

## SUMMARY DESCRIPTION

### **Narrative Solutions: Helping young adolescents to re-engage with the education**

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#### **Overview**

Narrative Solutions is an intervention programme for adolescents attending secondary school in year 8 and 9 (13-14 years old). The intervention aims to provide disaffected adolescents with adult guidance and support to help them become re-engaged with their education. The intervention consists of a narrative and solution focused approach, which focuses on changing the personal narratives adolescents have internalised about themselves as students by helping them to reflect on their lives at school, highlighting their strengths, and helping them to construct progressive narratives about themselves as learners

During their time at secondary school most adolescents become independent and motivated learners who are able to manage their personal relationships with other students and their teachers. Some adolescents though, find it difficult to adjust to the greater independence and responsibility expected of them at secondary school. They may not feel secure or confident in the classroom and they may feel less valued by their teachers who are not able to provide them with the same level of ‘parental’ support they had from their class teacher at primary school. In contrast to their more securely attached peers they are finding it difficult to cope with the level of independence afforded to them at secondary school. They become disaffected and start to associate with and are influenced by like-minded peers and their social status and peer relationships often become much more important to them than their academic progress.

The Narrative Solutions Intervention helps student to become more self-sufficient and independent learners by providing them with support and guidance and enabling them to re-construct a positive narrative about their relationship with school. A constructive narrative about school which will be based on the progress they are making in their learning rather than a narrative about gaining status amongst the peers through threatening/bullying behaviour or anti-establishment posturing towards their teachers.

The intervention also takes into consideration that adolescents’ personal story about school and themselves as learners, is embedded within the wider narrative of their family and community. With this in mind, an essential part of the intervention involves working with parent/s to help adolescents make the connection between their lives at school and the wider context of their lives outside of school. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the intervention requires the young person to take action between sessions, to break the pattern of behaviour and help them create a new narrative about

their time at school. Such a hands-on, solution focussed approach ,has the advantage of not only engaging in “therapeutic” talk, which often has a limited effect on adolescents, but also requiring adolescents to take action, which will challenge their assumptions and change their views of school.

## The Current Context

### The Narrative Solutions Intervention is set within the following context:

- The findings that adolescents start to become disengaged from education and disaffected when they are 12-14 years old. There is a drop in performance of students in the year first years of secondary school and government figures indicate that 60% of permanent exclusions from schools in England take place between the age of 12-14 years (Department for Education, 2015).
- The most recent annual report from Ofsted entitled the Wasted Years? (2015) highlights the continued disengagement and underachievement of students from disadvantaged backgrounds in secondary schools.
- There is increasing evidence that the most effective ways to increase students’ participation at school, engagement with education and reduce disaffection involve joint up interventions with families, students and educationalist working together (National Youth Agency, 2015; Tilton-Weaver, Burk, Kerr, & Stattin, 2013).
- The findings that young adolescents are particularly susceptible to peer pressure and the desire to be popular amongst their peers. Adolescents who feel less secure in themselves and/or have limited parental guidance may therefore need the support of mentors to help them resist the negative influence of some of their peers (Mayeux, Sandstrom, & Cillessen, 2008; Ryan, 2011; Tilton-Weaver et al., 2013).

## Narrative Solutions Intervention Overview

Interventions take place over a 6-9 week period where the Mentor meets with the student on a weekly basis for about 45 minutes (depending on the length of lessons in your school). To give the reader a sense of what the intervention involves the stages of the intervention are described below.

Intervention	Summary Description
Meeting with parent/s and student	At the start of the intervention the mentor meets with parents and the student. The purpose of the meeting is to explain the intervention, and listen to the parent/s’ and the adolescent’s views about his/her time at school. At this stage it also important to obtain the story of parent/s’ own experience of school and how valuable a good education is for them and their children.
<b>Session1:</b> Setting the Scene and obtaining the student’s story of her life at school	To Explain to the student the intervention and what is expected from him/her For the student to provide an autobiographical narrative of her experience of school. This is best done by separating the life story into chapters, for which the students provides a title (e.g. primary school years, before moving house).

<p><b>Session 2:</b> Narrative Solutions Session 1</p>	<p>At the start of the session the teacher/mentor shares the narrative summary with the student and adds any changes the student would like to make. In particular identify any recurring patterns in their relationships and their behaviour. This is then followed by a conversation about when the student was doing well at school (from last session) and what is going well now. Then the focus is on what the student wishes to change the most and how this may be achieved (for instance, Milner &amp; Bateman, 2011; Milner &amp; O'byrne, 2002; Payne, 2006). Initially it is often best to focus on those areas of the curriculum which the student is already doing well in. Once the areas which the student would most like to change are agreed upon the teacher/mentor and the student agree on which actions she will take before the next session.</p>
<p><b>Session 3- 6+</b> Reflecting on current events, reviewing progress and improving or changing the intervention</p>	<p>To talk about what has been happening since the previous session, a week ago. The focus is on helping the student reflect on what has been gone well and what has been problematic in the last few days. This is then followed by reviewing the actions agreed on in the previous session. The session may also include reviewing curriculum work with the student in the subject/s she is hoping to improve in. Here it is important that the student sees herself making progress. Towards the end of the session the agreed upon actions are improved on or changed depending on the progress that has been made. Agreed on actions are sent to the parents and if possible a meeting is also arranged with the parents halfway through the interventions</p>
<p><b>Final Session:</b> Review of the progress that has been made and bringing the intervention to an end</p>	<p>In the final session the student and teacher/mentor review the life story (created in session 1) with a focus on how things have changed in her life. Her it is important to emphasise how things are different to when she was experiencing difficulties at school. The aim is for the student to come away with a progressive narrative about herself as a learner.</p>
<p><b>Meeting with Parents and student</b></p>	<p>Meeting parents to bring the intervention to an end and to discuss how the progress made can be maintained.</p>
<p>Follow up meeting</p>	<p>Short follow up meetings with the pupil to ensure that any improvements are maintain or to take the necessary action of this is not the case.</p>

### Outcome from Pilot Project in two Secondary Schools

We conducted pilot interventions in two secondary schools with seven students in the spring term, 2015. Out of the seven students, one made almost no progress, two made limited progress (and needed continued support), and four students' participation and engagement improved substantially according to their own judgement and that of their teachers. One student was also identified as having made the most progress in the school.

One male student living with his mother was finding it difficult to concentrate in class because of frequently getting distracted by his classmates. He enjoyed the company of his peers and wanted to maintain his popularity in class. In consequence, he was doing less and less work and starting to become increasingly disruptive in class. During the intervention we obtained the “backstory” of his time at primary school and in year 7 at secondary school which illustrated to us and reminded him of what a good student he had been until reaching year 8 (see case example 1 below of John’s life at school). We then, with his mother’s support, encouraged him to behave differently in class and observe the impact this would have on his perceived popularity. He found that by focussing more on his work, his enjoyment of school was not diminished (and sometimes increased) and his popularity remained the same. One female student (described in example 2 below) also made substantial progress by providing her with specific help in Maths to initiate the intervention.

In the pilot study we also obtained feedback from teachers on the academic progress students had made. Overall these were very positive and encouraging. However, we did not have the opportunity to compare their academic performance over an extended period of time with those of other similar students. And in fact, the main reason for proposing a much more substantive research project (supported by the Education Endowment Foundation) is to collect quantitative data on student engagement and academic performance over time from a large number of students.

In response to the progress made by the students Simon has been seconded by the school to continue his work at that school. On the strength of the research conducted and the interventions we are submitting a bid for further funding from the Education Endowment Foundation and both schools have agreed to co-fund the project with some of their income for disadvantaged students eligible for the pupil premium.

### **Case Example 1: 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 better but I am still on report. I get bored and like to show off in front of my friends. I still got problems in some of my subjects and especially in Maths. [His current conduct and situation was then explored further in subsequent sessions]

*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. Most importantly, he appears to be quite self-aware of what it is that is often causing him to misbehave at school.*

### **Example of text/email 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 we 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 your 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)

## Case Example 2: 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.

### **Further Reading**

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