Can an Understanding of Personal Barriers to Coaching be Transposed to Provide an Understanding of Personal Barriers to Learning for English Boys in a Post-16 Education Context?

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Abstract

The purpose of this exploratory study was to examine whether some personal inner and outer barriers found in coaching are reflected as personal inner and outer barriers to learning for boys in a post-16 education setting. The study predominantly sits within the interpretivist paradigm. This was an action research focus group case study that utilised a single qualitative methods approach. Participants, boys, engaged in a semi-structured interview that specifically examined their views relating to some personal inner and outer barriers to learning. It is a single-site, multi-voice study. 'Positions of Consensus' and individual comments are presented in relation to experiences of some inner and outer barriers to learning and the impact of these on engagement with learning. The results suggest that some inner and outer barriers identified in coaching can be transposed to aid understanding of some inner and outer barriers to learning. The outcome of this research provides some speculative evidence for boys, educationalists, managers, teachers and parents that some inner and outer barriers to learning impact negatively on engagement with learning for year 13 boys (boys between 17 and 19 years of age).

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INTRODUCTION

The commencement of the 21st Century not only saw the start of a new Century; but the emergence of changes to educational philosophy in terms of meeting the pastoral needs of both students and teachers. The concept of coaching, which was well established in big business, was perceived as a structure and strategy that could be successfully implemented in the British education system. So strong was the desire to incorporate coaching into education that the National College for Secondary Leadership and Children's Services [NCSL] introduced and developed leadership programmes for future Heads and Principals in which coaching was at the forefront of the training process (see Creazy & Paterson, 2005; Leat & Towler; 2010; Lindon, 2011; Lofthouse; NCSL, 2016).

The coaching programmes utilised by the NCSL, indirectly, incorporated the notion that coaching would also benefit students in the context of learning. Various studies highlighted the power of coaching as a strategy to enhance learning. For example, Dawson and Guare (2012) indicate that coaching approaches can be effective, in education, at any age as long as the coachees have the required maturity to engage with such programmes.

There are also barriers to coaching for students (Grant, 2001). Much of the literature has tended to focus on barriers more broadly associated with institutions and organisations in which barriers tend to coalesce around funding and availability (Carter, Blackman & Hicks 2014; Sider, 2019) or interpersonal barriers, between coach and coachee that may impact coaching processes (Cox, Bachkirova & Clutterbuck, 2016).

One area that has received less attention relating to barriers in coaching is that of personal barriers to coaching. It is this that led the researcher to design a focus group research study with a view to exploring and developing the early work of Gray (2001a), Gray (2001b) and Gray (2001c) in which he examined what he refers to as 'inner' and 'outer' barriers to coaching.

Inner barriers can include thought patterns as barriers such as self-sabotage, over competitiveness, and (being stuck in) the middle zone. Outer barriers can include barriers such as stress, (other) people, and the environment. The researcher felt that some of the barriers Gray identified in coaching may also reflect the barriers that boys in post-16 education may experience with their learning. If this was the case, understanding barriers to coaching could compliment and contribute to an understanding of barriers to learning for boys in post-16 education.

The Senior Leadership Team and I, as teacher-researcher, were keen to examine whether or not an understanding of the personal barriers experienced in coaching may provide some insight and understanding of barriers with learning for boys when studying at the post-16 level at a Community College in the south-west of England. The aim of this focus group case study was to explore, through the voice of participants, if understanding personal barriers to coaching would contribute and lead to a better understanding of some personal barriers that may impinge on learning for boys. In sum, does being aware of inner and outer barriers to learning enhance boys' engagement with their learning in post-16 education?

Research Philosophy

This study was conducted within the broader qualitative research tradition and within the specific sub-discipline of educational action research. Action research seeks transformative change through the simultaneous process of taking action and doing research, which are linked together by critical reflection; thus it is an empirical process (Torbert, 1981). It typically involves practitioners such as teachers in systematic enquiries designed to improve practice (Koshy, Koshy, & Waterman, 2011). Such research is conducted "in situ" or "on the job" and provides teachers with opportunities to systematically examine issues that are important to them in their specific work context (Whitehead, 1985). The unique position of teachers in the educational process permits them to "develop their own personal theories of education from their own class practice" (McNiff, 1988, p. 1). Carr and Kemmis

(1986) emphasised that action research is a form of self-reflective enquiry and involves all those experiencing specific social situations. Moreover, action research can provide a specific form of insight that may not be available via the positivist tradition. More recently, Barry sought to refine the concepts introduced by Whitehead (1985) by proposing the concept of "Living Educational Theory" (LET), stating, "[it is] a critical and transformational approach to action research. It confronts the researcher to challenge the status quo of the educational practice" (Barry, 2013, as cited in Atkins & Wallace, 2013, p. 131). In summary, the vision of this specific LET research is to make an original contribution to knowledge through generating a living educational theory relating to barriers to the learning of boys in post-16 education within this specific social learning context.

Often such action research leads to the production of a case study such as the current study. Golby suggested that case studies enable researchers to observe [a phenomenon] closely and "to render it in some way intelligible" (Golby, 1994, p. 27). The case study provides information about the particular and if compared to similar studies may permit what Cooper (2016) refers to as meta-analysis.

Action research does have its critics; for example, Toro and Wenick (2007) suggest that often there can be initial resistance to an action research project. Participants in action research projects may not identify with the research project and their perceptions as to the relevance of the project may compromise engagement with the research (Corgo and Mercer, 2008). It might be that the actual research project is misunderstood, or that there is a mistrust of researchers that leads to pressure and frustration, for all involved, in the action research process (Zhou, 2012). Berg and Eikeland (2008) assert that the action researcher's observations can be "filtered" and "framed" by both the context and the researcher (Berg & Eikeland, 2008, p. 201).

The current research examines the possible inner and outer barriers to learning success as highlighted during focus group discussions following a coaching intervention involving Neuro-linguistic Programming (NLP), for boys in a specific post-16 education setting. Do the personal barriers to coaching highlighted by Gray (2001a; 2001b; 2001c) mirror, at least to some extent, personal barriers to learning experienced by boys in post-16 education? The purpose of the study was to initiate an initial exploration of possible personal barriers to learning as exposed via NLP coaching debriefing session in a specific educational context.

Coaching – A Brief Overview

A range of definitions exist in relation to coaching; however, in the context of the current study coaching is defined as "A collaborative, solution focused, result-orientated and systematic process in which the coach facilitates the enhancement of work performance, life experience, self-directed learning and person growth of the coachee" (Grant, 1999, as cited in Association for Coaching, n.d.). The 21st Century has seen coaching delineated into a plethora of schools of thought (Ives, 2008). Coaching is conducted either on an individual or group basis, depending on need (Brown and Grant, 2010). Furthermore, coaching approaches are broadly divided into three strands: firstly, directive or non-directive; secondly, personal development or goal-focused; and thirdly, therapeutic or performance driven (Ives, 2008). Coaching can be a helpful, reflective process for students, teachers, middle leaders and senior leaders (Abdulla, 2017; Cappella, Hamre & Kim., 2012; van Nieuwerburgh, 2017). "Coaching is a person-centred approach [it] it is a powerful way of supporting all those persons involved in education. It supports the notion that learning should be personal and changing." (van Nieuwerburger, 2012:6). Coaching employs a range of communication skills such as (active) listening, questioning and clarifying. The coachee is enabled to reflect upon their current position; to consider various opportunities and discuss (with their coach) different pathways which will enable them to achieve their desired outcomes or goals (Cox et al., 2016). General coaching philosophy focuses on trust and the belief that given the opportunity the coachee can move forward and make positive change (Jackson 2004).

Successful coaching is achieved through the application of specific models such as Whitmore's (2009, 2014) GROW model; or broader conceptual models such as Neuro-linguistic Programming (NLP) (Bandler & Grinder, 1975; Grinder & Bandler, 1976). Brief reference to NLP, as a coaching model, is pertinent here as this specific focus group case study followed an NLP coaching intervention (see Kudliskis, 2019). Proponents of NLP claim there is a connection between neurological processes (neuro) language (linguistic) and behavioural pattern learned through experience (programming). NLP is a coaching methodology enabling people to "model" the skills of exceptional people (Bandler & Grinder, 1975). Such modelling can be achieved through the use of Techniques of Change (see Kudliskis, 2019).

Models of coaching, in practice, help coaches shape what they do, which in turn, leads to enabling the outcomes the coachee wishes to achieve (Wall, 2016; Wall & Perrin, 2015). It is essential that coaching conversations meet the needs of the coachee, not the coach; therefore it is important that the coach is not confined solely to a rigid model (Robins, 2017). The National College for Schools Leadership and Children's Services [NCSL] in England and Wales deemed coaching to be so valuable in educational contexts that they embraced a coaching philosophy for all involved in state education and particularly for future leaders (Creazy and Paterson, 2005; Lindon, 2011; Lofthouse et al., 2010; NCSL 2016).

Whilst coaching is currently perceived as an essential element to successful learning and teaching various problems have been identified. These problems fit into three broad categories; institutional and funding barriers; interpersonal barriers; and, 'personal' barriers. Institutional and funding barriers highlight the problem that successful coaching may be impacted by negative institutional ideology or insufficient funding for programmes (Rocereto, Mosca & Forquer Gupta, 2011). Interpersonal barriers are those barriers associated with the relationship between coach and coachee (Carter, Blackman & Hicks, 2014). Personal barriers relate more as to how the coachee approaches and engages with the coaching programme of which they are part (Gray 2001a; 2001b; 2001c). Personal barriers can be divided into 'inner barriers' and 'outer barriers' to coaching success. Whilst these barriers to coaching are numerous the researcher wished to investigate specific elements particularly relevant to education and learning.

Inner barriers to coaching such as negative thought patterns can include processes such as self-sabotage (a pessimistic viewpoint that suggests that whatever can go wrong, will go wrong). Self-sabotage refers to behaviours or thought patterns that hold you back and prevent you from doing what you want to do. Self-sabotage creates problems in daily life and interferes with long-standing goals (Gray 2001a). Over-competitiveness is a phenomenon in which an individual becomes obsessed with 'winning' or 'excelling' in a given activity. A key driver for being over-competitive is possessing a strong desire of being at least as good as or more successful than others of a comparable nature (Gray 2001a). The middle zone is a (theoretical) area of the mind and sits between the inner zone (responsible for our emotions and the physical sensations of the body) and the outer zone (responsible for our objective engagement and observations of the world. The middle zone comprises our thoughts and mental processes. The middle zone is where an individual becomes 'caught between two stalls' – for example worrying about educational issues at home and then worrying about home issues whilst at school (Gray, 2001a; 2001b). Ambiguity can lead the individual to experience the inevitable sense of being 'stuck' between conflicting needs.

Outer barriers to coaching can include the following. Friends and people that are really close to an individual, as well as others perceived as some form of threat can undermine performance. Whether an individual is interacting with 'friend or foe'; comments such as *"You're a loser"* or *"don't set your sights to high because you might fall"* can all have a negative influence and impact upon performance (Gray 2001c). Comments often expressed because others 'care' tend to distract the individual and encourage them to adopt other, different strategies which may not be appropriate for a given situation (Gray, 2001c). So, even those with the best intentions can unintentionally undermine the performance of others. Stress can have a major impact upon individuals. The meaning of stress can be defined in various ways: stress as the product of external pressures (the stress of reorganisation or

poor working conditions); stress as a reaction to these pressures (emotional reactions such as anger and physical reactions such as a 'tightening' across the chest); and finally stress as both pressures and reactions (the coping resources an individual implements to reduce the pressures and reactions (Dunham, 1992, p.92-122). These stress events may be linked to an individual's personality characteristics such as shyness or to inappropriate perceptions of the self and others. More extreme concepts relate to issues such as parental separation, changing schools and even the death of a family member (Gray 2000c). In relation to learning, stress can develop due to difficulties with relationships; this can, in turn, have a severe a detrimental impact on learning and educational performance. The environment, whether at home, at school (see Williams & Burden 1997), or more broadly the general area in which an individual lives must be one in which the individual feels safe and secure. This security would be at a number of levels such as academic, emotional or physical levels. If the environment fails to provide a sense of safety and security then the negative impact upon performance can be profound (Gray, 2000c). For example, if a student is being bullied at school because they are clever the impact upon performance may be threefold. Firstly, the individual may elect not to learn as much because the emotional experiences associated with bullying are negative; secondly, the individual may experience physical attacks; and thirdly, they may also be physically repulsed by the experiences they have to endure.

It was against the above backdrop that the researcher was drawn to investigate whether possible personal barriers to learning were similar to the personal barriers experienced in coaching. This supposition was based initially on anecdotal observations and unrecorded utterings heard in informal conversations in the classroom and indirectly linked to a coaching study that had previously been conducted previously at the school (Kudliskis, 2019). The researcher speculated that there are similarities in personal barriers experienced in coaching to possible personal barriers to learning as experienced by boys in post-16 education. Whilst these barriers to coaching are numerous the researcher wished to investigate specific elements particularly relevant to education and learning.

Research methodology

This single-site, multi-voiced study was created to capture experiences and perceptions of those taking part. The focus group case study comprised students who identified as male and white. They were completing the final year of their post-16 education; all were taking their final A level examinations (an entry qualification to university). The group consisted of 7 year 13 students (aged between 17 and 19 years) (Mean 17.86; Standard Deviation 0.69) who, with parental consent, had participated over a period of 12 weeks (one term) in an NLP coaching intervention (see Kudliskis, 2019). However, this specific focus group case study reports on additional elements related to the original study. This study investigates and examines inner barriers and outer barriers to success with learning as identified, by the boys, in this specific post-16 education context.

The use of a case study could introduce bias as students participating knew the teacher-researcher at some level. This may have led to participants displaying subject effects which could have contaminated the study. However, all were asked to be honest in the way they reported their experiences in relation to this research. Research that involves human participants raises complex ethical, legal, social and political issues. There are three objectives in (education) research ethics. The first, to protect participants; the second, to ensure the research is conducted in a way that serves the interests of all stakeholders; the third, to manage risk, protect confidentiality and ensure informed consent (Hammersley & Traianou, 2012). In meeting these criteria this study received ethical approval from the Research Ethics Committee of the College.

Typically, educational research should utilise a pragmatic mixed methods approach using both quantitative and qualitative research tools (see Bazeley & Morina-Azorin, 2018; Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill, 2015). Research tools are, typically, inextricably linked to two broad research traditions. The positivist tradition requires the use of quantitative research tools such as closed questionnaires, structured interviews or structured observation schedules. These research tools permit the production of reliable data which may be statistically analysed and said research replicated in future research,

ultimately leading to the production of 'laws' of human behaviour. Conversely, the interpretivist tradition requires research tools such as, open questionnaires, semi-structured or participant observation which is valid data that reflects the perceptions and personal experiences of the participants. There is a substantial range of information relating to these traditions (see May 2011; Privitera and Ahlgrim-Delzell, 2019; Williams and Vogt, 2011) as examples of this.

For the purpose of this focus group case study the researcher felt that an interpretive approach using only a semi-structured interview was appropriate. Interviews are ubiquitous in society today. Almost everyone will have taken part in some form of interview in either a school, job or medical setting (Edwards & Holland, 2013) and therefore this is not a novel experience for the participant. Nonetheless, interviews conducted for the purpose of research require careful consideration. Whilst is was not possible to quantify and statistically analyse data associated with the positivist tradition, interpretivism permits the use of analytical generalisation(s) (Yin, 1989) and thus, in this case, insight into possible barriers to learning. All semi-structured interviews have three core features in common. Firstly, the interactional exchange of dialogue between two or more participants, typically in face-to-face exchanges. Secondly, a thematic or narrative approach in which the research has specific themes and issues to be explored and discussed in a flexible manner. Thirdly, a perspective in which knowledge is regarded as situated and contextual. Meanings and understanding are created through interaction and co-production of both the researched and the researcher (Mason, 2017). It is important to note the underlying implications of the social relationships and power relationships between the researcher and the interviewees in this form of research (Edwards & Holland, 2013).

A semi-structured interview was deemed the most appropriate research as it provided specific and lived perceptions and insight into the experiences of members of the focus group of both inner and outer barriers to their learning (see Appendix 1).

Approximately one week after a 12-week coaching intervention ceased (see Kudliskis, 2019), students took part in a recorded semi-structured interview in order to gauge their perceptions, if any, about inner or outer barriers to success on their engagement with learning experiences. The semi-structured interviews lasted between 22 minutes and 38 minutes (dependent upon the depth of responses from the various participants). All of the semi-structured interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed. Responses were explored through a form of thematic analysis (see Guest, MacQueen, & Namey, 2012). In some cases it was possible to synthesise viewpoints, be they negative or positive, as positions of consensus (Kudliskis, 2019); in other cases, the specific viewpoints of various boys in the focus group are presented in relation to barriers to learning. The outcomes of this form of analysis enabled the teacher-researcher to express, by foregrounding the voices of the participants, how understanding barriers associated with learning may, or may not, help a specific age range of male students engage with learning in a specific post-16 educational setting.

RESULTS

A general introduction may be suitable for the results.

The results were collected and collated in a qualitative format foregrounding the voices of the participants in relation to their views, experiences and perceptions of inner barriers and outer barriers to their learning. The results were placed into two broad categories: firstly, inner barriers to learning; and secondly, outer barriers to learning. Thereafter, an analysis of participant responses of barriers to learning were scrutinised in detail; emerging themes were considered. The category Inner barriers to Learning included the boys' reflections about self-sabotage; over-competitiveness; and (being stuck) in the middle. The category Outer Barriers to learning included the boys' reflections about people; stress; and the environment.

The qualitative analysis of participant views and perceptions are presented via the synthesising of viewpoints. At times the general views of the focus group are exemplified through the use of a specific participant response that more generally captured the broader views of the group. In short, the selected responses reflect various positions of consensus within the focus group. At other times, very specific, individualised comments are presented to add breadth and depth to the results.

Inner Barriers to Learning

Self-sabotage

The majority of participants indicated that self-sabotage can have an effect on their learning, albeit to varying degrees. This may be particularly evident in exam preparation and performance. One student explained:

Self-sabotage, I do find that it occurs; especially with exams. I think I'm going to do badly and forget all that I have achieved previously. I tend to overlook those [positive] things. (**Student 3**)

The above perception is supported by another student who indicated:

I have experiences of this…..; I've felt pessimistic…... [Self-sabotage] can happen and come from nowhere. (**Student 4**)

Another student explained that self-sabotage can be a product of external influences. The views and perceptions of (significant) others may serve to impact self-perception and lead to the modification of perceptions of self in the negative.

Self-sabotage does have an effect on how you learn. The route for self-sabotage is via external sabotage. People will label you. Once they label you, you may possibly start to think like that [in terms of the negative label]. This will affect your learning, and this will produce a self-fulfilling prophecy. (**Student 1**)

One student spoke of the limited impact of self-sabotage on learning performance and the steps he takes to ameliorate negative thoughts.

Self-sabotage doesn't affect me much. I try to stop these emotions from ever happening……….. I use this process [self-talk and affirmations] to help me when things don't go to plan. (**Student 5**).

The remainder of the focus group indicated that self-sabotage was not something they immediately identified as a hindrance to their learning. Sometimes, negativity via self-sabotage could be negated through positive self-talk.

I've not really noticed self-sabotage. [Anything negative] I try to combat with positive self-talk. (**Student 1**)

The themes that emerge from the views of boys, in post-16 education, relating to the impact self-sabotage are somewhat mixed. Those participants that did relate to self-sabotage indicated a range of negative impacts; specifically in relation to exam performance, learning in general, and the self-fulfilling prophecy (see Becker, 1963). Those who did identify with self-sabotage, at whatever level, explained how they attempted, to varying degrees, to moderate these feelings and experiences through the use of positive self-talk and personal affirmation.

Over-competitiveness

The second inner barrier to success with regards to learning is over-competitiveness. Such over-competitiveness could create undue pressure on boys seeking educational success and this may, in turn, be detrimental to their perceptions of self.

I am overly competitive. I love doing well…….. I need to be better than everyone else here and if I'm not it feels so, so bad. (**Student 7**)

This view is supported by another member of the focus group. However, this view also draws in focus how being over-competitive may not only be detrimental to the individual; but, also to his peers in the classroom. He states:

I'm fairly guilty of being overly competitive. I don't like that I'm competitive. You feel bad because people who've done worse than you feel bad. You also feel bad because some people have done better than you. (**Student 2**)

The group as a whole, but to varying degrees, expressed the idea that comparisons with others can dominate experiences in learning. The view of one student in the focus group provides a position of consensus, that boys in post-16 education compare themselves with and compete with each other.

I tend to compare myself to people I see being better than me. I put them on a pedestal when maybe they're not better than me; but sort of different from me. I think that I maybe being unfair to myself. (**Student 3**)

However, this student does note that being competitive may have benefits for learning as he does endeavour to model the successful behaviours of his peers.

I think sometimes I will model the behaviour of those I consider more successful. I will look at what they're doing and consider what I would do in the same situation……. I would take the behaviour I see in others as successful and then implant them in myself. (**Student 3**)

Another in the group supports the idea that over-competitiveness is evident in learning. However, he does note that this may have positive benefits for educational outcomes for boys. He states:

I think everyone is overly competitive…….. If you're overly competitive in education your educational [outcomes] are going to be very good. (**Student 2**)

One student in the focus group noted that comparing himself to someone else perceived as being better than him can generate a negative mind-set.

If I lose [perform educationally less well] to someone who is better than me; this can lead to a negative mind-set. (**Student 1**)

This student then explained how he tries to ameliorate his competitiveness.

I try to rationalise this [over-competitiveness] through positive self-talk. I say "no" and try pattern breaking to achieve a more positive mind-set. I try to find something to do as a distraction. I can then move on. (**Student 1**)

The emerging theme within the responses of the focus group tended to coalesce around a viewpoint that boys in post-16 education are over-competitive in relation to their education and learning. For the most part it is suggested that if over-competitiveness starts to dominate boys' perceptions of learning. This may be detrimental to learning experiences for both the individuals and their peers. However, albeit implicit, there is some suggestion that there is a need for a degree of competitiveness in education and learning as educational settings (as experienced by these boys) may intrinsically and extrinsically encourage competitiveness.

(Being stuck) in the middle

The final inner barrier to success is the middle zone. A place in which boys in post-16 education found a need to manage the conflicting demands of friends, family and their own particular (learning) needs. Without exception all the boys in the focus group indicated that they had to deal with competing demands.

Being stuck in the middle [zone] means I have to meet demands from competing forces; my parents and peers. (**Student 4**)

The above is further supported by the following comment:

This is a difficult place to be. You just get stressed about which should be your priority [parents, friends, learning]. (**Student 1**)

However, it was noted that developing strategies to cope with the conflicts experienced in the middle zone can enhance the abilities of boys to develop strategies that will be helpful in both learning and adult life. This is exemplified in the following position of consensus:

By understanding the middle zone you are understanding how things operate for the rest of your life; social, academic, whatever things you need to do. (**Student 2**)

It was clear that many, if not all, the boys wished to retain control of these conflicting demands in relation to education. One student succinctly states the broader view of the focus group by stating:

I want to be in control of what I want to do, rather than being controlled. (**Student 4**)

An example of the tensions associated with the middle zone is best exemplified through this personal narrative:

I have had subject teachers demand that I give in homework and wanting me to revise. I had my [long distance] girlfriend wanting me to talk to her, but I have had homework and revision to do……… I got stressed about that. At one level everyone wanted to reduce the pressure on me; on the other hand they all wanted something from me……. Being stuck in the middle zone has been stressful. (**Student 6**)

This evidence suggests that boys in post-16 education do experience pressure with the middle zone and the associated competing demands. The theme that emerged as a response to this issue was that all the boys felt that they experienced competing demands from peers, family and their own personal (learning) needs. All of the boys endeavoured to control these competing demands; however, the tensions generated can prove challenging to manage and could be a significant inner barrier to success.

Outer Barriers to Learning

People

The boys in this focus group expressed mixed views about the effects of other people on their learning.

[People] do definitely affect my learning; this can be positive and negative. I can easily get distracted so if I sit next to somebody who talks a lot this can be a [negative influence] on my learning. If I'm sat next to somebody who is focused, that can be beneficial. (**Student 3**)

This view was supported by another student who stated:

People are always going to be positive or negative; it depends if they're going to help or hinder your learning...... You can see what not to do or learn from what has happened [in a given situation]. (**Student 2**)

The influences of other people were sometimes perceived as detrimental to learning and this, in turn, could have a negative effect on learning. The more general view of the group is exemplified in the following position of consensus:

It depends on the person and the interaction I'm having with that person. If someone is deliberately bugging me when I'm trying to do something then that would be a problem...... that would have a negative effect on me. (**Student 4**)

Specific examples to support the above follow. In one example a student explains how "joking" with a peer, prior to an exam, appeared to have a negative effect. This joking was on-going and habitual. The effect for the participant is quite clear:

I had a friend whom whenever I met would say that I was going to fail before going into an exam. I'm not sure why; a sort of joke [I think]. We got into the habit of doing this to each other............ It did make me feel more negative about the exam. (**Student 6**)

It was noted by one student how one teacher suggested that this student's expectations were too high. Such perceptions, on the part of the teacher, had a negative effect on the student:

.... a teacher said that my expectations were too high. It really negatively affected me. He was trying to motivate me......, it didn't work. He said that I should have lower targets. This was a negative motivator. I felt down for days, if not weeks about it. (**Student 5**)

The emerging theme, relating to people, indicates that the boys in this study valued social interaction, with others, in their learning experiences. However, it was noted that in some situations other people can have a detrimental effect on learning. Specific examples in two narratives highlight the problem of joking and teacher perceptions that can hinder learning performance and success.

Stress

This study did not provide the boys with a specific definition of stress; but rather, let them express their experience of their perceived stress. What is clear is that stress is perceived as a form of psychological discomfort. It is a phenomenon that is negative if experienced in great quantities.

Stress affects me negatively. When I'm stressed I can't work as long...... If you're way too stressed you're not going to be able to think clearly. (**Student 6**)

This notion is supported by the views of another student:

I very much dislike stress. [Stress] is not pleasant to have to deal with. It can almost make me depressed. It can make me irritable; it can make me tired. (**Student 4**)

However, this student also acknowledges the possible benefits of stress for him in a learning environment:

Stress may be positive in the context of learning, in that a certain amount of stress may improve your performance; but I really don't like it........ Stress can enhance focus which is good in an exam but less positive over a prolonged period. Stress can be very degenerative to your life over a long period. (**Student 4**)

The notions as to the possible benefits of stress are highlighted in the following comments:

A little bit of added stress is helpful. I struggle, at times, to get motivated; so little stress for me is good……. Stress becomes an intrinsic motivator. (**Student 2**)

It was interesting to note that the majority of boys had identified particular solutions to dealing with their stress in their learning environments. One boy spoke of making positive changes:

I never really get stressed apart from when I have exams. I will stop [an activity] and move on to something else if I'm particularly stressed. I make physical changes quickly. I change my environment and I try to calm myself down. I try to work out what is stressing me out and thus end up solving the problem [of stress]. (**Student 1**)

A comment that encapsulated the boys' perceptions about the value of stress in a post-16 learning environment is noted in the following comment:

Stress may be positive in the context of learning, in that a certain amount of stress may improve your performance; but I really don't like it. I get stressed in exams; this will increase my performance. (**Student 7**)

The evidence from this focus group suggests that views in relation to stress, as an outside barrier to success, were mixed. The key theme was that those boys experiencing high levels of perceived stress may perform worse in their learning than if they were experiencing little or no stress. However, some boys acknowledged the positive benefits of stress in learning situations and for exams. When boys experienced stress the majority indicated that they would use specific techniques, appropriate to the specific needs, to reduce stress.

The environment

The learning environment may often be 'ignored' and underestimated as teachers strive to ensure that all content for specific courses are completed, thus ensuring success in final examinations.

The environment can greatly affect the amount you can focus and the amount you can take in. (**Student 6**)

The following view, which may seem extreme, reflects the specific experience of a specific boy and is worthy of consideration:

I need the environment to be "perfect". Even a curtain blowing in my room can be an issue. [Something like this] annoys me and gets me down. (**Student 7**)

The boys had mixed views about the ideal learning environment at school. One stated:

The right environment has the right temperature; not too hot, not too cold. It must be friendly; somebody has put some time into making the room look nice. Materials are topical [relevant] to the lesson which help me stayed focused. (**Student 2**)

The notion of a negative learning environment is captured in the following comment and reflects the position of consensus of the group:

A negative environment is a room with all my friends in it. I'm alright in the library because you're not allowed to talk. In other areas I get sucked into conversation. (**Student 4**)

It is interesting to note that the majority of boys from this particular focus group also spoke of how the environment in which they studied at home must meet their very specific learning needs:

My bedroom at home [where I study] is meticulously tidy. It annoys me having anything out of place. [These types of] distractions distract me from my learning because I have to sort them out [before I start my learning]. (**Student 1**)

Again the more specific views above are encapsulated, more generally, by another boy:

I need to remove all distractions in my [learning] environment. I start to think about the distraction and not the [task]. (**Student 5**)

The majority of the group also spoke about the environment in relation to exams. A view that captures the broad consensus of the group is:

The exam room needs to be minimalistic; with no clutter. [The exam room] should be clear, no colour and with no loud noises; if not this is less advantageous. (**Student 1**)

A comment that exemplifies the position of consensus within the group is:

A positive learning environment is a subjective thing; it depends on the subject and what is going on. (**Student 2**)

The theme to emerge from the observations of the boys in post-16 education was that the learning environment is important both at school and at home. The environment can impact learning negatively at times. Some boys prefer well decorated classrooms with displays reflecting the general content of learning. Others prefer a more neutral environment. Some form of relative isolation can be important to some boys as learning with friends can be challenging at times due to unhelpful social interactions such as informal chatting. It was also clear that there are specific requirements for the environment when taking exams. Examination rooms should be neutral areas with no colour, no outside noise to interfere with thinking processes, and examination rooms should be tidy and uncluttered.

The aforementioned observations are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Summary of Student (Boys) Emerging Themes Relating to Inner and Outer Barriers to Learning in a Specific English Post-16 Context

Specific Inner Barrier to Learning	Themes Relating to Inner Barrier to Learning	A substantial negative effect on my learning	A negative effect on my learning	Not a substantial negative effect on my learning
Self-sabotage	Exam performance		✓	
	Learning in general		✓	
	Self-fulfilling prophecy		✓	
Competitiveness	Over-competitiveness		✓	
(Being stuck) In the Middle	Competing demands (peers)	✓		
	Competing demands (family)	✓		
Specific Outer Barrier to Learning	Themes relating to Outer Barrier to Learning	A substantial negative effect on my learning	A negative effect on my learning	Not a substantial negative effect on my learning
People	Social interactions (teachers)		✓	
	Social interactions (joking with peers)		✓	
Stress	Stress impeding performance	✓		
Environment	The learning environment (well decorated)			✓
	The learning environment (neutral decoration)			✓

DISCUSSION

This study demonstrates that educational action research can provide the basis for transformative change and critical reflection (Koshy et al., 2011). The boys, in this study, were members of a focus group and all spoke, albeit in differing terms, about their experience of personal inner and outer barriers to learning.

Whilst there is limited reference in the literature to personal inner and outer barriers to learning the researcher felt that references to personal inner and outer barriers in coaching (Gray, 2001a; 2001b; 2001c) could be transposed to enhance understanding of such barriers to learning for boys in a post-16 context.

When examining personal inner barriers to learning a number of themes emerged from the qualitative data. Those who identified with the process of self-sabotage (Gray 2001a) also explained how they attempted to understand their experiences and ameliorate the effects of this. Comments relating to over-competitiveness (Gray 2001a) suggest that such over-competitiveness may be detrimental to learning; but, this was tempered by some reflections that identified a degree of competitiveness was necessary to achieve learning success. Being stuck in the middle zone (Gray 2001b) appears to lead boys to experience tension with regards to the competing demands of family, peers (and teachers). These three personal inner barriers to learning appear to mirror the personal inner barriers that may be experienced in coaching (Gray 2001a; 2001b).

When examining personal outer barriers to learning a number of key themes also emerged. The boys highlighted that other people (Gray 2001c) can have a detrimental effect on learning. Specific narratives highlighted the problem of 'joking' and 'teacher perceptions' that can be personal outer barriers to learning. When describing their perceptions of stress (Gray 2001c) views were mixed at times. Those who perceived levels of stress felt that such stress was a personal outer barrier to their learning. However, it was acknowledged that, in some instances, that a little stress could be beneficial in some learning situations. The environment (Gray 2001c) could be a personal outer barrier to learning with unhelpful social interactions such as talking, irritation and joking (banter) impacting negatively on learning. Similar to the findings about personal inner barriers to learning these findings suggest that three personal outer barriers to learning mirror the personal outer barriers that may be experienced in coaching. In sum, the challenges associated with some personal inner and outer barriers to coaching are reflected in learning. As an individual learns to engage with learning in a purposeful way they also have to learn to engage with and challenge their personal barriers to learning.

The unique position of teacher-as-researcher has enabled specific insight into how the boys were influenced and affected by personal barriers to learning in this specific educational context. This focus group case study has provided an opportunity to explore and observe phenomena closely and "to render it in some way intelligible" (Golby, 1994, p.27). These limited findings offer critical insight into personal barriers to learning and thus contribute to living educational theory (LET) (Barry, 2012).

This study was conducted in a Community College in a rural part of south-west England. It is important to acknowledge that the researcher's observations may be "framed" and "filtered" by this specific social situation (Berg & Eikeland, 2008, p.201). The small sample size limited the possibility to achieve substantial analytical generalisation as supported by Yin (1989). The sample was composed of participants identifying as male and white British and did not reflect the broader mix of ethnicities more typically evident in England and Wales.

There is evidence of resistance to this study (see Toro & Wenick, 2007) as the sample was only seven boys who self-selected to participate in this study. The original plans for the study were more ambitious and intended to include the whole cohort of Year 13 boys; however, the majority declined to participate. This may have been because there was mistrust, an issue outlined by Zhou (2012), of the research by the majority of the boys in the year group. Many of the boys in the cohort

may have not identified with the project (Corgo & Mercer, 2008); they may have felt their commitment to learning was being challenged rather than barriers to learning be explored.

The backdrop for this research was grounded in the notion that personal inner and outer barriers to coaching may be reflected as personal inner and outer barriers to learning. Coaching is seen as a useful intervention in educational organisations. In this instance, whilst not engaging in coaching *per se* the participants were able to reflect on their current position and consider different pathways to understanding personal barriers to their learning. They could move forward and make positive change (see Jackson, 2004). By drawing upon the ideas originally presented by Gray (2001a; 2001b; 2001c) relating to barriers to coaching the boys were then able to explore some of their personal barriers to learning.

Findings from this single site, multi-voice small scale study of personal barriers to learning must be viewed through the context of several limitations. First, as noted previously despite efforts to engage all of the boys from the cohort to participate in this study, the participation rate was low. Second, whilst the semi-structured interviews provided insight into the perceptions of the participants relating to personal inner and outer barriers to learning such findings cannot be generalised to other settings. Moreover, the qualitative data is also limited due to the lack of any other collateral observations from significant others such as parents, teachers and friends in the boys' lives. Third, the use of a self-selected sample limits the validity of the findings. Future research into personal barriers to learning would benefit from a more diverse sample and differing age cohorts, the use of a randomised control group and quantitative and qualitative instruments that can effectively measure barriers to learning; a mixed methods approach as advocated by Saunders et al., (2015). The inclusion of females is such a study would also permit gender comparison. Fourth, it may have been more appropriate to use close-ended questions as this permits the use of data-coding and analysis thus ensuring the reliability of the study (Pierce, 1995). That said, the teacher-as-researcher did not what to lead participants to particular answers via "filtering" and "framing" in the context of this research (see Berg & Eikeland, 2008). The open-ended questions gave respondents the opportunity to answer freely without having to categorise answers into a given response. In addition, the teacher-as-researcher was then free to pursue other areas of interest. Fifth, there was the possibility of social desirability effects may have influenced the research as, for example, participants may have wanted to please their teacher-as-researcher by providing what they believed to be acceptable answers. Sixth, further research should reference other personal inner barriers to learning such as limiting beliefs, negative expectations and inappropriate emotions to provide greater depth of understanding of barriers to learning.

The benefits of this research should not be ignored. The participants were assured that their data would be anonymised, and the results would not affect their relationship with the teacher-as-researcher. The participants had been asked to be honest in the way that they reported their experiences. The researcher had no reason to think that they had done otherwise. The use of analytical generalisation (see Yin, 1989) enabled the Principal, Sixth Form leadership team and teacher-as-researcher to engage with the inner-most thoughts, feelings and experiences of the participants by listening to their synthesised words or positions of consensus (see Kudliskis, 2019) and their individual utterances. These findings were then, more broadly, shared with middle leaders, teachers and other stakeholders.

It was intended that this research would not be "done" to the boys. The intention of this focus group case study was to explore some of the possible personal inner and outer barriers to learning by drawing upon the understanding of personal barriers in coaching. The purpose of this study was to foreground the voices of the boys.

This innovative piece of research was initiated as an exploratory study. The research was designed to provide the school with a better understanding of the personal inner and outer barriers to learning for a specific cohort. It is hoped that these findings provide impetus for further research in this area.

CONCLUSION

Action research conducted in educational contexts provides insight into issues, such as inner and outer barriers to learning for boys in post-16 education. Such research is of interest to teachers, leaders, educationalists and other stakeholders. Such insight may not be achieved when conducting positivist research. In this case personal barriers to coaching appear to reflect, at least to some extent, personal barriers to learning.

There is limited theoretical material relating to personal inner and outer barriers to learning. That which does exist is often grounded in grey literature. The teacher-as-researcher elected to examine personal inner and outer barriers to learning solely as a critical commentator. The purpose of this study was to contribute to living educational theory (LET) and to provide a foundation for further research in this area.

Whilst only a single research tool was used, the qualitative data gained provides insight into the perceptions and reflections of a small group of boys in relation to some inner and outer barriers to learning. The data provides some speculative evidence that some inner and outer barriers to learning impact negatively on engagement with learning.

It should be noted that direct or indirect subject effects and demand characteristics may have impacted the research. The study may have been influenced by unintentional demand characteristics of the teacher-as-researcher. The students may have unintentionally demonstrated subject effects. The teacher-as-researcher endeavoured to be systematic in the research process and liaised closely with a 'critical friend' to ensure that, the researcher, remained grounded throughout the whole process. Whilst the placebo effect cannot be dismissed the teacher-as-researcher believes that all participants provided honest reflections of their inner-most feelings, perceptions and experiences.

It should be acknowledged that the teacher-as-researcher endeavoured to ensure that the research was not simply "done" to the boys. The study, as a whole, was a collaborative process. The voices of the boys were foregrounded, and the research process provided a form of value in learning as the boys gained greater insight into possible inner and outer barriers to learning. To this end, the following comments reflect the broader positions of consensus of the group.

I thought [this study] was interesting. It has increased my understanding of how I [and others] think and learn and how to achieve higher results. (**Student 2**)

It can often appear that research is "done" to the participants. I felt that I was "heard" and I also feel that this was a positive experience...... (**Student 3**)

In sum, this was an exploratory study and the findings are limited. Nonetheless, the study provides another lens through which to examine and understand how some inner and outer barriers may impact learning for boys in post-16 education. These initial findings indicate there is potential for further research in this area.

Application in Schools

Whilst the findings in this research are limited some progressive schools, with a post-16 cohort, may wish to introduce and discuss with students the notion of personal inner and outer barriers to learning. This would enhance engagement with learning and provide students with greater insight into inner-most feelings and experiences. At a practical level, implementation of such discussions could be organised through teacher-student tutorials and student peer-coaching programmes. Similar programmes could be introduced into primary and secondary school settings. The value of such interventions could then be appraised through further research in these specific educational contexts.

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Appendix 1

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Inner and Outer Barriers to Learning

Interview Schedule

Preamble and Question 1: *Given your understanding of self-sabotage as a possible personal inner barrier to coaching to what extent, if any, do you think that self-sabotage could be a possible personal inner barrier to learning? Have you had personal experience of self-sabotage? Please give an in-depth response to this question. I may ask further questions if appropriate.*

Preamble and Question 2: *Given your understanding of over-competitiveness as a possible personal inner barrier in coaching to what extent, if any, do you think that over-competitiveness could be a possible personal inner barrier to learning? Have you had personal experience of being overly-competitive? Please give an in-depth response to this question. I may ask further questions if appropriate.*

Preamble and Question 3: *Given your understanding of (being stuck) 'in the middle' as a possible personal inner barrier to coaching to what extent, if any, do you think that (being stuck) 'in the middle' could be a possible personal inner barrier to learning? Have you had personal experience of (being stuck) 'in the middle'? Please give an in-depth response to this question. I may ask further questions if appropriate.*

Preamble and Question 4: *Given your understanding of people as a possible personal outer barrier to coaching to what extent, if any, do you think that people could be a possible personal outer barrier to learning? Have you had personal experience of people being an outer barrier to learning? Please give an in-depth response to this question. I may ask further questions if appropriate.*

Preamble and Question 5: *Given your understanding of 'stress' as a possible personal outer barrier to coaching to what extent, if any, do you think that stress could be a possible personal outer barrier to learning? Have you had personal experience of 'stress'? Please give an in-depth response to this question. I may ask further questions if appropriate.*

Preamble and Question 6: *Given your understanding of the environment as a possible personal outer barrier to coaching to what extent, if any, do you think that the environment could be a possible personal outer barrier to learning? Have you had personal experience of being of the environment impacting on your learning? Please give an in-depth response to this question. I may ask further questions if appropriate.*

Conclusion of the interview: *Are there any comments that you would like to make about your personal experiences in relation the research process and your participation in this research study?*

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