

Flourishing Youth Provision: The Potential Role of Positive Psychology and Coaching in Enhancing Youth Services

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Abstract

This article discusses how positive psychology and evidence-based coaching can support youth service provision in order to promote cross fertilisation between these different domains of practice. The transition from adolescence to adulthood is difficult for many young people and there is growing recognition that there should be a greater emphasis on the provision of youth services to help young people to achieve physical, emotional and psychological well-being at this key development stage. A literature review was conducted to identify key themes emerging in recent youth work strategies in the United Kingdom and Australia and from the positive psychology and evidence-based coaching research literature. Clear links can be made between the aims and objectives of youth work strategy and positive psychology and evidence-based coaching, and these have potential for use within youth services as a means of enhancing the well-being, resilience and hope of both young people and those who work to support them.

Key words: Positive psychology, evidence-based coaching, well-being, resilience, hope, youth work, young people

Introduction

The purpose of this article is to discuss how positive psychology can support youth work through evidence-based approaches to coaching and to inform youth workers about how evidence-based coaching and positive psychology may be helpful in their work. Simultaneously the article could inform coaches about how their expertise may be helpful to youth workers. In this way we hope to instigate a cross fertilisation between these different domains of practice.

Although the use of coaching methodologies in organisational and medical settings has grown substantially over the past five to ten years, to date coaching methodologies have not been widely promoted within the youth service. This is surprising because the role of youth workers is to act as agents of change, drawing out the best in young people by stimulating and supporting their development. This would seem to be a genuine natural fit with coaching and positive psychology.

This article is timely because the United Nations International Year of Youth was launched in August 2010. During the course of the year the UN hoped to create awareness about the positive contributions young people make and to seek a greater commitment and investment in youth related programmes around the world (UN, 2010). It signalled increasing global awareness of the need to improve life chances for all young people. The term 'life

chances' relate to having autonomy, engaging in positive social and community networks, accessing education and employment opportunities, being economically stable, experiencing health and well-being and living in a safe environment (Bamfield, 2007).

Many young people, particularly those from lower socio-economic backgrounds, lack hope, face significant barriers to achieving optimal life chances and increasing gaps in inequality (UNICEF, 2010, WHO, 2008). For example, in the United Kingdom, the Prince's Trust and "YouGov" Youth Index Report 'Hold Your Head Up' (The Prince's Trust, 2009) highlighted that one in ten young people felt life is not worth living and has no meaning or purpose; one in four felt depressed or stressed. More recent figures for young people not in education, employment or training are significantly higher (The Prince's Trust, 2010). Similarly in Australia the inaugural 'State of Australia's Young People Report' indicates that one in four young people aged 16-24 suffer from a mental health disorder, and one in three experience moderate to high levels of psychological distress. The figures for those at risk of self-harm, violence and substance abuse are rising, and there is increasing realisation that life for some young people is indeed tough (DEEWR, 2009).

There is growing recognition that a positive and proactive approach, rather than a reactive one, is needed in supporting young people's adolescent development (Porter, 2010; Layard, 2005). As a result youth services within the public and voluntary sectors that have historically sought to address young people's needs proactively have received greater recognition. Indeed, an increasing number of positive, proactive initiatives have been implemented in both Australia and the United Kingdom to enhance youth well-being and resilience and improve the quality of youth services. For example, the National Strategy for Young Australians launched in April 2010 is underpinned by a vision that all young people should be able to grow up safe, healthy, happy and resilient (DEEWR, 2009). In 2007, the former UK government launched a national initiative entitled "Aiming High for Young People: A Ten Year Strategy for Positive Activities (HM Treasury, 2007). The aim of this strategy was to increase participation by young people, including those at risk, in high quality and positive activities and to build their social, emotional and physical resources and resilience in order to assist in their transition to adulthood and employment.

However, in order to justify existing government funding and seek other investment in increasingly tough economic times, there is a growing need for youth strategies to be evidence-based and grounded in science. The purpose of this paper is to make explicit the links between positive psychology, evidence-based coaching and youth work strategy. We argue that the complementary fields of positive psychology and coaching, thus far are hardly acknowledged within current youth strategy, but can provide an important framework for youth work initiatives, including youth workforce development and also provide the scientific rigor required for ongoing evaluation of both their effectiveness and efficiency.

We also argue that the development of explicit links between positive psychology, evidence-based coaching and youth work has the very real potential to enhance youth services, further develop well-being, resilience, hope and flourishing in young people and potentially prevent the increasing rates of mental illness in the community.

Positive Psychology and Evidence-based Coaching

Positive Psychology can be understood as the scientific study of optimal functioning and the factors associated with flourishing living (Gable and Haidt, 2005). To flourish is "to

live within an optimal range of human functioning, one that connotes goodness, generativity, growth and resilience” (Fredrickson and Losada, 2005, pp. 678). The operational definition of flourishing requires the presence of a range of characteristics including positive emotions; engagement and interest; meaning and life purpose; positive relationships; self esteem; self determination; vitality; optimism; resilience (Huppert and So, 2009). Research has suggested that only approximately 20% of the population can be classified as flourishing (Keyes, 2007; Huppert and So, 2009) while 55% are in moderate mental health, with 15% being understood as ‘languishing’ - defined as a ‘hollow’ or ‘empty’ state somewhat devoid of positive emotion and the remaining 10% thought to be experiencing distress and mental health problems which may eventually lead to clinical depression (Keyes, 2007; Huppert and So, 2009).

Evidence-based approaches to coaching involve the intelligent and conscientious use of the best current knowledge integrated with practitioner expertise in delivering coaching to coaching clients and in designing and teaching coach training programmes (adapted from Sackett, Haynes, Guyatt, and Tugwell, 1996). The strength of an evidence-based approach to coaching is that it can provide coherent theoretical frameworks, valid information, critical thinking, and the methodological rigor necessary for a scientific foundation for coaching practice and research (for further discussion see Stober and Grant, 2006). The aims of evidence-based coaching are similar to positive psychology in terms of bringing scientific rigour to the enhancement of optimal human functioning and helping people to flourish (Palmer and Whybrow, 2007).

Coaching involves a collaborative relationship formed between a coach and a coachee for the purpose of attaining personal development outcomes that are valued by the coachee. Central to the coaching process is the articulation and clarification of personal goals, and these goals are generally set to stretch an individual’s current capacities (Spence and Grant, 2007). The coaching process is dialogue based but action oriented - it involves both ‘talking and doing’. The role of the coach is to facilitate accelerated goal attainment by helping individuals develop and implement solutions to the ongoing challenges faced during goal striving. Emphasis is placed upon the role of the coach as the facilitator (rather than the provider) of these solutions, with solution-focused techniques widely used as a means of assisting coachees to tap into their personal strengths and resources (Berg and Szabo, 2005).

Thus a solution-focused cognitive behavioural framework is frequently used in coaching interventions (Grant, Passmore, Cavanagh, and Parker, 2010). According to this approach, goal attainment is best facilitated by understanding the reciprocal relationships that exist between thoughts, feelings, behaviour, and the environment, and structuring these in ways that best support goal attainment. The inclusion of solution-focused techniques into this cognitive-behavioural framework helps orientate coaching towards personal strengths and solution construction rather than problem analysis (Grant, 2003).

This approach to coaching assists individuals to enhance goal striving by: (1) developing a positive /preferred future vision, (2) identifying desired outcomes, (3) establishing specific personal goals, (4) enhancing motivation by identifying strengths and building self-efficacy, (5) identifying resources and formulating action plans, (6) regularly monitoring and evaluating progress, and (7) the modification of action plans (based on the evaluation of progress). The monitor-evaluate-modification steps of this process constitute a “cycle” of self-regulated behaviours important for successful behaviour change and this forms the basis of the coaching process (Grant, 2003). We argue that such an approach has great relevance to youth work practice.

Indeed there is a growing evidence that coaching based on such frameworks can increase well-being, goal striving, resilience and hope in both young people and adults, with high school pupils, teachers, public sector managers and adults generally, and this is in both formal (with designated coach) and informal (peer coaching) contexts (Grant, Curtayne and Burton, 2009; Green, Oades and Grant, 2006; Green, Grant and Rynsaardt, 2007; Grant, Green, and Rynsaardt, 2010). Outcomes also indicate corresponding reductions in levels of anxiety and stress.

There is also increasing support for positive psychology interventions (PPIs). A recent meta-analysis of fifty-one empirically tested positive psychology interventions involving over 4000 individuals concluded that they can significantly increase levels of well-being and decrease depressive symptoms (Sin and Lyubormirsky, 2009). Interventions featured in the meta-analysis included solution-focused cognitive-behavioural coaching, goal training and setting, practicing gratitude and kindness, mindfulness training, learned optimism, strengths identification and development, best possible self exercises and hope therapy. Norrish and Vella-Brodrick (2009) make a strong case for the application of such interventions in support of adolescent well-being.

To date however there has been no specific examination of how such interventions might already be reflected in and be further applied within the youth work curriculum. Such applications could include supporting young people in general in setting and reaching goals in a range of areas including personal, education, work, health and well-being domains, as well as working with those who are “languishing” or at risk of falling in to depression.

Youth Service Provision

In order to make our case that coaching has much to offer the Youth Service, we need clearer understanding of the role of the Youth Service and the challenges it faces. It is to that topic that we now turn.

The Youth Service generally aims to engage all young people on a voluntary basis including those who present challenging attitudes and behaviour and those at risk of offending. It provides a range of informal social-educational activities that are enjoyable, challenging and meaningful and that enable young people to learn about themselves and the value of contributing for the benefit of others (Ofsted, 2007). In this context the trust and rapport established between youth workers and young people has been a vital and often unique tool through which life chances can be increased (Merton, 2004).

At their best youth workers already use informal coaching skills to promote the emotional, physical, social and personal development of young people, helping them to create a vision of a preferred future and develop both their confidence and skills as they move forward to achieve in life (Ofsted, 2005). So good youth workers work with young people to help them identify personally-valued and relevant goals, help them develop action plans, work to keep them motivated and engaged during the goal striving process and help them develop ways and means to overcome setbacks along the way. What is missing, and what we argue is sorely needed, is explicit and formal training in evidence-based coaching skills for youth workers.

Not surprisingly, youth work can be a highly stressful area of practice, and it is widely recognised that youth work is challenging and demanding and that youth workers themselves,

along with those who manage youth services are likely to suffer from work-related anxiety and stress (O'Callaghan, 2005). Bowie (2008) talks of the risks of stress, burn-out and depression faced by youth workers. He highlights the "five-way squeeze" (Bowie, 2008; p.1) whereby youth workers face competing demands from service users; team and organizational pressures; unrealistic political and community expectations; managing their own personal and social relationships; and their own sense of self-worth and success. Youth workers can face real threats to their personal safety alongside issues relating to funding restrictions, non-cooperation with other agencies, bad press and perceived lack of management support. We argue therefore that the youth workforce itself could also benefit from access to coaching support and that these are all important factors to be considered by coaches and coach training organisations who may seek to supply coach training services to those working in this area.

Recent Youth Strategy

Fortunately, and of interest to coaches, is the fact that, over the last ten years the former UK government's social inclusion agenda has been informed by a greater understanding of positive psychology and well-being (Layard, 2005; 2006). This shift in government policy provides great opportunities for coaching methodologies to be used in a wide variety of settings including youth work.

Following the 2005 'Every Child Matters' UK cross-governmental policy initiative the emphasis shifted from simply fixing what is seen to be wrong with young people to promoting their strengths and potential contribution to society (DfES, 2005). As a result a more pro-active approach emerged and through the previously mentioned 2007 'Aiming High for Young People' strategy, youth services in the UK were being given a significantly higher priority status and afforded greater funding and recognition. Recent strategy has also included the introduction of the Young People's Workforce Reform Programme which aims to build a more skilled and confident workforce within both the public and voluntary youth sectors (CWCD, 2009), although recent funding cuts in the UK may well have a negative impact on such initiatives there are some interesting ideas emerging on how to increase non-governmental social investment in youth risk prevention programmes through Social Impact Bonds (Young Foundation, 2010).

In Australia too, there has also been a growing awareness of the benefits of having a more proactive and whole government approach to addressing young people's needs. Investing in young people's futures has been promoted as of national interest (Ellis, 2009). October 2009 saw the launch of a consultation process on the first 'National strategy for Young Australians'. This has since been followed by the launch of the strategy in April 2010. The strategy aims to empower young people to take greater control and responsibility over their lives, build their resilience in navigating life's challenges and overall to help young people contribute to a healthier, safer and more productive Australia (DEEWR, 2010). Social Impact Bonds are also about to be piloted for the first time in New South Wales, Australia (CSI, 2010).

Given the laudable focus of the above strategies in building well-being in young people, it is interesting to note that as far as the authors are aware, at this stage, none have made any explicit mention of how positive psychology and/or coaching methodologies might enhance existing good practice within youth services.

Positive Psychology and Evidence-based Coaching: Applications to Youth Services

Positive psychology and evidence-based coaching are arguably well placed to support pro-active universal youth strategies. There are three key areas of research that are particularly relevant to youth service provision; the constructs of well-being, resilience and hope. A brief overview of these three areas is now provided below highlighting how each is relevant to interventions aimed at increasing well-being and optimal functioning within young people and youth services and how coaching methodologies could add to the youth worker's tool kit.

Well-being

Well-being is not just the absence of mental illness. The World Health Organisation defines it as the presence of "a state in which the individual realizes his or her own abilities, can cope with normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully and is able to make a contribution to his or her own community" (WHO, 2004). Currently there are two key approaches to its measurement: Subjective Well-Being (SWB) and Psychological Well-Being (PWB).

Subjective Well-Being measures assess life satisfaction: how happy and satisfied we feel with life. Historically, most "happiness" research has utilized measures of SWB. Subjective Well-Being relates to a sense of positive affect or emotion that comes with feeling good about ourselves, experiencing pleasure and having fun (Diener, 1984). In the context of young people and youth workers it is argued that supporting individuals to think, feel and ultimately behave more positively has benefit for the individual, those around them in terms of their families and friends and the communities within which they live, study or work and there are many positive psychology interventions that are applicable to coaching and to youth work that can increase SWB (e.g., Csikszentmihalyi, 1991; Sin and Lyubormirsky, 2009; Fredrickson, 2007).

Psychological well-being (PWB) on the other hand is more concerned with the level of engagement and meaning we have in our lives (Ryff, 1989). It relates to our sense of life purpose and the contribution we make to the world; how we develop relationships and get on with others; the sense of control and self-determination we have over our lives; our ability to shape our environment; our ability to be authentic and like ourselves; and our opportunities to learn, grow and be challenged.

These concepts are central to the aims of youth service work. Indeed research indicates that high quality youth work can result in positive outcomes that are related closely to PWB. For example youth services play a special role in promoting equity and diversity. They facilitate participation by marginalized young people who might struggle with issues relating to self-identity, self-esteem and authenticity such as those with disabilities, young people from ethnic minority or indigenous communities and young gay men and lesbians (Ofsted, 2007). Youth participation is also often cited as a key aim and outcome of effective youth work. Hart's "ladder of youth participation" has at its pinnacle the idea of young people identifying current needs and preferred futures, creating solutions, making choices and implementing change (Hart, 1992) – processes all central to coaching.

Given that past research has indicated that coaching can enhance both SWB and PWB, and given these are core aims of youth work, we argue that incorporating coaching methodologies into youth work has considerable potential to add the youth worker's tool kit in

terms of enhancing both SBW and PWB, and in doing so provide young people with an enhanced sense of positive affect, purpose, meaning, control and connectedness.

Resilience

The next construct that we see as being central to our case for cross-fertilisation between coaching and youth work is resilience. Resilience has been defined as the capacity of individuals, groups and systems to adapt to change and cope successfully and healthily in the face of adversity (Oliver et al, 2006). Whilst resilience may be described as a multi-dimensional construct, most theories of resilience are based on the premise that some children and young people, despite the serious risks they face, continue to flourish and achieve positive developmental outcomes (Yates and Masten, 2004).

As a key construct of positive psychology, resilience focuses on the internal protective factors of strengths, temperament, social skills and the ability to maintain positive emotions at times of adversity and challenge (Carbonell, Reinherz and Giaconia, 1998; Kaufmann, 2006). Research has shown that solution-focused, cognitive behavioural coaching can significantly increase levels of hardiness, which is a measure of resilience (Green, Grant and Rynsaardt, 2007; Grant, Green, and Rynsaardt, 2010).

Resilience researchers have sought to define the factors that create and foster resilience and to apply this learning through positive interventions for the benefit of young people, their families, and the wider community. Yates and Masten (2004) state that building resilience requires promoting coping strategies and strengths through positive social and educational activities at the same time as reducing the effects of risks such as family breakdown, poverty or deprivation. Resilience, therefore, is not only concerned with the personal assets of individual young people, but also the external protective factors around them (or not) such as families, schools, youth services, communities, and even the economic, political and cultural context within which they live (Gilligan, 2007; Layard, 2007).

Although not necessarily documented in the academic literature, the lived experiences of youth workers in the UK and Australia testify that there are thousands of potential examples of how effective youth work builds resilience by acting as an important protective factor and helping young people to develop their personal assets and resources. Youth work evaluations in the UK highlight increases in young people's confidence, decision-making, social responsibility, citizenship, skills development and educational achievement. Wider outcomes relate to increase social capital and community cohesion (Merton, 2004; Ofsted, 2007; DCSF and NYA, 2009).

In Australia, community driven youth work training, recreational and cultural programmes have been shown to be effective in increasing resilience, community respect and connectedness and result in corresponding reductions in substance misuse, violence and cultural discontinuity within the aboriginal population (Lee, Conigrave, Clough, Wallace, Silins and Rawles, 2008).

We argue that access to training in evidence-based coaching methodologies would help youth workers and managers further develop their skills in resilience building. Not only would this be beneficial for young people, but the use of resilience-building coaching methodologies within youth workforce support and development has the potential to revitalise and energise the organisations that deliver youth services themselves, particularly in the current times of

challenge and uncertainty (Macleod, 2009). Employee engagement and well-being programmes that include a focus on building resilience in commercial and business organisations have been shown to result in reduced absenteeism and presenteeism alongside increased retention, improved performance, higher levels of customer satisfaction and significant returns on investment (Macleod, 2009; Robertsoncooper, 2009) – all of these being extremely important issues for the youth sector.

Hope

Whilst the constructs of well-being and resilience are important, at its core youth work is about helping young people envision a preferred future for themselves, develop a sense of self-belief, and identify steps required to make their ideas about the future real. These are the essential constructs underpinning Hope Theory (Snyder, Rand, and Sigmon, 2002). The use of Hope Theory and its application through an evidence-based approach to coaching may well add considerable value to contemporary youth work.

Hope Theory (Snyder, Rand, and Sigmon, 2002) has emerged as an important part of the positive psychology movement. Studies of hopeful people have found that they have greater success, life meaning and health and fewer symptoms of depression and anxiety (Cheavens, Feldam, Gum, Scott and Snyder, 2006).

Hope Theory posits that hopeful people have three key characteristics:

1. They have desired *goals* which they are motivated and enthused by.
2. They have *pathways* – plans about how to reach their goals (or a plan with alternatives to reach their goals so if they fail first time they can try again).
3. They have the *agency* (self-belief and confidence in their capabilities) to strive for their goals.

Goals which are challenging but achievable and which also serve a wider purpose to the benefit of others contribute significantly to ongoing life satisfaction, a positive frame of mind, perseverance and resilience (Emmons, 2003; Sheldon, 2002). These notions have clear relevance for youth work in that Yates and Masten (2004) discuss the importance of tackling boredom in young people through the identification of personal strengths and the stimulation of positive emotions through engagement in stretching but obtainable goals.

However all young people face some level of anxiety concerning how to elucidate and achieve their dreams. Often parents are unable to offer a vision for the future or help to identify intrinsic goals. Young people will therefore look to their friends and peers or trusted others such as youth workers for support, with mixed results because they too have little idea about how to set and strive towards meaningful goals (Anderson, 2007). Therefore a basic understanding of Hope Theory and goal setting and how to best facilitate goal striving and goal attainment may be useful tools for youth workers in helping young people to build hope attain their goals.

We believe that youth work plays a particularly important role in helping young people to identify pathways and develop agency. Coaching conversations, based on the principles of evidence-based solution-focused cognitive-behavioural coaching can increase hope through supporting and encouraging young people to explore positive alternative routes to meet their

aspirations and develop a sense of self-efficacy in their ability to pursue and succeed in such opportunities.

Practical Applications

Existing youth work practice clearly makes a significant contribution to the well-being of young people. However we argue that a greater understanding of the theory and research outcomes provided through positive psychology and evidence-based approaches to coaching could add real value to future youth strategy, and its application, in a number of ways:

- The delivery of the youth work curriculum could be enhanced through the use of simple validated positive psychology interventions such as the Values in Action Signature Strengths Survey (Peterson and Seligman, 2004), “Best Possible Self” exercises, and purposeful acts of kindness and altruism and gratitude (Sheldon and Lyubormirsky, 2006), optimism (Seligman, 2002) and goal setting activity (Sheldon, 2002).
- Young people could be supported both individually and in small groups through the use of evidence-based coaching models. Such coaching models could be readily applied within peer led youth coaching and mentoring initiatives.
- The principles of coaching and positive psychology can be applied within youth workforce development programmes supporting leadership and management training, within both the public and voluntary youth sectors. This could include the use of coaching within line management and co-worker support structures and a range of interventions designed to increase employee engagement, well-being and resilience. In addition formal external executive and leadership coaching could be provided by appropriately qualified coaches to support and enhance the development of full-time professional managers of youth support services.
- Positive psychology and evidence-based coaching methodologies can be applied within community development contexts to support initiatives designed to build the capacity of the voluntary sector and to support the empowerment of young people and the community to develop and sustain new locally based youth provision.

Cross-fertilisation between Coaching, Positive Psychology and Youth Work

Training for both professional and volunteer youth workers has already been highlighted as a key requirement for the effective delivery of youth support strategies (DCSF and NYA, 2009). We argue that it is also essential that those who develop and deliver youth services should themselves be the initial recipients of any coaching and positive psychology interventions, as they are key role-models in the lives of young people. It is the youth workers who are able to develop the trust and rapport necessary to engage with young people and the communities within which they live, particularly those that are hard to reach.

If youth workers understand and experience the benefit of both positive psychology and evidence-based approaches to coaching they are then best placed to assess when these

interventions are appropriate to apply, and to pass on their learning and understanding to the young people with whom they work. This would require the effective dissemination, in a user-friendly manner, of the basic theories and their practical applications to youth workers at the most local level.

Future Directions for Research and Practice

Youth service strategies in the UK and Australia, alongside new opportunities for non-government investment, will increasingly place great store on the need to measure effectively the outcomes of youth interventions at a community, project and individual level. Qualitative and quantitative measures are designed to identify outcomes at a project or community level and relate to issues such as numbers of contacts and referrals; the impact on access to education, employment and training opportunities; reductions in reported crime and youth offending statistics; reductions in teenage pregnancy; and perceptions of increased community safety and community cohesion (DCSF and NYA, 2009). Currently, youth service inspection reports highlight that delivery of outcomes is inconsistent and hard to measure (Ofsted, 2007). Concerns are also raised that quality assurance is not secure and that weaknesses exist in measuring return on investment, with an over-reliance on quantitative data rather than evaluation of the experiences and achievements of young people themselves (Ofsted, 2010).

Existing studies into positive psychology and evidence-based coaching methodologies might provide the basis for potential future outcome measures within youth work contexts. There are an increasing number of simple validated self-report tools that could be applied to measure positive change in young people. These include the Satisfaction With Life Scale (Diener, Emmons, Larson and Griffin, 1985); Scales of Psychological Well-being (Ryff, 1989); Hope Trait Scale (Snyder, et al., 1991); Goal Striving (Emmons, 2003); and the Cognitive Hardiness Scale (Nowak, 1990). These measures could be applied by both youth workers and young people and used alongside existing data sets.

Norrish and Vella-Brodrick (2009) suggest that positive psychology interventions be tested through 'gold standard' longitudinal and randomized control trial studies with young people to ascertain benefits for well-being, educational achievement and longer term health, academic and career outcomes. This would undoubtedly be a challenge within youth work contexts. Whilst the possibility of conducting such research should be further investigated, it could be complicated to set up, time consuming and expensive. It might also be impractical due to inconsistent participation, high levels of attrition and the challenge of measuring outcomes on a longitudinal basis. There are additional ethical issues regarding the potential withholding of services to young people who need and want them, as part of a control group (Gilbert and Wislon, 2009). Nevertheless the lack of empirical evidence into the short, medium and long term benefits of youth work programmes continues to be a common theme and is a potential barrier to the ongoing financial investment that these services need.

It may however be possible to undertake small-scale short-term studies through which the delivery of positive psychology and evidence-based coaching interventions with young people and youth workers. The establishment of pilot coaching research studies within youth work contexts would be an exciting next step to help quantify the individual benefits to young people and to begin to introduce a long awaited evidence-base for youth work.

Conclusion

We have argued that the fields of positive psychology and evidence-based coaching have the potential to make a significant contribution to flourishing youth services - they build upon and add value to existing youth work practice and strategy. They can also help demonstrate a return on investment. There are significant challenges in developing and sustaining youth work initiatives that are consistently effective in engaging the large numbers of young people in the community who are languishing. This load continues to fall upon locally deployed youth workers and community volunteers to engage young people who are at most risk. It is these practitioners who have been able to develop, establish and maintain rapport with young people that would most benefit from an understanding of the application of positive psychology and evidence-based coaching methodologies.

Training for professional and voluntary youth workers incorporating the principles of positive psychology and evidence-based coaching, alongside the provision of coaching as part of peer and professional support structures could enhance the quality of youth work and the well-being of young people and those who work to support them.

Well-being, resilience and hope are just three of many positive psychology constructs that relate directly to important youth work strategies designed to ensure that young people can maximise their life chances and can grow into healthy, hopeful, hardy and above all, happy adults. The youth work arena is ripe for the kind of expertise that positive psychologists and coaches that use an evidence-based approach to coaching and coach training can offer. Given the current political and financial context, the time is right for further consideration, discussion and research into the introduction and application of the ideas outlined in this paper. We look forward to future developments in the links between evidence-based coaching, positive psychology and youth work with interest.

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