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For nearly two decades, she has directed the company Skolcoacherna in Sweden. They were pioneers in the field of coaching within the school system. Subsequently, they have provided training to a considerable number of teachers and school leaders in professional coaching. Skolcoacherna have undertaken numerous coaching assignments on behalf of the Swedish National Agency for Education, as well as other authorities. Their coach training program is accredited and approved by the ICF (www.skolcoacherna.se).

A Coaching Approach Prevents Problematic School Absenteeism and Early School Leaving”



The implementation of a coaching approach can effectively prevent problematic school absenteeism and early school leaving. By adopting this method schools can foster a more engaging and supportive learning environment that promotes student attendance and well-being.

The practice of a coaching approach in the classroom is one of the most effective ways to bring out the best in students, nurture their talents and strengths, strengthen their self-esteem and self-confidence.

This article will describe how a coaching approach can significantly help in the prevention of problematic school absenteeism and early school leaving. It will also present results from a current EU project (<https://educoachproject.eu>) in which teachers are provided with coaching tools and models to create a supportive and empowering school environment with the aim of reducing early school leaving. Additionally, the article offers some valuable tools in coaching.

1. Background

Problematic school absenteeism is a growing challenge both in Europe and globally, which is a concerning development. This issue is increasingly observed even among younger students leading to numerous adverse consequences. The negative impact of this trend underscores the urgent need for effective solutions.

While there are various definitions of problematic school absenteeism, in this context, we refer to it as an absence that adversely affects a student's academic performance, social and cognitive development, and mental health.

School absenteeism and early school leaving are serious problems not only for the individual but also for families, the school system, and broader society. The challenges associated with these issues may contribute to social isolation and exclusion, financial hardship, and the development of mental and physical health concerns. Early school leaving and academic failure have also been identified as risk factors that can contribute to criminal behavior.

Individuals who do not complete secondary education have fewer opportunities in society. Early school leaving is linked to unemployment or poorly paid, low-skilled jobs, with limited prospects for career advancement.

There are several factors why some young people give up education and training prematurely, including fragile socio-economic situations, personal or familial issues, family background or learning difficulties. The way the education system is set up, school climate, school culture, and teacher-pupil relations are all important factors in student success. This article will focus on school-related factors.

By implementing a coaching approach, schools can foster a more engaging and supportive learning environment, which can help prevent problematic school absenteeism and dropping out.

2. About Coaching and the Coaching Approach

2.1 Different Levels of Coaching

There are various levels of coaching. A coaching approach is a way of thinking, and an attitude adopted in interactions with individuals or groups.

It is also possible to work as a professional coach in schools, such as a teacher coach or student coach, with scheduled coaching sessions and a clear agreement and method.

This article will concentrate on the coaching approach.

2.2 Basic Assumptions

There are several basic assumptions for coaching and translated to the education system it means that you believe that the students:

- Possess knowledge and answers within themselves.
- Are capable and resourceful.
- Are responsible for their own actions.

The coaching approach cultivates a safe and constructive learning environment where the individual is recognised and acknowledged, thereby promoting independence and responsibility.

This approach enhances motivation and brings forth the driving forces within the individual. By providing a sense of security and trust, the individual is encouraged and motivated to find their own answers and solutions.

When this approach is adopted, there is a better chance of revealing the person's own resources, which gives them a sense of ownership of the answers and the pathways forward, enabling them to achieve the desired goal more readily.

The relationship is central, with a positive fundamental attitude towards the student and a profound trust in their abilities and possibilities.

2.3 The Gap – from Current State to Desired State

In coaching, the concept of the "Gap" refers to the difference between the current state and the desired state. Identifying these gaps is crucial in the coaching process. The focus is on the future, avoiding excessive dwelling on the past.

It is necessary for the students to clearly define their goals and what they aim to achieve. To evaluate their current standing, individuals must assess their position in relation to their goals. This requires an assessment of their strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats, like a SWOT analysis.

Subsequently, it is essential to devise an action plan to bridge the gap between their present state and their goals. The students should methodically work towards narrowing this gap and achieving their desired outcomes.

2.4 Results we see with a Coaching Approach

For almost 20 years, the company Skolcoacherna in Sweden has been training teachers and school leaders in professional coaching. They have observed an increased interest in Sweden and Europe in learning about coaching, as it contributes to the growth and development of both the individuals and the organisations.

Over the past ten years, Skolcoacherna have been working on behalf of the Swedish National Agency for Education, using coaching and coaching training to improve quality and to support schools facing major challenges, such as high rates of early school leaving and large numbers of newly arrived immigrants. The results from these coaching efforts demonstrate that a school coaching approach is an effective method for increasing students' motivation and engagement, helping them feel and perform better, which in turn prevents early school leaving.

Similar positive results have been seen in the COACH project described below.

2.5 Benefits of a Coaching Approach

A coaching approach helps bring out the best in students by strengthening relationships and making it easier for teachers to engage and motivate them.

It develops students' talents and strengths, builds their confidence, and nurtures their learning. Coaching can also reduce stress and help students achieve a better balance between studies and personal life.

It is a tool for self-leadership, promoting independence and responsibility. Students set clearer goals, find their own ways forward, and more easily achieve their desired outcomes. They develop a broader perspective, a better understanding of themselves, and get a sense of context. The coaching approach creates a more engaging and supportive learning environment, contributing to student well-being, better study results, reduced dropout rates, and improved inclusion.

2.6 Sources of Inspiration and Scientific Foundation

Coaching as a discipline is founded upon an "Eclectic Theory" - a combination of various approaches, including Humanistic Psychology, System Theories, and Positive Psychology. Moreover, several renowned philosophers, such as Socrates (400 B.C.) and Kierkegaard (19th century), have employed coaching-like methods in their teachings. Notably, Socrates encouraged students to engage through questioning rather than giving direct answers, while Kierkegaard emphasised the importance of the individual's ability to remain true to themselves as the primary task.

The use of coaching in the field of school education has undergone a gradual but significant evolution over time. Initially, coaching was primarily associated with the business sector and sports. However, in recent years, coaching has gained widespread acceptance in the educational realm, with numerous prominent school researchers, such as John Hattie, Helen Timperley, Dylan Wiliam, Carol S. Dweck, Michael Fullan, and James Nottingham, advocating for a coaching-based approach in schools.

2.7 The ICF Core Competencies

The International Coach Federation (ICF) has developed the ICF Core Competencies to enhance the comprehension of the skills and approaches employed in the contemporary coaching profession. These core competencies defined by the International Coaching Federation are fundamental to effective professional coaching <https://coachingfederation.org/credentials-and-standards/core-competencies>

These competencies encompass the essential skills and approaches a coach must have and demonstrate. Many of these competencies are also crucial in a coaching-centric leadership approach. The core competencies have been developed to provide a comprehensive understanding of the skills and methodologies to be used in coaching, as per the guidelines set forth by the International Coaching Federation.

The ICF Core Competencies are divided into four primary areas, each including eight Core Competencies:

A. The foundation – How the coach acts ethically and uses coaching.

B. Co-create the relationship – Describes how the coach, in partnership with the client, creates agreements, creates trust and security and maintains their presence and focus.

C. Communicate effectively – here the coach is expected to listen actively and help the client towards insight and learning by using tools and techniques such as powerful questions, silence, metaphors or similes.

D. Cultivating learning and growth – transform learning and insights into actions facilitating the client's development.

The individual skills above are not ranked; many are common and sometimes they can seem similar. This is because they often complement and build upon one another. To be able to listen actively, you need to be present. To ask challenging questions, you need to have created trust and closeness, and so on. They are all interconnected.”



Read more about coach competencies and skills in section 4.

3.The Erasmus COACH Project

3.1 Background

The Erasmus COACH project was a collaborative effort involving seven organisations from five countries, including Sweden, Poland, Italy, Ukraine, and Spain. The project, which ran from September 2022 to August 2024, was co-financed by the European Union's ERASMUS+ programme.

The objective of the COACH project (<https://educoachproject.eu/>) was to incorporate coaching approach in schools and teaching to help prevent early school leaving. The project aimed to strengthen a coaching leadership that taps into the individual's inherent potential and unique resources through a coaching approach and coaching skills.

3.2 Implementation of the COACH Project

At the beginning of the project, methods were developed for a coaching approach in teaching. The company Skolcoacherna, one of the five partners in the project, was responsible” for developing a suitable coaching education and they also trained all trainers in coaching.

Subsequently, the partners offered a shorter coach training to approximately one hundred teachers and twenty schools in their respective countries, equipping them with coaching skills and tools to better engage students.

These coaching tools were intended to help teachers not only identify students' academic needs but also provide them with strategies to enhance their interactions with students, thereby fostering a more inclusive, supportive, and responsive learning environment.

3.3 Results

The teachers and management in Spain, Sweden, Ukraine, Poland, and Italy have given incredibly positive feedback on this programme. Participants reported seeing real

improvements in student engagement, the relationships between teachers and students, and their own professional development. They gained new insights into the learning process and tried out innovative methods.

In Ukraine, this tool was particularly transformative. It gave teachers a much-needed way to address the emotional challenges students face due to the ongoing war. The coaching approach allowed teachers to connect with students on a deeper emotional and cognitive level, which was crucial given the traumatic situation. The teachers appreciated being able to shift their focus from traditional instruction to more student-centred, supportive, and reflective discussions. They believe this will boost both academic performance and emotional resilience.

The COACH project was successful in enhancing teachers' professional development. It provided teachers with practical coaching tools, allowing them to expand their teaching methods and improve how they engage with students.

Many teachers reported that the training sessions and hands-on application of coaching techniques had a lasting impact on their confidence and ability to handle diverse classroom challenges. The coaching tools, such as "listening" and "questioning," helped teachers become better listeners, ask more effective questions, and avoid immediate solutions. These tools can also be used in conversations and meetings with colleagues and parents. Teachers and school management believe that a coaching approach strengthens relationships, creates a positive atmosphere, and promotes student well-being, thereby reducing early school leaving. They are confident that these tools will promote school attendance and prevent early school leaving.

Teachers across the participating countries emphasised the importance of integrating the coaching approach into broader school programs and initiatives to maximise their long-term impact. The teachers stressed the significance of the coaching method becoming widespread throughout the school and being applied across all levels. By all levels they mean that the coaching tools should be introduced to all staff members, not only teachers but also management and student health personnel. They also expressed that it could be advisable to engage parents in the coaching method.

3.4 Resources Developed in the Project

The project developed self-assessment questionnaires called Quick Scan, providing tools for teachers, students, and parents to evaluate their school and school climate.

The results of these questionnaires offer a good starting point for understanding the current situation and can be used to discuss how a coaching approach can be applied in different scenarios.

The Quick Scan tool was widely recognised as valuable in identifying students' individual needs. Teachers across various countries reported that the tool offered a clear, structured, and user-friendly method to pinpoint key areas of concern, such as disengagement, emotional difficulties, or academic struggles. This early detection enabled teachers to take more targeted and effective actions to support their students.

The Quick Scan tool was used not only to understand students' academic challenges but also to promote reflective discussions with students and their families, encouraging greater involvement in the learning process. The project's website provides several free resources, including various coaching tools and the Quick Scan tool, (<https://educoachproject.eu/resources/>)

4. Coaching Competencies and Skills

4.1 Creating a Constructive Relationship and Cultivating Trust and Closeness

The most crucial coaching skills lie in establishing a constructive relationship built on trust and closeness. If there is no trust, it does not matter how good questions you ask or how well you listen.

A positive fundamental attitude towards the student, combined with a strong belief in the student's abilities and potential, is essential. Emotional engagement also aids the learning process. In a coaching approach, the student is acknowledged, confirmed, and provided the space to develop their own thoughts and ideas. Curiosity is a vital element. Research has shown that curiosity stimulates creativity and innovation, while also enhancing learning and problem-solving abilities.

4.2 Being Present

The coaching approach requires the practitioner to be fully aware and present with the student, focusing entirely on the current moment without evaluating, judging, or being distracted by other concerns.

When one is fully present and focused, it becomes possible to perceive the student as they truly are, notice shifts in energy, tone, and attitude, and release one's own emotions and preconceptions. ‘

Additionally, it may be appropriate to allow for periods of silence, pause, or reflection.

4.3 Listen Actively and on Multiple Levels

Cultivating the ability for active and multi-layered listening is essential in a coaching approach. Encouraging students to express their thoughts and feelings, followed by paraphrasing and summarising their statements, demonstrates a commitment to deeper understanding.

Research has shown that for adults in the workplace, the single most significant factor contributing to their ability to maintain a positive mindset and feel content, is whether they perceive that they have been listened to. This finding is equally applicable to students.

Educators must learn to attentively listen to students when they share their experiences, as this fosters a broader comprehension and provides teachers with valuable insights. The student's feeling of being listened to also instils a sense of being seen and heard, which in turn leads to courage, creativity, and reflection. When we engage in active listening, the student's communication takes precedence, while the teacher's own values and priorities recede into the background.

Cultivate your listening abilities to a more advanced level. Individuals often discuss varying degrees of listening, ranging from complete non-engagement to perceiving the unspoken and comprehending the entire person.

In the context of coaching, one should also endeavour to refrain from offering too much advice or too many recommendations.

4.4 Powerful Questions

The use of powerful questions is essential in a coaching approach. Such questions should provide new perspectives, encourage individuals to think in new ways, and foster a sense of empowerment and motivation. Effective questions are those that prompt students to reflect on their goals, values, and learning experiences, rather than simply giving the answers.

Open-ended questions, which cannot be answered with a simple "yes" or "no," enable students to discover themselves and uncover new opportunities. In a coaching context,

questions should ideally be future-oriented and focus on goals and visions. It is also important to keep the questions concise and address them one at a time.

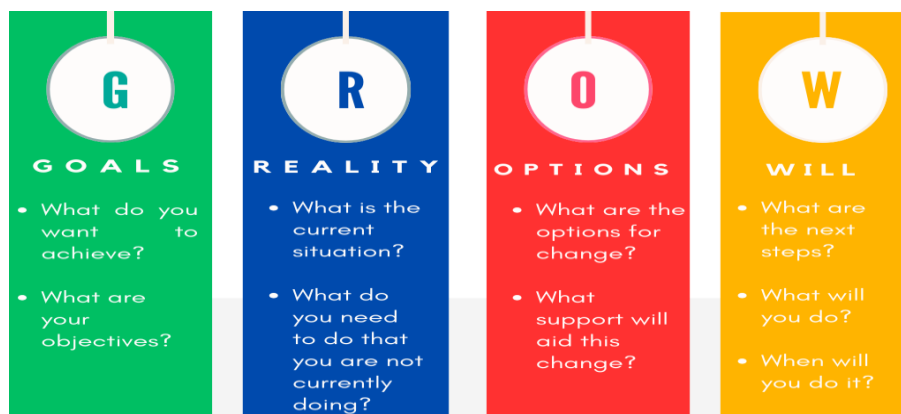
The GROW model is a widely recognised and valuable framework that structures coaching conversations, both with individuals and groups. This model can be applied in a coaching approach to guide the discussion. The individual in question should discuss the topic they wish to focus on during the conversation or coaching session.

GOAL: What does the student aim to achieve? What does the desirable outcome resemble?

REALITY: What is the current situation? Explore the situation by posing questions that encourage the coachee to reflect on the present circumstances, such as "How do you feel about the current situation?" or "Describe a day that exemplifies the current state of affairs."

OPTIONS: What can be done? Find opportunities for solutions and encourage action. Collaboratively brainstorm alternative ideas.

WILL: What do you wish to do and by when? The last step involves the coached person selecting the choice they prefer.



4.5 Set Goals that Motivate

Coaching is a forward-looking approach that emphasises action. Planning and setting goals are essential to provide direction and facilitate progress for the student.

It is crucial to develop realistic, clear, and inspiring goals that align with the student's ambitions and offer a sense of purpose. What does the student aspire to achieve through the coaching conversations? These goals can be quite specific, such as reaching a certain grade in particular subjects, thriving in the academic environment, gaining greater self-confidence, or achieving more balance in life. Based on these aspirations, a comprehensive plan is then formulated.

The goals should preferably be specific, measurable, achievable, relevant and timed, as in the SMART model, which stands for the goals to be **S**pecific, **M**easurable, **A**tttractive/**A**chievable, **R**elevant and **T**imed.

4.6 Develop your Feedback

Developing feedback skills is important in coaching. Feedback should be specific and concrete, highlighting strengths and areas for improvement, and designed constructively. “

Teachers must be able to validate student achievements, reinforce positive behaviours and actions, and provide clear feedback on how they can improve their skills or learning methods.

We distinguish between direct feedback and coaching feedback. Direct feedback is a form of communication where we convey what we experience directly to the student. It can be both positive and constructive in nature.

The purpose of providing coaching feedback is to facilitate the student's personal growth and encourage accountability. This type of feedback is oriented towards providing support to the student and helping their personal and professional growth and development.

It is recommended that coaching feedback should be frequent and be positive and constructive in nature, with an emphasis on finding potential avenues for improvement and fostering a forward-thinking approach. The utilisation of coaching feedback facilitates the growth and development of individuals in a constructive and positive manner.

5. Conclusions

Different research findings for example, in this report described COACH project, and results from the work of Skolcoacherna in Sweden, prove that a coaching approach has the potential to transform the way schools address the challenge of problematic school absenteeism and early school leaving.

The implementation of a coaching approach within the educational context can aid in the creation of a supportive and empowering learning environment, which in turn can help students achieve academic and personal success.

Schools that are successful in their endeavours adopt a coaching approach at all levels. It is desirable to adopt an integrated approach. Furthermore, there should be a unified coaching approach and a coaching culture with a clearly defined value base, wherein the values and goals are collectively embraced. They are deliberate in their efforts to cultivate relationships. In this context, the term "all levels" refers to all staff members, not only teachers but also management and student health personnel. Furthermore, it is advisable to engage parents in the coaching method, given their key role, particularly for students who are at risk.

It can also be very valuable having a system with Student Coaches in schools who can work to support students in managing of schoolwork and other aspects of the student's life. In Sweden there has been a significant increase in the number of Student Coaches. They can help students identify their strengths, set goals, and develop strategies to achieve these goals. They focus on improving the student's motivation, self-confidence, and self-esteem and can also assist with managing stress and performance pressures.

The establishment of a coaching approach between students is also a key factor. This fosters a unified approach and cultivates competencies in collaboration and knowledge sharing. Such a process will contribute to the inspiration and motivation of the students, which will in turn lead to an enhanced sense of security. Furthermore, it will aid in more effectively managing of both challenges and conflicts.

Peer-to-peer coaching is also a highly valuable approach, whereby teachers engage in mutual observation and provide each other with coaching feedback. This process has the potential to enhance the quality of teaching. In some of Sweden's municipalities, such as Stockholm, a structured peer coaching model has been adopted whereby professional coaches observe and provide feedback to teachers and teaching teams with the aim of enhancing classroom learning and addressing various pedagogical challenges. This results in an enhancement of pedagogical practices and student outcomes, as well as the establishment of a culture of continuous professional development.

It is also crucial for school management to adopt a coaching approach and coaching leadership. This strategy fosters a supportive and empowering environment for both employees and students, enhancing motivation, engagement, and overall satisfaction.