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SOLutions In Schools (SOLIS): implementing and evaluating staff training in solution focused practice to support student-staff communication, relationships, and wellbeing

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In the UK, it is reported that one in five children have a probable mental health disorder. Schools are key environments for promoting mental wellbeing; however, many school staff lack training in supporting student wellbeing. Furthermore, classroom behaviour when students are not behaving as expected is challenging for staff to understand and manage. A focus on discipline impacts negatively on students' school experiences, learning and wellbeing, as well as staff job satisfaction. Low school attendance and high numbers of students in detention affects learning and future life chances. "SOLutions In Schools" (SOLIS) is an innovative whole-school programme, training staff to use solution focused practice in their everyday conversations with students. Developed through a co-design process in an all-through school in England, the programme trains staff to have positive, strengths-based conversations to improve student engagement, staff-student relationships, and wellbeing. The aim of this paper is to report (1) how the training and programme components were implemented in practice; (2) staff evaluation of the training; (3) further development of the programme in response to student and staff needs; and (4) early feedback from staff. Methods: Participatory action research (PAR) was used to iteratively co-design and refine staff training and programme implementation. 240 staff were trained. Training feedback questionnaires ($n = 114$) were administered and analysed descriptively. Results: The training was feasible to implement and highly acceptable to staff. The programme components have been implemented into teaching and behaviour management strategies. The programme offers a potentially sustainable, evidence-based model for working in a strengths-based paradigm to enhance wellbeing cumulatively through everyday school interactions. Future research will explore the programmes' impact on wellbeing, behaviour, and staff job satisfaction.

KEYWORDS
mental wellbeing, schools, solution focused practice, students, teachers

1 Introduction

In this paper, we describe the implementation of an innovative whole-school solution focused programme, "SOLutions In Schools" (SOLIS). In the UK, one in five children have a probable mental health disorder (NHS Digital, 2023). Schools have a statutory duty to promote student wellbeing and are key environments to deliver prevention and early intervention around child mental health (Public Health England and Department for Education, 2021). In the UK, whole-school approaches are recommended, in which the entire school community works together to promote positive wellbeing (Public Health England and Department for Education, 2021). Wellbeing is known to improve educational success and life trajectories, enabling better school attendance, readiness to learn, fewer behavioural problems, and helping children to develop confidence and their overall resilience (Public Health England and Department for Education, 2021). However, most school staff (e.g., subject teachers) are generally not trained in supporting wellbeing. Moreover, staff commonly report lacking the skills, resources, and adequate training to support student wellbeing (Department for Education, 2024c; O'Reilly et al., 2018).

Managing classroom behaviour is also a challenge for teachers. In the 2024/25 UK national behaviour survey, teachers reported that for every 30 min of lesson time, 7 were lost due to misbehaviour (Department for Education, 2025a). Many young people feel overwhelmed by the demands of school yet are responded to with punishment, particularly those with mental health problems, living in poverty, or from racially minoritised backgrounds (Jay et al., 2023; John et al., 2022; Mind, 2021). Students with Black Caribbean heritage are more likely to be permanently excluded from school than their peers, even once disadvantage is controlled for, indicating the role of ethnicity in different disciplinary outcomes (Department for Education, 2022). Time in detention (commonly referred to as "reflection") or otherwise out of the classroom is time not spent learning, which contributes to increasing the attainment gap. Even brief periods out of learning reduce attainment: missing just 10 days can lower the likelihood of meeting expected standards by 25%–50%, with the greatest impact on students eligible for Free School Meals (a proxy measure of deprivation), who are already over-represented in lower attendance bands (Department for Education, 2025b). Large-scale analysis of England's National Pupil Database found that Free School Meals eligibility is a predictor of school exclusion at Key Stage 4 (Gorard et al., 2025).

Poor relationships with school staff also negatively impact pupils' learning, concentration, and motivation to attend school (Department for Education, 2024a, 2024d). Managing behaviour significantly impacts on staff stress, job satisfaction, and retention (Department for Education, 2024b). A 2024 survey of UK teachers found that 77% considered leaving education in the last 12 months (Tes, 2024). Most UK school strategies focus on resilience and a growth mindset, providing children with capabilities for life beyond school (Public Health England and Department for Education, 2021). School staff such as teachers are subject experts and are not usually trained in how to communicate with pupils to foster a growth mindset, particularly when challenges arise.

Solution focused practice (SFP) offers a different paradigm for everyday school conversations: instead of problems, it focuses on what students want to work towards and how they want to be better in the future (de Shazer, 1985). This approach explores times when problems are not happening, how this is achieved, and emphasises student resources and past successes. This is relevant for all ages and many challenges that young people face, including behaviour, attendance, learning, and self-esteem. The approach can be tailored to diverse educational needs (including autism; Kellett and Bell, 2025) and contexts.

SFP, when delivered to individual students by specialist professionals (e.g., mental health professionals) in schools, is effective in improving student wellbeing (Franklin et al., 2022; Karababa, 2024; Kim and Franklin, 2009). Solution focused techniques also improve communication with parents/carers (Furman, 2024; Metcalf, 2003), which is critical as better communication between schools and parents can resolve emotional and behavioural difficulties earlier (Smith et al., 2022). Studies of classroom delivered SFP show that teachers report increased confidence, greater effectiveness as classroom managers, and improved classroom control (Brown et al., 2012; Fernie and Cubeddu, 2016; Ghataorhe Johnson et al., 2026; Kelly et al., 2011; Lloyd et al., 2012). All these outcomes are likely to impact on staff wellbeing and morale.

This paper describes the process of iteratively implementing a whole-school solution focused programme. Training school staff in SFP to use in everyday conversations as part of a whole-school offer is an innovative approach to improving mental wellbeing, communication, and staff job satisfaction. Embedding in-house expertise also optimises sustainability rather than relying on mental health professionals, potentially helping staff to do more within the constraints of their current resources.

1.1 The SOLutions In Schools (SOLIS) programme

SOLIS is a whole-school solution focused programme that involves training school staff in SFP for use in their everyday conversations with students, colleagues, and parents/carers (authors names removed for peer review). There are five components (see Figure 1). SFP is embedded as a whole-school ethos, ensuring that the teaching philosophy and wider school culture reflect solution focused principles. Second, whole-class strategies help staff to create and maintain a positive classroom atmosphere, including techniques for helping students to stay on task when the class is losing focus. Third, conversations with individual students (and colleagues) emphasise how to have constructive conversations about moving towards the future they want (rather than on what is going wrong). Fourth, staff communication focuses on using positive language during meetings and the use of conversation stems to reflect on what is working well and to amplify these successes. Furthermore, self-regulation strategies are encouraged, to help staff to stay calm in challenging situations. Finally, a focus on parent/carer communication supports staff in using positive communication during phone calls home (often when the student is not behaving as expected) and in parent meetings. This includes helping staff and parents to shift from problem-focused to goal-

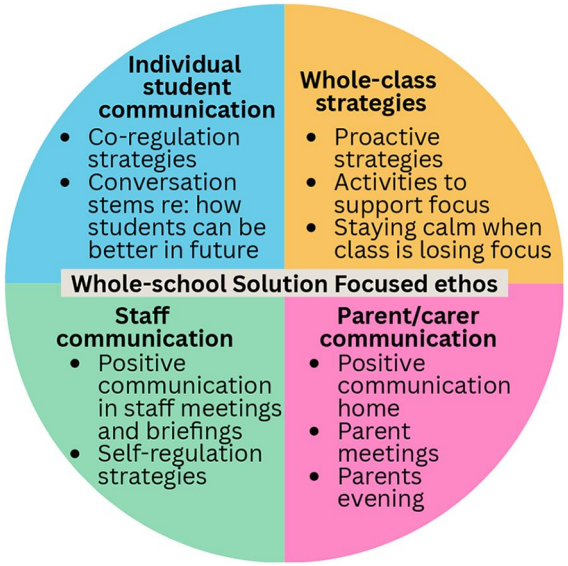

FIGURE 1
SOLIS programme components.

focused discussions and identifying exceptions – times when difficulties occur less often, with lower intensity, or not at all.

1.1.1 The SOLIS programme logic model

The SOLIS logic model (Figure 2) is underpinned by systemic, social constructionist, and positive psychology theories around SFPs' change processes (Durrant, 1993). The model emphasises a teaching philosophy and culture that recognises students as the experts in their own lives, with the skills and resources to achieve the future they want, particularly when challenges arise. Staffs' consistent use of strengths-based language towards the students' desired future increases positive emotional states, such as happiness and – central to SFP – hope (Froerer et al., 2018). Fredrickson's (1998) broaden-and-build theory (Fredrickson, 1998) provides the connection between experiencing positive emotions and the impact on actions and behaviour. The model proposes that experiencing an increase in positive emotions means the student is open to new ways of thinking and motivated to change their behaviour or try new things: the "broadening" phase, i.e., developing a growth mindset. Consistent experiences of positive emotions, over time, encourages the student to notice and build on their strengths and helpful behaviours they already do while also adopting new behaviours: the "building" phase (Kim and Franklin, 2015).

We propose that the early impacts of these experiences for the student(s) include improved hope, self-esteem, solution thinking, sense of competency, school engagement, and relationships with school staff and peers. For school staff, potential early impacts include confidence and skills in supporting students. Longer-term proposed impacts for students include improved mental wellbeing, social functioning, and quality of life. For staff, we propose that this more enjoyable way of working may lead to improved work wellbeing and job satisfaction. Wider impacts on the school may include reduced behavioural escalation (e.g., fewer removals from class, reduced reliance on senior staff intervention, and fewer reflections, parental involvement, suspensions, and exclusions), as staff adopt solution focused responses that interrupt cycles of repeated sanctions, disengagement, and serious outcomes (e.g., suspension).

1.2 Aims

In this paper, we describe the process of implementing a whole-school solution focused programme, and training staff as part of this programme, in an inner-city, multicultural, all-through (ages 4–18) school in England.

The research questions were:

1. How was the training and programme implemented in practice?
2. What is the feasibility and acceptability of staff training?
3. How was the programme further developed in response to student and staff needs?
4. What is early feedback from staff on the programme and potential for embedding in school policies?

2 Materials and methods

2.1 Research design

The training was co-designed with the school, including regular meetings with the Senior Leadership Team (SLT) and other staff including year heads, teachers, and pastoral staff, to refine the content and delivery. We employed a Participatory Action Research (PAR) approach to implement the programme. This is a collaborative, iterative approach that prioritises the expertise of stakeholders in generating meaningful insights and actions (Cornish et al., 2023). PAR aligns with the aim of fostering practical change and empowerment among school stakeholders. Furthermore, SFP is strongly aligned with co-design and PAR as it is a process whereby the end user identifies what is working well and what could be better (the solutions), viewing them as the experts. In practice, the research team introduced the processes and principles of SFP, and participants (school staff, students, parents/carers) identified relevant situations and settings. The data presented in this paper focuses on school staff participants – findings from school students and parents/carers will be presented in future outputs. Through a two-way, collaborative process, we worked together to iteratively refine the training content and focus along with the programme implementation process. We jointly identified what action was needed by discussing emerging priorities together. For example, in the introductory training session, school staff participants identified a need for further training in whole classroom management. This was then actioned and feedback from school staff was obtained, informing subsequent training content and programme focus.

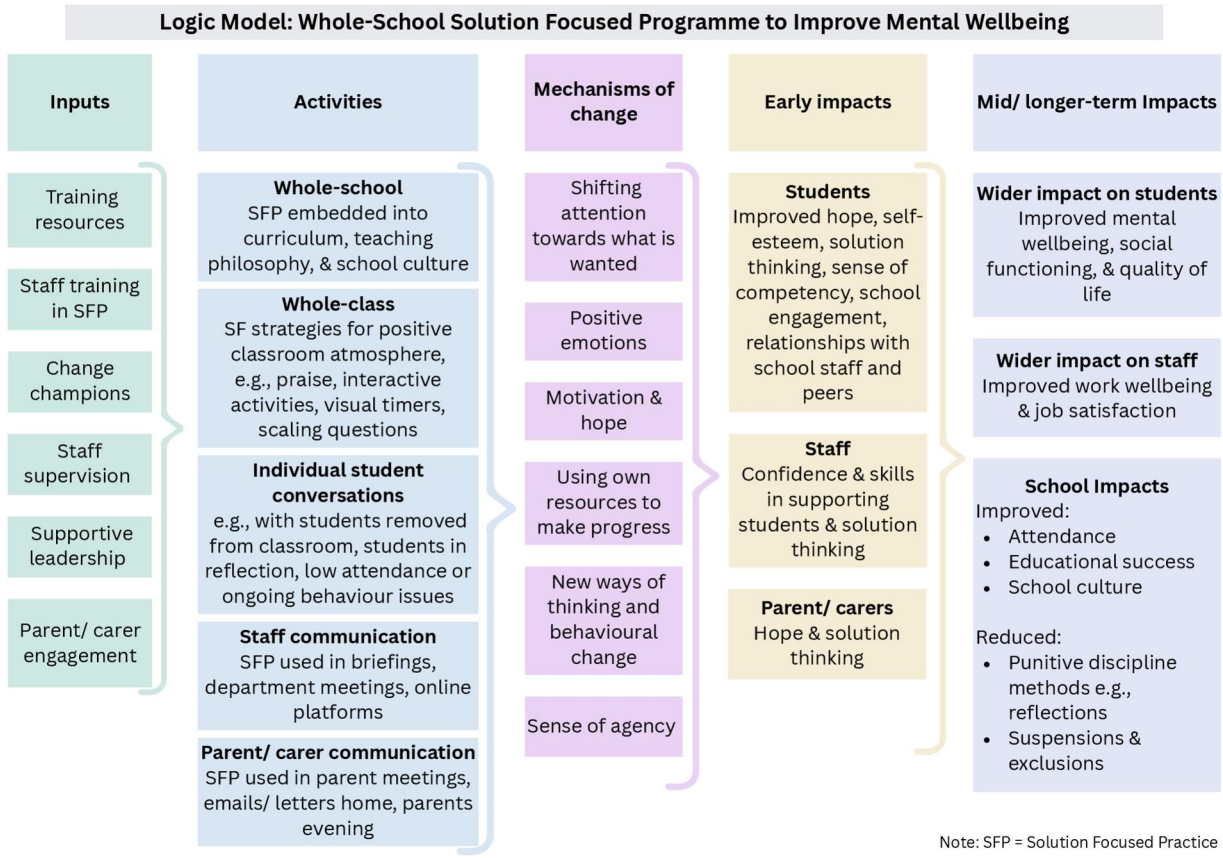

FIGURE 2
Logic model of the SOLIS programme (note: brackets indicate chronological progression from one component to the next).

2.2 Setting

The setting was a large (2,000 students), inner-city, all-through comprehensive school in England. The school comprised primary (ages 4–11), secondary (ages 11–16), and sixth-form stages (ages 16–18). The school was situated in an area with high levels of socioeconomic deprivation and a highly racially minoritised population. Many children living in this area (and therefore attending the school) are from minority ethnic backgrounds and experience poverty. Although demographic information was not collected from school staff, the wider demographic profile of the area suggests that staff ethnic diversity is likely to be high.

2.3 Ethical considerations

Ethical approval to conduct the study was granted by the City St. George's, University of London School of Health and Medical Sciences Research Ethics Committee (REC REF ETH2425-2380). The school Principal gave permission to conduct the study. Electronic and paper voluntary informed consent to participate in the study was obtained from staff prior to delivering the training. Participants were informed about their right to withdraw from the study at any time. Declining to participate in the study did not affect participants' right to receive training.

Ethical considerations of PAR included recognising and minimising the power dynamics present both within the school system (i.e., hierarchies among professional roles) and between the research team and the school. A key strength of the co-design and PAR process followed in this study was including school stakeholders in all decision-making stages of the project, from conceptualisation to implementation and evaluation. Decisions about what actions to take were made through iterative, two-way dialogue with members of the school community from across its levels – the SLT, teachers, pastoral, support, and administrative staff, and importantly, students and their parents/carers. This allowed participants to influence priorities, refine training content, and encouraged a sense of ownership, ultimately increasing the likelihood of acceptability and relevance. In practice, techniques to minimise power dynamics included: framing the project as collaborative from the outset; emphasising the expertise and knowledge of school stakeholders as essential to ensure its relevance to their needs; maintaining shared decision-making through regular meetings and discussion forums (e.g., staff meetings; student and parent/carer advisory groups); and researcher reflexivity during research team meetings. This included reflecting on the researchers' positionality and how this may influence our interpretations and decision-making during the study. The research team were all White female researchers collaborating with multicultural school stakeholders. Being attentive to the potential for cultural differences, we sought continual feedback from stakeholders to ensure that each PAR cycle and associated actions were contextually grounded.

2.4 Data collection: recruitment and procedure

A member of the SLT invited all staff ($n = 240$) to participate in the research study. This included teachers, support staff (Teaching Assistants, pastoral staff, administrators), and the SLT. Staff who consented ($N = 171$) were asked to complete pre- and post-training questionnaires, which were developed for the study. The pre-training questionnaire included two items: the first asked staff what they hoped to achieve from the training, and the second asked what key issues they felt SFP could help them address in their professional roles. This was used to refine the training content prior to delivery. The post-training questionnaire contained five Likert-scale items assessing the extent to which participants agreed that SFP had potential to improve their conversations at school, enhance student and staff mental wellbeing, and whether they would like further training in SFP. Six additional open-ended questions invited participants to describe what they found helpful about the training, what they enjoyed, what could be improved, what further training or support they would find useful, and how they would like to apply SFP in their work. "Live" feedback from staff was also obtained during training and on a flexible basis during programme delivery, informing subsequent training and supervision delivery. A brief interview was conducted with the Assistant Principal in the secondary school to gather early feedback on the programme. This was audio recorded, transcribed, and anonymised.

2.5 Data analysis

Training feedback questionnaire data was analysed descriptively. Quantitative items were summarised using descriptive statistics (frequencies and percentages for categorical variables). Qualitative items and the brief interview were uploaded into NVivo 15 (Lumivero, 2024). Inductive codes were generated to capture salient aspects of participants' experiences. Codes were subsequently grouped into broader categories representing, for example, commonly reported elements of the training.

3 Results

3.1 How was the training implemented in practice?

3.1.1 Training model and scheduling

The research team worked with the SLT to decide how and when all staff would receive introductory training in SFP and to schedule follow-up training sessions. Six follow-up sessions over one academic year were agreed via consultation with the schools' Continuing Professional Development (CPD) Lead.

It was agreed that 25 key staff members – identified by the SLT as "change champions" – would undertake more intensive training. This group consisted of Vice Principals ($n = 4$), Assistant Principals ($n = 3$), Heads of Year ($n = 7$), Heads of School ($n = 1$), Teachers ($n = 7$), Teaching Assistants ($n = 4$), Teaching and Learning Coordinators ($n = 1$), and Education Welfare Officers ($n = 1$). Some staff held concurrent roles, so totals exceed the number of participants.

3.1.2 Training content

Training was a mix of presentation, exercises, role plays, videos, and discussion. The 2-day training was an extension of the introductory 90-minute training and included further time for exercises and discussion. Training included core solution focused concepts, namely shifting staff mindsets from problem-focused to solution focused thinking; proactive classroom strategies to encourage student focus and engagement; scaling questions (asking participants to rate progress towards their "best hopes" on a 0–10 scale); and identifying student strengths (see Table 1). Training content was tailored to the needs of students at this specific school, drawing on our earlier co-design work (Robinson and McCabe, 2024). For example, in our previous work, some students from racially minoritised backgrounds or experiencing economic disadvantage spoke about the importance of avoiding disciplinary consequences which may disproportionally affect them. Therefore, the importance for these students of having an adult who believes in them and their ability to achieve was threaded throughout the training.

3.1.3 Ongoing staff training and supervision

Six further training sessions of 45 minutes length are ongoing, scheduled over one academic year. These have been held with secondary school staff only, due to practical constraints of holding them in the primary school. Training sessions have been developed iteratively in response to staff needs, which have included:

- Whole classroom management: Upskilling staff to refocus students and manage behaviour within the classroom rather than using the "on call" system to obtain support from designated senior staff. This training used the principles of positive discipline and "connection before correction" – connecting with students first before collaborative solution building to address an issue (Nelsen et al., 2013).
- A live solution focused conversation between one of the trainers and a student who was regularly removed from the classroom.
- Emotional co-regulation: In and outside the classroom – using staffs' calm presence, words, and actions to help a student to regulate their emotions.
- Parent communication: Solution focused communication with parents and carers.
- Staff wellbeing: Staff wellbeing and self-regulation techniques, to help staff to stay calm in challenging situations.

Furthermore, a solution focused WhatsApp group (for both primary and secondary staff) has been introduced after informal feedback during training suggested that staff valued the opportunity to discuss how the approach could be used for specific scenarios and felt this would be useful during real-time situations. The group enables staff to reflect, ask questions, share successes, and receive feedback from the research team and their colleagues.

TABLE 1 Content of the SOLIS programme staff training.

Training component	Key content	Example techniques and exercises
SFP as a mindset shift	Reframing children's challenges from problems into positive attributes or skills to be learnt (Furman, 2024)	Lollipop stick exercise: Staff invited to reframe words describing children's challenges (e.g., defiant, dramatic, hyperactive, anxious and moody) into positive attributes by writing an alternative word on a lollipop stick. Staff invited to reframe problem behaviours (e.g., "I want you to stop shouting out in class") as a skill to be learnt ("I'd like you to raise your hand and wait for permission to talk").
Whole-class positive strategies ("quick wins in the classroom")	Proactive strategies to create a positive classroom atmosphere and keep students focused on learning	Lesson starters ("how can we be at our best today?"), visual timers and brain breaks (e.g., movement, quick games), rewards, games, and interactive activities (e.g., ladders of incentives for positive behaviour, celebration events). Conversation stems for when the class is losing focus: (a) acknowledging that it is difficult for the class to focus; (b) noticing the small positives happening in the classroom; (c) inviting students to think about how they could keep on track for the remainder of class, (e.g., "*even though* it's hard for us to focus**,** *I'm noticing that* lots of us are doing well**,** *how can we be a bit better* for the rest of class?").
Conversation stems to avoid focusing on problems ("Instead of why, try…")	Avoid asking "why" questions and instead focus on desired behaviours	Practice replacing "why" questions ("why are you not wearing your blazer?" or "why have you not done your homework?") with describing desired behaviour (e.g., "I'd like to see you wearing your blazer, please."). Practice questions that help students to move towards their desired future: • Asking about what is wanted (e.g., "what would be different if you were focusing/ on time/ doing your best?" and "what difference would this make?") • Identifying exceptions and supporters (e.g., "when have you done this before?" and "who sees the best in you?")
Scaling questions	Using 0–10 scales to explore what is working for the student, class, staff colleague(s), or parent/carer(s), as well as what small improvements would look like	Practice using scales in relation to their own work goals and live scaling with students.
Identifying strengths	Identifying exceptions to problems and student strengths	Exercises using "strength cards" (Work Positive Limited, n.d.); selecting cards that represent qualities they possess and qualities they would like to see more of. Discussing how those qualities could grow moving forwards.
Adaptations for younger children	Creative approaches with younger children (ages 4–11)	Scaling questions using physical objects (wooden blocks, Lego) or active scales using numbers, a ladder, or hopscotch on the floor (Ajmal and Ratner, 2020).
Final reflections	Consolidating learning	Reflecting on the "standout" things worth taking back into their role and everyday life; planning how to use SFP in their role.

3.2 What is the feasibility and acceptability of staff training?

3.2.1 Feasibility of recruiting staff to training

Overall, feasibility was established in terms of recruiting and engaging staff participants to the training. All staff invited to the training attended and 71% of staff consented to complete training questionnaires. To optimise engagement, we worked closely with the SLT to schedule training around the academic calendar and avoid placing additional burden on staff. One successful strategy was identifying a senior school staff member who led on timetabling and managed the logistics of timetabling staff to attend training. The SLT advised that the summer term, after exams were finished, was the most appropriate time for the more intensive (up to 2-day) training, while the introductory all-staff session (90-minutes) was best delivered during a September INSET day, at the start of the academic year. Attendance at the ongoing training sessions has been consistently high, with nearly all staff in attendance. These

sessions have been scheduled during staff CPD time, designated time for staff to engage in learning and development activities outside of school opening hours.

3.2.2 Acceptability: high acceptability and perceived usefulness

Training feedback questionnaires indicate high acceptability of the training and programme from staff. Among the 114 staff who completed questionnaires, 105 (92%) agreed or strongly agreed that SFP had the potential to improve their conversations with students, and 102 (89%) agreed or strongly agreed that it could similarly enhance their conversations with staff. In addition, 102 (89%) agreed or strongly agreed that SFP could be helpful in supporting both student and staff wellbeing, and 100 (88%) agreed or strongly agreed that they would like further training in SFP.

Qualitative feedback supported these findings, with staff describing the training as engaging and relevant to their practice. Staff appreciated that SFP was a different way to approach everyday school conversations – reflecting that it was a mindset shift to reframe negative (sanction-focused) conversations into positive ones,

> "Starting off conversations with praise no matter how little because it shifts the mood of the talk into positivity and how we can move forward." (Teaching Assistant).

The importance of solution focused language was evident, with staff recognising that the words they use shape power dynamics within student interactions, with the potential to escalate conflict,

> "I liked the section about language e.g how starting a question with "why" immediately creates a blame-game situation." (Sixth Form Scholars Coordinator).

Furthermore, several staff reported increased confidence in managing behaviour effectively, particularly being proactive rather than responding to problems reactively,

> "As a new trainee teacher, behaviour management has been a big concern for me. I feel equipped to have a positive start to my lessons, with examples of how I can interact with my students focusing on what we can do better- not focusing on negatives." (Trainee Maths Teacher).

Many staff appreciated the practical nature of the exercises and techniques. One staff member said they enjoyed the "*easy and quick tips to implement*" (Subject Lead of Spanish). The scaling technique (exploring what is working for the student or class – as well as what small improvements would look like – by asking participants to rate progress towards their "best hopes" on a 0–10 scale) was frequently mentioned as a useful, practical tool to implement, especially with whole classes. One staff member said that they perceived the scaling questions would help students with "*encouraging self-reflection and building intrinsic motivation*" (Music Teacher).

3.2.3 Relevance of the training

Staff perceived the approach as well aligned with the school context and conceptually appropriate for promoting positive behaviour, relationships, and wellbeing. A salient perception was a move away from punitive-focused interactions towards calmer conversations grounded in respect, understanding, and collaboration. Qualitative feedback indicated that staff hoped that there would be less administrative burden – from reduced sanctions – therefore enabling them to have more "*quality time*" with students and to "*increase work productivity*" (anonymous). Some staff noted immediate positive effects on classroom atmosphere from trying out solution focused techniques following training,

> "Reframing conversations- it works and I have put this into practice with a difficult class. The mood change has been dramatic." (Secondary Teacher).

Staff described the potential of SFP to support student wellbeing, engagement, and behaviour, including encouraging internal motivation and self-belief,

> "Focus on developing students' ability to manage their own behaviour, develop self-belief, wellbeing. Celebrate the successes had by challenging students." (Primary Headteacher).

Largely, staff also thought the training had potential to support their professional wellbeing and self-efficacy,

> "I enjoyed being able to reflect on myself and how I can find solutions to any issues I may be facing" (Teacher).

Several staff noted the importance of SFP in fostering a supportive team environment that promotes confidence in handling challenges,

> "All staff to remain committed to a consistent approach, support each other as a team and allows for staff to feel equipped to deal with things independently" (Head of Year 10).

However, some staff noted that the relevance of the training could be strengthened by facilitators being "*further familiarised with how we do things at [school] for the advice to be a little bit tighter.*" (Head of History and PSHE). Staff also emphasised the need for the training and programme to be adapted to specific student groups, particularly those with special educational needs and neurodivergent learners. Some staff noted the challenges of meeting individual needs within large classrooms and stressed the importance of supporting staff to respond flexibly to diverse needs.

3.2.4 Recommendations for refinement

Staff recommendations focused on how the training could be strengthened to enhance implementation and impact. A consistent

recommendation was for longer, ongoing training sessions with more opportunities for active engagement and to practice skills, including "*practical demonstrations*" (Primary Teaching Assistant), "*modelling examples*" (Secondary Teaching Assistant), "*interactive tasks*" (Secondary Teacher), and "*group tasks*" (Secondary Teacher). Participants expressed a desire for greater use of real-life examples, case studies, and time to explore current challenges in depth. These suggestions informed subsequent training sessions, which incorporated staff-submitted examples for discussion. For example, one ongoing training session included a "live" solution focused conversation between the trainer and a student. This was a practical demonstration modelling both the solution focused techniques and mindset (curiosity, collaboration, emphasis on student strengths) and allowed subsequent interactive discussion and reflection.

Some staff highlighted the importance of keeping school conversations brief, particularly given time constraints between lessons. They suggested that conversation prompts could be streamlined to make them easier to implement in practice, with one participant noting the value of having "*a "phrase bank" that we can refer to*" (Primary staff member). Similarly, another staff member suggested that a *"handout/workbook that I could use as a structure for notes would help me consolidate what I learned over the two days*" (Second in Charge in Science).

Further suggestions focused on tailoring the training to whole-class strategies and to the needs of specific student groups, as mentioned previously. Participants also emphasised the importance of situating the training within the *"..context of existing school systems e.g., in reflection, during lesson, during behaviour meetings."* (Primary Headteacher). This feedback is continually feeding into ongoing programme development to ensure that the approach is embedded within the schools' existing structures.

Staff additionally highlighted the significance of the environment in which training is delivered, noting that the "*lecture theatre delivery [is] probably not the best environment for promoting discussion.*" (Secondary staff member). This illustrates how feasibility and acceptability can be shaped by the practical constraints of the school setting.

3.3 How has the programme been implemented and further developed in response to staff and student needs?

3.3.1 Implementing SFP into school policies and existing systems

Since training, staff have embedded SFP across policies and daily school life. For behaviour policies, student behaviour reports now include scaling questions, supporting students to assess progress and recognise strengths. In addition, the schools' approach to expectations for behaviour and personal conduct – particularly standards for uniform and appearance, which took a lot of staff time – now uses the language of SFP. For example, staff are now describing the desired behaviour ("I'd like to see you wearing your blazer, please") rather than telling the student they are not wearing their blazer or asking them why they are not meeting expected behaviour standards.

SFP has also been integrated into key internal processes, including staff weekly briefings, departmental meetings, teaching observations, and online professional development platforms. For example, staff briefings may begin with "something you've been pleased to notice about your work this week", and staff use an online platform to publicly celebrate colleagues' effective teaching practices. A further development, based on staff requests, has been for SFP to be incorporated into "Team Around the Child" meetings. This is a collaborative approach that brings together key people in a child's life, including school staff and parents/carers (for example, when there is an attendance or behaviour concern), to identify "what works" with a child and how things can be better in future. This approach is currently being further developed in school.

In response to staff feedback, posters have been developed for display in staff areas, illustrating solution focused prompts and conversation stems. These serve as quick signposts to simple, practical techniques that staff can readily adopt. Similarly, worksheets and solution focused resources (e.g., Good Question Cards; Work Positive Limited, n.d.) have been provided as practical tools.

3.3.2 Implementing SFP with students in and outside classrooms

Within classrooms, staff are increasingly using SFP to adopt a future-oriented approach to teaching, learning, and behaviour management. They are drawing on a range of strategies, including whole-class scaling in lessons, increased reward systems, visual timers to support focus, and reframing negative language to recognise students' strengths and skills. Staff are also using solution focused questioning techniques, including inviting students to consider what "being at their best" in a lesson looks like. Scaling questions have been particularly well received by staff as they are practical and easily implemented into everyday classroom routines.

SFP has also been integrated into daily interactions beyond the classroom, particularly in relation to attendance, engagement, and behaviour. For example, the Assistant Principal reported that for students with low attendance, rather than simply telling a student to attend a lesson, they will now prompt the student to explore what they do well and what other people would notice if they are at their best in class (e.g., their parents, teacher, friends), promoting intrinsic motivation to change behaviour. Furthermore, in instances where students need to be momentarily removed from a lesson, staff are increasingly using SFP to attempt to resettle them back into the classroom, rather than immediately using the "on call" system to alert senior staff to assist. For example, staff have been encouraged to ask questions such as "how can you have a good rest of the lesson when you go back into class?" instead of focusing on what was going wrong.

In response to staff requests for targeted support, individual and group solution focused coaching sessions have been introduced for students facing specific challenges, including low attendance and transitioning between primary and secondary school. These sessions use solution focused activities to help students identify their best hopes, recognise what is going well, and work towards what they would like to be "better". Activities

include solution focused resources, such as the Mindsetter Game (Listo Amsterdam, n.d.) and Good Question Cards (Work Positive Limited, n.d.). Creative methods for working with younger children include outdoor sessions based around sporting activities that drew on the students' interests and strengths. Early feedback from students suggests that they have enjoyed focusing on their strengths and how they can work towards their hoped-for future, with some keeping materials from solution focused activities to hand for reference throughout the day.

3.3.3 Implementing SFP in parent/carer communication

Communication with parents and carers is beginning to adopt a solution focused framework. Parent meetings are trialling a structured approach that includes: (1) a positive start; (2) the reason for the meeting; (3) hopes for the future; (4) exploration of exceptions; (5) scaling; and (6) agreement on next steps. Staff are also adopting a more collaborative approach by communicating more regularly and explicitly with parents about students' strengths and challenges, planned classroom support, and how this can be reinforced at home. Additionally, some teachers use solution focused questions in parents' evening, including scaling questions, to support reflection on student progress.

3.4 What is early feedback from staff on the programme and potential for embedding in school policies?

Early feedback from staff has been predominantly positive and suggests that they are shifting in both mindset and practice. Staff have not only reported that SFP is practical to use but have also demonstrated increasing ownership through independent application of the programme to suit their needs. The school Principal reported that most staff now approach student conversations with a different intention, shifting away from immediate sanctions to a position of curiosity and collaboration. Staff described "*reframing my language*" (Science Teacher) and trying "*to pause and think about how to address any situation I wish to remedy with staff and students*" (Secondary staff member), indicating greater awareness of using self-regulation strategies before responding to challenging situations.

The Assistant Principal reported that SFP was beginning to embed within daily behaviour and attendance processes, "*I'm finding myself using it more frequently day to day, especially with some of the quicker conversations*", demonstrating its usefulness even in brief student interactions. He described asking a reluctant student, "*what are you like on a good day in English?*", which led to the student "*reeling off... all these positive things around himself*". This enabled the previously disengaged student to enter and succeed in their lesson, and they later reported using the same strategy independently to attend another subject lesson.

Early feedback from staff suggests that the programme has supported a shift away from confrontational questioning that can escalate incidents – such as asking a student who has been removed from class, "why did you do that?" – towards a more constructive approach that facilitates reflective re-engagement, for example by asking, "what would need to happen for you to return to the classroom successfully?". This shift has been described as helping to stop "*the escalation of the refusal to go to the lesson*" (Assistant Principal) and contributing to fewer removals from class and on-calls. The sense of agency that SFP affords students was evident, "*rather than me saying 'you need to do this, you need to do this, you need to do this', it's them coming up with that*" (Assistant Principal), indicating an emerging shift in power dynamics where the student is recognised as capable of building their own solutions.

Ongoing consistency in using the approach has been key; from the outset of the academic year, senior staff communicated SFP has a whole-school strategy, presenting potential benefits as enabling staff to have more positive interactions with students and thus reducing administrative and emotional burden. Senior leaders have been instrumental in cascading SFP throughout the school,

> "We started with our pilot group of staff members… and then we cascaded it down into the rest of the head of year team and the rest of the leadership team, because it needs to be driven from the top." (Assistant Principal).

We have found that staff were more willing to engage once they see the potential benefits for themselves. This has been particularly evident during experiential training exercises, including live scaling exercises conducted with both staff and students, where immediate student feedback further reinforces the value of the approach. Additional experiential exercises prompted staff to reflect on their own lives and work. One staff member said it,

> "gives me ideas about how I could introduce solution focused ideas with my own children at home. The training is really empowering. It shows that every member of staff at school, no matter what their role, (support staff etc.), can implement this in their practice." (Maths Teacher),

indicating that the programme is perceived as relevant to all staff.

Despite a strong commitment from the SLT to implement the programme across the school, the process is ongoing. Issues include shifting the mindset of some staff, who are used to more traditional, problem-focused approaches. Practically, schools have tight academic schedules that can leave little room for additional initiatives if it is perceived as a burden. For example, a current challenge is implementing SFP in tutor time; form tutors have reported that tutor time is already tightly packed with other activities, meaning they have been unable to prioritise SFP. We are working with staff to consider how they can use SFP in brief (one minute) tutor time conversations, for example pair discussion of "how will you know you are at your best today?". Adapting the SFP strategies to the needs identified by staff has been valuable for maintaining their engagement, and senior leaders have described SFP interactions as feasible within these time-pressured contexts, noting that conversations

could be "*as powerful within two minutes as it can [in] 15 minutes*" (Assistant Principal).

3.5 Next steps

The next phase will focus on embedding SFP across other identified priority areas, namely: (a) tutor time and with exam year students; (b) responding to parent/carer communication (e.g., complaints); and (c) tailoring SFP for students' individual needs, including neurodivergent students and those transitioning between primary and secondary stages. Across all areas, the approach will continue to be iterative and collaborative, with evolving cycles of planning, action, observation, and reflection.

4 Discussion

This paper has described the process of implementing a whole-school solution focused programme, and training staff as part of this programme, in an inner-city, multicultural, all-through (ages 4–18) school in England. SOLutions In Schools (SOLIS) is an innovative school-wide programme embedded within the universal offer to support student and staff mental wellbeing, communication, and relationships. Overall, findings suggest that the training was highly acceptable to staff, perceived as relevant to their practice, and feasible to implement. Early staff feedback indicates that solution focused practice (SFP) is being implemented across school policies and daily interactions, shifting away from problem-focused disciplinary approaches towards how students can be better in future. At the same time, this paper has documented some considerations for implementing school-based wellbeing programmes.

Successful implementation of the training was facilitated by close collaboration with the school Senior Leadership Team (SLT). This emphasises the critical role of leadership buy-in for school-wide initiatives, and the careful need for presenting potential benefits to increase staff engagement (for example, that more positive interactions with students may reduce administrative and emotional burden). Other successful strategies included identifying a senior staff member who led on timetabling, aligning training with the academic calendar, and using existing CPD structures to deliver ongoing training in the secondary school. This supports implementation science literature emphasising that integrating school-based programmes into existing systems is a key facilitator for success (Schäfer et al., 2025). A future direction for the study will be to work with senior leaders in the primary school stage to ensure that ongoing training for primary staff is delivered around the logistics of the school timetable.

Staff evaluation of the training suggests that the core solution focused concepts (such as SFP as a mindset shift; focusing on student strengths and exceptions to problems; and proactive strategies to encourage a positive classroom atmosphere) were well received. Scaling questions (asking students/staff colleagues/parents and carers to rate progress towards their "best hopes" on a 0–10 scale) have been frequently used during implementation. This suggests that practical, easily implementable strategies are important in helping school staff to adopt SFP in school. Indeed, staff feedback emphasised the need to simplify the solution focused conversation stems, given the limited time available for student interactions. To increase the likelihood of programme uptake, the solution focused techniques need to be streamlined so that school staff can readily use them in everyday practice.

Staff perceived the training as highly relevant to their practice, describing the positive effect that solution focused conversations may have on student wellbeing and behaviour, including encouraging internal motivation to succeed. SFP challenges traditional authoritarian approaches and power dynamics in schools, instead assuming that students are the experts on their own lives with the ability to construct solutions to challenges. Potentially, this may create more collaborative student-staff conversations where solutions are co-constructed, therefore leading to a greater sense of agency and resilience for the young person.

Another salient perception was the positive effect that SFP may have on staff confidence, self-efficacy, and mental wellbeing, with some staff suggesting that these benefits may extend beyond their professional role into their personal life. SFP has been shown to significantly reduce job stress and burnout among professionals in other settings – such as nursing – improving coping styles and lowering emotional exhaustion (Kong et al., 2024). When working with children and families in social care, SFP has been found to improve staff satisfaction, team mood and atmosphere (Medina and Beyebach, 2014). The present study highlights the potential for SFP in school settings to extend benefits beyond student outcomes and impact staff confidence and wellbeing. Staff feedback suggested that the training could be further strengthened by adapting SFP for use with neurodivergent students. This could include making questions concrete and specific and using visual aids to support understanding (Kellett and Bell, 2025). We are currently tailoring the training model for students with specific needs.

In terms of programme implementation, a notable finding is that staff are beginning to independently implement SFP in their daily practice and create changes at multiple levels throughout the school. This aligns with the programme's intended provision of a flexible "framework" that schools can adapt to their local context. It is also consistent with other existing whole-school wellbeing programmes, both in the U.K. and internationally (see authors names removed for peer review). Logistical challenges are a primary obstacle that researchers and programme designers face in implementing school-based interventions, even when there is strong support for it (McCarthy et al., 2025). School staff are often juggling different roles and responsibilities and tight academic schedules that can leave little room for additional initiatives. Ensuring the programme fits into existing school structures – rather than being perceived as an "add on" – while also fostering stakeholder ownership is critical for programme success.

Early feedback suggests that many staff are increasingly shifting in both their mindset and classroom practice, although this has been more challenging for some staff. School behaviour management systems are typically problem-led, potentially leading to entrenched professional beliefs about punitive discipline. Shifting to such an innovative approach is a culture change that will take time to embed. Most staff have been highly receptive to this change, perceiving it as small "tweaks" in their everyday interactions. At this level of day-to-day practice, SFP has the potential to interrupt escalating negative cycles that can

have serious outcomes for students. For example, if a teacher uses SFP with a student in class to focus on what is wanted rather than the problem, this may increase the chances of the student remaining in the classroom instead of being given a reflection or being "on-called" (an escalation requiring senior staff intervention). In turn, this may interrupt cycles where multiple infringements lead to more serious outcomes, such as parental involvement, suspension, or exclusion.

4.1 Strengths and limitations

The Participatory Action Research (PAR) approach used in this study can be viewed as both a strength and a limitation. In terms of strengths, co-designing programmes with schools helps to improve how helpful and useful programmes are and increases the likelihood of acceptability and relevance (Reed et al., 2021; Reed et al., 2023). PAR involves iterative, collaborative cycles that ultimately optimise the programme so that it meets stakeholder needs, encourages stakeholder ownership, and is practical for real-world school contexts (Cornish et al., 2023). A potential limitation is the risk of power dynamics – both within school hierarchies and between the research team and school stakeholders – which can conflict with the aims of equitable decision-making (Noone and Kong, 2025; Young et al., 2024). To minimise this, we used strategies such as regular meetings and communication with stakeholders across all levels of the school, and explicitly emphasised stakeholder knowledge and expertise as essential to the process.

A further limitation of the data presented in this paper is its focus on staff perspectives. In the SOLIS study, students and parent/carers have been involved in all decision-making aspects since conceptualisation (see authors names removed for peer review). As the programme progresses, more student feedback will be essential. Asking young people how they experience wellbeing programmes using qualitative data is arguably important for programme designers and implementers (Foulkes and Stapley, 2022). The training content was tailored to the student population attending the school, which was in an area with a highly racially minoritised population and high poverty levels. During the co-design work preceding this study, students from these backgrounds spoke about the importance of having a trusted adult at school (rather than responded to with sanctions), given the adversity they may face outside of school. Seeking student feedback iteratively as PAR cycles progress will be important to ascertain whether the training and programme meet their needs.

Future work could extend SOLIS to other student populations. Staff identified that they may need further training in adapting the approach to work with children with special educational needs. Solution focused conversations use universal language that are relevant for many challenges that young people face. It is potentially suitable for children with special educational needs, for example the focus on the pupils' desired future outcomes – what they want to happen – aligns with characteristics of autism (Kellett and Bell, 2025). However, slight variations to language may be needed, for example using specific, concrete language to reach a shared understanding of what "better" would look like to them in their day-to-day life.

Furthermore, parent and carer input is an important consideration for whole-school programmes. We currently have a Student Advisory Group (formed of 15 students from diverse backgrounds) and a Parent Advisory Group (8 parents of children attending the primary and secondary school) who advise on programme design and delivery. We will also collect qualitative data from students as the programme progresses to understand how they experience solution focused conversations, what is helpful, and what could be improved. Incorporating this feedback into future research cycles will be essential to consider what they want from the programme and whether it meets their needs.

5 Conclusions

This paper has described the staff training, implementation, and early acceptability of SOLutions In Schools (SOLIS), an innovative whole-school solution focused programme to support wellbeing, communication, and behaviour. Findings indicate that SOLIS is highly acceptable to staff, with early feedback suggesting potential benefits for wellbeing, communication, relationships, and classroom atmosphere, alongside reduced reliance on punitive approaches. Central to successful implementation have been strong senior leadership support, co-design with stakeholders, and the integration of practical strategies into everyday school routines. While embedding a solution focused ethos represents a cultural shift that requires time to embed, SOLIS demonstrates promise as a sustainable approach to promoting more positive student-staff communication, relationships, and mental wellbeing through everyday school interactions. Our ongoing research study will examine its potential impact on student and staff wellbeing and job satisfaction.

Data availability statement

The raw data supporting the conclusions of this article will be made available by the authors, without undue reservation.

Ethics statement

The studies involving humans were approved by the City St. George's, University of London School of Health and Medical Sciences Research Ethics Committee (REC REF ETH2425-2380). The studies were conducted in accordance with the local legislation and institutional requirements. The participants provided their written informed consent to participate in this study.

Author contributions

FR: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Funding acquisition, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Visualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. TJ: Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Project administration, Visualization, Writing – review & editing. RM: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation,

Methodology, Project administration, Supervision, Visualization, Writing – review & editing.

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Conflict of interest

The author(s) declared that this work was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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Publisher's note

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