

Chapter 24. Coaching conversations to enhance wellbeing

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Abstract

Over the last decade, the use of coaching in schools has increased. Several books, research studies and case studies describe coaching experiences to enhance leadership, teachers' professional practice, students' learning and development, community members engagement. Although some coaching programmes in schools are mostly focused on performance, there has been a growing interest to promote the whole school wellbeing through the integration of positive education principles and intervention and coaching practice. This chapter examines the use of coaching to promote wellbeing and enhance and amplify positive psychology interventions in schools. We start by providing an overview of positive psychology and coaching integration, including some research conducted to date. Then, we describe coaching and highlight the importance of developing coaching skills as a requirement to have better conversations in schools. Next, we outline the potential of combining positive education and positive psychology interventions and coaching in schools. Finally, we argue for an approach that integrates positive psychology principles and practices and coaching to facilitate positive education programmes that promote teachers, students, leaders, staff and whole-school wellbeing. The chapter concludes with a case study.

Introduction

How many hours a day do teachers, students, and other school community members spend engaging in conversations? As far as I know, there are no reliable statistics in schools. However, research studies in the workplace suggest that between "50% and 80% of the workday is spent in communicating, two-thirds of that in talking" (Klemmer & Snyder, 1972). We can argue that education is basically a process of communication and that the quality of communication between teachers and students, parents and children, colleagues, or different school community members does matter. Quality conversations strengthen relationships, impact people's thinking, and enhance learning, performance and wellbeing

(Grant, 2016; Mehl, Vazire & Holleran, 2010). Coaching-like conversations (Cheliotis & Reilly, 2010) have also proved an excellent resource in different contexts, including schools. Therefore, it is worth investing in learning and developing skills to improve our conversations. This chapter is an invitation to consider coaching, and more explicitly coaching skills, as a helpful positive education tool to facilitate learning and wellbeing.

Positive psychology and coaching

Positive psychology and coaching have been defined as complementary fields (Green, 2014), both aiming to cultivate optimal functioning and wellbeing. Burke and Passmore (2019) and Lomas (2019) have suggested that, when focusing on wellbeing, coaching could be considered as a positive psychology intervention, that is “treatment methods or intentional activities aimed at cultivating positive feelings, positive behaviours, or positive cognitions [and] enhance wellbeing” (Sin & Lyubomirsky, 2009, p. 467). Others have explored the use of coaching to sustain or amplify the wellbeing gains experienced in the use of PPIs (Palmer & Green, 2018; Panagiota & Burke, 2021).

These perspectives can be observed in the implementation of positive education and coaching in schools. Some schools invest in positive education only and create programmes based on the use of PPIs. Others consider coaching as a tool to develop leadership skills or improve teaching and learning performance but do not necessarily contemplate positive education or use PPIs. Finally, others, and that has been the case for many in the last few years, may decide to provide training in positive education using a range of PPIs (acts of kindness, gratitude, etc.) and draw on coaching to ensure sustainability. The last option is the focus of this chapter. We argue that the best approach to implementing positive education should consider cultivating quality coaching conversations across the school to create a coaching culture.

What is coaching?

One of the most popular definitions of coaching is Whitmore’s (2009): “Unlocking a person’s potential to maximise their performance. It is about helping them to learn rather than teaching them.” (p. 126). Although the kind of coaching we consider in this chapter does not focus only on performance but also, more specifically, on wellbeing, the definition is still useful. It helps us understand that coaching conversations can unlock a person’s potential (for

example, helping them identify and use their strengths or developing a growth mindset). Also, to consider that, unlike teaching or mentoring, coaching is not about giving advice or telling people what to do but about helping them find their options and make their own decisions. Using Freire's words, it is about assisting them in becoming active agents of their own development and creating their lives (Freire, 2000).

Coaching is a one-to-one or one-to-many (as in group coaching) conversation. A skilled coach will listen and ask questions to respectfully challenge their conversational partner's thinking to help them to raise their self-awareness and set and achieve meaningful goals. In a coaching conversation, the coach is not an expert but a facilitator of learning. Hook et al. (2006) describe coaching as a powerful learning experience that helps people to feel valued and listened, think more clearly, recognise their strengths, skills and resources, identify desired goals or outcomes, as well as a wide range of options to achieve them and feel more confident and positive about change.

Although there are many coaching models, it has been argued that coaching is a solution-focused conversation (Grant et al., 2010). That means that the coaching conversation does not focus on the problem but the solution, helping the conversational partner consider what change they want to make, why they want the difference and how they can achieve it.

Coaching skills

Coaching conversations differ from other conversations in schools because they are based on the use of a set of skills, including rapport, active listening, and effective questioning. Besides, most coaching conversations work within a framework or structure.

While teachers have developed and use these skills in their teaching, there is always a potential for improvement. Besides, teachers should help students to develop these skills to move towards a coaching culture.

The first step in every conversation is building **rapport and trust**. Rapport forms the basis of meaningful connectivity, allowing people to communicate openly and honestly and, in turn, helping to build trust. Although some people are skilled at building rapport and do it intuitively, others will need some practice. For example, think about a person you connect with easily. The chances are that the person is present in the conversation. They listen and demonstrate this by not interrupting, reflecting, summarising or asking questions related to

your narrative, not judging you, using body language to encourage the development of your ideas, keeping confidentiality, and making the time for the conversation.

Active listening is getting out of your own thoughts and trying to understand the other person without judging. When you listen actively, you listen to what is being said and what is not being said. You are listening to the feelings and emotions behind the words. Besides, when you really listen, you are 'telling' the other person I see you; you are important to me. Rogers and Farson (1957) coined the term active listening. They consider it as a strategy to increase empathy. When you listen actively, you ask open-ended questions, reflect on another's feelings, clarify and summarise what you have heard. Listening is one of the fundamental principles of coaching. A rule of thumb in coaching conversations is that the coach should listen 80% of the time, using the other 20% to summarise, paraphrase, offer feedback, and, essentially, ask questions.

Questions are the backbone of coaching conversations. As teachers, we ask students questions to see if they remember or understand, to seek information, or to gain agreement, among others. These questions, however, are pretty shallow as they do not require much thinking on the part of the learning. In coaching conversations, we aim to ask thought-provoking questions, that is, questions at a deeper level, inviting people to think for themselves. Coaching questions are open, and therefore there is no correct answer. Most will start with 'what', and some will begin with 'how', 'when' or 'which'. Because the intention is to challenge the other person to consider ideas from different or unusual perspectives, if you find that the initial responses are superficial, you can encourage the conversation partner to expand and develop the answers. To achieve this, you can use prompts like 'I am curious about...', 'What else...?', 'How did you do that?', 'What do you think/feel?'.

All these coaching skills can be learned and developed by teachers, students, and other school community members. Just developing and using these skills would improve your conversations. However, a good coaching conversation will also have a structure that gives direction to the process. There are many different coaching models, and all of them should be used with flexibility. One of these models, used in solution-focused coaching, is OSKAR (McKergow & Jackson, 2002). That is a five parts model:

- Outcome or objective. What do you want to achieve?)
- Scale. Using a 1 to 10 scale to measure how close the person you are coaching is to achieving the desired Outcome.

- Know-How. Skills, knowledge, experience or attributes that will help the person you are coaching to move forward.
- Affirm + Action. After praising the other person skills, knowledge, experience or attributes, you ask questions for them to focus on the actions they need to take to progress towards achieving the goal.
- Review usually takes place at the beginning of each coaching conversation –if you have a series– to review the actions the other person have taken, consider what has improved and what is needed to keep moving forward.

Coaching conversations in schools

The support and resources to apply coaching in schools have increased over the last decade, primarily aiming to enhance professional practice by supporting teachers (Leat et al., 2012) or leaders (Crow, 2009) or students coaching students (Eriksen et al., 2019). In addition, many books and peer-reviewed papers support the benefits of using some form of coaching in schools (Green, Leach and Falecki, 2021).

Each school and each teacher should consider how coaching could be implemented in their organisation. It could be a formal process, hiring a professional coach or creating coaching training and practice opportunities for the staff. Eventually, the training could be aimed at students to also engage in peer coaching conversations. Another option could be to take part in some coaching training to learn and develop essential skills to improve school conversations using a coaching-like approach. Coaching could be used regularly or in on-off conversations related to teachers' and students' wellbeing. An example of coaching conversations combined with the use of PPIs can be found in Panagiota and Burke (2021). The authors observed the effect of a one-week-long randomised controlled trial in which one group of students completed a gratitude intervention and a second one engaged in a gratitude-and-coaching intervention. The results suggested that coaching can magnify the effect of PPIs. As suggested, coaching can also be considered as a PPI by itself. In a pilot study conducted by Maden et al. (2011) primary school boys participated in a strengths-based coaching programme and received eight group coaching sessions over two school terms. Students took the Values in Action-Youth assessment (Park and Peterson, 2006) to identify their strengths. The coaching conversations helped them set meaningful goals, be persistent to achieve them, and use their signature strengths in different ways. Students also engaged

in another PPI, a “letter from the future”, writing about themselves at their best. The results suggested an increase in students’ self-reported levels of engagement and hope.

Case study

Bullying has become a problem in many schools. According to a recent study completed in the United States of America (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2019), one out of every five (20.2% students) report being bullied, and school-based prevention programmes decrease bullying by 25% (McCallion & Feder, 2013). To reduce the number of bullying cases in a public secondary school in Madrid, a group of teachers designed a two-week programme that included different positive psychology interventions and peer coaching conversations among students. The interventions used were the ‘loving-kindness meditation’ and the ‘counting kindness’ intervention.

As founded by Fredrickson et al. (2008), teachers expected that the ‘loving-kindness meditation’, practised three minutes five times a week, could increase positive emotions and, in turn, personal resources like social support. When suggesting the ‘counting kindness’ intervention, the idea was to invite people to savour the good things they had done for others. According to Otake et al. (2006), the intervention aimed to encourage students to keep track of their acts of kindness (e.g., helping a friend, sharing a sandwich, holding a door open) and compute a daily count of these actions for a week. Teachers allocated space to create a ‘kindness mural’. They painted the wall with chalkboard paint, and chinks were available for students to describe their act of kindness before leaving school briefly.

The peer coaching conversations, one at the beginning of the programme, the second one at the end of the first week and the last one at the end of the programme, aimed to help students to raise their self-awareness, define what kindness meant for them and set goals related to the topic.

Although the experience was not part of formal research, teachers kept an observation record and organised students’ forums to discuss the results. Most of them found the experience meaningful and recognised that the coaching conversations helped them reflect on themselves and keep their commitment throughout the project.

Discussion points

- What strategies does your school currently use to have better ‘coaching-like’ conversations?
- What opportunities exist for staff and students to develop coaching skills?
- What evidence-based strategies identified in this chapter could be easily implemented in your school?
- How might coaching contribute to support and amplify the effect of positive psychology interventions used by students and staff?

Suggested resources

- *Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership. Coaching Resources*
<https://www.aitsl.edu.au/lead-develop/develop-others/coach-others/coaching-resources>
- *British Educational Research Association. Coaching*
<https://www.bera.ac.uk/search/coaching>
- Green, S., Leach, C. & Falecki, D. (2021). Approaches to positive education. In M. Kern & M. Wehmeyer (Eds.), *The Palgrave Handbook of Positive Education* (p. 21-48). Palgrave. This chapter considers and discuss the integration of positive psychology and coaching in schools.
- Ippolito, J. (2019). *Want to Transform Schools & Yourself? Think Like a Coach!*
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qAW1E6iq7AU>
- Tschannen-Moran, B., & Tschannen-Moran, M. (2010). *Evocative coaching: Transforming schools one conversation at a time*. John Wiley & Sons. Appendix B: Practice Exercises, include a good range of ideas to practice and develop coaching skills.

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