



## How Schools can Positively Help Young People's Wellbeing Post COVID-19



### Filling the Gap to Meet the Anticipated Increased Demand for One-to-One Support?

Well, here we are, in the midst of a relatively unforeseen (Black Swan) global event that has had a huge influence on the personal lives of all of us and on the wellbeing of many.

As a charity delivering face to face wellbeing support services for vulnerable young people, the impact of the required and necessary COVID-19 restrictions has been huge.

Like many organisations, we have felt the pinch, and a loss of momentum in certain projects.

The returning to normal is the great unknown of the pandemic, as recent events during lockdown easing have proven. In our context, dedicated school staff have had to think on their feet, adapt and change, sometimes on a daily basis, as they try to work out how to deliver education and all the other things schools have been given responsibility to facilitate as modern day community hubs, whilst ensuring the required obligation of self, community and pupil safety. Normality will however be returned to, as we've learned from the past, when there have been huge unforeseen global events.

In the meantime, what we know from media reports is that there is a concern about how to meet the potential increased demand for wellbeing and subject catch up support from young people. A recent BBC article presenting research carried out by Bristol University with 1000 year 9 pupils ends with a question from the presenting professor; "As schools reopen we need to consider ways in which schools can be supportive of mental health for all students" (BBC News accessed August 24th 2020). These needs will range from low levels to high, and sometimes the professional are the only ones that can deliver the required support. We want to propose another solution beyond the expert.



Many of our young people we have worked with online, have mentioned being anxious about the current situation, and the future as they digest daily news, and know of, or have experienced the negative outcomes of COVID-19 in their personal lives. The worry from school staff often is "in what shape will these young people be when they return to school?", and how does a school with a new intake in the coming academic year, that anticipates more demand for one to one support from its current pupils manage? An answer that has been raised frequently from charities, and support service providers is for government to increase funding for the experts to parachute in and fill that gap, we agree experts are needed in some cases. A pitfall of the "parachuting expert", is that they can't pick up every child requiring help, plus there is the potential to create dependency on the "expert" for solutions.

But what if we could build a schools' internal capacity to provide for the anticipated increase in demand for one-to-one support and subject catch up help? Schools have a lot of human resource capacity. To be clear, the following is not a proposition that asks teachers to do more, but one that gets young people energised to positively influence other young people.

Our experience of working with young people, as coaches, is that they are ready and willing to help their younger peers, given the skills, supervision and power to do so. Before we posit a solution, at this point we want to try and explain what we mean by coaching when we use it, and then near peer coaching. **For us coaching is a positive, solution's focused, goal setting, self-directed action learning conversation** that

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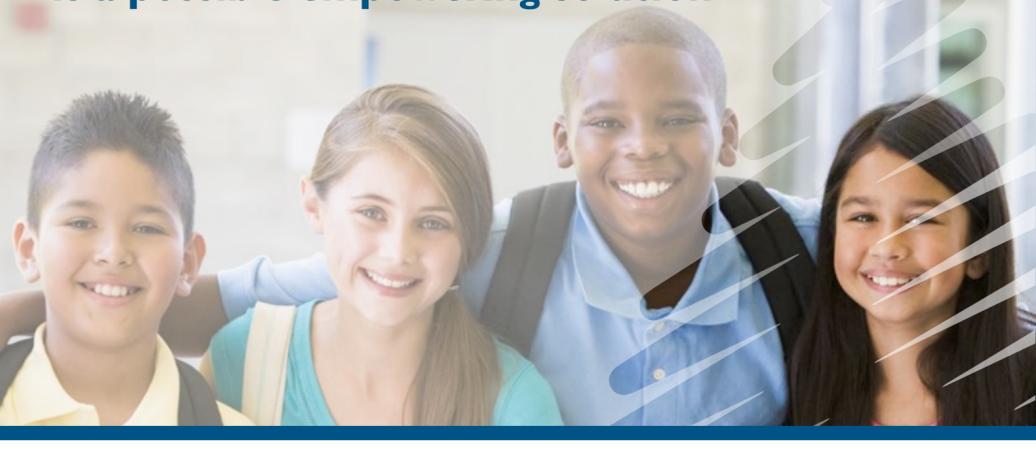
believes if a person is given time to think in a non-judgemental space, it will raise their self-awareness and help them find their own way forward. It is underpinned by positive psychology and allows a focus on desired states. Near Peer Coaching is all of the above, delivered by an older young person, or a more experienced person that

has had a similar journey, so can be in a position to listen with empathy birthed out of contextual learning. To create clarity, coaching differs from counselling (and therapy) in that it isn't about fixing

and healing the client and doesn't presume that the client has a clinical need based on past or present experiences.

Studies have shown that coaching can have therapeutic outcomes as action steps are taken.

## We believe that Near Peer Coaching is a possible empowering solution



We believe that Near Peer Coaching is a possible empowering solution to the potential of increased demands for youth wellbeing and catch up support. A team of 20 trained young people can support 60 younger pupils over an academic year (how do we know this? Our data analysis of the Near Peer Coaching approach from three secondary schools has shown that one Near Peer Coach supports 3.4 younger pupils over one academic year) –

The Near Peer Coaches are an internal team of other people centred young people, who provide a safe, non-judgemental positive listening space, allowing the young client to explore effective solutions to the issues they are facing within their context. In schools that have run this successfully the teams have been managed by lead youth coaches, had supervisory input from Elevate staff, and school staff, with school staff often not having to digress too far from their normal functioning. The outcomes for the young client group and the Near Peer Coaches has been positive all round; strengthening school capacity, strengthening their education community, increasing skills, improving behaviour issues, improving self-esteem, giving valuable skills for functioning in school, and for school leaving aged pupils, important skills for the workplace or higher education. On top of all that it's been cost effective too.

Near Peer Coaches have also been able to sign-post young people to other routes of support available via the school's systems, which may have not been highlighted if the young client was left without someone to talk to.

A primary school based in a high need diversely populated urban area commissioned an independent report into the impact of our Near Peer Coaching programme on its Near Peer Coaches. The following is an extract from the report:

*"In conclusion, the Near Peer Coaching programme helped the coaches to increase their levels of empathy, self-confidence, and the amount of skills which they found useful in terms of their academic and personal life. They were more willing to help other pupils and created more positive peer to peer relationships. They felt better equipped to interact with others based on acquiring better listening and speaking skills. The overall evaluation of the Near Peer Coaching programme by the students was positive, as some of them stated, for example: "I feel happy" or "I feel helpful and able to sympathise." This implies that peer coaching is a beneficial intervention which can contribute towards generally positive atmosphere in the classroom and improve the participants' overall wellbeing. It can help pupils to develop in many different areas and motivate them to become more confident individuals, taking an active approach in their own social, academic, and personal development." (Lansdowne Primary School Near Peer Coaching Report 2020)*

A further report and quantitative analysis on pupil coaches (an industry term used for coaching clients) by a different independent reporter showed statistically significant self-regulation results. Near Peer Coaching had improved the young coaching clients in the following areas; sense of happiness, perseverance, self-confidence, and self-awareness. The young coaches reported that the Near Peer coach had been really helpful in supporting them to make changes.

A paired samples t-test, using a social, emotional, and academic self-efficacy scale (Muris SEQ) showed that there was a statistically significant improvement in pupil self-efficacy post Near Peer Coaching support (self-efficacy is a fundamental concept in Bandura's social cognitive theory, and proven to be vital for positive human functioning, resilience and wellbeing it is also a predictor of performance). These are some findings in an analysis of over 200 young coaches some of which were supported by Near Peer Coaches.



Could it be, that for those not classified at the high end of the wellbeing need scale, another supportive young person to turn to can be really useful and prevent an embedding of issues, due to acquiring the necessary self-regulation skills early in school life? There is evidence that developmentally adolescents and some younger people do begin to start seeking "role models" that aren't the regular adult in their lives and open up more quickly to people they trust that are of a similar age group.

To answer the initial question at the beginning of this paragraph, the Near Peer Coaching project has shown us, that yes, it is really useful to have another skilled young person to talk to and that this can really help towards filling the gaps in transition, subject catch-up and wellbeing support that schools face.

So given the results in pilot programmes and current projects, post COVID-19, or in the embers of COVID-19, schools could build their internal capacity to provide one-to-one support services to young people, which could be delivered using internal online systems (for example integrated online communications in MS TEAMS or Google Hangouts) or socially distanced face to face interactions within the school building. The training could be delivered observing social distancing guidelines as we await a return to normality. Forward thinking schools can positively help their younger pupils who express wellbeing and catch up needs, by having energised committed skilled older pupils who are onsite, available and willing to give towards something beyond themselves through the power of coaching during such challenging times.

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