

Article

Supporting K-12 Students to Learn Social-Emotional and Self-Management Skills for Their Sustainable Growth with the Solution-Focused Kids' Skills Method

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Abstract: There is an increasing need in schools and/or at home, as well as in society at large, to find ways to help students develop social-emotional and self-management skills, particularly in cases when they exhibit emotional or behavioral problems. This study aims at exploring how Kids' Skills (KS), a method based on solution-focused psychology, can be used to help students overcome emotional or behavioral problems through learning relevant skills. We collected 23 case descriptions during a two-year period (2017 to 2019) from KS practitioners who had used the method in their workplace, at school, at a kindergarten, or at home. We used content analysis for the qualitative data analysis. The analysis results demonstrate how the KS method can be used to support students in learning social-emotional and self-management skills to overcome their difficulties. This study found four key components of the KS method that appear to be critical for producing desired changes in children. These are (1) helping students to identify specific social-emotional and/or self-management skills that they need to learn to overcome their difficulties; (2) supporting students in learning their identified skills by helping them understand what the skill entails and become aware of their strengths and resources; (3) assisting students in acquiring their identified skills; and (4) reinforcing the learned skills to ensure sustainable effects. We conclude that the KS method offers support for students in learning self-management and social-emotional skills to ensure their sustainable growth.

Keywords: sustainable growth; social-emotional skills; self-management skills; solution-focused; Kids' Skills method



Citation: Niu, S.J.; Niemi, H.; Furman, B. Supporting K-12 Students to Learn Social-Emotional and Self-Management Skills for Their Sustainable Growth with the Solution-Focused Kids' Skills Method. *Sustainability* **2022**, *14*, 7947. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su14137947>

Academic Editor: Yuzhuo Cai

Received: 1 April 2022

Accepted: 22 June 2022

Published: 29 June 2022

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1. Introduction

At some stage of their development, almost all children, or students, experience emotional or behavioral problems that they do not know how to overcome on their own. It is therefore important for adults to find effective ways to help children discover strategies to manage their problems and to develop social-emotional and self-management skills for their sustainable growth.

Most established methods or approaches that aim at helping children with emotional or behavioral problems are based on a problem-solving paradigm [1–4], which in turn relies on discovering the underlying causes of their problems and on making an attempt to eliminate or alleviate those causes. Over the last few decades, different kinds of approaches have been developed that are less focused on identifying underlying causes and more focused on developing solutions.

One such approach is known as the solution-focused approach. It was originally developed in the field of psychotherapy but has in recent years been increasingly applied and practiced by educational psychologists [5–10] in supporting students to overcome social-emotional and behavioral problems. Unlike most problem-focused approaches, the solution-focused approach is not focused on identifying the probable causes of problems,

but on the desired outcome, or goal, to be achieved, and on discovering ways to help children utilize their strengths and resources to achieve those desired outcomes.

The concept of sustainability can be defined from different angles. On the macro level, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) [11] has defined a set of sustainability development goals to address global challenges such as climate change, poverty, hunger inequalities, low quality education, and other serious global problems or crises. At the meso level, UNESCO addresses local challenges and problems for sustainable development. In this paper we will focus on the micro level, on the sustainable development of individuals. Education for sustainable development includes social development for sustainable personal growth through the development of relevant skills and competencies [12,13]. Social-emotional and self-management skills are important future skills. Students exercise agency by learning or reinforcing skills to overcome problems and difficulties. Future skills, also called 21st century skills, have been discussed widely over the last ten years [14–16]. Such skills have also been referred to as generic skills, meta-skills, transferable skills, or transversal competencies. Learning social-emotional and self-management skills prepares students for their future. Such skills are useful for studies, for work, and for life in general. Hence, learning social-emotional and self-management skills is important for students' sustainable growth and in helping them to become active agents of their own lives.

1.1. Theoretical Framework of the Study

In this study, we investigate how the Kids'Skills (KS) method has been used and what are its main procedural components used in supporting children to learn self-management and social emotional skills relevant for overcoming problems and difficulties. The KS method is a collaborative step-by-step procedure aimed at helping children overcome emotional and behavioral problems and difficulties. The approach was developed in Finland in the 1990s by Dr. Ben Furman and his team in collaboration with Sirpa Birn and Tuija Terävä, two special education teachers who were responsible for the teaching and care of a group of special needs children [17,18] exhibiting diverse emotional or behavioral problems. Over the years, KS has grown in popularity and is currently used by numerous educational and health care professionals in many countries around the world.

The KS method was initially developed at daycare centers to help children who had emotional and/or behavior problems. It was constructed from practical real-life situations. This method has been widely used and appraised by school psychologists and counselors, children's therapists, and practitioners, and it has attracted many researchers to study this method. Research studies have emerged [19–21] in which KS is evaluated as an intervention to enhance and support children's psycho-emotional growth and development. A recent study by Hautakangas et al. [19] looked at 28 children aged 4–7 with poor self-regulation skills who took part in a KS intervention program. They found that the children who participated in the program showed significant progress when compared with a control group comprised of 15 children. Similar findings have also been reported in a study by Philipp et al. [20], in which pupils receiving KS counseling demonstrated significant improvements in their subjective feelings of empathy, self-efficacy, and self-worth. These findings are further confirmed in Niu & Niemi's study [21]; the authors examined the effects of a class-wide application of KS. In their study, they found that children who participated in the project significantly improved their social-emotional and self-management skills in a classroom learning environment.

The KS method is founded on the principles of Solution-Focused Brief Therapy (SFBT). SFBT was developed by a group of therapists working in a small private clinic in Milwaukee during the 1980s [22–24]. Both Pichot [25] and Lutz [26] emphasized that SFBT is a goal-oriented, client-centered and collaborative approach where clients are helped to set their own goals and are empowered by pertinent questions to make desirable changes in their lives. De Shazer et al. [27] pointed out that a central key aspect of SFBT is that the therapist helps the client define a concrete vision of their preferred future.

KS emphasizes children's own agency through the employment of motivation theory. Watkins et al. [28] have shown that learning is most effective when learners are actively engaged in the learning process and actively participate in constructing their own meaning. Autonomy and competence have been shown to be key motivation factors in learning [29,30]. Furthermore, Bandura [31] stated that agency was "the power to originate action" that leads individuals to take an active role and adopt purposeful intentions in their actions. All the steps of the KS method explicitly or implicitly emphasize students' active participation, autonomy, competencies, and agency. The students get to decide what skills they want to learn, what they want to call their skills, who their supporters are, how they want their supporters to help them, how they wish to celebrate learning the skill, etc. This gives students ownership of what they want to learn and how to learn it. The KS method enables children to take an active role and to assume agency while learning social-emotional and self-management skills. It is important for students to become active agents in their own lives for their sustainable future growth.

The KS method is a protocol comprising 15 concrete steps (see Table 1). It aims to help students identify and acquire skills to overcome social-emotional and behavioral problems. In SFBT [22–27], the basic idea is to help clients overcome problems by helping them define their preferred future and assisting them in discovering what they need to learn or change to achieve their preferred future outcomes. Another important feature of SFBT is associated with the idea that "no man is an island." For example, DeJong [22] has emphasized the role that various people in the clients' life can play in supporting them to make desired changes in their lives. This SFBT principle is explicitly or implicitly portrayed in steps 5, 6, 8, 10, 12, 13, and 14 of the KS method. These seven steps are aimed at boosting the student's motivation and reinforcing their social support when learning their skill. In addition, Berg [32] and Newsome [33] have suggested that SFBT is designed to help clients identify strengths and skills that they already possess that they can utilize to overcome their problems or difficulties. This SFBT principle is apparent in steps 7 and 9 of the KS method, two of the steps aimed at building up students' confidence in learning skills. The solution-focused brief therapy approach has managed to gain acceptance as an evidence-based psychological therapy intervention [34,35]. During the past few decades, it has also gradually been adopted to use by educators, notably by teachers, school psychologists, and school counselors [36–39].

The importance of social interaction and supporters is emphasized in all the steps of the KS method. Vygotsky [40] and social-cultural theorists have emphasized the importance of social interaction in learning, and highlighted the influence of culture, society, language, and symbols on human cognitive development. He believed that the community plays a central role in mediating children's learning and development [40]. Social interaction, students' learning community, KS practitioners, and the student's supporters play an important role in the implementation of the KS method.

Table 1. Steps in the KS method.

Steps	Name of the Steps	Description of the Steps
Step 1	Converting problems into skills	- Convert the child's problem into a skill that the child can learn
Step 2	Agreeing on the skill to learn	- Make an agreement with the child about the skill to learn
Step 3	Exploring the benefits of the skill	- Help the child see the benefits of learning the skill
Step 4	Naming the skill	- Let the child give a name to his/her skill
Step 5	Choosing a power creature	- Let the child pick an imaginary creature to help them learn the skill
Step 6	Obtaining supporters	- Let the child decide who will support him/her in learning the skill
Step 7	Building confidence	- Build the child's self-confidence about being able to learn the skill
Step 8	Planning a celebration	- Offer the child an opportunity to plan a celebration in advance

Table 1. Cont.

Steps	Name of the Steps	Description of the Steps
Step 9	Defining the skill	- Let the child role-play the skill to ensure that the skill is concrete enough that it is possible for the child to practice it
Step 10	Going public	- Let the children inform their social network about the skill they have set out to learn
Step 11	Practicing the skill	- Make an agreement with the children about how others can, when needed, remind them of the skill in case they forget this skill
Step 12	Creating a reminder	- Make an agreement with the children about how others can, when needed, remind them of the skill
Step 13	Celebrating success	- Once the child has acquired the skill, arrange the planned celebration and encourage the child to thank all his/her supporters for their help
Step 14	Teaching the skill to others	- Where possible, arrange that the children have an opportunity to teach their newly acquired skills to someone else
Step 15	Learning the next skill	- Invite the child to pick another skill to learn and start the same procedures again

1.2. Study Design and Research Questions

In this study, we aim to investigate how the KS method is used to support children in learning social-emotional and self-management skills to overcome their difficulties. The design of this study is illustrated in Figure 1.

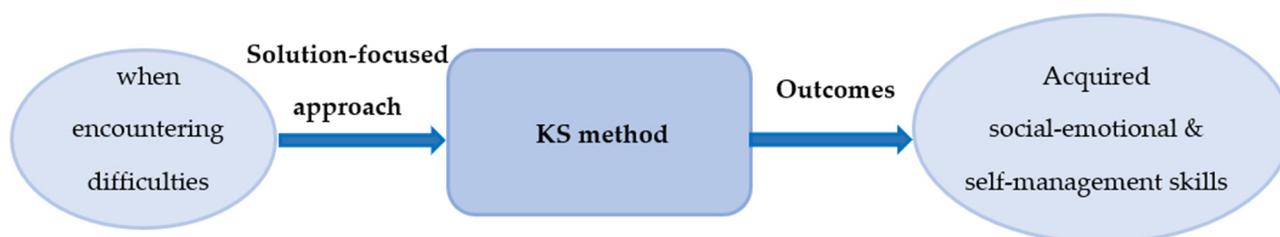


Figure 1. The design of the study.

We intend to investigate the following research questions:

- How are the steps of the KS method used to support students in learning social-emotional and self-management skills to overcome their problems?
- What are the key components and functions of these components in the implementation of the KS method?

2. Materials and Methods

We collected 23 cases between 2017 and 2019 from KS practitioners in schools, kindergartens, or at home where the KS method has been used to support children to overcome problems and difficulties. The participants included 23 KS practitioners from nine countries all of whom had participated in a workshop or training program to learn the KS method. The word KS practitioner refers to parents, school counselors, school psychologists, and teachers. The practitioners used the KS method with K-12 students aged 4–18 years old in their own countries. Table 2 illustrates the demographics of this study.

We informed the KS practitioners that participation was voluntary. Confidentiality and autonomy were explained to them when collecting the data. We also interviewed five KS practitioners to verify the data. Additionally, we viewed four video interviews with students in which they explained how they learned their skills by using the KS method. This study followed the Finnish National Advisory Board on Research Ethics (2009). No participants' or individuals' names, or personal information, were mentioned, and no one can be identified from the data provided by this study.

Table 2. The demographics of the participants in the study.

Cases	Countries ¹	Participants: KS Practitioners	Participant's Gender	Case Involved Student Gender	Case Involved Student Age
1	China	Mother	Female	Boy	8
2	China	School counselor	Female	Boy	7
3	China	School counselor	Female	Boy	7
4	China	Teacher	Female	Boy	18
5	China	School counselor	Female	Girl	8
6	Czech Republic	Father	Male	Boy	5
7	Finland	Mother	Female	Girl	4
8	Finland	Daycare teacher	Female	Boy	5
9	Finland	Father	Male	Boy	6
10	Finland	Mother	Female	Boy	7
11	Finland	Teacher	Female	Girl	8
12	Germany	School counselor	Male	Girl	12
13	Germany	Teacher	Female	Boy	9
14	India	School psychologist	Male	Boy	13
15	Ireland	Mother	Female	Boy	6
16	Japan	Father	Male	Boy	5
17	Japan	Teacher	Female	Girl	7
18	Japan	Mother	Female	Boy	4
19	Japan	School counselor	Female	Girl	10
20	Japan	School counselor	Female	Girl	15
21	Japan	School counselor	Female	Girl	7
22	Romania	School counselor	Male	Boy	11
23	UK	Teacher	Female	Boy	9

¹ Cases listed according to the country's name in alphabetical order.

We asked the participants for the following data: (1) participant's background information; (2) child's age and gender; (3) what kind of problem or difficulty did the child have; (4) how specifically did the KS practitioner work together with the child using the KS method and what steps described in the method did they use; (5) what was the outcome; (6) what observations or reflections did the practitioner have from implementing the KS method.

Content analysis was used for qualitative data analysis of the 23 cases. The data analysis process follows the 15 steps in the KS method. The 15 steps of the KS method were allocated into four subgroups according to their key functions. The data analysis is shown in Table 3.

Table 3. Data analysis of the 15 steps of KS and the four subgroups with data examples.

Grouping the Steps	Implemented Steps	One Data Example in Case 22
Subgroup 1: Identifying specific skills to be learned	Step 1: Turn the problem into a skill Step 2: Agree on the skill to learn	- Problem of "easily getting upset" turned into the skill of "controlling one's temper"
Subgroup 2: Enabling students to learn the identified skills	Step 3: Exploring the benefits Step 4: Naming the skill Step 6: Choosing a power creature Step 5: Obtaining supporters Step 7: Building confidence Step 8: Planning a celebration Step 9: Defining the skill	- Child can continue to play with others - "Cooling down" skill - A superhero from the child's favorite computer game - Father, mother, sister, teacher, classmates - Good at learning, playing chess, football, etc. - Going out with the child's two classroom supporters for McDonalds and a movie - Walking away, alone for a moment, then going back
Subgroup 3: Acquiring the identified skills	Step 10: Going public Step 11: Practicing the skill	- Announcing the child's skill at school and at home - Mike put a lot of effort into learning his skill Mike made rapid progress.

Table 3. *Cont.*

Grouping the Steps	Implemented Steps	One Data Example in Case 22
Subgroup 4: Reinforcing the skills	Step 12: Creating reminder	- Others could remind him by saying “snow” should he forget his skill
	Step 13: Celebrating success	- Mike invited his two classroom supporters out for McDonald’s and a movie
	Step 14: Teaching the skill to others	- Mike shared his experience with his friends
	Step 15: Learning the next skill	- Started another “waiting my turn” skill

3. Results

In this section, we analyze the data from the 23 cases by examining the steps used in each case. We also strive to identify the main component and function of the four subgroups. We present the findings in accordance with the research questions proposed in this study.

3.1. The Steps Used in the KS Method

Based on the data analysis from the 23 cases we examined which of the 15 steps of the method were used in the 23 cases. The presence of the various steps in each case is shown in Table 4.

Table 4. The frequencies of steps used in the KS method identified from the 23 cases.

Steps Used in All Cases (23 Out of 23 Cases)	Most Often Used Steps (22–16 Out of 23 Cases)	Less Used Steps (10–11 Out of 23 Cases)
Step 1: Converting problem into a skill (23/23); Step 2: Agreeing on a skill (23/23); Step 4: Naming the skill (23/23); Step 6: Obtaining supporters (23/23); Step 9: Defining the skill (23/23); Step 11: Practicing the skill (23/23).	Step 3: Exploring benefits (22/23); Step 10: Going public (21/23); Step 7: Building confidence (19/23); Step 12: Creating a reminder (19/23); Step 13: Celebrating success (19/23); Step 8: Planning a celebration (17/23); Step 5: Choosing a power creature (16/23).	Step 15: Learning the next skill (11/23); Step 14: Teaching the skill to others (10/23).

We found that six of the steps were used in all the cases, and that there were seven most often used steps and two less-used steps. The majority of steps were used in most cases. There were six steps that seem crucial for students to acquire skills: the problem is converted into a specific skill that the student can learn (Step 1); the student agrees to learn that skill (Step 2); and the student gives a name to the skill (Step 4). In all the cases, supporters were recruited to help and assist the student in learning the skill. Forming a support group or learning community for the student is an important element in the KS method. Once this has been done, the student needs to practice their skill (Step 11). Before practicing the skill, it is important is to define the skill (Step 9). The students can do this by demonstrating the skill in role-play, and by ensuring that the skill is concrete, feasible, and clear enough for the student to be able to perform the skill. The prevalence of the various steps in the 23 cases illustrates that the KS method can be applied flexibly depending on the case. There were, however, certain steps that were used globally indicating that these steps are vital for the process.

3.2. Grouping the Steps in the KS Method According to Their Main Components and Functions

In this section, we analyzed the data from the 23 cases following the analyzing process in Table 3. We presented the findings of the four grouped steps, which indicate the four main components and their functions. The four components and their functions in the KS method were reported in the following order: (1) Component I—Helping students to identify the specific skills to be learned in order to overcome their problems; (2) Component II—Enabling students to learn their identified skill; (3) Component III—Assisting students to acquire their identified skills; (4) Component IV—Reinforcing the skills. We report these components in the following four sub-sections.

3.2.1. Component I—Helping Students to Identify the Specific Skills to Be Learned

The first component in the KS method is helping students to identify specific skills to be learned by turning problems into opportunities for learning social-emotional and/or self-management skills. Looking into the first group set, Steps 1 and 2, we investigate how these steps were used to identify social-emotional problems or the self-management skills that the students needed to learn to solve them.

Table 5 shows in the 23 cases what the students' problems were, what their skills were, and whether their skills were social-emotional skills and/or self-management skills. For example, in Case 1, this student's problem was that he was often late for school. His preferred future outcomes or goals was that he should be on time for school. Therefore, the identified specific skill for him was to learn the self-management skill of "being in time for school". Cases 8 and 13 showed that one problem could be turned into several smaller skills. This indicates that dividing a bigger skill into smaller skills is a strategy that should be adopted in some cases. The data in Table 5 indicated that all the students' problems can be turned into opportunities for learning specific social-emotional and/or self-management skills. When examining the identified skills, we noted that all the skills were concrete skills that can be carried out and accomplished.

Table 5. Component I: Identifying specific skills to learn with Steps 1 and 2.

Case	Problems	Specific Skill to Be Learned (Step 1, 2) to Achieve Preferred Future Outcomes	Category of Skills
1	- Often late to school	- Be in time at school	Self-management skill
2	- Difficult to get along with others, fights with his peers, uses violence against other children	- Stop and calm down when getting angry	Social-emotional skill/ Self-management skill
3	- Biting his nails	- Take good care of his nails	Self-management skill
4	- Low self-confidence, worried about failing, difficulty in learning English	- Passing English examination	Social-emotional skill
5	- Does not listen well in the class, cannot concentrate for a longer time	- Practice juggling ball to concentrate	Self-management skill
6	- Refuses to go to kindergarten because he felt anger and helplessness when one of his friends tells him not to play with anyone else but him.	- Be brave and tell his friend not to order him around	Social-emotional skill
7	- Very selective with food	- Taste new foods	Self-management skill
8	- Extremely picky with food, refuses to come to the table to eat, and does not want to go to the toilet with the result that he often soiled his pants	- Skill 1: Learn to lay the table with others - Skill 2: Learn to sit at the table with others - Skill 3: Learn to put food on the plate - Skill 4: Learn to eat together with others - Skill 5: Learn to go to the toilet regularly	Self-management skill
9	- Often wets his pants	- Go to the toilet	Self-management skill
10	- Afraid of dogs	- Let dogs come closer and sniff him	Social-emotional skill
11	- Low self-esteem	- Learn the skill of saying good things about herself, see the good acts which she did everyday	Social-emotional skill
12	- Short attention span, too impatient, complaining, ADHD	- To learn to wait until it is her turn	Social-emotional skill/ Self-management skill
13	- Shouting in a loud voice whatever thoughts happen to come to his mind. Interrupts, argues, fights with others. Cannot concentrate on listening, refusing help	- Skill 1: Take note when he has things to say - Skill 2: Listen to teachers' instructions - Skill 3: Accept help from others	Social-emotional skill/ Self-management skill
14	- Gets angry easily, skips school, fights with others	- Learn the skill of calming down	Social-emotional skill/ Self-management skill
15	- Wets his pants at school	- Remember to go to the toilet	Self-management skill
16	- Did not put away his toys after playing	- Put each toy into the toy box after playing	Self-management skill
17	- Worried and anxious after seeing a sick man lying on the train station on her way home from school	- Needs to smile more	Social-emotional skill
18	- Pushes his 10-month-old younger sister really hard when he is annoyed	- Hug his mother instead of pushing his younger sister when he is annoyed	Self-management skill
19	- Doing her homework in the last few minutes	- Do homework every morning for 10 min	Self-management skill
20	- Often absent from school	- Go to school	Self-management skill

Table 5. Cont.

Case	Problems	Specific Skill to Be Learned (Step 1, 2) to Achieve Preferred Future Outcomes	Category of Skills
21	- Skips school, feels anxious when her mother is out of sight	- Learn to enjoy school without thinking about her mother	Social-emotional skill
22	- Easily gets furious if things do not go his way, shouts, hits his friends, throws things around	- When things do not go his way, learn to walk away, to be alone for a while	Social-emotional skill/ Self-management skill
23	- Difficulty falling sleep, struggles with paying attention at school, short attention span	- Skill of having a good restful sleep	Social-emotional skill

In order to illustrate how the steps were implemented, we used an actual case (Case 22) to demonstrate the main component I and its function underlying group I of Steps 1 and 2. All the names in this case have been changed and personal information has been omitted.

Mike was a 9-year-old boy . . . His problem was that when things didn't go his way . . . he tended to get furious . . . he would shout, hit his friends, throw things around or rip apart books, etc.

His teacher Eija decided to try use the KS method to work with Mike. Eija knew Mike would need to learn to control his temper, but she was not sure what skill he needed. She decided that it was best to discuss with Mike the skill he would like to learn.

"What happens to you, Mike, when things don't go the way you want?" . . . "What would you want your friends to think about you instead?" Mike gave thoughtful answers to these questions.

Eija then asked: "What would you like to learn to get along better with your friends?" Mike said that he needed to learn the skill of "cooling down" . . .

Eija and Mike then had an interactive conversation and successfully completed Step 1 by converting the problem into the skill of "cooling down." Mike decided what skill to learn, demonstrating the student's agency and active role in his learning. Steps 1 and 2 indicate that the first main component in the KS method is identifying a specific skill for the child to learn, and its function is to assist students in converting problems into opportunities or goals for learning social-emotional or self-management in order to achieve the preferred future outcomes.

3.2.2. Component II—Supporting Students in Learning Their Identified Skill

The second component in the KS method is enabling students to learn their identified skill. Looking into the second set of steps (Steps 3–9), we investigate how these steps were used in the KS method (see Table 6). This group of steps indicated that component II and its function is to enable students to learn skills by discovering their motivations and strengths as well as building confidence and concrete skills.

Table 6. Component II: Enabling students to learn their identified skills with Steps 3–9.

Case	Exploring Benefits (Step 3) Planning a Celebration (Step 8)	Naming the Skills (Step 4)	Getting Support (Step 5, 6) People, Power Creature	Finding Strengths (Step 7)	Defining the Skill (Step 9)
1	- Others like him more	"Rooster crowing"	Parents, Rooster soft toy	- Happy and easy to be with	Discussed/performed
2	- Has more friends - Less worry	"China Bobby" (a traffic policeman)	Teacher, classmates, mother, "Spider"	- Very sweet and helpful, massages mother's shoulders and washes dishes.	Discussed/performed
3	- Can have a celebration - Cuts his own nails	"Chameleon" (a cartoon character)	Parents, brothers, aunt, etc. chameleon in children's book	- Smart, good imagination	Discussed/performed

Table 6. Cont.

Case	Exploring Benefits (Step 3) Planning a Celebration (Step 8)	Naming the Skills (Step 4)	Getting Support (Step 5, 6) People, Power Creature	Finding Strengths (Step 7)	Defining the Skill (Step 9)
4	- Feels better in his studies - Going out for a celebration	“English exam”	Teachers, classmates, a cartoon character	- Good at science, engineering, etc.	Discussed/performed
5	- Her classmates admire her - A party of “Juggling Ball”	“Juggling ball”	Parents, little sister, friends Harry Potter	- Plays badminton, piano	Discussed/performed
6	- Feels happy, proud, brave, etc.	“Harry Potter”	Parents, teachers Sniff from Moomin valley	- Can ride a bicycle, swim, etc.	Role-played
7	- Able to taste new food, find new delicious foods	“Yum Yum”	Parents, brothers, teacher “Poop-king” Lego character	- Bravery in tasting something new	Discussed/performed
8	- Tummy feels better - Nicer to be in a kindergarten	“Poop-king”	Parents, teacher, etc. Batman	- Can do many other things quickly	Discussed/performed
9	- Smells better - A costume party	“Ants in the pants”	Parents, brother, grandparents, friend, aunt, cousins		Discussed/performed
10	- Able to go to parties at friend’s place where there are dogs	“Fido skill”	Parents, grandparents, friends		Discussed/performed
11	- Be happier, have friends	“Princess skills”	Teachers	- Good at writing	Discussed/performed
12	- More respect from friends, get some new friends	“Waiting tone”	Parents, friends, teachers, etc., horse Cindy	- Good at math	Role-played & video recorded
13	- Calmer - Remembers thoughts better	“Note skill” “Robot skill” “Help skill”	Teachers, peer students	- Interested in robots	Discussed/performed
14	- Accepted better in friends’ group, parents won’t fight	“Calming down”	Parents, teachers, friends	- Good at football and other sport events	Role-played
15	- Feeling good, staying dry	“Remembering”	Parents, grandparents, teachers, brothers	- Learning reading	Discussed/performed
16	- Able to find his toys quickly	“Kitsune Kozo” (the Fox Kid)	Parents, Fox Kid wearing a cape	- Can tidy up things	Discussed/performed
17	- Smiles more, has fun, not afraid	“Audrey” (Japanese comedy)	Mother, best friends, teachers, etc. “Audrey”	- Can smile	Role-played
18	- Gets hugs from mother	“Band-aid”	Mother	- Draws pictures, etc.	Discussed/performed
19	- Has more time to enjoy weekends, etc.	“Study Victory Plan”	Teacher, “SMAP” a popular band in Japan	- Likes music	Discussed/performed
20	- Spends time with classmates, enter the high school	“School Go!”	Parents, teachers, classmates, counselor, iPad, cell phone		Discussed/performed
21	- Enjoys school more	“Kitty”	Teachers, parents, classmates Poster of “Kitty”		Discussed/performed
22	- Friends think better of him, not angry at him, happier,	“Cooling down”	Parents, sister, classmates, teachers, a superhero from a computer game	- Learned math multiplication, plays chess very well, very good at football	Role-played
23	- Wakes up early for school; more time to watch TV	“Good restful sleep”	Parents “Dwarf” from Snow White		Discussed/performed

Table 6 illustrates Steps 3–9 in the 23 cases. Step 3, exploring the benefits, and Step 8, planning and imagining the success of a celebration, together motivate students into thinking, “I want to learn this skill.” Step 4, where students name the skills they need, gives them firm ownership of their identified skills. The students became actively engaged in their skills creation processes in which similar kinds of skills had various names that were decided by the students themselves. Step 5 and 6 created a learning community and supporting function for the students in which the students knew that they were not alone. They could get support from others and could think: “I know I can get support when I am learning this skill.” Step 7 created confidence in students by looking at their strengths, what they were good at, and the skills they had already learned. Step 9 helped students see clearly what their skills were, and that they were able to perform them: “I know how to perform this skill.”

The conversation below from Case 22 illustrates how the teacher and student used these steps in the second group. First, the teacher Eija explored the benefits of the skill (Step 3) with Mike.

Eija: How will that be good for you? What benefits do you get from learning that skill?

Mike: The others will not be cross with me.

Eija: What else?

Mike: I can continue to play with the others.

Eija: That's great. Anything else?

Mike (smiling): I will be happy again.

Eija initiated the idea of supporters, which was Step 6, and Mike decided who his supporters would be and how they could support him. Additionally, Mike chose an imaginary supporter in Steps 5 and 6. Eija told Mike: “You can decide who you want to ask to support you in learning the ‘cool down’ skill.” Mike named his supporters as his mother, his father, and his little sister. Eija then asked: “And how would you want them to support you?” Mike said that when needed, his supporters should remind him of his “cooling down” skill simply by saying “snow.” Mike wanted his imaginary supporter to be a superhero from his favorite computer game.

Eija built up Mike’s confidence (Step 7) by stating what he was good at and what good things other people said about him:

“Mike, you are very good at learning things. I notice that you’ve learned math multiplication very well already and your father says that you have learned how to play chess with him at home, and I also heard that you are a very good player in your football team.”

Eija went on to say, “When you have learned your ‘cooling down’ skill, of course, it’s very nice to celebrate by doing something nice together with your supporters . . . ” Eija and Mike then together imagined how Mike would celebrate (Step 8) when he acquired his skill. Mike gave a detailed plan of his future celebration, coming up with the idea that he would want to invite his two supporter classmates out to McDonalds and a movie.

As Mike clearly knew how to perform his skill, Eija and Mike together discussed and imagined what this skill would look like:

Eija: “What could help you to calm yourself down when you’re about to become furious, Mike? What could you do instead of what you have been doing so far in these situations?”

Mike: “I think I need to learn to walk away, to be by myself for a moment and then go back.”

They then did a role-play together several times so that Mike could demonstrate this skill (Step 9).

3.2.3. Component III—Assisting Students in Acquiring the Identified Skills

After identifying the specific skills, and discovering the students' strengths and supporting resources, as well as the benefits and details of the skills that enabled the students to learn the identified skills, it is then time to start to practice and acquire the identified skills.

The third component in the KS method is acquiring the identified skills in order to achieve the desired outcomes. Looking into the third set of groups (Steps 10–12), we investigate how these steps were used in the KS method. In all the 23 cases, students announced their skills to their social supporters (Step 10) and actively practice their skills (Step 11). In most of the cases (19 out of 23 cases), students had used reminders to support their learning in case they forgot their skills.

In Case 22, Eija discussed with Mike that it was possible there would be setbacks and they talked together how to prepare for setbacks with Step 12 as a reminder.

Eija: "Mike, when you try to learn a skill—any skill—sometimes you might forget the skill. When that happens, you will need others to help you one way or another. Do you have any idea of how we—your supporters—can help you in those situations?"

Mike replied that he did not want anyone to remind him by criticizing him if he forgets. He just wanted them to say to say "snow."

Mike announced his skill to his social networks at home and at school (Step 10) and started to practice his skills (Step 11) with his supporters to support him in case of setbacks (Step 12). Mike's learning of the "cooling down" skill was announced at school and at home. During the next few weeks, Mike put a great deal of effort into learning his skill. Whenever Eija or either one of his classmate supporters used the code word "snow" to remind him to calm down, he knew what to do. In four weeks, he had made enough progress that everyone agreed that it was time to celebrate.

The evidence in the 23 cases when using Steps 10–12 leads to Component III and its function in the KS method, namely assisting students in practicing and acquiring their skills with the function of achieving the desired future outcomes/goals.

3.2.4. Component IV—Reinforcing the Learned Skills

After students have acquired their specific skills, it is important to reinforce the skills that have been learned. The fourth component in the KS method is helping students to reinforce their skills learned so that the skills and positive behaviors can last. Looking into the fourth set of groups (Steps 13–15), we investigate how these steps were used in the KS method. In most of the cases (19 out of 23), students shared their celebrations after they acquired their skills (Step 13). In about half of the cases, the students taught their skills to others (Step 14) and then started to learn the next skills (Step 15).

All the steps in this group aimed to reinforce the students' skills which they had acquired. This is also illustrated in Case 22. Mike celebrated his success (Step 13) with his two supporter friends. After his success in learning his first skill, he was keen to share his experiences (Step 14) with others and was ready to learn the next skill (Step 15). The following notes were made on Mike's achievement:

... as planned, Mike invited his two classmate supporters out one evening for McDonald's and a movie ... the evening was a great success

Mike is very excited about his success in learning his "cooling down" skill. And his friends were also impressed by his changes. He shares his experience with his friends and also eagerly wants to start another skill, "waiting my turn."

The evidence of using Step 13–15 in the 23 cases leads to Component IV and its function in the KS method, which helps students to reinforce their skills for long-lasting effects.

3.3. Practitioners' Reflections and Feedback When Using the KS Method

In this section, we present the main points based on the practitioners' reflections and feedback when using the KS method.

3.3.1. Children Are Keen to Learn Skills Rather than Talking about Their Problems

Several practitioners stated that converting problems into learning skills is a unique turning point. It is much easier for children to accept the ideas of learning skills, especially if the children decide what skill they want to learn and can give names to their skills. The process, as stated by the practitioners, should be fun and rewarding:

“I have used the KS method with several children. I find that children are keen to learn skills, but the learning must be fun and rewarding for them.” (Case 1)

“This approach [the KS method] has challenged me hugely to push aside focusing on problems and to stick to the agenda of looking at the solution or skill to be learned. The child in my case was very keen to do this and in fact took most of the ownership for it himself. He was very driven by the notion of a celebration and his strength of character shone through in his own determination. The solution was within the child himself.” (Case 15)

3.3.2. All Children Have Solutions and Unique Strength

Several practitioners stated that the more they used the KS method, the more they felt that children are resourceful, and that children have their own solutions and their own unique strengths. As one practitioner put it in:

“From this case, I can draw the conclusion that everyone has their own unique strengths . . . the point is to find a correct and appropriate way to bring these strengths into play. The child I was helping told me: ‘I discovered something new in myself . . . [that] the new way and method offered me a different thinking and learning dimension, which makes me feel confident in my study.’ Therefore, there is no one so-called best solution, but only the most appropriate one for that child!” (Case 4)

“I was impressed that my son could think like this and was able to have such a positive conversation with me at his age. I was also amazed about his ability to think of a skill to learn and about the name he wanted to give to his skill. When having Kids’Skills conversations with children, I’m often impressed by their ability to collaborate. I conclude that children have their own unique ways of solving problems if only we speak their language and take the time to talk with them.” (Case 18)

3.3.3. The Importance of Supporters

Almost all practitioners pointed out the important role of supporters and the support from the child’s social network. The supporters can give positive feedback, encouraging words, as well as providing friendly reminders to the learners. Quite often the supporters started to learn skills themselves and the children become their supporters. When the child and an adult were learning skills together and they were both paying attention to each other’s progress and praising each other, their relationship improved, and the atmosphere became better. The previously habitual communication style characterized by paying attention to problems and what was not working diminished.

“Supporters are very important for children” (Case 2)

In Case 5, the practitioner reflected on the times when she asked the child how she could support her learning concentration. The child said that she wanted her mother to support her. Then when she was asked in what way she could be supported, she said that she wanted her mother to learn the skill of “closing her mouth,” because the mother was always telling the child she should do this, or she should do that: “I did this wrong, I did that wrong. She’s always complaining about me.” The child eventually offered to be her mother’s supporter. Her mother happily accepted the suggestion and agreed to learn skills together with her daughter. They also celebrated together when they both acquired their new skills.

In Case 23, we have this report: “The child was very cooperative throughout. Getting his parents to change was more challenging. In my view it was important for them to learn not to shout at him, to be more patient with him, to mind their language and dedicate more time to their children . . . I kept in touch with the family and learned that not only had their relationship with the child improved, but also his younger brother had started to learn a new skill.”

3.3.4. Experiencing Setbacks

The learning process, however, is not always smooth. Sometimes children experienced setbacks, forgot their skills, cannot make any progress, or totally lose their interests in learning skills.

“Sometimes children experienced setbacks. I remembered in this case there was slow progress in learning the skill. At some point the child totally lost interest in learning a skill. The loss of motivation was related to his mother’s unhappiness with his slow progress. It is very important for children to feel that they are appreciated, encouraged, and praised by their supporters for their small successes as well as for any efforts to learn a skill . . . I suggested to many mothers that they learn how to encourage and praise their child to help them learn skills.”
(Case 2)

Some practitioners stated that the process could be rocky. Sometimes it was difficult to convert the problem into a relevant skill, and sometimes children wanted to learn a skill that was unrelated to their problem or difficulty. When there was lack of progress, the learning process needed to be reviewed to identify which steps could be modified or improved. When reviewing the project, the following questions can be presented: Is the skill the child is learning too difficult? Has it taken too long for the child to learn the skill? Is there a need to celebrate small successes? How are the child’s supporters helping the child, and can they do something more?

Several of the practitioners stated that the more they used the KS method, the more confident they became in using it.

4. Discussions

This study aimed to investigate how the 15 steps of the KS method were used and what were the main components and their functions in supporting students to overcome their problems by learning social-emotional and self-management skills. We used a content analysis method to investigate the 23 cases. In the discussion, we followed the research questions to discuss the findings.

This study indicated that four main components and their functions were identified in the KS method by grouping certain steps together. These are (1) helping students to identify specific skills to be learned to overcome their problem by turning problems into opportunities to learn social-emotional and/or self-management with steps 1 and 2; (2) enabling students to learn their identified skill by discovering their strengths, resources, and details for their new skills with steps 3–9; (3) assisting students to acquire skills to achieve desired outcomes with steps 10–12; and (4) helping students to reinforce their skills to ensure long-lasting effects with Steps 13–15.

This study confirmed earlier studies by Hautakangas et al. [19], Philipp et al. [20], and Niu & Niemi [21] that children made significant improvements through the KS method. The steps in KS implementation indicated that the main principles in SFBT were fully utilized in the KS method. The first component, identifying the specific skills that students needed to overcome problems, aligned with the main principle in SFBT of the desired future outcome. This outcome was stated by many researchers when using SFBT [22–27]. The second component, enabling students to learn their identified skills, was also shown in focusing on students’ strengths, as emphasized by Berg [32] and Newsome. Additionally, the supporting function in this second component took in the social support importance of SFBT, as mentioned by DeJong [22]. Additionally, the notions of interaction and the

learning community as found in Vygotsky's social cultural theory [40] played a critical role in the KS method. The interactions and feedback in the learning community when using the KS method is also an essential element in Vygotsky's social cultural theory [40].

This study sheds light on how the solution-focused KS method can be used to support students to learn social-emotional and self-management skills for their sustainable growth. Such aptitudes are essential for social development through the development of relevant skills and competencies [12,13]. Learning social-emotional and self-management skills can prepare students for the future. All the steps implemented in the KS method demonstrated the students' autonomy and competencies, which are important motivational factors, as stated by Deci [29] and Ryan [30]. The students made their decisions about their skills, the names of skills, whom they wanted as supporters, how to support them, and how to celebrate their success. These factors demonstrated their active role as highlighted by Watkins [28], and their agency as expressed by Bandura [31]. Learning social-emotional and self-management skills is important for students' sustainable growth in order for them to become active agents in their own lives.

The implication of this study is that problems can be turned into valuable opportunities to learn social-emotional and self-management skills. As one participant in our study stated: *"I used to see children with problems, now I only see children with skills to learn."* Moreover, when students learn social-emotional and self-management skills by using the KS method, they also become active agents in their studies and in their lives. As one student stated in his video interview: *"I become more active in my studies after I learned my skill."*

Although this study is based on second-order data from KS practitioners' reports, we did interview five practitioners and examined four students' videos to verify the data. It would be valuable to obtain the firsthand data by being involved in the process and observing how students learn their skills. Future research could also conduct longitudinal studies to detect how sustainable the students' changes are over time. This study was based on 23 cases from 9 countries. The question of cultural differences should be explored further when trying out the KS method in different countries, and the limitations of using the solution-focused KS method should also be examined.

5. Conclusions and Implications

It was our aim to explore how the Kids'Skills (KS) method, which is based on solution-focused psychology, can be used to help students overcome emotional or behavioral problems through learning relevant skills. To achieve this aim, we investigated 23 case stories using content analysis. Our main finding was that by using the KS method, it was possible to help students identify specific skills that they could learn to overcome their problems. The methods also enabled students to discover their strengths, resources, and the details needed to learn new skills. Social support was important throughout the process. The method assisted them in acquiring the relevant skills and desired outcomes. It also offered them a way to reinforce their skills to ensure long-lasting effects. We conclude that the KS method can support students in learning self-management and social-emotional skills to achieve sustainable growth. This study included 23 cases from nine countries with diverse cultural backgrounds and educational settings. This diversity seems to imply that the KS method is cross-culturally applicable, although further studies are still needed. The method can be utilized by teachers at school as well as by parents at home, but the main agency in acquiring skills and in achieving desired changes are the children themselves.

6. Patents

The name "Kids'Skills" is the English translation of the concept "Muksuoppi", the Finnish name for this method developed by Ben Furman and his team at the Helsinki Brief Therapy Institute.

Author Contributions: Conceptualization, S.J.N. and H.N.; Methodology, validation, formal analysis: S.J.N. and H.N.; Investigation, resources, data curation, B.F. and S.J.N.; Writing—original draft preparation, visualization, S.J.N.; Writing—review and editing, visualization, supervision, H.N. and B.F.; Project administration, S.J.N., H.N. and B.F. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: Open access funding provided by University of Helsinki.

Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Data Availability Statement: Not applicable.

Acknowledgments: Our thanks to the KS practitioners who provided the data in this study.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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