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Equity-Centered School Leadership Coaching

Introduction

School leaders play a central role in improving school culture and carrying out instructional and organizational leadership. One meaningful support for school leaders' work and development has been coaching.¹ Following the expansion of coaching in the business sector almost a century ago, coaching has expanded in the education field over the past decades for both teachers and school leaders.² There is no standard definition of coaching, but in general, it entails one-on-one individualized support in learning to clarify, address, and reach professional goals.³ District and school leadership coaching frequently blends components of both teacher-facing instructional coaching and executive-facing facilitative coaching, with the latter's attention to the development of leadership skills to support organizational aims.⁴

While there has been expanding attention to issues of equity and social justice amongst coaches, attention to equity-driven school leadership coaching remains nascent within scholarship. In this brief, we a) summarize the literature on the recipients, types, and common challenges of leadership coaching; b) provide an overview of coach competencies and methods of coach development in the literature; and c) discuss the existing literature and offer potential implications for equity-driven school leadership coaching.

Coach Competencies*

- **Support**
Centering the leaders’ humanity first and foremost, before judgment or tasks, is critical.
- **Trust**
Confidentiality between coaches and school leaders.
- **Reflexive inquiry**
Open-ended questions and reflection on taken-for-granted frames of reference and beliefs around effective leadership practices.
- **Dialogic thinking partner**
Valued in inquiry to develop shared understanding and learning. Helpful if coach has knowledge of coachee’s school and context.
- **Focus**
Have a specific and simple vision regarding goals and plans for improvement.
- **Sustained nature**
Extended duration and frequency of coaching allowed leaders to slow down their discussion, which may foster deeper learning and change.

Who, What, and What Gets in the Way of Leadership Coaching

Across the United States, approximately 50% of principals receive coaching at some point in their career, with the majority of coaching happening in the first few years of a principal’s tenure.⁵ Most principals report coaching being beneficial to their leadership and to increased student achievement.⁶ The format and methods of coaching vary, with coaching sometimes originating within the school district, in partnership with local institutions of higher education, or in partnership with county offices.⁷ While a variety of mechanisms, coaching designs, and formats have been found useful, specific structures are context-dependent, suggesting that relationships and consistency are what matter most. For example, one study found that coaching may support school leaders’ reflection on teacher feedback (e.g. evaluations), but this usefulness was dependent first on the leader finding the feedback useful as well as the number of times that the leader met with their coach.⁸

Keeping the Equity Center

While much of the existing literature indicates the importance of equity within coaching and asserts that improved learning for all may attend to issues of equity, there are gaps in our understanding of equity-driven school leadership coaching.⁹ However, existing literature on equity-driven instructional coaching¹⁰ and executive coaching,¹¹ as well as practitioner-facing literature,¹² offer several insights in terms of the urgency, needed competencies, and potential design.

Coaching, like schooling itself, is a site where the status quo of white supremacy and anti-blackness can be reproduced or disrupted through a variety of mechanisms and routines.¹³ Disrupting the inequitable status quo requires strategic intervention

if coaching is going to be equitable.¹⁴ For example, similar to other approaches to educator learning and support, traditional coaching approaches may assume race does not matter or that racism is not inherent to every stage of the coaching process.¹⁵ During leadership coaching, conversation can often remain neutral, surface level, and focus on technical aspects of school leadership.¹⁶ However, coaching can help equity knowledge grow¹⁷ and support the development of more just schooling routines that center opportunity and inclusion of minoritized students through critical reflection and action. For example, Sablo-Sutton’s study outlines how a coach who has the awareness to recognize issues of equity, the language and content knowledge to engage in the conversation, and the courage to raise these issues can support leader development for equity.¹⁸

Critical reflection and attention to relations of power comprise the core of coaching for equity. Diamond and Gomez support critical reflection as a tool to

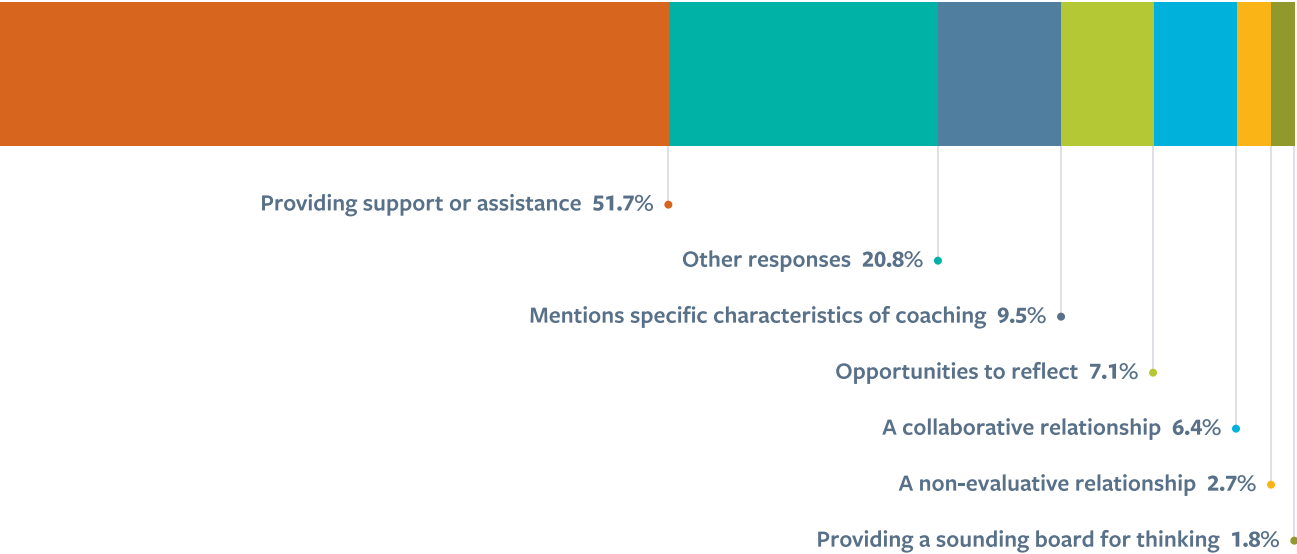
Coach Development†

While some coaches have natural dispositions that support these competencies, coach development is important. Scholarship has spoken to the importance of coaches’ learning communities and communities of practice that can foster opportunities for coaches to critically examine their own problems of practice and receive feedback.

Furthermore, opportunities for coaches to deepen their understanding of local and macro systems of oppression and social justice is fundamental to their confidence and growth. Studies report that interstate working groups and coaching cohorts have been appreciated by coaching practitioners.

However, some empirical research on instructional coaching communities of practice cautioned that actual time spent together frequently limited deeper engagement with dilemmas of practice and was instead taken up with other activities.

Themes from the responses to: *How would you define leadership coaching?‡*



*Disrupting the inequitable status quo requires strategic intervention if coaching is going to be equitable.*¹⁴

both reflect backward—on what has been done, patterns of inequity that have been (re)produced, and mechanisms that perpetuate that—as well as a critical reflection as forward planning, intentionally approaching actions, routines, and norms with a sharp focus on who will be most served and how race and forms of oppression are at play. Critically-driven equity coaching can also help challenge dominant narratives and create counternarratives that upend the dominant scripts around race, racism, and power.¹⁹ In this sense, attention to relations of power both within the local and immediate contexts, as well as larger systems, discourses, and histories can support taking equity-oriented action. Coaches play an important role in connecting critical perspectives with the day-to-day work of coachees.²⁰

Guided by literature on teacher-centered coaching, equity-driven school leadership coaching might also expect and prepare for inevitable tensions and heavy emotions. Elena Aguilar’s practitioner guide Coaching for Equity offers several suggestions for what coaches working with teachers should be prepared to do. These suggestions include attending to emotions, building trust, knowing how to respond to the question “Do you think I’m racist?”, gathering data to illustrate inequities and honing one’s dispositions such as compassion, curiosity, trust in the coaching process, humility, mutuality,

appreciation, and a learner orientation. Teacher-facing coaching literature also cautions that the work of equity may meet barriers from leadership which may not see attending to equity as a priority or goals of equity clashing with other institutional demands, obligations, and accountability. While school leadership coaching has the potential to intervene in these areas, coaches of school leaders might benefit from thinking about 1) how school leaders might ease these burdens or challenges that teachers might navigate as they work for equity and 2) how they themselves may have to navigate constraints or a lack of support under district leadership, priorities, and constraints.

The small body of literature focused on equity-oriented coaching and mentoring also offers insights into how coaching design might be re-mediated to foster greater criticality and impact. Orange and colleagues suggest that Reciprocal Learning Partnerships for equity reframe the traditional coach/coachee model to provide an open-ended framework to encourage co-constructed collaborative conversations. This partnership can support reflection around noticing, naming, and taking action toward eliminating inequitable practices and structures that educators encounter in their day-to-day work. They further stress the importance of attending to identity, positionality,

and biases within such partnerships as they impact how participants see and strive to address issues of equity. Although Orange and colleagues do not specify a focus on coaching school leaders, their equity-focused framework may align well with school leadership coaching competencies around dialogic thinking partners. Extending this dialogic approach to thinking about equity, identity, and power can support ongoing reflection and action plans to disrupt and transform inequitable practices in teaching and other organizational routines.

Furthermore, such intentional attention to identity and collaboration could be responsive to coaching across differences. Research on executive coaching, mentoring in higher education, and other forms of collaborative learning and development has emphasized the importance of reflecting on the impact on people of color in cross-racial collaboration.²¹ While this discussion is yet to be central to the literature on school leadership coaching, it may be particularly relevant given that leadership coaching programs often tap former principals and superintendents to coach new leaders, thus drawing from a coach population that is disproportionately white and male-identifying.²² Without this critical attention, reports in executive coaching suggest that coaching clients of color can lead to encouraging assimilation and adaptation to dominant cultures rather than honoring the wholeness and integrity of the coachee.²³ Likewise, coaches of color and/or coaches that hold other marginalized identities may end up taking on extra, uncompensated change work for their school or district when unsupported in coaching those with dominant identities. Overall, further attention is needed in practice and research on the interplay between the various intersecting relations of power that might exist in coach and coachee relationships in education.²⁴ In the following section, we offer questions to guide reflection on the contents of this brief and incorporation into practice.

Notes

1. Huggins et al., 2020
 2. Knight, 2011; Woulfin, et al., 2023
 3. Lochmiller, 2014
 4. Lochmiller, 2014; Warren & Kelsen, 2013; Wise & Jacobo, 2010
 5. Wise & Cavazos, 2017
 6. Wise & Cavazos, 2017; Warren & Kelsen, 2013; Wise & Hammack, 2011
 7. Warren & Kelsen, 2013; Hayes & Burkett, 2021; James-Ward, 2011; Klar et al., 2020; Huggins et al., 2020
 8. Bickman et. al., 2012
 9. Orange et al., 2019
 10. Blaisdell, 2018; Marshall & Buenrostro, 2021; Land, 2018; Woulfin et. al., 2023
 11. Roche & Passmore, 2021; Chiu, 2022
 12. Aguilar, 2020; Bussman & Louis, 2021
 13. Dumas, 2014; Diamond & Gomez, 2023
 14. Roche & Passmore 2021; Irby, 2021; Chiu, 2022
 15. Diamond & Gomez, 2023; Irby, 2021
 16. Sablo-Sutton, et. al., 2023
 17. Warren & Kelsen, 2013
 18. Sablo-Sutton et al., 2023
 19. Delgado & Stefancic, 2001
 20. Land, 2018
 21. Blaisdell, 2018; Roche & Passmore, 2021
 22. Taie & Goldring, 2017
 23. Roche & Passmore, 2021
 24. Lopez, 2013; Mullen, 2009
- * Knight, 2011; Lochmmiller, 2014; Orange et al., 2019; Silver et al., 2009
- † Klar et al., 2020; James-Ward, 2011; Lewis & Jones, 2019; Riley & Meredith, 2017; Silver et al., 2009; Woulfin et al., 2023
- ‡ Adapted: Wise & Cavazos, 2017

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Drawing from 21CSLA Qualities of Leadership Coaching, we offer the following questions for reflection:

- 1 Consider the **assets** for leadership in your school/district/region. How could those be identified and built upon in a coaching program?
- 2 What has identifying your **purpose**, values, visions, and goals looked like this past year? How might this shape the focus of coaching for you and/or your coaching program?
- 3 Where might you, your coachees, and/or the program incorporate more attention to issues of equity related to **embodied practice** such as beliefs, ways of being, and behaviors?
- 4 When have you, your coachees, and/or the coaching program you’re involved in built emotional intelligence and **resilience** of leaders over the last year? What opportunities to do this might you create in the year ahead?
- 5 What would coaching prioritize to support your/your coachees’ ability to engage in **continuous improvement** efforts within your/their organization?
- 6 How do you, your coachees, and/or your coaching program connect individual growth and development with **systems-level thinking**?
- 7 When was the last time you had a conversation around your own identity, values, beliefs, and impact in a way that fostered your ability to facilitate conversations around **systemic oppression** and bias? How might this become a regular part of your coaching practice/program?
- 8 Following a challenging conversation with a coach/coachee, break in regular meetings, or shift in focus, how do you/your coachees re-establish **relational trust**?
- 9 What forms of **evidence** (e.g. feedback and reflection on observations of practice, meeting agendas, strategic plans, survey results, etc.) feel the most comfortable for you/your coachees to engage with in coaching? What feels less familiar?
- 10 How often does your/your coachee’s **goal** frame the time you spend together in coaching? How do your coaches raise issues of equity in coaching conversations that the coachees may not have considered yet?

21CSLA Equity Statement

Leaders for equity transform education to improve access, opportunity, and inclusion for students and adults, especially those who are systemically marginalized and historically underserved, so that they can thrive.

About 21CSLA

21CSLA (21st Century California School Leadership Academy) is dedicated to the professional learning and support of California's educational leaders—teacher, site, and district—to create more equitable learning environments that improve success for underserved students. A key member of California's Statewide System of Support, 21CSLA is headquartered at UC Berkeley School of Education and works in partnership with UCLA School of Education and Information Studies, California Subject Matter Project, and seven 21CSLA regional academies throughout the state.

The 21CSLA initiative provides high-quality, equity-centered professional learning for educational leaders of schools and districts in California. Programs are provided at no cost to participants and include leadership coaching, communities of practice, and localized professional learning to improve outcomes for historically marginalized students.

Bridging Research and Practice

21CSLA seeks to bridge the gap between research and practice in education for educational leaders. We coordinate and facilitate Research-Practice-Partnerships among California educational leaders and educational researchers by creating connections and providing research support. The research briefs compile and present current research in a concise format, including reflection questions to help leaders adapt and adopt the information into their own practice. 21CSLA regularly produces Research-Practice Webinars in which scholars and practitioners engage in conversations about timely issues. We also curate a variety of resources for educational leaders to learn about current and important topics in education (e.g. webinar video recording and highlights, research briefs, podcasts). For more information, visit <https://21cslacenter.berkeley.edu/research>

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