

School Heads' Perceptions of Coaching Practices in Primary Schools: A Pilot Study

Aziyah Mohd Yusoff¹

Institute of Aminuddin Baki, Genting Highlands, Ministry of Education, Malaysia
aziyah@iab.moe.gov.my

Norhayati Yeop²

Institute of Aminuddin Baki, Genting Highlands, Ministry of Education, Malaysia
norhayati@iab.moe.gov.my

Norhayati Aziz Esa³

Institute of Aminuddin Baki, Genting Highlands, Ministry of Education, Malaysia
hayatiaaziz@iab.moe.gov.my

Faridah Mohamad⁴

Institute of Aminuddin Baki, Genting Highlands, Ministry of Education, Malaysia
faridahmd@iab.moe.gov.my

Normah Ramli⁵

Institute of Aminuddin Baki, Genting Highlands, Ministry of Education, Malaysia
normah@iab.moe.gov.my

Nor Azlina Mohammed Suberi⁶

Institute of Aminuddin Baki, Genting Highlands, Ministry of Education, Malaysia
azlina.mohammed@iab.moe.gov.my

ABSTRACT

Coaching has emerged as a transformative tool in educational leadership, providing school leaders with the strategies and resources crucial for sustainable and effective school improvement. This study explores how coaching practices impact school heads' professional development, focusing on the influence of relevant content, effective delivery, and targeted instructional methods in fostering leadership growth. Specifically, it examines the role of coaching in developing school heads' ability to address complex challenges with adaptability, thereby promoting a school culture that prioritizes continuous improvement. Based on a literature review and data from 27 purposively selected school heads from the Bera District Education Office in Pahang, the findings highlight that coaching is instrumental in enhancing leadership skills. Interestingly, demographic factors such as sex and years of experience were found to have no significant effect on coaching efficacy. This suggests that effective

coaching practice relies less on tenure or background and more on targeted professional development, a growth mindset, and supportive institutional resources. The study underscores the importance of investing in structured coaching programs and organizational support to cultivate essential coaching skills, highlighting that coaching effectiveness is closely tied to continuous learning and committed engagement. These insights provide a compelling case for incorporating coaching as a core component of school leadership development, with the potential to elevate school performance and foster a positive impact on teachers.

Keywords: *Coaching, school leaders*

Background

Over the past ten years, coaching has emerged as one of the top five strategies for leadership development and transformation in response to growing problems in complicated workplaces as according to Underhill, as cited in Bennett & Bush, 2009). In fact, coaching is considered as one of a key component in successful professional development where it will be a form of support to highlight a person's potential to maximize their own performance as stated by Mastura, Azni & Ramiaida (2020). This is corroborated by Wasylyshyn (2003), who claimed that coaching can influence self-awareness, behavior modification, and leadership efficacy. Furthermore, working with clients (coachees) in a creative and thought-provoking process to help people reach their full potential, both personally and professionally, is what the International Coaching Federation (ICF, 2020) describes as coaching. Previously untapped sources of creativity, productivity, and leadership are frequently made available through the coaching process.

Similarly, according to Whitmore (2002), coaching refers to unlocking a person's potential to maximize their own performance. Whereas, coaching in an educational context can be seen as an opportunity to support educators in their personal and professional development, and, in this context, it benefits from a more humanistic coachee-centered angle. In addition, it is also based on the principles of promoting positive change (Rogers, 1951, 1959) and self-actualisation (Stober, 2006). It cannot be denied that there is evidence that coaching in the management aspect provides various benefits to an organization (Gilley & Gilley, 2007; Hunt & Weintraub, 2011), to employees who receive coaching services (Gilley, Gilley, & Kouider, 2010), and to the coaching manager himself (Boyatzis, Smith & Blaize, 2006).

In the context of Institute of Aminuddin Baki Genting Highlands Branch, the Ministry of Education, the Leadership and Management Coaching and Mentoring Course (CMC) is a course offered to school leaders under the Personal Quality domain. This course aims to improve the performance of educational managers and leaders using coaching and mentoring approaches.

Table 1. Number of participants

Year	Number of participants
2024	28
2023	93
2022	60
2021	30

The objective of this course is to develop educational leaders to implement coaching and mentoring skills in the right way and provide individual coaching and mentoring action plans. Educational leaders will also plan follow-up coaching and mentoring actions for the organization.

However, there is a dearth of empirical data addressing the impact of coaching on enhancing teacher capacity, and other academics believe that coaching has led to an imbalance and misunderstanding in terms of definition and application. This has led to an interest in learning more about the efficacy of coaching in general (Bartolo, 2021). Nonetheless, research indicates that leaders generally do not engage in coaching activities or demonstrate coaching abilities (Gilley et al, 2010; Lombardo & Eichinger, 2001). This is further corroborated by Green and Grant (2010), who claim that unless a leader has coaching experience, casual coaching interactions might not occur. Organizations risk missing out on the benefits of informal coaching if they don't understand why leaders don't use it. There is still the lack of conclusive evidence regarding the effectiveness of coaching (Grant, Passmore, Cavanagh & Parker, 2010). Furthermore, there is still the lack of conclusive evidence regarding the effectiveness of coaching (Grant, Passmore, Cavanagh & Parker, 2010). The purpose of this study was to examine the relationship between demographics (sex and current work experience) and coaching practice.

Literature Review

Coaching is a short-term intervention aimed at improving performance or develop a competency; or is an enabling process learning and development takes place towards improving self-performance (Parsloe, (1999). The practice of coaching is a profession that requires leadership, dedication, character, knowledge, skills, appropriate attitudes, patience, as well as an understanding of one's self (Kerr, Garvin, Heaton and Emily Boyle, 2006). Similarly, according to the International Coach Federation (ICF) (2009) after working with a coach, 70% of coachees reported an improvement in his or her job performance, 72% in his or her communication skills and 61% in his or her business management (Sonesh, Coultas, & Lacerenza., 2015). In education context, novice principals ranked mentoring or coaching as the on-the-job support they valued the most (Anderson & Turnbull, 2016).

Method

The researchers used a deductive technique to test the theory. The survey was given to samples of school administrators at the primary schools in Bera, Pahang, West Malaysia, as part of the study's mono method approach. The researchers decided to use purposive

sampling as their sampling technique. As a pilot study, the instrument was used with 27 school leaders who had been in their current positions for one year to over thirteen years. Table 1 shows the participants' demographics. Males made up the majority (63%), with females coming in second (37%). It was a cross-sectional study. The designated course manager who led the relevant course granted permission to perform this study. SPSS version 25 was used to analyse the gathered data. The data was presented by the researchers using frequency, percentage, mean, and standard deviation as the foundation for both descriptive statistics and statistical inference. Normality test was tested in this study by using Kolmogorov-Smirnov (K-S) and Shapiro-Wilk (S-W).

Result and Discussion

Regarding data analysis, Table 2 to Table 4 show the respondents' composition by sex, grade rank, and years of experience in their current position.

Table 2. Sex

	Frequency	Percentage
Male	17	63
Female	10	37
Total	27	100

Table 2 indicates the sex breakdown where a total of 17 school leaders in Primary schools are male (63%) and a total of 10 respondents is female (37%). Table 3 depicts the grade position of the respondents as below.

Table 3. Grade Position

	Frequency	Percentage
DG 38	1	3.7
DG 44	17	63.0
DG 48	9	33.3
Total	27	100

According to the grade position breakdown in Table 3, nine school heads in primary schools have between one and three years of current work experience (33.3%), four have between four and six years (14.8%), ten have between seven and nine years (37%), three have between ten and twelve years (11.1%), and one respondent has more than thirteen years and above (37%). The respondents' grade positions are shown in Table 3 as follows.

Table 4. Current Working Experience as School leader

	Frequency	Percentage
1 – 3 years	9	33.3
4 – 6 years	4	14.8
7 – 9 years	10	37.0
10 – 12 years	3	11.1
> 13 years and above	1	3.7
Total	27	100

Table 5. Reliability Statistics

Cronbach's Alpha	N of Item
.978	38

The Cronbach's Alpha in this study is high (0.978). Based on table 5, in the whole Cronbach's Alpha coefficient value for all variables measured is $\alpha = .978$ which is equals to 97.8 percent. This shows that the degree of reliability of the items found in the questionnaire is consistent or 97.8 percent of the degree of reliability of the sample on the answered questionnaire items.

Table 6. Test Of Normality

Sex	Kolmogorov-Smirnov ^a			Shapiro-Wilk		
	Statistic	df	Sig.	Statistic	df	Sig.
CompositeCop	.262	27	.000	.739	27	.000

a. Lilliefors Significance Correction

Table 6 presents the results of the Shapiro-Wilk (S-W) and Kolmogorov-Smirnov (K-S) analyses. The knowledge that respondents acquired about coaching practices revealed that the values of K-S, $p < 0.000$, and S-W, $p < 0.000$, were not normally distributed.

Research Question (RQ):

RQ 1: What is the level of course content, delivery of lecturers, and instructional method?

Table 7 displays a high mean score for the lecturers' delivery, content, and teaching tactics.

Table 7. Course content

	Mean	Standard deviation	Interpretation
Content	4.80	.34194	Very high
Delivery	4.85	.30076	Very high
Instructional method	4.74	.41688	Very high

RQ 2: What is the level of Relevancy?

School heads' perceptions of the course's relevance are shown in Table 8, where every item received a high score.

Table 8. Relevancy

	Mean	Standard deviation	Interpretation
Coaching & Mentoring	4.85	.362	Very high
Preparation	4.85	.320	Very high
Active Listening	4.78	.424	Very high
Reflective questioning	4.81	.396	Very high
Reflective thinking	4.85	.362	Very high
Observation	4.81	.396	Very high
Feedback	4.85	.362	Very high
Coaching simulation	4.93	.267	Very high
Way forward	4.81	.396	Very high

This suggests that in order to effectively lead the school, school heads require coaching abilities. Acknowledging the significance of these abilities, they are urged to use what they have learned in the course to coach their professors. By effectively preparing themselves as coaches, using active listening during the session, practicing reflective thinking, evaluating their teachers fairly, providing them with insightful feedback, and motivating them to solve problems through the use of effective questioning techniques, they will be able to have coaching conversations with their teachers and ultimately unlock their potential. This is vital since educational challenges is far challenging than before. Given how difficult educational issues are now, this is crucial.

RQ 3: What is the level of Coaching practices?

They believe that each of the fifteen components listed below gives them meaning in terms of coaching practice. They believe a three-day course has given them the fundamentals

of coaching, including goal accomplishment, coaching ethics, option exploration, and coaching condition creation, as seen by their high score. However, school leaders need to improve three areas: establishing a realistic goal, investigating issues, and evaluating (choosing the best alternative). This is crucial because 33.3% of school heads have only been in leadership positions for one to three years, making them incompetent to fully utilize teachers' ability.

Table 9. Level of Coaching practices

	Mean	Standard deviation	Interpretation
Suitability	4.67	.480	Very high
Sameness	4.63	.492	Very high
Creating condition	4.70	.465	Very high
Coaching ethics	4.74	.447	Very high
Goal setting	4.67	.480	Very high
Goal attainment	4.70	.465	Very high
Realistic goal	4.59	.501	Very high
Issue explored	4.59	.501	Very high
Probing	4.67	.480	Very high
Challenging questions	4.63	.492	Very high
Options	4.74	.447	Very high
Exploring resource	4.63	.492	Very high
Evaluation	4.59	.501	Very high
Way forward	4.67	.480	Very high
Plan of actions	4.67	.480	Very high

RQ 4: Is there a relationship between current work experience and coaching practice?

Table 10 demonstrates that the coaching practices of school heads and present work experience in terms of years are unrelated. There was no significant correlation between the two variables, according to a chi-square test for independence, $X^2 (28, n = 27 = .093, \phi = 1.191)$. Whether or not school heads engage in coaching at school is not determined by the length of their present job experience.

Table 10. Chi-Square Tests [current work experience and coaching practice]

	Value	df	Asymptotic Significance (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	38.275 ^a	28	.093
Likelihood Ratio	28.917	28	.417
Linear-by-Linear Association	.310	1	.577
N of Valid Cases	27		

a. 40 cells (100.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is .04.

Symmetric Measures

		Value	Approximate Significance
Nominal by Nominal	Phi	1.191	.093
	Cramer's V	.595	.093
	Contingency Coefficient	.766	.093
N of Valid Cases		27	

RQ 5: Is there a relationship between sex and coaching practice among school heads?

Table 11 demonstrates that coaching practices and sex has no significant correlation between both, X^2 (28, n = 27 = .592, phi = .454).

Table 11. Chi-Square Tests [sex and coaching practice]

	Value	df	Asymptotic Significance (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	5.559 ^a	7	.592
Likelihood Ratio	7.135	7	.415
Linear-by-Linear Association	.890	1	.346
N of Valid Cases	27		

a. 15 cells (93.8%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is .37.

Symmetric Measures

		Value	Approximate Significance
Nominal by Nominal	Phi	.454	.592
	Cramer's V	.454	.592
	Contingency Coefficient	.413	.592
N of Valid Cases		27	

RQ6; Is there a relationship between content, delivery and instructional method, and coaching practice?

Table 12 shows a substantial correlation between the lecturers' content, delivery, and instructional technique and the coaching practices that the school heads learned during the course. The coefficient value is $r = .637$, $p < .000$, indicating a strong association as according to Davies (1971) interpretation score. This demonstrates that school leaders' coaching practice knowledge is determined by the lecturers' competencies.

Table 12. Correlations

		CompositeC p	CompositeC Dlm
Spearman's rho	CompositeC p	Correlation Coefficient	1.000
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.000
		N	27
	CompositeC Dlm	Correlation Coefficient	.637**
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.000
		N	27

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Conclusion

There were no significant findings among school head's demographic information (sex and current work experience) towards coaching practice. Demographic information did not contribute to predicting coaching practice because they were insignificant. This implies no matter how long they stay in position as school heads, it does not mean they apply their coaching knowledge at school. The findings suggest that experience alone does not ensure effective coaching. Coaching practice likely requires specific training, commitment, and support that enable school heads to implement their coaching knowledge actively. Just holding the role for a long time does not automatically translate into applying coaching skills effectively. This implies that targeted professional

development, rather than years of experience or demographic background, is essential for fostering a coaching culture among school leaders.

The lack of a significant relationship between demographic factors like sex and work experience and coaching practice suggests that coaching effectiveness is likely tied more closely to specific competencies, training, and the organizational culture that supports coaching. Just being in a leadership role or having more years of experience doesn't inherently develop the skills needed to coach others effectively. Effective coaching often requires:

1. **Targeted Training:** School leaders may need ongoing professional development focused specifically on coaching techniques, reflective practices, and interpersonal skills to support staff effectively.
2. **Mindset and Motivation:** Effective coaching is often driven by a growth mindset and a genuine commitment to staff development, which are not determined by demographics or years in position. Leaders who are motivated to coach may develop these skills regardless of their tenure.
3. **Institutional Support and Resources:** Without structured time, resources, and encouragement from the broader school system, even experienced leaders may struggle to prioritize coaching due to other responsibilities.
4. **Openness to Continuous Learning:** Leaders in their role for many years may not inherently stay updated with the latest coaching practices unless actively seeking growth opportunities.

These findings emphasize that organizational support and targeted leadership development play a more decisive role in fostering effective coaching than demographic characteristics alone. Schools striving to build a robust coaching culture would benefit from **investing in** structured coaching programs that equip leaders with the resources, training, and motivation necessary to practice coaching effectively. Importantly, developing school heads' understanding of coaching techniques requires more than just experience; it depends on how well the content is delivered and methods taught in training programs. Over time, school leaders should be able to effectively coach teachers, utilizing skills like active listening, insightful questioning, and recognizing individual strengths to foster professional growth.

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