

NOA Engagement Coaches Project

6 Engagement Coaches were recruited to work with Year 9 & 10 students in Norwich schools to provide coaching support. Coaches have worked with over 200 pupils during Spring & Summer Terms 2022 (ranging from 20-40 per Coach). The Engagement Coach role was designed following feedback from secondary schools about the mental health and wellbeing needs of their pupils and gaps in learning.

Given the length of time of this support and the complex barriers to learning faced by many pupils, as well as wider interventions this group receive in school, significant improvements to attendance, behaviour and achievement cannot be clearly evidenced.

Anecdotal feedback from Coaches clearly identifies examples where this support has had a positive impact. Coaches describe how pupils have responded positively to 1:1 support, many seem to have improved wellbeing, engagement with learning is higher and students exhibit less in-school truancy. Attendance for some students who have been supported has improved but not consistently across the cohort.

Each Coach, alongside their manager in school, created an implementation plan with suggested changes to school systems to better support pupils, based on the understanding they have from this role and from sharing their approaches with other schools.

An external evaluation of this project was completed by Anglia Ruskin University. This evaluation was a joint piece of work across the Engagement Coach project in Norwich Opportunity Area and the Learning Behaviour Leads project in Ipswich Opportunity Area. These projects were similar but had some elements of delivery that differed. Findings from Anglia Ruskin University are included in full in the document below.

Key findings and recommendations that relate to the work in Norwich are listed here:

Project Implementation

- The main behaviour and engagement challenges Engagement Coaches were aiming to support were attendance and disruption in class across all of the schools involved in the project.
- The implementation of the programmes varied widely between settings, in terms of the number of students involved, the reason for their participation, and the focus of the support provided by the Engagement Coach.
- A key strength of the programme was flexibility – this enabled settings and the ECs to focus their attention where they felt they could make the greatest impact.
- The high levels of staff absences in the settings, due to Covid-19, sometimes created a tension between the ECs plans for the intervention, and the need of the setting. ECs frequently had to cover absences, which led to a blurring between their role as an EC and other roles in the setting (such as Teaching Assistants).

Experience of Coaches

- Coaches emphasised the difficult nature of their work, supporting high needs students.
- Some Coaches noted challenges in working with colleagues, who were often more senior than them, and who could see the suggestions offered as criticism. While some ECs felt that their SLTs were very supportive, a minority noted that this wasn't the case, which made it difficult to implement their planned intervention without access to the necessary resources and time.

Support for students

- The settings all had existing approaches in place to support behaviour, but the EC programme gave them the opportunity to focus on particular groups of high risk students. One SLT member explained, "it was more a case of really honing in on these core students and identifying which aspect we need to promote in order to improve engagement."
- The data evidenced positive outcomes from the programme, for both students and the ECs themselves. ECs and SLT members reported success with individual students, including enabling that student to stay in school, increasing their attendance, and growing students' confidence in the classroom.
- Engagement Coaches acknowledge that a small core of students invited to participate in the interventions had not engaged (some not attending sessions at all) and their learning behaviours had not improved over the course of the intervention.
- Our evaluation indicated that the programmes had potential to have a long term positive impact on learning behaviours and engagement in the settings, through building capacity amongst staff and creating a supportive and open school culture.

Recommendations for future projects (Anglia Ruskin University)

1. We recommend that commissioners acknowledge the emergent nature of interventions in complex systems such as schools, and that this can make one-size fits all intervention impractical. Setting the principles of an intervention and then allowing the programme itself to be designed and implemented at a local level, allows those working within the system to design an intervention which best suits their context, and can deliver the greatest impact.
2. The ECs found the resources available on the Padlet very useful - we suggest these resources could be made more widely available to schools and colleges, for them to access as and when required.
3. Developing a community of practice with their peers was also valuable for the ECs. Facilitating networks between settings would enable more staff to benefit from these communities of practice.
4. Clarity of data collection requirements throughout the duration of the intervention would have helped ECs to track students' progress themselves and not rely on wider school capacity.
5. Additional training and support for ECs to be able to set up and deliver a project successfully and ensure clarity about the purpose of their role and communicate this effectively to colleagues.

Evaluation of the IOA Learning Behaviour Lead and the NOA Engagement Coaches programmes

Anglia Ruskin University, July 2022

The deliverables agreed for this project are as follows:

1. Identify a representative sample of young people to track across participating schools, and a suitable control group, baselining engagement measures such as attendance, fixed term exclusions and teacher assessed performance in core subjects, and tracking performance over the year to measure the impact of the programme overall, and on differing approaches. Where parity of measures are achievable, engagement with learning and positive/negative behaviour points can also be used to determine impact.
2. Undertake a process evaluation, carrying out focus groups and surveys with key stakeholders to determine the strengths and weaknesses of the programme design and execution, providing recommendations to support sustainability planning by the Ipswich Education Leadership Boards.
3. Evaluate the impact of the programme and schools' engagement with the voluntary and community sector – whether collaboration increases, the reasons behind levels of collaboration and engagement, and a measure of confidence for practitioners in education and the VCS on their ability to improve outcomes by aligning activity and sharing information.
4. Produce six case studies that exemplify a range of approaches to improving engagement in education, where possible across the range of strategies in the [EEF Framework](#).
5. Liaise with the department for education as required, sharing progress, to support their long term evaluation plans of the LBL and EG programmes.
6. A presentation event to share and promote good practice
7. Two peer reviewed publications that will be shared with relevant stakeholders.
8. Opportunities for ongoing access to resources through ARU Educational Partnerships programme (newsletters, research updates, education fellowships, partnership events).

Expected Short term outcomes:

1. Reflective evaluation process supports continual refinement and improvement of the programme.
2. Insights and recommendations inform sustainability planning at area level, and inform decision making at school level
3. Evaluation report and case studies placed on the INOA Sharing learning Hub support wider understanding of the project outcomes.
4. Understanding on the effectiveness of the training and role in achieving outcomes for young people

Expected Long term outcome:

A greater understanding of impactful interventions, how they are delivered most effectively and the contexts in which they work support future planning and education outcomes for children and young people improve.

Evaluation Approach

Ipswich and Norwich were identified in 2017 by the Department for Education as Opportunity Areas to address poor social mobility. Priorities for the areas include tackling the barriers to learning faced by children and young people, that can prevent them from engaging with education, and subsequently lead to underperformance, disengagement, poor attendance, and potentially exclusion. With the Opportunity Area programme ending in August 2022, Ipswich and Norwich invested in staff capacity to address these priorities, with the appointment of “Learning Behaviour Leads” (LBLs) and “Engagement Champions” (ECs) in primary and secondary schools and colleges. In Ipswich, LBLs were Teaching Assistants who were released from their timetables for one day per week, supported by a £5000 grant, while in Norwich, ECs were full time roles. Both LBLs and ECs were supporting the students in their setting who were experiencing the greatest challenges to engagement in education. The LBLs and ECs were supported themselves by a portfolio of Continuing Professional Development (CPD) activities, including sessions delivered by Unity Research School and the Suffolk TA Network, as well as bespoke local training to meet specific needs. The LBLs and ECs were also encouraged to connect with each other to generate a network of peer support which could extend beyond the life of the project.

The ARU research team planned an evaluation of the LBL/EC programmes which would capture the intended and actual programme delivery and outcomes. There were 23 Ipswich schools/colleges with LBLs, so a purposive sample of these was selected by the OA programme manager (n = 10), to include primary and secondary schools and colleges from across the area. As only six Norwich schools/colleges had an EC, all of these were invited to take part in the evaluation. The ARU team initially contacted the Headteacher of each setting via email to obtain their consent for the setting to participate in the evaluation. Once consent had been obtained, the researchers then contacted the LBL/EC to arrange an interview with them, and with an appropriate member of the school senior leadership team (SLT).

Gaining consent from the settings proved challenging, with many settings experiencing significant staffing constraints during 21/22 that limited their capacity to participate in the evaluation. Both the ARU researchers and the OA Programme Managers followed up with the settings after the initial email contact, to provide opportunities for the setting to raise any questions/concerns about participating in the evaluation. Consent was obtained from three Norwich and five Ipswich schools/colleges, which was a smaller sample than was initially planned (five – eight Norwich settings and 10 Ipswich settings), but it was agreed with the OA Programme Managers that this was acceptable given the constraints. The settings will be referred to as Nor1, Nor2 etc, and Ip1, Ip2 etc in this report, to protect the anonymity of individual settings, staff, and students.

The ARU team undertook the evaluation in two phases. The first phase was carried out in January-March 2022 and was focused on identifying the baseline measures of the target students’ engagement with education, setting up tracking measures, and determining the planned delivery and intended outcomes of the programmes. The second phase took place in April-June 2022 and focused on measuring students’ engagement over the course of the programmes, assessing the effectiveness of the programme delivery, and identifying

examples of good practice. Ethical approval for the research was provided by the ARU ethics panel.

The main qualitative data was collected through semi-structured interviews with the LBLs/ECs (n = 7), and SLT members (n = 7). Although eight settings participated in the evaluation, we were only able to secure an interview with the LBL in one school, and with the SLT member in another school. Initial interviews were conducted during the first phase of the evaluation, and follow up interviews were conducted in the second phase, with both the LBL/EC and SLT member, where possible. Participant information sheets and consent forms were provided to all participants and signed forms returned before the interviews, and verbal consent was also confirmed before the start of each interview. The first interviews established participants' intentions and expectations for the programmes, and the second interviews encouraged participants to reflect on the programme implementation, both what worked well and what could be improved, and identify areas of good practice. Interviews were all conducted via Teams in the first phase, and then a mixture of Teams and in person during the second phase.

Data was also collected through an online survey sent to teachers in the sample schools in the first phase of data collection (between 14th January and 17th March 22), to gain their views on issues related to engagement in learning within the setting. The survey was distributed to teachers through email via the school SLT/administrator and contained predominantly open questions, after the initial contextual questions at the start of the survey. There were 23 responses to the survey, with 19 from the Ipswich OA, and four from Norwich. Respondents were from schools which catered from 120 to 2000 pupils. Out of the 23 respondents, there were six SLT members, 16 teachers, and one Teaching Assistant, and respondents taught and supported students from EYFS to post-16. The researchers had originally planned to conduct another survey in the second phase of data collection, to explore any changes resulting from the LBL/EC programme implementation, but in discussion with the OA Programme Managers it was felt that this would place an additional burden on the settings, and wasn't necessary in light of the other data being collected in phase two.

The researchers sought to collect quantitative data held by settings on the attendance, behaviour, exclusion, progress, and achievement of the target students as part of the evaluation, and produced and disseminated a spreadsheet for the sample schools to record this data in the first and second phase of data collection. However, the capacity issues mentioned previously meant that schools were unable to engage with providing this data, despite reminders from both the ARU researchers and the OA Programme Managers. The OA Programme Managers instead provided the researchers with quantitative data they had collected from all schools with an LBL/EC during the programme implementation.

The lead researcher attended training sessions with the LBLs and ECs in February 2022 to discuss the evaluation and request that the LBLs/ECs kept a reflective diary between February and June 2022, to reflect on the programme delivery, and the approaches and resources used, and then share this with the research team in June. This was open to all LBLs/ECs (rather than just those in the sample settings) as part of their personal development from participating in the programme. The researcher provided a template for

the reflective diary, but the NOA were already using a reporting template which covered the same topics, and so this was used as an alternative by the ECs. The research team received eight reflective diaries/reports in total from the LBLs/ECs.

The final data collection method was focus groups with the students involved in the programmes, in the second phase of data collection. Four focus groups were conducted, in line with the project plan, with between two and four participants. The focus groups were held on school premises during the school day, and were facilitated by a member of the research team. Informed consent was obtained from the students' parents in advance of the focus groups, via a participant information sheet and consent form sent home by the school and the signed form returned by parents. The researcher also obtained verbal consent from the students before the start of the focus groups. The focus groups were important to understand the impact of the programmes from the perspective of the young people they sought to help.

The interviews and focus groups were transcribed, either automatically using the Teams transcription function, or by an ARU authorised transcription service. Transcripts were thematically coded to evaluate the programme delivery and fidelity to the planned intervention (i.e. what they planned to happen versus what actually happened) and the impact of the programmes, and to identify good practice, as the basis for case studies.

Project Outcomes

In the first stage of the evaluation, we were keen to understand the behaviour and engagement challenges facing the settings, and how the LBL/EC programme was intended to support behaviour and engagement. From the 23 survey responses collected during Jan – March 22, the main behaviour and engagement challenges were attendance and disruption in class. These issues were seen to have increased since the start of the Covid-19 pandemic, for example one respondent commented: “SEMH (social, emotional and mental health issues) specifically increased over the last year”. The most common factors that respondents noted as contributing to these issues was parental engagement and students' home environment. One respondent noted the wider impact that behaviour issues cause across the school: “A few children in each class taking up all the available adults. Other children do not get supported with their learning, therefore progress across the school suffers”, emphasising the importance of interventions in this area.

Twelve of the 23 respondents knew about the LBL/EC programme and 10 of these believed that the programme was a key part of behaviour management/engagement support within the school. Six believed the LBL/EC programme had already improved behaviour/engagement in the school. There was a desire from staff for the LBL/EC to play a more strategic role in supporting behaviour in the school, as one respondent explained: “Need the (learning behaviour lead) to support staff with ideas and strategies - not to be used as a TA but as skilled support that follows through to class based staff.” From the respondents who had experience of the LBL/EC programme in their school, one commented: “it has provided a person/time capacity which has helped a number of children get through the year”, evidencing the value of the programmes.

As the schools did not have capacity to engage in providing quantitative data using the spreadsheet we provided, we instead used quantitative data provided by the IOA for their area, which measured how the LBL programme had impact the confidence of LBLs from baseline to the reporting point in March 22. The survey data showed that the programme had improved the LBLs' confidence in all aspects of identifying and supporting students' needs. The biggest increase was in identifying and supporting needs in metacognition, from a confidence level of 4.8 (identifying needs) and 4.6 (supporting needs) to 7.7 and 7.4 respectively. Respondents had the greatest confidence in identifying and supporting needs in SEND, social and emotional learning, and behaviour at the March reporting point (with all scores at least 8.4, up from between 6 and 6.7). Parental engagement was slightly lower but still improved, from 5.9 to 7.6. This increased confidence is supported by the positive comments from the LBLs/ECs in the interviews about the training sessions provided as part of the programmes. They valued gaining access to a range of perspectives and resources, in order to enhance their own practice, for example one commented, "I do go into the Padlet a lot (...) I would look at the resources there just to see if there's anything else that I can put in place." Many had also shared resources with colleagues, and were keen for approaches to be adopted more widely within the setting One LBL noted, "The emotion-based school avoidance training, for example, I thought was brilliant, and I shared loads of resources with my colleagues." This enhanced knowledge and confidence will likely have a sustained benefit beyond the life of the programmes, in how staff identify and support students' needs, and in how they share knowledge with and support colleagues.

The implementation of the programmes varied widely between settings, in terms of the number of students involved, the reason for their participation, and the focus of the support provided by the LBL/EC. One SLT member noted "we've all taken quite a unique approach to it." At Ip1, the intervention was aimed at eight students, four of whom had been entered into the programme because of attendance reasons, three for behaviour, and one for social emotional learning. One student did not participate as they were absent from school for the duration of the intervention, but the LBL reported that the other seven students were making either good or some progress since the intervention started. At Ip2, there were also eight students involved, again for a mixture of reasons, including behaviour, social emotional learning, and academic progress. Of these students, three had again not participated in the intervention due to long term absence, and the other five were making progress. Ip3 had a larger intervention, involving 24 students, nearly all of whom had been selected to participate to support their academic progress. Of these, 17 were making progress (albeit three only making limited progress), and four had not yet joined the intervention. The data was not provided for Ip4. The LBL in Ip5 had not been able to implement the programme by the second data collection point in June 22. At Nor1, 14 pupils were supported by the programme, and had been selected because of behaviour and subject-specific learning reasons. At Nor2, 20 students were supported by the programme, and at Nor3 40 students were supported, both for a variety of reasons, including behavioural, academic learning, and absence related.

The settings all had existing approaches in place to support behaviour, but the LBL/EC programmes gave them the opportunity to focus on particular groups of high risk students. One SLT member explained, "it was more a case of really honing in on these core students

and identifying which aspect we need to promote in order to improve engagement.” The data evidenced positive outcomes from the programme, for both students and the LBLs/ECs themselves. LBLs/ECs and SLT members reported success with individual students, including enabling that student to stay in school, increasing their attendance, and growing students’ confidence in the classroom.

For example, an EC described the impact on two of their students;

“Just this morning I had a teacher, his form tutor, who’s also his math teacher, who says these shutdowns are way less frequent now”,

“(student) is able to stay in far more lessons. She’s putting her hand up, volunteering answers. She is not quite able to do assessments in class because she gets very self-conscious. But what she will do is take the assessment and do it outside of class and that would have been unthinkable four months ago. So there’s something there about belief and self-confidence and self-worth.”

The programmes had also contributed to a culture change in some schools, with children more open in talking about their problems, and more likely to seek help when they needed it. One EC described, “I’ve built a trust with those children and they are able to open up to me.” The value of these personal relationships and an open culture will again have the potential to extend beyond the life of the programmes.

The LBLs/ECs did face challenges, however. They acknowledged that a small core of students invited to participate in the interventions had not engaged (some not attending sessions at all), and their learning behaviours had not improved over the course of the intervention. One EC reported “for some students it’s got to the point where I’ve had to manage my expectations and accept that their behaviours will just be consistent.” Covid-19 had an ongoing negative impact, with high levels of staff and student absence, and the LBLs/ECs were often needed to cover sessions within the setting. The reports/reflective diaries emphasised the difficult nature of the LBLs/ECs work, dealing with high need students, some of whom were occasionally violent, including to the LBLs/ECs themselves. Some LBLs/ECs noted challenges in working with colleagues, who were often more senior than them, and who could see the suggestions offered as criticism. One LBL commented: “some teachers are very much ‘this is my classroom, my student, my rules’”, but that “some teachers are absolutely fantastic, they welcomed me in with open arms.” While some LBLs/ECs felt that their SLTs were very supportive, a minority noted that this wasn’t the case, which made it difficult to implement their planned intervention without access to the necessary resources and time.

The key risk identified at the start of the project and throughout its implementation was the capacity of schools to engage with the evaluation, including participation in interviews by SLT members and LBLs/ECs, completion of the survey by teachers, provision of quantitative data about the students, and facilitation of focus groups. The lead researcher took several steps to mitigate this risk, namely working with the Opportunity Area Managers to follow up with invited schools, attending online training sessions with LBLs and ECs to discuss the evaluation and encourage participation, and agreeing alternative sources of data with the OA Managers where needed. The provision of quantitative data by the schools was ultimately not

feasible, so the OA Managers instead provided data collected as part of the internal reporting for the programme, as discussed above.

Lessons Learned & Recommendations

A key strength of the programmes was their flexibility - this enabled settings and the LBLs/ECs to focus their attention where they felt they could make the greatest impact. One EC commented, "I feel like I kind of moulded it to be what I wanted it to be, and I was given I was given free rein to do that." The additional resource that the programmes provided for the schools made an important difference in the support that could be provided to students. The LBLs/ECs did however feel a lack of clarity at the start of the programmes about the purpose of their role. They reported that SLT members and other colleagues were also sometimes unclear about the LBL/EC role, and had different expectations from that of the LBL/EC themselves. This, alongside the freedom of choice about the focus of the intervention, made it difficult for some of the LBLs/ECs to develop a plan for their intervention. This then made starting and delivering a meaningful intervention more challenging, and in the case of one of the sample settings (Ip5), they had not realised any of their plans by the second evaluation phase.

One EC commented "I've never done a project before. I was asked to do this and missed the first session because I didn't know I was doing this project. In hindsight, if I was more prepared, it might have been a bit different." The high levels of staff absences in the settings, due to Covid-19, sometimes created a tension between the LBLs/ECs plans for the intervention, and the need of the setting. LBLs/ECs frequently had to cover absences, which led to a blurring between their role as an LBL/EC and other roles in the setting (such as Teaching Assistants). This limited their capacity to deliver a meaningful intervention, and the LBLs/ECs who had struggled to determine a clear plan for the intervention at the start were most likely to suffer from this role creep. Greater one-to-one support for the LBLs/ECs at the start of the programme could have helped them to make the key decisions about the focus of their intervention, and to give them confidence in the expectations of their role, which could have helped them to maintain focus on delivering their plans over the subsequent months.

It was apparent from our interviews that the LBLs/ECs struggled to measure the impact of their interventions. Some LBLs/ECs commented that collecting baseline data before the intervention started, and then throughout the duration of the intervention, would have helped them to track students' progress, but they were not sure how to do this themselves. Our attempts to capture this with quantitative data collection during the evaluation was also unsuccessful, with the schools lacking the capacity to engage with the process. Simple quantitative data was provided by the OAs, but the measures used and timescales of the evaluation precluded any statistically meaningful measure of impact. We recommend that evaluation should be planned at the beginning of future programmes, so that data is collected at the right time and in the right way. For example, providing training to the LBLs/ECs at the start of the programme, with templates for capturing data, would have facilitated their tracking of pupils' progress, as well as upskilling the LBLs/ECs in monitoring future interventions. It would also be beneficial to consider incentivising engagement amongst potential participants, for example through staged funding, contingent on participation in the evaluation.

The LBLs/ECs found the resources available on Padlet very useful, and we suggest that these resources could be made more widely available to schools and colleges, for them to access as and when required. The training itself could potentially be streamlined, as some LBLs/ECs found this repetitive, and struggled with the volume of training, particularly at the start of the programme. Developing a community of practice with their peers was also valuable for the LBLs/ECs, for example one EC commented, “networking with others, that’s a real positive as well that I will take from it.” Facilitating networks between settings in the future would enable more staff to benefit from these communities of practice. Networks could be geographically based, role based, or student need based, each of which would provide opportunities for staff to make connections beyond their own setting and share best practice.

Our evaluation indicated that the programmes had potential to have a long term positive impact on learning behaviours and engagement in the settings, through building capacity amongst staff and creating a supportive and open school culture. We would recommend that the commissioner could return to the schools in a year’s time to explore how the LBL/EC programmes have influenced practice in the longer term. Key issues to explore would include - are the LBLs/ECs still working in the school (or is someone working in the same role)? Are the initiatives they implemented during the programme still running? Has any of the training shared with other school staff affected their practice? How has the behaviour and learning outcomes of the target students been impacted in the longer term? Is this work part of the school improvement plan going forward?

In terms of broader recommendations for others working in this area, we would emphasise that collaboration with stakeholders before launching an initiative is crucial, to understand the priorities and challenges they are facing. Throughout the time that the LBL/EC programmes were running, schools were under significant staffing pressure due to Covid-19 absences. In many schools, the LBL/EC therefore had the greatest value as an additional staff resource, and their plans for the intervention sometimes had to take a backseat. We also recommend that commissioners acknowledge the emergent nature of interventions in complex systems such as schools, and that this can make one-size fits all intervention impractical. Setting the principles of an intervention and then allowing the programme itself to be designed and implemented at a local level, allows those working within the system to design an intervention which best suits their context, and can deliver the greatest impact.