A thematic analysis of the experience of educational leaders introducing coaching into schools

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Abstract
Purpose – Schools are traditionally hierarchical organisations with headteachers holding significant influence to effect change. The purpose of this paper is to present the findings of an investigation into the experiences of school leaders introducing coaching cultures into their schools.
Design/methodology/approach – This study adopts a phenomenological approach. In total, 20 face-to-face, semi-structured interviews were conducted with headteachers and deputy headteachers in the UK. Thematic analysis was used to code the data and identify themes.
Findings – The paper reports on six themes based on the experiences of school leaders who participated in this study: personal beliefs about coaching are influenced by prior experiences; frustration about the pace of change; pressure of conflicting demands; feelings of isolation; the need for confidence to see the process through; and experiencing personal growth. The findings of this study shed light on the experience that school leaders may face when introducing coaching initiatives.
Research limitations/implications – These findings are unique to the participants of this study and therefore not representative of a general population of educational leaders. Further research into factors that can influence the successful introduction of coaching initiatives into educational settings is recommended.
Practical implications – The paper includes implications for school leaders who wish to introduce coaching initiatives into their educational contexts. It is argued, for example, it is helpful for school leaders to reflect on their own beliefs about coaching before initiating cultural change within their schools.
Originality/value – This paper fulfils an identified need to understand leadership experiences in relation to coaching in schools. This understanding will support policy makers and school leaders interested in embedding coaching cultures within schools.

Keywords Educational leadership, Thematic analysis, Coaching culture, Headteachers, School leaders

School leaders have considerable influence over the organisations they lead. In some situations, they are the sole decision makers in relation to staff and student prospects. In fact, Leithwood et al. (2008) suggested that “School leadership is second only to classroom teaching as an influence on pupil learning” (p. 28), positioning school leaders as capable of affecting lasting change within their institutions. This study explored the role that school leaders can have in introducing coaching into their organisations as a way of having a positive impact on pupil learning and outcomes. In educational settings, the term “coaching” refers to conversations that aim to improve outcomes for learners. Coaching is defined as a facilitative intervention designed to support people to take responsibility for making changes to their behaviour or ways of thinking in order to achieve meaningful objectives (van Nieuwerburgh and Barr, 2017). Gormley and van Nieuwerburgh’s (2014) review of the literature on “coaching cultures” (p. 99) concluded that organisations that develop coaching cultures create more “positive and supportive” environments where...
individuals and organisations can grow. Peter Hawkins (2012, p. 21) defined a coaching culture in this way:

A coaching culture exists in an organization when a coaching approach is a key aspect of how the leaders, managers, and staff engage and develop all their people and engage their stakeholders, in ways that create increased individual, team, and organizational performance and shared value for all stakeholders.

van Nieuwerburgh and Barr (2017) concluded that “coaching initiatives in educational settings are about ensuring positive experiences for both learners and educators” (p. 507). This study offers an opportunity to understand school leaders’ perspectives about introducing coaching initiatives in their schools. The literature supports the cultivation of coaching and mentoring skills in educational contexts for headteachers, middle leaders and teachers (CUREE, 2005; Fletcher, 2012; National College for Teaching and Leadership, 2014). While mentoring is widely accepted across the education system in the UK, coaching does not seem to have become a cultural norm in quite the same way. Given the systemic influence that school leaders can have in schools, the desired outcome of this study was to increase our understanding and learn from the experiences of those in leadership positions who have introduced coaching into their schools. This paper concludes with some practical considerations for school leaders who may be in the process of introducing coaching in their own institutions.

Coaching and leadership
Research into the experiences of educational leaders as they introduce coaching initiatives in their schools is limited. While some researchers focus on models of leadership or coaching that are being used in schools, this study sought to understand the experiences of leaders as they work to introduce coaching initiatives. The authors recognise that many leadership styles are discussed in the literature, so this study focused specifically on those that are most relevant to school leaders interested in introducing coaching into their educational contexts.

Coaching as a profession has developed into a worldwide industry in the past 20 years (International Coach Federation, ICF, 2016). A 2005 report shows that coaching has become progressively accepted in schools, with some schools endorsing dedicated coaching resources to support the development of coaching practice amongst staff and pupils (CUREE, 2005). As more is understood about the application of coaching in education, many headteachers are moving schools from a “nascent” coaching culture, pockets of good coaching practice, to “embedded coaching cultures” (Clutterbuck and Megginson, 2005, p. 232) where a “coaching approach” (Campbell, 2016) is part of everyday engagement between team members, such as teacher-to-teacher, teacher-to-leader and leader-to-leader conversations.

van Nieuwerburgh and Campbell (2015) proposed a Global Framework for Coaching and Mentoring in Education, which considers coaching in educational environments through “quadrants” (of educational leadership, professional practice, student success and well-being and community engagement), offering the most appropriate entry point for leaders to prioritise coaching to enable an efficient and effective intervention. van Nieuwerburgh and Campbell (2015) designed the coaching framework to enable best practice to be captured and shared, to continue the development of the field of coaching in education, to support further research into the experiences of the coaching approaches and to be of practical use to those practising in education. The four quadrants provide a convenient categorisation to efficiently manage coaching support for all stakeholders. It is appropriate to begin this review of the field with the educational leadership quadrant of the framework.

If coaching skills are a necessary capability for successful leaders (Grant and Hartley, 2013), then it is crucial for school leaders to develop an understanding of how coaching is central to their leadership development (Whiterod, 2014) to ensure the most appropriate leadership style that is resilient and responsive. In their Leading Coaching in Schools...
Document, Creasy and Paterson (2005) highlighted the need for educational leaders to raise their self-awareness to understand and develop themselves before they can realistically develop others. This aspect of leadership behaviours parallels with coaching literature that identifies the need for coaches to be self-aware. Hardingham (2015), for example, contended that expert coaching practitioners are taught to use themselves as tools for understanding their clients. These views suggest that it may be helpful for school leaders to develop their emotional intelligence in order to increase their own self-awareness.

The National College for Teaching and Leadership (2014) was established using evidence-based research and working alongside school leaders. It focuses on six principal learning areas in which coaching skills can make a significant contribution to the learning of aspiring educational leaders:

1. achieving headship;
2. strategic and operational management;
3. developing self and others;
4. partnerships and wider relationships;
5. understanding and changing school culture; and
6. leading improvement.

These principles relate very closely to the findings in a study by Clutterbuck and Megginson (2005) considering the link between companies’ business performance and an investment in coaching. They highlight the importance of changing organisational culture to keep up with a changing business environment. The common theme is developing leadership and coaching capabilities that can influence the development of coaching cultures within organisations.

Leadership theory continues to evolve, with advances to match the age and setting of the time (Shatzner, 2009). Leadership trends have been stimulated by many external factors, such as technology and a growing understanding of the psychology of people, teams and organisations. Shatzner’s (2009) investigation of the dominant leadership theories in education identifies instructional leadership and transformational leadership, suggesting that the instructional style dominant in the recent past has focused on instructing the teacher and student learning, and a transformational style has focused on a school vision that supports a culture of intellectual stimulation.

Instructional leadership began in the 1980s in the USA because of the growing belief that headteachers could have significant impact on the effectiveness of a teacher and therefore on student outcomes. Instructional leadership today has evolved and includes a distributed approach (Stronge et al., 2008), where leadership responsibilities are shared across the school staff. Distributed leadership is described by Spillane (2005) as the practice of leadership through the interactions between peers, subordinates and the situational circumstances.

While recognising many leadership styles used in organisations, we provide an overview of the transformational leadership approach, as this is often discussed in educational settings. This type of leadership aligns well with a coaching approach. It has been argued that transformational leadership can be well-suited to supporting needs of teaching staff and students (Bass, 1995). Lofthouse (2016) highlighted how the four ‘I’s of Bass’s (1995) transformational leadership model (individualised consideration, intellectual stimulation, idealised influence and inspirational motivation) define the characteristics of successful coaching relationships between coaches and teachers. Lofthouse (2016, p. 1) described this as creating a “collaborative professional space”.

In a UK research study into types of school leadership, Hill et al. (2016) categorised five leadership styles (accountant, architect, philosopher, soldier and surgeon) as the dominant approaches adopted by headteachers as they attempt to transform failing schools. In their study, headteachers with the traits of the architect were found to be most effective over the long term,
notably even after the headteachers had left their schools. The authors found that those leaders thought long term and created space and time for teachers, also took a holistic view of the cultural needs of the school and its community. The research showed that the architect leader developed people by introducing coaching and mentoring to improve leadership and teaching in schools. Hill et al.’s (2016) study is the first to correlate a headteacher’s (teaching) subject specialism to their leadership style and how previous experiences influence behaviours. Hill et al.’s (2016) research is relevant to this study as it suggests that an enhanced understanding of headteachers’ leadership styles may inform how implementing a coaching culture can help manage the conflicting pressures of achieving academic results in the short term while building teacher capability for long-term sustainability (Creasy and Paterson, 2005).

Headteachers who develop leadership self-efficacy and build confidence in the senior leadership team (Swain, 2016) through a distributed leadership model build the foundations for a learning organisation (Stronge et al., 2008). They encourage people by exploiting coach–leader capabilities (Watts, 2011). Effective management is situational, with leaders adopting a directive or questioning response dependant on myriad factors. It may seem paradoxical, but according to an ICF study, coaching could contribute to leadership role confusion (Filipkowski et al., 2016) because of inadequate coaching skills training. While it could be argued that the ICF (as a leading professional association for coaches) may have an interest in promoting the training of leaders in the use of coaching methods, the findings support a common sense rationale that leaders who wish to model the desired behaviours would require ongoing coaching skills practice.

According to one researcher, headteachers who provide opportunities for their deputies to practise genuine leadership tasks and responsibilities achieve higher levels of “autonomy, trust, collaboration and respect” (Swain, 2016, p. 3). He argues that these beliefs stimulate self-efficacy in senior and middle leaders which could determine future leadership behaviours. Swain’s (2016) study found a statistically significant relationship between headteachers’ leadership practices and deputy headteachers’ sense of leadership self-efficacy. Headteachers’ levels of self-awareness in their leadership competence influence their confidence. However, when Adams and Gumage (2008) considered headteachers’ self-perceptions vs teachers’ perceptions of leadership, they found that “the results suggest substantial differences between the self-perceptions of the headteachers and perceptions of the teachers of head teacher leadership effectiveness” (p. 222). This underscores the importance of self-awareness in educational leaders. Understanding one’s personal beliefs and values plays a significant role in how leaders operate, driven by their “operating philosophy” (Boyatzis and McKee, 2005, p. 216). According to Boyatzis and McKee (2005), a leader’s operating philosophy is sometimes at odds with his or her outward behaviours. If coaching were presented as a leadership approach, it would allow headteachers to role model coaching behaviours, thereby encouraging senior and middle leaders to adopt them. Netolicky’s (2016) study found that Australian school leaders who adopted coaching helped to change leader–teacher modus operandi from evaluation to “self-authored learning experiences” (p. 79). The literature suggests that it is helpful for educational leaders to be self-aware and make conscious decisions about the style of leadership best suited to their organisations and congruent with their personal values.

**Introducing coaching into educational settings**

If school leaders seek to introduce new coaching-related behaviours, then the prevailing system is required to be open to adopting these new behaviours. Peter Hawkins (2012, p. 22) proposes degrees of “coaching cultures”, suggesting that they exist anywhere from tactical competencies, “artefacts” through to systemic beliefs and commitments to learning. Coaching-style behaviours are considered as an important capability of effective leaders and managers of people (Hamlin et al., 2006). While many are familiar with the idiom “do as I say not as I do” (McGraw-Hill Dictionary of American Idioms and Phrasal Verb, 2002), it is now conventional wisdom that modelling desired behaviours are expected from leadership. Creasy and Paterson (2005)
proposed that school leaders should “model the dialogue and personal approaches” (p. 5) as one of six key roles a school’s leadership team plays in its coaching implementation. Modelling behaviours for teacher learning is not only applied to coaching practice. In a study on teacher engagement, the researchers (Bell et al., 2010) suggest in order to support teachers’ use of research in improving professional practice, headteachers must model “engagement with research as a tool for tackling particular school improvement” (p. 7). This further acknowledges the pivotal role school leaders play in developing a school’s culture.

Ellinger and Bostrom’s (2002) study into managers’ beliefs about their roles as facilitators of learning suggest that managers’ “mental model or world views” (p. 148) are shaped by past experiences from beliefs that influence their behaviours. If modelling behaviours is an important component of developing a culture in schools, then school leaders’ belief in the value of coaching may play a critical role in whether or not coaching can flourish in their institutions. Headteachers’ behaviours are directed by their beliefs and “view of the world” and play a significant role in encouraging others to adopt similar behaviours.

School leaders have a significant causational effect on school culture (Evans, 2011); therefore, it is reasonable to expect that as they become aware of how coaching behaviours shape positive leadership, they must actively model those behaviours (Swain, 2016; Woods et al., 2009) to senior and middle leaders. This suggests that a school leader who offers holistic and systemic support, modelling “cognitive, technical, social, ethical, emotional and spiritual” values (Woods et al., 2009, p. 268) provides the leadership conditions for coaching to advance in their school.

This review of the literature has presented the view that leadership style is a strategic choice, and that school leaders are able to determine the leadership style that would best suit the changing circumstances (Blanchard and Hersey, 1996; Hill et al., 2016) of the school. Furthermore, school leaders’ past experiences may impact their leadership style. A distinction can be drawn between a commitment to a particular leadership style and the need for coaching skills training for school leaders to be proficient at coaching others. School leaders who model a coaching approach in their leadership can nurture future leader–coaches to engender an environment conducive for coaching to develop in their institutions.

Research design
The purpose of this study was to understand the experience of school leaders, which included headteachers and deputy headteachers, who are introducing coaching initiatives in their schools. Given the nature of this study and its focus on the experience of school leaders, thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2008) was chosen as the most appropriate methodology for this research. This method is well-suited to identifying and subjectively logging patterns and generating themes from participant interviews.

In total, 20 school leaders were recruited through a network of postgraduate students on a coaching programme, personal contacts and a search conducted through social media. A central requirement was for candidates to have leadership positions in schools and experience of coaching practice or introducing coaching into educational environments.

The participants came from a variety of schools, including privately funded independent preparatory schools (1), senior schools (8) and state-funded academy schools, primary schools (1) and senior schools (7). A further three participants were former headteachers now in senior leadership roles within Academy Trust head offices which oversee a group of schools in their trust.

Bryman and Bell (2007) listed 12 major interview types from which data can be gathered. In order to elicit the experiences and perceptions of individual participants, semi-structured face-to-face interviews (Table A1) were chosen and then conducted at each school. The interview questions were designed to cover the key research objectives, with flexibility to adapt according to the participants’ responses. Rubin and Rubin (2012, p. 70) called this “responsive interviewing”, with the intention of continually improving the research
questions. In recognition of each participant’s disposition to share deeper personal experiences during the conversations, the interviews had three stages:

1. understand the participant’s background and career journey;
2. identify significant moments that occurred as participants embarked upon the development of a coaching culture; and
3. exploration of the participant’s experiences during those significant moments (see Figure 1).

All 20 interviews were conducted by the researcher; 18 were face-to-face interviews at the participants’ schools, and 2 were conducted via Skype. The basis for face-to-face interviews was to establish rapport between the researcher and participants.

It is important to note that the initial sampling process drew several participants who, in subsequent interviews, failed to meet the sampling criteria of “having experience of leadership and coaching” (see Table I). The decision was made to retain participants in the sample as Group 3, as it was felt that their experiences could offer supplementary perspectives.

The data were carefully analysed. First, each participant’s interview was listened to twice, the transcription read and re-read, and the number of instances where a participant recounted an experience coded. Individual topics and ideas emerged, and themes were interpreted by the researchers. Second, the individual themes (from each participant) were analysed alongside those of other participants. As a result of this, a series of overarching themes were identified. During each of stage of the data analysis, the researchers applied a level of interpretation to the participants’ words and phrases. Finally, themes were cross-referenced with the data set to ensure they were adequately supported.

Results and discussion
Six major themes emerged from the thematic analysis of the experiences of the participants of this study. Each theme is presented and discussed below (Figure 2).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Role (Number)</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Group 1</td>
<td>Headteachers (8) Deputy headteacher (1)</td>
<td>Acknowledged as leading a coaching culture in their school</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group 2</td>
<td>Headteachers (5) Deputy headteachers (2) Middle leader (1)</td>
<td>Experienced in/or utilising coaching in the school setting</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group 3</td>
<td>Headteachers (2)</td>
<td>Limited use of coaching in their school</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exploratory</td>
<td>Deputy headteacher (1)</td>
<td></td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table I. Participant categories for the investigation
Theme: personal beliefs about coaching are influenced by prior experiences

This study highlighted the important influence of previous experiences on school leaders’ beliefs towards coaching. School leaders who experienced coaching as part of their leadership career development had greater capacity to determine the role of coaching in their school. The review of the literature suggested that school leaders who experienced coaching had higher levels of self-efficacy (Swain, 2016; Netolicky, 2016). In this study, school leaders who had experienced coaching expressed greater confidence in introducing coaching initiatives within their own schools. One senior leader described her experiences in this way: “My previous boss was a mad [sic] coaching person, in the sense that she understood the value of it as well. So it does make a difference who you work for or trained under” (Participant 20). On the other hand, another participant explained that she was “forced” by her headteacher to attend a 10-day residential workshop to attain a recognised coaching qualification. This provided the participant the impetus for a conscious change to how she sought to develop her own leadership style:

I think because that kind of experience that drove me because I had been forced to go and do the qualification. That’s kind of what I guess moved my thinking on in terms of coaching just as a leadership style if nothing else. (Participant 17)

In both cases, the early experience of coaching influenced school leaders’ beliefs about coaching. Past experiences shaped what headteachers came to believe as important in the schools they led. Reflecting on career experiences and using those same experiences in their everyday practice suggests that many of the educational leaders in this study were reflexive (Schon, 1983).
Theme: frustration about the pace of change

The time pressure on school leaders was commented on by every participant in this study. Participants struggled with feelings of frustration about the time needed for coaching to become common practice: “The biggest difficulty was going to be the pace at which the change needed to happen” (Participant 15). Developing a change in thinking and behaviours evolves over time, and the pace of change tried the patience of many leaders. Leaders who believed in the benefits of coaching were not immune to the frustrations about the speed of change. One interviewee expressed the following point: “I think you have to be patient as well, I mean I haven’t been patient and we’ve come a very long way in a very short space of time but it takes time to change culture” (Participant 3).

To maintain the pace of change, some leaders delegated management of the coaching initiatives to a deputy headteacher. One headteacher spoke positively about delegating the coaching programme to a specialist who became the catalyst for coaching uptake with teachers: “You have to find the right person in school who the others in school have confidence in” (Participant 9). The risk of delegation was cited by one headteacher who explained assigning coaching development to his senior team: “I’m frustrated with it, I’m frustrated that my two leaders aren’t running with it. And I think they are a bit scared of it” (Participant 6). Another headteacher admitted, “If I’m honest, sometimes [the pace of change is] irritating because I’ve moved on and doing other things” (Participant 15).

It seems that “shortage of time” is a major barrier to headteachers adopting a coaching approach or developing coaching within their schools. Even in schools in this study where headteachers believed in coaching and expressed support for coaching, performance data and league tables remained key considerations.

Theme: pressure of conflicting demands

In England, the government collects a significant amount of data to measure pupils’ performance and “sets minimum floor standards for primary and secondary schools” (Roberts and Bolton, 2016). Performance data and league tables are an important currency of measure, with many school leaders heavily focused on academic results (Pearson, 2017). Some deputy headteachers experienced contradictory pressure from their headteachers. While verbally supporting coaching, some headteachers under pressure to raise academic results begin to display inconsistent behaviours: “Every now and then the headteacher will communicate in a way where his anxiety about results comes through” (Participant 13). In this way, school leaders can inadvertently undermine coaching initiatives.

The focus on achieving positive academic results may account for perceived pressure on time discussed in the previous theme. One deputy headteacher reported that the headteacher was unlikely to prioritise coaching or to recognise coaching as a development tool: “We have had a change of head teacher, at the moment [coaching] is not seen as being a high enough priority. But it’s something I think is important” (Participant 4). Another interviewee spoke of encountering the same experience within her previous school: “It’s very public and there is significant pressure from above me in terms of getting results” (Participant 17).

Staff’s expectations also rise as the developmental nature of coaching initiatives increase their capabilities and potential opportunities in other schools. One headteacher reporting her leadership team’s efforts at developing a coaching culture gave her teachers more confidence to apply for leadership roles in other schools: “I’ve been scared for a little while that we’ve done such a great job that the minute someone says, ‘I’m going for an interview’, I get a bit desperate” (Participant 15).
The apparent conflict between the urgency of improving students’ academic results and the presumption that coaching takes time caused most concern for participants:

The biggest challenge is the schools that need it the most are able to do it [coaching] the least, or they feel they have the least time to do it […] and therefore comes very low down the pecking order. (Participant 18)

**Theme: feelings of isolation**

Those in leadership positions often talk about the solitary nature of the role (Saporito, 2012) even though headteachers acknowledge that they have governors and senior teams to discuss and debate issues with during times of uncertainty. Isolation is experienced by educational leaders, and this was expressed by several participants in the study. Senior leaders also reported feeling isolated when there was a lack of support for coaching by their superiors and teaching colleagues.

One multi-academy trust executive explained that role modelling from senior leadership is not yet a strategic priority: “We don’t have a good plan and a strategic plan as to how to develop that coaching culture across our organization” (Participant 18). While this leader had considerable experience and a strong belief that coaching plays a key role in leadership and teacher performance, he remained a “lone” voice amongst colleagues. Another headteacher expressed feeling alone and lacking in experience of how to “work with resistors” and realising her vulnerability: “But you know just to be the person you are, you believe. That puts you in a vulnerable situation […] as well. Because you know you are exposing yourself for who you are” (Participant 9).

**Theme: the need for confidence to see the process through**

Many participants spoke about the confidence needed to lead and pursue coaching initiatives through to implementation. While many spoke assertively about their aspirations and achievements, they were also able to recollect moments of doubt as they wrestled with the complexities of introducing coaching initiatives into their institutions.

Bravery was identified as necessary when attempting to introduce coaching in the school system. Some talked about moments of a lack of confidence and the “need to be brave” (Participant 4). The word bravery re-emerged in relation to challenging the short-term “tell” approach vs a coaching approach for long-term embedded learning: “It’s the least rewarding, I mean it’s the bravest person who wants the least rewards […] but they have to make that decision and that’s the challenge I think” (Participant 18). The challenge of confidence affects experienced headteachers, too. One interviewee mentioned the need for renewed confidence, despite being at the school for over 10 years: “I find myself battling far harder, at senior management level” (Participant 10).

One headteacher demonstrated confidence by initiating deliberate coaching conversations alongside the instructional leadership approach she felt she needed to lead the school to academic success. This enabled staff to develop an early appreciation of coaching and its role in building teacher capacity. Recognising early coaching successes helped develop inner confidence, even when the school needed a quick turnaround in academic results.

It seems that the necessary confidence developed as result of positive experiences. Headteachers who experienced success demonstrated greater resilience to bounce back, and participants managed success and setbacks by recognising achievements to cultivate confidence in their beliefs. One interviewee described bravery in this way: “You must stand by what you believe” (Participant 18). Previous experience in businesses outside of education provided another headteacher with a strategic perspective on the importance of evidence to give her confidence “if I really feel it’s right because I’ve got the evidence that tells me it’s right or I know it’s going to be okay” (Participant 15). In most cases, participants in this study suggested that confidence or bravery was required when working towards implementing coaching initiatives in their schools.
Theme: experiencing personal growth

The study offered participants time to reflect and discuss their experiences. Many participants commented on the personal learning that resulted from their journey. Growth experience was a pertinent theme for this study. It encapsulates the principle of self-directed learning so fundamental to the ethos of coaching.

The openness to personal development while in a leadership position was variable amongst the participants. Several school leaders used peers as mentors early in their leadership career: “Each year I have a school improvement partner who comes in for just a day and spends time with us” (Participant 2). A number of participants also used an executive coach from outside education to support their personal development. One spoke about leadership coaching as providing “a kind of a real stillness in terms of her listening to me feeling confident and comfortable to say ‘and I have no idea how to deal with this’” (Participant 17). Other participants spoke about utilising the expertise of other school leaders for sharing concerns and experiences within informal group get-togethers.

Education has embraced the concept of reflection (Creasy and Paterson, 2005). One headteacher felt he had failed to develop a coaching culture in his school but spoke passionately about the value of such practice: “I suppose my focus hasn’t been so much in coaching. It’s been more focused on the importance of reflection and that has moved greatly from reflection to reflective action” (Participant 1). Several participants reported that their leadership styles had evolved as a result of their experiences. Many shared how they learned to deal with their impatience at the pace of progress. This is best captured by the experience of one headteacher: “I would start it in a different place, I would spend more time reflecting on this school and myself in the school and less time thinking right, let’s introduce a culture” (Participant 6).

Another said her experiences in choosing to lead with a coaching approach enabled her to see more potential in others. Many participants recognised an internal battle to manage a desire for speed and how they developed a new tolerance: “I want things to happen very quickly. I discovered quite a bit of patience through the process” (Participant 18). While many leaders still see coaching as “soft skills” and a process to be adopted, participants in this study developed a different understanding to coaching skills: “I quite quickly became quite evangelical about it and the philosophy behind coaching is almost more important to me than the coaching approach itself” (Participant 3).

Summary

The pressures on leaders in education are significant and complex. The findings of this study offer the perspectives of some of the leaders experiencing these pressures. By centreing this study on the experiences of school leaders who are advancing coaching in their institutions, the objective has been to gain a better understanding of their personal experiences and learn from them in order to inform others who are introducing coaching into their educational contexts.

The enormous responsibility for much of our children’s learning is placed in the hands of the education system, which is under constant pressure to improve academic results (Scott, 2017). School leaders who demonstrate self-awareness and focus on their personal development are likely to develop greater leadership and coaching self-efficacy. The global consulting firm PWC’s (2017) study of chief executive officers asserts that adaptability is now the most important characteristic required to deal with the pace and magnitude of change. Given the complexity and speed of change in education, self-awareness and adaptability are characteristics that educational leaders will need to adopt if they are to continue providing high-quality environments from learning and personal development.

Further research

Time is a precious commodity in schools. The study highlighted that the “lack of time” is perceived to be a barrier to developing coaching initiatives. More research into school
leaders’ perceptions of time may be helpful. Further quantitative research could be conducted to evaluate the generalisability of the themes that emerged from this study. Additional research into the relative importance of the themes identified in this study (and any others), could contribute new information for educators’ strategic decision making in relation to introducing coaching initiatives.

Limitations
The qualitative method of this research was designed to provide descriptions of the participants’ experiences. These experiences are unique and therefore not representative of a general population of educational leaders. Further, it should be noted that both researchers have an interest in encouraging the use of coaching within the educational sector. While efforts have been taken to minimise the possibility of unintentional bias, this should be taken into account when considering the findings of this study.

Implications for practitioners
The focus of this study was on the experience of school leaders as they introduced coaching initiatives in their educational institutions. Based on the findings of this study, the following implications may be helpful for school leaders and policy makers to consider:

- Early positive experiences of coaching can influence leaders’ attitudes towards the use of coaching in educational settings. Therefore, it may be helpful to consider providing aspiring leaders with opportunities to receive high-quality coaching as part of their professional development.

- Perceived time pressure in schools can work against the successful rollout of coaching initiatives. Therefore, it may be helpful to consider the necessary investment of time and provide sufficient resources to ensure that coaching initiatives have a good chance of success.

- Sometimes, the pursuit of academic results can seem to be at odds with an interest in developing a coaching culture. It may be helpful to get whole-school agreement about the purpose and long-term aims of introducing coaching. If managed well, academic results and coaching cultures might be mutually beneficial.

- Leaders can feel isolated, and courage is required to see coaching initiatives through to implementation. Administrators and policy makers may wish to think about providing peer-support arrangements for school leaders who are introducing coaching initiatives in their institutions.

- Finally, this study suggests that school leaders who develop coaching initiatives or cultures in their institutions experience personal growth and development. If this is the case, then the introduction of coaching initiatives can be a way of supporting school leaders to become reflective practitioners and act as role models to their educational communities.

References


Further reading


### Appendix

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Areas</th>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Potential secondary questions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Background and motivation</td>
<td>What brought you to leadership?</td>
<td>What were you experiencing at the time?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>How did you become introduced to coaching as an approach?</td>
<td>What was going on for you at the time?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>What were you experiencing at the time?</td>
<td>How did you make sense of that?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Coaching culture</td>
<td>What do you hope to achieve developing a coaching culture in your school?</td>
<td>What were you experiencing at the time?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>How will you know a coaching culture has been successfully embedded?</td>
<td>What was going on for you at the time?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>What were you experiencing at the time?</td>
<td>What were you thinking about at the time?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>What were you feeling at the time?</td>
<td>What were you feeling at the time?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>How did you make sense of that?</td>
<td>How did you make sense of that?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Experiences</td>
<td>Thinking about the journey of embedding a coaching culture in this (other) school […]</td>
<td>What were you experiencing at the time?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>What were the key moments?</td>
<td>What was going on for you at the time?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Is there anything else you wanted to say about that?</td>
<td>What were you thinking about at the time?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Could you describe incidents where you felt your intervention made a difference to your employees?</td>
<td>What were you feeling at the time?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“What were you thinking/feeling as you were dealing with that?”</td>
<td>Focus on your thoughts and feeling that accompanied your specific behaviours</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Self-awareness</td>
<td>What have you had to develop in yourself to be effective at leading a coaching culture?</td>
<td>Looking for instructional vs transformational</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>What do you see as your responsibilities in developing the coaching culture in this school</td>
<td>What were you thinking about at the time?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>How would you describe your leadership style</td>
<td>What were you feeling at the time?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Tell me more about how these styles (direct/non direct) affected your ability to bring about change?</td>
<td>Is there anything else you wanted to say about that?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Reflecting on the journey once more […]</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Could you explain that what you have learnt and changed in your leadership approach?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>How have you monitored your own progress?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table A1.**
Semi-structured question track for participants

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