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Author(s): Passmore, Jonathan and Brown, Andy

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Coaching non-adult students for enhanced examination performance: A longitudinal study

Abstract

This paper reviews the development of coaching in schools and presents findings from a multi-school site longitudinal study in the UK. The paper starts by reviewing the coaching educational literature and identifies the growth of coaching in educational settings for teacher development and principal / head teacher performance. The paper uses as an example leading work in Sandwell Council to explore the potential for coaching to be extended to working with non-adult populations, specifically with children preparing for examinations and builds on previous studies in this area. The paper highlights the processes involved in training coaches in this project, the coaching process and the outcome of a three-year longitudinal study. It moves to discuss the emerging potential for coaching in working with non-adult students and how educational authorities can use the Sandwell example to develop their own programmes. The study shows the benefits of coaching when used as a personal development tool to support learning. It also reveals the potential for coaching as an intervention for non-adult populations, specifically in enhancing examination performance and its potential to become a government tool to address social disadvantage and, if targeted, to increase the number of children from lower socio-economic groups progressing to university. The paper lastly raises the question whether coaching can be used to address challenges faced by young people during periods of stress.

Key words

Coaching psychology, educational coaching, school coaching, pupil coaching, educational mentoring, hardiness, improving examination performance and positive psychology.

Introduction

Coaching research is slowly beginning to build an evidence base from its position five years ago, when research was of a poor quality and low frequency. More research however is still needed to build our understanding of coaching its potential to impact on performance for different populations and also to understand the nature of how coaching makes a difference over other learning and development interventions (Fillery-Travis & Lane, 2006 & 2007).

This research base has been summarised on a number of occasions (Kampa-Kokesch & Anderson, 2001; Passmore & Gibbes, 2007). Such restatement of past research and a reflection on themes and emerging issues is useful as a means to help ensure that current research builds on past findings and that research is targeted towards filling the many gaps in our knowledge.

More recently, work at Harvard University has brought together leading coaching academics from across the world to discuss the current research and to identify the key research questions for the next five years. Some of these studies aim to understand coaching's impact using random controlled trials others are exploring coach behaviours, with a desire to understand the effect of different interventions (see: <http://www.coachingresearchforum.org>). Research is also being undertaken to understand the impact of different methodologies, and whether some approaches may be more suited to particular kinds of coaching challenges. With the current energy and effort being displayed, coaching can establish in the next five to seven years an evidence base which other interventions have taken two or three decades to build.

Much of the research which has been undertaken has focused on executive populations, with more limited work into life and health coaching. In comparison educational coaching and coaching with non-adult populations is under researched even in coaching terms. This is in spite of massive growth in educational coaching in the USA where School districts are reported to be hiring thousands of coaches. Knight notes that in the State of Florida alone there are more than 2,600 full-time coaches (Knight, 2008).

As with executive coaching there has been a growth in the number of coaching texts, which reflects growing interest in coaching's potential contribution to education (Bloom, 2005; Creasey & Pattern, 2005; Kise, 2006; Moxley & Taylor, 2006; Passmore, 2006; Knight, 2007; Lindsey, Mantinez & Lindsey, 2007; Portner, 2007). Much of this work however is towards developing and enhancing the performance of teachers, or helping Headteachers / Principals make the transition from teacher or deputy to school or college leader. Some work has been undertaken in the area of student performance in adult populations (Grant, 2001). The focus of this work however was towards comparing the efficacy of different coaching interventions and the impact on adult learners. There has also been some work in the area of coaching parents to help enhance children's performance (Graham, Rodger & Ziviani, 2008), along with a small number of studies on coaching's impact.

A recent study with a young population sample examined the impact of fostering hope in a small sample of 22 university student athletes (Rolo & Gould, 2007). The mean age of students in the study was 19. Participants in the coaching group experienced increased hope and improved academic performance after both the initial coaching period and after six weeks after the coaching intervention was complete when compared with the control group.

An educational based study (Knight 2008) involved the use of instructional coaching; a model developed for coaching teachers. The study uses a sample of fifty-one participants who were trained in an organisation technique. The group were divided with one group being supported in its implementation through coaching and the second group unsupported. The results revealed that teachers who were supported by an Instructional coach used the new framework more than teachers who were not supported by a coach. The study did not however review the impact on learners, except if evidenced based approaches are being taught, then it can be expected that these will lead to enhancements in student performance.

These studies suggest coaching assists adults in occupational settings, as well as in education settings. However, in what ways can coaching contribute to non-adult student's well being and learning?

Of more direct relevant has been life coaching work with school age children (Campbell & Gardner, 2005; Green, Grant, & Rynsaardt, 2007). In the first of these studies a sample of 12 students in Year 12 took part in a life coaching project, which saw coaching being delivered by a school counsellor. The study indicated that coaching may be a useful intervention for building resilience and well being in a non-adult population. However the sample size was too small to draw significant conclusions from the findings.

The second study by Green et al (2007) built on the work by Campbell and Gardner (2007) using a sample of 56 female students, with a mean age of 16. The control group study used coaching delivered by teachers trained in coaching techniques and each participant received ten coaching sessions over two school terms. The results revealed a statistically significant increase in coaching participants in cognitive hardiness and hope. Further, there was a decrease in levels of depression. Other research in hardiness and hope has shown the significance of these changes in young people. Oullete (1993) highlighted that hardiness can provide an effective buffer, making individuals less exposed to mental health conditions. Further, McHenry (1993) noted that students high in hardiness are more effective at managing stress and achieve higher grades.

These two studies, and the prior research into hardiness and hope suggest that coaching could be an effective tool to assist non-adult learners in improving their examination performance, at a cognitive level through developing coping skills and mental resilience and secondly through individuals developing study skills and setting personal learning goals, which contribute towards enhanced performance.

This study sought to explore educational attainment explicitly and whether coaching could be an effective tool for assisting non-adult learners in improving performance as measured by examination grades.

Method: Sandwell project

Sandwell is a local authority education area in the West Midlands, UK. The education area has suffered lower educational attainment, as measured by Grades A*-C for GCSE, when compared with comparable education authorities, based on Fisher Family Trust clusters (Fisher family Trust, 2008). The Sandwell Coaching Project (known as ACES: Academic Coaches Ensuring Success) was established to address under attainment. It specifically sought to raise attainment levels at GCSE level (Key Stage 4) in line with the corporate priorities of Sandwell Metropolitan Borough Council (SMBC) and the Local Strategic Partnership (LSP) by increasing the numbers of young people achieving the benchmark 5 A*-C passes in Sandwell from 38% to 44% over a three years.

Students were identified for coaching using pupil data (Fischer Family Trust) available from the UK Government's Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) of students predicted to get five A* - C GCSEs. The data showed that only 60 percent were meeting school predicted grades, while 40 percent with the potential to achieve five passes failed to achieve the predicted gain. This group became the target population for the project, as a means to drive up overall attainment levels in the LEA.

The local authority contacted Head Teachers and invited them to participate in the programme. Eighteen schools agreed to join the programme. Participation was voluntary and funding for the project was provided by the local authority. The recruitment and training of the Academic Coaches (AC's) was a key element of the programme. The coaches were recruited from a pool of newly qualified graduates interested in teaching, but who had not attained PGCE (UK qualification for teaching) or a teaching related qualification. The majority of the coaches were in their early twenties. A total of 47 part time coaches were appointed initially. The coaches receive a full induction and training programme and enhanced CRB checks before they started in the schools. The 4-day induction programme was co-ordinated by the Programme Manager and delivered by a training consultant with a proven track of training mentors and coaches. The training programme focused on a behavioural goal focused model of coaching. Coaches were trained in coaching skills, alongside problem solving, learning and group behaviour. The full learning objectives for the coach training programme are summarised in Table 1.

The training was supplemented by a specific 'coaching day' lead by a qualified and experienced coach, who had experience of working with GCSE students using the 'GROW' model and other techniques including the use of goal setting, questioning and listening skills.

Consideration was also given to ethical issues particularly around boundaries, with young adults in their early twenties working with impressionable and pressurised young people. In this respect advice was offered by the Council's Child Protection Officer and included best practice tips for coaches to avoid situations which could lead to potential problems.

Table 1: Themes with Coach training programme

Core area	Themes
Developing Helping Skills	Developing a relationship with a client. Clarifying clients problems and challenges Finding solutions and moving the client forward How to successfully exit a client.
Learning to Learn	The brains relationship to learning Mind management Independent learning Environmental and behavioural factors Group work to Raise Achievement To think about when group work can be used. To understand group dynamics and behaviours To examine theoretical models and frameworks To reflect upon our own styles, values as a facilitator To understand managing boundaries of a group Practicing planning and delivery of group sessions.

A small number of coaches were based in each of the high schools. A communications programme was initiated to dispel any misperceptions about the coaches or the programme. This was targeted at parents, staff and students to ensure shared understanding about the nature of the programme and of coaching. Specifically the communications sought to reassure parents and pupils that coaching was not remedial, but was goal focused and aimed at supporting students to achieve their potential.

In total 1987 students received coaching over the three years of the project. The average age of students was 15. Each coach worked with between 20-25 students, usually working weekly to review study skills, work topics, problems and personal goals. The sessions were typically 4 to 8 weeks apart, depending on the needs of the students. Coaching sessions lasted an average of 60 minutes.

Results of the programme

The programme was tracked year on year over three years. This tracking was part of a rigorous evaluation programme for the coaching programme. This reflected the desire to evidence whether public funds had been invested efficiently and whether such a programme had value.

The annual results were compared year on year for the three years of the project (2004/2007). Data collected in the period prior was also compared with data from the year immediately preceding the project (2003/04). These results show an upward trend in the number of students participating in the project from 552 to 772. They also show an upward trend over the three years of the project from 53% in year one to 73.6% in the third year of the study for pupils examination performance at GCSE A* to C. The significance of this is demonstrated when compared with the grades from schools not in the project from the same years which started above the ACES schools in the first year of the project but by year three these schools performance had fallen behind the ACES schools.

The project had also set to address the gap between Sandwell, as a local performing education authority, and neighbouring authorities, as well as addressing the gap between Sandwell and the national figures. In both cases Sandwell's performance improved above both local and national trends. By year three of the project Sandwell was broadly comparable with its regional neighbours and had made significant progress to close the gap with the national figures, reducing this from 16% to 7%, again with year on year improvement. The results are summarised in Table 2.

The project had also set to firstly address the gap between Sandwell, as a local performing education authority and neighbouring authorities. Secondly to address the gap between Sandwell and the national figures. In both cases the results from the participating schools revealed improvement above both the regional and national trends. By year three of the project Sandwell was broadly comparable with its regional neighbours and had made significant progress to close the gap with the national figures, reducing this gap from 16% to 7%, again with year on year improvement. These results are summarised in Table 3.

Table 2: Sandwell Results: 2003-2007

Schools	2003 / 2004 (year before the programme started)	2004 / 2005 (1st year of programme)	2005 / 2006 (2nd year of programme)	2006 / 2007 (3rd year of programme)
Sandwell Schools (% of students gaining 5 or more GCSE A*-C grades).	38%	43%	47%	55%
Total Sandwell students in GCSE cohort.	3575	3559	3654	3971
Number of students coached (%age of whole cohort).	0 (0%)	552 (15.5%)	663 (18.1%)	772 (19.4%)
Number (%) of those ACES students coached achieving 5 or more GCSE passes at A*-C grade.	0 (0%)	296 (53%)	403 (61%)	568 (73.6%)
National % of students gaining 5 or more A*-C grades at GCSE.	54%	56%	59%	62%
Average A*-C grade for Statistical neighbours not using ACES.	44%	48%	51%	55%

Table 3: Results: Sandwell regional & national comparisons: 2003-2007

Schools	2003 / 2004 (year before the programme started)	2004 / 2005 (1 st year of programme)	2005 / 2006 (2 nd year of programme)	2006 / 2007 (3 rd year of programme)
Gap between Sandwell and National Performance Statistical A*-C at GCSE	16%	13%	12%	7%
Gap between Sandwell and Neighbourhood LEA Performance Statistical A*-C at GCSE	6%	5%	4%	1%

Discussion

This large scale study conducted over three years and over 18 schools, with a sample of over 500 students in each year demonstrate that coaching can be an effective intervention with a non-adult population in helping students enhance examination results.

The core measure for Sandwell, was the improvement of pupils gaining A* - C grades at GCSE. The results show an improvement from 38% prior to commencement of the programme to 55% after 3 years of the programme. This is based on steady growth year on year. These results, of year on year growth, suggest that coaches in the programme drew from past experiences and used this to enhance their methods and approach. A second factor that may also have contributed to this outcome of annual improvement was a growth in confidence of the students who were participating in the programme. As students saw examination results improve, their belief in the programme and what they could achieve also grew. In this way the programme may have acted to raise student expectations, in schools where expectations had previously been low.

One argument which could be made is that improvement were due to other factors, such as continued improvement in UK students at GCSE level, where a steady improvement has been made in educational attainment over the past decade, due in part to a stronger focus on results. As a result a comparison was made with national figures across the three year period and also with neighbouring authorities, as a means to rule out regional factors, such as changes in education spending in the West Midlands region. The national figures show a continued improvement, as measured by the percentage of A*-C grades. However the rate of growth at Sandwell was significantly above the national UK average, and above the regional improvement. As a result the gap between Sandwell its

neighbouring authorities and the national UK figures has been closed. The gap was reduced from 16% prior to the start of the programme to 7% after three years. Further, when compared with its regional neighbours the gap has been reduced from 6% prior to the start of the programme to 1%.

In response to these trends three of Sandwell's neighbouring local authorities in the West Midlands have now chosen to develop a coaching programme to raise academic attainment in their own area having witnessed the success of the Sandwell programme. As a consequence of the increased numbers of young people gaining 5 or more passes the Sandwell is now piloting Academic Coaching in their post 16 centres. The objective being to ensure that the young people will have the confidence to go forward towards their aspirational career goals and to secure university places.

While not a specific variable measured in this study the age range of the coaches may have enabled them to relate to students, in a way which teachers were unable to. Further, the personalised nature of the learning, goal setting and the use of personal responsibility to encourage high performance may have been factors in the outcomes.

The results from this study have wider implications for both coaching and for national policy. The study confirms the hypothesis that coaching can be an effective intervention for enhancing examination performance. Further the study builds on the earlier work of Campbell and Gardner (2005), and Green, Grant, and Rynsaardt (2007) in relation to building hope and resilience. This study confirms that coaching has potential value as a tool with non-adult populations in supporting educational attainment.

While counselling has been widely used with young people in Family Therapy and through the development of counselling services for children and adolescents, coaching as yet has not crossed in any significant way from adult populations. This study provides initial evidence that coaching can be an effective educational intervention in enhancing student attainment for young people aged 15 and 16.

At a national policy level coaching offers the potential as an intervention to address educational inequalities. Previous research has shown that children from middle income families are more likely to benefit from aspirational parents. These parents provide a supportive home where home-work is encouraged, study skills acquired by their parents from university are shared and goals are set with the children. Further, such parents are more likely to understand examination stresses and provide the mix of challenge and support that enhances performance, and helps the young person to develop the hope and resilience to cope with challenges and upsets. For many children whose parents have not benefited from such educational opportunities, coaching can supplement the parental role, proving the goals, encouragement and support in the study process, and particularly during examination periods. This is particularly important for children in care, who in the UK have traditionally suffered the lowest educational attainment of all groups. Coaching thus can play a useful part of a wider social inclusion agenda, addressing inequality.

The previous research also suggests that by building resilience and hope young people may be better equipped to cope with the challenges which later life brings from university pressures, to changes in employment status and the emerging self identity as an adult

worker and parent. As a result coaching may offer a double win, in both short-term educational gains and the resulting opportunities which flow from higher educational attainment, but also longer term gains in personal development that may serve the individual well in later life. The long-term impact of such coaching however has yet to be demonstrated, and could be the subject of further research.

Limitations of the research

The study has a number of limitations. Firstly, the study is focused within one local authority area. A follow up study could test the findings in a second locality and with a wider range of students rather than those on the borderline of grades. A second limitation of the study is that there was no control group. The group which acted as a comparison did not receive any intervention, and as such a difference in the intervention group could be expected. A third weakness that could be strengthened in a further study would be to examine a wider assessment of performance beyond GCSE grades, and to observe whether coaching had a longer term effect into for example A level grades for those who had received coaching.

Conclusions

This paper sought to review coaching as an intervention in education with non-adult populations. The focus to date has been on working with Heads and teachers to enhance their performance in staff management curriculum planning and class-room planning. The results from this single authority based study show coaching can contribute to student performance, and be used as a tool to address social inequalities as well as supplement home study.

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