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BOOK REVIEW

Truancy as an Opportunity for Development? A Systemic Solution-Focused Approach - The Nine-Phase Model of Truancy

Johanna Kiniger

Carl Auer Verlag GmbH (Heidelberg), 2021, 199 pages, ISBN 978-3849790493, €22.95 (e-book available) (German language only)

Review by Katalin Hankovszky Christiansen

Solutionsurfer, Coach, and Trainer

At the beginning of this book there were the tears of a teacher. She was desperate -once again- to find further chances when it came to supporting a talented youngster and getting him back to school. Or luring. Or forcing. Or whatever. It is difficult to ensure that one's own possibilities as a teacher are exhausted, when there is really nothing left but personal concern for a young person.

Starting with the title, Johanna Kiniger sets you in motion, in dialogical struggles with a question mark and an apparent oxymoron. The subheading with the nine-phase model also made me sit up and take notice, action-guiding processes that have more phases than I have fingers on one hand... and the term 'systemic solution-focused', which is so widespread in German-speaking countries, both promise a certain complexity. It's already gratifying that one of the Forewords comes from "Max", a school dropout, and he also has the final word. Hope comes up as soon as you scan it, because "those affected" get a voice here, they have an active part.

The book is the publication of research work which earned funding from the Austrian Solution Circle in 2019, based on the author's master's thesis. Johanna Kiniger provides an extensive literature review to clarify the term 'truancy' with its history and related terms. She also provides an overview of approaches to school refusal. Process models and other illustrations help the reader to keep up. In short sketches (in chapters 8-11), the author describes her ideas and approach to making solution focus usable for her research. In doing so, she uses the wording "systemic solution-oriented approach", a common term in German-speaking countries.

She develops a pragmatic picture of consulting, coaching and qualitative research. At this point, the author refrains from a critical discussion of the terminology used, but her detailed procedure and research results effectively illustrate the chosen concept. This is arguably more satisfying for solution-focused practitioners than for those interested in capturing clear distinctions of the currents in the solution-focused approach.

In the qualitative research work, Kiniger focuses on the young people's school refusal as a coping action. The questions for her guided interview were created in cooperation with three school dropouts. When she uses a specially developed phase model, the author relies on solution-focused questions in the interview: "*Solution-focused questions stimulate individual solutions and open up new approaches and perspectives*" (Bamberger 2015, p. 72, as cited in Kiniger, p. 99).

The rich quotation material (in chapters 15-16) makes the voices of school dropouts audible and "solutions, coping strategies and new individual approaches" emerge.

The conversations show that truants increasingly learned to focus on what was effective or what worked well, that they developed visions of the future and were able to draw hope from it. Their wish for counseling, coaching and other conversations grew and they understood how to make use of such offers. A special insight is that former school refusers are in demand as interlocutors. Among the individual attempts to cope, it is often mentioned that figuring out one's own rhythm of life is helpful, as well as finding ways to distance oneself. Many use the time for creative activities and experiment deliberately with provocation or traveling.

The author lists in detail the competencies that the interviewees developed in times when they were refusing to go to school. Johanna describes the life skills based on the 10 core competencies of the WHO and adds technical and methodical skills.

The visions of solution that result from the interviews seem particularly stimulating to me:

- Changes in the school system and curricula
- Interdisciplinary subject 'solution competence'
- More systemic solution-oriented counseling and brief coaching
- Interlaced prevention, intervention, and rehabilitation
- Support groups at schools with external experts
- Participation, co-determination, and collaboration
- Expertise through gained (life) experience
- Changes in teaching, e.g., towards more flexibility and agility
- Systemic solution-focused developmental kit and platform for school dropouts (Kiniger, 2021, pp. 176-179)

It is good to read that the author is still working on this last item...

Reading the author's conclusion and summary gives us hope that "truancy" can actually be the "fact that a young person or child does not go to school and this behavior does not meet the expectations of the systems" (Rotthaus 2019, p.112, as cited in Kiniger, p. 81) and this can be used to renegotiate expectations and redesign options for action.

So this book is an encouragement for teachers, school social workers and even parents who face student dropouts. The questionnaire itself might be even useful for initiating conversations with actual truants. In a sense of prevention this is also a book for all school communities to think over their practice of participation and to extend the possibilities for development and learning of all.

The reviewer

Katalin Hankovszky Christiansen is a Solutionsurfer, coach, and trainer who works with teachers.

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