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## RESEARCH ARTICLE

# PERCEPTIONS OF SELF, EDUCATION AND THE VALUE OF COACHING: POSSIBILITIES TO IMPROVE ENGAGEMENT WITH LEARNING IN A POST-16 EDUCATIONAL SETTING

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### ABSTRACT

*Living educational theory (LET) research provide spracticalenquiries into education in real life contexts. This form of research provides a platform for examining coaching, particularly in the context of students' perceptions of self, education and the value of coaching. Coaching is purported to be a powerful developmental tool. Concepts and models of coaching are briefly presented. Thereafter, a description of a pilot study into how student perceptions of self, education and the value of coaching may contribute to engagement with learning is provided. The study utilised a single-method approach (open questionnaire) that sits within the interpretivist paradigm; specifically LET. It is a single-site, multi-voice study capturing perceptions of students in post-16 education, situated in a rural community college in England. 'Positions of Consensus' are explored, as are individual narratives which suggest that coaching is perceived as advantageous and may be helpful at some psychological level, in enhancing students' engagement with learning in post-16 education. Deductions provide some speculative evidence that coaching may aid engagement with learning in this specific context. It is suggested that coaching models and strategiessuch as neuro-linguistic programming (NLP) could be implemented, via a cost-effective training programme, in post-16 educational settings to enhance engagement with learning and to drive a culture of excellence in schools and FE colleges.*

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## INTRODUCTION

The concept of coaching is perceived as a strategy that can be successfully implemented in the British education system (Kudliskis, 2019). The National College of Secondary Leadership and Children's Services developed a leadership programmes for potential Heads of schools and colleges in which coaching was a prominent element of these programmes (Lofthouse *et al.*, 2011). Coaching can be a very effective tool in creating highly efficient leaders. This has then led to a 'trickle-down' as newly qualified Heads perceive coaching as beneficial to students in terms of supporting learning and enhancing learning outcomes. Dawson and Guare (2012) have noted that coaching can be effective in education, at any age, providing the coachees (leaders, teachers or students) have the maturity to engage with such programmes. It is a truism that perceptions of coaching relate to the notion that coaching positively promotes and enhances the development of the self. There are a number of coaching frameworks to enable engagement with the coaching process. It is generally believed that a coach can empower the individual to modify behaviours and change thought patterns thus creating greater autonomy and self-awareness (Gray, 2000a; Gray, 2000b). The focus of this pilot study endeavours to examine this concept in a specific educational context by exploring perceptions of self, perceptions of education and perceptions of coaching by students in their first year of post-16 education, at AS Level. In sum, could an understanding of the perceptions of self, education and perceptions related to coaching be implemented in an educational context to encourage AS level

students to engage more purposefully with their learning and enhance self-awareness and positivity in relation to said learning?.

**Positionality:** Positionality is an essential component of the qualitative research process. The position of the researcher must be acknowledged. Decisions made by the researcher may affect every aspect of the research process (Holmes, 2020). This may bias the presentation of knowledge regarding the social world (Coghlan and Brydon-Miller, 2014). The characteristics of the researcher, the participants and the research environment must be contextualised. Researchers involved in qualitative research must explain positionality as the ontological and epistemic beliefs can impact qualitative research (Holmes, 2020). In short, an honest expression of positionality contributes to the validity of the research. My interest in coaching has developed over the years. This pilot study reflects the desire to examine the responses of participants in relation to their perception of self, education and coaching in this specific educational context. My positionality, as researcher, is significant; this is reflected in my engagement with the research literature, sample selected, the specific institution and my interpretation of these research findings. Nonetheless, my positionality should not diminish the research findings; but instead, act as a reflection of participant perceptions at a specific moment in time.

**Coaching:** In this context coaching is a form of intervention in which an experienced person, the coach, supports a learner with their endeavours to achieve particular goals by providing support and guidance (Cox *et al.*, 2018). The learner is referred to as the coachee.

In an educational context coaching is applied to support students, teachers, and educational leaders. "Coaching is a person-centred approach [it] is a powerful way of supporting all those persons involved in education. It supports the notion that learning should be personal and changing." (van Nieuwerburger, 2012:6). Coaching provides assistance and thus enables the coachee to develop and succeed in complex, independent performances (Karmudrin *et al.*, 2020). Coaching can be likened to a "meta-profession" encompassing the support of individuals, including learners, in all endeavours including education (Cox *et al.*, 2018). It should be noted that approaches to coaching can be influenced by cultural variation (Rosinski, 2011). Coaches use a range of communication skills such as listening, clarifying, questioning and restatementing. Such coaching techniques help learners to modify their perspectives and thus identify other approaches to achieve their goals (Cox *et al.*, 2018).

Educational coaching enables students to become better learners by motivating them to solve their personal learning problems and nurturing empowerment. Students learn to develop skills that enable them to become a self-motivated, independent learner. One aspect of an educational coach's role is to help learners reflect on their current performance and then consider and negotiate objectives for the future. The coach supports the learner in identifying needs and then planning for these needs (Deiroio *et al.*, 2016). Educational coaches work with students in various situations, not solely those who are struggling academically (van Nieuwerburger, 2012). Put simply, educational coaching is about dialogue; creating opportunities for two-way conversations that are positive and solution-focused. Successful coaching is achieved through the application of specific models such as Whitmore's (2017) GROW model; Hawkin's (2014) CLEAR model; Gilbert and Whittleworth's (2009) OSCAR model; and Green and Grant's (2006) CIGAR model. Broader conceptual philosophies such as Neuro-linguistic Programming (NLP) (Bandler & Grinder, 1975; Grinder & Bandler, 1976) also exist. Neuro linguistic Programming (NLP) is a coaching model introduced by Bandler & Grinder (1975); Grinder & Bandler (1976). They likened an individual to a cybernetic unit; a complete mind-body system. An individual comprises an internal experience associated with the mind ('neuro'); the language the individual uses ('linguistic') and the behaviour ('programming') that results from their interaction with the outside world (Bandler & Grinder 1975; Grinder & Bandler 1976). NLP coaches use learner-specific or the behaviour-specific techniques to help an individual to modify malformed behavioural patterns. The utilisation of NLP strategies can aid individuals to move from negative to positive behavioural patterns and ultimately to move from 'failure' to success (Ilyas, 2017). However, NLP has faced a range of criticism; for example, Rosen (1997) refer to it as psychobabble; Beyerstein (2001) likens NLP to pseudoscience, whilst Zeb *et al.* (2021) note that NLP comprises disjointed theories.

**Research Philosophy:** This pilot study was conducted within the broader qualitative research tradition; specifically educational action research. Action research provides the opportunity to generate an ongoing cycle of co-generative knowledge linked together by critical reflection (Coghlan & Brydon-Miller, 2014). Teachers involve themselves in systematic research designed to improve professional practice (Koshy, Koshy, & Waterman, 2011). Teachers use action research to find out what works in a classroom. "Action research is essentially the *scientific method* of teaching" (Khasinah, 2013:113). Such research is conducted "on site" (Whitehead 1985) and has proven to be a catalyst for change in improving classroom practices (Abrenica & Cascolan, 2022); Action research provides teachers with opportunities to examine issues that are important to them in their specific work context (Whitehead, 1985). More recently, Barry proposed the concept of "Living Educational Theory" (LET), stating, "[it is] a critical and transformational approach to action research. It confronts the researcher to challenge the status quo of educational practice" (Barry, 2012, as cited in Atkins & Wallace, 2012, p. 131). Barry contends that the life of the action researcher is inextricably linked with individuals and communities involved in the subject of

study. In the context of education it is essential for the teacher-researcher to research their professional practice to improve what they are doing, as a teacher, in ways that are important to them. LET provides explanations of educational influences of the teacher-researcher's own learning, the learning of others and the learning in social formations (Barry, 2012). Educational action research can provide a specific form of insight that may not be available via the positivist tradition. The purpose of this specific LET research is to make an original contribution to educational knowledge by examining perceptions of self, perceptions of education and perceptions of coaching and examine whether coaching, in particular, could contribute to the learning of 1<sup>st</sup> Year student in post-16 education within this specific learning context. Action research does have its critics. Simonsen (2009) explains that action research is time consuming and risky as relevant actors may not engage with the study in a positive manner. It becomes necessary for the action research to "sell" research ideas. Moreover, action research is personally demanding and challenging for the researcher. The researcher has a responsibility to the project and must be committed to certain activities and the results (Simonsen, 2009). Participants in action research projects may not identify with the research project; thus perceptions as to the relevance of the project may compromise engagement (Corgo & Mercer, 2008). There may be a mistrust of researchers, a lack of motivation (both on the part of the participants and school administrators) and a lack of resources that leads to pressure and frustration in the action research process (Zhou, 2012; Othman, 2011). Furthermore, Berg and Eikeland (2008) assert that the action researcher's observations can be "filtered" and "framed" by both the context and the researcher (Berg & Eikeland, 2008, p. 201). This pilot study examines participant perceptions of self, their perceptions of education and their perceptions of coaching as an intervention to enhance the learning and general self-development. The qualitative responses via an open-ended questionnaire are highlighted from study group responses following 6 half-hour introductory coaching workshops. Do the perceptions discussed above, particularly regarding coaching, appear to be of possible value to students in the first year of their post-16 AS level study?

## METHODOLOGY

This single-site, multi-voiced pilot study was created to capture participants' personal perceptions of self and education together with personal perceptions of coaching and coaching needs. The study group comprised students who identified as male or female and white. The participants were completing the 1<sup>st</sup> year of their post-16 education; all were taking their AS level examinations (the first year of an entry qualification for university in England and Wales). The study group comprised a random sample reflecting gender and black and minority ethnic (BAME) groups who were studying subjects (Psychology, Sociology or World Development) within the Human Sciences department. The department consisted of 98 students taking one or more of the subjects; of these, 87 indicated that they would take part in this study if selected by random sampling. A random sample was selected reflecting 10% of the students from the study group. The group consisted of 9 Year 12 students aged between 16 and 17 years (Mean 16.22; Standard Deviation 0.44) who, with parental consent, participated over a period of 6 weeks (one half term) in 6 half-hour workshops designed to introduce coaching; in particular, Neuro-linguistic Programming (NLP) as a possible source of coaching support with learning. The use of a case study, such as this, could introduce bias as students participating in the research knew the teacher-researcher as the lead of the Human Sciences department. This may have led to participants to display subject effects which could have contaminated the study. However, all were asked to be honest in the way they reported their perceptions in relation to this research. Research that involves human participants raises complex ethical, legal, social and political issues. There are five objectives in (education) research ethics. The first, to protect participants; the second, to ensure the research is conducted in a way that serves the interests of all stakeholders; the third, to manage risk, protect confidentiality and to ensure informed consent (Hammersley

& Traianou, 2012) together with fourth, justice and fifth care for participants (Hammersley & Traianou, 2014). In meeting these criteria this study received ethical approval from the Research Ethics Committee of the College. Typically, educational research should utilise a mixed methods approach using both quantitative and qualitative research tools (see Fetters & Morina-Azorin, 2020; Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill, 2023). Research tools are inextricably linked to two broad research traditions. The positivist tradition promotes the use of quantitative research tools such as, for example, closed questionnaires or structured interview schedules. These research tools ensure the production of reliable data that can be statistically analysed and the research method replicated in future research. This, ultimately, leads to the production of 'laws' of human behaviour. Conversely, the interpretivist tradition requires the use of qualitative research tools such as, for example, open questionnaires or unstructured interviews. These research tools ensure the production of valid data that reflects the perceptions and personal experiences of the participants. There is a substantial range of information relating to these traditions (see Lambert 2019; Benton and Craib 2023).

For the purpose of this pilot study the researcher felt that an interpretive approach using only an open questionnaire was appropriate. Open questionnaires are abundant in society. Almost everyone will have participated with some form of questionnaire in either a school or job; therefore, this is not a unique experience for the participant. Nonetheless, open questionnaires conducted for the purpose of research require careful construction (Kara 2018). The positivist tradition permits the statistical analysis of data; whereas, interpretivism permits the use of analytical generalization (s) (Yin, 1989) and thus insight into the responses received by the researcher. All open questionnaires have three core features in common. Firstly, such questionnaires are free-form and permit responses to be descriptive and explanatory. Secondly, they permit participants to answer in an open text format instead of using pre-defined keywords or options, a thematic or narrative approach is enabled. Thirdly, open questionnaires allow researchers to investigate knowledge and understanding (Kara, 2018). Meanings and understanding are generated by both the researched and the researcher (Lambert, 2019).

An open questionnaire was deemed the most appropriate research tool as it provided specific insight into the perceptions of members of the study group relating to their self, education and coaching needs in education (see Appendix 1). Approximately two weeks after the 6-week coaching workshops, participants completed the open questionnaire in order to gauge their perceptions about self, education and coaching needs. In particular how their self-perception may impact their learning experiences and whether coaching may positively support their learning. The questionnaire was completed between 20 – 30 minutes (dependent upon the depth of responses from the various participants). It should be noted that this study focuses on student perceptions, particularly with the coaching element; not to examine any specific coaching strategies or techniques. Responses, in some instances, are explored through a form of thematic analysis (see Guest, MacQueen, & Namey, 2012). In some cases, it was possible to synthesise viewpoints, be they negative or positive, as 'positions of consensus' (see Kudliskis, 2019); in other cases, the specific narratives of various participants in the study group are presented in relation to perceptions of self, education and coaching needs. This form of analysis enabled the teacher-researcher to express, by foregrounding the voices of the participants, their perceptions of self, education and the value of coaching.

## RESULTS

The results were collected and collated in a qualitative format foregrounding the voices of the participants. The results were assembled into three broad categories: firstly, perceptions of self and learning; secondly, perceptions of education; and thirdly, perceptions about coaching and learning. Thereafter, an analysis of participant responses was conducted; emerging themes and individual narratives were considered. The questions presented below are in an abridged

format; the full version of the questions are in the appendix (see Appendix 1).

### Personal Perceptions of Self and Learning

1. *What accomplishments must occur during your lifetime so you consider your life satisfying?*

All of the participants indicated a desire to achieve something of personal value. Some indicated a desire to excel in their chosen sport, their chosen interest, or with their relationship with family and/or friends. However, two comments worthy of note were presented in the following statements:

*I feel to live a good [rewarding] life you need to say "I can't believe I did that" instead of saying "I wish I had done that". (Participant 2 – F)*

*I need to do things for myself [be proactive] and not because someone is telling me to. (Participant 7 – F)*

2. *If there was a secret passion in your life, what would it be?*

When participants were asked this question the responses were diverse. Some indicated a desire to be highly successful with music in some form. Others indicated a desire to "help others"; or, of a desire to excel in sport, particularly football. A comment that best encapsulates the secret passion of the above was referenced via the Star Wars films.

*I want to be a Jedi [knight – a reference to the Star Wars series of films]! (Participant 6 – F)*

3. *What would you consider your role in the community to be?*

All of the participants made reference, in some form, of their desire to help others in their local, country or global context. This key theme demonstrates the caring passion of the students in this specific cohort. The position of consensus of the pilot study group is clearly demonstrated in the following two comments:

*I think my role is just to be a kind, helpful person to the people around me. (Participant 9 – F)*

*I want to make people happy. I want to listen to their problems and try to help [where possible]. (Participant 2 – F)*

4. *If you could devote your life to serving others – and still have the money and lifestyle you need – would you do it?*

When the participants were asked this question all indicated that they would help others. However, the help offered depended on individual circumstances. The words "helping" and "caring" of others was used by all participants. The individual comments that best reflect this are as follows:

*Yes, I would like to be the head of an organisation and to give people the chance to have a good work experience. I want to be involved in a high-profile project to help others.....(Participant 3 – F)*

*Yes, I would like to help others (adults, children, teens) who have experienced the same life (cancer) experiences as me. I want to help them through drama therapy. (Participant 4 – F)*

5. *Write down 2 or 3 things that are working well for you?*

Responses to this question made reference to benefits experienced with family and friends. Some participants noted that learning in particular subjects was going well; or, their participation in sport was working well. More individual, thoughtful comments were also proffered:

*Thinking of every day as a new day. To look at what I have done rather than what I haven't done. (Participant 4 – F)*

*Helping others; listening to others. (Participant 2 – F)*

6. *What do you do when you're really up against it?*

Participants provided answers to this question in which words such as “stress”, “anger” or “freak out” were expressed. None of these emotions were defined by either the researcher nor the participants; however, it was clear that such emotions generated uneasiness and a high level of emotional discomfort. The following best reflects the position of consensus of this pilot study group:

*I get tearful, angry, upset, stressed out, panic freak-out and give up [on the task in hand]. I blame my [in]abilities when [I'm up against it]. (Participant 3 – F)*

At a more individualistic level one participant stated:

*I will 'zone out' and stop talking to people. I will 'take it out' on my family when I don't really mean to. (Participant 7 – F)*

7. *If you had a 5-year goal and you had the continuing services of a coach to help you make it happen....., what would that goal be?*

It was clear that all the participants had perceptions as to where and how they would like to be in the future. Such perceptions included having achieved “academic success” at both A level and later at university. Others spoke of “success” in business and sport. These participants had also considered possible shortcomings and how they need to address said shortcomings. Comments that encapsulated the broader views of the pilot study group include:

*I would want to overcome all the issues that I have now. I would try to use what I've found out about myself and why these things happen. I would use this [knowledge] to help others. (Participant 6 – F)*

*I want to be more positive; to be more confident; and to talk about my feelings more. (Participant 4 – F)*

8. *What's missing in your life? What would make your life more fulfilling?*

This question produced a range of narratives representing a breadth of perceptions. Some participants spoke of specific items that they felt were missing in their lives such as their “inability to write songs” or to “play a musical instrument”. Others wished to “travel to other countries”. However, the broader position of consensus of the group is represented in the following statement:

*Closer, more trusting and loving relationships with all my close family members. I want a friendship group I can completely trust. I want [encouragement] to explore more ideas of what I want to achieve and how I can achieve them. (Participant 3 – F)*

9. *What activities have special meaning for you?*

The responses to the above question were various. It was interesting that physical activities in the form of “football”, “bike-riding” and “walking” held special meaning for some.

*I love playing football; well, I enjoy any sport. I enjoy the time when I am only concentrating on the sport and nothing else. (Participant 5 – M)*

A theme that emerged from the majority of responses related to having “special” or “close” friends. This theme is exemplified in the following position of consensus:

*Going out with friends as this helps me escape some [negative] feelings about school and home. (Participant 3 – F)*

10. *Who are the significant people in your life?*

This question presented responses that resonated with the whole group. There was no deviation. All declared the following sentiment with one or two adding an extension of pets, teachers or grandparents.

*My family and my close friends. (Participant 2 – F)*

11. *What have been the significant events in your life?*

All participants were able to highlight, often in great detail, the significant events in their lives. Such events coalesced around major family events, both positive and negative, academic success and sporting success. A comment that encapsulates the above is:

*Having my tonsils and appendix removed. Winning my football league(s). Passing my GCSEs. Losing my nan. My little sisters being born and getting closer to my mum and older sister. My family and my close friends. (Participant 7 – F)*

A touching individual response was:

*Overcoming cancer (twice). The loss of my father. Becoming a member of the National Youth Theatre of GB. (Participant 4 – F)*

12. *Tell me about time(s) when you were operating at “peak performance”, when things were going well for you, you were “on top of your game”.*

This question also elicited responses with comprehensive detail. Many of the responses focused on peak performance in “sport”, the arts and “academic work”. The following reflects the position of consensus of this pilot study group:

*I believe that I was operating at my 'peak performance' at the end of last summer. I had just got my first job. I had got really good GCSE results and I was playing water polo really well. I was really pleased with myself and my achievements; especially in the job as I had stepped out of my comfort zone to get it. (Participant 9 – F)*

13. *Do you believe in God or in the concept of a higher power?*

This question was inserted to gain a sense of the spirituality of the participants. Spirituality is not defined here; but, reflects the notion that, possibly, by believing in God or a higher power this may contribute to an acceptance of support from another; a coach. The College, whilst offering Religious Studies as a subject, does tend to follow the Christian doctrine. The following of such a doctrine, in which the individual seeks help from ‘another’ could, in this tight frame of reference, be seen to indicate help from another, in the form of coaching, as appropriate. Views were mixed. Many did not believe in God; however, the notion of a higher power reflected the majority of views as encapsulated in the following comment:

*I believe in spirits and souls; I believe my dad is with me in some spiritual sense. I believe in some sort of higher power or God. I'm not entirely sure which; God or a higher power. (Participant 4 – F)*

### Personal Perceptions of Education

1. *What do you want from your education?*

All of the participants aspired to achieve well in their education (at this stage, A levels). This then, frequently translated into going to a good university, developing a career and having a good job. The following position of consensus reinforces this point:

*[This is a] simple process as from my education I want to achieve good grades; helping go to a good university so I can ultimately earn good money. (Participant 2 – F)*

## 2. What are your key career goals?

Key career goals were various as might be expected from the participants. These individual narratives are reflected in the following comments.

*To live and work in Europe. In particular, I want to work in Austria as a ski guide or ski instructor. (Participant 1 – M)*  
*I want to doing something I enjoy and that pushes me..... (Participant 6 – F)*

However, one participant noted that his career goals were less predictable at this point in their life:

*I don't have career goals at the moment. I have never been able to see myself in a specific career that I am interested in. However, I do want that [a vision for my future]. (Participant 5 – M)*

## 3. What skills or knowledge are you developing?

All participants spoke in positive terms about the skills or knowledge they were developing; this was not always simply academic or subject-based. Participants spoke of the need to be “reflective”, “communicative” and to develop “emotional skills” in tandem with their learning skills. Individual narratives included:

*I am learning how to [effectively] communicate with people. My need to write quickly is being developed. (Participant 2 – F)*  
*I need to develop reflective thinking skills. I need to gain the necessary knowledge for A levels. I want to become an emotional thinker. (Participant 4 – F)*

## 4. How do your career goals support your personal goals?

In a similar vein, all the participants were able to identify links between their career goals and personal goals; albeit that these were very individual. However, a broader position of consensus is presented in the following comment:

*My career goals support my personal goals because [both sets of goals] encourage me to try harder and achieve now. This will help and support me in the future. (Participant 6 – F)*

## 5. What do you want to do to support your career goals?

The participants appreciated that they needed support for their career goals. Concepts that were important include the need for “confidence” and “positivity”. However, the majority also highlighted the importance of work experience to their career success.

*I want to do some training [as a ski guide and instructor]. I want to complete some work experience. (Participant 1 – M)*

*I need to gain work experience in a nurse [school]. (Participant 2 – F)*

## Personal Perceptions of Coaching linked to Learning

### 1. What do you want to make sure you get from your coaching relationship?

Given the participants had attended (NLP) coaching workshops, this gave them the opportunity to think very specifically about their education. All the participants noted their shortcomings, in some form, with learning with issues such as “writing effectively”.

*Helping me to find strategies to write sufficient information in the time allocated. Helping me cope with my panic attacks during examinations. (Participant 2 – F)*

However, it was clear that the majority felt they needed various forms of emotional support, one stated:

*I want to feel comfortable talking about my feelings, personal and life experiences. I need someone who can help with my personal and specific needs. I also need a coach who can suggest strategies and ways of approaching and thinking about things. (Participant 4 – F)*

Another stated:

*I would like support when feeling anxious about my subjects. I would like to[feel] trust when saying something I'm uncomfortable with. I would like advice on how to deal with my anger and frustration when I feel it. (Participant 6 – F)*

### 2. How do you want your coach to be?

Participants spoke in terms of a coach being “supportive”, “empathic” and “calming”. Whilst such terms were not defined by either the researcher or participants the comments suggest a need to feel happy and positive with themselves and their learning. Some individual narratives that explored the needs from a coach included:

*I would like my coach to help and advise me; however, I would like the coach to let me try and figure out the answer. (Participant 6 – F)*

*I need a coach who will help me go deeper to explore my thoughts more. I need a coach who asks questions; is a good listener and is emotionally in tune [with me]. (Participant 4 – F)*

*I want my coach to be encouraging; to push me with my work. However, I don't want to feel out of my depth. (Participant 7 – F)*

### 3. What do you want to work on in coaching?

The responses to this question further highlighted the need, by participants, for emotional support. The specific emotions that participants wished to work on in their coaching included “stress”, “anger”, “frustration” and “panic”, all linked to their learning. The position of consensus for the pilot study group is reflected in the following comment:

*I would like to work on overcoming my anger and frustration and to find ways of feeling less stressed about things that I don't understand; especially with upcoming tests or exams. (Participant 6 – F)*

Two other individual points identified areas for developing emotional resilience:

*My confidence in my ability. Developing confidence and staying calm in tough situations. (Participant 9 – F)*

*I want to develop coping strategies for the pressure and stress of everything around college work. How can I feel positive again? (Participant 3 – F)*

### 4. What 2 steps could you take immediately that would make the difference in your current situation(s)?

Participants identified a range of ways in which they could make a difference to their current situation such as completing more “practice papers” and completing “extra essay questions” prior to exams or improving their “time management”. It appears that the participants knew possible solutions to the problems they faced; but that additional support and guidance was needed beyond the

classroom. Again, the requirement for enhanced emotional resilience came to the fore as demonstrated in the following narratives:

*Recognising what makes me angry and why. It would be helpful to look back at past situations and [discuss] what happened. (Participant 5 – M)*

*I need to become more confident in myself and [acknowledge] my knowledge and ability. I need to stop comparing myself to others. Trust that I'm only working for myself and that I'm not letting anyone else down. (Participant 6 – F)*

5. *What can a coach say to you when you are most "stuck", that will return you to action?*

The emotional condition of 'being stuck' was experienced by the majority of the participants. Some participants could identify strategies to help them get 'unstuck', but felt less able to implement such strategies. It appeared that a coach would be better placed to aid the implementation of strategies to enable a return to action.

*My coach must be motivational. They must remind and encourage me about what I want to achieve. (Participant 3 – F)*

*The coach would tell me to relax; think about what I am going to do and then carry on. (Participant 9 – F)*

*To ask me why I am stuck and to ask me how I can get "unstuck". (Participant 4 – F)*

6. *What changes might you need to make in order to help your coaching be successful?*

This question enabled participants to consider how they could assist in the coaching process. The majority acknowledged they could help in this process by considering their behaviour and then making positive modifications to that behaviour. Whilst the responses were individualistic they provide insight into what post-16 learners in Year 12 can do to support themselves.

*I need to manage my time, with regards to learning, more effectively. I need to change my attitude to both college and learning. (Participant 3 – F)*

*I need to be able to accept help. I need to acknowledge that some of the issues that occur are to do with my 'self' [they are self-inflicted]. (Participant 5 – M)*

*Not to be tentative; to say whatever naturally comes to my mind. I must learn to go with my gut instinct, it is often right. (Participant 4 – F)*

7. *If you trusted your coach enough to tell them how to manage you most effectively, what tips would you give?*

Given that the participants trust their coach and felt able to discuss coaching strategies, this is what they would suggest:

*Always be calm and patient; however, be firm and fair when necessary. (Participant 1 – M)*

*Ask me more questions that challenge my thinking; but, ease into deeper questions carefully. (Participant 4 – F)*

*To reduce my experience of stress [in relation to exam performance]. Give me helpful advice; help me identify useful strategies. (Participant 2 – F)*

## DISCUSSION

This pilot study demonstrates that Living Educational theory is an educational explanation a researcher gives for their educational influence in the learning of others (see Barry, 2012). LET, as action research, can provide the basis for possible education transformation and critical reflection (Koshy, Koshy & Waterman, 2011). The students, in this study, presented, albeit in differing terms, their perceptions of self, education and coaching in relation to their learning. There is limited reference in the literature to perceptions of self, education and coaching, nonetheless, the researcher felt the perceptions expressed by the participants does provide insight into the

possible value of coaching and learning for students this 1<sup>st</sup> year of A level study in this post-16 context. Although all the responses in the 'Personal Perceptions of Self and Learning' do not focus on education and coaching *per se*; they do give some individual insight into the cultural values of the participants. These values will be a product myriad influences, but one of the major influences will be education. The experiences of education, positive or negative, will then impact on the perceived needs for coaching.

**Perceptions of self:** When exploring perceptions of self the participants indicated the need to lead a "good life" and to become more "proactive" in their lives. A theme that emerged was the desire to "help others" in a variety of contexts. When considering what was 'working well' participants perceived that learning in specific subjects was "going well"; many also acknowledged "success" in their chosen sport. However, when participants met difficulties with learning they indicated their response to be "stress", "anger", or to "panic". Such emotional responses seem to indicate low levels of resilience. This is linked to a sense of "inability" and at times will lead to distress being "taken out" on parents. This may be a product of the transition experiences associated with the movement from GCSE to GCE A levels. GCSEs are qualifications that act as a gateway qualification to GCE A levels or higher level vocational qualifications in England and Wales. These qualifications are, typically, teacher-directed and involve dependent learning on the part of the student. Whereas, GCE A levels require students to engage with critical thinking, substantial analysis of information and effective communication (Relocate Magazine, 2023). The difference in academic requirements with these qualifications is substantial and in some cases schools and colleges may not meet the transitional needs of students effectively. When considering their five year goals participants perceived their "academic success" both at college and, later, at university was important. Participants perceived the need to "overcome [personal] issues", to be "more positive" and to be "more confident" as important. Whilst other participants craved various forms of creative ability or the capacity to "travel to other countries". Many spoke of generating "closer, more trusting and loving relationships", to be "more confident" and "self-believing".

Participant perceptions indicated that activities that had special meaning for them involved a range of outdoor and physical activities. It was interesting to note "special" and "close friends" were perceived as very important. Significant life events coalesced around major family events, academic success and sporting success. Perceptions of peak performance were frequently associated with "support", the Arts and "academic work"; these areas were often interlinked. Participant perceptions about God or a higher power were mixed. However, implicit in the responses was the idea that seeking the help of another, such as God or a higher power may indicate the preparedness to engage with the support of 'another', such as a coach. Furthermore, those who normally actively participate in sport, at whatever level, will have experienced the support of a coach in relation to their sport. This sports coach will have nurtured and encouraged best sporting practice and skill. Therefore, these participants may view an academic coach as being beneficial in aiding and supporting their learning. In sum, the participants aspired to work hard and achieve; however, it appears that the lack of emotional resilience can thwart the desire for success with learning; at least to some extent. The transition from GCSE to GCE A level, whilst addressed in school and college from an academic standpoint, may not be sufficiently addressed from an emotional standpoint. As Karmudrin *et al.*, (2020) note the coach can provide assistance and enable the coachee to develop and transfer their learning to succeed in complex, independent performances. Van Nieuwerburger (2012) affirms this point by stating coaches endeavour to help students learn how they best learn. Frequently, the focus may not be simply to help those who are struggling academically, but also to help those, who amongst other things, may lack emotional resilience.

**Perceptions of Education:** Participant perceptions in relation to education demonstrated aspiration and the desire to achieve well at this stage (A level), at university and in the development of their

career. As might be expected career goals were very individualistic; many were specific, although one participant indicated that his career goals were less predictable at this point. Perceptions of skills and knowledge that education provides were not always academic. For example, participants spoke of their perception that skills such as “*reflection*”, “*communication*” and “*emotional skills*” were being learnt alongside subject material. Perceptions relating to career goals supporting personal goals indicated, in broad terms, that all participants were able to identify links between both. In an educational context, providing support to achieve career goals requires specific input in areas such as “*confidence*” and “*positivity*”. As Deiroio *et al.* (2016) maintain one aspect of an educational coach’s role is to help learners reflect on their current performance and then consider and negotiate objectives for the future.

**Perceptions of coaching:** All participants highlighted, albeit in various ways, that a coach needs to help them develop their writing strategies, their approaches to thinking about learning and reflecting on issues to aid in preparation for academic tasks such as exams. The majority also highlighted the need for a coach to provide emotional support with their learning. Participants needed to “*feel comfortable in expressing their feelings*” and “*personal experiences*” to the coach. In particular, the participants perceived the need for the coach to help them address “*anger*”, “*frustration*” and “*anxiety*”. Further, a coach needed attributes including being “*supportive*”, “*empathic*” and “*calming*”. Some participants sought to gain greater insight into their perceptions as a coach should enable participants “*to explore their thoughts more deeply*” or “*to provide more encouragement*”. Participants indicated that they wanted to ‘work on’, with a coach, their negative emotional responses such as “*stress*”, “*anger*”, “*frustration*” and “*panic*” as an attempt to develop emotional resilience in relation to learning. The participants indicated that they were aware of the steps that they could take to enhance specific learning situations, but they indicated that additional support and guidance was necessary beyond typical classroom interactions. Some participants could identify strategies that they believed would help them get ‘unstuck’ with the learning; however, they perceived that a coach would be better placed to intercede by helping them implement the use of such strategies. The participants appreciated that they could, themselves, aid with the success of coaching interventions by making “*positive modifications*” to their behaviour. They could manage their time more effectively, accept help, and to be less tentative in classroom interactions and to, at times appreciate how self-sabotage can negatively impact learning. The personality of the coach was also perceived as important. The coach should be “*calm*” and “*patient*” but “*firm*”; the ability to challenge the participants’ thinking was perceived as an essential requirement.

In sum, the transition from GCSE to GCE A level is substantial. Schools and colleges do implement transitional programmes; but, these generally tend to be at an academic level. The participants had high aspirations regarding higher education and future careers. However, as they enter post-16 educations it appears that the participants had not developed the necessary levels of emotional resilience and this negatively impacts learning. Engaging with a coach was perceived as a valuable intervention to aid, support and guide learning by the participants. This pilot study was conducted in a Community College in the south-west England. The researcher acknowledges that his observations may be “*framed*” and “*filtered*” by this specific social situation (Berg & Eikeland, 2008:201). The small sample size limited the possibility to achieve substantial analytical generalisation as supported by Yin (1989). Moreover, the sample was composed of participants identifying as female or male and white British; this does not reflect the broader mix of ethnicities more typically evident in England and Wales. This (LET) study has been time-consuming, somewhat risky, demanding and challenging (see Simonsen 2009). There is some evidence of resistance to this study (see Toro & Wenick, 2007) as eleven students chose not to be included in the random sampling process. This may have been because of mistrust as to the purpose of the study and a lack of motivation on the part of the students (see Zhou, 2012); or the

perception of a lack of relevance to these students (see Corgo & Mercer, 2008). The original plan for this pilot study was more ambitious. It was intended to include the whole cohort of Year 12 students from the 6<sup>th</sup> form; however, the ability of the teacher-researcher to devote time and conduct such a substantial piece of research (see Simonsen, 2009) would have compromised teaching and learning activities for the students as they studied for their A levels. Nonetheless, this LET study embraces the *scientific method* of teaching (see Khasinah, 2013) as it offer teachers a different optic of the needs of students and thus could be perceived as a catalyst for change in improving classroom practices (see Abrenica & Cascolan, 2022). This specific LET pilot study has also helped the teacher-researcher and management team better understand the needs of the students, in this setting. LET enables students to better understand their intrinsic needs and thus empowers them to engage more purposely with their learning (see Barry, 2012). Coaching is seen as a useful intervention in educational organisations. This specific pilot study, whilst not engaging in coaching *per se* did provide the students with the opportunities to reflect on their current perceptions about their self, their learning and the value of coaching. This, in turn, provided participants with the opportunity to consider if coaching could enhance their engagement with learning.

Findings from this single site, multi-voice pilot study to perceptions of self, education and coaching in relation to learning must be viewed through the context of several limitations. First, as noted previously the participation rate was low. Second, whilst the open-ended questionnaire provided insight into the perceptions of the students relating to self, education and coaching in connection with learning, such findings cannot be generalised to other settings. The qualitative data is also limited due to the lack of any other collateral observations from significant others such as parents, teachers and friends in the participants’ lives. Third, the use of a small random sample limits the validity of the findings. Future research into self, education and coaching in relation to learning would benefit from a more diverse sample to include members of the BAME social group and differing age cohorts. The implementation of a randomised controlled trials together with quantitative and qualitative research tools that can effectively measure perceptions of self, education, coaching and learning would enable greater insight into these concepts as advocated by Saunders *et al.*, (2023). Fourth, it may have been more appropriate to use close-ended questions as this permits the use of data-coding and analysis thus ensuring the reliability of a study. However, the open-ended questions gave respondents the opportunity to answer freely without having to categorise answers into a given response. Fifth, there was the possibility of social desirability effects that may have influenced the research as, for example, participants may have wanted to please their teacher-as-researcher by providing what they believed to be acceptable answers. Sixth, the teacher-as-researcher could be accused of ‘filtering’ and ‘framing’ evidence from this pilot study (see Berg & Eikeland, 2008). If so, this was not done consciously. The benefits of this research should not be ignored. The participants were assured that their data would be anonymised and the results would not affect their relationship with the teacher-as-researcher. The participants had been asked to be honest in the way that they responded to the open-ended questionnaire. The researcher had no reason to think that they had done otherwise. The use of analytical generalisation (see Yin, 1989) enabled the Principal, Sixth Form leadership team and teacher-as-researcher to engage with the perceptions of the students by considering positions of consensus (see Kudliskis, 2019) and their individual narratives. These findings were then, more broadly, shared with middle leaders, teachers and other stakeholders. It was intended that this research would not be ‘done’ to the students (Purdy and Spears, 2020). The intention of this pilot study was to explore the perceptions of the students relating to their self, education, and the perceived value of coaching and to foreground the voices of the students and reduce any notion of confirmation bias. This innovative piece of research was initiated as a pilot study. The research was designed to provide the school with a better understanding of how understanding perceptions of self, education and coaching may benefit the learning for a specific cohort.

These initial findings should provide impetus for further research in a range of educational contexts.

## CONCLUSION

Living educational theory, conducted in educational contexts, can provide professional insight into student perceptions of the self, education and coaching. Such research is of interest to teachers, leaders, educationalists and other stakeholders as they strive to understand how young people learn to learn. Such insight may not be achieved when conducting positivist research. There is limited theoretical material relating to perceptions of self, education and coaching and how understanding such perceptions may enhance learning. The teacher-as-researcher elected to examine such perceptions in relation to learning as a critical observer and commentator. The purpose of this pilot study was to contribute to living educational theory (LET) and to provide a foundation for further research in the area of student perceptions. Whilst only a single research tool was used, the qualitative data gained provides insight into the perceptions of students of self, education and the value of coaching in the context of learning. The data provides some speculative evidence that understanding these student perceptions can impact positively on experiences with learning. It should be noted that direct or indirect subject effects and demand characteristics may have impacted the research. The study may have been influenced by unintentional subject effects on the part of the students. The teacher-as-researcher may have unintentionally demonstrated demand characteristics. The teacher-as-researcher endeavoured to be systematic in the research process and liaised closely with two 'critical friends' to ensure that the he, the researcher, remained grounded throughout the whole process. The teacher-as-researcher believes that all participants provided honest reflections of their perceptions. It should be acknowledged that the teacher-as-researcher endeavoured to ensure that the research was not simply 'done' to the students. The study, as a whole, was a collaborative process (see Purdy and Spears, 2020). The voices of the students were foregrounded and the research process provided a form of value in learning. The students gained greater insight, understanding and reflections as to perceptions of self, education and coaching and how this could benefit their learning. In sum, this was a pilot study and the findings are limited. Nonetheless, the study provides a window through which to examine and understand how perceptions of self, education and coaching may positively impact learning for students in post-16 education. These initial findings indicate there is potential for further research in this area.

**Application in Schools:** Some progressive schools, with a post-16 cohort, may wish to consider introducing coaching programmes to aid students with their transition from GCSE study to GCE A level study. This would provide students with greater insight into perceptions of their self, education and coaching thus enhancing their approach to learning. At a practical level, implementation of such coaching programmes could be fulfilled through the appointment of qualified education coaches. An initial tool and valuable starting point for teachers and education leaders would be to read the book "*Teaching for Excellence*" written by Richard Bandler and Kate Benson. Similar programmes could be introduced into primary and secondary school settings. The value of such interventions could then be appraised through further research in these specific educational contexts.

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2. If there was a secret passion in your life, what would it be?
  3. What do you consider your role to be in your local community; or, in your country; or. In the world?
  4. If you could devote your life to serving others – and still have the money and lifestyle you need – would you do it? How would it look?
  5. Write down 2 or 3 thing that are working well for you?
  6. What do you do when you are really up against it?
  7. If you had a 5-year goal and you had the continuing services of a coach to help you make it happen (and money were not an issue), what would that goal be? What difference would working with a coach make?
  8. What's missing in your life? What would make your life more fulfilling?
  9. What activities have special meaning for you?
  10. Who are the significant people in your life?
  11. What have been the significant events in your life?
  12. Tell me about time(s) when you were operating at “peak performance”, when things were going well for you, you were “on top of your game”, you were pleased with what you were doing or accomplishing. What was going on? Who else was involved? How did you feel? (This is no time for modesty – tell it like it was.)
  13. Do you believe in God or in the concept of a higher power? If so, describe the most useful and empowering aspects of your relationship with God or the higher power. If not, what reference point do you use?

#### Personal Perceptions of Education

1. What DO YOU WANT from your education?
2. What are YOUR key career goals?
3. What skills are YOU developing?
4. How do YOUR career goals support your personal goals?
5. What do YOU want to do to support your career goals?

#### Student Questionnaire on Coaching in Education with Brief Reference to Neuro-linguistic Programming (abridged for publication)

##### Personal Perceptions of Coaching linked to Learning

1. What DO YOU want to make sure you get the best from a coaching relationship? (Maybe write down 2 or 3 things that occur to you.)
2. How DO YOU want your coach to be with you?
3. What DO YOU want to work on in coaching?
4. What 2 steps could YOU take immediately that would make the difference in your current [learning] situation(s)?
5. What can your coach SAY TO YOU when you are most “stuck” that will return you to action?
6. What changes might YOU need to make in order to help your coaching be successful?
7. If you trusted your coach enough to tell them how to manage you most effectively, what tips would you give?

#### Appendix 1

##### Student Questionnaire on Coaching in Education with Brief Reference to Neuro-linguistic Programming (abridged for publication)

##### Personal Perceptions of Self

1. What accomplishments must, in your opinion, occur during your lifetime so that you will consider your life to have been satisfying and well lived – a life of few or no regrets?

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