Headteacher Development through Non-Linear Coaching and Coaching Psychology

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Abstract:

This study explored how a non-linear coaching model can be used to develop headteachers in South Africa on their learning journey. The study explore, how coaching psychology and a non-linear coaching model, can be used to develop headteachers within South Africa through non-linear coaching learning conversations. The case study explores through qualitative data, how senior leaders in schools were able to reflect on their learning through the use of a non-linear coaching model to deepen their understanding of senior leadership, and how they strategically needed to consider the needs of their school, as well as the learners, and teams within their schools. A qualitative research approach was used, and semi-structured interviews were thematically coded through the use of Braun and Clarke's (2006) 6 phase model. Key learning from the project is that a collaborative professional approach, facilitating effective learning conversations through a non-linear model ensured that leaders were able to develop a deep understanding of their contexts, and were able to engage with key strategic decisions making processes in a safe, trusting learning environment.

Introduction

Hattie (2012) points out that leadership makes the second biggest difference to learner outcomes; however, in South Africa, where this study was set, leadership development, and in particular Headteacher development, is often limited to individuals driving their own learning journeys to engage with masters level education rather than a formalised approach (Mestry, 2017) such as the National Professional Qualifications for Headteachers (NPQH) is in place in England (DfE, 2022). Leaders can become a headteacher of a school with a limited amount of experience in teaching, without the relevant development opportunities to equip them fully for the role (Naidoo and Mestry, 2019). Coaching is an unknown concept in Headteacher development within South Africa, and as Naidoo and Mestry (2019) point out, leadership development centres around masters level studies, and focuses mainly on instructional leadership development.

However, as new headteachers, there are often a wide range of challenges to navigate throughout the leadership journey. Beabout (2012) reflects on how leaders need to lead their teams through turbulent times, and where a new headteacher has little or no experience in supporting the organisation or team, masters level studies, can provide theoretical knowledge which can be translated into practice, but further support is needed through coaching to translate how this needs to happen. As a novice Headteacher, sense

making and sense giving is a key skill to develop on the learning journey (Weick, 1995 and Oberholzer and Macklin, 2022).

Shams (2022) points out that coaching as a cognitive learning tool was utilised since the early 1900s, and that it was mainly used for instructional purposes, and the author points out that 'in this context [it] lacked any systematic use of psychological knowledge'. She also points out that coaching was mainly used for teaching physical education. Since the 1980s a more refined model was drawn upon, separating the teacher and the coach's role. However, authors such as Wood et al. (2016) and Matthewman et al. (2018) reflect on how coaching evolved since the 1980s, and that it is now used in a variety of different ways to support learning within education, and in particular leadership development. Shams (2022) states that 'the practice of coaching using psychological theories and research has been applied to various areas of education, including leadership development. Conor and Pokora (2017) point out that coaching is a learning relationship, and that due to the co-constructive nature of coaching, it provides an ideal opportunity to enable leaders to engage with these learning relationships to help unlock their potential.

Oberholzer and Boyle (2023) explore the development needs of headteachers in England and reflect on how learning development need to be carefully considered to meet the needs of the coachee. Dreyfus (2004) point out that when considering the learning development of a novice, the coaching intervention needs to be approach differently from that of an experienced headteacher. Oberholzer and Boyle (2023) emphasise that important of ensuring that the learning needs of the Headteacher is carefully considered.

Whybrow et al. (2023) makes the point that learning is not linear, which aligns with Macklin and Oberholzer's (2022) view that in response to the needs of the headteacher, the coach often needs to think differently about the coaching intervention, opposed to a more linear approach to coaching, where the emphasis is on identifying the goal. At times, due to the challenges faced in the first few months of being a new headteacher, where sense making takes a significant priority (Weick, 1995), the headteachers learning conversations with their coach might need to take a different approach to the traditional focus on establishing a goal. Goal setting might be part of the learning journey over time. A non-linear approach is required to enable the headteacher, to evaluate and analyse key points more fully to ensure that learning can take place.

Defining non-linear coaching:

Oberholzer and Macklin (2022) explore that in more complex adaptive systems, traditional coaching approaches such as Whitmore's (2017) GROW (Goal, Reality, Options, Will), might not always help senior leaders, and in particular headteachers, to find ways forward. In situations where a wide variety of complex issues ranging from curriculum decisions, staffing, safeguarding, finance, premises issues, and changing government policy directives to name but a few, need to be navigated, it might often be more challenging to identify a

specific goal to focus on. For new headteachers, it will be even more difficult to first familiarise themselves with a new context, and to then get to grips with the needs of the new context. Adair (2014) points out that leaders need to strive to meet the needs of the organisation, individual and task, and to pinpoint what these needs are, are not always as simple as one coaching conversation. In addition, new headteachers might often find themselves being at sea with their inner dialogue, and they might find tensions within themselves, where they also need to cope with imposter syndrome (Browne, 2020), and the fear of being found out. This challenge to cope with inner dialogues is particularly relevant to headteachers in South Africa, whose experience and pre-headship training is limited.

Macklin and Oberholzer (2022) argues that in these circumstances, where new headteachers are faced with a complex adaptive system, and need to learn to navigate their own learning, as well as meet the needs of their teams, organisation and the tasks they need to address, thee coach needs to engage with the coachee, to develop an understanding of the intra-dependencies, and inter-dependencies of themselves and their teams, as well as the inter and intra- connected nature of their organisation internally and externally. In our complex work environments people will often work across teams, and in several teams, and they are often not just located into one team, and this adds to the complex relationships to the inter- and intra-dependencies they have across teams.

Looking at these challenges, a 'traditional coaching model' such as the GROW model, will provide a narrow confine of the scope and range of complexities within which a coachee needs to function and what needs to be considered in relation to these challenges. Often a coachee will set the priorities and these can often be unchallenged by the coach, who does not consider the multitude or myriad of connections and relationships which a person works within. With these interconnective relationships in mind, the coach needs to take a more holistic approach to the 4 properties of complex adaptive systems (Macklin and Oberholzer, 2022), and consider the following 4 properties:

- Self-organisation
- Inter-relatedness
- Adaptive nature
- Emergence

(Obolensky,2010, p. 84- 88)

Based on the properties of complex adaptive systems which implies that leaders function within a network of collaborative professionalism, and interconnectivity (Hargreaves and O'Connor, 2018), and that headteacher needs to learn how to navigate this interconnected system. Bush (2020) points out that leadership is linked to context, and new leaders in particular, need to learn how to navigate the context they need to lead effective.

Coaching, as a cognitive leadership tool, enables leaders, to 'unlock' their 'potential' through supportive coaching conversations and connect with others through the process of sense making (Weick, 1995). The process of sense making also enables the leader to think more

strategically opposed to being too reactive in the new context.   Leaders need to be able to align the internal processes with the external turbulence (Beabout, 2012). The coach needs to support leaders to enable them to 'evolve' alongside the evolving landscape of the education landscape, which stretches beyond the scope of a linear coaching approach. The coaching conversation provides leaders with an opportunity to move from a turbulent situation to reach a point of perturbance. A point of perturbance is when emergence is starting to unfold (Beabout, 2012). This is similar to a coach adopting Vygotsky's (1934) zones of proximal development and moving a coachee to the point where new learning happens.

Macklin and Oberholzer (2022) highlight when non-linear coaching conversations take place, the starting point can be where the most turbulence is. It can well be that the leader needs to first make sense of the immediate turbulence such as a policy directive which might change, or a situation unfolding in the context. More understanding is needed regarding this challenge, and more research or learning is required, before, it can be revisited to ensure that it can be unpacked. The authors suggest that a non-linear approach in the form of the phronesis model is considered, where the starting point of the coaching conversation can vary, opposed to being fixed on setting an immediate goal. Goal setting can result later on in the learning conversation. The term phronesis derives from Aristotle's work.

Birmingham (2004, p. 314) explains that Aristotle, contrasted phronesis from other 'mental states'. Episteme is defined as 'scientific knowledge' or 'expert knowledge' whereas techne is defined as 'craft or craft knowledge' where process and production is being considered through reasoning. Techne does not reflect on the 'nature of the goal' just how to achieve the goal. Techne, can be described as 'rationality'. The basic steps that need to be taken to achieve the goal, and often when models such as the GROW model are being unpacked, it often leads to the rationality, rather than deeply exploring all the different interconnected aspects, that will lead to a more in-depth understanding of the issue, and potential outcomes. By carefully considering all the 'mental states' and exploring each aspect of reasoning carefully, the leader will develop the ability to explore key challenges, by using techne, episteme, parxis and phronesis in its fullest sense, to make sense of the challenges, and to give reason to ways forward (Macklin and Oberholzer, 2020 and Maitlis and Christianson, 2014).
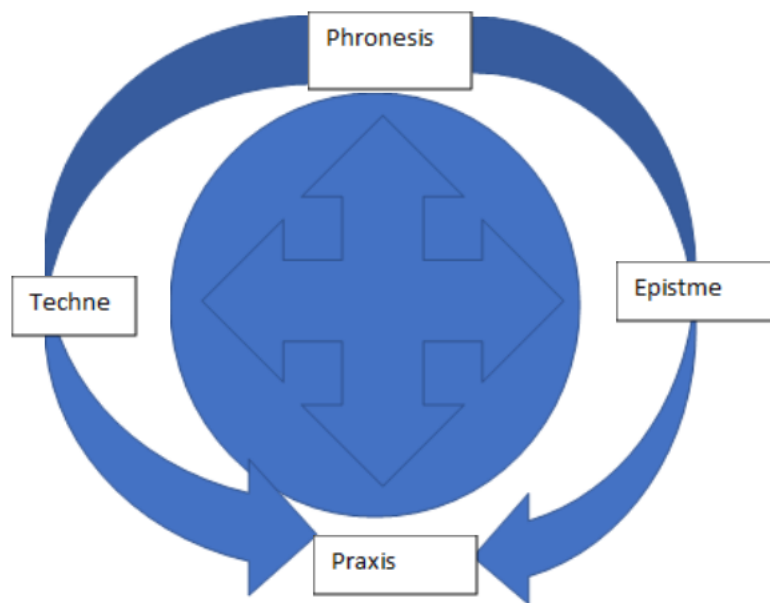
Figure 1: Complex Adaptive Coaching Model: Phronesis Model

Once the leader is able to make sense of the theoretical aspects (Epistme) and consider the technical skills of what needs to happen, in relation to the step-by-step approaches that are required, they are able to reach a state of phronesis, where they are able to reason through, these variables, to make an appropriate decision. Through the coaching process they are able to draw on their understanding of the theory, processes, and their own experiences, and tacit knowledge (Polanyi, 2009) to arrive at the most appropriate outcome or action (Praxis). Once clarity is gained regarding all these aspects, strategic goal setting can take place.

So, in contrast with more traditional coaching approaches, a non-linear coaching approach, can start off with exploring a wider range of aspects as outlined in the above considering the phronesis model, to develop a deep understanding of these issues, before the learning conversations moves towards a more strategic goal setting phase. For the purpose of the study, non-linear coaching models were define drawing on Macklin and Oberholzer's (2022) work on the phronesis model, as coaching conversations which can consider the theoretical aspect, technical aspects, as well as the practical aspects of contexts or challenges faced by the coachee, to arrive at a point where they are able to unpack these challenges in a step by step way, to make sense of these challenges, and to identify strategic ways forward through goal setting. The learning conversations do not need to start with initial goals, and can explore the contextual challenges, and wider range of issues in greater depth with the theory, technical skills and practice in mind, before it moves on to unpack these, and strategise.

Methodology:

A qualitative case study approach was used to investigate how a non-linear coaching approach can support headteachers in South Africa. Yin (2018) argues that a case study approach will provide deep and rich data to enable the researchers to analyse and evaluate the impact of the non-linear model on the development of headteachers. Qualitative data was collected through the use of semi-structured interviews, after the coaching conversations took place over a 6 week period, and all ethical considerations and consent was provided as required by the British Education Research Association (BERA) (2018) guidance, as well as the British Psychological Society (BPS) (2021) ethical guidance.

Qualitative semi-structured interviews were used, and carefully designed with Oppenheim (2010) and Cohen et al.'s (2018) guidance in mind, to ensure that questions are open-ended and non-bias. The semi-structured nature of the questions provided a helpful platform to enable the researchers to draw comparisons between delegates, as well as add addition questions, which were carefully noted down in the final part of the interview, where participants were invited to contribute any additional points.

In addition, the sample size for the study comprised of 10 headteachers in South Africa, ranging from primary and secondary school backgrounds. Headteachers were in post in either a primary or secondary school, and it was a range of schools including rural schools in the north of South Africa. The criteria for participants were that they had to be new headteachers who were not in post for longer than 3 months, to ensure that the study could focus on how coaching can be used to develop 'new' headteachers in their roles as school leaders. Leaders were provided with 6 coaching sessions, as well as 3 online training sessions regarding leadership, and coaching. Further developments ensued from this study, but it is not within the scope of the paper to fully explore these. Participants were recruited by sending invitations to schools via email, outlining the purpose of the study. Engagement with the study was voluntary, and participants were reminded that they were able to withdraw from the study at any point without any consequences. Participants engaged in two semi-structured interviews, of 30 minutes each reflecting on their learning journey with their coach. The semi-structured interviews were conducted by the research member of the team who did not engage with coaching, to ensure that the position of power within the coaching relationship was carefully mitigated as well as any potential biases.

Semi-structured interviews were recorded making use of Microsoft TEAMs which is fully GDPR (2018) compliant, and every effort was made to ensure that participants were not recognisable in relation to the data that was used for this study. Transcripts were developed and shared with participants to approve, to ensure that the content is accurate and a true reflection of the interview as recommended by the BERA (2018) guidance.

Transcripts were thematically coded using Braun and Clarke's (2006) 6 phrase model to identify key themes, which will be further explored in the findings below.

Findings and Discussion:

The post coaching interviews, provided the researcher with an interesting mixture of responses. These were carefully coded using Braun and Clarke's (2006) 6 phase mode, and it resulted in the following concept map:
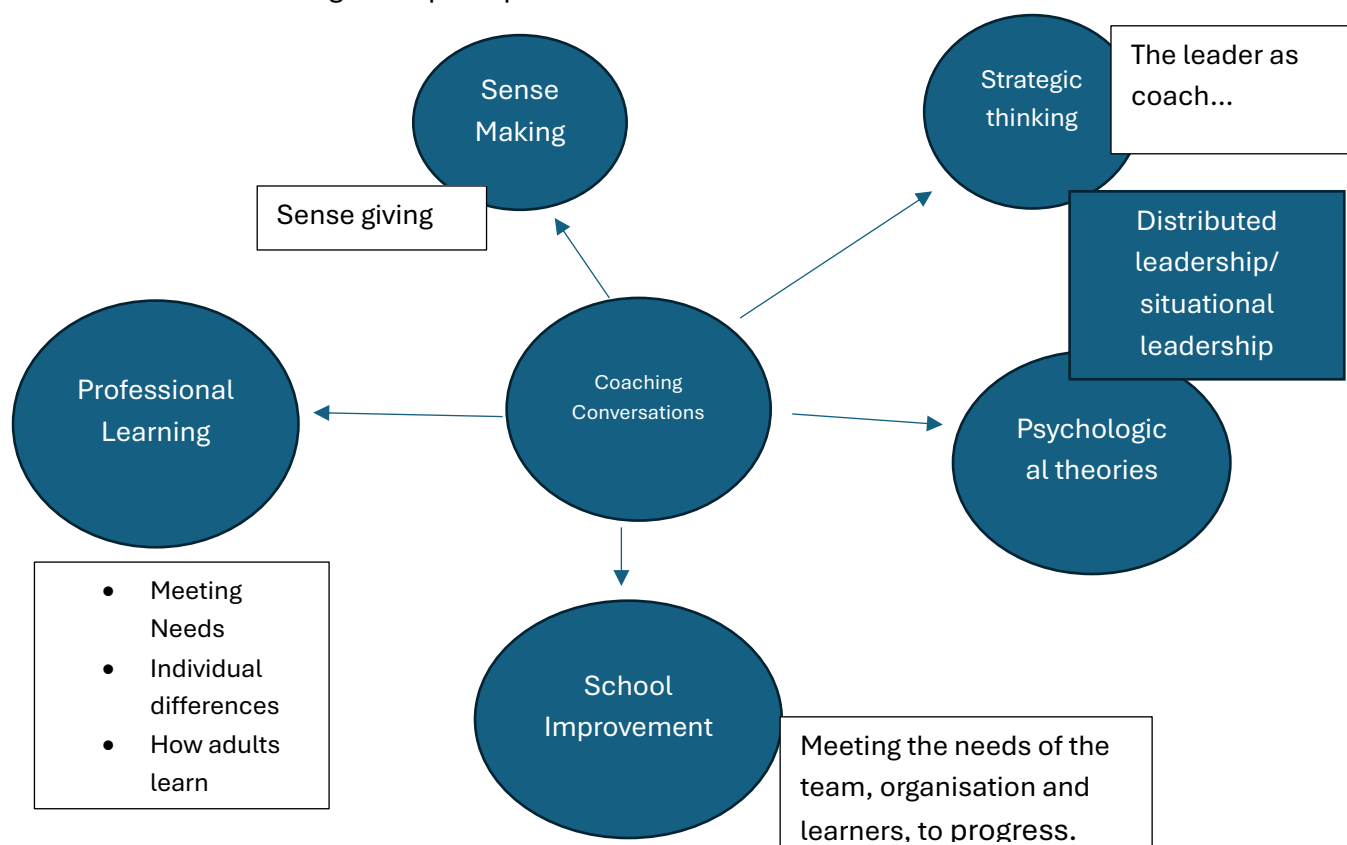

Figure 2: Concept map based on key themes

1) Sense Making

   Leaders were asked to explore how they felt the coaching conversations enabled them to develop their own learning and thinking within the evolving landscape they had to navigate. Leaders responded in a variety of different ways, however, the predominate theme was that the coaching conversations helped to explore the contextual challenges they faced withing each one of their schools, and by exploring this and verbalising this they were able to start making sense of the challenges they faced. For example a headteacher from a combined school (nursery, primary and secondary) stated, that:

   'I was able to share my concerns regarding my school with someone in a safe space where I knew I was not being judged by my parent board, the department for education or my staff. I could explore concerns and new things candidly and honestly.

I could ask questions I would not normally ask, and as I was asking these, and responding to my coach's questions, I was able to become clearer in my understanding of what the new policy directives mean, and what I can do to embed it into the school's existing policies. I could break it down, and then start thinking how I can share it with my senior leadership team, to enable us then to think of how we can to put this in place. My coach provided my with a safe learning space, where I could be calm, and think about all the elements and aspects. We discussed my understanding of the concept, and I realised I had to do more around my learning, and also that I need to think what it needs to look like for me and teachers when we need to apply it.

The headteacher's reflections illustrate how the coach made use of the phronesis model to touch on the theoretical elements of what is required, as well as the practice elements. In addition, this quotation highlights the importance of a safe and trusting space to ensure that professional learning can take place. The ability of the coaching conversation to not only provide psychological safety, but to unpack the coachee's potential through the process of sense making is illustrated carefully here (Weick, 1995). The importance of questioning and how the coach questions and allows for questions is highlighted here as well, to help promote the thinking and learning. The ability of the coach to facilitate the sense making to enable the coachee to provide opportunities for the teams to make sense of the new challenges with confidence is highlighted here as well (Macklin and Oberholzer, 2022).

One headteacher pointed out that the coaching conversations enabled her to engage more with the policy directives she had to unravel:
'I had to respond to a request from the department for education in terms of new regulations that had to be put in place, I was new to the school, it was only my first week, and I was not sure how to do it. I did not know any other headteachers to ask, so I asked my coach to explore it with me. I did not really have an understanding of what I wanted to achieve, and I did not know where to start. We analysed the document together. In our discussions we discussed my understanding of the document, my underpinning understanding, as well as how I think it needs to translate. I realised I had to do more research on this initiative as I did not fully understand it or what it meant for my school, and it became my first step towards developing this as a policy and strategy for the school. It was a good way to develop a clear sense of what the document meant, and how to explain it to my team.'

In this quote it is clear from the participant how the coach helped her to make sense of the changes, how to unpack these, and how to think it through in terms of the change required, in line terms of what is required for the team. The participant

emphasised how the conversation was helpful in making sense of what was required and how to 'give sense' to her team (Weick, 1995).

When analysing what the participant shares, it is clear that she came to the coaching conversations not 'understanding' of what she wanted to achieve. By working through the theoretical aspects of the coaching conversation, analysing the policy changes in collaboration with the coach, enabled her to make sense of what is meant, and enabled her to move to the technical and practical requirements, to then break the problem down into manageable steps, and to start thinking more strategically.

2) **Strategic Thinking**
   Adair (2014) points out that strategic thinking is when leaders start to consider the whole, and become aware of how they need to make decisions with the entire organisation in mind. In adaptive complex systems organisations are also part of a wider and bigger 'whole' or system, and they need to align with the requirements within that. Leaders need to develop the skills to think more holistically, and engage with systems thinking more effectively to enable them to become more strategic. However, as a Novice school leader, who might only have been in teaching for three years, moving from the classroom into a whole school role where a wider range of challenges needed to be considered, presented different challenges. For example one participant shared:

   'I was asked to take on the leadership role, due to the fact that I am very effective in the classroom. However, I only had to think of my learners and their lessons. In this new role, I need to think of policy directives, how it applies to the school, how we need to align it, what the outcome needs to be for all learners and staff, and how it needs to compare to the national picture. My coach understood that I was worried about this, and helped me to navigate through the more complex landscape, by enabling me to talk through what I understood, and then to ask me questions regarding the implications of what I understood, and if I made certain decisions.'

   The reference to the coach's understanding of the leader's 'worries' is key, and as Dreyfus (2004) points out, it is important to align to where the leader is at, and then to work with them through their thinking to enable them to unlock their potential. Working with the leader's understanding of the theoretical, and then to move on to the more abstract later on, is a good example of how the phronesis model can be used, to engage with systems thinking regarding more complex adaptive systems. The leader is provided with a safe learning space to enable her to adopt a growth mindset (Deck, 2010) and to explore different avenues, and to consider implications before key decisions are made. Another participant shared that,

'the coaching conversations not only made me aware of my own limbic response to change, and how I needed to move from my initial panicked state, to a calm analytical state to work through the issues I had to explore, it made me more aware of how others might respond to radical change as well.'

The co-constructive nature of the coaching conversations also made coachees aware of the neuroscience behind the coaching process, and how they can self-coach, and apply some of the coaching principles to their engagement with their teams. Participants were able to engage in a more strategic way with their teams to adopt a more distributed leadership approach to make the most of their team's talents as well as one participant shared:

'In my coaching sessions, my coach made me aware of the fact that good leaders develop other leaders, and I made sure that I take the time to identify what everyone in my team wanted to achieve, and how I could facilitate it, in line with the changes we wanted to put in place to drive the strategy'.

Understanding the team, and the team's needs are key to ensure that teams can engage effectively and maximise their ability to function well, as outlined by Adair (2014). Enabling the leader to become more aware of their own strengths and how their team can enhance that is key, as well as enabling the leader to understand how they can work with their teams through a coaching approach where psychological principles and theories can be considered as well.

3) **Professional Learning**

As already mentioned in the above, the coaching relationship is co-constructive (van Nieuwerburgh, 2017) and the coach and coachee engage with a learning relationship (Connor and Pokora, 2017). The collaborative professional relationship of the coachee and coachee and the value of this relationship to provide a safe space, and core skills to equipe the new leader to grow, cannot be underestimated.

Coachees, highlighted in the above examples how the 'coach made them realise' or how the coach worked with them to analyse challenges, and how the coach framed conversations to enable them to unpack challenges.

Participants also shared, that through their coaching relationships they developed effective listening skills for example,
'I think coaching makes me a better person and leader, as I now take the time to summarise what I am hearing, and check that I really fully understood what was said. I ask open questions to enable my team to explore a wider range of perspectives and ideas, rather than just relying on my own views.'

The coachee's ability to draw on the hidden learning in the coaching relationship opens up an interesting range of professional learning opportunities, as from the above, it can be seen that the new leader is developing listening skills, skills to build and develop trust, empathy – all valuable skills to develop as a leader, which is gained through the coaching relationship. Types of questions are also considered carefully. A participant leading in a secondary school shared that he felt that,

'why questions seem to upset colleagues, and they feel like I am being critical. However, when I use 'I have noticed…' colleagues are happier to engage with me when I ask questions. It seems softer and more mindful of how they might feel.'

The participant's observations align with Thomson's (2013) views on question uses, and how questions can be developed to open others up for learning in a safe and meaningful way. The development of leaders was not directly linked to the direct conversations they had on strategy development, but more specifically on their way of being with their teams as well in the wider sense.

4) School Improvement

The purpose of the study was to focus on leadership development through coaching and in particular how drawing on key principles of coaching psychology can support, to ensure that learners have improved life-chances through education. It is therefore important to also touch on how the coaching relationships impacted on the wider school community and in particular the outcomes of learners.

Headteachers reported the following outcomes for their schools:
- 3 struggling schools in the region reported that through the support of their Headteachers, and leading a significant school improvement project through coaching, their outcomes for the end of the academic year improved by 20%.
- 4 schools reported that their outcomes improved by 15%.
- 3 schools reported that their outcomes improved by 10%

The date shared in the above, outline that headteachers made use of coaching to drive school improvement, and used their learning through the coaching conversations to impact positively on their teams, and learning to improve outcomes. It is worth noting that the data generated by the last 3 schools were emerging data, as the project was not as matured as for the first 3 schools, and the prediction is that future outcomes will be more refined, with additional support.

5) Other Benefits:

Headteachers also reported that they were more able to communicate key messages more effectively to their teams, and share key issues with their teams using coaching approaches for example:

' ..for the first time ever, am I able to have open conversations with staff regarding the school goals, vision and mission and how their work in the classroom, aids that. There are no tensions, and we are able to openly discuss how the member of staff can improve… I consider creating a safe space, and consider ensuring that I enable the member of staff to analyse situations, rather than be reactive too it through non-judgmental explorations of key points.'

The above is an example of how the headteacher employs key principles of coaching psychology to provide a safe, trusting environment, and ensure that the thinking is around the issues.

Another headteacher reflected on the following:

'I was able to host a learning conversation with a member of staff about their performance and progress, and I we were able to discuss this in a safe space without the member of staff feeling worried…'

The emphasis on psychological safety is outlined by both headteachers as a key feature of their practice and they are now more equipped to engage with others in a open and meaningful way.

Conclusion

The study indicates that there are clear co-constructive benefits from using coaching and principles of coaching psychology to develop headteachers in relation to their own personal effectiveness, as well as their ability to engage with their staff. An added benefit is also their impact on their learning communities, teams and learners. The study is a small scale study with emerging data, which will be further extended to provide more details outcomes in its next cycle of research. However, the key learning from the findings so far is that coaching can make a significant difference to new headteachers to make sense of their complex adaptive systems to impact positively on learners and the communities they serve.

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