The coaching experience of four novice principals

Cheryl James-Ward
Department of Educational Leadership, San Diego State University, San Diego, California, USA

Abstract

Purpose – This study followed four novice principals in two urban school districts through one or two years of their leadership coaching experience. The purpose of this study was to determine principals’ perceived benefits of the coaching experience, principals’ beliefs regarding the most beneficial attributes of a coach, and the match between these findings and the core leadership practices that most dramatically impact student achievement.

Design/methodology/approach – This study followed four novice principals in two urban school districts through one or two years of their leadership coaching experience.

Findings – Principals in this study appeared to have had a successful coaching experience in part because of: the coach’s knowledge of curriculum, schools, and districts; the practicality of the experience; and the coach’s ability to collaborate and shape the thinking of principals without being authoritative or intrusive. Principals experienced success on the job as identified by the student achievement on state tests and their advancement to district principal leadership roles.

Originality/value – The focus of the coaching in this study appeared to be centered on the core leadership practices noted to have the most impact on student achievement. The results revealed that the skills sets and knowledge of a coach are critical to the coaching experience. The general effects of a coaching focus on core leadership practices may also play a significant part in principal success; however, more research is needed to make a full determination.

Keywords Coaching, Novice principals, Leadership practices, Schools, Principals, Leadership

Paper type Case study

Over the last decade, there has been unprecedented pressure for increased student achievement at the national level. In the USA, the impetus for this pressure was manifested through the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) (2001) and continues through federal policies such as the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (2010). With NCLB came an unparalleled focus on the role of leadership in improving student achievement. This resulted in calls for universities to restructure educational leadership programs and in increased efforts by school districts to provide effective professional development and/or other systems of support for both new and veteran principals alike. Although current literature points to increased efforts at the university level to better prepare future principals for their role (Orr and Orphanos, 2011; Perez et al., 2011; Young et al., 2007), the task remains daunting. Since principals are recognized as key to improving student achievement (Gurr et al., 2006; Hallinger and Heck, 1996; Leithwood et al., 2004; Mullen et al., 2002; Peck and Mullen, 2010; Spillane, 2006), both traditional and new forms of support appear essential for principals, especially for those entering the position (Goddard et al., 2004; Kearney, 2010; Petzko, 2008).

One support system that has emerged for meeting the complex and dynamic needs of twenty-first century principals is principal coaching (Bloom et al., 2005; Goddard et al., 2004; Kearney, 2010; Petzko, 2008; Young et al., 2007). Various researchers have examined leadership coaching in terms of need, content, coach’s characteristics, and
This study conducted in a medium size urban school district focuses on the recipients of leadership coaching, the principals. It examines the benefits the principals identified that they received from having a leadership coach and the aspects of the experience they considered most valuable. The paper begins with a brief overview of the literature, followed by a description of the setting, participants, methodology, and findings, and ends with conclusions and recommendations.

Leadership coaching
Leadership coaching, a relatively recent form of professional development for school administrators, is also a focus of current research. Most of the scholarly definitions of leadership coaching include some mention of outcomes, or goals. Bloom et al. (2005) define coaching as “the practice of providing deliberate support to another individual to assist him/her in clarifying and/or achieving goals” (p. 5). Reiss (2007) defines it as an ongoing relationship between a coach and a coachee that focuses on coachees’ taking action toward the realization of their visions, goals, or desires. Hargrove (2008) states that coaching is about expanding a leader’s capacity to accomplish what he or she needs to accomplish by focusing on both short-term goals and the long-term vision. Often, the short- and/or long-term goals are concerned with students’ academic improvement on standardized measures that affect a school’s standing and, sometimes, a school’s access to resources. For the purpose of this study, the researcher defined leadership coaching as an ongoing process between a principal and a non-district coach who assists principals with reaching desired school and district level goals as well as maximizing their leadership capacity.

Research on leadership coaching has been concentrated in three primary areas: impact on student achievement, identification of the attributes of an exemplary coach and components of the coaching process. This paper will focus on the latter two: attributes of an exemplary coach and components of the coaching process. According to leaders in the field, the attributes of an exemplary leadership coach have been identified as: proven track record of results and of emotional intelligence (Hargrove, 2008); active listener (Bloom et al., 2005; Knight, 2011; Lovely, 2004; Lubinsky, 2002; Silver et al., 2010); strong questioning skills (Bloom et al., 2005; Knight, 2011; Lubinsky, 2002; Silver et al., 2010); ability to serve as a neutral party (Bloom et al., 2005; Lovely, 2004); and ability to establish trust, identified throughout the literature as the critical attribute (Aguilar et al., 2011; Bloom et al., 2005; Knight, 2011; Silver et al., 2010).

Ortiz (2002), in studying the coaching process, identified the following components: determining the strengths and improvement needs of the leader; setting goals and objectives; identifying places where learning can occur; providing targeted feedback; encouraging reflection; and constantly coming back to revisit goals, growth, and next steps.

Setting and participants
For this study the researcher, in her capacity as leadership coach, followed the steps laid out by Ortiz to examine principals’ perceived benefits of having a leadership coach and their reporting of most valuable aspects of the experience. A qualitative case study of four principals was selected as the best approach for drawing out from principals the benefits they received from their coaching experience and their identification of which
benefits they considered most valuable. Participants included four-novice principals who received leadership coaching for one to three years from the researcher. The principals were from two districts in Southern California, both urban districts with diverse student populations. One school district had over 100,000 students, with Latino students making up the largest percentage followed by Whites. The other district had just over 26,000 students, with Latinos comprising 70 percent of the student body, followed by African Americans. Both districts had experienced rapid superintendent turnover, with each district having three superintendents within a four-year period, and both had exhibited instability at the superintendent cabinet level as well. One district set forth very specific goals for the principal coaching experience, namely, that principals who had not been provided with coaching would receive support to bolster their transformational leadership skills and their ability to successfully implement district mandates. There were no pre-established goals for the coaching experience in the other district.

As leadership coach, the researcher met with three of the principals in this study twice monthly for a half-a-day and corresponded with each in between sessions. She met with the fourth principal twice monthly the first year and less frequently in the two subsequent years. The coaching sessions were grounded in blended coaching, beginning with instructional and reflective strategies, and over time moved to facilitative, inquiry based, and more reflective coaching strategies (Bloom et al., 2005). After every meeting, principals were sent follow-up notes that summarized the meeting and reiterated agreed upon next steps.

Consistent with recommendations in the literature (Aguilar et al., 2011), the researcher focussed her initial coaching sessions with three of the four principals on their vision for the school and ways to extend this vision throughout their school communities. Subsequent coaching sessions with each of the four principals generally began with a discussion of follow-up notes from the previous meeting followed by classroom visits, discussion about the visits, and recommendations for teacher support. Aguilar et al. (2011) and James-Ward and Salcedo-Potter (2011) both had noted that principals and their coaches spent the majority of their time together in classrooms and discussing instruction and teacher support, and this proved to be the case in this study. Additional discussion topics between coach and principal centered on analyzing and utilizing data for teacher support, including managing difficult teachers; developing change plans; and addressing political challenges from teachers, unions, school board members, supervisors, or community members.

**Description of principals and their school communities**

Since leadership coaching is both a professional and a personal encounter between coach and coachee, occurring in a particular context, brief descriptions of the four principals in this study (identified by pseudonyms) and their school communities provide an overview of the context for this research.

**John: principal of an academically high achieving elementary school**

John received his undergraduate degree from Wheaton College and his master’s from Harvard University. He entered teaching through Teach for America (TFA, 2011) and taught for four years before becoming a vice principal for six years at three different sites, working with the same principal. John was a fifth year principal at a high-achieving elementary school in a quaint middle class neighborhood in a large urban district with a student population over 100,000. The school’s state academic ranking,
based on a range from 200 to 999 points known as the academic performance index (API) (California Department of Education Academic Performance Index, 2011), hovered above 900 (schools with an API above 800 are considered high performing). In spite of its high-achievement status, some of the students at the school were not reaching mastery in core subjects. Most of the teachers were veterans and had taught at the same site for over 15 years. Many of the teachers lived in the community and were friends with parents. When past principals attempted to make changes to the learning environment, they were quickly transferred. John served under five different supervisors in his five years as principal. He received coaching during his first through fourth years in the position.

Beth: principal of a persistently low-performing elementary school
Beth was a fifth-year principal who had been assigned a leadership coach in her third year. Prior to the arrival of the coach, Beth had not received any leadership training, mentoring, or coaching from the district. Beth was principal in a persistently low-performing elementary school with 100 percent of the ~500 students on free lunch (United States Department of Agriculture, 2011) and over 75 percent second language learners. The majority of teachers had been there for five or more years. Three teachers were on improvement plans when the coach arrived. Beth was faced with the challenge of placing these teachers on improvement plans with no further action organized by the district to remove subpar teachers. Moreover, the district had begun renovations on the campus before she arrived but had encountered contractual and funding issues. As a result, the renovation project came to an abrupt halt, and a dumpster full of materials was left on Beth’s campus for three years along with unfinished and uninhabitable buildings.

Sandra: principal of an elementary school with declining API scores
Sandra received her undergraduate degree from the University of Southern California (USC) in social science and communication and her master’s from Pepperdine University. She taught for five years before becoming a curriculum specialist for two and a half years, a middle school history teacher for three and a half years, and an assistant principal for two years at a middle school. As a fifth year as principal, Sandra had received coaching during her third and fourth years. Similar to Beth, she had not received any leadership training, mentoring, or coaching via the district prior to the arrival of the coach. She had inherited a high-performing elementary school with a state API of 844; however, by the end of her second year as principal, the school’s API had dropped to 769. Sandra’s school was in a middle-class neighborhood, but 45 percent of her students were being bussed in from lower socioeconomic areas of the district. At the time of this study, there were approximately 400 students at the school, half African American and half Latino. After Sandra’s first year, seven of her 18 teachers either transferred to other schools or resigned from the district. In her third year, Sandra faced several challenges related to persistent absences. Additionally, she was faced with a teacher who had received satisfactory evaluations prior to her arrival but since then had been receiving less than satisfactory ones. When Sandra formally placed the teacher on an improvement plan, she encountered hostility and resistance from both the teacher and the teacher’s colleagues who rallied to her defense. During the spring of the Sandra’s fourth year, the teacher left the school on disability and did not returned.
Maria: principal of an academically high-performing elementary school

Maria received her bachelor’s and master’s from California State University, Dominguez Hills. She taught for nine years before becoming a program specialist in the human resources (HR) department. After five years in HR, Maria became a vice principal of a middle school identified as low-socioeconomic status (United States Department of Agriculture, 2011) with over 900 students. Maria served as a vice principal for one year before being assigned principal of one of the district’s highest performing elementary schools with an API of 839. Although most of the students at her school were performing at mastery according to criteria set forth by NCLB (2001) and the California Department of Education (CDE Testing and Accountability, 2011), Maria believed there was room for improvement. Maria was in her second year as principal and had been assigned a leadership coach for her first year.

Methodology

This study used a case study design to examine the perceived benefits of leadership coaching identified by four novice principals as well as their beliefs regarding the most beneficial attributes of the coaching experience. A case study approach was chosen because it is concerned with human experiences derived from detailed descriptions of people being studied (Cresswell, 2009) and allows for the exploration of an entity or phenomenon (the case) bounded by time and activity. This study lived within the boundaries of three consecutive years and two school districts. Qualitative data were gathered from participant observations, an open-ended survey, and the coach’s notes.

Participant observations

Merriam (2009) asserts that participant observation, as a qualitative research method, assists the researcher in learning the perspectives held by a study’s participants. For three years, the researcher spent one to four days each month in each of the two districts coaching the four principals in this study. In her role she was able to coach and observe each principal during coaching sessions, follow-up discussions, classroom visits, and structured and unstructured communications with teachers and staff over the duration of the experience.

The researcher had a diverse and relevant background for conducting this study. She had been a principal of three elementary schools in different socioeconomic areas and a director responsible for district intervention initiatives, supervising the lowest performing elementary and middle schools and coaching the principals of the lowest performing high schools in a district of just over 100,000 students. She possessed practical and theoretical knowledge of the components of effective leadership, communication skills, and a track record of securing trust and achieving success. Because of her background, her experience, and her research training, the researcher believed that she was well qualified to internalize and contextualize the experiences of the principals and obtain a detailed view of the districts’ leadership, the school settings, and the school communities.

Open-ended survey

The researcher designed an open-ended survey administered to principals at the end of the coaching experience. Construction of the survey was informed by earlier research on effective coaching programs (Cheney et al., 2010; Daresh and Lynch, 2010; Davis et al., 2005; Kearney, 2010) and included components that had been identified as part of the coaching process (Ortiz, 2002). Survey questions were designed to elicit information
about perceived benefits of having a leadership coach and principals’ opinions of the most valuable aspects of the experience. Survey questions were reviewed by a panel of leading researchers in the field of principal preparation and school leadership prior to being sent to each principal. Reviewers were requested to analyze the questions in light of the research objectives and submit comments or recommendations to be incorporated into the final version. Table I presents the final version of the survey administered to the four principals.

In order to ensure anonymity and comfort in responding to the survey, the survey was administered by an independent-survey administrator, one of the principals in the study. Responses were received by the survey administrator, organized, and forwarded to the researcher for analysis.

Coach’s notes
Following each coaching session, the researcher wrote extensive notes to catalogue the experience. Observations notes might include notations on principal actions and comments and follow-up items for discussion during the next coaching meeting. Coaching notes were shared with the principals on a regular basis as part of the on-going coaching process. Notes also were shared for modification and/or amplification to ensure reliability and validity of observations.

Validity and reliability of findings
Consistent with warnings in the literature about validity and conflict of interest (Merriam, 2009), the researcher recognized that functioning as a participant observer carries risks. To address issues of validity, the researcher arranged for survey responses to be compiled anonymously by an independent researcher as previously noted. Survey response data subsequently were cross-referenced with the coach’s follow-up notes, which had been sent to principals for member checking following each coaching session and reviewed with principals at the subsequent meeting.

The researcher also recognized that researcher objectivity could be questioned in this study since the researcher was the coach who had been retained to facilitate the success of the principals, three of whom were women in leadership positions. To minimize the effect of emotional attachments and gender identification, the researcher kept this possibility ever present in her activities and analyses and was sensitive to the feedback received from participants, the survey, and the member checks. She also believed that the extended amount of time spent in the environments and with the subjects grounded her in the realities of the experiences. It should also be noted that the researcher was focussing on the benefits of the experience in this study and did not request information about any potential disappointments. However, the

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<tr>
<th>Numbers</th>
<th>Questions</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Please describe your coaching experience.</td>
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<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Was the coaching experience what you expected? Why or why not?</td>
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<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>What was the most beneficial part of your experience? Why?</td>
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<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Did you gain anything from your coaching experience? If so, please explain.</td>
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<td>5</td>
<td>Which principals do you believe should have principal coaches?</td>
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<td>6</td>
<td>What were the characteristics or skills sets of your coach that you most valued?</td>
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<td>7</td>
<td>What are the skill sets or characteristics you believe necessary for a principal coach?</td>
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<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Is there anything else that you would like to share?</td>
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Table I.
Open-ended survey questions
open-ended survey was designed to give the principals voice about their experiences and structured so that other-than-positive information could be communicated in responding to some of the questions.

Data analysis
The researcher initiated her data analysis by examining the principals’ anonymous survey responses received as text from the independent administrator. By identifying underlying key concepts from each of the eight questions, the researcher sorted data into six categories. Data were distilled further into the two major foci of this study: benefits of having a coach and most valuable aspects of the experience. Survey data then were compared with data from the researcher’s observation, discussion, and follow-up notes prior to reporting the findings.

Findings
Analysis of survey responses, observation data, and coach’s notes identified five benefits that the four principals perceived they received from their coaching experience and seven components that one or more principals submitted as a particularly valuable aspect.

Benefits of having a coach
Data analysis of the survey responses identified the following as benefits of having a coach: opportunity to learn things quickly; becoming comfortable with the profession; improving ability to provide meaningful feedback; developing leadership skills; and managing politics. These benefits were confirmed by the researchers’ observations and data from her notes.

Opportunity to learn things quickly. The researcher had noted during her early observations that principals desired instructional coaching more than any other type. She observed that principals implemented suggestions almost immediately and in the process were able to adapt suggested feedback to meet their own leadership styles, thus amplifying possible effectiveness. One principal commented, “I felt pushed, in a good way, to learn quickly and come up with an action plan or next steps.” In their survey responses, the principals also expressed appreciation that they were able to benefit from their coach’s sharing of her knowledge and experiences with school successes, an important coaching skill set identified by Aguilar et al. (2011) and Cheney et al. (2010), and the principals recognized the value of immediacy in being able to consult with the coach about concerns and questions. As one principal noted, “To have someone to speak to candidly and a neutral party to confide in was most helpful.”

Becoming comfortable with the profession. Kearney (2010) has observed that for principals new to the profession to utilize what they have learned in graduate courses, on-going collaborative discussions involving inquiry, reflection, and broader thinking are necessary. Over the course of the leadership coaching, the researcher observed that the four principals “grew into the profession.” Some of this growth could be attributed to having more time on the job; however, the researcher observed the principals applying the benefits they were receiving from experienced coaching focussed on the intricacies of the profession. In survey responses, principals conveyed that the coaching experience was one that assisted in their maturation in the profession. As one principal noted, “It was an experience that saved my sanity and provided hope when I felt hopeless.” Another wrote, “Who I am as a leader has been dramatically shaped by my three years with my coach and something that I credit as the key growth ingredient
in me professionally.” A third reported, “The coaching experience really influenced my growth as a principal. The knowledge I gained supported the requirements and job duties I was expected to perform.” The principals’ survey responses and the researcher observations and notes confirmed that the coaching experience helped the principals feel supported and encouraged them to believe in themselves, in their abilities, and in new possibilities.

Improving ability to provide meaningful feedback. The researcher observed and principal feedback confirmed that principals’ ability to communicate with their teachers improved over the course of the coaching experience. In part this could be attributed to learned behavior from the on-going principal-coach discussions, but some of the improvement should be credited to the benefits gained from joint school walkthroughs and subsequent reflections on ways to support teachers in their classrooms. As one principal stated:

I enjoyed the instructional walkthroughs and the conversations I had with my coach regarding the observations. The coach’s feedback was very candid and guided my next steps for professional development for my staff and me to enhance student achievement. Each professional development session I delivered was focused and supported the teaching practices on campus.

Another principal reported, “It was the experience of [the coaching] that allowed me to see elements and issues within the school quickly and come up with rapid responses accompanied by feedback.”

Developing leadership skills. Each of the principals in this study identified leadership tasks they considered fundamental to the position including being clear on school vision, staying focussed on the vision and current goals, being an instructional leader, managing school politics, being visible on campus, and bringing people together to develop a cohesive school culture. In their survey responses, the principals acknowledged that their ability in these areas improved as a result of having a leadership coach. This finding aligns with those of Darling-Hammond et al. (2007) and Kearney (2010), who reported that novice principals enter the job having studied elements of the profession and theoretical ways to handle matters but lack the skills to spontaneously pull it all together. Over the course of the coaching experiences, the researcher observed principals moving from being hesitant about making decisions to being decisive and acting with conviction. One principal, in submitting survey comments about her growth in leadership, commented, “My coach had an amazing ability to shape my thinking and lead me to arrive at my own conclusions.” Another stated:

My knowledge of leadership, specifically in leading change, has increased tenfold. Understanding how to bring stakeholders together and move them in the direction you want them to go without being top down in style has been huge, also learning how to work through difficult situations and stay focused on the goal at hand. Understanding my own self as a leader and what my vision is has been instrumental in centering who I am and where I want to take people.

Managing politics. Encouraging political sensitivity was one of the foci of the coaching experienced, as evidenced by the coach’s follow-up note to a principal:

It was great to see you out mingling with the parents after school and at the kindergarten presentation. So much of the principalship in a high performing and affluent school is about being a politician. Community relations can either make a break a principal.
The researcher observed, and had written in her notes, that principals gained skill in handling the political aspects of their position and that this skill extended to interactions with teachers, parents, school administrators, and community members. In commenting on the value of learning how to manage political situation, one principal wrote, “The political side of leading schools is so multi-faceted, and my coaching experience has been huge in terms of understanding how to manage this and create win/win situations and can’t say no questions.”

The most valuable aspects of the coaching experience

Data analysis of survey response identified the following benefits that one or more of the four principals identified as particularly valuable: developing sets of leadership practices that impacted student achievement; establishing a shared vision that served as the framework for school-wide goals; providing assistance using the vision and goals to motivate stakeholders and to help the principal and staff members make sense of their work; helping develop ways to monitor organizational performance by setting up routines for classroom walkthroughs; developing structures for walkthrough follow-up notes; analyzing data to determine next steps; and assisting with developing structures to communicate with various school stakeholders and political parties. The most valued aspect of the coaching experience identified consistently by the principals was the benefit of acquiring practical skills. The most frequently identified examples of this benefit were classroom walkthroughs, discussions about next steps, and discussions about moving to the next level.

Experience gained from classroom walkthroughs. All four principals praised the experience gained from classroom walkthroughs and subsequent discussions about instruction. As one principal commented, “Classroom walkthroughs, along with discussions about next steps, were very beneficial.” As noted earlier, another stated, “I enjoyed the instructional walkthroughs and the conversations I had with my coach regarding the observations.”

Discussions about next steps. Principals reported that the coach’s follow-up notes that referred to classroom visits and identified next steps for individual teachers, grade levels, or the school were very helpful. Analysis of the researcher’s coaching notes identified frequent references to walkthroughs that focussed on next steps for specific grades or teachers, content areas, classroom environments (as supports for learning), instructional delivery and input, and student engagement. Notes from one school walkthrough recorded the following:

We noted in [Mrs D’s] room that the objective posted really dealt with ELA [English Language Arts]. It was large and student friendly, but not [suitable] for ELD [English Language Development]. We also noted that [Mrs D] was walking the room as students worked, and the next step would be for her to actually engage students to ensure that what they are doing is on point, to take the learning deeper, and to make use of teachable moments.

Discussions about moving to the next level. Cheney et al. (2010) raised questions about what makes an effective coach. The researcher has determined that the experience of leadership coaching, when viewed in its entirety, essentially is about moving to the next level. To be effective, coaches must engage coachees in discussions and actions regarding next steps; moreover, they must have a system for monitoring implementation of next steps as well as measuring effectiveness. Data analysis confirmed that principals particularly valued the coach-principal conversations regarding how the principals could lead or move his or her staff to the next level. One principal reported, “The coach’s feedback was very candid and guided my next
steps for professional development for my staff and me to enhance student achievement.”

This importance of discussions about moving to the next level is supported by notations throughout the researcher’s follow-up notes. For example, in one set of coaching notes the researcher wrote:

As we discussed, this timeline will need to address the phases of development including teacher awareness, initial use [of student assessment for instructional purposes], comfort and understanding of the importance of the assessment cycle, and, finally, ownership of the process.

A fourth consideration: neutrality of the coach. One other aspect of the coaching experience worth noting is that of the neutrality of the coach. Bloom et al. (2005) emphasized that one of the major responsibilities for a coach is to build and maintain trust with the coachee (p. 26). In a coaching leadership relationship, neutrality and trust complement each other. Principals in this study recognized the importance of trust and valued the benefit of developing a trusting relationship with someone who held a neutral position. As one principal noted:

The coaching experience was not what I expected. I thought that I would be annoyed by the time that I would be obligated to spend with my coach during her visits. It was actually a wonderful time to talk to someone that I did not supervise and that did not supervise me about my immediate and long-term challenges and goals.

Another principal commented:

Usually when you speak to someone that is ahead of you professionally, they are someone that is in a supervisory position, so it becomes more difficult to be completely honest about your experience. The neutrality of the coaching relationship removes that barrier.

These comments about the importance of neutrality are consistent with the attributes required of a coach noted by Bloom et al. (2005) and Lovely (2004).

Conclusion and recommendations

The principals in this study perceived that the coaching experience provided valuable support and experience that helped them to be successful in their jobs. They reported that the coaching experience gave them confidence and an array of skill sets necessary to address a myriad of issues ranging from political considerations to day-to-day support for classroom teachers. The findings uncovered three over-arching themes about why the coaching experience was beneficial: collaboration around key leadership practices or practical skills; development of principal efficacy and professional growth; and coaching from an experienced, neutral coach. Districts wishing to support principals through coaching programs should structure their coaching with attention to these themes.

Because collaboration around leadership skills emerged as critically important to principals, district coaching programs should ensure that coaches themselves are steeped in principal leadership skills and, equally or more important, able to coach in a collaborative, neutral manner that elicits trust and mutual respect. Professional growth often is the byproduct of gaining practical skills through collaborative experiences; hence, districts should to set aside time for coaches to acquire and/or practice blended coaching strategies as recommended by Bloom et al. (2005). Collaboration should focus on the use of instructional methods to build principals capacity and confidence and facilitative methods to build principal self-efficacy and sustainable capacity.
Neutrality of the coach cannot be underestimated. Prior research by this researcher and colleagues has established that the principalship is often considered a lonely profession (James-Ward and Salcedo-Potter, 2011; Kearney, 2010), one reason being that principals do not feel comfortable sharing their concerns or shortcomings with supervisors or those they supervise. In this environment, a leadership coach can function as that supportive person that mitigates feelings of isolation.

In this study both the coach/researcher and the principals reported that the value of the coaching experience was grounded in the practicality of the work. Districts should expect principals and their leadership coaches to engage in the day-to-day work of instructional leaders, doing together the work known to lead to successful schools (Leithwood et al., 2004).

As a result of the researcher’s undertaking this study and evaluating the findings, she suggests that the field of leadership coaching could benefit from research in four areas:

1. What specific activities or experiences in leading schools do principals who have had leadership coaches attribute to their coaching experience?
2. What, if any, is the relationship between coaching and coachee efficacy?
3. What impact does system or district level involvement have on leadership coaching?
4. Do principals from districts with stable leadership find coaching as impactful as those from districts with high superintendent and cabinet level turnover?

Kearney (2010), in noting that many principals leave the position within the first five years and others never enter the position because of its overwhelming complexities, called attention to the importance of leadership training for principals:

When novice principals are able to improve and broaden their portfolio of skills, they are on a path to make a difference, stay on the job, and become highly accomplished leaders who use their expertise to affect successful teaching and learning (p. 18).

The researcher agrees with Kearney’s assertion. Her experience and research findings indicate that if novice principals can be supported in such a way that they feel the job challenges are manageable and if they acquire skills sets to manage the work so they control the job rather than the job controlling them, then more principals may experience job satisfaction and stay in the profession. This study indicates that well developed coaching experiences are valued by novice principals and appreciated for helping them acquire the skills and knowledge they need to fulfill their responsibilities.

References


Coaching of novice principals

Further reading


About the author

Cheryl James-Ward received her B.S. in Applied Mathematics from the University of California at Santa Barbara, her M.A. from California State University Dominguez Hills, and her Ed.D. from the University of Southern California. She has served as both a principal and supervisor of schools for the Long Beach Unified School District. She is currently an Assistant Professor at San Diego State University and a leadership coach. She has coached dozen of principals and assistant superintendents throughout California and has written several papers on leadership coaching. Cheryl James-Ward can be contacted at: cward@mail.sdsu.edu

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