

The perceptual changes in life experience of at-risk adolescent girls following an integrated coaching and positive psychology intervention group programme: An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

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Objectives: *The research sought to analyse the perceptual life changes and perceived quality of life (PQoL) subsequent to participating in an integrated coaching and PPI programme.*

Design: *A qualitative approach was employed and Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was utilised to analyse the data.*

Method: *Three girls from an inner-city London school were selected to participate. Semi-structured interviews were used.*

Results: *Three key themes emerged: the ability to control emotions/reactions; increased experience of positive emotions/thoughts; and the identification of purpose and meaning to life.*

Conclusion: *The participants reported that participating in the programme brought the benefit of an improved perception of quality of life.*

Keywords: *at-risk; adolescents; girls; appreciative coaching; interpretative phenomenological analysis; coaching psychology; positive psychology coaching; subjective wellbeing; perceived quality of life.*

Introduction

PREVIOUS RESEARCH on coaching and positive psychology interventions (PPI's) has focused on middle-class/private-school adolescents. In order to demonstrate its effectiveness, these interventions need to be replicated on different socio-economic/cultural backgrounds (Seligman et al., 2009). Additionally, the area of subjective wellbeing and life-satisfaction in at-risk adolescents is supported by only limited research (Oberle, Schonert-Reichl & Zumbo, 2010). This is pertinent given the societal need subsequent to the London Riots which took place in August, 2011. One of the drivers of unrest was found to be anger at a lack of hope and desperation about their current, future and economic situation (Howker & Malik, 2013).

For this study, we define 'at-risk adolescents' as those experiencing a range of prob-

lems that render them 'at-risk' for developing into healthy, functioning adults such as stress, poverty, abuse, death of a parent/sibling (Schonert-Reichl, 2000) and/or at-risk of becoming NEET (Not in Education, Employment or Training).

Coaching, 'unlocks a person's potential to maximise their own performance' (Whitmore, 2002, p.8). PPI's increase wellbeing through the cultivation of positive feelings, thoughts and behaviours (Sin & Lyubomirsky, 2009). This research employed an Appreciative coaching approach. Appreciative coaching focuses on what 'is' working rather than what is not (Orem, Binkert & Clancy, 2007) and stems from Appreciative Inquiry, which again focuses on a relationship between a positive core of experiences and a positive future (AI) (Cooperrider, 1990). AI was initially delivered in organisational settings as a vehicle of change, there-

fore it was decided to deliver the coaching in a group format. Using coaching and positive psychology interventions in group settings is a cost-effective solution to schools given the financial climate (Brown & Grant, 2010).

'Positive education' (Seligman et al., 2005) is defined as applied positive psychology in education. It provides an antidote to depression, increases wellbeing and serves as a pathway to increased life satisfaction (Seligman et al., 2009). Coaching and PPI's are integral to positive education (Green & Norrish, 2013) and yet there is no guiding, empirical framework. Therefore an exploration of the programmes that combine the best ingredients of coaching and positive psychology is needed. Currently these approaches operate in isolation. However for greater sustainability, integration is key (Green, Oades & Robinson, 2012).

Literature review

To improve one's life, one must improve the quality of experience. It is argued that those from lower socio-economic, dysfunctional families have increased chances of stress (Norrish & Vella-Brodrick, 2009). Moreover, they are at-risk of under achieving/languishing and experiencing more undesirable outcomes and less desirable outcomes in comparison to flourishing adolescents (Howell, Kern & Lyubormirsky 2007).

It is important that research into at-risk adolescents is developed to support them to flourish. Being labelled at-risk, however, often contributes to the risk (Kerka, 2003) due to the attachment of at-risk characteristics, which neglect the student's assets (Calabrese, Hummel & San-Martin, 2007). Focus, therefore, ought to be on developing resiliency/mental toughness (Clough & Strycharczyk, 2012) and the identification of strengths/positives (Schonert-Reichl, 2000).

Wierenga (2008) researched adolescents who were 'making a life' amid non-optimal social conditions. Time and connecting holistically without agendas with youth workers enabled transformative work to begin. Just talking helped the adolescent form a

narrative and develop a trusting relationship leading to greater resource access. Furthermore, Oberle, Schonert-Reichl and Zumbo (2010) found that positive personal traits such as optimism, a sense of belonging in school and supportive relationships with family, peers and non-related adults were important developmental contexts associated with life satisfaction. Gilman and Huebner (2003) found that high life satisfaction was associated with hope, positive relationships and negatively related to depression, anxiety and a negative attitude of school and teachers.

Huebner et al. (2004) studied adolescents' perceived quality of life (PQoL) and found links between low PQoL and living in commercial/ethnically diverse areas and substance abuse. Furthermore, those that reported high life-satisfaction had less chance of developing behavioural problems after a stressful life event than adolescents with low PQoL.

Due to coaching being a developing field in schools mentoring has been described to a greater extent. Maldonado et al. (2008) found that high-quality, long-term mentoring relationships impacted the self-efficacy, aspirations, and possible-selves of at-risk adolescents. Herrera et al. (2011) found that mentoring positively impacted how adolescents viewed themselves academically. However, these outcomes were not sustained and there was no improvement in classroom effort, self-esteem or peer/parent relationships. The evidence, therefore, suggests mixed results. Given the potential impact of coaching and mentoring programmes in these settings, further study is required.

Van Nieuwerburgh et al. (2011) found GROW coaching impacted adolescents' self-awareness, relationships and study skills and that they met/exceeded their academic targets. Green, Grant and Ryansaart (2006, 2007) found cognitive-behavioural (CB), solution-focused (SF) coaching was associated with significant increases in resilience, hope and goal striving and significant decreases in depression. The sample popula-

tions were self-selected private-school girls, therefore they may have had a significant amount of hope initially and, therefore, been more motivated to achieve their goals.

Appreciative Coaching (AC) is a new approach within the field of coaching, which was introduced by Orem, Binkert and Clancy in 2007. Rather than trying to fix problems, the coachee's attention is pivoted on what is working and what could be. The coachee is taken through four phases; discovery, dream, design and destiny in collaboration with five principles, power of vision (Anticipatory), appreciative stance (Constructionist), art of the question (Simultaneity), pivoting (Poetic) and genuine affirmation (Positive). Again, there is limited empirical research to support its use however its source, Appreciative Inquiry (AI), is beginning to be used in higher education as 'appreciative education' (Bloom, Hutson & Konkle 2013). San Martin and Calabrese (2010) used AC to empower a group of at-risk adolescents in a pupil referral unit (PRU). Focusing on their strengths, a shift in mind-set was evidenced as they began to think more optimistically and believe that a desired, imagined future was possible. Unfortunately, due to time constraints only two stages of the 4D model were delivered. This promises to be a valuable avenue for enquiry and further research is required.

Collins, Eisner and O'Rourke (2013) propose that the use of coaching in group contexts produces more advantageous results than one-to-one coaching due to the coachee receiving more support via a network of peers thus reducing isolation. This realisation may open the door for positive change. Also, there is greater accountability to achieve goals especially if others demonstrate progress (Brown & Grant, 2010). Group coaching clients can even gain a sense of gratification from being able to help others in similar situations. Concern exists, however, that coaching delivered in this way will prevent coachees from disclosing openly due to confidentiality. Furthermore, group size may affect group dynamics and as

groups learn at different rates, the coach needs to ensure their communication fits each participant (Collins et al., 2013). However, using coaching and PPI's in group contexts may be preferable when working with adolescents as they may find it difficult to trust adults (Vella-Brodrick, 2013).

There have been numerous studies examining the use of positive psychology with adolescents (e.g. Ewan & Green, 2013; McGrath, 2009; Norrish & Vella-Brodrick, 2009). The Penn Resiliency Programme is the most researched, with sustainably reduced depression and anxiety outcomes (Seligman, 2011). The majority of the evaluations, however, were implemented by their team (Kristjansson, 2012) and only small, inconsistent depression outcomes found (Gillham et al., 2006). However, in the UK, those of disadvantaged backgrounds benefited more (Challen & Machlin, 2009).

Seligman et al. (2009) found that strengths identification (Peterson & Seligman, 2004) and 'three good things' PPI's improved school engagement and social skills. However, no decreases in depression and anxiety were found. Norrish and Vella-Brodrick (2009) found no significant results however, qualitative feedback stated the life satisfaction of the adolescents was improved. In contrast, Bromley, Johnson and Cohen (2006) found that strengths identification protected against the development of mental-health problems despite the participant experiencing two negative life events. Finally, Froh, Sefick and Emmons (2008) found a relationship between participating in a gratitude PPI and school experience satisfaction. Students with low initial levels of positive affect benefitted most.

There have been various critics of positive psychology stating that it adopts a 'Pollyanna' attitude where everything is seen through rose-tinted glasses (Ehrenreich, 2010; Norem, 2002). Additionally, theories such as Fredrickson's 'broaden and build' (2001, 2009) are thought to be conceptual not empirical. AC has faced similar critique of being naïve, idealistic and ignoring prob-

lems whilst focusing only on the positive (e.g. Bushe, 2007a, 2007b; Bushe & Kassam, 2005).

Positive Psychology and AC do not deny negative emotions. Instead they recognise these as natural, important aspects of life whilst shifting individual's outlook so to discern what makes their lives more meaningful and pleasurable. In 2015, longitudinal, empirical results are expected from a PPI study at Geelong Grammar school in Australia, which may empirically conclude what positive psychology can bring to the wellbeing of adolescents (Norrish & Vella-Brodrick, 2009b).

Discussion is developing around integrating positive psychology with coaching particularly in schools, as in Positive Education (Green, Oades & Robinson, 2011; Linley & Harrington, 2005). Green et al. (2013) recommend for these to be combined as both are necessary to increase wellbeing and goal striving.

Positive Education is based on five foundations of wellbeing: social/emotional competency, positive emotions and relationships, strengths identification and sense of meaning and purpose. Educational Psychologists have advocated for a stronger focus on prevention and promotion for wellbeing (Noble & McGrath, 2008). Due to schools being a direct resource to at-risk adolescents, it would be the ideal place for integrative coaching and PPI programmes (Clonan et al., 2004). Adolescence is a pivotal stage in development that carries huge implications for functioning over life (Norrish et al., 2013). Schools are now seen as institutions whose role extends beyond academic competence to preparing the 'whole child' to increase wellbeing (Huitt, 2010). Vella-Brodrick (2013) argues that there is currently a one-size-fits-all approach that creates disengaged students and feelings of low self-efficacy. The evidence suggests that coaching and PPIs do the opposite and do not negate needs of at-risk students but instead promote flourishing and mastery which will raise their aspirations to succeed. Moreover, it is key to

intervene at multiple levels simultaneously and design interventions that focus on minimising factors that lead to problematic functioning (i.e. risk factors) along with strengths within the adolescent and his/her environment (i.e. protective factors). The school context may serve to mediate the relationship between risk exposure and outcomes. Schools that are perceived as positive, empathising and with a sense of belonging/connectedness have implications for adolescent functioning (Schonert-Reichl, 2000).

There is, however, the contentious issue of whether those at-risk may actually have undiagnosed mental-health issues (National Research Council & Institute of Medicine, 2009). It has been suggested that Positive Psychology could lead to negative outcomes in these cases (Wood, Perunovic & Lee, 2009). Better screening and understanding is, therefore, required (Green & Norrish, 2013).

A recent grounded theory study by Robson and van Nieuwerburgh (forthcoming) on disadvantaged adolescents at-risk of developing mental health problems suggested that the experience of coaching as well as positive psychology creates a process, a positive relationship and a set of skills that help young people to deal with their situations. Skills included growing accountability, awareness and responsibility of choices and control over their thoughts, feelings and behaviour, which resulted in increased confidence. Therefore, coaching and positive psychology do have much to offer young people at-risk of developing mental health problems and thus there may be parallels with this research.

This literature review suggests that the research question is a relevant realm for analysis. However, there is no research integrating appreciative coaching with PPIs with Seligman (personal communication, 17 April 2014) stating 'I am not aware of a similar study'. Therefore, this research contributes to the understanding of how coaching and PPIs are experienced by at-risk adolescents.

Method

Research paradigm

The theoretical framework is concerned with examining and understanding the lived experience of the participant. The conceptual framework centres on the belief that humans are 'sense/meaning-making organisms' (Smith, 2009). The main driver for choosing the epistemological framework was the research question. The phenomenological position was chosen because it examines participants' perceived lived experiences. Based on the phenomenological approach, there is not one valid reality to be observed but infinite equally 'real' realities that stem from our subjective experiences (Langbridge, 2007). Additionally an idiographic position is taken as the research is seeking to identify the 'meaning' experienced by each participant. Due to there being two levels of interpretation within IPA, a double hermeneutic position is taken. In other words, it is recognised that as the participant is making sense of her lived experience, the researcher is trying to make sense of the participant trying to make sense of her experience. Therefore, it is highly reflexive (Smith & Osbourne, 2009) and enables the practitioner to be interviewer.

The traditional methodology used for PPIs and coaching, which primarily are conducted on private school adolescents, are quantitative, randomised control (e.g. Green et al., 2011; Norrish & Vella-Brodrick, 2009; Seligman et al., 2009) with self-report questionnaires being utilised. These do not allow for full disclosure/voices to be heard. There are also limited longitudinal studies conducted. Longitudinal studies would demonstrate long-term effectiveness of PPI's and coaching (Norrish et al., 2013).

The traditional methodology for at-risk adolescent's research is qualitative through a mixture of longitudinal grounded theory (Wierenga, 2008) narrative (Tellis-James, 2013), action research (Doveston & Keenaghan, 2006; San-Martin, 2010) and thematic analysis (Maldonado et al., 2008) using structured and unstructured inter-

views. Green et al. (2013) propose that future research should focus on qualitative data so that more understanding can be gleaned into the complex human dynamics involved in these interventions.

Quantitative methodology was ruled out for this study as the research does not seek to measure. Instead it seeks meanings, experiences and data richness. Furthermore, quantitative researchers aim to keep themselves at a distance from those they are researching whereas qualitative methodology recognises the complex two-way process. Schools are also not practical environments for quantitative studies, due to the difficulties of controlling the variables that influence the outcome. Within schools, there may be other interventions running which may impact findings. A qualitative method was deemed the best approach to conduct the research as it explores, describes and interprets experiences of small samples (Smith, 2009).

Interpretative phenomenological analysis which is 'committed to the examination of how people make sense of their major life experiences' (Smith et al., 2009, p.1.) was chosen as it works with small homogenous groups to interpret meanings. However, there are limitations to IPA, due to the focus on hermeneutics/interpretation. Moreover, one is unable to test a hypothesis as it only concentrates on the participant's experience. Further research can be conducted on larger groups to glean quantitative results.

Participants

The participants were three 15-year-old girls from a comprehensive girls' school in north London who fit the 'at-risk' criteria. There is some ethnic diversity between the sampling. They are all from a similar socio-economic backgrounds and were languishing therefore are a purposive, homogeneous sampling.

Procedure

A reflexive journal was kept throughout. Participants attended a six-week coaching and PPI's group programme at their school.

This took place weekly where possible. Towards the end of the programme, the three girls were asked whether they were interested in being interviewed so to better understand their experience. A consent letter was signed by their parents with a briefing letter given to explain. Due to IPA being chosen and it being highly reflexive, the practitioner is able to also be the interviewer. The semi-structured interviews took place two weeks after the intervention. Each interview lasted between 30 to 40 minutes. Students were briefed prior to the interview and informed of their right to withdraw during or after the interview; that the interview was going to be audio-recorded yet their anonymity would be protected. A semi-structured interview guide of five open-ended questions was used based on Smith and Osborne (2009) (see Appendix 1 for the questions used) Further questions were asked such as ‘what do you mean?’ and ‘how did you feel?’ to allow for clearer examination. After the interview, the participant was thanked, debriefed and interviews were transcribed verbatim by the researcher shortly thereafter.

Data collection

Prior to commencing, the researcher ensured that she was open-minded, flexible, empathetic, persistent and curious (Smith, Larkin & Flowers, 2009). There may have been some issues of power-play that needed to be negotiated (e.g. the student wanting to please the researcher and give the ‘right’ answers). This was overcome by the researcher saying at the start of the interview that she wanted them to be open and honest and that nothing they could say would offend as it would only help shape the research.

In order to assess qualitative validity and quality the researcher needed to be sensitive to the context, the data and the socio-cultural environment. In so doing, the interviewer needed to put the interviewee at ease

and recognise interactional difficulties in order to produce a good interview and get good data. Additionally, due to it being a purposive sample of adolescents who are traditionally expected to be difficult to access and engage, it was necessary for the researcher to remain patient. The researcher had to ensure the interview was attended to closely so to pick up any cues as it needed to be coherent and transparent for the reader to understand what was being said. The research could therefore be replicated to increase reliability (Smith et al., 2009c).

Data analysis

Each interview was transcribed verbatim to confirm accuracy. Lines were numbered and wide margins were left on either side for coding ease. Additionally a space was left between each turn in conversation. Analysis happened only after all three interviews had occurred so to prevent the interviewer influencing subsequent interviews. Analysis occurred inductively and line-by-line. The transcript was re-read whilst listening to the audio. Text which was thought to be important was underlined with some initial, reflective notes made as thoughts arose to bracket them off as well as noting anything of interest in the left margin. Descriptive, linguistic and conceptual comments were made with reference to theory sought. After the first transcript was read, emergent themes were identified from the initial notes and written in the right margin. The next transcript was analysed in the same way. Once all three transcripts were analysed, connections were looked for across the transcripts by comparing the separate lists to identify common themes. Abstraction was used to form ‘superordinate themes’ to group together emergent themes. Finally, this was input into a Word file with verbatim interview excerpts in order to demonstrate where the evidence was found (Smith et al., 2009c). The three emergent themes are presented in Table 1.

Results

Themes arising

Better control of emotions/reactions

Each participant reported struggling with controlling their emotions prior to participating in the programme and reported bad behaviour as a consequence. Being able to control their emotions and reactions was something they now experienced.

‘I try not to get as angry as quickly and I’ve learnt how to calm down a bit more than before... even though I am a loud person I’ve learnt how to use it in the right way... a positive not a negative way...’ (p.7, 211–213).

‘in a situation where I’m not happy I no longer become angry instead I stay calm and try to remain calm...’ (p.14, 511–512)... before in an argument I probably would have had a fight but now I know how to control myself so yeah (p.14, 514–515).

The participants spoke of how they had matured which had led to self-discipline and suggests growth and development.

‘Now I’m much more mature about the arguments that we have compared to before.’ (p.1, 19–20).

The participant’s even reported experiencing praise from family, friends and teachers about their behaviour and emotional control.

‘Teachers, friends and family have all said my behaviour has changed in a positive way’ (p.15, 547) and ‘my friends have told me that they have seen a difference in how I handle situations more calmly and I get less angry and I walk away from bad situations (p.3, 97–98).

There was even some insight that being angry all the time has an effect on your feelings and emotions and how thinking more positively has the opposite effect.

‘it makes me feel like a better person because when you’re angry all the time that when I feel like all the negative things come into your mind because you’re just an angry person naturally so but if you are like a naturally positive person you’re like calm, it helps you with situations and everything and softens your mind as well (p.7, 215–218).

There was also some further insight into how one’s reactions affects others.

‘I feel like people can understand me better now because I’m calm. Before when I was angry I just used to shout and be aggressive so people didn’t really listen to what I was saying’ (p.7, 233–235)... and were kinda scared or intimidated by the way I approached them now I approach them in a calm way so that they feel like I am coming to them in a respectable way (p.7, 245–247).

Table 1: Overview of experiences subsequent to programme.

| Superordinate theme | Subordinate themes |
|---|--|
| 1. Better control of emotions and reactions | 1.1 Able to stay calm |
| | 1.2 Able to see things from others perspectives and think about consequences |
| 2. Increased experience of 'positive' emotions and thoughts | 2.1 Increased self-belief |
| 3. Identification of purpose and meaning to life | 3.1 Identified strengths and applied them to life/ambitions goals |
| | 3.2 Identified that supportive relationships are valuable |

Able to see things from others perspectives and think about consequences

All the participants reported experiencing a newfound level of maturity and selflessness that were not present prior to participating in the programme.

‘I think about the effect of what I’m going to do and how it will hurt others... before I never used to care about the consequences and used to be selfish... now, instead of thinking about myself, I see everyone around me and see things from other people’s perspectives... if I was going to do something I wouldn’t just do it for my own purpose I’ll think oh, will it be helping this other person’ (p.14, 517–519 and p.15, 549–550, 552–553).

This maturity is further addressed when referencing arguments and how since participating in the programme their ability to resolve arguments had improved due to becoming aware of what was worthwhile.

‘When I argue with people, I see that I’m much better at resolving arguments and being mature about situations. Things like where I would’ve stood there and fight, I now walk away and think, no, it’s not worth it’ (p.3, 71–73).

Consequences of one’s actions was something that was additionally highlighted by the participants.

‘But now it’s like if someone said that to me, I’d say do you really wanna do that? Think about the consequences! I think ahead of my actions now, what it actually means (p.9, 298–299).... Before, I got arrested for assaulting a police officer even though i didn’t mean to after i was thinking in my head, it can’t be that bad can it?! I didn’t really think of the consequences whereas now if I done that I’d be scared because I know the consequences of that. The effects of criminal record, people judge you for it... (p.10, 325–328).

One participant went so far as to say that being part of the programme allowed her to see the error of her ways and that another

way was possible, referring to her ‘possible-future-self’ (Maldonado et al., 2008).

‘It made me see another perspective and made me realise that where I was going wasn’t good so do a U-turn’ (p.6, 186–187)

A lot of insight and perspective was gleaned by the participants which made them see things from a different mindset.

‘If something bad happens to me I don’t see it as a way of turning off. I used to but now I don’t... I feel like it’s a way of making me stronger into something I actually want to be so as it comes like, use it as a way to help motivate myself instead of putting myself down and saying because this happened to me I’m not going to do this and thinking why do always bad things happen to me? Instead I take it on board and think, okay maybe this happened to me for a reason and start considering the factors around it’ (p.7, 223–231).

This insight was further understood by the realisation that everyone is on their own journey and rather than compare with others, accept.

‘I used to think, why does everyone else have a happy life? I’d learnt to understand that everyone has their own tests in a different way... some people’s tests may come later on in life or just not as harsh as others (p.8, 251–253)... then again if it wasn’t for all the stuff in my past, I wouldn’t be who I am today thanks to that it’s made me who I am (p.9, 282–283).

Increased experience of positive emotions and thoughts.

All participants reported experiences of positive emotions and thoughts, It made me feel positive really positive’ (p.14, 522) which impacted their perceptions of the present, future and of others.

‘I think I appreciate things much more... if my dad bought me something I’d feel really grateful... plus I see that I have a hope of having a bright future, before

I never used to think that...' (p.4, 113–116, 119–120).

Positive emotions such as hope and gratitude were all reported as having been experienced by the participants describing themselves as now more positive people.

'I'm a more positive, more aware, less selfish person' (p.16, 572).

This more positive outlook led one participant to even reflect on her past and see 'that some good has come out of it....' It could be interpreted that by learning how to think more positively through the programme, the participants were able to reframe their worldview and see things through different tinted glasses.

'Even though bad stuff has happened to me, I can now see that some good has come out of it, it's shaped me... It made me look at more of the positives, like how I used to think of the negatives, it made me bring up the positives, even though it was hard to think of positives, to think that there is a positive thing in every situation' (p.6, 189–191, 193–194).

Increased self-belief

All participants reported experiencing increased self-belief and confidence subsequent to the programme.

'I think its the thinking thing like, I know what I want to become, I know what I want to do, I know why I come to school, I know what I want to get out of everything now' (p.3, 77–78).

There was also a newfound appreciation that the effort one puts in, one gets out in accomplishment.

'I know that I am good at stuff... I know that I'm doing well... what I'm putting in is having an effect on the grades that I'm getting. In French I got an A* whereas before I got a B which is a big jump' (p.13, 533–535, p.16, 557–559).

This confidence in their competence led to a change in the perception of their 'possible-future selves' (Maldonado et al., 2008).

'this is what I wanna do, this is what I wanna get and I am going to get it...

like the belief in my goals... I think I can do well... before it was like, no way, never, no chance and now it's, yeah I could, I just have to put the effort in... my self-belief is getting better each day' (p.2, 52–53, p.3, 83–87).

And: 'I want to work hard and get everything that I want to get and focus on school... I want to get good grades and do well at school and a good job... I'm going to achieve it... I'm going to work in geology... (p.16, 576–579).

One participant previously had 'being a criminal' as their ambition but subsequent to the programme, is driven to work within the criminal justice system.

'before, they were negative, not like, I want to work in prisons, more like, I want to be behind the bars, now I'm more driven to them [ambitions] and instead of me getting locked up, it being me doing the locking up!' (p.6–7, 177–178 & 201–203).

Being successful and achieving was something all the participants desired but there was no belief.

'I've always wanted to be, like successful but I didn't really believe it and I didn't know my strengths and weaknesses, no I knew my weaknesses but not my strengths and I couldn't believe stuff, I couldn't believe what I was being told' (p.14, 491–493).

This suggests for all participants that being on the programme helped to increase their belief in their possible future-selves (Maldonado et al., 2008), which led them to forming realistic goals to work towards which is further evidenced by:

'I see that I have a hope of having a bright future, before I never used to think that' (p.4, 119–120).

Identification of purpose and meaning to life

Within the interviews the participants began to allude to the fact that they had identified the role of goals, purpose and meaning in life and how this affected their motivation to attend school and concentrate whilst there.

'I seem more happier in school and I like school more, I enjoy it more or seem to and I care about my work more because If you're coming to school and you don't know what you wanna get at the end of it, you don't really care, you're just here, but when you know what you wanna do, you're more focused and you have that thought in your mind, I have to get this good grade for what I want to do so I need to focus' (p.3, 102–106).

They even spoke of how they found meaning in having coaching.

'no one forced me to come and that must've meant it meant something to me for me to keep on coming' (p.2, 44–45).

This identification of purpose and meaning led the participants to have a change in the importance of their priorities which affected their daily life routine.

'Now I revise every evening... before I used to wake up, go school, be rude and I wouldn't focus on lessons and then on the weekend I would go out partying and wouldn't come home till the next day. Now, it's go school, focus, ask questions, take down notes and then come home and revise!' (p.17, 589–592).

One could interpret deeper to find that a lot of the partying and trouble making had been a distraction and escape from reality.

'I found a way to escape reality... like now I've realised that that's not a way to help you it just makes it worse... because when it comes back to hit you it hits you harder in the face but if you take it as it comes then it's kind of better because you know what you're dealing with' (p.9, 307–310).

Identifying purpose and meaning filled the void so that they no longer felt the need to always be out or at someone else's home.

'Do you wanna come for a drink up on Saturday? Should we go out and cause trouble... beat people up?' (p.9, 305–306)... sometimes I wouldn't even come home, I would just go to someone else's house... now I'm always at home! That's the best place to be!' (p.1, 338–341).

Identified strengths and ambitions

All the participants reported the experience of identifying their strengths within the programme and how this had benefitted their perception of themselves.

'It helped me like identify and know my strengths and understand what to do and have a positive attitude... also how to improve as a person... and use what I have to help me...' (p.14, 504–505).

Becoming aware of their strengths enabled them to believe in their ambitions.

'I have ambitions now.' (p.2, 57) 'I want to pass my GCSEs... and I go college and I go uni I want to become an accountant (p.2, 64–65).

And 'Now I'm more like my ambitions... I'm more driven to them... and turning my ambitions round and thinking of the positive (p.7, 201–202)... I want to be the best of the best. I want to be at the top of the FBI (p.13, 454)... being the sort of person who goes into the prisons and advises young people and help them rehabilitate (p.13, 456–457).

The programme also identified to one of the participants how her strengths and skills could be used in more constructive ways thus helping others to not experience the same amount of suffering that she had.

'I now know that I'm a good leader and instead of using that on the streets to become a good gang leader, I use it in actual life, like a role model to younger people because I don't want people to experience what I have experienced' (p.12, 442–444).

Supportive, loving relationships are valued

All participants reported the importance of having supportive relationships and how they can make such a huge difference to the quality of their life.

'just having that guidance there, that coaching, having that person tell you that you are not worthless, you're amazing, your work is brilliant... you are going to make something of yourself, that's what helped me, the little comments, the

‘thank you’s, it showed that they actually appreciated the stuff that I’ve done’ (p.13, 465–471).

One participant experienced less familial attention growing up and she said that if she did not get the ‘guidance/loving’ from the coaching she would have ended up ‘victim to the streets’ (p.10, 345) and getting it from not necessarily your friends but people you grew up with on the streets. You’ll get it from older boys, you’ll get it from gangs... the wrong attention’ (p.12, 415–417).

This demonstrates how imperative early care and attention is.

‘My mum never used to pay attention... Like if I say I want this she never really used to get it... because of what was going on at home I never used to have a relationship with my mum (p.10, 336–337)... as someone who grew up in Hackney or Brixton where I’m from, you need a family to grow up with otherwise your life is basically on the streets... you need someone to constantly remind you that you’re amazing, you need someone to constantly remind you that you’re their star, you need loving... (p.11, 405–409).

This suggests what a difference getting positive feedback/praise has on an adolescent (Schonert-Reichl, 2000) ‘to be told that I am a bubbly, kind character made me feel nice because no one has ever said stuff like that’ (p.12, 447).

Thankfully, the relationship with the mum improved during and subsequent to having the coaching programme:

‘my mum would say that I have matured and Im actually thinking about consequences now where I didn’t before and that Im talking into consideration the fact that she is trying now... we’re all trying now... (p.11, 400–402).

The support did not just come from adults, but peers were also reported as a resource.

‘I’m surrounded by friends who have the same aspirations and are clear on their future, we therefore have similarities and help one another in all situations. When

we are revising, we will all be messaging each other, taking pictures of our work... it’s really good that we can help one another” (p.15, 526–528, 531, 584–585).

‘being in school, getting my education, having a relationship with my mum, having friends that I can talk to... that’s what makes me happy’ (p.11, 397–398).

The participants mentioned how imperative it was to have like-minded friends with common aims/aspirations to integrate with. Belonging to a collective who hold you accountable, encourage you and are your champions was experienced as being important. The participants relied on one another as a support system after having shared an experience together, which mitigated stress and provided security for them (Brown & Grant, 2010).

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine qualitatively what the perceptual life changes at-risk adolescents would experience following a coaching and PPI programme. Three perceptual life changes were identified; better control of emotions/reactions, increased experience of positive emotions/thoughts and ability to identify purpose and meaning to life. This led to increased engagement and accomplishment at school/in relationships and all reporting higher PQoL. This concurs with findings that daily positive life experiences predict higher PQoL (Huebner et al., 2004) and life satisfaction relating to positive personal traits, hope and supportive relationships (Gilman & Huebner, 2003; Oberle, Schonert-Reichl & Zumbo, 2010). The findings are also consistent with positive education’s five foundations of wellbeing (Noble & McGrath, 2008).

Consideration of each theme with review of the literature will now be made. With regards to the theme of ‘better control of emotions/thoughts’ this concurs with Robson and van Nieuwerburgh’s (forthcoming) findings who found increased control over thoughts and behaviour subsequent to a

coaching and positive psychology programme. Csikszentmihalyi (2002) found within his longitudinal research that if we are able to control/master the information that comes in and our interpretations and responses, we can then decide what our lives will be like, despite adversity. This can lead to calmer, mature behaviours similar to what was found in this research.

The second finding 'experience of 'positive' emotions/thoughts' is consistent with Mather and Hulme's (2013) appreciative inquiry findings of positive mind-set/optimism. The 'increased self-belief' subtheme concurs with Maldonado et al. (2008) and Herrera et al.'s (2011) findings of self-efficacy, aspirations, self-esteem and possible-selves of at-risk adolescents. Robson and Van Nieuwerburgh (forthcoming) similarly found that coaching is a potential method of application of positive emotions where confidence and self-belief can increase.

'Identified purpose and meaning' covered the subthemes of strengths, goals, accomplishment and relationships that are consistent with Green et al.'s (2013) coaching findings of goal striving increases. Emmons (1999, 2004) found that goals are related to increased happiness and a sense of meaning/connection so pursuing goals is vital to our functioning, without which we would languish. Likewise, results concur with Van Nieuwerburgh et al.'s (2011) relationship improvements and study-skills findings and Norrish and Vella-Brodrick's (2010) higher life satisfaction and increases in academic performance.

Seligman (2002) found that having an abundance of social ties differentiated the happiest people from the least happy, which concurs with our finding of the importance of intimate, trusting relationships. Strengths identification, focus and usage emerged as important, which concurs with Steen et al.'s (2005) finding that strength identification and use is associated with happiness and lower rates of depression.

Levels of engagement within school increased subsequent to taking part in the

programme. This agrees with Seligman et al. (2009) and Froh et al. (2008). Csikszentmihalyi's (2002) 'theory of optimal experiences' based on the 'flow' concept, proposes that when a person's body/mind is stretched out of its comfort zone to accomplish something worthwhile, it leads to growth/discovery. The findings suggest that these adolescents experienced similarly, which led to a more complex self, both integrated with others and differentiated.

The superordinate-themes of meaning and purpose agree with Csikszentmihalyi (2002) as optimal experiences add to a sense of mastery in determining the content of life. If this is joined into a meaningful pattern it leads to control and happiness. Seligman, Peterson and Parks (2006) found that meaning and engagement pursuit was correlated with higher life satisfaction and lower depression.

Seligman (2002) divided happiness into: positive emotion (pleasant life); engagement (engaged life) and meaning (meaningful life). He subsequently devised the (P)ositive emotion, (E)ngagement, (R)elationships, (M)eaning and (A)ccomplishment flourishing model to measure wellbeing. This is all consistent with the emergent theme findings. Kern et al. (2014) found that private-school adolescent's wellbeing was multidimensional although there was some overlap between meaning and relationships, which suggests that adolescents may gain meaning from their relationships with others. This was similarly found in this research.

The group setting proved advantageous which supports Brown and Grant's (2010) assertion that groups are valuable due to support and greater accountability. The knowledge that one's sufferings are shared added an important perspective to the 'egocentric' adolescents. The findings agree with Kerka (2003) as the girls disclosed what a difference it made having their assets focused on. This equally corresponds with the finding that at-risk students do best with teachers who adopt a sense of belonging, develop a

strengths-based approach and focus on their positive core (Wierenga, 2008). Furthermore, sharing meaningful stories of virtue was powerful.

Biswas-Diener and Dean (2007) found two variables of key importance for achieving and maintaining subjective wellbeing; goals and social relationships. Happy people have three things in common, positive-thinking habits, health and relationship maintenance. Happiness can be separated further into processes, life conditions and personal choices. Coaching and PPI's give adolescents the tools and insight to realise how to make personal choices so they experience more positivity. Ryff and Singer's (1998) theory of wellbeing states that people are happiest when they are connected, autonomous and capable. This corresponds with the study's findings.

What this suggests is that life satisfaction will have improved based on the perceptual life changes the adolescents are now experiencing following the programme. This has the likelihood of safeguarding against depression as well as increasing wellbeing. Fredrickson (2001) found that positive emotion and broadened thought intensify one another which leads to an upward spiral of wellbeing. There are similarities with Seligman, Rashid and Park's (2006) positive psychotherapy, which focuses on building positive emotions, strengths and meaning in a group setting across six weeks. This is touted as the new way to treat and prevent depression.

Limitations

Due to the fact that the coaching and PPIs were delivered in a group setting, participants were unable to intensively go into their experiences, which may have affected rapport. Additionally, the qualitative nature of the research meant that the sample was not representative of the population. However, that being said, this research will be enlightening to those practitioners who work with or are interested in working with young people, specifically at-risk young girls to

further glean an understanding into how they experience the world. It could also be similarly useful and important to parents or parents to be.

Carrying out research with a group of challenging adolescents meant that a certain degree of drop-out was inevitable. From an initial group of 10, only three completed the programme and, therefore, were the only ones interviewed. Those that dropped out did so for a number of reasons. Some were not ready for coaching and positive psychology and may have been more suitable for therapy. There was also the issue of the adolescents being selected for being 'at-risk' which caused some resentment and defensiveness. Additionally the sessions were run after school, which was one of the reasons given for why some of the girls did not turn up.

Some of the interview questions needed to be re-phrased for the girls to understand and some participants provided brief answers and required additional prompts. The researcher's subjectivity/interpretations based on this sample population is worth noting. The researcher has had experience of being an at-risk adolescent therefore may have reacted when hearing something that she empathised with. This was alleviated by using the actual words from each participant when coding.

Implications for future research

It is suggested that further study is carried out on a larger sample-population to validate the results so that reliability can be upheld. Further research is additionally required to explore how to incentivise coaching readiness in order to prevent high drop-out rates in 'at-risk' populations. Additionally, it has been suggested that one must be aware of the tyranny of positive thinking, which can make those who feel particularly negative to feel even worse. Therefore, the context, diversity and caveats are of importance when delivering a positive and coaching psychology programme so further tweaking of the programme is required. Furthermore, Lyubormirsky and Layous (2013) assert the

importance of a person activity fit for effectiveness therefore in future research, at-risk young people ought to have the choice of which PPI to use (K. Hefferon, personal communication, 25 June, 2015).

A mixed-methods approach is recommended to demonstrate the empirical effect. This could include quantitative scales pre/post, for example, the 'satisfaction with life' scale (Diener et al., 1985) followed with qualitative open-ended questions.

We propose that doing this type of intervention early on in school will buffer adolescents from depression and anxiety subsequently. It would be worthwhile to have intensive one-to-one sessions with those who are experiencing past/present perceived troubles so that rapport is not undermined.

This is exciting research, which should serve to motivate further, wider applied intervention research in the field as an appropriate next step to deepen understanding.

Conclusion

Despite technological advances and material luxuries, some people still feel like their lives lack meaning/purpose and there is a sense of unhappiness/boredom. This is because material conditions are secondary and people have not learnt how to control the content of their experience. The difference between someone who enjoys life and someone who gets overwhelmed is interpretation. Epictetus said 'Men are not afraid of things but of how they view them' (Csikszentmihalyi, 2002, p.20). People who learn how to control their inner-experiences will be able to determine their PQoL, which some argue is as close as any of us can come to being

happy. This programme provided a small sample of at-risk adolescents with a broadened and positive view of themselves, others and their lives overall. This led to more positive emotion/thoughts, calmer behaviour, more engaged and meaningful relationships, accomplishment, purpose and a greater sense of self-belief. What this suggests is that integrating coaching and PPIs may have a role to play when working with at-risk adolescents. Long-term outcomes might include academic achievement (Waters, 2014), job success and better health (Howell, Kern & Lyubormirsky, 2007). Therefore, further research and the development of an integrated positive coaching psychology framework, similar to the Grounded Theory model by Robson and van Nieuwerburgh (forthcoming) developed for at-risk adolescents, is strongly recommended.

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Appendix 1

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|---|
| 1. Could you describe to me how you perceived your life prior to taking part in the coaching programme? (only if they struggle) PROMT: Environment, home, family, friends, school, aspirations/ambitions |
| 2. If you had to describe what having the coaching programme meant to you, what would you say? PROMT: What words/images spring to mind? |
| 3. How is your life different now than from before you started the coaching programme? PROMT: Relationships, grades, aspirations, hobbies? |
| 4. How do you see yourself as different? PROMT: Different behaviours/thinking/feelings/views/opinions/aspirations? |
| 5. How would your friends/teachers/family say you have changed if at all? PROMT: Behaviour/thinking/feelings/moods |
| 6. How do you see yourself in the future? |