

Leaders in Teaching Research Note: Evidence on coaching and mentoring for education leadership

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Prepared by the Learning Generation Initiative

Key messages

These key messages highlight important points from the summary of research this note provides on coaching and mentoring for education leadership. The note draws on studies from a variety of methodologies, including academic research, program evaluations and grey literature. It looks across a range of contexts but focuses more heavily on examples from Africa.

- Many school and middle-tier leaders (those at regional and district levels) do not receive formal leadership training in preparation for their roles.
- The evidence suggests that in schools where leaders do receive training in leadership skills, learning and teaching outcomes improve.
- Coaching and mentoring are increasingly seen as impactful approaches to supporting professional development for school and middle-tier leaders. These are specific leadership training techniques that can help prepare leaders by providing access to knowledge and constructive feedback from experienced actors, supporting identification of challenges and problem solving, and facilitating peer learning through mechanisms like professional learning communities.
- Coaching for middle-tier and school leaders as part of wider interventions has shown positive impact on learner outcomes, school leaders meeting national standards, school leaders improved understanding of their role and better perception of their capacity to lead their school, shifting perceptions of school leaders as authority figures to learning partners, increased school leader motivation, and promoting distributive as opposed to authoritative leadership styles for school leaders.
- Coaching is usually utilized as part of a wider intervention, not as a standalone approach. Coaching examples tend to use hybrid approaches (both face-to-face and virtual check ins), involve education actors from different levels of the system, and are used alongside other peer approaches like professional learning communities.
- Providing structured training for coaches is a key element of programs that have shown strong impact, and many interventions include the use of officially recognized certification and degrees.
- Alongside coaching and mentoring, the use of professional learning communities for school and middle-tier leaders has been shown to improve collaboration and encourage peer-to-peer strategizing and problem solving.

Introduction

This note is intended to support the Leaders in Teaching (LiT) program by providing a summary of the latest evidence on coaching and mentoring in education to inform the program’s Lead pillar activities, particularly the leadership capacity development for Regional Education Offices (REOs) and National Education Leadership Institute (NELI) training for Senior High School Heads. While the focus of LiT leadership training is for regional officers, there is limited evidence on coaching and mentoring for middle-tier leaders, therefore, we have also drawn on the literature around school leaders. It is also important to note that although Leaders in Teaching is interested in the use of retired education professionals in coaching interventions, there is very little evidence of their role or impact as coaches in the literature. The note collates evidence on coaching and mentoring from both high- and low-income contexts, then provides a few exemplary country case studies to illustrate some of the promising practices for coaching and mentoring in education and concludes by summarizing key messages.

Coaching and mentoring in the education sector

Outside of the education, most notably in the business and medical sectors, there is substantial evidence on the positive effects of mentorship and coaching for the professional development of leaders and managers (Anthony, 2017; Sambunjak et al., 2006; Wise & Jacobo, 2010). However, the use of coaching and mentoring for school leaders remains relatively underexplored in the education literature for low- and middle-income countries, despite the increase in innovative training and support mechanisms (Anderson, 1989; Blackwood et al., 2009; Klar et al., 2020). Even less is known on this topic as it relates to targeting middle-tier leaders (those situated at district or regional levels), as only recently are these roles being recognized as change agents in the system (Childress et al., 2020; Tournier et al., 2023). Peer learning for professional development – particularly professional learning communities or communities of practice – are showing promising results, and mentoring or coaching are often included as part these models (Three Stones International, 2020; Tournier et al., 2023).

The rise of coaching or mentoring in the education sector stemmed from a push to strengthen quality teaching and learning outcomes as coaches were known to help develop people’s ‘hidden potential’ (Reiss, 2015) through addressing fears, pushing comfort zones, encouraging problem solving, and helping align values and passions (Reiss, 2015). As such, coaching first entered the education sector primarily for teacher professional development, though evidence now points to coaching as an effective strategy for also supporting school leaders (Grogan & Crow, 2004; Parylo et al., 2012; Searby, 2010), and emerging literature is beginning to see the benefits for those at the middle-tier as well (Barber et al., 2010; Childress et al., 2020; Tournier et al., 2023). However, research suggests that coaching for those in and out of the classroom differs and must be utilized appropriately. While coaching teachers often revolves around enhancing classroom practices, leadership coaching focuses more on developing organizational capacities which can support both individual practices and school-wide changes (Lochmiller, 2014).

Evidence from coaching and mentoring in high-income contexts

Evidence on coaching and mentoring in education is more well documented among high-income contexts (Huggins et al., 2021; Mangin, 2014; Reiss, 2015). A nationally representative study of US school leaders found that approximately 50 percent receive leadership coaching during their tenure, with many reporting that coaching is not only beneficial for their own practices as a leader, but that impact trickles down to increases in teacher performance and student achievement (Wise & Cavazos, 2017). This mirrors findings from other high-income country studies which suggest that leadership coaching has positive and significant effects on leadership activities, such as more strategic interactions with teachers to facilitate feedback, practice changes, and self-reflection (Goff et al., 2014; Reiss, 2015; Roberston, 2016). There are several examples from high-income contexts¹ where middle-tier leaders coach and support one another or school leaders, but there is little evidence of impact (Barber et al., 2010).

A rigorously evaluated study on a school leader training program in the US (Texas) found that after one year the program led to statistically significant improvements in math and reading test scores (0.10 and 0.20 standard deviations) (Fryer, 2017). In Ontario, Canada, a study on the role of middle-tier leaders and external coaches (a cadre of Ministerial appointed former teachers, school leaders, and subject experts) to support school leaders and teachers to better interpret and use school data led to sustained student learning improvements (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2013; Mourshed et al., 2010; OECD, 2016).

Launched in 2003, an aspiring school leaders' program in New York City utilizes tailored coaching sessions run by retired or experienced principals and superintendents to help recruit, develop, and support school leaders in high need areas. These aspiring school leaders begin their program with an intensive summer training program, followed by bi-weekly sessions on leadership development and support for data and budgeting throughout the year (Barber et al., 2010; The Leadership Academy, 2023). The coaches who support these aspiring leaders are chosen for this program based on their own leadership practices via several key criteria such as use of collaboration, strong decision-making skills, and provision of continuous feedback and assessment. When joining the program, the coaches also receive professional development specifically in mentoring, and participate in their own peer learning communities (PLCs) so that they have a network of support. During the PLCs, they work together to set clear expectations on leadership performance and discuss ways to evaluate and support the aspiring leaders. Both coaches and the aspiring leaders are required to sign contracts at the beginning of the program to ensure accountability and agree to regular participation in classroom observations, school walk-throughs, debriefing sessions, and ongoing training. Coaches receive a small monthly stipend from the program while they participate (Wallace Foundation, 2023).

Coaching and mentoring in low-resource contexts

In many low-resource contexts, the path to becoming a school leader is often via teaching, and many school leaders do not feel prepared once they take the position as there tends to be very limited access to pre- and in-service leadership training (Biamba & Odero, 2016). In a recent review of school leadership

¹ Australia, Canada, England, Singapore, and United States

in four low- and middle-income countries (Kenya, India, Malaysia and Indonesia), 44 percent of the surveyed school leaders in attended fewer than three professional development workshops and 91 percent had only one or no coaching sessions (Priya & Sampat, 2021). In Indonesia specifically, school leaders have limited access to continuous professional development, with nearly 81 percent receiving no kind of central training, and between 2009 and 2011, almost half of all school leaders had no training at either the state or district level (ACDP, 2013). While the use of coaching for leadership development in low-income countries is much less researched, emerging evidence is highlighting ways that coaching can be used effectively for both school and middle-tier leaders, including for instructional leadership (Dusabe, 2022).

Promising examples of coaching and mentoring in low-resource contexts

Leading Teaching and Learning Together, Rwanda

The Leading, Teaching and Learning Together program² in Rwanda was implemented in 680 secondary schools between 2017 and 2021. School leaders obtained a Continuous Professional Development Diploma in Effective School Leadership and school education inspectors received a certification in Educational Mentorship and Coaching. The program was aligned to the Rwanda Basic Education Board's Professional Standards for Effective School Leadership, and served to define the roles, responsibilities, and functions of school leaders. The five standards of school leadership include how to create strategic direction, lead learning, lead teaching and training, involve parents and the community, and manage the school. Additional attention was paid to inclusive education policies, and task and emotional dimensions of school leadership. The program took place across 18 days over one year (16 days for training and two for examination). School education inspectors learned how to coach school leaders, lead PLCs, and support new teachers' induction. They also played a central role in collecting and analyzing school performance data. During quarterly PLCs, inspectors trained school leaders on how to identify challenges, develop school improvement plans aligned with the sector improvement plan, share best practices, and reflect on how to disseminate best practices. Additionally, school leaders also received coaching and evaluation visits by the inspectors throughout the year, and eight face-to-face targeted sessions on Saturdays or Sundays to avoid school disruptions (Uworwabayeho et al., 2020).

An initial evaluation report of the program indicated **an increase in intrinsic motivation among school leaders, specifically through peer learning and coaching support**, and a reduction in teacher absenteeism (VVOB Education for Development & Education Development Trust, 2017). At midline, there were reports of increased collaboration among teachers and a greater motivation to improve teaching quality because of school leader support. **School leaders also mentioned greater understanding of what their managerial role should look like and an improved perception of their capacity to lead their school.** Furthermore, observations and interviews at midline noted shifts from authoritarian to distributive leadership styles from school leaders, and **both school leaders and inspectors had begun to recognize**

² Led by VVOB, Mastercard Foundation, and in collaboration with the Rwanda Education Board and the University of Rwanda College of Education.

the value of coaching and mentoring because they saw direct results of how it supported teacher's learning and quality as well as improvements in school improvement plans and yearly action plans (Three Stones International, 2020). At endline, **99 percent of school leaders reported high competence in applying the five standards of school leadership** (up from 81 percent at baseline) and **93 percent of school education inspectors reported a high confidence in coaching and mentoring school leaders** (up from 69 percent at baseline) (Three Stones International, 2021).

Jovem de Futuro, Brazil

The Instituto Unibanco's Jovem de Futuro (JdF) three-year training program³ in Brazil, in partnership with the State Department of Education, focuses on strengthening educational management through results-oriented management (Instituto Unibanco, n.d.). The JdF program helps school and district leaders align goals and use data for school improvement planning. Initially adopted in 2008, the program includes almost 70 hours of training for regional and district leaders, and 48 hours and 120 distant hours for school leaders and pedagogical coordinators, all at the secondary school level. Training is led by professionals from the Instituto Unibanco and focuses on how to increase student learning and graduation rates, how to set performance targets, specifically for math and Portuguese, and develop school action plans. In addition to the training, Instituto Unibanco supervisors provide additional in-person and online support to those undergoing the training to mentor, monitor, and advise so that school leaders and managers can share best practices with others going through the program. In-person check-ins between the school and district leaders and the program supervisors happen three times within the school year so that school leaders can adapt and iterate on their performance targets and school action plans based on their progress (Borges et al., 2023).

Recent programmatic evidence points to student test score increases in math and Portuguese (0.12 and 0.09 standard deviations). Furthermore, the program was **considered low-cost, about 5 percent of public expenditures per student for secondary school, while high-effectively at improving student learning**, equating to a 30 percent increase in the amount that students learn on average (de Barros et al., 2019). At the end of one cycle, several school leaders cited their **increased confidence in their use of evidence and data for planning, monitoring, and evaluating school action plans, and felt supported by their peers through in-person and online exchange opportunities, where they could learn how to problem solve and share school leadership challenges** (Vinha et al., 2020). More than 4,000 secondary schools have been reached through the program.

Building Learning Foundations, Rwanda

Another program from Rwanda, The Building Learning Foundations (BLF) is a partnership between the Rwanda Basic Education Board and Education Development Trust, which selects high performing school leaders to become 'national leaders of learning' (NLLs) and 'local leaders of learning' (LLLs) who serve

³ Instituto Unibanco is a non-profit organization in Brazil which works to improve public education in Brazil through educational management for continuous advancement.

as peer leaders in primary schools. NLLs and LLLs go through a three-part structured professional development program (see Box 1). Once they have been trained, NLLs and LLLs help build capacity development for their peers through PLCs and in-person one-on-one coaching sessions. Coaching involves questioning teachers and head teachers, encouraging them to reflect on their practice, and guiding them to come up with their own solutions. The topics covered in the PLCs are often aligned to the national leadership standards so that school leaders can become effective leaders of learning in their own schools, but the PLCs can also include specific school development topics such as increasing the use of English at schools, library access, and how to better use and collect data. Once trained, NLLs provide coaching opportunities for the LLLs within their district and then LLLs use their experience skills to provide specialized coaching to other school leaders. In situations when a head teacher needs additional support, LLLs work with their sector education officers to provide very targeted coaching (Tournier et al., 2023).

NLLs and LLLs reported that **coaching helped shift their perceptions of school leaders from authority figures to learning partners**. Findings also showed that PLCs improved wider collaboration between the school and middle-tier leaders. NLLs PLCs, which take place once a term, provided new opportunities to work on a team with district education officers and sector inspectors and helped increase their visibility, with district officials beginning to view the NLLs as partners who could get things done. Additionally, the program showed **substantial gains in the percent of school leaders meeting the national competency standards**, improving from 41 percent in 2018 to 98 percent in 2021 (FCDO, 2021). The Rwandan school leader competency standards include creating strategic direction for the school, leading learning, leading teaching, managing the school as an organization, and working with parents and the local community.

Box 1. Building Learning Foundation's leadership professional development courses

LLLs and NLLs receive accredited workplace-based continuous professional development training, led by the University of Rwanda College of Education and Building Learning Foundations program specialists, to strengthen their confidence and competencies focused on instructional leadership. The System Leadership certificate requires nearly 300 hours of structured learning over one year for LLLs and an additional 600 hours for NLLs to receive a diploma in System Leadership, who are selected at the district level to help organize and facilitate training sessions for the LLLs in their district.

For the certificate, LLLs participate in three modules focused on 1) being a collaborative and reflective leader for learning; 2) valuing evidence in leading and learning; and 3) modelling and guiding leadership for learning. These modules are taught through workplace-based activities, personalized coaching sessions, and PLCs.

For NLLs who undertake the diploma, there are three additional modules which include 1) teacher development and parental engagement; 2) strengthening safeguarding, inclusion, and governance; and 3) establishing self-improving and sustainable leadership for learning. The course is first available for a cluster of district education officials from each district to strengthen professional collaboration and improve understanding of effective school leadership. Then, these district officials work together to implement and evaluate a new intervention focused on one of their modules and deliver a final report on their professional

learning. NLLs also have the opportunity to address a ministerial commission and engage in national policy dialogue on a topic of interest to them. This allows NLLs to work locally with LLLs to discuss relevant issues that need national spotlight and with the University of Rwanda to do the necessary background research before addressing the commission.

At the end of the program, NLLs and LLLs submit a portfolio which contains all module assignments, progress reports, and feedback to show that their new skills and knowledge was translated into effective practice. These leaders can then share these portfolios with school inspectors and district officers to facilitate more enriching conversations and build shared understanding of improvements.

These courses have helped address the historical challenges NLLs and LLLs faced when trying to engage district-level professionals by providing all stakeholders the opportunity to engage in this program and strengthen understanding in the skills leaders are developing. Initial results showed strengthened collaboration between schools as a result of this program, and interviews have indicated improvements in school management and leadership from those who have participated in the program (Tournier et al., 2023).

Advanced Certificate in Education – School Management and Leadership, South Africa

Supported by the Department of Education in South Africa, the Advanced Certificate in Education is a practice based part-time program providing management and leadership support for aspiring and new school leaders. The program was started in 2004 between the University of Johannesburg and the Matthew Goniwe School of Governance and Leadership. Those entering the program receive practical knowledge on how to be a competent educational manager, rather than focusing on theoretical knowledge about education management. This program also provides training on peer mentoring. Current and aspiring school leaders can use this certificate as an opportunity to upgrade their qualifications (i.e. from deputy to head teacher). The program focuses on the following learning outcomes: communication and literacy, computer literacy, understanding school management and leadership, portfolio development, managing teaching and learning, managing policy, planning, and school development, leading and managing people, and managing organizational systems and physical financial resources (Department of Basic Education Republic of South Africa, 2021).

School leaders who engage in the program receive hybrid site visits at their school from former school or middle-tier leaders, and many engage in voluntary PLCs. However, the ratio of mentees per mentors is very dependent on the number of qualified mentors per province, which has caused some quality issues with the program. In some instances, mentors only work with about five school leaders and so can provide in-person support and feedback at schools. In other cases, mentors may work with 40 school leaders and can only provide support via telephone conversations or when there are cohort training sessions (Bush et al., 2011). At the end of the program, leaders submit a portfolio which includes assignments, school-based documents, reflections, and a research project. Once submitted, leaders have an on-site assessment check to ensure claimed changes were appropriately made. These assessments are led by program staff, their mentors, or district officials. Nevertheless, the program has had positive impacts. A small qualitative study on the program indicated that leaders who reported **strong relationships with their mentors and felt as if they were improving in their practices, were also**

at schools which showed recent improvements in student examination results (Msila, 2012). Several school leaders also indicated that **the PLCs were a very powerful tool for school development and supported their ability to work and learn from one another** (Bush et al., 2011).

Conclusion and key messages

Much of the existing literature around evidence-based coaching is focused on high-income contexts and focuses on coaching and mentoring for teachers. Furthermore, there is very little evidence on the impact of using retired educational professionals for coaching interventions. However, the existing evidence on programs in low-and middle-income countries indicates that coaching and mentoring for school leaders does have a positive impact on school- and student-level outcomes and can help increase school leaders' own perceptions of what it means to be an effective leader. Coaching and mentoring have been shown to help prepare leaders by providing access to knowledge and constructive feedback from experienced actors, supporting problem solving, and facilitating peer learning through mechanisms like professional learning communities.

As the country examples illustrate, coaching is generally not used as a standalone approach but included as part of wider interventions to support improved professional development for school leaders and teachers. Providing structured training for coaches is a key element of programs that have shown strong impact. Where there is evidence, coaching has shown positive impact on:

- school leaders meeting national standards,
- school leaders improved understanding of their role and better perception of their capacity to lead their school,
- shifting perceptions of school leaders as authority figures to learning partners,
- increasing school leader motivation, and
- promoting distributive as opposed to authoritative leadership styles for school leaders.

In light of the growing spotlight on middle-tier professionals and strengthening school leadership, more research is needed to better understand how regional and district level officials and school leaders can most effectively support one another through peer-to-peer mechanisms such as coaching, mentoring and professional learning communities.

Recommendations for Leaders in Teaching

The Leaders in Teaching program could consider several of the key messages from this note in implementing the leadership coaching component for regional education offices, including: ensuring content focused on specific and practical standards or competences; the use of peer learning communities, or existing networks, to complement coaching; ensuring a manageable ratio of coaches to regional officers; and hybrid coaching models that use both in person and remote modalities and include follow up to initial training.

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