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Coaching: An approach for leadership development in the Singapore Education System

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper explores coaching as an approach to developing school leaders in the Singapore education system. It takes a closer look at the nature of coaching experience of “Beginning Principals” and “Principal-Trainers”, as well as the related benefits and challenges.

Design/methodology/approach -- A qualitative inquiry approach is adopted to seek answers to three research questions. Interviews with four beginning principals and three Principal-Trainers were conducted, guided by three structured questions.

Findings – Beginning principals described a positive, helpful and empowering coaching experience when coached by Principal-Trainers. The latter skillfully asked questions in a non-threatening manner, creating a safe space for deeper self-reflection. In the process, the beginning principals gained greater self-awareness, self-empowerment, and insights on self-care. They appreciated the shared context of school leadership when coached by Principal-Trainers. While coaching is a useful leadership development approach, inherent implementation challenges do exist.

Research limitations/implications – The sample size is limited as coaching is recently structured as an approach to developing school leaders. Further research is recommended as coaching becomes more pervasive.

Practical implications –The findings support a compelling case for a more pervasive adoption of coaching as an effective approach for school leadership development. Principals are supported when coached as they lead schools in this dynamic and challenging environment. There is scope for self-coaching, peer coaching and coach supervision of principals, middle leaders and classroom teachers.

Originality/value – The value of this paper lies in the research findings that the coaching experience between the Principal-Trainer (as coach) and the beginning principal (as learner/coachee) is beneficial in several ways. Also, coaching is found to be a useful approach for leadership development.

Keywords Singapore, education system, coaching experience, Beginning Principals, Principal-Trainers, School Leadership, Leadership Development, Professional Development.

Paper type Research Paper

Introduction

Becoming a school leader (principal) in the Singapore education system is a mark of recognition and achievement as it represents the pinnacle of the leadership career track (MOE, 2020a;). Singapore principals are vested with the important responsibility of “Bringing out the best in every child” (MOE, 2020b). They are expected to make infinite numbers of decisions daily to achieve school goals. This is no mean feat, especially for first-time principals. Leading in this current volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous (VUCA) environment where change is constant can result in some degree of confusion, fear, concern, isolation, and even competition. It is at this initial incumbency that beginning principals will appreciate support such as consulting, mentoring, collaboration, peer support, supervision, coaching, and evaluation. Among these, coaching provides a distinctively powerful approach for these principals as they learn to better respond to the myriad challenges encountered.

This paper explores the coaching experience and it explores whether coaching can be used as an approach to support the growth and development of principals in Singapore schools. The research questions are as follows:

- a) What is the coaching experience like for the “Beginning Principal” and the “Principal-Trainer”?
- b) What are the benefits of the coaching experience for the “Beginning Principal” and the “Principal-Trainer”?
- c) What are the challenges of coaching as an approach to school leadership development?

Here, ‘coaching experience’ refers to the emotions and thoughts of the “Beginning Principals” as they are being coached by “Principal-Trainers” in Singapore schools. This coaching experience is premised upon a learning relationship whereby the beginning principal learns from a more experienced principal through a process of the latter asking thought-provoking questions (ICF, 2020) to create greater awareness in the former. That is, the experienced “Principal-Trainer” as coach provides learning opportunities for the beginning principals as ‘learners’ (Ng, 2005). Hence, for this paper, the term ‘learner’ would be more appropriate than ‘coachee’ or ‘client’, both of which are commonly used in coaching relationships in non-education settings. For this paper, “Beginning principals” are newly-appointed school leaders upon graduation from a milestone leadership training programme known as Leaders in Education Programme (LEP), conducted at the National Institute of Education (NIE). As learners, they are coached by “Principal-Trainers” who are divested veteran principals undertaking a new role as leadership trainer and coach. As former principals, they possess substantial breadth and depth of the competencies, knowledge, skills, attitudes and values required as leaders of future-ready 21st C learners.

In short, the answers to the three research questions serve to capture how the learner and the coach feel about the coaching relationship, as well as their thoughts about coaching as an approach to principalship development. The next segment shall set the context upon which these research questions shall be addressed.

Context of this paper

The Singapore education system is under the purview of the Ministry of Education (MOE) which is responsible for the formulation and implementation of education policies. The MOE aims to provide every child with the opportunity to develop holistically and maximise their potential, helping them grow into lifelong learners. This is operationalized through the central governance of 360 primary, secondary and post-secondary schools (MOE, 2020c). The principals are responsible for implementation of MOE policy initiatives and delivery of school outcomes that are aligned to the overarching national imperatives.

In Singapore, examinations are high stakes as academic results have tremendous impact on school placement and subsequent, life opportunities. Education is considered a strategic passport for a brighter future as Singapore is a small island state lacking in natural resources. Its people is key to economic growth and prosperity (Gopinathan, 2001; Hairon and Goh, 2019; Ng, 2017; Ong, 2019). Hence, human resource development is a top priority. With scarce resources, education reforms are inevitably underpinned by strong pragmatism and efficiency for maximum outcomes is the norm (Hairon, 2019).

With this strategic focus on education, the Singapore education system has done consistently well in international comparative studies. It is ranked as amongst the world's best-performing school systems. For example, Singapore students were among the top in the Trends in International Math and Science Study (TIMSS) in 1995, 1999, 2003, 2007 and 2016 (MOE, 2020b); fourth in the 2006 Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS); top in the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) that assesses students' abilities in science, mathematics and reading (Teng, 2016). It is also consistently ranked amongst the best in its ability to meet the needs of a competitive economy in the Global Competitiveness Report (MOE, 2020b).

Success factors for these achievements include the clear vision, political will, and educational leadership of MOE; the importance placed on a student-centred and values-driven education; a focus on nurturing and developing teacher and leadership capacity to deliver reforms at the school level; an ambitious and rigorous set of standards and assessment; a culture of continuous improvement, and a future orientation that seeks to benchmark its educational practices against the best in the world (OECD, 2011).

Amongst these factors, this paper shall focus on leadership capacity. Singapore school leaders are identified by MOE through a rigorous system. High performing classroom teachers are given opportunities to enlarge their job responsibilities. This accession from a classroom teacher to a subject head, head of department, vice-principal and then to the principal's chair is facilitated by the "continuous professional development (that) is ingrained in a school's shared vision of professional learning" (MOE, 2019).

Professional development involves on-the-job work assignments, challenging projects, mentoring, coaching, and milestone courses at each phase from accession to incumbency (Boon, 2018). In Singapore schools, coaching is used as part of the overall development of teachers and leaders. For example, during work performance management conversations, an eclectic mix

of the coaching and mentoring approaches is deployed (Ng, 2012). Various approaches such as Cognitive Coaching (Costa and Garmston, 2002), the GROW structure (Whitmore, 2009), the GROW ME Model (Ng, 2005), and the Evocative Coaching Model (Tschannen-Moran, 2017) are deployed.

In recent years, more attention has been paid to coaching as an approach for leadership development. For example, aspiring principals identified by MOE to attend the LEP are matched with experienced incumbent principals (“Mentoring Principal”) for several weeks (NIE, 2020). While on school attachment, LEP participants shadow mentoring principals who would not only role-model, teach, or advise, but also coach through asking questions to engage the LEP participants for deeper reflection. In addition, to prepare them for school transformation, the revised LEP (NIE, 2020) includes coaching in the curriculum. Besides lectures, seminars with MOE senior management, visits to local and international schools and organisations, and attachment to mentoring principals, LEP participants are organized into groups facilitated by syndicate leaders who also coach the participants

Furthermore, over the last three years, coaching has been made available to LEP graduands when appointed as beginning principals. They are coached by trained Principal-Trainers. This coaching is in addition to the MOE-initiated peer-mentoring programme (APS, 2020; Boon, 1998). The mentors also engage in coaching conversations with the novice principals to help them towards better insights and self-awareness about their strengths, personal beliefs, values and areas for growth.

All these are indicative of a greater traction towards coaching as a viable approach for leadership development. There is also a growing interest to nurture a coaching culture in the Singapore education system to deepening leadership capabilities. Having set the Singapore context, the next segment shall explore what the work of the principals entails, the challenges, tensions and dilemmas that they face, and how coaching can offer a platform by which a relationship between a coach and coachee/learner can support the principals to find their own resolutions.

Literature Review: The work of a Singapore principal

Principalship is a desirable post for those who aspires to rise to the apex of the school organisational structure. (MOE, 2020a). The satisfaction, deep joys and fulfilment derived from principalship is immeasurable (Boon, 2018). Recognitions for their dedication and commitment within the MOE system as well as the consistently high performance of Singapore students in international studies are affirmative of their hard work well executed.

While the work of the principal is satisfying and meaningful, it is also undeniably highly demanding, complex and challenging (Boon, 2018; Goh, Hairon and Lim, 2019; Hairon, 2019; Lee, 2015 ; Ng, 2016; Stott and Low, 2000; Ong, 2019). This is especially so for beginning principals whose confidence may be shaken and self-doubt may set in when confronted with complex challenges (Mortimore and Mortimore, 1991). Principals and teachers are perceived to face intense pressures from parents who relentlessly seek the best for their children (Chan, 2020;

Davie, 2020; Ng, 2010) and students are just as stressed (Davie, 2017). Unhealthy competition driven by school ranking (prior to 2012) led to the push to do more and this can take a toll on the well-being of principals. For example, according to previous research, a first-time principal lamented, “On some days, I returned home feeling physically very drained and mentally very taxed” (Boon, 2018, p. 164).

The stress on principals are tremendous not only physically, but also psychologically and emotionally. Beginning principals do put in excessive work hours (Boon and Dimmock, 2011) and experience a sense of professional isolation and loneliness most when they had to make particularly difficult decisions (Weindling and Earley, 1987; Duke *et al.*, 1984; Lee, 2015). For example, Duke *et al.* (1984) reported the “unexpected loneliness of the principalship, the unanticipated time pressure, and the disconcerting feelings of unpreparedness...” (Duke *et al.*, p. 26). Yet, findings from previous research shows that despite the difficulties, the principal still soldiers on with a “cheerful, optimistic, and positive” disposition (Boon, 2018, p. 161)

The stress and challenges were felt not only in schools, but can also posed imminent threats nationally. Consequently, in 2012, the then Education Minister Mr. Heng Swee Keat publicly abolished school banding by absolute academic results (Heng, 2012). He then exhorted four “Every’s” – Every School, a Good School; Every Student, an Engaged Learner; Every Teacher, a Caring Educator; Every Parent, a Supportive Partner -- as a signal for the key stakeholders, that is, principals, teachers and parents to play their part for the future of Singapore

However, the pressures on principals did not abate after the ministerial declaration. The notion of not over-emphasizing academic implies that more has to be done to address the other equally important outcomes of education. Guided by the overarching Desired Outcomes of Education, all schools are responsible for nurturing students to be confident, self-directed, active contributors and concerned citizens (MOE, 2020d). Schools are also accountable for developing students to be critical thinkers, creative, innovative, and embrace life-long learning for future-readiness (Ng, 2017). Hence, recent MOE initiatives such as Applied Learning Programmes, Full Subject-Based Banding, reduction of examination load, Direct School Admission scheme, the new Primary Six Leaving School Examination (PSLE) scoring system, and Character and Citizenship Education (CCE2021) have to be implemented with due diligence and fidelity. These initiatives are necessary to reflect the system's transformation to prepare students for the complex and demanding twenty-first century (Goh, Hairon and Lim, 2019).

All these mean that the principal is key in leading schools for effective implementation and successful outcomes (Fullan, 2014; Heng, 2012; Ng and Wong, 2019). The principal is expected to juggle multiple roles and navigate carefully as a visionary, strategist, curriculum leader, culture builder, staff appraiser, people developer, change leader, human resource-physical-budget allocator, among others (Sergiovanni, 2009; Hairon, 2019; Ng, 2017). The principal has to engage stakeholders in new ways of thinking, doing and being, raise questions about teaching, learning and assessment, and challenge assumptions about innovations in education. A most recent illustration is the unexpected upheaval when schools were acutely disrupted by the current Covid-19 pandemic. Schools swung into action and take steps to ensure

that learning continues despite social distancing measures. During ‘Circuit Breaker’ period from 7 April to 4 May 2020, schools remained open and teachers have to swiftly switch to virtual teaching. Students have to be independent learners in the midst of home-based learning and blended learning (Ng, 2020).

Furthermore, the principal has to be wise in balancing and navigating around tensions and paradoxes (Ng, 2017). He has to manage tensions between academic rigour and joy of learning (Heng, 2012) and be inspired to reimagine possibilities to prepare future-ready learners. He has to unquestioningly receive MOE policy initiatives (Hairon and Goh, 2019), lead the change and simultaneously ensure that basic values and imperatives remain rooted as constants (Ng, 2017). Although schools are centrally governed and MOE encourages school autonomy, the principal practices ‘centralized decentralization’ and adopt a ‘strategic alignment, tactical empowerment’ approach to manage the tension between MOE and school needs (Ng, 2016, 2017). He has to lead nationally (Heng, 2014) and negotiate between school needs and national needs, align school goals to MOE imperatives and ensure that teachers are ready to implement the numerous policies. The tensions of hierarchy (Hairon and Goh, 2019) meant that principals have to manage power relations (Goh, Hairon and Lim, 2019; Hofstede *et al.* 2010) with staff in an increasingly collaborative culture. For example, Hairon and Goh (2019) found that teachers desire more equality in decision-making when it involves their work but will still prefer that the final decision and responsibility rest on the principals. This struggle to hold and not hold power is a delicate act for the principal to balance. Other tensions include school-level juggling of short-term versus long-term goals, ensuring quality of teaching versus quantity, allocating time and other limited resources to meet competing needs, and so on (Ng, 2017).

What it really means is that the job of a Singapore principal (especially beginning principals) is not only complex and demanding, but will be even more so in the current VUCA environment. Former Education Minister Heng Swee Keat acknowledged:

Implementing this series of changes is very challenging, because it is not just about programmes, but about mindsets and beliefs on what matters, and of exercising fine judgement of what is relevant and useful for each child. (Heng, 2013).

Against this backdrop of the Singapore education system and the challenges that principals face, new capabilities that go beyond the traditional transference of leadership knowledge, skills and competencies (Petrie, 2018) become more critical. It is not sufficient to be equipped with the ‘what’ and ‘how’ of school leadership. It is timely to suggest that principals step back and examine their ‘being’ as a leader and as a person. Principals can better ride the tumultuous times if they strengthen their capabilities in generating an internal seat of judgment, or personal authority, that evaluates and makes choices about external expectations (Kegan and Lahey, *et al.*, 2016). This search for self-coherence through alignment with one’s own belief system, ideology, or personal code is about bringing the whole self to the workplace. It is about learning to be self-aware through reflection on the limits of one’s ideology, seeing if the current perspective is in some way partial or incomplete, be more open towards contradiction and opposites, and seeking to hold on to multiple systems. In this sense, through asking evocative and deep provoking questions, the coach (“Principal-Trainer”) can help the learner (“Beginning

Principal”) to be more confident in principalship. In short, coaching can be a powerful developmental approach for Singapore principals.

Literature Review: Coaching for professional growth

The term coaching is sometimes used interchangeably with mentoring (Jones, 2015; Ng, 2005; Whitmore, 2009). Both involve a learning relationship between a novice and a more experienced person for improved performance. However, there are some distinctions. Mentoring focusses on the more experienced practitioner providing work-related advice (Boon, 1998; Costa and Garmston, 2002; Whitmore, 2009). It is more concerned with learning for the medium to long term while coaching addresses learning for performance in the short to medium term (Ng, 2005). Coaching is premised on a partnership (Robertson, 2009) whereby the coach skillfully asking questions to help the learner reflect critically and see new perspectives and opens new possibilities for more effective future actions (Brothers, 2005; ICF, 2020; Tolhurst, 2010; Whitmore, 2009). Coaching is defined as “partnering with clients in a thought-provoking and creative process that inspires them to maximize their personal and professional potential” (ICF, 2020).

The value of coaching lies in a non-judgemental process that honours autonomy, supports deep reflection, encourages self-directed learning, and strive for resourcefulness, high achievement and fulfilment (Brothers, 2005; Netolicky, 2016). It strengthens professional performance by enhancing the learner’s ability to recognize and examine familiar patterns of practice and reconsider underlying assumptions that guide and direct actions. It is based on mutual trust and respect (Neolicky, 2016; Ng, 2005). Ontologically, a person lives in interpretive worlds, and his reality is constructed on the basis of a set of beliefs, paradigms and master assessments. While the ‘what’ of the topic is obvious, coaching ontologically is concerned with the nature of ‘being’, delving deeper into the underlying beliefs, assumptions assessments being held by the learner/client. Feedback by the coach as an objective observer can be an energy source of self-renewal as it activates self-evaluation, self-analysis, and self-modification. Self-awareness begins with a highly personal intellectual, psychological, and spiritual shift of consciousness. It empowers the learner to recognize the inner capacities to shift thinking, perception, and disposition (Brothers, 2005; Costa and Garmston, 2002; Whitmore, 2009).

Literature abounds on the benefits of coaching, including supporting learner/client to have a better sense of well-being of self and others, for self-efficacy, greater performance, positive work experiences and relationships and meaningfulness in work and life (Cherkowski and Walker, 2018; Grant, 2014; Keyes, 2003; Kutsyuruba *et al.*, 2019; Lowery, 2019; Ng, 2012, Onchwari and Keengwe, 2008; Popper and Lipshitz, 1992; Rhodes and Fletcher, 2013; Seligman, 2011; Tolhurst, 2010). Using good evocative questions (Maxwell, 2014; Tschannen-Moran, 2017), the coach supports the learner/client in self-awareness (Ebbeck and Seah, 2018; Passmore and Fillery-Travis, 2011; Tschannen-Moran, 2017) and exploring, triggering new interpretations, and learning new distinctions. In the process, it provides the learner a greater

power to act (Netolicky, 2016). This self-empowerment benefits the learner in strengthening his own identity and recognizing the potential for better outcomes (Ng, 2012; Tolhurst, 2010; Tschannen-Moran, 2017).

Coaching, unlike other forms of professional development, generates personal well-being for the client in the midst of the busy and stressful work under demanding and complex conditions (Kutsyuruba *et al.*, 2019; Lowery, 2019). An awareness of one's well-being can include both the hedonic aspects of feeling good (positive emotions) and more eudemonic (conducive to happiness) aspects of living well that entail experiences of positive relationships, meaningfulness in life and work, senses of mastery and personal growth, autonomy, and achievement (Aguilar, 2018; Keyes 2003; Ryan *et al.*, 2008; Seligman, 2011). Research has shown that a person's body is designed to have auto-warning functions to alert as to how much the body and minds can handle. Mental and emotional fatigue, anxiety and stress can lower one's immune system, with the potential to ill health and burnout (Davie, 2017). Hence, an awareness of how one's biological make-up responds to external triggers is useful for self-regulation and self-management.

Coaching applies to all levels at the workplace and at any stage of their career development. In schools, it is not only limited to early career stages but also useful for experienced teachers and school leaders (Blackman, 2010, Campbell *et al.*, 2017; Hobson *et al.*, 2009; Netolicky, 2016; Ng, 2012; Tschannen-Moran, 2017). In leadership development, coaching supports personal and professional learning as one is being helped to assimilate into new roles and responsibilities. When a coach is an experienced leader himself, the culture of shared understanding and shared commitment (Brothers, 2005) between the learner and coach can be helpful as the focus is on the common ground of school leadership. The coach leverages on the power of appreciative inquiry and strengths-based person-centered, no-fault, mindset for supporting professional learning (Jones, 2015; Tschannen-Moran, 2017). Speaking to a coach helps clarify the learner's self-identity, beliefs, philosophy, and values that supports a mindset of being adaptive and open to complexity while simultaneously be systemic and strategic in making astute choices. Having a willingness to listen and a curious disposition to engage the learner helps to unearth deep-seated awareness and gain new perspectives (Brown, 2018; Loewenstein, 1994; Passmore and Fillery-Travis, 2011; Robertson, 2009). Furthermore, learning the coaching skills vicariously while being coached is useful for leaders to practice self-coaching, peer coaching, and team coaching (Rhodes and Fletcher, 2013).

While literature supports the view that coaching is beneficial, it is not a panacea for leadership development (Netolicky, 2016; Rhodes and Fletcher, 2013). A comprehensive leadership development programme requires a complementary wide repertoire of strategies and approaches including coaching. It requires a good mix of 'horizontal' and 'vertical' growth of the leader (Kegan and Lahey, *et al.*, 2016; Petrie, 2018) where there is a balance of a variety of external learning opportunities and an internal awareness of self at a deeper level.

Methodology

The methodology of this research is shaped by the nature of the phenomenon under study. Specifically, the purpose here is to explore coaching as an approach to principalship development in Singapore schools. As it focusses on the learners' lived experiences and perspectives as they are being coached by the more experienced former principals, what is elicited by the researcher is likely to be reflective and interpretative (Creswell, 2013; Brown, 2018). Each participant shares his own interpretation and perception of reality as experienced. The participants' recollection of their coaching experiences, perceptions and observations thus necessitates a methodology that is essentially qualitative (Merriam, 2002; Pring, 2000). In seeking to understand the world of school leadership and the preparation necessary for the demanding and complex role, the subjective meanings of their experiences land well within the social constructivist domain (Denzin and Lincoln, 2011; Creswell, 2013). Hence a qualitative inquiry approach is adopted in this study.

The primary source of data for this paper is derived from interviews guided by the following questions:

- a) Describe your experience of being coached (or as coach) as part of principalship development.
- b) In what ways is coaching useful for you?
- c) What are the challenges in relation to coaching as an approach to leadership development in the Singapore Education system?

The interview questions are phrased appropriately to address the beginning principals and Principal-Trainers during the interview. Four "Beginning principals" (represented by PR-A, PR-B, PR-C, and PR-D) and three "Principal-Trainers" (represented by PT-Q, PT-S, and PT-T) are selected based on a representations of different school types and years of experience as principals. As mentioned earlier, the "Beginning principals" are first-time principals appointed after graduation from the LEP. Their headship experiences range from 1.5 to 3.5 years at the point of interview. PR-A and PR-B are principals of primary schools while PR-C and PR-D are heading secondary schools. The "Principal-Trainers" are veteran principals who garnered among them a range of 36 to 40 years each in the education service before retirement. Each of the Principal-Trainers were incumbent principals for between 15 to 22 years each. They have between 4 to 6 years of experience as school leadership trainers.

Although the interviews were designed to be conducted face-to-face from April to July 2020, this was disrupted by the Covid pandemic. Hence data was collected via emails and online interview over Zoom applications. The interview data collected is transcribed and follow-up conversations are conducted for clarifications and validation. The data is then coded and organized thematically, guided by the research questions. The "information-rich" (Patton, 1990; Merriam, 2002, p. 12) data provide invaluable input for answering the stated research questions. Additional references are also made to research literature, MOE documents, LEP Handbook and online resources. The rich interview data presented as key findings shall include verbatims to

accurately represent the lived experiences of the participants (Moustakas, 1994). In the next segment, research findings are grouped into three sections according to the three research questions articulated earlier on.

Research Findings

a) Coaching experience

On the whole, the beginning principals spoke about the coaching experience as being highly useful, positive, encouraging, supportive, enjoyable, and empowering. For example, PR-C described her coaching experience as “wonderful” and she said, “I actually look forward to the sessions with was my coach. I enjoyed it because I feel he was very non-judgmental... It was a safe space for me.”

To be able to have an open conversation on tough leadership issues in a safe space is a welcome change for beginning principals. There is no fear knowing that the coach is non-judgmental. This is affirmed by PR-B who recalled the “useful and meaningful’ coaching sessions where he could “bounce off contextualized issues I were facing in my school.... I was able to be more open and candid with my challenges and struggles in my first few months as a principal.” Pr-B’s view about being able to “bounce off contextualised issues” also demonstrates his desire for personal connection and engagement with a more experienced person who has walked the difficult path of principalship. Like Pr-B, PR-A appreciated her coaching experience:

My coaching with a Principal-Trainer has been particularly useful.... I have benefitted richly from her knowledge, stories and sharing of her perspectives, bearing in mind that she was both a former principal of no less than two schools and an academic in the field of education leadership. I am grateful to her as she has made a difference in my professional growth as a beginning principal.

These uplifting impressions of the beginning principals resonated with the views of Principal-Trainers. PT-Q shares how he used “powerful questions that will help them to decide for themselves the best way towards the solution”. As a trained coach, he explained that it helps to be equipped with some coaching skills:

The coaching process to help school leaders is not judgmental nor does it ‘spoon-feed’ by providing solutions. All solutions and answers are determined by the coachee through the use of the powerful questions asked by the coach.

Similarly, PT-T agreed:

Coaching dispositions and coaching conversational skills are very helpful to school leaders to learn more about themselves and to be able to connect to others.

She emphasized that for authentic change to happen, conversational skills are crucial in engaging others. She reiterated,

The times have changed. People don't like to be told, people like to be part of the decision, or feel that they are part of that decision. People like to be empowered, to be in a space of choice to make that decision, whether they wish to learn or not. But as school leaders, we tend to try to lead and guide people down a path. When I speak to people down the ranks, not all of them feel very positive about this. And I think this is where we can change to improve the whole system for the nation.

PT-T's thoughts here highlighted a predominantly tendency amongst those of higher authority. The "teach-tell-advice-direct" mode seems like an occupational hazard of educators who are traditionally trained to "teach" more than engaging in asking questions to arouse the curiosity of students to self-discover and to be self-directed.

b) Benefits of the coaching experience

In addition to the positive and welcoming coaching experience, the findings in this research also show that the coachee (learner) and the coach benefitted from the coaching relationship in three aspects: Self-awareness, self-empowerment, and shared context.

Firstly, the coaching relationship helps raise a greater sense of self-awareness of the learners. The coaches provided a safe space for the learners to reflect and be introspective around an issue at hand. Through skillfully asking questions, the coaches support the learners to realise that work is not all about the act of busyness. The learners learnt that self-awareness is more than the cognitive understanding, but it embodies the entire person or 'being' of principalship. For example, PR-A reflected that her coach

...skillfully puts a spotlight on the very issues that are in my blindspots, before waiting for a coherent, whole-person response from me. This includes observing how my body is arching forward or backing off, my rising or falling tone of voice and the choice of language in my nuancing. (PR-A)

This awareness of the learners' physiological and emotional reactions towards an issue is useful for self-management, self-regulation and self-care. For PR-A, the power of coaching for self-awareness and self-care came across clearly:

I recall there was one session when she asked me about how can I care for myself. Immediately I was uncomfortable. Self-care is a moot point for me. I don't engage in such internal discourse or emotions, although I have to do it in encouraging my staff to practise this.... That made me think a lot after that session. (PR-A)

Similarly, PR-C recalled that her coach "allowed me to be a bit more circumspect about challenges and not to get so anxious." PR-A also noticed that the 'action' aspects of her work tended to overwhelm her personhood ('being') while undertaking her daily roles. She said:

As a beginning principal, it is tempting for me to get carried away in two ways: zealous for action and mind-framed in theories. This can be an unwelcome combination that generates anxiety among staff. It can also lead to over-exertion on my part.

She attested to the benefit of being coached as she recalled intentionally “slow down, observe my body and language, and then reflect or respond. This has sensitized me to my inner thought and talk”.

From the perspective of the coach, PT-S explained the usefulness of being coached:

In the course of any work, the need to ‘do’ overshadows the authentic emotions, thoughts and things that impact the person’s spirit. We lose touch with ourselves. Therefore, we lose a part of self-awareness that is needed to become more effective. That identity is buried under work which has higher priority. So, coaching does this ‘interior’ work. It rests on the assumption that the business that we engage in everyday (exterior work) would become more effective if we can sort our interior out.

In addition, she shared:

If we can sort our emotions and our inner thoughts and spirit out, we will be able to live more authentically, less fearful of censor or our bosses, less need to constantly wanting to be affirmed by our communities, take more independent actions, (and) therefore, take more transformational actions. We will also know better where we are coming from and why we are behaving in a certain way.

Self-awareness is mutually beneficial for the learner and coach. For example, PT-T remarked:

By coaching school leaders, I learned where my blind spots are, my default mode and therefore, I have to practice harder.... and I become more self-aware. I become more mindful of having to look at my whole being of a coach and also to able to be the example of the ‘being’ of a leader or a coach.

The second benefit that coaching offers concerns self-empowerment. The coaching relationship helped beginning principals to think through on their own and make decisions for future actions. It is useful for capacity building towards self-determination instead of being too other-reliance and deferring to top-down directives. it activates self-evaluation, self-analysis, and self-modification. This is sense of self-empowerment is what PR-A appreciated: “At each session, she empowers me to determine the agenda.” Similarly, PR-B acknowledge his coach:

The coaching session assisted in me identifying and acknowledging my struggles and challenges and through skillful questioning, allowed me to derive workable solutions to address those.

PR-C recollected that she was “able to think about how to address the issue. It may not be a solution, but I go away with a better clarity on the situation.” She shared that she gained through reflections about her way of doing things as a school leader:

I reflected about something that I think I could do better and that is, maybe not jumping to making decisions so fast. So I remind myself that sometimes I do not need to rush into making decisions.... I continue to remind myself along the way to give it time,

Furthermore, PR-D recalled:

I was not being directed to do anything, but it was really a process of reflection. So, several series of questions were being asked. ... to rethink about some of my assumptions, some of my beliefs and how it could have possibly affected my interpretation of the scenario. And it also provided me with opportunity to look at alternatives, especially things which I may not have considered before.

From the perspective of Principal-Trainers, the value of empowering their learners is also acknowledged. They believe that the beginning principals are intellectually capable and are experienced as vice-principals to be able to derive at their own solutions. For instance, PT-Q said:

In many cases, the client (learner) expects a ready-made solution to be provided, but this is not the aim of a coaching session. As such, the challenge is to ask the right questions to help the client decide for himself/herself the best way towards the solution to his/her challenge.

As coach, PT-S also learned “how to hold the other person perfectly able to solve his own problems, believing that people have their own resources and capability to live out their lives fully. They are whole and resilient even at the point when they may not be in the best shape.”

In the Singapore MOE system, self-empowerment can sometimes be diminished by cultural work values such as respect and deference to higher authorities in the hierarchical structure (Hairon and Goh, 2019). There is a need for mindset change, to be more collaborative, more collegial and cultivate a trusting mutual relationship among colleagues (Goh, Hairon and Lim, 2019; Ng, 2017).

Thirdly, beginning principals benefitted when coached by Principal-Trainers who have ‘been there, done it’. They are seen as supportive, understanding and empathetic of the trials of the beginning principals. PT-S surmised thus: “Actually many of them have similar issues and they are quite consistent.” In this sense, the culture of shared understanding and shared context is useful for the learner in at least three aspects: Safe space, role clarification, and coaching skills. Principalship can be a lonely endeavor as one is absorbed in the daily unending tasks. Beginning principals appreciated having a more experienced other whom they could relate with. For example, PR-B felt comforted that he is “engaging with someone who is aware of the context, demands and expectations of the job, someone who was in my shoes before and can empathize and relate with the same feelings of trepidations and apprehension that I may have in starting out in the role.” Similarly, PR-C reminisced: “You go to a person who can understand and his approach is not to tell you what to do, but to give you that space to share and even as you're sharing, you are reflecting. She added:

He also helps me to know that I am not alone in having all these issues. And so you don't feel like you're doing such a bad job or whatever.

Furthermore, she recalled the “assurance through the time with him that given the different issues, it will be okay.... and not to get too caught up or too bogged down by issues of the day.”

These views resonated with what PT-Q has to say:

Being in the same profession helped as my clients are mainly school leaders and we are in the same business of educational leadership. Much of the issues center around their relationships with their staff, peers and superiors.

Principal-Trainers like PT-Q benefitted from the coaching experience as he improved as “a far better communicator, learning to focus on the client and to determine through our coaching session what is best for him/her” and “we mutually develop a strong relationship based on mutual trust and respect.”

Also, coaching helps beginning principals to consider the different options available for further actions. They could reflect on the core issues that they are struggling with and avail themselves to the different leadership and management styles for specific situations and purposes. The knowledge, stories and sharing of her perspectives of the Principal-Trainers them in decision-making. For example, PR-B expressed “...at the end of the session, I felt that I am more clear of the issues at hand that I was struggling with, and was able to detail some short-term and long-term plans to address those issues.”

Furthermore, While being coached, the beginning principals learned some useful coaching skills from the coaches. For example, instead of the default telling and directing mode when communicating with staff, they can learn to reframe their concerns as questions, thus help in managing complex school challenges. This is how PR-C put it as to how coaching helped her:

I can come out with the solution fast but it is even better giving room for other people to make the decisions. I think that will be developing people rather than showing that I'm a leader. So that is a practical example....I think it's more of a state of mind thing.

The coaching knowledge is also useful school leaders as people developers in leading and facilitating aspiring leaders and teachers through self-coaching, peer coaching, and team coaching. PR-D described how he used coaching to develop his staff:

I also try to model after is that ... to be able to use the same questions, ... to refrain myself from providing or to go directly into issues when I'm talking to my colleagues, especially my vice-principals, to help to get them to also think and reflect what are their personal motivations, what are their underlying assumptions and maybe to think about different things.

Both PT-T and PT-S also highlighted that the use of powerful questions in the coaching process helps in sharpening the learner's observation skills. PT-S commented that learning some basic coaching skills can be usefulness as “They can actually coaching themselves and also they can coach each other.” Similarly, PT-T added:

It is not just about cognitive head knowledge..... it is also about self-coaching,....so that you can coach others to be self-aware. Only by this change of culture towards coaching that teachers can be more effective and their work for example, in Character and Citizenship Education, Form Teacher Guidance Period, Teacher-student rapport will be more meaningful.

c) Challenges of coaching as an approach to school leadership development

The key concern is the lack of dedicated time for a meaningful coaching conversations. As a novice school leader, it is not surprising that one is predominantly driven by the ‘what to do’ rather than reflection on the ‘being’ of a school leader. For example, PR-C shared, “...the main thing is time. ... We have to really intentionally make time for it because it's so easy to get caught up. So, ...when we get the emails that say, you need to schedule that session, we are like where to find time? It is like exercise. You know you need to discipline yourself to go. But after you do it, you feel so good.” She further shared: “You still need time to sit and reflect after the coaching session because there will be questions that will be thrown up”.

Another finding is that coaching as an approach for vertical leadership development can be supported by other on-going professional development platforms for building leadership capabilities. Coaching is not the cure-all, and need not be a standalone. It can be incorporated as part of the mentoring process. For example, PR-B observed that mentoring and coaching are:

...rather intertwined.... the coaching component was also brought out through a cognitive coaching approach. My mentor provided a listening ear and allowed me to share my initial struggles and challenges but through series of questions, he actually led me to articulate my own solutions and plans to counter those issues.

Furthermore, coaching need not be rigidly structured as a “must-do” activity in the school’s professional development framework. It can leverage on the fundamental principles of Socratic questions, the power of appreciative inquiry, and the application of other instruments such as the strengths-based tools to facilitate in asking powerful and evocative questions. However, coaching competencies need to be honed through practice. PT-Q reflected, “Initially, due to lack of experience there were ‘glitches’ along the way such as deciding on the right questions to ask, or wondering what is truly the issue presented by the client.” The feeling of not good enough was similarly observed by PT-T, “Challenges were self- inflicted ones – the sense of not being good enough from the lack of practice and deep knowledge.”

Another observation concerns the occupational hazard of the Principal-Trainer as coach. PT-T mused,

With coaching, I still fall a lot into the telling mode because my habits of the past will come in, playing the advisor, playing the counselor, playing the wiser other. I think it's a hazard of being a teacher or being an educator and being a leader too. It is so easy to tell,

to advice. So yes, that's where a lot of work needs to be done....the muscle memory is strong.

Discussion

It is little surprising that research findings on the coaching experience between the coach and learner as well as the benefits of coaching derived in this study are consistent with literature. This segment shall discuss the findings in the Singapore education context.

The positive emotions of the coaching experience as expressed by the beginning principals and the Principal-Trainers are similar to what literature says (Cherkowski and Walker, 2018; Grant, 2014; Keyes, 2003; Kutsyuruba *et al.*, 2019; Lowery, 2019). The beginning principals appreciated the coaching experience and described how their coaches created a safe space for honest conversations. Their views are in agreement with research on the nature of coaching, one that is premised on a partnership in a safe and trusting non-hierarchical relationship between the coach and the learner (ICF, 2020; Neolicky, 2016; Robertson, 2009). The beginning principals as learners articulated how their coaches supported them in raising self-awareness by skillfully asking questions, and enabling them to reflect deeper, analyse issues from different perspectives, and in the process, availed themselves to the different possibilities for future actions. This notion of self-empowerment leading to greater satisfaction, better outcomes, and optimizing the personal and professional potential of the learner is consistent with research by Brothers, 2005, Costa and Garmston, 2002, Ng, 2005 and Whitmore, 2009. These authors noted that the coach, through raising self-awareness and giving feedback, supports the learner towards self-evaluation, self-analysis, self-modification and self-renewal.

The findings around self-awareness and self-empowerment as benefits of the coaching experience have implications on coaching as an approach to leadership development in the Singapore context. This is because the nature of coaching that centers on a non-judgemental, non-hierarchical safe space seems to contradict the predominantly hierarchical setup in the Singapore education system and schools are centrally-governed under the purview of the MOE. In this structure, schools are organized into clusters and principals are under the supervision of the cluster superintendents. Classroom teachers in turn are under the charge of middle leaders who in turn report to their school leaders.

This juxtaposition of a hierarchical organizational structure and a non-hierarchical coaching relationship raises some interesting observations. Given these differing characteristics of the two setups, the school leader is 'caught in the middle' in several ways.

Firstly, Singapore principals are fully aware of their roles and responsibilities as head of schools. They have been assimilated into the job during accession (Boon, 2018). Being accountable to the MOE in achieving educational outcomes, their core business is to ensure that MOE policy initiatives are effectively implemented by teachers for students' holistic development; they are also responsible for the management of facilities, funding, staff, and other stakeholders (Ng, 2013). In addition, they have to lead nationally (Heng, 2013), to align school practices with national and MOE imperatives. To achieve school goals, they need to wisely adapt

policies to the school context through a ‘strategic alignment, tactical empowerment’ approach (Ng, 2016). They also have to be mindful that they do not lose focus in the midst of numerous policy changes (Ng 2013). These functional roles of principals as set within the conventional hierarchical supervisor-subordinate structure would also mean that power distance, an inherent feature of a structural organization (Goh, Hairon and Lim, 2019; Hofstede *et al.* 2010) is something school leaders have to be mindful of. Furthermore, this challenge posed by the hierarchical structure is also accentuated by cultural work values predominant in the Asian (including Singapore) context where relationships in general are deeply-rooted in Confucianism. Greater emphasis is placed on values such as respect for authority, filial piety, respect for tradition, face concept, and extended family or kinship relationships in the workplace (Hairon and Goh, 2019). In schools, work is conducted in ways that are sensitive to cultural work values of hierarchy, collectivism and long-term orientation (Hairon and Goh, 2019). For example, research by Goh, Hairon and Lim (2019) highlighted the influence of cultural values on distributed leadership practices in the Singapore schools, and that school leaders practice high power distance when relating with staff. In short, the deep-seated power distance between the superior and subordinate can be a stumbling block to any authentic coaching relationship.

Secondly, Singapore principals play a dual role as supervisor (appraiser, evaluator) and people developer (nurturer). These two contradictory roles pose a challenge. The superior has to clearly delineate the fine line between them when relating with their subordinates. As supervisors and appraisers, they have to manage, lead and evaluate their subordinates (Sergiovanni, 2009). Yet, as people developers, they have to be nurturing and non-judgemental. For productive conversations to happen, there needs to be openness and trust. Literature has documented the tension between the developmental and appraisal roles of the supervisor (Ng, 2012). The coach has to be mindful of the potential conflict between the formative and evaluative aspects of learning (Black and Wiliam, 2003; James *et al.*, 2007). With this challenge, the fidelity and integrity of the coaching process may be compromised and this can affect the coaching relationship. Even if the superior is clear about his role, it may not be so for the subordinate, thus possibly cause mistrust and guardedness. Hence, the implementation of coaching in its pure sense can be challenging in the Singapore context.

In a hierarchical setup, it is no surprise that the job of principalship can be a lonely one. This is borne out by research by Duke *et al.*, 1984, Lee, 2015; Weindling and Earley, 1987. In Singapore school, even though the work of principalship, especially in decision-making, principals are not necessarily alone. As part of the education system, there are numerous bases of support. For example, MOE-initiated support such as peer-mentoring and the cluster system provide direct support and network. However, such ways of support are part of the different platforms for what Kegan and Lahey *et al.*, (2016) termed as the ‘horizontal’ development of the principals. The different platforms for development are predominantly work-related and staff may not feel safe or comfortable bringing up their difficulties to their superiors. Hence, the anxiety and apprehension experienced by the school leader in the given cultural context may hinder their leadership development. This explains why the beginning principals appreciated the shared understanding derived from the coaching relationship. Support from their coaches who share the same leadership context (and are not their superiors) goes a long way in supporting the learners.

This shared context between the Principal-Trainers and beginning principals enhances the coaching experience and relationship. Besides gaining confidence and self-empowering from the solutions that learners derive from within themselves, they also benefitted from a greater awareness about self-care. This is especially necessary in the Singapore context where leadership is such a complex and challenging role. Singapore principals have been reminded that education is a human endeavour (Ng, 2017) that is to be run as a marathon rather than a sprint (Heng, 2013). They need the wisdom and discernment to pace out the numerous MOE-initiated policies and negotiate carefully when leading the staff and other stakeholders. Hence, in this study, coaching benefitted learners in helping them to draw from their prior knowledge, make use of sensory data and intuition to guide, hone and refine their own actions. They are also empowered to make choices between self-assertion and integration, to be open to reflect on ambiguities and explore possibilities to create new meanings, seek balance between solitude and togetherness, and seek perspectives beyond self and others to generate resourceful responses. Such benefits are also supported in literature (Costa and Garmston, 2002; Petrie, 2018). The tough work of teaching and leading has to be balanced with preservation of the human spirit. This notion of self-care is consistent with literature (Brown, 2018; Keyes, 2003; Kutsyruba *et al.*, 2019; Lowery, 2019). Self-care is crucial not only for the principal, but also for the teachers who are at the forefront of preparing the young for the future. Here is where coaching can be helpful, as illustrated by the reflections of the beginning principals in this study. They acknowledged the learning to take a step back and pace their work energies. This capacity for self-awareness, being sensitive to one's whole being, especially physiologically and emotionally, cannot be underestimated. Principals can be empowered to have the confidence when faced with tough situations. For example, when getting closer to the tipping point, they can have within themselves the courage to speak up. Brown's (2018) exhortation to 'daring to lead courageously', acknowledging one's vulnerability, and having the humility to seek help are strengths rather than weakness.

While coaching may be a powerful approach to leadership development, there are inherent implementation issues in the Singapore context. For one, dedicated and meaningful one-to-one coaching requires time. This is challenging in the busyness of daily work in schools. This explains why coaching is practiced as part of the mentoring process during work conversations between the superior and subordinate. In this sense, coaching is essential but is not a panacea for all leadership development purposes (Netolicky, 2016; Rhodes and Fletcher, 2013). A comprehensive leadership development programme requires a complementary wide repertoire of strategies and approaches including coaching. It requires a good mix of horizontal and vertical growth of the leader (Kegan and Lahey, *et al.*, 2016; Petrie, 2018). Leadership development is not about setting a goal for principals to reach the highest level possible, but about capacity building to enable them to undertake the complex work in leading schools. In the Singapore system, the plethora of approaches such as on-the-job training, job expansion, mentoring, and milestone training programmes will remain as the mainstay to prepare teachers for accession to higher levels of responsibilities. The school leaders need to decide on the approach to adopt at appropriate times. For example, if answers are needed, mentoring and directives would be more suited than coaching.

Furthermore, in working with stakeholders, principals will need different approaches under situations. Coaching is useful for principals to be better prepared in managing diverse talented individuals working effectively together in the school community towards a common goal. It is powerful as it provides a safe format for professional dialogue and develops skills for reflection on practice, both of which are necessary for fruitful collaborations and productive outcomes (Costa and Garmston, 2002; Costa and Kallick, 2000). Considering the changing roles of principals and teachers in Singapore schools, teachers are expected to take on greater leadership responsibilities in teaching and learning, and administration (Hairon and Goh, 2019; Heng, 2013). In that sense, the principles and values of coaching can be further explored within and across schools. For example, self-coaching, peer coaching, team coaching are possible options available to support a positive school culture where enhancing energies can help strengthen towards harmonious collegial and collaborative relationships.

In summary, the benefits of coaching for leadership development are overwhelming despite some implementation limitations when practiced in Singapore schools. Coaching as a leadership development approach is a compelling proposition towards sustainability in the VUCA environment. School leaders need and want support that is self-empowering and holistic. Coaching can enhance their intellectual capacities with regards to the 'whats' and 'hows' of leadership, but more powerfully, it addresses their need for deep meaning, fulfilment, and satisfaction as they enact this challenging role of principalship. In other words school leaders can be more innovative, more resourceful, more productive and achieve better outcomes when they lead from within, engaging the head, heart and hands coherently.

A final point concerns the research perspective. This small-scale study is a contribution to the body of literature on coaching in supporting professional and personal growth of Singapore school leaders. There is potential for further research in Singapore schools as coaching becomes more pervasive. In addition, while much of the literature on coaching for leadership development has been predominantly Western-based, this paper is a contribution towards the academic rigour in Asia-Pacific countries.

Conclusion

This paper highlights the benefits of the coaching experience between the coaches (Principal-Trainers) and learners (beginning principals) in the Singapore education system. The learners were positive about the coaching experience. Through the coaching relationship, they gained greater self-awareness and strengthened their capacity to reflect deeper, be more self-aware. More importantly, they have the capacity to be self-empowered and exercise self-care while undertaking the critical and heavy responsibilities of principalship.

In short, coaching offers a useful approach for leadership development in the Singapore education system. Also, the learning from this Singapore experience may provide some insights and lessons for application in education systems elsewhere.

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