

Enabling young women to develop confidence, self-awareness and independent thinking through a self-development and coaching intervention in Devon, UK

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Abstract

There are increasing mental health issues among UK youth with young women from disadvantaged backgrounds being particularly vulnerable. Recognising the complex issues facing young women in Devon, funding was obtained to deliver an ambitious programme entitled *No Label No Limit* providing emotional support and personal development to young women (aged 13 to 14 years) in 13 schools across Devon in the academic year 2022/2023. A subset of this group (45 young women from five educational establishments) received additional one to one youth coaching sessions. Although the youth coaching was originally intended to increase the potency of the *No Label No Limit* programme, it proved to be a highly effective standalone intervention for disadvantaged young women with complex and multiple needs. This paper will describe and discuss this coaching intervention and its evaluation.

Keywords: youth coaching; young women's mental health, school to work transitions

Introduction

There has been a notable increase in mental health issues among United Kingdom's (UK) youth, as reported by NHS Digital (2023), with NHS England (2023) further highlighting that one in five children and young people had a probable mental disorder in 2023. This trend, exacerbated by events like the Covid-19 pandemic (Office for Health Improvement and Disparities, OHID, 2022), is particularly pronounced in specific age groups (Bunn & Lewis, 2021; Kwong et al., 2020;). There is evidence that, over the pandemic, disadvantaged children and young people have had poorer mental health and well-being outcomes than those with more advantage (Bunn & Lewis, 2021, Kwong et al., 2020; OHID, 2022). Girls and young women from disadvantaged backgrounds were particularly vulnerable, experiencing greater challenges (Bunn & Lewis, 2021, Kwong et al., 2020). These issues are of interest to work and organizational psychologists as young people's futures in the workplace are uncertain and, unless steps are taken to resolve these issues, the result will be severe national skills shortages in the future (Carter, 2019).

The UK's approach to mental health has evolved, leading to a deeper understanding and a more comprehensive way of addressing well-being (National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE), n.d.; Somerset National Health Service (NHS) Foundation Trust, 2023; Turner et al., 2015). This is especially true for 13 to 14 year old (UK School Year 9) young women in Devon, where mental health offers both challenges and opportunities

for effective intervention. The Office for Health Improvement and Disparities (OHID) adopts the World Health Organization's (WHO) holistic view of mental health, defining it as a state of well-being in which individuals recognize their abilities, cope with life's stresses, work productively and contribute to their community (OHID, 2024; WHO, 2022). Such a perspective not only encompasses resilience, emotional, psychological and social well-being but also impacts thoughts, emotions and actions, thereby transcending the mere absence of mental illness. In the UK, young women face distinct mental health challenges, influenced by societal expectations, pressures related to body image, career success and social relationships (Abel & Newbigging, 2018; Mental Health Foundation, 2017). In addition to this, the impact of social media is associated with increased anxiety, depression and broader mental health challenges, including poor sleep, online harassment, low self-esteem and negative body image (Khalaf et al., 2023). Furthermore, mental health challenges in rural areas like Devon are exacerbated by factors like geographical isolation and limited access to healthcare services (Devon Health and Wellbeing, 2022; Devon Partnership Trust, 2022). Covid-19 has amplified these challenges, highlighting the need for effective mental health strategies (Devon Health and Wellbeing, 2022; Devon Partnership Trust, 2022).

Understanding the specific needs of groups, including those with pre-existing mental health issues, is crucial to providing targeted interventions and addressing existing inequalities. By focusing on vulnerable groups like girls and young women from disadvantaged backgrounds, work can be done towards closing the mental health gap and ensuring improved well-being for all young people (OHID, 2022). These are prominent issues for schools and educational establishments to recognise and ameliorate, alongside providing traditional education (Bunn & Lewis, 2021) equipping the young people to make the best education to work transitions.

Evolving mental health support: Counselling, therapy and coaching

Mental health support in the UK is evolving with traditional methods like counselling and therapy being complemented by coaching (British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy, BACP n.d.; van Nieuwerburgh & Barr, 2017). Mental health is now seen as a multifaceted issue requiring diverse support mechanisms. Schools' increasing role in direct mental health interventions (Bora et al., 2010; Koschmann et al., 2019), as reflected by the introduction of support teams (Bunn & Lewis, 2021), suggests potential for coaching programmes to support students with mild to moderate needs (Bora et al., 2010; Koschmann et al., 2019). This combination of emotional support and personal

development tools is crucial for addressing students' mental health needs, offering a holistic support system for students (Koschmann et al., 2019).

Emergence of coaching in education

Educational institutions are increasingly adopting coaching as a strategic tool to support student mental health (Devine et al., 2013; Koschmann et al., 2019, van Nieuwerburgh & Barr, 2017). This shift is driven by the recognition that coaching can play a significant role in fostering resilience, emotional intelligence and coping strategies among students (Devine et al., 2013, Koschmann et al., 2019). Integrating experienced mental health professionals and coaches into schools, alongside online learning resources, can enhance student engagement and foster stronger connections on pressing issues impacting their daily lives. Live coaching sessions provide a secure space for students to discuss life's challenges and learn evidence-based coping strategies. This multifaceted approach, combining coaching with digital tools, holds promise for holistically improving overall mental health and well-being within educational environments (Darian Lawrence-Sidebottom et al., 2023). Unlike traditional methods that often react to mental health issues after they have arisen, coaching is a proactive approach that aims to prevent such challenges from developing in the first place (Bora et al., 2010).

Challenges and implementation

Many challenges are faced by educational establishments in the UK in addressing mental health issues. According to a report by Mind (2021), almost two thirds of young people in secondary schools (next step from primary education for those aged 11 to 16 years) across England are being denied vital mental health support at school, with many reporting that their mental health had affected their schoolwork at some point. The UK government has taken steps to help look after the mental health of children and young people by providing funding for training, mental health support teams and online resources for schools and colleges (Department of Education, 2023).

Coaching offers a creative and viable solution within these constraints. The increasing prevalence of mental health issues among young people in the UK underscores the need for integrated approaches (Bunn & Lewis, 2021) to provide holistic and responsive support around excluded young people. There is a growing recognition of the need for a person-centred, comprehensive and inclusive approach to mental health support. This underscores the necessity of integrating various forms of support (Department of

Education, 2023), such as counselling and coaching, to effectively address the mental health needs of young people in the UK.

Youth coaching, as described in this paper, is an intervention available to educational establishments. Coaching is a partnership between the coach and the student. It's a collaborative process aimed at helping students achieve their goals and unlock their full potential. Coaching is not academic tutoring or a replacement for therapy, mental health treatment or counselling. While coaching may support academic growth and psychological well-being, it is a goal-orientated approach focusing on the student's overall personal growth and development. Unlike therapy or counselling, coaching is focused on the future rather than the past and is not intended to diagnose or treat mental health conditions. The coach supports the student in identifying their strengths, weaknesses and opportunities for growth and helps them create a plan of action (Heart of the South West Careers Hub, 2023).

Recognising the need for emotional support in schools

Recognising these complex issues facing young women in Devon, the Heart of the South West (UK) Careers Hub (here after the Careers Hub) obtained funding in 2022 to provide an ambitious new programme of self-development workshops. *No Label No Limit* was delivered to 480 female students in 13 schools across Devon in the academic year 2022/2023 providing emotional support and personal development assisted by youth coaching.

This work built on a similar pilot programme delivered by volunteers in two schools in East Devon in 2021/2022 where students had requested individual support with processing and implementing the contents of the workshops they had received. At the time, the volunteers and schools were not able to meet this need. It appeared the students were unable to fully benefit from the workshops or discuss future careers until their barriers of low confidence, low self-esteem and issues of a mental health nature were addressed. The current programme aimed to test whether *youth coaching* further improved the results from the other interventions of the *No Label No Limit* programme. This paper will describe and discuss this coaching intervention.

Why academic year 2022/2023

Education leaders described this year as the toughest year in education with student absence at an all-time low, challenging behaviours and mental health issues rising, staff

absence and turnover high, greater demands on teaching roles and a year of teacher strikes. Many of these students had engaged in on-line learning during the pandemic and struggled to re-engage since. It is well known the pandemic has widened the disadvantage gap and had a disproportionate impact on vulnerable groups. Local business leaders feel young people are not prepared well for work and observe a decline in communication, soft skills, resiliency and aspiration post pandemic (Heart of the South West Careers Hub, 2023).

What is *No Label No Limit*

This is a personal development and careers programme aimed at disadvantaged year 9 young women (third year of secondary school; ages 13 to 14 years) to improve confidence, self-belief, social and emotional capabilities, behaviour and aspirations. The drivers for this are: a) Young women generally outperform young men academically, but this doesn't translate to pay advantages; b) Education leaders in the South West of England have reported that young women set limitations on their career goals resulting from lack of support networks, role models, self-esteem and opportunities to enable them to achieve their potential; c) Women make up almost half of the UK's workforce, but 75% of women end up in caring, catering, cashiering, cleaning and clerical jobs; d) By age 12 years 50% of young women aspire to gender-stereotyped jobs perpetuating the gender pay gap; and e) Young women's mental health has been far greater affected than young men's from the pandemic (Devon Health and Wellbeing, 2022).

The *No Label No Limit* programme was delivered to 480 young women (aged 13 to 14 years) in 13 schools across Devon. The programme consisted of seven workshops giving the young women a toolkit of techniques to improve their confidence and self-worth, manage emotions and demanding situations, improve well-being, build resilience, challenge stereotypes, set goals and develop personal branding. A self-discovery journal accompanied the workshops along with a "Be Kind" book with tips on improving happiness, well-being and positive thinking. Also included were 12 career lunch clubs that were open to all students (male and female) in 10 schools. The lunch clubs encouraged discussion among the young people after showing 12 three-minute long videos of local female business leaders sharing their career journey and advice. Youth coaching was part of this programme.

Youth coaching intervention

The youth coaching intervention aimed to test whether *youth coaching* further improved the results from the other interventions with 10% of the cohort participating in coaching in the summer term 2023. The aims were to: a) Increase self-awareness, confidence, motivation and aspirations so that young women feel able to take the best of the opportunities available to them; b) Develop a growth mindset and become more resilient; c) Embrace change, adapt and learn from successes and setbacks; d) Foster curiosity and a willingness to try new things; and e) Support removal of their individual barriers to implementing the contents of the workshops and increase the potency of the programme. The next section explores the youth coaching methods in more detail.

Method, approach, models, techniques and delivery

The Careers Hub and coaches met at the beginning of the partnership to share approaches and to learn more about the progress of the programme and the schools they were partnered with. All coaches were appropriately checked, registered and trained to safely work with young people.

Although various tools and techniques can be used in youth coaching the focus of this work was solution-focused, (e.g., Jackson & McKergow, 2002), as opposed to problem-focused, enabling the young women to build on their strengths, to work on their current issues, stay focused on the relevant issues (Grant, 2011) and look towards their futures. Further, a cognitive behavioural approach (see Neeman, 2006) was taken to look at the connection between thoughts, physical reactions and feelings (e.g., anger) that may be limiting the young women's development. Building on these approaches the coaches used a selection of methods including: the GROW model, a strengths inventory, a values exercise and work sheets to enable the young women to explore the barriers to their goals and future choices.

GROW model

The GROW model of coaching is a popular framework used to structure coaching sessions. The model was developed by Sir John Whitmore (Whitmore, 1992). GROW offers four interrelated phases to structure a coaching session: Goals; Reality; Options; and Wrap-up (sometimes called Way forward). Over time various versions of the model

have developed, for example the I-GROW model (Issue; Goal; Reality; Options; Wrap-up; Wilson, 2011).

Strengths inventory

Focusing on young peoples' strengths is a valuable coaching tool. The Values in Action Inventory of Strengths for Youth (VIA-Youth) describes 24 strengths with brief definitions enabling young people to self-select their strengths and refer back to these within the sessions (e.g., Bravery, Fairness, Gratitude, Peterson & Seligman, 2004). VIA-Youth has proved to be reliable and valid (Park & Peterson, 2006; Ruch et al., 2014). Coaches either used this inventory or a values exercise (Giant, 2014).

Values exercise

The young women were given a list of 30 values (e.g., Honesty, Being popular, Having adventures; Giant, 2014, p. 127) from which they were asked to pick their top 10 values. After this they were asked to reduce their choice to their five most important values. These values were then explored in the coaching sessions seeing how these values were met in their lives and to inform decision-making about future actions/goals. A 1 to 10 scaling tool can be used to show progress towards meeting these values from session to session. Several other rating scales were used by coaches to measure the young women's progress.

Rating scales

Early in the first session participants were asked to use a 0 to 10 rating scale to describe the relevance of the issue they have chosen to work on (e.g., sustaining friendship relationships, see Box 1) and where they are, at the moment, in achieving action on this issue (where 0 means you are not likely to take any action and 10 means you are 100% committed to achieving this action or goal). The rating scale is repeated at the end of the session and in subsequent sessions to indicate individual progress on the issue (see an example in Table 4).

Life scaling tool

Some coaches used a variant of issue rating that explores aspects of life the young woman would like to focus on. Categories were: school, home life, friendships, hobbies / interests and self-care. Students were asked to rate each area out of 10 followed by where they would like to be on this scale; from this a goal should emerge.

Worksheets

Self-completion worksheets are valuable aids for participants to explore specific areas they wish to act on and can be completed between the coaching sessions adding an on-going focus to the work. Coaches used a variety of those listed below.

Identifying solutions to a problem

This worksheet helps break down aspects of an identified problem into what needs to be achieved. It then explores a number of solutions looking at the advantages and disadvantages of the approaches. Finally a solution will be chosen that is written down (The Coping Sponge).

Success triangle

This is a worksheet that explores the participant's qualities to be successful; what success looks like and what needs to be worked on to be 'who I want to be'. The triangle representation allows visible and less visible attributes to be discussed (Westbury, 2024).

My perceived sense of control

This worksheet prompts the participant to explore which events are: a) In your control; b) Somewhat in your control; and c) Not in your control. This is a helpful process to developing coping strategies (The Coping Sponge).

Unhelpful and helpful thoughts

This tabular worksheet encourages the participant to list unhelpful and unhealthy thoughts and to generate more helpful alternatives. The participant is then requested to replace their unhelpful thoughts with more helpful ones (The Coping Sponge).

My coping strategies weekly log

When problems are noted it is helpful to consider strategies that the participant will take to lessen or ameliorate these problems. These coping strategies can be listed on the worksheet and a diary approach taken to when they are used (The Coping Sponge).

Well-being support worksheet

This was explored when students had highlighted a need for self-care or daily routine support. This worksheet enables the participant to identify what they do to care for

themselves (e.g., hobbies, healthy diet, socialising) and where they could add value by making some simple changes (A. Westbury, personal communication, December 12, 2023).

Decision balance chart for change

This worksheet is useful when a change is being considered to explore the advantages and disadvantages of making the change, and not making the change. The balance of these views is discussed to see if the change is worthwhile and the conclusion to make the change, or not, is written down (The Coping Sponge).

Stress container

This worksheet uses the image of a flask to explore what happens when the flask overflows; and what coping strategies can be used to turn on the tap to release pressure. Further questions explore what can be changed, what is urgent, what has to be accepted, who can help and what strategies are helpful or unhelpful (Mental Health First Aid, MHFA England).

Identifying comfort, stretch and panic zones

In some sessions a visual aid was used for the young women to think about how they could stretch themselves to build more confidence into their lives. By exploring the different zones and what they look or feel like, the young women were able to identify how and why they were often remaining in their comfort zones (e.g., their bedroom). They could then consider why this wasn't always a productive way to live their lives, and how they could set themselves small challenges, to build their confidence, whilst not feeling too overwhelmed (A. Westbury, personal communication, December 12, 2023). The next section will describe how the coaching was delivered.

Selection process and opening workshop

Four coaches were appointed to partner with the five schools (one coach worked with two schools) working with young women in school year 9 (aged 13 to 14 years). Coaches developed their own interactive, introductory workshop delivering them to the young women in their schools ($N = 100$). These sessions helped the participants understand what youth coaching was, how they could benefit from the sessions and to build rapport with the coach. Each student completed a self-assessment survey (a needs assessment) of their current confidence, motivation, positivity level and indicated areas they thought the

coaching could support them with. The young women were then invited to apply for a place with some encouragement from the school.

After the initial workshop, four educational establishments in consultation with teaching staff and the appointed coach selected young women to go forward to the coaching programme. Staff in one college had already chosen the young women they wished to take part in the programme based on their understanding of their needs. Forty-five young women volunteered and were selected to take part in the coaching intervention (no one was refused a place). This subgroup makes up approximately 10% of the 480 *No Label No Limit* population. Parental consent was gained before the coaching sessions began.

Delivery of youth coaching sessions

Each student received four, one to one sessions with a coach lasting up to 45 minutes over the summer term. Four coaches delivered a total of 179 coaching sessions to 45 young women across five schools (one coach delivering to two schools). These sessions were mainly delivered virtually in school (with the exception of one school requesting the first session was delivered face to face). Virtual delivery was more accessible as it did not depend on school attendance (e.g., if the young woman was excluded from school they could access the session from home) and did not involve long journeys in rural environments. All participants were volunteers with the exception of the young women from one school (PC, see Table 1) who were selected by school tutors.

Table 1

Description of youth coaching intervention participants

Schools	Coach	N students	N sessions	When in 2023	Variance from 4 sessions
TA	AW	10	37	May - June	3 had 3 sessions
TS	JH	9	36	June - July	
PC	JS	12	47	May - June	1 had 3 sessions
SC	KJ	5	20	April - July	
GT	KJ	9	39	May - June	4 had 5 sessions, 1 had 3 sessions
Totals		45	179	9 170	

Coach post session data collection

Coaches submitted feedback to the Careers Hub after each session using an online form (e.g., number of attendees, overall progress of the sessions and any issues arising).

Immediate feedback enabled issues to be dealt with quickly to ensure the programme ran as smoothly as possible. Coaches, where necessary, used the school safeguarding policy to liaise with staff regarding any student concerns (e.g., having to act as a carer at home) and identify the support needed. This meant that a strong professional relationship was established between the Careers Hub, the coaches, the school and the young women. The Careers Hub held a group debrief meeting with all the coaches at the end of the programme.

Student evaluation

At the end of the fourth, and last, coaching session, young women were asked to complete an evaluation form about how they felt the sessions had been, the impact they had made and their next steps arising from the coaching programme. These evaluation forms captured the difference the four sessions had made for each student (for detail see Evaluation section). Next we will describe the information gained from the introductory workshop and the coaching sessions.

Findings from the youth coaching sessions

Coaching population

The young women who accessed the youth coaching programme were low in confidence, self-belief, self-esteem and the ability to express themselves (50% were receiving free school meals and 20% were registered as having special educational needs and disabilities, with many more waiting to be assessed). These circumstances fed into shared barriers the young women faced around achieving their success.

Such barriers existed within mental health challenges, with many participants experiencing anxiety, eating disorders, lived trauma and self-harm. The young women expressed negative social interactions with young men in their year group, including sexist behaviours, shutting down emotional expression, discouraging beliefs about women generally and holding views of women as objects to be mistreated or controlled. This resulted in participants feeling an increasing lack of confidence when surrounded by young men in classroom settings, impacting their self-esteem and self-belief further.

Other barriers and concerns were around peer expectations and judgements. There was real fear amongst the young women of having their failures captured on film and shared

on social media, resulting in holding unrealistic expectations for themselves, creating a damaging driver of perfectionism. Such perfectionism manifested in how they outwardly expressed themselves in physical appearance, behaviours and expressing opinions safely. Overall, these barriers contributed to the young woman's existing low confidence, self-belief and self-esteem, creating demand for the programme to enable them to overcome such barriers and effectively build their resilience towards such challenges.

The self-assessment needs survey identified the young women wished to use the coaching sessions to benefit them in areas such as: confidence, managing emotions, effective communication with both peers and trusted adults, better friendships, overcoming the fear of judgement, enhancing well-being, body image issues and gaining a balance between school and life.

Response to coaching sessions

Although many of the young women were nervous about starting the programme and most of them had not experienced anything similar before, there was a definite sense that they felt privileged to have the opportunity to engage in the coaching process. Overall engagement in the sessions was positive, with the majority of the young women utilising the sessions to talk openly, articulate their thoughts and following through with strategies and actions discussed. Some of the participants had experienced therapy sessions, and therefore were familiar with the process. On instances when participants were absent from school, they took the initiative to attend their coaching sessions online from home.

Scaling tools were used to focus discussion and develop goals. The life scaling tool showed that young women often scored themselves low on self-care. This was largely because, when explored, many of them were not sleeping well and certainly not for long enough. Reasons for lack of sleep were, for example, staying on mobile phones either on social media or talking with friends until the early hours of the morning, or using their mobile phone to aid them in getting to sleep (which mostly didn't work). Other reasons for lack of sleep were stress and overthinking: students said they couldn't switch off, often checking their phones in the middle of the night. Some of the young women lacked any kind of routine and didn't seem to have any reminders about going to bed at a suitable time.

Other worksheets showed many young women were struggling with low confidence and self-esteem. Several found it difficult to leave home other than for school and felt anxious about social interactions. Where this was evident simple goals were set, for example, *'To be braver about talking to people outside of the family network'* and then this goal was broken down into achievable steps. For one student, this was to walk to the shop on her street corner and buy something. This meant interacting with the staff in the shop, which felt very out of their comfort zone. This coaching approach allowed the young women to talk through their difficulties, visualise how they would feel when they were more confident and how to make their goals achievable.

Many young women felt that they didn't do enough with their lives, often resorting to spending much time in their rooms because they felt there was nothing else to do. One student decided she was going to learn a new language to add some variety into her life saying: *"I have realised I don't do anything different with my life."* To offer a flavour of the coaching sessions we have included two case studies (Box 1 and 2) made up from a variety of individual experiences to maintain confidentiality.

Case study A

Student 'A' was shy and withdrawn during the coaching; she was going through issues with relationships and friends (e.g., finding it problematic to interact with others, both adults and other young people) although they were doing well in extra-curricular activities.

Problem/Goal

'A' found it hard to sustain relationships and was questioning their impact within friendship groups having been through previous bullying. 'A' had a low opinion of herself and blamed herself for difficulties with friends. 'A' wanted to be able to speak to people she didn't know, which extended to friends of friends and to increase their confidence.

Coaching approach

We began by getting an understanding of likes and dislikes and then talked about the issue; how it was impacting her life and what would be different if the issue was overcome. The first step was for 'A' to identify their strengths across several domains (YIA Youth) followed by an exercise to work out important values. Looking at strengths and values enabled the coaching to draw on these strengths to overcome difficulties and to guide decisions about what actions 'A' wanted to take.

Working with the GROW model encouraged 'A' to come up with a goal. This goal was quite wide initially around talking to new people, but 'A' was able to hone it down to a focus on those in her class to start with and later extended it to adults. 'A' assessed herself as being at 1 on a scale of 0 – 10 with her ideal to achieve a 10. We looked at what steps 'A' had tried herself and how to build on these.

Each week 'A' set actions to try out over the week to bring her closer to her goal. Potential barriers to carrying out these actions were identified, and we considered what things would be helpful to overcome these barriers. In the coaching sessions we looked at the limiting beliefs 'A' had about herself in relation to what others thought of her and came up with other empowering beliefs that recognised the attributes, skills and abilities that she has. We worked on communication skills, such as conversation starters and explored the things 'A' could do in situations she found stressful to reduce anxiety. During this time 'A' experienced a tough time and we identified who she could talk to about this. Despite these difficulties 'A' attended all the coaching sessions and took on the actions she set for herself.

Outcomes

'A' increased in confidence over the period of the coaching and was able to talk positively about herself and her achievements more easily. Small steps were taken to talk to different people who she didn't know, extending beyond the classroom environment. At the end of the sessions the self-rating scale rose to 6 (out of 10) for achieving her goal, going up five points during the course of the coaching. 'A' noted she wasn't overthinking going into situations and felt more confident talking to people. 'A' was clear about how she could transfer the steps she had taken to start talking to other people outside of the school environment, particularly adults.

Case study B

Student 'B' was lively and sure of herself, though sounding deflated when talking about the problems discussed. During the period of coaching 'B' went through issues at school experiencing sanctions under the schools' behaviour policy.

Problem/Goal

'B' found it hard to manage anger and this was especially difficult in school situations when pupils were picking on others, especially younger ones. 'B' had a good awareness of herself and her reactions when angry with a clear idea of her future career and how not being able to manage her anger would have an impact on this. 'B' wanted to handle situations where she would get angry in a more calm and positive way so that she wouldn't miss out on school.

Coaching approach

After getting some general information regarding personal likes and dislikes we then talked about anger, how this was impacting her life and what would be different if she overcame the issue. We used the YIA Youth followed by a values exercise to work out what was important to guide decisions about the actions 'B' wanted to take.

Working with the GROW model encouraged 'B' to come up with a goal. 'B' was very clear and specific about her goal wanting to manage her anger reaction better so that she could be calmer in situations to avoid acting in a way that would have negative repercussions for her at school. Whilst 'B' also recognised that how she expressed anger could be an issue in other areas of her life she was keen to focus on the impact at school. 'B' assessed herself as being at 2 on a scale of 0 – 10 on achieving her goal with the ideal being to achieve 8. We looked at what steps 'B' had tried herself and how to build on these.

Each week 'B' set actions to try out over the week to bring her closer to her goal. Potential barriers to carrying out these actions were identified, and we considered what things would be helpful to overcome these barriers. In the coaching sessions a cognitive behavioural approach was taken to look at the connection between thoughts, physical reactions and feelings. 'B' also tried a range of techniques to help calm her, identified positive ways to express anger and gained awareness of the difference between aggression and assertion. During the coaching 'B' shifted towards removing herself from situations, not reacting and dealing with heated situations when in a calmer state.

During the coaching period 'B' went through a stressful situation and was away from school. 'B' still wanted to have the coaching session, as it was online, at home. Despite these difficulties 'B' attended all the coaching sessions and although there was one week where she did not take the action she set for herself, nonetheless this was picked up again at the next session.

Outcomes

Over the period of the coaching 'B' improved in managing her emotions to be able to respond more calmly in situations at school where she would become angry, and said she was able to think in a different way about situations, which was helping. At the end of the sessions the self-rating scale rose to 6 (out of 10) for achieving the goal; going up four points over the course of the coaching. 'B' identified actions she could continue after the coaching including finding some more calming techniques and was feeling positive about changing her reactions when in charged situations at school to prevent disciplinary actions and missing out on school.

Evaluation of the coaching intervention

Both the young women and coaches completed evaluation surveys. Data collection methods, findings and aggregated outcome data follow.

Young women's evaluation of the coaching sessions

At the end of their coaching sessions young women completed a questionnaire asking: a) How much have the sessions helped you to: Be more confident in yourself and your abilities; Have higher aspirations and feel better able to express these; Feel better equipped with knowledge, tools, skills, and support to follow your ambitions; Understand the importance of your continued development of learning and support networks; Get ideas and inspiration about your next steps; and Challenge and overcome stereotypes (responses 1 = *Not at all*, 2 = *A bit*, 3 = *Quite a lot*; 4 = *A lot*); b) Overall rating of sessions (1 to 5 stars); and c) What have these sessions helped you with (qualitative response); What will these sessions help you with in the future (qualitative response); What actions will you take as a result of the sessions; and What else would you like to tell us about the sessions (qualitative response). Data analyses were undertaken by a third party and only descriptive statistics and participant comments were collected.

Data aggregated at school level (see Table 2) showed a positive response from the young women with overall star ratings in excess of 4 (range 4.2 to 4.9) and the majority of specific aspects of the programme (24 out of 30 responses) were of 3 and above

(see Table 2) showed a positive response from the young women with overall star ratings in excess of 4 (range 4.2 to 4.9) and the majority of specific aspects of the programme (24 out of 30 responses) were of 3 and above (the sessions helped this aspect ‘Quite a lot’). Participants who were selected by the school (PC) showed a similar pattern of responses to the other institutions.

Table 2

Young women’s evaluation of coaching sessions per school

How much have these sessions with the youth coach helped you to:					
	TA	TS	PC	SC	GT
Be more confident in yourself and your abilities	3.38	2.67	3.55	3.00	3.83
Have higher aspirations and can express these	3.25	2.33	3.45	3.00	3.33
Better equipped with knowledge, skills, tools, support to follow ambitions	3.13	2.67	3.18	2.80	3.33
Importance of development of learning and support networks	3.13	2.83	3.18	2.80	3.33
Get ideas and inspiration about your next steps	3.50	3.00	3.18	3.20	3.50
Challenge and overcome stereotypes	3.38	3.00	3.27	3.20	3.50
5 Star overall rating	4.9	4.2	4.8	4.6	4.5

Note: Participants at PC were chosen by the school.

Thematic analyses of qualitative responses described the help coaching gave the young women with four themes. **Having a positive mindset about themselves** (e.g., being more confident; particularly speaking to strangers, and being one’s self). Participants developed **Positive behaviours** improving social skills of communication (e.g., not being shy); managing relationships with friends, family and different situations. Participants were able to **Manage stress and anxiety** by staying calm and regulating emotions (e.g., anger), applying time management and thinking through different situations (e.g., “Not overthinking and catastrophising”). Finally, participants described **Proactive behaviours** of asking for help when needed.

Responses showed similarity across the schools, particularly in relation to developing a **Positive mindset** (confidence). The school scoring below 4.5 on the five-star rating noted benefit in **Managing stress and anxiety** by managing emotions; particularly anger (noted by two schools in the next section).

What will these sessions help you with the future

The same four themes captured the help the sessions would afford participants in the future. **Positive mindset** comments focused on confidence, self-belief and self-reflection. **Positive behaviours** were knowing how to respond in different situations, confidence when talking to others (e.g., at interviews), being grateful and thinking positively about the future. **Proactive behaviours** were motivational (e.g., *“I will be a lot more motivated to complete homework and try my best”*), preparing and taking time with things; improving myself, *“Getting out of my comfort zone”* and *“Speaking up for what I want”*. Managing stress and anxiety focused on managing self and emotions (anger and aggression).

What actions will you take as a result of the sessions

Participants from three schools commented on actions resulting from the coaching sessions, however positive and proactive behaviours are noted in other comments from all educational establishments.

Participants' comments focused on three themes: **Positive mindset** (e.g., being confident, thinking about actions, *“I will not put myself down”*, *“Remember that you don't have to do what someone else wants you to...”*); **Positive behaviours** (e.g., being less distracted, more organised at school, and sharing what I have learnt with others); and a new theme **Affect** (*“Be calm, be happy”*) emerged.

What else would you like to tell us about the sessions

Participants from all schools offered additional comments, all positive; with agreement across the schools. Themes focused on: **Praise** (e.g., amazing sessions, inspirational, helpful); **Positive mindset** (e.g., *“I discovered a lot of stuff about myself I didn't realise I didn't know”*. *“They changed my whole mindset about education”* and *“I feel I am doing much better in my lessons now”*); and **Personal support** (e.g., *“They have helped me through the tough times and having the chance to express what I'm feeling”*, *“They helped target my issues personally and issues in my life that many would not relate to in order to manage them.”* *“I've taken away many notes that I can reflect on in the future”*.)

In summary, the coaching sessions were enjoyed; the young women found them interactive and engaging. Ratings were positive and the young women's comments

described the rich nature of the benefits of the sessions in relation to their mindset, behaviour, affect and actions. The timeliness of the intervention was validated by participants noting the value of personal support during tough times.

Coach evaluation

A self-report questionnaire asked coaches to provide an overall rating of sessions (1 to 5 stars). Then for each participant coaches rated (on a scale from 1 = Very poor to 5 = Very good) “In the sessions how did you find”: a) Pupil engagement; b) Level of discussion; c) Pupil openness to activities and development; d) Pupil ability to articulate support needs; e) Pupil eagerness to continue; f) Pupil satisfaction with the session; and g) Your satisfaction with the space / arrangements with the school. Further, coaches were asked for examples of student goals shared in sessions; and student self-assessment on achieving goals.

Data aggregated at school level (see Table 3) showed coaches' overall ratings were positive (between ‘Good’ and ‘Very Good’, range 4.3 to 5.0). The overall highest rated school was the one that had selected their students for coaching showing their support for the intervention.

Table 3

Coach's evaluation of sessions per school

In the sessions how did you find:					
	TA	TS	PC	SC	GT
Pupil engagement	4.40	4.82	4.58	4.00	4.25
Level of discussion	4.30	3.91	4.50	4.00	4.17
Pupil openness to activities and development	4.40	4.36	4.83	3.25	4.08
Pupil ability to articulate support needs	4.20	3.82	4.25	3.50	4.00
Pupil eagerness to continue	4.60	4.36	4.50	3.25	4.17
Pupil satisfaction with the session	4.50	4.09	4.50	4.00	4.25
Arrangement satisfaction with the school	4.20	4.55	3.92	3.75	3.67
5 Star overall rating	4.70	4.50	5.00	4.30	4.70

Note: Participants at PC were chosen by the school.

A majority (27 out of 35 responses) of specific aspects of the programme were rated positively (satisfaction being ‘Good’ or ‘Very Good’). Participants from the school

that had selected the young women for coaching showed a similar pattern of positive responses to the other institutions.

Participant goals

Examples of goals set by the young women were: To step away from heated situations (either at school or home when angry; and calm myself down); To run sport sessions and speak with more confidence; To complete all homework before the deadline; To learn (how to make the right decisions or to be more assertive); and To know the skills to improve and enhance career opportunities in the future.

Participant progress

While there was some variation in the type of ratings coaches used to describe progress, all coaches reported the overall participant progress per school using the categories 'None', 'Some', 'Moderate' and 'A lot' and 'A great deal'.

These ratings were positive. Coaches rated young women's progress towards their goals in four schools between 'Moderate' and 'A lot' and one school (TA) between 'A lot' and 'A great deal'. One coach specified each young women's goal progress (0-10) showing gains through the sessions (see Table 4). All participants made progress towards their goal; with three young women achieving their ideal position and six others progressing towards their ideal (increasing from 1 to 5 scale points).

Table 4
Examples of participant progress rating 0 to 10

Starting	Ideal	End	Achieved
3	9	7	+4
7	9	8	+1
6	9	9	achieved
2	7	4	+2
6	8	8	achieved
1	10	6	+5
2	8	8	achieved
6	10	9	+3
2	8	6	+4

Comments about the coaching sessions

One coach and one school made comments about the sessions.

Thematic analyses showed four themes covered the benefits coaches noted following the sessions: **Value** (e.g., quoting the young woman *"These sessions are really helping me see what I need to work on"*); **Motivational** enabling behavioural changes (e.g., *"Several of these students have really made an effort between the first and second session to make positive changes to their lives"*); **Taking control** (e.g., *"I really think the whole programme has ignited a spark in this student and she has realised she can be in control of her future"*); and changes in **Affect**; being less anxious and happier (e.g., *"...changed her mind set and says she feels so much happier. She is having much better relationships with her mum and dad, and they have commented on how different she is now"*). A school representative observed the Value the sessions were making (e.g., *"I have never seen (student) with a smile like she had when she came out of yesterday's session! Thank you again for helping our students, I know they are really benefiting from your coaching"*). They noted that while the school selected the young women for coaching (the only one to do so) this meant that this had worked well for most students, but some were *"less excited for sessions"*.

Summary of qualitative analyses

The coaches enjoyed delivering the sessions finding many sessions rewarding, seeing the young women becoming empowered and changing their behaviour towards a more positive mindset and actions. These notions were validated by the young women and feedback from a school (see Figure 1) showing that the coaching programme was valued. However, delivery was not without difficulties as all coaches noted problems with arrangements and IT. The next section will explore our reflections on the coaching intervention.

Figure 1

Summary of qualitative themes from young women, coaches and schools

Young women	Coaches	School
Having positive mindset about themselves (e.g., increased confidence)	Value of coaching	Value of coaching
Exhibiting positive behaviours	Motivated students	Changes in affect
Managing stress and anxiety	Changes in affect	
Using proactive behaviours	Administrative difficulties	
Expressing affect		
Praise for coaching		
Coaching offered personal support		

Lessons learned from coaching intervention

The overarching lesson learned is that young women need and want the opportunity to make changes in their lives. By the time they get to educational Year 9 (aged 13 to 14 years) they have been subjected to many confusing messages from social media about how they should grow up, they can undergo changes in their families and end up retreating from close family members, as well as face many changes in friendship dynamics. Therefore, the coaching programme offered opportunity for the young women to talk in a non-judgemental space, to work through problems and to discover who they really want to be. A number of other lessons were learned; and we will examine these by looking at what worked well and what were the challenges, summarised in Figure 2.

Figure 2
Lessons learned from coaching intervention

What worked well	What worked less well
Pre-programme with Career Hub and coaches	Administration and communication with schools
Launch workshop introducing coaches to school and students	Confidentiality of coaching sessions
Student selection by coach and schools	Number and timing of coaching sessions
Virtual delivery	Virtual delivery
Ongoing communication with Career Hub, coaches and schools	

What worked well

The pre-programme meeting of coaches and the Careers Hub enabled discussion and sharing of content and progress in preparation for the coaching encounters. Launch workshops helped the young women understand what coaching is, how it can help them and building rapport with the coaches gave them confidence to apply for the programme. The workshop also gave an opportunity to assess needs.

Advice and guidance to schools on selection of participants from the Careers Hub and coaches, meant that generally the right students for coaching were recruited. The young women were selected either after the launch workshop or by the school themselves. Both selection methods proved successful; and coaching was quickly focused to the young women's needs. Virtual delivery worked well and was effective in engaging with the young women. Participants felt comfortable and safe, and some were familiar with receiving counselling and therapy in this way.

It was important to keep stakeholders (Careers Hub and educational establishments) involved in the intervention. Coaches took time to update parties; and, as a result, one of the schools asked for additional sessions with some of their coachees later that academic year. This follow-up evaluation showed that while the young women continued to navigate the ups and downs of their lives, they were able to do this more confidently and continued to use the coaching tools shared during the initial four sessions.

What worked less well

As with any programme, there were some challenges worth exploring before repeating a similar intervention. Several administrative problems occurred as a result of poor IT, organisation (students not having the link to connect, not receiving documents sent by coaches), communication (coaches unable to connect with school staff, or being left waiting) and inadequate space for the online sessions. These issues impacted negatively at times causing disruption to the beginning of sessions and reduced coaching time. The educational establishments recognised these issues and did their best to reduce the barriers. In one school, the coach directly emailed their coachees, finding this successful for student feedback.

It was imperative that participants had a private and confidential space within the school to attend the sessions and uphold confidentiality. In one school a member of staff listened in and commented on the first coaching session while sitting in the room with the participant. This obstructed the process and delivery; reducing the trust and support felt by the young person. The coach felt this affected the students' openness, identification of their goals and participation by not allowing the promised confidentiality. The correct space and confidentiality were found for the remaining sessions and impact for those participants was subsequently achieved.

Although the coaching intervention achieved impact, due to the nature of the needs of some students, all coaches would have liked six, rather than four sessions. They felt this would have achieved even more positive outcomes; trying out more strategies and embedding new thinking. For example, four participants in one school received a total of five sessions; as one student had dropped out. It was felt where the students had more complex needs, that this additional session was valuable.

Coaching sessions need to be at regular intervals, ideally no more than fortnightly apart; and this was rarely possible. Further, it may be better to deliver coaching in the winter

term (rather than April to July). This timing may be more beneficial and transformational for the young women who struggle with issues to a greater extent during the winter months. We appreciate that behaviour change takes time, especially when needs are complex and multiple. There is a high chance of regression of behaviours and reinforcement of the key tools used in coaching is needed. Therefore, we suggest a top-up coaching session (either at half-term or once a term) to continue supporting these young women. The next section will discuss the benefits of the programme.

Discussion and further research

Our findings suggest the coaching sessions were a highly effective standalone intervention for disadvantaged young women with complex, multiple and special needs. This adds further evidence validating the shift towards including coaching in education signifying a more comprehensive and inclusive mental health care approach (Bora et al., 2010; Darian Lawrence-Sidebottom et al., 2023; Devine et al., 2013; Koschmann et al., 2019).

The early outcomes for the young women were increased confidence, self-belief, raised aspirations and wanting to take better control of their lives with the realisation they can make positive changes. There were also good outcomes for schools; with early indications of improved behaviours (e.g., increased motivation to learn) and greater application to learning. We will discuss the benefits for the young women, followed by benefits for educational establishments, mentioning further research to increase insights.

Outcomes for young women

Foremost this evaluation highlighted that young women need and want help with many aspects of their daily life. Creating a safe space for them to open up and access support from professionals outside of the educational environment, enabled the young women to work on issues such as anxiety, unhappiness at school, dealing with intense emotions and labels they have amongst peers. The benefit of coaching is that it empowers young people to realise they can make changes, that they do not have to remain as they are if they are feeling stuck. This intervention was a proactive approach that offered the young women opportunities to explore simple, practical ways to work towards their life goals. The coaching approach promotes well-being as it empowers the young women to make changes to their lives and build strategies to increase their resilience to difficult issues. The young women believed in the solution-focused approach to coaching, taking much

benefit from it. Some participants expressed that this coaching had been more helpful than school counselling and the one to one nature more focused than group-based mental health treatments. In particular the future-focused coaching was appreciated as it did not aim to identify problems or dwell on the past.

Young women have many barriers impairing their ability to be successful, affecting their energy, concentration, optimism and performance. The abundance of mental health issues and special needs expressed by this group appears to contribute to poor relationships, aggressive behaviour and absenteeism which has affected the extent to which their personal development had progressed within the *No Label No Limit* programme. The youth coaching has enabled these participants to make more rapid and tailored progress in their self-development journey by managing their stress and anxiety and taking time to think through situations that were making them feel angry and powerless. These changes were validated by coaches noting that the young women appeared happier, less anxious and engaging in more fulfilling social relationships. Similar benefits of increased coping skills and resilience were seen in an Australian school study using solution-focused coaching with year 12 students (Campbell & Garner, 2005).

Confidence was an area in which the young women collectively achieved positive outcomes. Many took courageous steps forward to accomplish things they were fearful of doing before, which reinforced their confidence even further. The success of this increase in confidence directly impacted on their self-belief, generated feelings of happiness, motivation and aided a new, positive outlook on school and life. Managing emotions too became something which the young women found easier to do, through accepting emotions, allowing themselves to feel emotional and understand what was beneath these feelings.

Through the coaching process the young women realised their issues were holding them back in education and life and would potentially impact on their career success. They were keen to improve things for themselves realising the impact on their future choices if they did not address these problems. A strong feeling was conveyed to the coaches that the young women wanted to change their negative attitude and feelings of unhappiness. These benefits are likely to support the young women through their decision-making and education to work transitions (Carter, 2019). Findings from an earlier coaching intervention (Gosden & Levi, 2019) using a strengths-based coaching approach showed the benefits of workplace coaches within schools to enable participants to make more effective career choices.

A longer-term aspiration of this project was to enable young women in rural areas to see and want to explore a wider range of careers as opportunities for their futures. Research exploring the next steps in the education to work transition of these young women (in comparison to a matched cohort of similar needs, not receiving coaching) would offer further evidence of the continued benefit of this coaching intervention. Such research was out of the scope of this project but would be a valuable step forward to explore if four sessions were indeed sufficient to enable behavioural change, or as the coaches suggest, further 'top-up' sessions would be required. As it stands, this four session approach is a cost effective intervention that requires a more detailed return on investment evaluation.

Outcomes for the educational establishments

There was a strong appetite to trial the programme from the start; recognising the intervention demanded time and resource. There was also an appreciation for the quality of coaching professionals involved within the programme, with all coaches demonstrating enthusiasm for the intervention, maintaining a flexible approach with understanding of the issues faced within education. The schools believed in the solution-focused approach of the coaching, taking much benefit from it.

Immediate outcomes for schools were improved behaviours of these young women; adopting a more positive mindset and increased motivation and application to learning. This resonates with findings reported by Madden et al., (2011) when strengths-based coaching (using VIA-Youth) was offered to primary school students. Upon seeing the value of the programme, schools would like to continue offering the programme if school budget and funding becomes available; indeed one establishment has since gone on to offer further coaching to students.

Positive participant behaviours were observed by teachers; which were relayed back to the young women to ensure they were aware of how they were changing their behaviour within school. The participants took new perspectives around aspirations, recognising what they could achieve in their futures. The young women practiced new strategies to become more organised and disciplined around school task management and taking control of their life. This further increased their appetite to learn, making school a more enjoyable place to be.

This intervention has enabled young women to improve their confidence and belief in themselves, take steps towards improving their futures, develop strategies for

success and resilience. These are the characteristics of psychological capital (belief and confidence in capabilities, hope, optimism and resilience; Luthans et al., 2015).) Our evaluation offers evidence to demonstrate that these improvements will also help these young women to improve their school and life outcomes. Students now appear more aware of their potential, have aspirations for their future and are more able to make informed choices that are right for them.

This evaluation adds to the emerging evidence-base that coaching is a powerful tool to support learning and development for students, teachers, school leaders and educational establishments (Devine et al., 2013). Our assessment showed that this group of young women were struggling with a range of anxieties and barriers affecting their learning, growth and development. One to one coaching delivered virtually was a sufficient and powerful intervention to enable the young women to attain, or to be working towards, their goals.

There was concern, particularly from the educational establishments that the virtual delivery of coaching would be insufficient to develop rapport with the young women. However, online delivery was well received by the participants and allowed some flexibility of delivery if the young person was not in school. Several factors may contribute to this success. Young people are generally more competent and knowledgeable about IT processes (Clutterbuck & Hussain, 2010) and are familiar and at ease with communicating remotely. However, this was not a total virtual delivery process as the launch workshop introduced the coaches in person to the participants validating their expertise through their presence in the school.

The inclusion of coaching within the educational curriculum signals a move away from the traditional notion of a teacher as an instructor to that of a facilitator (Griffiths, 2006). However, there are significant challenges with this change and this intervention captured some of these. Providing a selected cohort of young women with online coaching was disruptive to the routine of the educational establishments. Issues of providing resources (particularly private space) and trust (enabling the coaches privileged access to the young women) were seen as challenging. Similar difficulties were noted in a previous coaching programme held in educational establishments in a comparable geographic location (Gosden & Levi, 2019). In that intervention, association with, and support for this programme was seen to divide teacher opinion creating a 'them' and 'us' grouping of supporters and detractors. This made it difficult to develop a learning culture that would embrace teaching as facilitation (Devine et al., 2013). In their summary of literature

looking at education and coaching Devine and colleagues (2013) note that for coaching to contribute to educational improvement it should not remain being applied at the individual level. This suggests that both students and teachers need access to coaching and systems of collaborative learning (such as peer discussion and leader development) are needed to develop a collective learning culture.

Conclusion: Yes, youth coaching made a difference

Although the youth coaching was originally intended to increase the potency of the *No Label No Limit* programme, it clearly took on a life of its own and proved to be a highly effective standalone intervention for disadvantaged young women with complex and multiple needs. Although youth coaching may not be seen as traditionally fitting within the careers arena, its place in a careers programme is in helping to reduce barriers and improve skills that then enable students to take the necessary steps towards career goals that otherwise they may not. This cohort, without coaching support and further ongoing support are highly likely to be the Not in Employment, Education or Training (NEETs, Eurofound, 2012) of tomorrow.

Youth coaching may be a more effective intervention than careers guidance for these particular young women. At a time when school leaders report behaviour, mental health and absence at an all-time low, particularly amongst young women between 13 and 14 years of age, youth coaching will help cultivate a growth mindset enabling them to deal positively with these issues and their barriers to learning and success. This will reduce the enormous strain and challenges educational establishments are currently experiencing.

Schools, supported by careers funding, should consider youth coaching as part of a whole school approach to helping remove barriers to learning for disadvantaged students and to improve personal development, career goals and support their learning. On the basis of this intervention we have recommended that all schools in the Devon Careers Hub and beyond be made aware of how youth coaching is a highly effective intervention. Through the writing of this paper we have become aware that for continued and long-term change within educational establishments coaching (for staff and students) and systems of collaborative learning are needed to develop a collective learning culture.

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