

# Simple Addition

## *Doing Things Differently Adds Up to Change*

**W**hat would a solution-focused approach to RTI look like on the elementary, middle school, and high school campus in your district? How would a teacher utilize a solution-focused approach to create a successful context in which challenging students performed masterfully? And how might each of those students respond to such a respectful and curious educator whose desire was to focus on their strengths rather than their deficits. Let's take a look.

### **An Elementary Discovery**

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Alice Cedillo did not realize that her worries about getting everything done for the achievement tests had affected her students. As an experienced teacher, Alice had always completed things on time, but because she was now in graduate school studying for her school counseling certificate, things just kept piling up. She was frustrated and needed to get just one more thing done before going on to the next lesson.

So on that warm afternoon in Texas, her fourth-grade class did what any class with an unhappy teacher would do. They misbehaved. As she tried to settle them down, one of her students asked innocently, "Ms. Cedillo, are you okay?"

A bit taken aback by the question, Alice replied with her own question: "Why are you asking me this?"

The student responded, "Because you are yelling at us more than usual."

Alice Cedillo was known for her outstanding teaching, classroom management, and humorous attitude, which always made learning fun. So when she became a bit irritable, the students felt her pain and it rippled throughout the classroom. My, was she a powerful influence. She recognized that influence when the student spoke up, so instead of putting the blame back on the students and telling them they needed to behave, she did something different, innovative, and very solution-focused.

“Hmmm. You are probably right. What do you think I need from you right now that would help me?”

Hands flew into the air. Alice was amazed. The answers ranged from “You need us to be cooperative with you” and “You need us to be quiet and do our work” to “You need us to be nicer this afternoon.”

Given these rather candid but sincere responses, Alice took the opportunity another step: “And what would that look like, just for this afternoon, in this classroom, when you begin being cooperative, quiet, and nicer?”

Again, hands flew up. By this time, Alice was at her whiteboard, writing down the students’ suggestions, smiling to herself. She went over the suggestions again and repeated them back to the students, asking how they would each begin doing those things on a small scale just that afternoon. They told her what they could do. The rest of the afternoon went perfectly. Alice was amazed—so amazed that she used the same strategy weekly, sometimes daily, and added a rating question to the exercise: “On a scale of 1 to 10, with ‘10’ meaning we are doing everything perfectly together that I want you to do, and ‘1’ meaning we are not doing very well at all, where would you want to be by this afternoon?”

When the students took on the task of making their score go up, they also took on ownership. They became even more responsible than before, even when the typical reward and consequences were given out. They also seemed proud of themselves, which Alice was quick to acknowledge. Alice was impressed with the way the solution-focused approach to classroom management worked, so much that she began noticing that her mood was more stable and her class even more delightful. The students, in turn, responded the same way. After one year of using the approach on an almost daily basis, Alice decided to take the solution-focused approach another step.

In the fall of the next year, Alice wanted to create the same environment with her new crop of students. Normally, she required that students always ask to borrow scissors, pencils, erasers, glue, or any other item from her desk—a sort of boot camp training to make sure that she had things under control. Given her good experience in the spring of last year, she decided to try something else. She designated an area of the classroom for her students, saying, “This is your supply table. On it are all of the supplies you will need this year. I want you to feel free to get what you need when you need it. The thing is, you are responsible for keeping it neat and orderly. You won’t have to ask to use these things. This is your privilege. You keep that privilege as you take care of things. I trust you.”

The students took better care of *their* desks than any students in previous years had done to take care of the things they borrowed. She began to wonder more about the solution-focused approach and how different it was from what she had learned about behavioral approaches to classroom management and discipline. Could it be that this new generation of students could become responsible without

needing an authoritarian environment? And could they become more respectful and compliant as a result?

## Intermediate Revelation

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In an intermediate school twenty miles away, Patti Gatlin, a school counselor, had concerns about her school client, Brian, who was returning from alternative school the next day. Brian had developed some behavioral issues over the past semester that had caused him grief and cost him lots of referrals to the office and the alternative school. While Patti had tried to gather Brian's team for meetings about how to support Brian, the team seemed to be at a loss on how to help him. Prior to this day, Patti had noticed that whenever Brian had returned from his previous stints at alternative school, it was with a good report; however, he usually rebounded back to his old habits after only a few days. This time, Patti was determined to do something different. She went to her principal and explained to him that there was a need for everyone, including Brian, to get a fresh start when Brian returned. Luckily, the principal was flexible and forward-thinking, and he said yes to Patti's request. That afternoon, Patti made Brian a new schedule. *When he comes in tomorrow, she thought, he is going to get a fresh start—and a new team.*

When Brian came in the next morning, he was anxious and concerned. He, too, wanted things to be different, but being an adolescent, he was rather stuck. When Ms. Gatlin told him he had a new team, he was skeptical but relieved. *Maybe this will work,* he thought. When Brian went to meet his team, he was impressed by their welcoming smiles and openness to helping him get on track. Ms. Gatlin told the team that Brian did well in alternative school both behaviorally and academically. He had the ability; he just needed a new context to show off that ability, and many of the teachers on his new team used a similar teaching style to that in the alternative school.

It has now been four months since the team change. Brian has had no further incidents with behavior. His teachers are able to teach Brian in the way that he needs to be taught in order to succeed. In a recent team meeting, Brian was assessed as doing well and it was noted that his grades are improving quickly. He was referred to as "pleasant."

## Raising the Bar and Rating the Middle School

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Ten miles away, on the same morning that Patti Gatlin held her first meeting with Brian's new team, the principal of a middle school couldn't wait to announce the results of the most recent state achievement test to the faculty. Excited and unable to contain her enthusiasm about the test results, she raved, "Some more

great news—the passing rate for eighth-grade reading was 96 percent, which I told you about last week. What you didn’t know was that the passing rate for the at-risk students was 92 percent. I learned at my meeting on Friday that our school had the smallest achievement gap for this subpopulation of any middle school in the district. That accomplishment was noted and discussed at the district meeting. Congratulations to Tonya Romine and her talented students!”

How did Tonya Romine, a teacher, single-handedly raise the achievement scores in a classroom full of at-risk students? I asked her, and she told me:

It began with one student who was at risk as well as enrolled in special education. I did an activity with my class, using the scaling question “On a scale of 1 to 10, with a ‘10’ meaning you reached your goal and a ‘1’ meaning you are far away, where are you?” I told students to put down on a paper the goal that they really wanted to accomplish. I said it could be something like passing TEKS (Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills) or passing eighth grade. I told them that it could be something small like turning in assignments or even using their planner daily.

Then I used myself as an example. I wanted to lose weight. If I tried to go straight from a “2” to a “10,” skipping all the steps, going from eating terrible and never working out to strict healthy eating habits and working out every day, would that work? They thought that was really funny because they have seen me eat! I told them that the same concept works for them. They got it. Together, we wrote things they would have to do, calling them “small baby steps,” and I asked them to keep their scales to refer to.

One of my students went from making C’s in the beginning of the class to making all A’s and B’s. When I was going over his grades the next six weeks, his grades were amazing. I asked him about it. I asked, “How did you do that?” He said, “It was because of you, Mrs. Romine.” It didn’t occur to me that he was talking about the scale he had created. It had made a huge impact on him. We recently got our TEKS test scores back, and he passed! He had never passed the reading TEKS in the previous years. This was the first time!! He continues to be successful! One last thing: this was also his first year out of resource reading! I have now told him that I have full faith in him, that he can tackle any obstacles that come his way!! In one week, he has the math TEKS, and he says he is ready!

Out of the nineteen kids who took the TEKS reading test, only three did not meet expectations; six of the nineteen were special education students.

## High School Miracle

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In Oslo, Norway, over five thousand miles away from Alice, Patti, and Tonya, Vibeke, a high school teacher, had just learned about solution-focused ideas at

a workshop. She dreaded going to class because there were two girls in her writing class that were bullying each other to the point that teaching had become a huge challenge. Vibeke had tried disciplining the students in her class, but the students rebuked everything she said to them. At the workshop she attended, she was introduced to the concept that there can be no resistance when a person cooperates with another person's needs. She also liked the idea of the miracle question. *I could certainly use one right now*, she thought. Approaching her classroom on Wednesday, Vibeke was ready to try something new.

The class entered the room, rowdy as usual. Instead of engaging in a power struggle to settle them down, Vibeke simply stood in front of her desk, quietly waiting until everyone sat down. The students were a bit surprised. Normally, there would be an assignment on the board for them to do as they were settling in. Today, the board was blank. When the students were curiously quiet, Vibeke began:

Students, I realize that I have not connected well with you this semester and that you are not getting what you need from me. There is a problem in our classroom with people being disrespectful, and I am in need of your help. Let's say that after you leave this classroom today and then go home, overnight, a miracle happens. When you return tomorrow to our classroom, things are much better. You can learn better, I can teach better, and everyone will feel more comfortable. What will be happening that will tell you that things are better for each of us?

Silence. When had a teacher ever asked her students for help? When had a teacher ever put control back into the hands of students in the form of rules or structure? The students sat silent for a long time. Vibeke was patient. Slowly, hands went up.

"People would be respectful to each other."

"School would be interesting. . . ."

"I could hear you teach us; it would be quiet."

"No more interrupting. . . . I would be listened to by the rest of the class when I had something to say."

"No name calling."

Vibeke was silently shocked at the students' answers. Some of the answers even came from two of the girls whom she had concerns about. Vibeke wrote the students' answers on the right end of the whiteboard. She then put up a scale of 1 to 10 and labeled "1" "challenged classroom" and "10" "great classroom." She asked the students to rate their class up until today. The answers averaged about 3. Vibeke thanked the students for their help. She said she wanted them to think about the exercise they had just done. Some of the students asked her if they could start some of their ideas that day. Vibeke told them that she wanted them to wait a day or two to think more about the exercise and that she would let them know when they would begin. On Thursday, the class was quiet and

ready, but Vibeke told them that she still thought they needed time to think. On Friday, she told them that she thought they should try the ideas for that day only and see how things went. Things went so well that before the class was over, she asked them to rate themselves. They rated their class a “7.”

The classroom ran smoothly for the rest of the semester. The issues between the two girls dissolved without Vibeke ever having to address them. Grades went up, and Vibeke, given more compliant students, became more creative with her teaching. The students actually policed themselves whenever a student tended to get off track. Vibeke’s other classes joined in on the rating question, and a competition for the best classroom emerged on its own.

## **Turning Chaos into Compliments: A School Counselor Creates the Opportunity**

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Back in Texas, a second-grade teacher, new in her profession and full of optimism and patience, had started off the school year with a vision. The classroom was decorated with information about current events, student artwork, a couple of fish tanks, and a pet rabbit. The lesson plans were fun and informative. Yet at recess and eventually in the classroom, the angelic children in Ms. Juarez’s class turned into bullies who threatened other students in their class and others outside their class.

By the time February came, Ms. Juarez’s patience had turned to frustration and she asked her school counselor intern, Amanda Clark, to help her with getting her class back on track and regaining management of her class. Amanda was prepared to do something different as she walked into Ms. Juarez’s class that morning. The students were a bit off task to begin with, and getting them back on some sort of orderly track seemed a tall order. Amanda put those observations aside, waited until the students became somewhat quiet, and spoke: “Hello, I am Ms. Clark, and I want to talk to you today because your teacher invited me to talk to you about some things that she was concerned about. Does anyone have an idea why I am here?”

The students’ hands went up, each begging for a chance to reply, and Amanda answered each one, writing their answers on the whiteboard:

We’re bad.

We pick on each other.

We aren’t nice to each other.

We talk about each other.

Amanda quickly dispelled the idea that the children were bad, re-describing them to herself as “talkative, assertive, and generally off track.” Her thinking kept her focused, open, and creative. Then, she asked them the miracle

question: “Suppose tonight, while you slept, a miracle happened. When you came back to school tomorrow, what would be better?” Again, a flood of hands waved. Amanda wrote down different answers that the students gave to her:

We would be good.

We would be nice to each other.

We wouldn’t start fights.

We wouldn’t talk about each other.

We wouldn’t pick on each other.

We would work together.

Amanda told the children that she really liked the last item that they gave her. She told them that they were going to play a game. She then divided the class into two groups. One group was to stand on one side of the classroom, and the other group would stand on the other side. They were to face each other. Then, Amanda gave each group a stack of construction paper. She asked each group to choose a leader. She told them that she wanted them to find a way across the room to the opposite wall by pretending that the construction paper was stepping stones. The leader was to begin laying “stones” (pieces of paper) one in front of the last, barely touching, until there were enough stepping stones to reach across the room. As the groups worked, they found that they could only get halfway across. They faced each other as both groups made it into the center of the room. There were no more sheets of paper to walk on. “We need more paper!” the students said.

Amanda told them that there was not more paper. Then she asked, “What are you going to do? How will you get to the other side?”

Silence. Then chatter. Then ideas:

“We can make both of our sides’ paper touch, and then we can walk across.”

“We can share the paper.”

Amanda applauded their answers, and soon, the leaders of both groups spread their papers out enough so that everyone could cross over, both groups walking toward each other, then passing each other to the other side.

Amanda asked the students to go back and sit in their seats. She then asked them to tell her what a *team* was. The students began talking rapidly about what a team did. Amanda again wrote down their answers. She asked the rating question: “On a scale of 1 to 10, with ‘10’ meaning you are a great team and ‘1’ meaning you are not a team, where were you this morning before we did this game?”

Most of the children responded that they were about a “3” or “4.” Amanda then asked the students what they could do to move up. The dialogue began to be about learning to be nicer to each other, being helpful to each other, and not picking on each other.

Amanda then asked, “Students, when you were doing the exercise a few minutes ago, who did you notice was already doing some of the things you just described?”

Hands flew up.

“Charlie did. He was nice. He’s always nice.”

“Juanita was nice; she shared the papers with me.”

“Ken didn’t punch me like he does sometimes when we crossed the room.”

Amanda asked Charlie, Juanita, Ken, and others if they had realized they were being teammates. They smiled shyly and shook their heads.

There were many more compliments during this time than Ms. Juarez ever thought possible. As she stood there, watching the transformation, Amanda asked her to write the names of those identified as teammates on the white-board each day. She also asked her to rate the class on a daily basis. The students loved the idea of the scale and of getting their names written on the board in a good way. At the end, Amanda just asked the students to do whatever it took to get noticed by their peers so that more names would be written on the board under “Teammates.”

## Education Unleashed!

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What happened to the traditional consequences, confrontations, and promises of an unfortunate future that any one of the teachers or school counselors in these scenarios had at their fingertips? They chose different options. They chose options that clearly took their system by storm and produced outstanding results. What were they thinking? They were thinking with a solution focus rather than a problem focus, and when it comes to Response-to-Intervention ideas, that focus on solutions opens up success for students who otherwise might never experience it.

## New Focus, New Process, New Results

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Solution-focused RTI is a process that involves less paperwork and more conversations that focus on solutions rather than problems. Are you sold already? Solution-focused RTI is

- A process that focuses on times when students are slightly more successful rather than times when they are unsuccessful, in prior years of school, current year at school, at home, or outside of school in extracurricular activities
- A process in which student referrals to special education are slowed down in an effort to identify competencies rather than problems,



resulting in an appropriate decrease in referrals and increase in academic success

- A systemic process in which behavioral issues occur less and compliance and respect grow through a new type of relationship that develops between students, parents, and teachers
- A process that increases teacher competence and confidence as student resources are brought to the forefront, guiding teachers toward more effective interventions and thus ensuring more success
- A process that is less rigorous for staff and that invites more responsibility on the part of students and parents, contributing to buy-in by parents
- A unique opportunity for educators to see beyond problems toward solutions, increasing hope and an awareness of what works rather than what does not work

Because it takes a solution focus rather than a problem focus, solution-focused RTI may at first appear to be “just more positive.” Caution! It is not simply more positive, optimistic, or simplistic. In fact, it is the opposite of simplistic, for it requires a paradigm shift in thinking for an educator. It will take the rest of this book to fully understand and put into practice the solution-focused way of thinking, acting, and responding. Understanding and implementing the process requires that you begin seeing success over failure, no matter how minute. It means counting minutes of success rather than thinking “He never pays attention.” It means tearing up a note to a parent that describes a child’s failure and writing a note that punctuates the child’s assets, *even if those assets appear only occasionally*. Is this a softer approach? Not necessarily. But it is a different approach, one that challenges us to change our thinking from “She will never succeed in this class with her study habits” to “When does she study more efficiently, even slightly?”

### Chapter Perspectives to Consider

In each situation discussed in this chapter, a traditional problem-focused approach might have had very different results. In the following perspectives, consider the differences in thinking that result from using a solution-focused approach rather than a problem-focused approach. Each change of thinking will lead to new strategies.

*Teacher:* What is my goal, and how can I enlist the help of my students to reach that goal? What can I do as their teacher to connect better with them?

*Administrator:* This teacher [or student] did not have a problem for the first three months of school. What was happening then that made a difference?

*School counselor:* How can I assist the teachers and students so that they see each other as competent and able to figure out what they would like to achieve?