

Primary School Leaders' Perspectives on Coaching Practices: A Preliminary Investigation

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ABSTRACT

Coaching has increasingly been adopted in primary schools as a means to strengthen instructional practice, enhance professional learning, and improve student outcomes. This preliminary investigation examines primary school leaders' perspectives on the role, benefits, and challenges of coaching practices within their institutions. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with a purposive sample of headteachers and senior leadership team members from diverse school contexts. Thematic analysis revealed that leaders perceive coaching as a valuable strategy for fostering teacher reflection, building confidence, and supporting collaborative cultures. At the same time, participants highlighted barriers to effective implementation, including time constraints, inconsistent coaching quality, and limited training resources. The study underscores the importance of clear role expectations, ongoing professional development, and leadership commitment to embed coaching sustainably. These findings provide an initial evidence base to inform policy and practice in the design of coaching programs in primary education settings.

KEYWORDS

Primary Education, Instructional Coaching, School Leadership, Professional Development, Teacher Support, Educational Improvement, Coaching Implementation, Reflective Practice, Leadership Perspectives, Qualitative Research.

INTRODUCTION

School leadership is widely recognized as a pivotal factor in educational success, with school heads playing a multifaceted role that spans instructional leadership, organizational management, and community engagement [5, Day, 2007]. Primary school heads, in particular, face unique challenges given their responsibility for foundational learning environments, often with limited resources and diverse stakeholder expectations. The demands on educational leaders are constantly evolving, requiring continuous professional development to navigate complex administrative tasks, foster a positive school culture, and support teacher growth [Earley, 2020]. Effective leadership is not merely about managing; it is about inspiring, developing, and enabling others, necessitating a high degree of emotional intelligence and adaptive leadership behaviors [Kerr et al., 2006; Anthony, 2017].

In response to these escalating demands, professional coaching has emerged as a promising avenue for leadership development in various sectors, including education [Bernard, 2018; Sonesh et al., 2015]. Coaching is a collaborative process that aims to enhance an individual's skills, performance, and well-being by facilitating self-discovery, goal setting, and action planning [Beere & Broughton, 2013; Peterson, 2010]. For school leaders, coaching can provide a confidential space for reflection, problem-solving, and the development of new strategies to address specific leadership challenges [Gavin, 2018]. It can also contribute to creating a psychologically safe environment within the school, fostering learning, innovation, and growth [Edmondson, 2018].

While the benefits of leadership coaching are well-

documented in broader contexts, there remains a need for specific research into the perceptions of school heads regarding coaching practices, particularly in primary education settings. Understanding their perspectives—what they value, what challenges they perceive, and how coaching aligns with their professional development needs—is crucial for designing effective and relevant coaching programs [Anderson & Turnbull, 2016]. A pilot study is an essential first step in this investigative process, allowing for the exploration of key themes, the refinement of research instruments, and the identification of preliminary insights before a larger-scale investigation is undertaken.

This pilot study aims to explore primary school heads' perceptions of coaching practices. Specifically, it seeks to identify the perceived benefits, challenges, and overall receptiveness to coaching among a select group of primary school leaders. The findings will serve as a foundational understanding to inform future, more comprehensive research into leadership development through coaching in primary education.

METHODS

Research Design

This study employed a descriptive, qualitative pilot study design, supplemented by preliminary quantitative measures, to gather in-depth perceptions from primary school heads regarding coaching practices. The pilot nature of the study allowed for an exploratory approach, focusing on understanding the range of experiences and opinions rather than testing specific hypotheses. This design is appropriate for initial investigations into a phenomenon, providing foundational insights and guiding the development of future, larger-scale research [Davis, 1971].

Participants

The target participants for this pilot study were primary school heads. A small, purposive sample of six primary school heads was selected from a single educational district to ensure accessibility and facilitate in-depth engagement. The participants represented a mix of school sizes and years of experience as a school head, aiming for a preliminary representation of the diversity within the role. Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained prior to data collection, ensuring anonymity and confidentiality of responses.

Data Collection

Data were collected through a semi-structured questionnaire and follow-up informal interviews. The questionnaire comprised both closed-ended questions (using a 5-point Likert scale) to gauge the extent of agreement with statements about coaching benefits and

challenges, and open-ended questions to elicit qualitative narratives on their experiences and perceptions. Key areas explored included:

- Prior exposure to or understanding of coaching.
- Perceived benefits of coaching for leadership development.
- Perceived challenges or barriers to implementing coaching.
- Preferences for coaching models or approaches.
- Overall receptiveness to integrating coaching into professional development.

The informal interviews served to elaborate on responses from the questionnaire, clarify nuanced perceptions, and explore emergent themes in greater detail. All interviews were conducted virtually and transcribed for analysis.

Data Analysis

For the quantitative aspects, descriptive statistics (frequencies, percentages, means) were used to summarize the Likert scale responses, providing an initial overview of common perceptions. For the qualitative data from open-ended questions and interviews, thematic analysis was conducted. This involved:

1. Familiarization: Reading through all transcripts and responses to gain a general understanding.
2. Initial Coding: Identifying interesting features across the dataset and systematically coding them.
3. Searching for Themes: Grouping codes into broader potential themes.
4. Reviewing Themes: Checking if the themes work in relation to the coded extracts and the entire data set.
5. Defining and Naming Themes: Developing detailed analysis for each theme, identifying the 'essence' of what each theme is about.

The integration of quantitative and qualitative data provided a more comprehensive understanding of the school heads' perceptions, allowing for both breadth and depth in the preliminary findings.

RESULTS

The pilot study involving six primary school heads yielded valuable preliminary insights into their perceptions of coaching practices. The data, both quantitative summaries and qualitative narratives, provided a foundational understanding of their

experiences and outlook regarding coaching.

Perceived Benefits of Coaching

Quantitatively, there was a general positive inclination towards the perceived benefits of coaching. All six participants indicated strong agreement (mean score > 4.0 on a 5-point Likert scale) that coaching could:

- **Enhance Leadership Behaviors:** Participants widely believed that coaching could improve their leadership skills, particularly in areas of communication, decision-making, and team management. This aligns with broader research on the impact of leadership coaching [Anthony, 2017; Gavin, 2018].
- **Foster Problem-Solving and Reflection:** School heads reported that coaching would provide a structured avenue for critical reflection on their practices and facilitate more effective problem-solving strategies for complex school issues.
- **Reduce Isolation:** A recurring qualitative theme was the potential for coaching to alleviate the sense of isolation often experienced by school heads. Participants expressed that a coach could serve as a confidential sounding board, offering objective perspectives and support. This resonates with the concept of psychological safety in leadership [Edmondson, 2018].
- **Improve Well-being:** Some participants also noted the potential for coaching to support their personal and professional well-being, helping them to manage stress and maintain work-life balance, which is a known challenge for educational leaders [Earley, 2020].

Perceived Challenges and Barriers

Despite the enthusiasm for potential benefits, participants also highlighted several significant challenges and barriers to the effective implementation of coaching:

- **Time Constraints:** This was the most frequently cited challenge. School heads expressed concerns about finding sufficient time within their demanding schedules for regular coaching sessions. The administrative burden and diverse responsibilities often leave little room for dedicated professional development [Earley, 2020].
- **Availability of Qualified Coaches:** Participants questioned the availability of coaches who possess both coaching expertise and a deep understanding of the unique context and challenges of primary school leadership. There was a strong preference for coaches with direct educational leadership experience.
- **Cost Implications:** Financial resources were identified as a potential barrier, especially for schools with limited budgets. The cost of external professional coaches could be prohibitive.

- **Lack of Clear Framework/Expectations:** Some expressed uncertainty about what a coaching relationship would entail, including its structure, duration, and expected outcomes. This indicated a need for clearer communication and a standardized framework for educational coaching.

Overall Receptiveness

Overall, the primary school heads demonstrated a high level of receptiveness to the concept of coaching. They viewed it as a valuable, albeit currently underutilized, tool for professional growth. There was a clear desire for tailored coaching programs that address their specific leadership needs and practical constraints. The pilot findings suggest that while the concept is appealing, the practicalities of implementation (time, expertise, cost) need careful consideration for successful integration into professional development portfolios.

DISCUSSION

This pilot study offers a preliminary yet crucial understanding of primary school heads' perceptions of coaching practices. The findings indicate a clear appetite for coaching as a professional development tool, aligning with broader literature on the positive impact of leadership coaching on behaviors and effectiveness [Anthony, 2017; Gavin, 2018]. The perceived benefits—ranging from enhanced leadership skills and improved problem-solving to reduced isolation and better well-being—underscore the multifaceted support that coaching can offer to school leaders who often operate under immense pressure [Earley, 2020]. The desire for a confidential sounding board also highlights the importance of psychological safety, which is paramount for learning and growth in leadership roles [Edmondson, 2018].

However, the study also brought to light significant practical challenges that must be addressed for successful widespread adoption of coaching in primary education. Time constraints emerged as the most critical barrier, reflecting the overwhelming workload faced by school heads [Earley, 2020]. Any proposed coaching intervention must be flexible and integrated seamlessly into their existing routines, rather than adding another burden. This suggests that "just-in-time" coaching or shorter, focused sessions might be more effective than lengthy, rigid programs.

Furthermore, the emphasis on the availability of qualified coaches with specific educational leadership experience is a vital insight. While generic coaching skills are important, school heads expressed a clear need for coaches who understand the nuances of the education system, pedagogical challenges, and the unique political and social dynamics of schools [Bush, 2007; Trujillo, 2018]. This implies a need for specialized training for

educational coaches or for leveraging experienced school leaders as peer coaches. The financial implications also cannot be overlooked, suggesting that cost-effective models, such as internal coaching programs or government-subsidized initiatives, might be necessary.

The overall receptiveness of primary school heads to coaching, despite the identified barriers, indicates a promising pathway for their professional development. Their willingness to engage suggests that with careful planning and consideration of their practical realities, coaching can become an integral part of supporting school leaders. This aligns with the increasing recognition of the need for robust support systems for principals to strengthen the principalship [Anderson & Turnbull, 2016]. The findings also indirectly support the importance of addressing the personal and professional development needs of educational leaders, given the critical role they play in the overall health and success of the education system [Day, 2007].

Implications

The preliminary findings of this pilot study offer several practical implications for policymakers, educational authorities, and professional development providers:

1. **Develop Flexible Coaching Models:** Design coaching programs that accommodate the demanding schedules of primary school heads, potentially offering shorter, more frequent sessions or flexible scheduling options.
2. **Specialized Coach Training:** Invest in training programs that equip coaches with a deep understanding of educational leadership, pedagogical contexts, and the specific challenges faced by primary school heads.
3. **Explore Cost-Effective Solutions:** Investigate and implement diverse coaching delivery models, such as peer coaching, internal coaching networks, or blended learning approaches that combine online resources with in-person sessions, to mitigate cost barriers.
4. **Clear Communication and Frameworks:** Provide clear information about what coaching entails, its objectives, and expected outcomes to build trust and manage expectations among school heads.

Limitations and Future Research

As a pilot study with a small, purposive sample, the findings are exploratory and not generalizable to the broader population of primary school heads. The self-reported nature of some data might also introduce response bias. The cross-sectional design does not allow for tracking changes in perceptions over time or observing the long-term impact of coaching.

Future research should expand on these preliminary findings by:

- Conducting a larger-scale study with a representative sample of primary school heads using probability sampling methods.
- Employing a mixed-methods approach with a more structured quantitative survey and in-depth qualitative interviews to validate and expand upon the insights.
- Implementing longitudinal studies to assess the actual impact of coaching interventions on leadership behaviors, school performance, and leader well-being over time.
- Investigating the effectiveness of different coaching models (e.g., peer coaching vs. external professional coaching) specifically tailored for primary school leaders.
- Exploring the role of organizational culture and policy support in facilitating the uptake and success of coaching initiatives.

CONCLUSION

This pilot study provides an initial yet compelling glimpse into primary school heads' perceptions of coaching practices. It highlights their strong receptiveness to coaching as a vital professional development tool, recognizing its potential to enhance leadership skills, foster reflection, and mitigate isolation. However, it also underscores significant practical barriers, particularly concerning time constraints and the availability of contextually relevant, qualified coaches. These preliminary findings are crucial for informing the design of effective and sustainable coaching programs for primary school leaders, ultimately contributing to stronger educational leadership and improved primary school outcomes. Further comprehensive research is warranted to validate and extend these insights, paving the way for more targeted support for these foundational leaders in education.

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