Experiences of aspiring school principals receiving coaching as part of a leadership development programme

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Abstract

Purpose
This paper adds depth to our understanding of *how* coaching works by exploring the experiences of 14 aspiring school principals who received one-to-one leadership coaching as part of a leadership development programme.

Design/methodology/approach
This study adopts a phenomenological approach. Individual semi-structured interviews were conducted with the participants. Thematic analysis was used to code the data and identify themes.

Findings
This paper reports on four themes based on the experiences of the participants: having time to reflect; feeling safe to explore; focusing on what's important for me; and experiencing positive emotions.

Research limitations
The findings are unique to the participants who volunteered to take part in this study and therefore not representative of a general population of aspiring educational leaders. Further research is needed into the possible benefits of coaching to support educators undergoing leadership training.

Practical implications
The findings raise a potential dilemma within the teaching profession about the use of educators' time; while they need to give time and attention to multiple stakeholders, they also need to protect time for their own development and self-reflection. Based on the reported experiences of the participants in this study, it is recommended that coaching be considered a component of professional development for educational leaders.

Originality/value
This paper adds to the growing research base for coaching in education, providing a unique insight into the experiences of aspiring school principals who received one-to-one leadership coaching as part of a leadership development programme.

Keywords: aspiring school principals; coaching; schools; thematic analysis

Introduction

Over recent years, meta-analysis studies and systematic reviews of empirical and practitioner research have confirmed the positive effects of workplace coaching. For example, in their meta-analysis study, Sonesh *et al.* (2015) found a significant improvement in self-efficacy and stress reduction and a significant positive effect on behavioural change, suggesting that coaching is effective in improving leadership skills, job performance and skills development; Grover and Furnham's (2016) systematic review of empirical and practitioner research found improved wellbeing, career satisfaction and goal attainment.

However, this study responds to Theeboom's (2016) invitation to researchers to shift focus from "Does coaching work?" to "How does coaching work?" It explored how aspiring school principals experienced the coaching component of a leadership development programme designed and sponsored by an Australian state department of education. The programme provided up to eight individual leadership coaching sessions for each participant to support them as they engaged with blended-learning components including workshops, an internship alongside another school principal, project work and online learning, culminating in the award of a graduate certificate from an Australian university. The participants in the programme held various middle-leadership roles in schools and aspired to be promoted to school principal. This study focused only on how they experienced the coaching component and not how they experienced the other components. Through its exploration of their experiences, the study revealed what happened to the participants in a psychological sense to help them strengthen their leadership capacity. This contribution to our knowledge about how coaching works is notable because such conversations are confidential and not easily accessible beyond those who deliver and receive coaching.

Literature Review

Over the last 20 years, the increasing recognition of the role of coaching in improving the performance and wellbeing of learners and educators has led to a continual expansion of the use of coaching in educational settings (Campbell and van Nieuwerburgh, 2018). As a further development, coaching interventions in education

are increasingly based on psychological theories and research (van Nieuwerburgh and Oades, 2017). In this literature review, after defining two different types of coaching in education and briefly considering the educational contexts in which coaching is used, the authors explore the use of coaching to support educational leadership.

Definitions of coaching in education

There is still a lack of clarity about the definition of "coaching". Sometimes the terms "coaching" and "mentoring" are conflated, with practice presented as being on a continuum from nondirective to directive. While this lack of definitional consistency may give an opportunity to continue the dialogue and develop deeper understandings about what coaching is and how it works, it poses a challenge when drawing conclusions from research. Towards the directive end of the continuum, instructional coaches work with teachers to improve classroom practice, including "identifying and explaining teaching strategies to meet goals" (Knight, 2018). Much of the literature, especially from the United States, is about instructional coaching for literacy and numeracy. In contrast, the authors of this study interpret coaching as a *facilitative* intervention that is closer to the nondirective end of the continuum, reflecting Whitmore's (1992) observation that "coaching is unlocking a person's potential to maximise their own performance. It is helping them to learn rather than teaching them" (p. 5). The coaches in this study had received coaching training based on van Nieuwerburgh's (2012) definition of coaching as

> a one-to-one conversation that focuses on the enhancement of learning and development through increasing self-awareness and a sense of personal responsibility, where the coach facilitates the self-directed learning of the coachee through questioning, active listening, and appropriate challenge in a supportive and encouraging climate. (p. 17)

Research studies on coaching in education

Grant *et al.* (2010, p. 153) noted that peer-reviewed research on professional coaching for educators is somewhat limited, and this remains the case despite a growing body of research and academic literature. Within the compilation of coaching in education English-language publications gathered by van Nieuwerburgh and Barr (2019), a little over half (188) were empirical studies, and of these, only 19 studies focused on coaching for educational leadership.

Impact of coaching in education

"The Global Framework for Coaching and Mentoring in Education" (van Nieuwerburgh *et al.*, 2019) provides a useful structure for surveying the existing research by proposing

four educational contexts for coaching: professional practice, community engagement, the student experience and, the subject of this study, educational leadership.

Coaching has been used successfully to improve *professional practice*, particularly learning and teaching through instructional coaching for literacy and numeracy (Elek and Page, 2018; Knight and van Nieuwerburgh, 2012; van Nieuwerburgh and Barr, 2016, p. 510). Kraft and Blazar's (2018) meta-analysis of instructional coaching confirmed large positive effects on both instructional practice and student achievement and discussed the challenges of scaling up. Several studies also share the effectiveness of peer coaching (Hooker, 2014; Kidd, 2009; Rivera-McCutchen and Sharff Panero, 2014). Lu's (2010) review of the literature on peer coaching in preservice teacher education confirmed the value of peer coaching in that setting. The use of coaching in *community engagement,* especially with parents, is emerging in the research literature, with success observed when parents are coached by teachers (Graham, 2013) and when parents are trained as coaches (Bamford *et al.*, 2012). Coaching is also being applied to the *student experience*, with coaching of students leading to promising improvements in performance and wellbeing (Devine *et al.*, 2013; van Nieuwerburgh and Barr, 2016, pp. 513–515) and improved confidence and self-motivation (Fields, 2018).

The fourth context in the framework is *educational leadership,* which is the focus of this study*.* The literature includes an extensive range of guidance and advice for educational leadership coaching – for example, Bloom *et al.*'s (2005) focus on "blended coaching" to support the development of principals, Aguilar's (2013) "art of coaching" strategies, Robertson's (2016) work on building educational leadership capacity through partnership, and educational leadership programmes in Australia, Denmark, England, Scotland and the United States, where coaching is a key component (Sackman, 2013; van Nieuwerburgh and Barr, 2016). The impact of coaching for educational leadership has been shared through a range of research studies.

Impact of coaching for educational leadership

Research studies do not always clarify the exact nature of the coaching intervention, making it challenging to draw conclusions from research. However, it is worth noting that a range of research studies have reported on the success of coaching to support the leadership development of education leaders, principals and headteachers. Lofthouse and Whiteside's (2020) research study of headteachers in England receiving facilitative leadership coaching where the headteacher sets the agenda found a positive impact on their self-belief and confidence, and that coaching had the potential to help maintain sustainability in the school workforce. Improved leadership capabilities were experienced by school leaders in 12 predominantly rural, high-poverty school districts in the southeastern United States (Klar *et al.*, 2019) and in a mid-sized urban district (Weathers and White, 2015). Experienced principals receiving coaching alongside feedback were more likely to change their behaviour than principals receiving feedback

without coaching (Goff *et al.*, 2014). Coaches who participated in a two-year pilot programme of coaching for veteran leaders highlighted the key role of questioning in supporting the school leaders to provide their own solutions (Lindle, 2016). In Hollweck's (2019) Canadian study exploring the experiences of being a mentor–coach on a teacher induction programme, the mentor–coaches reported positive emotions, engagement, positive relationships, meaning and accomplishment from their experiences. Coaching has also supported novice principals (James-Ward, 2013), aspiring leaders (Blackman, 2010) and educators who are not yet in leadership roles (Grant *et al.*, 2010). With the increasing focus on the wellbeing of educators and students, it is interesting to note that Sardar and Galdames (2017) found that when school leaders felt supported by coaching, they perceived an improvement in their performance and higher levels of resilience.

However, being coached does not always lead to feeling supported, and a note of caution has been sounded by Lochmiller and Karnopp (2016) in their longitudinal study of leadership coaches who were working with assistant principals. The authors found examples of school principals (line managers of the assistant principals being coached) controlling coaches' work with the assistant principal rather than allowing a confidential relationship, and this had an adverse effect on the coach/coachee relationship.

Next steps

The literature has so far revealed the potential for coaching interventions to enhance the wellbeing of educational leaders and aspiring leaders – if the coaching is done well. Because of the role of leaders in developing empowerment and teacher agency in their teams, further research is needed to understand how coaching interventions can support them in that role. As coaching in education matures, more research is needed to increase our knowledge and understanding not only about the *impact* of coaching on the wellbeing and performance of educational leaders, but also on the *what* of the coaching intervention and the context – *what was it that led to those outcomes?* Therefore, further phenomenological exploration about coachees' actual experiences of coaching could contribute to this knowledge and respond to Theeboom's (2016) invitation to focus on "How does coaching work?"

Method

This research study explored the experiences of 14 aspiring school principals who had received leadership coaching from external coaches as part of a state-wide leadership development programme for aspiring school principals in the state of Victoria, Australia (Bastow, 2018). As part of a 12-month leadership development programme, participants had received up to 8 hours of context-specific coaching following completion of a 360-degree diagnostic tool to help determine learning needs.

Methodology

In order to explore the experiences of individual participants, a qualitative research method was required, and thematic analysis was selected for two reasons. First, it provides a flexible yet robust framework for gaining insight into shared meanings and experiences (Braun and Clarke, 2014). Second, it could potentially offer tentative findings and insights for consideration by practitioners. Braun and Clarke (2006) observed that thematic analysis can be applied across a range of theoretical and epistemological approaches. The epistemological position of this study was broadly empiricist as opposed to rationalist; it was conducted on the assumption that the knowledge gained came from the participants' experiences and their interpretations of those experiences (Willig, 2008, p. 3) rather than the assumption that the chief source and test of knowledge is reason. Further, the approach is phenomenological because the experience was "real" to each participant (Willig, 2008, p. 13).

Consistency of coaching approach and procedures

There had been a high level of consistency in the approach and procedures of the coaching intervention. All coaches had several years of experience of educational leadership coaching and had been trained and accredited by the same coaching provider. The coaching provider had briefed all coaches on their role in supporting participants to work towards personal leadership development goals as they engaged with the blended-learning components of the programme and had provided regular small-group coaching supervision and annual professional update to the coaches. Based on van Nieuwerburgh's definition of coaching described earlier in this paper, all coaches had adopted a facilitative coaching approach to support self-directed learning as opposed to a more dialogic approach (e.g. instructional coaching) where the coach may share expertise. This definition of coaching, contrasting it with other developmental supports such as mentoring, had been presented to participants in programme materials and through an initial group briefing before the commencement of the coaching. A standard coaching agreement and other documentation had supported consistent contracting, and all participants had begun their coaching engagement with a debrief and goal-setting conversation based on a 360-degree diagnostic tool. After an initial 90-minute session, all coaching sessions had lasted approximately one hour. The first coaching session had been delivered in-person, with subsequent sessions being a mix of in-person, phone or videoconferencing to suit the coach and participant.

Participants

On completion of the leadership development programme, all members of one cohort of the programme were invited to participate in the research study. Each person was sent an invitation letter and a participant information sheet about the research study. A total

of 14 people accepted the invitation and gave their written consent. Terry *et al.* (2017) recommend between six and 15 participants for studies where thematic analysis is used, so the number of participants was considered sufficient. The demographics of the group, coached by seven different coaches, were five men and nine women. Participants were aged between 35 and 55, had between six and 25 years of teaching experience with most participants having 11 to 15 years of experience, and worked in a range of sectors: four primary, five secondary, two P–9, and one each for P–12, special and outdoor education. Two participants had become principals by the time of interview, while others held roles as assistant principal (eight participants), leading teacher (two participants) and learning specialist (two participants). Eight participants had completed all eight coaching sessions, three had completed seven sessions and the remaining three participants had completed six, five and four sessions, respectively.

Data collection

The coaching component of the programme had taken place over a period of up to 18 months, and research participants were interviewed during the following two months. The participants were randomly allocated to three research assistants based in the UK. The research assistants invited each of their allocated participants to take part in an individual semi-structured interview using a videoconferencing call of approximately one hour. The interview questions were deliberately nondirective to avoid leading the participants. The first question was "Tell me about your experiences of being coached". Nondirective expander questions were used, such as "Tell me more about that", "What else?" and "How did that make you feel?" Participants were also asked, "What is the relationship between the coaching you have experienced and your leadership development, if any?" In order to ensure that the participants had not omitted any reflections about their experiences of being coached, they were also asked, "What else would you like to say about your experience of being coached?" The interviews were transcribed by two research assistants, who anonymised the transcripts to maintain confidentiality before they were passed to the researchers.

Data analysis

Analysis was iterative and collaborative. In the first stage of the analysis, transcripts were randomly allocated in duplicate to three researchers. Each transcript was read and analysed by at least two of the researchers, who became familiar with the data and generated initial codes through an inductive approach (Braun and Clarke, 2006). The researchers met and used flip charts and discussion to identify patterns, to generate initial themes from the data and to develop a concept map. Separately, the researchers identified participant quotations that supported each theme, and through further discussion, the three researchers continued to develop the themes. In the next stage, a fourth researcher (one of the research assistants who had interviewed participants) joined the analysis team for the remainder of the study. She reviewed the themes,

checked that they were strongly linked to the data and offered further insights to the ongoing development of the themes. Analysis and meaning-making continued throughout the writing phase (Smith, 1995), and the themes were revisited on completion to confirm that they were reflected in the data. Finally, a fifth researcher reviewed the themes within the context of the completed written paper.

Ethical considerations

Ethical approval for the study was granted by the Research Ethics Committee at the University of East London, UK, and by the Department of Education and Training in Victoria, Australia. The Australian Psychological Association's *Code of Ethics* (2007) and the British Psychological Society's *Code of Ethics and Conduct* (2009) were followed. In particular, the study adhered to the ethical protocols in the British Psychological Society's (2009) "Standard of Protection of Research Participants" (pp. 19–20).

Reflexivity

Reflexivity urges researchers "to explore the ways in which a researcher's involvement with a particular study influences, acts upon and informs such research" (Nightingale and Cromby, 1999, p. 228). Throughout their work on the study, the researchers reflected on how their values, experiences and beliefs may be shaping the research. There was a risk of unconscious bias because three of the researchers held professional links to the provider of the coaching, and two of the researchers had previously held educational leadership positions. To counterbalance this, the research team placed a strong emphasis on acknowledging assumptions held and attempting to avoid the impact of any bias – for example, by inviting the fourth researcher to collaborate in the analysis and writing of results and discussion.

Findings

Thematic analysis of transcribed interviews with participants provided insight into the experience of school leaders who had received one-to-one leadership coaching as part of a structured leadership development programme. Four overarching themes emerged: having time to reflect, feeling safe to explore, focusing on what's important for me, and experiencing positive emotions.

Having time to reflect

This theme was well supported in the transcripts of this study's participants, with numerous references to the experience of having time to reflect on professional practice. In fact, this theme was identified in all the transcripts. Participants reported positive

appreciation at being "forced" to take time out for themselves, enjoying a sense of opportunity and structured self-exploration:

> It's almost enforced pause and an enforced stop, rest, think. (P13, 48–49)

> It gave me an opportunity to reflect on the work that we had done, but in my own context. (P10, 315–317)

> It gave you mental headspace to be able to listen and think and process. (P1, 27)

As one participant (P10) articulated, "doing the doing" of teaching can be so consuming that the opportunity for reflective practice and development of strategic thinking can become habitually sidelined in favour of a responsive focus on the immediate: "What was happening was the important stuff wasn't getting done because the urgent stuff was being, was kind of over-riding it all the time" (128–129). As P5 noted, "It was the element of time to self-reflect with the coach, and … not just sit, sit on my own in an office and let my thoughts wander" (135–136).

Feeling safe to explore

This theme is closely related to the one above. Participants reported that they felt safe to explore and learn during the coaching sessions. Specifically, participants noted that they trusted the coaching relationship, enjoyed a "safe space" to share their personal agenda and felt supported to explore their thinking. Participants reported particular value from the fact that their coach came from outside their school context: "It definitely helped being able to have that with someone who wasn't in the school organisation as well. So that buffer was important … they were external to that … very removed I suppose" (P3, 287–288). The importance of separation from a work context, underlined by coaching confidentiality practices, enabled participants to gain trust in the relationship and proactively explore complex issues in a supportive, non-judgemental space:

> There is a lot of trust that is involved because you are making yourself quite vulnerable. (P7, 287–386)

> It was really exploring and opening up how I felt about myself and the sort of leadership I was doing … the sort of leadership I wanted to do … coming to grips with any … self-doubts that I had. (P2, 142–146)

> Sometimes that might be the only voice or the only moment you actually have discussions about some of the really complex issues that you deal with. (P13, 382–383)

> I was able to be very frank, and I … you know, I did not feel judged. (P5, 101)

Participants also acknowledged the value of a neutral coaching relationship allowing them to explore self-limiting perceptions and accept challenge constructively, without feeling judged or exposed:

> The whole fact that it is someone who is completely removed from my context, who doesn't make any of those assumptions that the people in my context make. (P10, 403-–03)

> She was quite, you know ... very supportive in, in my goals, in having challenging conversations. (P9, 82–83)

> I set that parameter that I really need to be challenged, I really want to be pushed and extended. (P14, 183–184)

Focusing on what's important for me

This theme was evident in every participant's account of the experience of being coached. This theme was demonstrated through descriptions of a personalised experience, which in contrast to their public role was essentially private:

> You can't sort of go to the staff member next door and talk about whatever it is. (P4, 200–201)

> It is one thing to have the practical sessions where we went to [location of leadership training programme] ... but to then have the coaching element that was just for you, you know, me specifically ... really gave that self-belief. (P5, 130–132)

> I've loved the fact that I can do it behind closed doors, quietly, with no interruptions and no-one listening, and no-one knowing: it's me and her. And I can go as fast as I want ... as slow as I want. Um, really, it's in my hands. It's in my court. (P6, 285–289).

Building on the sense of a personalised learning experience, participants saw tangible value in the practical focus on working with aspects of their real-life context:

> The opportunity to ... improve and reflect, in a real-life situation that doesn't involve reading a book or reading an article and having a professional discussion and yada, yada, yada. I really like how it is action focused and it is tangible. (P7, 327–329)

Talking about where *I* was at. So, what was going on in terms of *my* school leadership journey, and what was going on in *my* particular context … workwise, but more broadly as well. (P10, 97–99)

In addition to the benefits reported of a personalised and practical approach to developing leadership skills, the opportunity to unpack individual specifics and rehearse strategies was appreciated by the majority of participants:

Just being able to talk through, unpack, ask a question … being able to articulate or plan something out before you go into a difficult conversation … really sort of helped … with your day-to-day business. (P4, 208–212)

I was able to practise conversations with my coach … and rehearse the conversation in different ways it could go, so that when it actually came to the conversation, I'd practised those. (P9, 183–184)

Rather than talking about, all the time, focusing on sort of, big picture school leadership kind of stuff … we really went down to this one particular aspect of my particular context, or what sort of strategy we could try that might help in that particular situation. So – really specific, really focused and really practical. (P10, 120–134)

Experiencing positive emotions

This theme captures an experience reported by the majority of participants: positive feelings of affirmation and empowerment. The quotations below provide a sense of the positive emotions experienced by some of the participants in this study:

That encouragement was really positive and that … that affirmation that you are doing … some things well. (P8, 192–194)

Be me! I don't have to prove I'm anybody else, (P2, 38–39)

Pretty good for my self-esteem overall. (P4, 17–18)

The coaching allows you to get past this blame that, you know … I may not be doing it as well as what I'd like to, but … I've got the power to change this and to put things in place to make these changes. I think it's kind of quite empowering and you look at things from a more optimistic point of view. (P13, 277–283)

Nice balance between reinforcement and challenge. (P11, 74–75)

Probably one of the best things I have done. (P6, 31)

Discussion

The four themes presented above provide a vivid insight into the lived experience of having been coached as an aspiring school principal as part of a leadership development programme. Furthermore, the sequence of the reported themes presents a cohesive story of "*how*" the coaching experience worked for participants: in summary, it was through a process of responding to the preconditions for learning (Themes 1 and 2), actively engaging with the fabric of personalised learning (Theme 3) and gaining the motivation to put their learning into practice back in the workplace (Theme 4). In the next section, the findings are discussed further with additional reference to relevant research findings and theories, as appropriate to an emergent enquiry.

Having time to reflect

The participants in this study appreciated the time for reflection afforded by the one-to-one coaching conversations. Their experience seems to support the view of Kline (1999) who argues for the importance of creating conducive "thinking environments" for people to think for themselves. A number of academic studies have also highlighted that educators value time for reflection. In her study of peer coaching used as a support system for early childhood education students, Hooker (2014) found that working with a peer coach offered increased opportunities for focused reflection and planning. In another study, participants who received coaching as part of a short coaching training workshop found the experience helped them reflect and gave them time to think (Barr and van Nieuwerburgh, 2015). In fact, the perceived value of coaching as an environment for reflection is being increasingly recognised within the field (Atwal, 2019; Mycroft 2019; Paterson and Munro 2019).

Feeling safe to explore

Another commonly reported experience was one of safety within the coaching conversation. Participants alluded to a range of possible factors contributing to this feeling of safety. These included trust in their coach as a person with whom they could talk candidly and be vulnerable without fear of judgement. There was a sense of a liberation of not feeling judged. This theme reflects what is known about the importance of trust in the coaching relationship. Van Nieuwerburgh and Love (2019) argue that "trust is an essential ingredient in the relationship between the coach and coachee, upon which the effectiveness of all coaching activity ultimately depends" (p. 64). Research supports this claim. For example, de Haan and Duckworth (2012) found that the "client-coach relationship (working alliance) strongly mediated the impact of self-efficacy and technique on coaching outcomes, suggesting that the perception of working alliance by the client was the key factor in coaching outcome" (p. 185). In other words, the sense of safety experienced by the participants of this study will have

increased the likelihood of positive outcomes from the coaching conversations. According to Lofthouse (2018), coaching in educational settings is as an opportunity for enabling conversations that increase trust and enhance agency (pp. 7–9).

Focusing on what's important for me

One of the findings of this study provides a relatively rare insight into the experience of being coached. Perhaps because coaching is a confidential intervention that takes place behind "closed doors", there is relatively little written on this aspect of a coachee's experience. As educators who invest much of their time on the learning and development of others, it may be the case that the experience of focusing on one's own needs and interests was especially notable to the participants of this study. Being able to focus on whatever was of most importance to them, the participants experienced a sense of autonomy, which self-determination theory (SDT) describes as a basic psychological need (Deci and Ryan, 1985). When people "feel a full sense of choice and self-initiation about their goal pursuits" (Clutterbuck and Spence, 2017 p. 222), they will be more motivated to pursue their goals. SDT is recognised as a way of increasing autonomous motivation (Stone *et al.,* 2009), and the use of SDT within coaching can be a way of promoting optimal functioning and wellbeing (Spence and Deci, 2013).

Experiencing positive emotions

The participants' experience of positive emotions aligns with similar research in non-education organisations. For example, one of the findings in Grover and Furnham's (2016) systematic review of 52 research studies noted that coaching of individuals increased their wellbeing. The applied positive psychology field recognises the value of specific interventions such as coaching (Lomas *et al.*, 2014) to help build individual psychological capital (sometimes referred to as PsyCap) and conceptualised as "a higher order positive construct comprised of the four-facet constructs of self-efficacy/confidence, optimism, hope, and resiliency" (Luthans *et al.*, 2007 p. 4). Each of these factors is seen to be malleable and responsive to both context and development. The theme of positive emotions reported in this study was not only experienced as a source of enjoyment – it was seen as contributing to behavioural changes that enhanced leadership capability such as a broadening of perspective ("the balcony view" [P1, 52–53]) and increased empathy: "If I'm feeling like this, then I'm pretty much sure everybody else is feeling the same way" (P13, 283–284). As such, both psychological capital and the ability to model leadership behaviour were seen to be augmented. In the educational context, "emotional labour", defined by Grandey (2000) as "the process of regulating both feelings and expressions for the organizational goals" (p. 97), plays a significant role. A recent study into "the effects of teachers' psychological capital competencies on their emotional labor competencies" (Tosten and Toprak, 2017, p. 7) found a significant link between psychological capital and the ability to display the appropriate emotions and behaviours, with "hope and optimism as dimensions of

psychological capital … [having] the highest predictive power on teachers' emotional labor behaviours" (p. 7). In respect of the findings of this study, the experience of participants suggests that coaching reinforced their psychological capital through increasing hope and optimism.

Wider Discussion

Having discussed how the reported experience of participants in this study relates to relevant theory and research, the next section takes a broader view. Below, the participants' perceptions of how the coaching may have influenced their leadership roles are presented. This is followed by a discussion about the practical implications of this study, along with limitations that should be considered when considering these findings and implications.

Perceived influence on leadership role

In addition to exploring participants' experience of undertaking coaching as part of a leadership development programme, participants were invited to reflect on the potential influence of the coaching experience on their own leadership development. Participants reported that they perceived an impact on their *professional practice*. For the majority, this represented a shift in their day-to-day behaviours towards a more strategic approach: "It reminded me to step out and really look from the balcony view" (P1, 52) and "I would want to jump straight in and help, and of course I still want to do that, but at times I think I find myself just stepping back from that a bit more and … almost coaching people through things more" (P5, 279–282). A number of participants also reported an increase in *confidence* as the coaching progressed, not only in their aspirations to the role of principal but also in their understanding of how to make progress towards that goal:

> I don't reckon I would have felt confident to, you know, start in a principal position 12 or 18 months ago, but you know … as I went through that process I became more and more confident. I felt that I had the skills to do that. (P5, 259–263)

Confidence was also described as increased comfort with ambiguity in leading groups: "I'm now much more confident to sit with my team and say I don't know the answer here, I don't know what to do" (P1, 376–377). This ability to be comfortable with showing vulnerability was recognised as a valuable asset to the more senior participants who had recently moved into leadership roles (P13, P14): "It's that sharing of responsibility that doesn't all sit at my door or my chair. So, in terms of my development that has been the greatest bit" (P14, 238–239).

Implications

The Australian Government recognises that "School leaders are working in increasingly complex and challenging environments, and the role of the school principal has changed significantly over the past 20 years" (Australian Government, 2014). In their professional standards for school principals, the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL) describes principals as those who "model effective leadership and are committed to their own ongoing professional development and personal health and wellbeing in order to manage the complexity of the role and the range of learning capabilities and actions required of the role" (p. 16).

The findings of this study point to a potential dilemma within the teaching profession: the prime responsibility to *give* time and attention to multiple stakeholders (students, colleagues, parents) to promote achievement of academic goals and development of others negatively impacts the ability to *have* time and safe space for self-reflection and development.

Yet, as the findings demonstrate, with the benefit of "having time to reflect" and "feeling safe to explore", the role of service to others may be usefully examined within a coaching programme in pursuit of "focusing on what's important for me". With the exception of one participant (P12), this brought a range of reported positive emotions with beneficial implications for professional practice and individual confidence to put learning into practice.

Furthermore, this study raises the question of whether "preconditions" may be fundamental for the personal development of educational leaders. The teaching profession understands this in respect of its students and their specific learning challenges in the context of multiple pressures, but without ensuring necessary preconditions for the personal development of its leaders, learning orientation within schools may be sub-optimal. Participants who were already in new leadership roles saw the benefits of building on their own experience of being coached to create a developmental culture for their senior teams:

> So, trying to encourage myself and everyone else around me to be more coach-like, to really, truly understand what is happening and then to encourage the other person to identify the opportunities … it's that sharing of responsibility that doesn't all sit at my door or my chair. … I think it's given me a better understanding of how I can support other leaders in their own development as well. (P14, 227–241)

> I'm just a little more aware of … the possibilities and different ways of working … I've realised that through the coaching. (P13, 188–190)

Based on the experiences of participants in this study, the introduction of one-to-one leadership coaching as a component of professional development could be considered alongside other interventions as an effective way to building more resilient leadership capability and confidence.

Limitations

A number of limitations should be considered when considering the findings and implications of this study. First, the number of participants was relatively small. Second, participation in this study was voluntary so the participants who accepted the invitation may have been more inclined to be positive about the experience than those who did not accept. Third, the method for capturing research data from participants was through interviews conducted over a videoconferencing platform. This may have inhibited some participants who would have preferred to meet in person. Finally, some members of the research team had professional links to the coaching provider, leading to concerns about researcher bias. In order to manage this, independent UK-based research assistants were employed to undertake the interviews with participants. In order to minimise the risk of researcher bias, four of the paper's authors undertook the coding, analysis and write-up, and the fifth author reviewed the themes within the context of the completed written paper.

Conclusion

In this study, the researchers aimed to learn more about the lived experiences of educators who received coaching as part of a leadership development programme for aspiring school principals. By adopting thematic analysis, the study addressed Theeboom's (2016) challenge to move from the question of "Does it work?" to "How does it work?" Participants in this study reported that they had time and space to reflect, that they felt safe to explore and that they were able to focus on what was important to them. Moreover, participants reported that they experienced positive emotions during this process. This reinforced the current interest in enhancing the wellbeing of educators (van Nieuwerburgh and Oades, 2017). This paper highlights the need for further research into the field of coaching in education. Specifically, research is needed into the perceived impact of coaching on the professional behaviours of educational leaders. While this study focused on the experiences of aspiring educational leaders, it would be interesting to learn about the experiences of educators at other levels of the hierarchy who receive coaching alongside the taught element of professional development programmes. It is possible that education professionals at other levels may also benefit from coaching prior to engaging in a more challenging leadership role and throughout the career ladder climb.

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