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Feedback-based coaching towards school leaders' professional development
Reflections from the PROFLEC project in Cyprus

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Abstract
Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to discuss feedback-based group coaching as a strategy towards school leaders' development. On the basis of data collected within the framework of the project "Professional Learning through Feedback and Reflection" (PROFLEC), this case study explores the Cypriot school leaders' views about feedback and coaching as developmental tools. The PROFLEC project was implemented in participating countries during 2013-2015 and involved completing an online leadership self-assessment inventory, training as well as coaching sessions.
Design/methodology/approach – Observations and interviews with coachees and coaches illustrate participants' views on feedback-based group coaching, the critical conditions of its implementation and the perceived value of the particular model.
Findings – The study concludes that feedback-based group coaching can enhance school leaders' organisational socialisation and learning; yet, certain aspects, such as the nature of the feedback, the role of the coaches, the establishment of trust as well as voluntary participation are required to enhance reflection towards action for school leaders.
Originality/value – This paper supports the importance of feedback-based group coaching as a developmental strategy for school leaders.
Keywords Staff development, Coaching, Educational leadership, Group coaching, Feedback, leader development, Continuing professional development, School management and leadership, Self-assessment, Peer groups
Paper type Research paper

Introduction

It is argued that focused and sustainable school improvement is related to leaders' behaviours, and that leaders' effectiveness has an indirect effect on students' performance (Leithwood and Louis, 2012). Since school improvement cannot solely rely on leaders' personal experiences and natural ability alone, leadership development programmes established extensively worldwide have taken numerous forms and formats (Huber, 2004; Mclay and Brown, 2003; Nicolaidou and Petridou, 2011b). With great man theories long gone, several researchers and theorists (e.g. Katzenmeyer and Moeller, 2001; Murphy, 2005; Spillane, 2006) suggest that leaders' development should place emphasis, not only on knowledge and skills, but intrapersonal competencies as well (Lepak and Snell, 1999). At the same time, Schön's (1987) well-debated dichotomy between practice competence and professional knowledge appears of relevance more than ever; the relationship between what leaders know and how they act is quite critical. Since real world problems do not present themselves in well-formed structures, school leaders should demonstrate, not only knowledge and skills, but also the capacity to reflect on practice.

In view of the well-documented benefits of feedback and coaching as strategies for the development of school leaders, the European project "Professional Learning through Feedback and Reflection" (PROFLEC), implemented in Cyprus[1] during the period 2013-2015, aimed to bring these two strategies together. The current paper reflects on feedback-based group coaching, as this was applied within the framework of the particular project. Specifically, focus is placed on the exploration of the extent and the ways in which school leaders' considered feedback and coaching as developmental tools, towards the acquisition of individual skills and the enhancement of their capacity to impact school action.

The literature: feedback and coaching in school leaders' professional development

To support school leaders in the development of skills, competencies and motivation, the application of knowledge and the exploration of their practice, valid and constructive feedback is often valuable. In fact, feedback on leadership can enhance understanding of leaders' role and fit to the job (Goldring *et al.*, 2009).

Yet, school leaders rarely have access to valid and reliable feedback on their practice and skills (Thach, 2002; Nicolaidou and Petridou, 2011a; Aas and Vavik, 2015). Leaders may receive informal feedback from teachers, pupils and parents but it is often not clear how such feedback translates into learning, and in turn impacts practice. At the same time, leaders receive formal summative evaluation reports from school inspectors, but again it is unclear how such results – often highly judgemental – relate to learning (Thach, 2002; O'Neil and Marsick, 2014) that will, in turn, help leaders act on changes. The respective literature frequently suggests that to develop, school leaders must receive feedback and derive meaning from this (O'Neil and Marsick, 2014). Hence, there is a need for meaningful and constructive feedback to become integrated into professional development activities (Marks and Printy, 2003; Nicolaidou and Petridou, 2011b).

Since feedback alone is not regarded as sufficient for development (Cannon and Witherspoon, 2005; Alicke and Sedikides, 2009), coaching has emerged as one of the fastest growing strategies in leadership development (Hobson, 2003; Reiss, 2006; Underhill *et al.*, 2007; Schein, 2009). Despite the newness of this approach in human resource management (Schein, 2010; Aas and Vavik, 2015), coaching is reported to facilitate active engagement and learning and enhance intrinsic motives for leadership

(Bacon and Spear, 2003; O'Neil and Marsick, 2014). The literature suggests that coaching can support leaders' reflection on feedback and effectively help them respond to arising problems (McGovern *et al.*, 2001; Neufeld and Roper, 2003; Goldring *et al.*, 2009; Mavrogordato and Cannon, 2009; Goff *et al.*, 2014; O'Neil and Marsick, 2014; Aas and Vavik, 2015). Ellison and Hayes (2006) reported on the effects of coaching for school heads, indicating positive views towards this approach. Silver *et al.* (2009) further argued that new school heads consider coaching unique and useful for professional development. At the same time, several studies (e.g. Luthans and Peterson, 2002; Smither *et al.*, 2003) outlined the benefits of coaching for the individual, in particular with regards to raising job satisfaction levels. Beyond the individual, benefits are also reported for the institutions in which they work. Mavrogordato and Cannon (2009) suggested that coaching can be intrinsically meaningful in schools, since it can be a constant reminder to school headteachers of their values, assisting them to internalise rules and regulations, "attack" bureaucracy, put things into perspective, and increase efficiency and innovative potential. Robertson (2008) concluded that coaching can help participants have ownership of self-development, gain intellectual independence, feel politically empowered and build self-confidence to improve learning for themselves and their institutions. Hence, coaching can help school leaders move away from being reactive and isolated to being proactive (Mavrogordato and Cannon, 2009). In view of these research studies, several claims are put forward that coaching can enhance leadership potential and improve school performance (Thach, 2002).

Feedback and coaching: the PROFLEC-CY

PROFLEC aimed to provide valid and reliable feedback to school leaders on their skills and support them to interpret this meaningfully. Even though PROFLEC addressed school leaders at various career stages (e.g. aspiring leaders, middle leaders, leaders), PROFLEC-CY was only addressed to headteachers. In line with the general PROFLEC design, PROFLEC-CY employed a three-stage process of leaders' development. During the first stage, participants completed the online-based self-assessment inventory "Competence Profile of School Management" (CPSM), which automatically generated individualised feedback reports (Huber and Hiltmann, 2011). The CPSM reflects real-life school situations and is based on psychometric principles, thus offering participants the possibility to reflect on their strengths and weaknesses in various areas of school leadership. The second stage included training workshops for all participants who had completed the inventory to help them interpret feedback reports, reflect on their results and relate "low" and "high" scores on different dimensions to everyday practices. The third stage involved group coaching for a number of participants. These sessions adopted a group dynamic approach, whereby participants provided support to peers through discussion and reflection. A group coach facilitated the groups. The feedback from individual reports was utilised towards reflection on leadership roles (Nicolaidou and Aas, 2013). Hence, group coaching was employed as a linkage between the structured feedback of the CPSM report and action – enactment on this report – towards school improvement.

This final stage involved the application of the PROFLEC coaching model and the respective protocol (Nicolaidou and Aas, 2013). The coaching model adopted Whitmore's (2004) five-stage developmental approach, namely: "Where do I stand now?", "Where do I want to be?", "Why should I make the effort to change?", "How will I get there?" and "How can we support the change process?" The coaching protocol included five steps: presentation of the problem, clarifying questions, reflection from

peers, person in-focus reflections, goal setting and action planning. The first coaching session aimed to build trust between the participants and help them identify what high and low scores in their feedback report meant; headteachers were also asked to choose one of these areas for further professional development. After the first session, coachees were asked to identify one critical incident from their daily school practice, in relation to their selected area for development and bring that up for discussion at the next session, set three weeks later. During this second session, with the help of peers, coachees identified one aim and decided on one action to address before the third session, set four to six weeks after the second. During the third session, coachees referred to their personal aim and explained what they had done in-between sessions, as well as what they could have done. They further elaborated on the problems encountered and why these had occurred. The session ended with reflection on the process and a "verbal gift" for peers to take away to celebrate learning time together. The time between coaching sessions was deemed necessary to allow the participants to implement actions, in response to personal aims.

The three coaching sessions were offered to six groups of participants, accommodating 30 Cypriot headteachers in total. Three primary education inspectors, formally trained in PROFLEC, acted as the group facilitators. Participants were selected on the basis of convenience, since they were invited by their inspectors to join the sessions. The meetings were held in consideration of participants' availability, while the synthesis of each group varied in terms of participants' work setting (urban/rural schools).

Research methodology

The present study aimed to explore to what extent and how feedback-based group coaching – provided within the context of the PROFLEC project – assisted school leaders to reflect on their leadership capacity, learn from each other, inform their practices and develop as leaders. In this regard, this case study drew on data collected in one project partner, Cyprus. Such an approach was deemed appropriate, since it related to the localised context and built on relationships, beliefs and attitudes (Elliot and Lukes, 2008, cited in Hamilton and Corbett-Whittier, 2013, p. 10).

Observations and interviews were selected as data collection tools as these could better capture social situations and interactions (Cohen *et al.*, 2011). Hence, observations and interviews were employed to explore participants' responses on: the content and the quality of the coaching interactions (problems raised, critical incidents, types of questions, links to the CPSM feedback report, personal aims and action plans, actions); the critical conditions for coaching (the format of the sessions, the role of the coach, openness/trust); and the perceived value of feedback-based group coaching for the participants.

The observations were conducted in all six coaching groups during the second and the third sessions. They focused on the interaction between all group members and the coach, the types of emerging issues and questions, and the nature of the discussions developed. Coachees were informed about the aims of the study and agreed to allow non-participating observations from the researchers.

Interviews aimed to collect data particularly on the perceived value of the feedback-based group coaching as a developmental strategy. Therefore, interviewers tried to elicit clarifications and explanations on specific occurrences and types of interactions in each group to capture participants' views on the structure and content of the coaching (i.e. why did this happen? Why did you react the way you did? In what ways has this helped you? Did this discussion relate to your school and if yes, in what way?). Short individual interviews with one participant from every group were conducted after the second

and third sessions. Participants were coachees who voluntarily agreed to share views and insights from the coaching sessions with the researchers; the same person was interviewed each time, yielding a total of six participant interviewees. Interviews were also held with the three coaches at the end of each session (six short individual coach interviews). In addition, focus group interviews – one with each group of participants (six in total) and one with all three coaches – were organised after the final session.

Observational and interview data were recorded through note-taking, as some participants refused to be tape-recorded. However, notes were shared with participants for verification purposes (Miles *et al.*, 2013). Notes were then coded with their content analysed, in light of the aforementioned aims. Data analysis followed Miles *et al.'s* (2013) stages, namely data reduction, data display and conclusion drawing/verification. Specifically, data were interrogated in relation to the content and quality of coaching interaction, the structure of coaching sessions, and the value of feedback-based group coaching.

Results are presented below in view of three distinctive categories/themes: the content of the coaching; the critical conditions for implementation; and the perceived value of group coaching. In this presentation, observational and interview data are reported in view of their source. Headteachers were attributed numbers (e.g. HT1, HT2, etc.), based on a clockwise seating arrangement as they were sitting in circles. Therefore, observational data indicated as "obs" are presented according to the headteacher (coachee), the group and the session (i.e. obs., HT1, group 1, session 2). Individual interview data, indicated as "int", are presented for coachees according to the headteacher, the group and the session (i.e. int., HT2, group 2, session 3); for the three coaches, such data is cited as "C1", "C2" and "C3" for each coach. Group interview data are cited as "gr_int".

Results and discussion
Coaching: content and quality
Links to the feedback. The coaching sessions intended to support coachees in developing as school leaders and thus relied heavily on the feedback report; during the sessions participants were asked to draw on their personalised feedback report (this was generated once they completed the online self-assessment inventory-CPSM) to identify areas for development and explore their strengths and weaknesses as school leaders. Interview and observational data reveal a number of issues related to the links between the feedback report and the coaching as such but also to the content of the coaching sessions.

As pointed out in the group interviews, although the feedback report seemed lengthy and included specific theory and research developed terminology, it was a starting point for emerging discussions during the coaching sessions. As one participant noted; "It is so much better that the discussion starts off from the feedback report. I think that the discussion helps you to realize what the report meant to say and you come to peace with it which at first you thought was bad or untrue and wicked" (gr_int, HT2, group 1).

Coaches confirmed that coaching helped participants draw links to feedback reports. One of the coaches referred to the authenticity of the interaction emerging during sessions:

> I never expected that they [the participants] would be so revealing. I tried to stop vertical and sensitive questions but they just emerged. […] People see personal meaning when they bring in something as concrete as their feedback report and this helps the discussion kick off and increases their motivation since they feel that they have something personal to gain from. It is about them personally and not a general recipe to fit all (int., C1, group 1).

Participants seemed primarily concerned about their individual scores in the feedback report. Therefore, during the coaching session they wanted to discuss and interpret their scores further:

> I was at first impressed by my high score for the devotion to work (96) […] when I read the description at the end I soon realized that my devotion actually causes problems to me at my home and my personal life, as it is overlooked for the sake of my work. And I wanted to see why this is happening (int., HT2, group 4, session 2).

> […] I feel stressed and this came up in my results as well, even though there is no obvious reason why I am stressed and worried. Let me read from the definition of stress from the report [he reads a section from the report […]], this makes sense to me and it worries me as I do not recognize any of these reasons to be worried about (obs., HT1, group 2, session 2).

> Yes, my empathy results were medium and this incident I shared with [the group] points out why, I guess. Empathy may not be my best quality but it seems that other people need it and I may need to try hard […] and I need your views on how to improve (obs., HT2, group 6, session 2).

Respondents also reported trying to explain low or high scores with examples from their everyday school practice. In this regard, coaching helped them to understand what their results meant in professional terms and how these reflected life in schools. Observational data supported this further:

> I discussed this with colleagues and this discussion helped me realize that I had this increased score because even though I do delegate responsibilities and tasks to my senior management team at the end of the day I do everything myself (obs., HT1, group 3, session 2).

> What really troubled me was my score in the "assertion" where I got a score of 20. This means that I am not assertive, maybe as much I wanted to be. It may also mean to me that I back off during conflicts or when I have to ask for something to happen, or that I may be giving too much leeway, too much room to my colleagues (obs., HT2, group 2, session 2).

On the basis of these findings, one could argue that feedback and coaching acted as a "retrospective contemplation of practice undertaken in order to uncover the knowledge used in practical situations, by analysing and interpreting the information recalled" (Fitzgerald, 1994, p. 67). The above seemed to verify the importance of incorporating feedback into professional development (Goldring *et al.*, 2009; Thach, 2002). In this case, the feedback provided to school leaders made a point of departure for individual and group reflection, while coaching allowed for peer assistance along this process. This is particularly interesting in view of the Cypriot context, or any similar settings, where formal feedback to school leaders is non-existent. This finding also strengthens the importance of valid and reliable feedback set on solid foundations, i.e. resulting from the employment of a valid assessment tool. In this event, the data also point to the reluctance of school leaders to accept their scores in the feedback report. This also explains some of the observed tendency to devalue its content; in line with other research evidence (Nicolaidou and Petridou, 2011a, b; Goff *et al.*, 2014) as these practitioners may not be accustomed to receiving such valid and coherent feedback.

Personal and professional perspective. As discussed above, the focus of the coaching sessions was on the development of the self at a professional level, but participants also could provide useful insights on the personal level. As a result, during the coaching sessions, the themes discussed were related to the skills assessed by the CPSM, such as

stress, empathy, feedback, instructional leadership, health and safety and human resource management. In fact, participants highlighted that coaching helped them come to terms with the inventory: "These sessions help you **not** to be suspicious of the tool […] I have read what I needed to read in the first place and after our discussions I went back and thought really hard of what this means for me" (gr_int, HT3, group 2).

To take this a step further though, discussions seemed to challenge not only the concepts and theories leaders held in relation to themselves as persons, but also those they had as professionals. The following comments are indicative of this trend:

> I have also enriched my repertoire from what I have heard so far in relation to a number of issues. I have made a note to all you have said so that if I encounter such incidents or in similar situations I would know what to do. Human communication and relationships are so difficult to address and we need to be careful […]. As long as I, the headteacher, can support my decision for deviating from a collective decision or school policy and justify it, and make sure that my decision has been taken in the best interest of the kids and the school then I can do that! (obs., HT2, group 2, session 3).

> Now I know that when people enter my office I should make a note of what they say, and commit myself to investigate into the matter instead of trying to provide excuses, try to justify things without really knowing what has happened […] I feel that I have changed as a result of what I have learned in here. I feel that I have more confidence in myself as a headteacher now. This is not something that any formal course could possibly teach you (obs., HT4, group 1, session 3).

Beyond acknowledging personal and professional strengths and weaknesses, participants were asked to prioritise areas for development, set personal goals to this end, and most importantly, develop a plan of action. Specifically, during session 3, coachees had the opportunity to talk about what they had implemented with reference to levers and barriers, and discuss what they had learned. Even for issues considered as self-evident, headteachers found these discussions enlightening. The literature also highlights that participants involved in coaching usually set their own agenda and priorities (Kowalski and Casper, 2007). Hence, the context of the project encouraged participants in focused and methodical ways to reflect on their personal and professional skills and try out new practices.

Critical conditions for implementation
The role of the coach. Apparently, Cyprus had a rather unique coaching situation with the selection of inspectors as coaches. As some participants indicated, the only reason for joining the coaching sessions was because their inspector had asked them to do so:

> To be honest I did it only because of the coach [who] asked me to […] I didn't want to take part because of [my] workload and I thought it was yet another research project. But I am happy I did it after all (gr_int, HT5, group 3).

Interestingly, for some participants, the coaching sessions signalled a different relationship with their inspector. As a participant stressed, "I really feel trust and warmth in here. I can talk freely to my inspector now and directly without thinking twice of how it will look like when I say something" (obs., HT1, group 3, session 3). For others, this was a chance to discuss issues that troubled them, but which were never discussed with the inspector before. As they argued, the nature of the sessions gave rise to sensitive issues that they would not normally bring up (e.g. "I have never discussed these minor issues

with my inspector before as I was not sure I could trouble him/her with these, and I am very glad I had the chance now to share these", obs., HT4, group 3, session 3).

In relation to the facilitative and non-participatory nature of the coach's role (who acted more as a facilitator, rather than an expert in the field), participants appreciated that the coach followed a structured approach and respected the PROFLEC protocol to ensure reflection and equality in participation. In fact, they highlighted this as one of the most important aspects of the coaching process. As two participants noted:

No we did not mind when the coach stopped us or reminded us of time because I personally have so much to share that I could not stop talking and could take up of other people's time and they could leave here without having said or shared anything (gr_int, HT4, group 4).

I think that the procedure and the steps ensured equal treatment for us all. I personally liked the turning of backs. This made you focus and really listen without interfering (gr_int, HT1, group 5).

However, the fact the coach was also an inspector had a "catch-22" effect on the procedure. As some of the participants discussed after the sessions, the presence of the inspector inhibited them, to some extent, from sharing as much as they would like to. As a participant stressed, "I didn't reveal as much since I did not want my inspector to know about how I handle staff absences, even though I knew he would not have done otherwise" (int., HT2, group 2, session 3).

Therefore, this study highlighted the importance of the coach's facilitating role, but also raised caution on the impact of established power or authority relationships (Thach, 2002). The coach's profile and selection criteria are issues extensively discussed in the respective literature. In fact, the selection of "the best" coaches often relates to the goals of the coaching, as well as the school or the system, in which this takes place (Goldsmith *et al.*, 2000).

Group dynamics. Trust between group members was discussed during the group interviews as a critical condition for the successful implementation of coaching. Participants argued that they were hesitant to open up at first, but soon were at ease, especially once they felt, not criticised, but respected for what they shared.

As interview data suggested, building trust between group members was related to the fact that coaches were not keen to deviate from the suggested coaching model. This aspect, along with the almost "prescriptive" attendance to the protocol proved important. As a participant indicated:

[…] the turning of the backs raised respect and trust in the group; by listening to peers' reflections and to how respectful and true others are of you when they talk about you behind your back, you respect this and open up as well. You realize that people are not bad or vindictive or wish to look down on you (int., HT3, group 6, session 2).

Both coaches and coachees warned that the synthesis of the group was critical. Participants seemed to get on well and suggested that they had already started pursuing further social meetings as a group. As they further

I was very happy with the synthesis of the group. It seemed that we really gelled together […] after our session, we all attended in in-service training on the Greek language new curricula […] did you all notice that we all sat together? (int., HT2, group 2, session 3).

The synthesis of group is important otherwise [people] will not open up. I know that what we have heard is not a criticism and it is great to find such a supportive network, someone to listen to you to respect you not impose on your staff and then let you decide what to apply, take home with you (int., HT4, group 5, session 3).

> The synthesis of the groups is very important. This worked well for group 2. But for the other group the synthesis did not work well. I did not plan it but I think that I should have thought it through first or spent more time on trust building somehow (int., C3).

However, as a headteacher suggested, "if a person patronized the procedure […] we would not open up. I would talk to the coach and withdraw from the process" (int., HT4, group 1). Participants even suggested ways in which they could deal with these persons: "maybe we could be blunt to this person and get him/her to understand that his/her behaviour is damaging the group and reason for being here" (gr_int, HT5, group 3). Apparently, those not "true to the group or the process" would not benefit from the coaching (int., HT4, group 1, session 2). There were occasions where the group seemed polite enough not to reject these members, which impinged on the dynamics of the group:

> I found the HT4's reaction to be appalling. She showed from the start that she did not respect the session, the protocol structure or what we were asked to do. This made all of us be more wary of what we were saying, at least I was. […]. I felt that there was more to say but I didn't […] her attitude […] put me off. I felt that if I said things the way I wanted to it would damage my professional image; if she was not in the group I would not mind because the rest of the people were more positive towards what we were doing […] I don't trust her and I was more typical and careful in the meetings (int., HT2, group 2, session 2).

Robertson (2005) argued that coaching amongst peers, either in a dyadic or group format, needs to be seen primarily as a learning relationship; participants need to be "equally committed to facilitating each other's leadership learning development and wellbeing (both cognitive and affective)" (p. 24). Since group coaching could potentially give rise to friction amongst members, how these groups are set up should be given careful consideration.

Nature of participation. Interestingly, coaching appeared most useful to headteachers with an average number of four to five years in post, while more experienced participants (i.e. over ten years in post) seemed more demanding. As an acting headteacher pointed out "these sessions have been like a survival course for me as I am new" (obs., HT3, group 5, session 3). On the contrary, an experienced participant noted:

> I am a head for more than ten years now. I have never rung up anyone to ask for help. I feel that this process is ok but there is nothing to help me with. I have already been through all these things and I have a lot of things to contribute and share with you, but I am not sure how helpful this will be for me […] what else is there to know? I am ok with these sessions to continue but in a less formal way, we don't need all this (gr_int, HT4, group 1).

The above reinforces the argument that participation in coaching needs to be on a purely voluntary basis (Goldring *et al.*, 2009). Apparently, only leaders who need this form of development should participate in coaching sessions:

> I know that what we have heard is not a criticism and it is great to find such a supportive network, someone to listen to you, to respect you, not impose on your staff and then let you decide what to apply, take home with you (int., HT3, group 3, session 2).

> I am overwhelmed by our conversation, with the fact that we have come close to each other, close enough to share and support each other. I am enthusiastic with the fact and we would like to continue this longer (int., C1).

Perceived value of feedback-based group coaching
The learning acquired. Overall, as interview excerpts below also indicate, participants seemed to appreciate the coaching sessions more than the inventory (first stage) and the training workshop (second stage). In their majority, participants thought of sessions as valuable, constructive and significant for their personal development. As pointed by various participants:

> These [the coaching sessions] were the most valuable part of the project. It is not easy to open up, it felt like psychotherapy almost. […] At times I stayed silent to hear how you reacted to these. I feel ready and more certain of myself for next year. We may be showing dynamic and strong to the outside world but inside we are still insecure etc. This is my 4th year in headship and it is the first time I have had such a positive experience where someone actually listened to me and paid attention to me and bothered truly about my problems and worries (int., HT2, group 2, session 2).

> These meetings have been most useful and the conversations and the reflection as well. It is great to see that even though we all come from different schools we all sort of face the same things […] I will keep your suggestions as I am still new to this, in fact I am only an acting head and I face various problems. I want to thank you all for accepting me to the group with such warmth (int., HT3, group 3, session 3).

Participants suggested that the sessions helped them try out specific, simple and practical steps to address the issue they had identified in their feedback report as critical to them. This process, as they argued, raised their self-confidence to approach certain aspects in school. Therefore, feedback-based group coaching appeared to enhance Cypriot school leaders' learning. Specifically, coaching seemed to help leaders derive meaning from their everyday practices and the way they acted and become more confident. The combination of feedback and coaching appeared quite effective and provided school leaders with specific, practical and focused strategies for development and action. This is in line with the literature about the potential of feedback-based coaching to support development and lead to action (O'Neil and Marsick, 2014). Goff *et al.* (2014) further argued that "feedback and coaching may provide actionable information for strategic, focussed action" (p. 686).

In addition, benefits were reported for the coaches who were self-critical of what they had done and why, also making reference to what they had learned themselves through this process.

Reflection. Learning during coaching was based on reflection, self and peer assisted; the sessions appeared to support Schön's (1983) reflection on action, allowing participants to reflect on their actions in a critical way and providing peer assistance along the process:

> In my efforts to support myself I have thought philosophically about the matter we discussed last time and I came to realize that it is all down to selfishness and the fear of failure […] it is a note of personal failure and it shows that you are personally inefficient or incompetent so it damages yourself image […] I have now learnt that it can happen to me, and it has and it is ok to have a messy spot in the otherwise perfect paintings I have drawn for myself (obs., HT2, group 6, session 3).

> It is a difficult road to take, working with yourself […] it is always easier to work with others; you cannot escape from yourself. It is a great feeling to share after all and to discover that you are not alone (obs., HT4, group 2, session 3).

> We sometimes give value to something according to what it is worth. So let's think whether we place too much emphasis on something that is not worth it and I feel that when in school I don't have the time to do this. Working with you here has helped me realise this (obs., HT3, group 2, session 2).

Reflection – defined by Schön (1983) as viewing professional artistry meaningfully to improve it using the knowledge derived from other sources – may be difficult for school leaders in the particular context, where leadership education is still in its infancy (Nicolaidou and Petridou, 2011a; Petridou *et al.*, 2014). Schön's "reflection-in-action" may be considered a luxury for several school leaders, since they learn how to deal with emergent situations on the job. With school leaders often facing time-pressured situations where they need to take fast decisions, "the scope for reflection is extremely limited" (Eraut, 1994, p. 145). Success in addressing an unprecedented event often depends on the school leaders' ability to skillfully manage the event. However, "reflection-in-action" can yield learning in intended ways, which can directly and positively impact practice; data indicate that this is possible through coaching sessions.

Interpersonal dimension. The interpersonal dimension frequently emerged in participants' accounts as of high relevance. Apparently, school headteachers could see how their role could be differentiated and enacted upon by other colleagues (Passmore, 2009; Aas and Vavik, 2015). This study also demonstrated that when resting on real working life examples, and facilitated by peers who experience similar issues and worries, feedback-based group coaching can lead participants to derive deeper meanings of their professional lives:

> Human communicating is often missing from our lives and this gave it to us right now […] You always feel insecure to reveal something personal but it didn't happen today. We all came close to each other. I realized through this process that life is short and we need to learn to communicate more and better! (int., HT4, group 1, session 3).

> I have certainly enjoyed it even I did not join the group as voluntarily as I would like to. It helped me stand on my own two feet, have confidence in me and be stronger where I thought I needed to. Also where I thought I had a problem or where I saw myself as lacking and I doubted myself [I have realized that] this is not true after all and the feedback from the report helped me understand this. In relation to the larger group I realized that I am not alone. In relation to the smaller groups this was stronger. It is great to be able to share and be true to yourself and others and receive the same from others as well (int., HT2, group 2, session 3).

Hence, peer support, as well as helping to alleviate pain or stress observed, can potentially act as forms of self-efficacy development for school leaders. This finding also resembles Bandura's (2000) assumption that social persuasion impacts self-efficacy levels. Peer-assisted learning has been frequently discussed in the respective literature. Kutzhanova's *et al.* (2009) study of young entrepreneurs concluded that peer-assisted learning helped learners construct their own understandings. Ladyshewsky (2006) also argued that peer-assisted learning can enhance critical thinking beyond the narrow frame of a situation. Aas and Vavik (2015) conclude that in group coaching sessions, school leaders "develop both their social and professional competence" (p. 262).

Implications
This study focused on feedback-based group coaching and its implications for school leaders' development. It needs to be noted here that coaching was implemented

in a group – rather than a dyadic – format, a structure under-researched and not widely employed.

In this case, although participants were not all working in the same school, they were helped to share common worries, barriers and levers. Aas and Vavik (2015) have suggested that with group coaching, school leaders learn from each and appreciate how their role is performed differently. This, the researchers argue (Aas and Vavik, 2015), leads to a form of cultural competence (Passmore, 2009) that allows leaders to respond to ideas of their peers and, at the same time, question their own personal or work-related assumptions constructively. Group coaching also appeared to support networking between participants. The coaching sessions allowed school leaders to socialise, whilst employing their organisation as a point of reference. This is in line with other studies which highlight the importance of socialisation as a developmental strategy (Nicolaidou and Petridou, 2011a). Kutzhanova *et al.* (2009) further reiterated that "the opportunity [given to school leaders] to meet with peers, therefore, provides [them] with productive learning experiences, helps them to maintain positive self-esteem, and provides a forum for sharing ideas and receiving unbiased and trustworthy feedback" (p. 9). Additionally, group coaching appeared to contribute to context-specific organisational socialisation, since in this study almost all participants were new to the post (Merton, 1963). The discussions originated from the leaders' individualised feedback reports; examples and scenarios brought in were also school – and leader – specific, while each case was contextualised through illustrative examples from everyday practice. In this regard, group coaching gave rise to organisational socialisation, through which participants enhanced their knowledge and learning about their role and its possible enactment. According to Brown and Grant (2010), when coaching adopts a group format, even the most reluctant individuals can join discussions, while participants from a variety of settings can "benefit from broader perspectives, support and accountability" (p. 35).

Therefore, this study highlighted the potential for coaching as a professional development strategy in Cyprus for school leaders to reflect, design, implement, monitor and evaluate personalised professional plans, based on feedback. Yet, issues related to the implementation of such a strategy need to be well thought out, in light of the findings, as well as the respective literature. When employing group coaching as a developmental activity for school leaders, the aspects indicated earlier, such as the synthesis of the group, the nature of participation and the role of the coach certainly need further consideration. This has wider implications for those who offer professional development programmes for school leaders in the international arena as well.

A major challenge in the implementation of coaching is the defensiveness participants may exhibit. In this study, the voluntary nature of participation helped them to overcome defensiveness and negativity towards the feedback and the inventory. Brown and Grant (2010, p. 6) noted that group coaching cannot be "effective and appropriate, [if] individuals [are not] willing participants". Goff *et al.* (2014) further indicated that, when school leaders participate voluntarily in professional development and coaching, they are more likely to change their behaviour in school.

Another area to be addressed concerns the establishment of trust among participants. Headteachers in this study seemed to appreciate the climate of openness. They could speak freely of what troubled them and they were encouraged to address change. The establishment of trust was also facilitated by the coach who – almost prescriptively – attended to the coaching protocol; raising conflicts was avoided and equal treatment of group members was ensured, allowing participants to feel at ease

before sharing. As Kowalski and Casper (2007) also pointed out, a trusting relationship is essential for efficient coaching; without it, coachees may find it difficult to share their fears or deepest thoughts. Therefore, a non-judgemental coaching approach needs to be nurtured.

Finally, the role of the coach and his/her professional identity could be explored further. In this case, participants only joined the coaching because their coach/ inspectors had asked them to. Since they were invited by someone in an evaluative and consulting professional relationship to them, this could potentially obstruct them from engaging in any discourse of personal nature (Kets de Vries, 2005). As explained already, school inspectors acted as coaches for convenience purposes. However, such an approach could raise issues of social desirability, openness of participants during coaching sessions, access of coaches to participants' feedback reports and the balance between coaches' supervisory and support role as areas for concern. Coaching, as Kowalski and Casper (2007) argued, can be ineffective once participants are found in an evaluative relationship either between them or with their coach. Yet, interestingly, data in this study strongly indicated that the degree of openness was not extensively impacted by the presence of the inspectors. The coaches did not have access to the feedback reports, and acted only as facilitators, following the coaching guidelines to the letter (Nicolaidou and Aas, 2013). Therefore, the involvement of inspectors in coaching sessions for school leaders could be further looked into. Another area for further exploration relates to the level of coaches' involvement in supporting school leaders' planning and implementing of actions, in response to the coaching sessions.

Looking ahead

The present study indicated that feedback and coaching can be valuable tools in leadership development. The study also emphasised that peer support networks, based on reliable feedback systems, can promote reflection, enhance learning and impact practice. Participants seemed to highly value the contribution of both feedback systems and group coaching. Reflection-in-action can help participants appreciate the situation they face, explore possibilities for development and take action through coherent peer support and assisted learning.

Successful elements of this study relate to the establishment of trust between participants, the structured behaviour of the coach, the non-judgemental nature of peer support, the group dynamics and the employment of feedback as a starting point to explore and delve deeper into the reality of leaders' roles. These aspects enhance productive synergies and useful encounter between participants, which can eventually evoke intrinsic motives. As such programmes aim to support school leaders in building and establishing a leadership identity, coupling feedback and coaching can bridge individual and professional needs, theory and practice. Hence, professional development providers need to consider how to best use feedback and coaching as developmental strategies for school leaders.

As a result of this study implications for further research in this field also arise. Research could be conducted in relation to the antecedent factors that school leaders bring in when they join coaching sessions. Further investigation is also needed in relation to the learning effects of coaching, the impact of any learning on leaders' behaviour as well as school leadership practices. Some studies indicate a not-so-significant effect on the coupling of feedback and coaching (Goff et al., 2014), and others a stronger effect (Thach, 2002; Hobson, 2003; Smither et al., 2003; Goff et al., 2014).

Therefore, since building leadership capacity is not an individualised act, additional studies – not only in the Cypriot context but also elsewhere – could shed more light into the extent and the quality of impact that feedback-based coaching might have on participants' personal and professional lives.

Note

1. The project has been a LLP-Multilateral KA 1 EU Project, coordinated by the University of Teacher Education, Zuq, Switzerland. The other partners were The University of Manchester (School of Education), Masaryk University (Brno, Czech Republic), University of Oslo (Department of Teacher Education and School Development – ILS), University of Seville (IDEA), The Danish School of Education (University of Aarhus). Vanderbilt University (USA) and Griffith University (Australia) participated as a third country partner. Sweden (University of UMEA – Department of Political Sciences/Centre for Principal Development) and Australia (Griffith University – Queensland) have joined the project as associated partners and were self-financed.

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