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## **'More willing to carry on in the face of adversity': How beginner teachers facing challenging circumstances experience positive psychology coaching; An interpretative phenomenological analysis**

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Positive psychology coaching (PPC) is defined as the approach of activating positive psychology (PP) in an applied and systematic way through coaching (Passmore & Oades, 2014). Currently studies looking at how PPC is experienced by coachees are limited (Madden, Green, & Grant, 2011; van Nieuwerburgh & Green, 2014). While there has been some early success cited in relation to using a PPC approach in professional development in education with adults (Zwart, Korthagen, & Attema-Noordewier, 2014) it is not yet known how teachers experience PPC, and we know that PPC is being used in the education sector for those experiencing challenging circumstances. The purpose of this paper was to gain an understanding of how PPC is experienced by beginner teachers undergoing challenging circumstances. This initial explorative study adopted a qualitative approach using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). Three beginner teachers facing challenging circumstances participated in five PPC sessions each. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with each of the participants. Each interview was transcribed, annotated and analysed using the IPA methodology. Four superordinate themes emerged: 'perfectly normal to feel this way'; making sense and 'joining the dots'; increased positive emotion; and, time to think 'in an easy-going environment'. Further studies of the application of PPC in educational settings are needed.

**Key words:** Positive Psychology; Positive Psychology Coaching; Education; Beginner teacher; Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

### **Practice points**

- **To which field of practice area(s) in coaching is your contribution directly relevant?**  
This contribution has direct relevance for coaching practitioners across the education sector and for those who practice PPC.
- **What do you see as the primary contribution your submission makes to coaching practice?**  
To help practitioners deepen their understanding of the role and use of PPC to support professionals experiencing challenges

### **What are its tangible implications for practitioners?**

- Education organisations may consider offering PPC as an additional professional development tool
- PPC as a professional tool could be explored for educators more widely including its use for school leaders or professionals who lead teacher training programmes.

## Introduction

The teaching profession is under considerable challenge at present with heightened levels of stress and attrition being reported (Kidger et al., 2016). Some areas of the UK, such as the Opportunity Areas, where a UK government programme aims to help more children and young people achieve their full potential through targeted funding in areas facing the biggest challenges to social mobility, are experiencing even greater demands (see. Opportunity area Programme: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/opportunity-area-programme-research-and-analysis>). Retention is particularly declining amongst early career teachers (Fisher, 2011; Helms-Lorentz, Slof, & van de Grift, 2012), for example 32.3% of newly qualified entrants working in the UK state sector 2011 were not recorded as working in 2016, just five years later (House of Commons, 2019). PPC is a recently defined approach of activating PP in an applied and systematic way through coaching (Passmore & Oades, 2014). As a discipline, PP aims to “understand, test, discover and promote the factors that allow individuals and communities to thrive” (Sheldon, Frederikson, Rathunde, Csikszentmihalyi, & Haidt, 2000).

The two fields of PP and CP began to intersect deliberately in academic literature, research and practice when Kauffman (2006) described PP as the “science at the heart of coaching” (p.219). It is acknowledged that there is ongoing discussion into how PPC can be defined and exploration continues into this (Panchal, Palmer, & Green, 2019; van Nieuwerburgh, Lomas, & Burke, 2018). PPC is now a strong area of interest and discussion, with growth of its application in educational settings; it may be able to support the teaching profession under challenge and is consequently the type of coaching chosen to be explored in this study. For the purposes of this study the definition proposed by Oades and Passmore (2014) and the conceptualised framework by Burke (2018) is used to guide a PPC approach.

## Literature Review

PPC is increasingly being cited as an opportune way to ameliorate life and work challenges (Grant & Spence, 2010; Linley, Biswas-Diener, & Trenier, 2013). The literature on PPC’s potential beneficial applications to education has begun to filter through both for students and for educators (Madden et al., 2011; van Nieuwerburgh & Green, 2014). Existing studies in PPC in education currently tilt more towards understanding the pupil and student experience over the educator and teacher experience. Yet there has been an increase in the use of PPC and PP with educators in education settings, and a rise in publications and conferences evidence this (Geelong Grammar School <https://www.ggs.vic.edu.au/Institute>, the Positive Education Conference New Zealand <http://www.conference.co.nz/pec19>, and the International Positive Education Network (IPEN) festival <https://ipen-festival.com/>). What is not yet broadly known is how PPC is *experienced* in the education profession when used as an intervention for those experiencing emotional and cognitive challenges in their roles. There is a need to explore the experience of adult and professional PPC coachees in order to ask better research questions, design better interventions, and enable further research.

## Coaching in education

Comparative to other sectors, coaching has made a late start in education (van Nieuwerburgh & Green, 2014). Coaching was formally encouraged within the education sector in the UK in 2003 by the Department for Education and Skills as one of a number of continuous improvement strategies (DfES, 2003); in 2005 when the National Framework for Mentoring and Coaching was launched by CUREE (2005); and by the then National College for School Leadership (NCSL) who endorsed its legitimacy in the school environment by positing

“strong evidence that coaching promotes learning and builds capacity for change in schools,” (Creasy & Patterson, 2005, p.4).

In spite of a late arrival (van Nieuwerburgh, 2012; van Nieuwerburgh & Campbell, 2015), coaching in education is an increasing component of innovative school improvement programmes in the UK such as the Department for Education funded *Leading Together Programme* (“Empowering Leadership Team: Discover our Leading Together Programme”, 2018), a two-year school improvement programme designed to support whole leadership teams working together to bring about positive change in schools. The programme empowers schools to build an environment and culture that can transform outcomes for pupils. Several studies have highlighted the success a coaching approach can have in the education sector (Green, Oades, & Grant, 2006; BMG Research, 2016). Green, Grant, and Rynsaardt (2007) demonstrated that 28 female students undergoing a cognitive-behavioural solution-focused life coaching programme experienced increases in cognitive hardiness, hope and decreases in depression. Grant, Green, and Rynsaardt (2010) looked at the impact of developmental coaching on teachers and found participants reported significant increases in goal attainment, wellbeing and resilience, and significant reductions in stress. Coaching is believed to contribute to newly qualified teachers’ development (van Nieuwerburgh, 2012). In spite of these important studies, there remain gaps in the literature with a need for ongoing research into the experience of coaching in education; the impact of coaching in education; and to its possibilities within teaching and leadership.

### ***The proposed benefits of PPC***

Strengths are defined as “a pre-existing capacity for a particular way of behaving, thinking or feeling that is authentic and energising to the user and enables optimal functioning, development and performance” (Linley, 2008, p.9). Strengths are central to PPC in most definitions and a number of studies have shown the beneficial effect of this; people experiencing better wellbeing and levels of vitality (Govindji & Linley, 2007); higher performance at work for leaders and their reports (Linley, Woolston, & Biswas-Diener, 2009); and feeling able to persevere longer under adversity (Oades & Passmore, 2014). In a study looking at women in the financial services sector undergoing strengths coaching, it was found that strengths use supported a more positive experience with work and increased engagement (Elston & Boniwell, 2011). PPC has been shown to support coachees through a variety of transitions in life both personal and work related (Linley et al., 2013).

### ***PPC in education and early indication of its influence***

A small number of studies have started to shine a light on the influence of PPC in schools. Madden et al., (2011) showed how a strengths-based coaching pilot programme was associated with significant increases in students’ self-reported levels of engagement and hope. Van Nieuwerburgh and Green (2014) suggest in their synthesis of literature that utilising the Mental Toughness Questionnaire 48 (MTQ48; Clough, Earle, & Sewell, 2002) could support the increase of resilience or enhancing wellbeing. Pritchard and van Nieuwerburgh (2016) explored how ‘at-risk’ girls (girls who are most likely to attain lower than expected academic and professional outcomes), experienced a coaching and PP programme, leading to improved perceptions of quality of life. Robson-Kelly and van Nieuwerburgh (2016) showed in their study that the experience of coaching creates a process, a positive relationship and a set of skills where ‘at-risk’ adolescents, through growing accountability, awareness and responsibility, develop choice and control over their thoughts, feelings and behaviour, helping them to deal with adversity.

## **Methodology**

### ***Design***

Qualitative research methodology was used in this study, through an IPA approach chosen to explore a particular experience (Smith et al., 2009). The method provides deep insight into an individual's psychological world.

### ***PPC Process***

The PPC method used with research participants in this study incorporates Passmore & Oades (2014) definition of PPC, where underlying PPC are four key positive psychological theories; strengths theory (Proctor, Maltby, & Linley, 2011), broaden and build theory (Frederickson, 2009), self determination theory (Spence & Oades, 2011) and well-being theory (Seligman, 2011), as well as the six core components outlined in Burke's (2018) conceptual framework to inform its approach. The PPC was therefore conducted by a knowledgeable practitioner (in this instance a positive psychologist working at MSc level), took a strengths-based approach (with participants undertaking a strengths analysis ahead of the coaching and trained in identifying and applying their strengths within the coaching), drew on positive diagnosis, incorporated optimal-functioning goals, positive psychology interventions (self-administered cognitive or behavioural strategies designed to invoke naturally happy thoughts and behaviours and improve the happiness of the person performing them (Sin & Lyubomirsky, 2009)) and positive measures.

### ***Participants***

Participants were "selected purposively" to allow the specific experience and phenomena being sought for exploration to be represented through the research project (Smith et al., 2009, p48). All participants met the following homogenous sample criteria:

- Beginner teachers in Year 1 of their teacher training;
- Taking part in the Teach First entry into teaching (a well-known and full-time employment-based teaching training programme run by a Charity with a social mission to tackle educational inequality);
- Referred for coaching with the intention explained that the coaching aimed to support the participants with wellbeing challenges;
- All received a PPC intervention of 5 one-hour PPC sessions over the telephone<sup>1</sup> (in November 2018 – January 2019) followed by an optional IPA interview (in February 2019), followed by a final PPC session.

Four participants were invited to take part in the study and the IPA interview, and three opted to be interviewed, with the fourth declining due to a change in personal circumstances. Trust was established during contracting by reassuring confidentiality and by reassurance of the researchers' education background. With IPA, a small sample is required to enable deep individual analysis of experience. This approach deliberately counterbalances the argument of nomothetic psychology only allowing group perspectives (Smith et al., 2009). The three participants underwent semi-structured IPA interviews – a suitable sample size in IPA to aim for quality over quantity (Smith et al., 2009).

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<sup>1</sup> The coaching is via telephone as the teachers involved are based in geographically isolated areas of educational need.

### ***Procedure and data collection***

The data collection began with a one-hour IPA semi-structured interview, ensuring the participant remained the experiential expert in the topic (Smith et al., 2009). The semi-structured interview consisted of a previously shared short and flexible schedule of key questions with a relaxed preamble aimed to create comfort and ease in the process and target a deep and detailed as possible understanding of the coachee's experience. During the interview, the schedule guided the conversation and the interviewer listened as an active co-participant and abandoned the structure as necessary, spontaneously probing to follow the lead of the participant and their concerns (Smith et al., 2009). All interviews were audio-recorded in duplicate, using both a dictaphone application and online via Zoom.

### ***Data analysis***

The first step in data analysis was transcribing the interviews beginning with the most complex, and engaging interview (Smith et al., 2009). As this study takes the IPA method, the transcription happened verbatim participant by participant. Each transcription was then individually analysed. In each case, the interview transcriptions were read and re-read repeatedly before detailed note taking. The analysis followed broad but specific stages of analysis including descriptive, linguistic and conceptual note taking, before then looking for individual codes, followed by themes – first subordinate themes, and then superordinate themes. In accordance with the IPA method, these psychological themes were interpreted by the researcher and then coder reliability checked through peer supervision and by the second author. These unique themes were then drawn together to consider patterns, with those patterns then forming a new group of superordinate and subordinate themes, again with layered coder-reliability checking. The analysis took an iterative process, with a natural and constant shift between different analytical processes (Smith et al., 2009), from note taking to coding, to mind mapping superordinate and subordinate themes to drawing up layers of iterative individual and then group iterative thematic tables. The coaching intervention that preceded this research was also carried out by the researcher along with the IPA interview.

### ***Reflexivity***

To uphold the ethical framework of the research and avoid practitioner-researcher bias there was a range of reflexivity deployed throughout the research. There was simultaneous reflexivity throughout the process through journaling: prior to each interview, for an hour following each interview, and as the analysis took place, the researcher reflected on ethical codes of coaching and any influence of personal, professional and academic roles to avoid any abuse of trust (Duncombe & Jessop, 2002). The researcher also consulted with supervision groups and the second author, and the analysis also underwent coder reliability checking to avoid making sense in a way that distorted fragmentary and contradictory stories (Frosh, 2007).

### ***Findings***

As the participants attempted to convey their experience of PPC as beginner teachers undergoing challenges, each described a uniquely personal journey. This uniqueness was felt despite each being at the same point in their career development and undergoing the same type of PPC coaching. Across the three interviewees, IPA interpretative analysis led to a range of themes and sub-themes being identified. The research findings also presented common experiences of going through PPC, with four overarching themes identified

(‘perfectly normal to feel this way’; making sense and ‘joining the dots’; increased positive emotion; and, time to think ‘in an easy going environment’), further divided into 14 sub-themes listed.

Table 1. Themes and sub-themes identified in the data.

Themes	Sub theme
1. ‘Perfectly normal to feel this way’	1.1 Normalisation of challenges 1.2 Self-acceptance of experience 1.3 Self-compassion
2. Making sense and ‘joining the dots’	2.1 Greater self-understanding 2.2 Perspective development 2.3 Sensemaking of experience
3. Increased positive emotion	3.1 Self-empowerment, achievement, and confidence 3.2 Gratitude 3.3. Heightened sense of hope and resilience 3.4 Compassion towards others
4. Time to think in an ‘easy going environment’	4.1 A space to open up in, relief 4.2 Unconditional support 4.3 Reassurance and validation 4.4. Warmth

(1) ***‘Perfectly normal to feel this way’***: the experience of PPC supported the participants to feel that the challenges they were experiencing were not direct causes of their selves. They experienced a normalisation of their challenges and expressed experiencing self-acceptance and greater self-compassion for themselves: ‘perfectly normal.... to feel this way’ (P1).

(1.1) *Normalisation of challenges*: the concept of feeling more ‘normal’ through the PPC in contrast to how they had been feeling was expressed by all participants: ‘part of the human condition’ (P1); ‘overwhelmed, it’s for a reason and not just that I’m abnormal’ (P3); ‘quite a normal reaction rather than an overreaction, and it was nice to know that’ (P2).

(1.2) *Self-acceptance of experience*: the concept of feeling better able to accept themselves for who they were was described repeatedly: ‘feeling like things were normal and feeling like that my experience wasn’t because I wasn’t

destined to be a teacher or couldn't do the job, it was just a normal experience that people go through' (P3).

- (1.3) *Self-compassion*: beyond self-acceptance, participants 1 and 2 also spoke of their experience as presenting a newfound self-compassion during the sessions: 'help me to accept, erm, you know, that, no amount of you know, feeling bad about it after the effect, the fact, is going to change it' (P2); 'I wasn't you know...to blame' (P1).

- (2) ***Making sense and 'joining the dots'***: to different degrees the participants spoke of the experience of PPC as a process whereby they experienced greater awareness of their self as if learning more and more about their self, more perspective on what they were going through and greater sensemaking of their context, experience and challenges: 'began to repackage and again to reconsider' (P1); 'makes you see that actually the situation might not be as bad as it feels' (P2).

- (2.1) *Greater self-understanding*: the participants described their experience as one that was evolving with increased self-awareness through the PPC conversation: 'allowed me to re-evaluate particular situations that I'd faced that week for example, and see where I'd acted in a particular way and where actually I'd shown strengths and I'd shown courage [...] actually saw the relevance and the manifestation of them' (P1); 'you'd never hear in my vocabulary, I never say that I'm proud of myself, er....I have achieved...but actually....beginning to change some of that language and begin to acknowledge those things' (P1).

- (2.2) *Perspective development*: there is a sense of heightened perspective of their respective situations and interpretations of them developing through the sessions: 'reconsidering again' (P1); 'allowed me to take a step back and look at the bigger picture rather than looking at the things that were like upsetting me' (P2).

- (2.3) *Sensemaking of experience*: the experience of being able to make better sense of thoughts and emotions: 'joining some of the dots' (P1); 'nothing is in isolation' (P1); 'making sense of a complex picture' (P1); 'this all comes together' (P2); 'made sense of things, they made me feel like I could...erm process things' (P3).

- (3) ***Increased positive emotion***: all participants cited a range of positive emotions that they experienced throughout the PPC. Whilst all were linked by a positive category of emotion, the type of emotion experienced differed by each along with the intensity of the emotion and the range of emotion. Repeated moments of reflection in the sessions are cited as ways of illustrating the positive emotion felt: 'you've come through this, this and this – and that shows a lot of strength right? And again, I think just taking... just taking a moment to see it from that angle in and of itself was quite empowering' (P1).

- (3.1) *Self-empowerment, achievement, and confidence*: these were suggested as emotions experienced during the sessions by two of the participants, P1 and P2 repeatedly: 'sense of achievement' and 'ultimately it all comes down to me' (P1); 'much more confident actually. It made me feel much more confident' (P2).

- (3.2) *Gratitude*: as an emotion experienced in the PPC gratitude was directly cited by P2; 'it made me feel grateful that I had those strengths because it made me understand, well, who would I be if I didn't have those strengths?' (P2).

- (3.3) *Heightened sense of hope and resilience*: whilst inferred by P1 through an empowered sense of self, hope is directly referenced by P2 and P3 and linked to a resilience felt from the increased hope: 'made me feel happier and more willing to carry on in the face of adversity' (P2); 'feeling just more better and more uplifted [...] made me feel I could kind of get through the journey that is the teaching journey' (P3).
- (3.4) *Compassion towards others*: was then suggested by P3 alone yet it felt significant to her experience to mention it here; 'feeling a bit more compassionate towards others' (P2).
- (4) Time to think in an 'easy going environment'**: all participants signalled that the emotional conditions of their relationship with the coach was a core part of their experience of PPC. All signalled a safety and warmth in the relationship through a space that provided new time to think: 'Quite a relief to be able to open up which again, is not something that is necessarily in my nature' (P1); 'speaking to somebody...out in the open....comforting' (P3).
- (4.1) *A space to open up in, relief*: it was repeated by all of the participants as a space that offered 'relief' (P1, 3) and 'comfort' (P1, 2, 3); extended by metaphors of 'releasing the problem' (P3); 'honest and open in that conversation, I guess a safe space where those things could be spoken about' (P3).
- (4.2) *Unconditional support*: was specifically cited by P1 and P2 as being important to their experience: 'felt unconditionally supported' (P2); 'genuinely nice....' (P1); 'an hour where the focus was me'; 'somebody was listening to me...and had no ulterior agenda' (P2)
- (4.3) *Reassurance and validation*: were again repeated concepts by all participants, felt through the interaction with the coach and the relationship developed. P1 illustrated this through a heart metaphor; 'heart in your head...being reassured is more of a heart feeling than a head feeling' (P2); and reassurance was repeated multiple times by participants 2 and 3.
- (4.4) *Warmth* was experienced and expressed by both P1 and P3 and cited as 'something inside, it's a kind of warmth' (P1); 'comfort [...] warm....an easy-going environment where anything could kind of be said' (P3).

## Discussion

The purpose of this study was to understand how the participants and educators undergoing challenges experience PPC, as a first step to considering how this type of coaching could support engagement, wellbeing and retention challenges in the teaching profession. The data suggested that these lived experiences are individually subjective and unique. Four superordinate themes were identified: the participants felt 'perfectly normal to feel this way'; the participants experienced themselves making sense and 'joining the dots'; they felt more positive emotion; and they reported that they had time to think 'in an easy going environment'. This study supports the proposition that the use of PPC can improve life and work challenges (Grant & Spence, 2010; Linley et al., 2013). As indicated by Passmore and Oades (2014), underlying PPC are four key positive psychological theories: strengths theory (Proctor, Maltby, & Linley, 2011); broaden and build theory (Fredrickson, 2009); self-determination theory (SDT) (Spence & Oades, 2011); and well-being theory (Seligman, 2011). This study sheds light on how PP theories directly link to the participants' experiences.



As previously discussed, the Grant et al., (2010) study looked at the impact of developmental coaching on teachers and found participants reported significant increases in goal attainment, wellbeing and resilience, and significant reductions in stress. Although goal attainment was cited as an outcome of this solutions-focused cognitive behavioural coaching (Grant et. al., 2010), it is interesting that it was not one of the themes identified by participants of this study. Equally, ‘stress reduction’ was not specifically cited, but these findings do link into the participants’ increase of positive emotion including hope and resilience, as well as experiencing comfort and warmth in the process which may be indicating a decrease in negative affects such as stress. As one participant explained, PPC ‘made me feel I could kind of get through the journey’ (P3). Zwart et al., (2014) examined a strengths-based approach to teacher professional development and their results suggested this approach increased a sense of self-efficacy, autonomy, competence and relatedness which can be key factors in goal-attainment. This is reflected in the increased levels of greater self-awareness with the participants from this study.

The “second wave” approach to PP argues the importance of incorporating the negative side of emotions as well as the positive (Lomas & Ivztan, 2015; Sims, 2017). Participants in this study reported that acknowledging negative emotions was helpful in these circumstances. It appears that by recognising and acknowledging these negative emotions during the PPC, the participants in the study were able to find a sense of peace within their professional roles. In this study, there were no indications that the performance of the participants had improved. This is contrary to claims by Francis and Zarecky (2016). Further research is required to see if the participants’ experiences had improved their performance at work.

Each of the themes will be discussed further below.

### ***(1) ‘Perfectly normal to feel this way’***

The theme of feeling a normalisation of challenges, self-acceptance of experience and self-compassion was cited most by participants. Self-compassion is relevant when considering personal inadequacies, mistakes, and failures, as well as when confronting painful life situations that are outside of our control (Neff, 2003). Self-acceptance has been linked in academic research to increased strengths use (Niemiec & McGrath, 2019); when individuals know and use their strengths this can increase our level of self-acceptance. The experience of educators in this study would suggest that it may be helpful to consider providing professional development opportunities that would allow educators to become more aware of their personal strengths.

A further area of applied psychological theory and practice that has been seen to lead to normalisation, raise self-acceptance and self-compassion is acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT) (Hayes, Strosahl, & Wilson, 1999; Flaxman & Bond, 2010). Links have been made between the aims of PP and ACT (Ciarrochi, Kashdan, & Harris, 2013) and its coaching equivalent, Acceptance and Commitment Coaching (ACC). Methods of thought defusion, acceptance, and contact with the present moment – the three key tenets of ACT (Ciarrochi et al., 2016) all link desirably with PP (mindfulness, second wave acceptance of negative emotion, self compassion) and CP (presence of coach, and exploration of thinking patterns), (see also the compelling case of Skews & Palmer, 2016).

### ***(2) Making sense and ‘joining the dots’***

A key purpose of coaching is to raise the awareness of the coachee (Whitmore, 2002) and so it is expected that greater sensemaking would emerge as one of the findings in this study.

Interestingly, the participants link this greater awareness of themselves, their perspective and sensemaking of experience to the PPC process and again particularly in its identification and application of their strengths. This greater self-understanding links to research and theory on strengths understanding and usage (Oades & Passmore, 2014). Beginner teachers undergoing challenges are perhaps less likely to see their own strengths through the repeated series of observations and critical feedback. This seems particularly important for P1 and P2 who are reluctant to acknowledge their own strengths, and P3 who has very negative thoughts. Furthermore, this experience of the participants could be seen as their achieving a greater sense of meaning in their life and work, aligning with PP theories of meaning at work (Bailey & Madden, 2016).

One notable theme of research into “meaning at work” relates to organisations creating welcome, supportive and pro-social work environments. Being part of a community can make one feel connected to the world and that one belongs, enhancing the perception of work as meaningful (Grant, Dutton, & Rosso, 2008). This approach to work creates a sense of psychological safety, where human beings feel able to congruently engage their selves in their work. Otherwise, an employee can feel that they are alienated from their work and feel disengaged (Kahn, 1990; May, Gilson, & Harter, 2004). The teachers interviewed appeared unable to make sense of their experience prior to PPC and PPC has supported each of them to do this.

Perspective development and sensemaking sub themes can be linked here to the self-determination raised through the coaching relationship (Spence & Oades, 2011). SDT recognises that the socio-cultural conditions of a person’s life often stifle human development and growth. Based on this observation, the presence of a PPC coach could be understood as representing a general improvement in these teachers’ socio-cultural working conditions. The coachee is related to in a way that acknowledges their core values and developing interests (autonomy support), their capacities and strengths are recognised (competence support), and the coaching relationship is characterised by genuine caring, trust and honesty (relatedness support) (Spence & Oades, 2011, p43). According to Deci and Ryan (2000), relationships with these features create a platform for effective human action and help to support the complex meaning-making processes that represent the development of the self.

### ***(3) Increased positive emotion***

The theme of increased positive emotion and its link to CP has been repeatedly acknowledged in other CP studies (e.g. Robson-Kelly & van Nieuwerburgh, 2016). Fredrickson’s broaden-and-build theory proposes that positive emotions broaden one’s cognitions and actions and fosters growth and coping skills (Fredrickson, 2009). This is clear with P2 and P3 who spoke of greater coping – ‘made me feel happier and more willing to carry on in the face of adversity’ (P2), ‘I could get through’ (P3). Positive emotions are said to build durable physical, cognitive and social resources (Lyubomirsky, Sousa, & Dickerhoof, 2006), and this rings true across all three participants in this study. As Seligman’s theory of well-being theory would suggest (2011), the participants feel greater wellbeing with their increase in positive emotions.

Fredrickson and Joiner’s research (2002) suggests the effects of positive emotions should accumulate and compound when positive activity is concurrently practiced. A particularly curious experience of the participants is the suggested increase of the positive emotion of hope and their linking this to a greater sense of resilience and overcoming adversity. In an education climate where retention is an ongoing challenge (Fisher, 2011; Helms-Lorentz et al., 2012), the links between PPC, feelings of greater resilience and its relation to retention deserves further research.

#### ***(4) Time to think in an ‘easy going environment’***

The importance of the supportive environment provided through the coaching relationship comes up repeatedly in CP studies (Grant & Stober, 2006). Relatedness is understood to be an important psychological resource in considering one’s wellbeing in many models within PP (see Lomas, Hefferon, & Ivztan, 2014), as outlined in SDT (Deci & Ryan, 1985). Parsons’ study on the impact of PPC on midlife executives (2016) is the first to link the impact of the coaching to the importance of the relationship of the PPC coach. What is interesting in this study is that this idea is repeated as directly experienced through PPC and also that it is specifically present in the experience of an educational professional, the beginner teacher.

Gordon argues that the coach who deploys a strengths approach takes more of a ‘collaborative partnership’ whereby the coach draws on the expertise within the coachee therefore making any goals or desired actions more self-concordant with the coachee (Gordon, 2016, p.270). It may be possible that such a collaborative partnership is missing for the participants in this study. Further research is required into the supportive relationships that are made available to teachers experiencing difficulties.

The narratives of the participants of this study suggest that the warmth experienced with the PPC coach might not be present elsewhere in their beginner teacher journey. This is implied through the repeated metaphor of ‘opening up’ with the PPC coach. For example, one participant appreciated that ‘somebody was listening to me. And had no ulterior agenda’ (P2). This absence of perceived warmth could be explained by the current pressurised education system (Lynch et al., 2017). It may therefore be worth considering the value of investing more time in developing relationships in schools and enabling more supportive mechanisms such as PPC as part of the professional development journey of early career teachers.

#### **Limitations**

The interviews were led by the researcher who was also the coach in this PPC intervention. Whilst this allows for closer connection to the data and the experiences of the participants, there is a risk that participants may have described their experiences more positively. Participants were reminded at the start and throughout the research that they did not need to say positive things about the coaching, the coach, the organisation they are being trained by or their experience. The contexts the participants were in were time-pressured, as teachers working long hours and experiencing challenges. The emotional burden that the participants might feel in taking part, due to the challenges they were undergoing, was mitigated by emphasising throughout the research process (including recruitment, interview and debrief process) that partaking in the research would be anonymous, voluntary and consent could be withdrawn at any point up to publication of these findings. There has been a reliance on researcher reflexivity to mitigate these limitations.

#### **Suggestions for future research**

It is important to re-emphasise at this point that this is a qualitative study and therefore the findings cannot be generalised. However, it is appropriate, based on a deeper understanding of the lived experiences of the participants of this study to raise questions about whether such interventions might be helpful to the education community. As this study was carried out in the UK, it may be interesting to undertake similar research projects in other countries and cultural contexts. This qualitative study has increased awareness of the lived experience of a

few UK-based early career educators. It has raised a number of questions that may be usefully explored further:

- How might focusing on strengths support educators and educational leaders through challenging experiences?
- How might PPC support educators to find meaning at work?
- Does PPC have a positive affect on the self-determination of educators?
- What specific positive emotions are raised through PPC?

### **Concluding remarks**

This study has given voice to the little-known experience of beginner teachers who received a PPC intervention. The findings highlight some of the life-hampering and professional challenges experienced by the beginner teachers in this study. There may be merit in exploring whether PPC could be part of a holistic support structure for beginner teachers. Based on the experiences of these participants, it may be worth exploring whether the use of positive interventions such as PPC coaching can be considered alongside other types of support for educators. It is possible that PPC could provide beginner teachers with a collaborative relationship and a safe relationship. Since educational systems globally are interested in reducing attrition and increasing the wellbeing of educators, the use of PP and CP in schools, colleges and universities should be investigated further.

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