

Academic Paper

# The experiences of educational coaches prior to their first placement: An interpretative phenomenological analysis

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## Abstract

Studies of student coaching have shown benefits to both students and coaches, yet little is known about the experiences of coaches as they prepare to coach. This study sought to explore the experiences of six undergraduate trained educational coaches from a UK university prior to their first placement coaching secondary school students. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was used to collect data, undertake semi-structured interviews, and analyse the data.

Three overarching themes emerged from this study: Nervous energy; Sense of responsibility; and Sense of reciprocal benefit. These themes may be helpful in informing training and supporting educational coaches, and may provide insights to inform the development of new theories about the use of coaching with young people.

## Keywords

coaching in education, educational coach, interpretative phenomenological analysis, teacher education,

## Article history

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## Introduction

The use of coaching has been increasing in school contexts over the last decade. As interest grows, educators have been exploring different ways in which coaching can be used in educational settings (van Nieuwerburgh, Knight & Campbell, 2019). Much of the existing research focuses on the clients and not the coaches. This research sought to shed light on the experiences of those who coach in educational settings. To explore this aspect further, this study was conducted with Education degree undergraduate students who had been trained as coaches and were about to undertake placements as external educational coaches of students in a secondary school. Whilst coaching has been used to target students at grade boundaries (Allison & Harbour, 2009) and to

enhance examination performance (Passmore & Brown, 2009), there has been little research on the impact such interventions may have on the coach. Where research has been conducted, it has been on internal coaches operating within a university context (Feehily, 2018). Having a better understanding of the experiences and perceptions of educational coaches may support coach training providers – including teacher education institutions incorporating coach training modules within their undergraduate and postgraduate programmes – to develop appropriate professional development opportunities for such coaches. This research therefore sought to understand ‘What were the subjective thoughts and experiences of undergraduate Education students after the completion of their training as educational coaches, and prior to engaging as external coaches for non-adult students in secondary schools?’

Using qualitative data generated through interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), this study explored key themes, which could inform further research, training or support for novice education coaches.

## Literature review

For many years, both coaching and mentoring have been included in the range of strategies for improvement in educational settings, for example studies of the impact of coaching on teacher and student outcomes (Green, Grant, & Rynsaardt, 2007; Kohler, McCulloch Crilley, Shearer & Good 1997; Passmore & Brown, 2009; Ross, 1992; Showers & Joyce, 1996); and studies of the impact of mentoring (Cureton, Green & Meakin, 2010; Hudson, 2013; Smith & Nadelson, 2016), and mentoring relationships (Tenenbaum, Crosby & Gliner, 2001).

This study focuses on coaching, at the nondirective end of the directive/non-directive spectrum (Pask & Joy, 2007, p.246), rather than mentoring which tends to be a more directive intervention (Ives, 2008, p.100).

## Coaching in education

Coaching in education has been defined by van Nieuwerburgh (2012, p.17) as:

*a one-to-one conversation that focuses on the enhancement of learning and development through increasing self-awareness and a sense of personal responsibility, where the coach facilitates the self-directed learning of the coachee through questioning, active listening, and appropriate challenge in a supportive and encouraging climate.*

Coaching is expanding in education, and the body of research and academic literature is growing (van Nieuwerburgh & Barr, 2016; van Nieuwerburgh et al., 2019). Increasingly, coaching interventions in education are based on psychological theories and research (van Nieuwerburgh & Oades, 2017). The Global Framework for Coaching in Education (van Nieuwerburgh & Campbell, 2015) initially set out four educational contexts for coaching: educational leadership, student success and wellbeing, professional practice of educators, and community engagement. While students benefit indirectly from the coaching of school leaders, teachers and parents, students can also be coached directly by external coaches, or by internal coaches who may be teachers or other professionals, or by fellow students.

A review of the literature on coaching in education shows that studies are broadly within four categories (van Nieuwerburgh & Barr, 2016; van Nieuwerburgh et al., 2019): (1) the educational contexts in which coaching takes place; (2) the coaching methods used and by whom; (3) the impact of coaching on the client; and (4) the impact of coaching on the coach (a small number of studies).

## **Impact on the client**

Coaching of students has led to promising improvements in performance and wellbeing (Devine, Meyers & Houssemand, 2013; van Nieuwerburgh & Barr, 2016), and improved confidence and self-motivation (Fields, 2018). Behavioural, goal-focused coaching by trained academic coaches over a three year period has resulted in improved student examination performance and increased hope (Passmore & Brown, 2009). Coaching can also impact indirectly on student attainment when used as a method to apply positive psychology research in education (Green et al., 2007). In contrast, the primary focus of coaching may be the wellbeing of students: in studies by Robson-Kelly and van Nieuwerburgh (2016) and also Pritchard and van Nieuwerburgh (2016), students at risk of developing mental health problems participated in coaching programmes based on positive psychology and appreciative inquiry, leading to increased wellbeing and positive emotions. Students who participated in solution-focused cognitive behavioural life coaching by school counsellors and trained teachers experienced improved coping skills and resilience, improved hardiness and hope, and decreased levels of depression (Campbell & Gardner, 2005; Green, Norrish, Vella-Brodick & Grant, 2013). An increasing number of studies about peer student coaching have indicated that students, including primary-age children (Briggs & van Nieuwerburgh, 2010; Dorrington & van Nieuwerburgh, 2015) can be trained to coach one another successfully (Plumer & Stoner, 2005; Short, Kinman & Baker, 2010; van Nieuwerburgh, Zacharia, Luckham, Prebble & Browne, 2012).

## **Impact on the coach**

While most coaching research has focused on outcomes for the client, few studies describe the impact on the coach. In van Nieuwerburgh and Tong's (2013) study, after coaching their younger peers, student coaches reported improved attitudes to learning. In educational settings, such discoveries are significant. In Barr and van Nieuwerburgh's (2015) study, teachers reported experiencing helpful insights and a combination of optimism and anxiety during a coaching training programme. Feehily (2018) examined the lived experiences of internal coaches whose place of work happened to be an educational institute (a university), but these were practising what Jones, Woods and Guillaume (2016) define as 'workplace coaching' (formal coaching activity concerning a client's work role and where the coach does not have supervisory authority over the client) rather than educational coaching. More research is needed on the experiences of educational coaches, including peer student coaches, and this current study aimed to complement coaching knowledge and understanding.

## **Methodology**

The study used IPA as a means of exploring the personal experiences of six coaches as they prepared to coach young people in a secondary school. This section gives the rationale for using IPA, then describes the phenomenon and the sample. The process for collecting and analysing data is then described.

### **The phenomenon**

The phenomenon was the participants' lived experience of the interlude between completing their training as an educational coach and carrying out their first session as an external educational coach with a student in a secondary school.

### **The choice of IPA**

Phenomenology is a philosophical approach to the study of experience (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009, p.11), and the rationale for using IPA was the researchers' intention to gain a rich idiographic

account of the participants' experiences. Smith and Osborn (2004) note that IPA aims to explore and understand the meaning of an experience from the participant's point of view. A feature of IPA is that it is highly interpretative rather than descriptive, and it recognises hermeneutics – the theory of interpretation. There is a double hermeneutic - while the participants are responding to the interviewer, they are interpreting their experiences and thoughts to make sense of them. Meanwhile the interviewer is also interpreting the participant's words and attempting to bracket their own concerns and hunches, and by their listening and attention they are an active co-participant (Smith et al., 2009, p.64).

## The participants

The participants were first-year undergraduate students from a teacher education programme at a UK university. They had undertaken a coaching module based on the underlying assumption that coaching is an enabling, facilitative, non-directive development intervention. The module had covered a range of approaches – goal-focused coaching, cognitive behavioural coaching and positive psychology: specifically working with strengths. The study took place when the students were about to begin an assessed placement where each would coach a young person from a local secondary school. All students who had taken the coaching module were invited to participate in the study. Six students volunteered and were recruited as research participants. Table 1 gives a profile of each participant.

**Table 1: The participants in the study**

Participant	Gender	Age
P1	Male	21
P2	Female	23
P3	Female	20
P4	Female	19
P5	Male	18
P6	Female	41

## Data collection

Data collection was undertaken through a semi-structured interview with each individual participant. In order to avoid leading the participants, and to encourage them to share their lived experience, the researcher began by asking a neutral question, "As you think ahead to the coaching sessions, what comes to your mind?". The participants' answers informed the direction of subsequent questions. A second researcher transcribed the interviews, adding non-verbal information about pauses and laughter.

## Data analysis

Using Smith et al.'s (2009) guidelines for IPA, data analysis was completed by the two researchers who had not interviewed the participants. The two researchers shared the six transcripts equally, with each person taking the lead on analysing three transcripts. Working individually, they read, re-read and analysed each transcript (Smith et al, 2009), adding exploratory comments on three levels: descriptive comments, linguistic comments and conceptual coding. Patterns in the comments on the first transcript were analysed to identify emergent themes, which were clustered into provisional superordinate themes and sub-themes. A concept map of the first participant's provisional superordinate themes and sub-themes was compiled. The above process was repeated for each of the transcripts individually. Each researcher was then questioned by the other researcher to check that their transcript analysis was well-founded. Both researchers worked jointly to consider all of the participants' responses, using the knowledge of these multiple voices for further interpretation, and to further develop the superordinate themes and sub-themes. Through ongoing reflection and discussion, the superordinate themes and sub-themes continued to evolve

throughout the analysis and writing phase (Smith, 1995). Themes and illustrative quotations were shared with the interviewing researcher, to check that they captured a good sense of the experience of the participants. Braun and Clarke (2006) advise that themes should “capture something important in relation to the overall research question” (p.82), so themes were not necessarily dependent on prevalence. Rather, decisions about themes were informed by relevance to the research question and significance to the participants.

## Ethics

Throughout the study, the British Psychological Society Code of Ethics and Conduct (2009) was followed. Ethical approval was granted by the Research Ethics Committee at the of University of South Wales.

## Findings

The results are presented through the themes shown in Table 2.

**Table 2: The themes in the coaches' experiences**

Superordinate Theme	Sub-theme
1. Nervous energy about the forthcoming coaching sessions	Enthusiasm, excitement, positive anticipation Uncertainty about what to expect
2. Sense of responsibility about the success of the coaching interaction	Own performance Client's experience Coaching relationship
3. Sense of reciprocal benefit	

### Nervous energy about the forthcoming coaching sessions

Participants reported experiencing nervous energy as they anticipated their first coaching session. Positive aspects of this energy were tempered with an uncertainty about what to expect.

#### Enthusiasm, excitement, positive anticipation

The participants reported that they were excited about putting their new coaching skills into practice, and looked forward to getting started, so that each could work with their client.

*... I also want to apply what we study here...and I really can't wait to do it because I'm sure it's going to make a difference. (P2: 262—264)*

*I've never done anything like this before. So, yeah, I'm excited to find out what it's like. Find out what the kid's like, find out how, see the whole thing in practice for real. (P1: 336—338)*

The participants expected that the experience would help them prepare for working with children in future, and one participant realised that the experience would inform her reflections on teaching as a career.

*I'm nervous. I'm excited and nervous at the same time...I think it will help me decide whether teaching is...the right career for me. (P4: 35—38)*

#### Uncertainty about what to expect

The uncertainty appeared to relate to the participants feeling unable to predict what their client would be like, and what support they would need. Some participants wondered whether they would

be able to cope.

*I'm more worried about who the person's going to be. If they're going to be more trouble than I might be able to handle...I'm thinking about what I'm going to say to them on the first time. (P3: 36—39)*

However, other participants felt that their discomfort would end once they began coaching.

*I'm not comfortable with it, and I don't think I will be until I'm doing it, really. But I'm sure once we get going it'll be fine. (P1: 46—47)*

Sense of responsibility about the success of the coaching interaction

As they reflected on their thoughts and feelings about the coaching interaction, participants shared their sense of responsibility about its success.

*It's not something to go lark around and have some fun. This is someone's life, and I'm rather hoping I can help them. (P6: 587—588)*

This sense of responsibility seemed to be multifaceted, relating to their own performance, the client's experience during the interaction, and the coaching relationship.

### **Own performance**

Participants wanted to understand the client's needs and were reflecting on what might be said during the coaching conversation. To prepare, they explained that they were collecting resources that might be useful and continuing to read coaching literature from their course. They were keen to be fully prepared.

*And the other anxiety would be that I might not be very good...so this is one of the reasons why I keep reading, because I want to make sure that I will understand exactly what the person tells me. (P2: 404—408)*

*I mean...you don't wanna [sic] turn [up] with something you found the night before, and you know, find out it's not very good for them. (P3: 280—281)*

However, one participant noted that, as well as specific tools, broader preparation would be needed, to deal with the unexpected.

*I've looked into some learning resources and tools...I don't want to do that TOO much...I'd rather see them on the first session and then start, em, seeing how much I can do, seeing what they need. Because I've got loads of anger tools, but they might not be angry! [laughing]. (P3: 464—471)*

One participant planned to ask the tutor for practical help with their performance if necessary.

*I'd probably just come to you for advice if that was happening and see where to go from there. (P5: 423—424)*

One participant realised that if the coaching wasn't going as planned, some reassurance from the tutor would help them believe in their own ability as a coach.

*Like if I can't see any sign of them wanting to do it, and I'm starting to think "Oh, is it me? Am I the problem?" ...I think I'd need some sort of boost... "You're trying your best". Although I*

*probably already know the answers in my head, sometimes you just need to be told, don't you?*  
(P4: 496—502)

Other participants felt more confident about their performance. For one coach, this was linked to her being older than the others on the course.

*I'm quite confident...I've been around a long time and you get more confident as you get older.*  
(P6: 691—693)

### **Client's experience**

The participants felt a sense of responsibility for the client's experience and pondered what the interaction would be like for the client. Some participants were also curious about the experiences of the students who would be coached by other coaches on the programme, as well as their own client.

*I want to see if other...clients progress as well. And how many succeed, how many develop from this process. Let's see honestly how well this process works.* (P1: 784—785)

The coaches' thoughts about the clients appeared to be affected by their own background or stance. One had been coached when she was a school student, and her expectation of the client's needs may have been affected by interactions with her own coach.

*...perhaps they don't feel really comfortable to discuss with their parents or their friends about what worries them.* (P2: 39—41)

Another participant was more pragmatic and expected that the client would relax if given space to talk.

*Everybody's a bit of a narcissist, I think...If you get them talking...about themselves, they might open up and then become a bit more comfortable with the questions...* (P1: 182—185)

### **Coaching relationship**

When the coaches considered the nature of their relationship with the client, they recognised that they might be seen as a friend but preferred to be seen as a role model.

*So I'd rather be more like a role model than their friend.* (P3: 106—107)

The importance of developing a trusting coaching relationship was a significant strand throughout the coaches' sense of responsibility for the coaching interaction.

*Well, they could trust me. I know they can, but they don't know that. But they're starting to think "This is someone that cares. This is someone that I can trust."* (P4: 399—401)

They wanted the clients to know that they were trustworthy and thought this could happen if they were open and non-judgemental. One participant speculated that this approach might also help the student trust their teachers more.

*We're all the same. We've all been through the same stuff. So I think if they could see a more open side to someone, they'll be a bit more trusting. Maybe trust the teachers a bit more as well.* (P4: 595—597)



## Sense of reciprocal benefit

Although the priority of the coaches in the study was to help the clients, they reflected on the personal benefits that they expected to derive incidentally in return.

*Hopefully they get the best they can out of this. And so do the coaches as well I suppose. Learning experience for everybody. (P5: 845—847)*

Alongside the coaches' satisfaction that they were helping the students, they anticipated benefits related directly to themselves. For example, they realised that they had already learned useful skills that they could continue to use on the course in future.

*If a kid actually progresses, there's quite a good feeling, isn't there? And stuff like goal-setting, target-setting, stuff like that. I can always apply it to myself on the course...It's gonna help me develop as well. As well as the good feeling – altruism almost. (P1: 664—668)*

The coaches also anticipated that they would be able to use their new coaching skills to help other young people in the future.

*Outside of uni I work with Barnardo's, and I take kids out for days out and stuff, so I want to be able to get some experience that I can maybe use with them. Maybe not in the same way, but em, you know, how to handle certain situations. (P3: 522—526)*

However, they were prepared to compromise their own benefits to ensure that the client had a good experience.

*Because if I kind of focus too much on forcing them to do something that won't work for them, then they won't benefit from it. Even if it looks, you know, good on my report...still at the end of the day they don't get anything out of it. (P3: 310—313)*

## Discussion

This study set out to explore the feelings and experiences of undergraduate students who had been trained as educational coaches; specifically, their thoughts and feelings about their pending initial placement working with secondary school students. The decision to focus on educational coaches was driven by the fact that most research has been focused on the experience of the client, rather than the coach (Pritchard & van Nieuwerburgh, 2016; Robson-Kelly & van Nieuwerburgh, 2016). This discussion will examine the findings against the literature and explain new understandings and fresh insights. In addition, limitations of this present study and implications for future research will also be discussed.

Three main themes emerged from the qualitative data. The educational coaches reported feelings of nervousness (P3: 'I'm not comfortable with it, and I don't think I will be until I'm doing it...') blended with enthusiasm (P4: 'I'm excited and nervous at the same time'). This is in keeping with research involving teachers taking part in coaching training (Barr & van Nieuwerburgh, 2015), where the same blend of emotions was expressed. This may be the phenomenon of nervousness when being asked to implement any newly acquired or honed skill. However, such feelings may arguably be enhanced when training to become a coach, as such training typically requires individuals to become more psychologically minded. Whilst under-researched in the context of coaching, this phenomenon has been identified amongst counsellors in training, with Truell (2001) detailing how the training leaves individuals more aware of their own inner dynamics, issues, capacity and defences. Such raised awareness might reasonably trigger nervous energy amongst some trainees.



Another key theme concerned the sense of responsibility that the coaches expressed. Some adopted coping strategies of committed reading and preparation prior to the coaching, whereas the opposite approach was also articulated (P3: *'I've looked into some learning resources ... I don't want to do that too much'*). This shift from ways of doing – the amassing of tools and techniques – towards ways of being echoes similar journeys in the coaching literature (de Haan, 2016). In the context of coaching supervision, Clutterbuck, Whitaker and Lucas (2016, p.145) similarly argue that preparation may not always be a helpful strategy, so it was interesting seeing this range of approaches expressed by the current study's participants.

The final superordinate theme identified in the data analysis was that of 'Sense of reciprocal benefit'. Participants gave responses that foregrounded the importance of beneficial outcomes, but these benefits were recognised as being available to both agents within the central coach-client dyad (P5: *"...they get... the best out of this. And so do the coaches as well, I suppose"*). The expectation of benefits for the clients is in line with studies such as Passmore and Brown (2009) and Fields (2018), whereas the expectation of benefits for the coach supports the findings in Kowalski and Casper (2007) as well as van Nieuwerburgh and Tong (2013). The ability to apply newly-honed coaching skills beyond the immediate population (P3: *'...I work with Barnardo's... experience that I can maybe use with them'*) is similar to the desires expressed by the teachers trained to coach and studied by Barr and van Nieuwerburgh (2015), where novel uses and target populations for coaching were also identified by the participants.

The accruing of desired outcomes by students receiving coaching is often central to the purpose of such interventions (Torbrand & Ellam-Dyson, 2015). The fact that participants in coaching training report experiencing similar beneficial outcomes suggests the potential for further research into coaching skills training as an intended intervention for self-development rather than solely for role/vocational competence acquisition.

One interesting theme was the notion of the client as active participant, rather than a belief in agency lying solely in the power of the coach or their toolbox of techniques (P3: *'...if I ... focus ... on forcing them to do something that won't work for them, then they won't benefit from it'*). The educational coaches in this study were aware they would be working with students identified as at risk of disengagement with education. Kretzschmar (2010) identifies issues around culture and class, knowledge about coaching, having a commitment to change and feeling safe, as all relevant to a client's potential coachability.

## **Limitations of this study**

The limitations of this study should be taken into account when interpreting the findings. The researcher who recruited and interviewed the participants was also the course tutor. Despite an explicit recognition of this and encouragement to participants to be open and honest about their experiences, it is possible that they may have consciously or unconsciously emphasised positive experiences because of the relationship built up with the tutor during the course. Because the tutor would be assessing their work, they may have withheld comments that would have demonstrated negativity or uncertainty. Also, the participants were volunteers interested in talking about their thoughts and feelings in advance of their first placement, and therefore may have been positively inclined towards the opportunity to coach younger students. It is possible that different answers may have been given if the interviewer had been someone other than the tutor, or if the interviewees had been students on the course who had not volunteered to participate.

## **Implications for practice and future research**

This study sought to address the gap in research that focuses on the student coach in educational coaching relationships. In addition, it looked at educational coaches, many of whom were only a few years ahead of their clients in role maturity, but nonetheless operating in a coaching rather than

mentoring dynamic. Whilst it has been argued that mentors and mentees both benefit from educational mentoring relationships (Tenenbaum, Crosby & Gliner, 2001), there is scope for further research concerning the benefits for near peer student coaches, including studies that generate quantitative data.

Second, a longitudinal study, following up student near peer coaches during and after interventions could track the evolution of their thoughts and feelings as they progress through their early experiences of working with student clients. This could produce data that may be fed into future coaching training programmes, including those in teacher education courses, allowing trainees to anticipate and prepare for typical experiences and emotions.

A third suggestion is to implement pre- and post-training measures of psychological mindedness to identify whether coaches in training experience a phenomenon analogous to that of counsellors in training. If this were found to be the case, then support mechanisms to guard against potentially undesirable consequences of raised self-awareness should then be put in place.

As the current study was carried out with students on an education degree module, it would be interesting if future studies were to extend the scope of participant recruitment. If a future study focused on students who took the coaching module as part of a different course (i.e. not Education), it might result in a different set of feelings and experiences being articulated.

## Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to gain insight into the subjective thoughts and experiences of the trained educational coaches prior to their initial placements, thus broadening the amount of research on coaching in education that centres on student coaches.

Three main themes were identified: 'Nervous energy about the forthcoming coaching sessions'; 'Sense of responsibility about the success of the coaching interaction'; and 'Sense of reciprocal benefit'. As this was an IPA study, assumptions regarding generalisability are not being made. Nevertheless, some of these themes echo those from van Nieuwerburgh and Tong (2013), suggesting that they are not wholly context-generated. This may suggest that more consideration should be given to the benefits of training students and educators to become coaches.

Conclusions could be drawn about the benefits of anticipating and preparing trainee educational coaches about some of these thoughts and feelings when designing coach training programmes. For instance, reassurances, coping strategies and guidance about ongoing support could be emphasised to reduce the risk of nervous energy having a negative impact.

As with any exploratory research, it is hoped that some of the emergent themes from this study might be used to generate hypotheses for more empirical (quasi-) experimental studies. Finally, referring back to the Global Framework for Coaching in Education (van Nieuwerburgh & Campbell, 2015), training and supporting education degree students to work as coaches with secondary school students could not only enhance the success of the school students, but also - given that many of the coaches aspire to pursue a career in teaching upon graduating – it may enrich their future professional practice and build their efficacy in deploying a coaching style of teaching and communicating for many years to come.

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