

Enhancing the practice of educational leaders through coaching conversations

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Educational leaders draw on a variety of conversational strategies to foster individual and collective commitment to change within their institutions. For change to occur, deep reflection and intentional practice are critical. The coaching conversation is a potentially powerful strategy in developing and embedding this practice. This research poses the question, ‘To what extent does knowledge of coaching conversations enhance the practice of educational leaders?’ This interpretive study involved fifteen participants enrolled in a post-graduate coaching and mentoring course within a Masters of Educational Leadership degree at the University of Waikato, New Zealand. Participants held a range of formal leadership positions within the early childhood, primary, secondary and tertiary education sectors. The study was grounded on dialogue during, and questionnaire data at the end of the course. The findings indicated varying levels of understanding about the coaching conversation. While these leaders expected to engage in coaching conversations, many felt inadequately prepared to facilitate these. It was therefore important that theoretical knowledge be complemented by scaffolded opportunities in which to practice the coaching conversation. Participants indicated that this learning experience substantially contributed to the development of their coaching practice. This research confirms that creating a space in a higher education setting for educational leaders to intentionally facilitate the coaching conversation is a vital component in leadership preparation and learning. Through ongoing opportunities for practice, coaching conversation skills are developed and refined to the point that they become familiar and natural and can be transported to other spaces such as the work place. Educational leaders who are skilled in the art of coaching conversations will be better placed to develop the self-awareness, agency and broad based commitment needed for their educational institutions to thrive in times of rapid change, uncertainty and complexity.