

What you are particularly enjoying at school are the practical lessons such as ICT, Art and Sport. You like all the creative and practical subjects best. You are also getting on well with you form tutor this year.

What you would most like to change is your behaviour in Maths lessons. At present you get distracted easily by your friends and then you engage in disruptive behaviour. You realise that you are very much influenced by your friends. You also get bored sometime by the work and then you start messing about and act the “class clown”. We also talked about how already at primary school you wanted to impress your friends and that this often got you into difficulties.

On scale of 0 – 10 (0 = behaving badly in English and 10 = behaving perfectly) you gave yourself a 5. We then talked about what you are already doing to improve your behaviour and what you need to do next to move from 5 to 6. After some discussion we agreed that you would do the following before our next meeting:

- To think more before acting (especially about the consequences of my actions)
- Not doing what others are telling me to do and therefore getting into trouble
- Being more aware that other pupils may not be laughing with me, but at me
- Trying to get teachers to trust me again (not yet sure how I am going to do this).

Best wishes

Copy also sent to John’s mother (after having obtained his permission to do so)

Appendix 3: Record of Narrative Solutions Intervention with Alice

Alice (name changed) is a year 8 female student who struggles with work in lessons mainly due to low confidence and issues related to her home life where her mum has a long term illness. Simon Edwards (the researcher) was asked by Miss Roberts, the school based mentor (SBM) for the Narrative Solutions Intervention, who also teaches Alice, not to discuss Alice's family unless Alice wanted to as there were tensions at home between Alice, her mum and dad. During the second session when Alice's mum (Diane) attended Diane explained Alice currently had a number of agencies involved with her home life such as the Integrated Services Team and CAMHS. It was evident Diane was supporting Alice at home with social issues and with her school work.

Recording Alice's narrative

During the first of six sessions on the Narrative Solutions Intervention we discussed her life story starting at which ever age she wanted. Alice chose to start the story in years 4-5 and seemed happy discussing her happy and sad times in and outside of school. She explained she found her early years in primary school (years 4-5) happy as she had taken a lead role in her class for a whole school production of Joseph and his technicolour dream coat. Alice said she just enjoyed everything about this production. At this time she also had a new sister born and a new cousin. Alice recalled these happy times and precise memories of where she was when she got the call from her mum saying she had a new sister. Alice remembered the time, place and what she was wearing when the call came through.

In year 5 though Alice said she remembered she didn't like school as she had a teacher she didn't get on with. However, she did get on well in English and Maths as she had a teacher she liked. Alice explained she hadn't enjoyed school nor experienced happy times since the end of year 5. During year 6 Alice said she had a good maths and English teacher again and the head teacher, who was also her English teacher, used to joke with her and call her 'smiler'. This helped her be happier and enjoy English. She enjoyed maths as well as it was fun and on Fridays they would have early 'Murley maths' (Murley was the teacher's name) where rewards were given out for work completed. In year 6 she also liked cooking on a camping trip.

At home though her uncle had split up with his partner (who Alice liked) and had got engaged to his now fiancé (who Alice doesn't like). She also explained she remembered her relationship with her dad deteriorating during year 6 and that she now has a poor relationship with him. She has a reasonable relationship with her 3 year old sister though. From year 6 though Alice could not think of any happy memories inside or outside of school other than with her science teacher, Miss Roberts (SBM) who she really liked, had a good relationship with and in whose classes she achieves well. Alice said she particularly didn't like the maths and English teachers and didn't do well in their classes. However, when completing the initial questionnaires for the project it was evident that Alice wanted to do well was angry because she couldn't achieve the levels she wanted in these subject. This motivation provided the basis for the intervention.

Identifying an area for intervention

During the following session Alice's mum Diane attended and Simon read to Alice and Diane a summary of Alice's narrative story. They then talked about Alice's current experiences at school. Alice primarily focused on negative experiences at school and home though but did identify gymnastics she does once a week as a positive experience. One negative experience she constantly picked up on was failing a science exam she had taken since the last session. This failure had impacted her confidence across all subjects as it had made her feel as though she had done something morally wrong. This seemed to influence her negative view of current experiences. However, when shown the timeline again she noticed that she had done very well in science during the previous term. This perceived failure had knocked her confidence as she wanted to be a nurse as an adult and needed science to achieve this. Her future goals seemed to be in jeopardy. However, Simon referred to the timeline and reminded Alice of where she had previously done well, and also explained that failing a science test ought not to be made into a moral judgement about her whole life. However, said she now felt scared to try anything in science and other subjects now.

Subsequently Alice set personal targets in science which focused on attempting work set but taking the middle of three options provided by her teacher to 1) work either collaboratively all lesson with a peer (red), 2) work collaboratively for half the lesson and independently for half the lesson (orange), 3) work independently for the whole lesson (green). She also decided she would share her learning once in each science lesson over the next week to build her confidence again. Her science teacher, Miss Roberts, agreed to create a target card for Alice which Miss Roberts would fill in with comments related to these targets after each lesson. Alice would share her targets and progress with her mum as well, who would encourage her at home.

My-maths - an intervention vehicle

The following session Alice and her science teacher, Miss Roberts, explained that Alice had met her targets and was building her confidence again in science. Simon asked Alice if she wanted to keep these targets or look at another issue she might set targets for during the following week. Alice explained she was struggling in maths and wanted to learn but couldn't. Alice explained she gets frustrated at the beginning of the maths lesson when given sums to work out on the white board. Alice said she just looks at the sums and can't do them. In response Simon reminded Alice of her previous success achieving her targets in science and asked her what she had done in addition to the targets in order to achieve the success. Alice said she had worked independently for 5 minutes then asked her friend for support and had also tried to not give up as soon as she felt she couldn't do something. Simon asked if she wanted to apply these successes and targets to some my-maths. Alice agreed and chose six sums, equal to her current maths levels and set herself three targets; 1) work independently for five minutes, 2) attempt all the questions without giving up and 3) to complete some sums above her normal academic level. She then attempted seven sums, which were above her normal maths level and Simon made notes of her actions throughout. This took five minutes. His notes recorded;

Alice started by saying 'I'm really bad.' Then she got 4/4 questions correct but once she got one wrong she said 'I don't even know this' to which I responded 'Go on have a go, remember science.' Alice tried the next three sums and got two correct.

In total Alice achieved 4/7 correct sums at level 7. Simon then showed Alice his notes and explained the points at which she made negative comments and subsequently almost gave up after the fourth sum. At this point Simon had encouraged her to keep trying, which she had. Simon and Alice discussed how she had been feeling when making the comments. Alice said she had thought she couldn't do the sums told herself she couldn't do them. Simon showed her his notes and explained to Alice that her comments and negative thoughts were setting her up with an negative *'I can't do it attitude'* rather than *'what can I do well attitude.'* Once she had convinced herself she couldn't do the sums she almost gave up and had needed encouragement to try again. Simon then showed Alice his notes after she had started to try again, which showed she had overcome her negative thoughts by trying harder and believing in her ability. Simon then reminded Alice of this positive approach she had taken in the science lesson the previous week and that this had helped her succeed. Alice then set the same targets for another six maths questions, which were higher than her normal level but this time knowing that she could overcome negative thoughts by persistently trying. Alice however, decided that she had set a target which was unachievable in getting all seven questions correct. She subsequently set an additional target of attempting all the questions with a positive attitude but also setting a target of getting 60% of the sums correct. She subsequently worked for five minutes independently without support, completing all six questions and getting 4/6 correct; 60%.

Alice subsequently used these targets in the following week's maths lessons. Although at the following mentor session she said she had not had sums set that week she did say she had improved in maths and was more confident to complete work, raising her confidence from a 3 to 4 on the mentor guide scale. The following week she also started doing homework with her dad, with whom she said she had previously not had a good relationship.