

Academic Paper

An exploration into the links between coaching practices, coaching cultures, and the emergence of ecological agency in schools

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Abstract

This study explores the relationship between coaching practices, coaching cultures, and ecological agency in schools. Using a phenomenological approach, it examines the experiences of nineteen teachers to understand how coaching influences teacher agency. Thematic Analysis identified five key themes, highlighting coaching's role in fostering a supportive culture. Findings suggest coaching enhances teacher agency but may not generalise broadly. This research contributes to educational coaching literature by addressing its impact on teacher development and school improvement. It offers practical insights for educators and policymakers aiming to create dynamic learning environments.

Keywords

coaching in education, ecological agency, teacher development, phenomenological research, coaching culture

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Introduction

Ecological agency, as explored by Biesta et al. (2015) and Lofthouse (2019), examines how individual capacities, relationships, and the school environment shape teacher agency. Coaching, meanwhile, is a reflective practice that fosters learning and development through questioning, active listening, and challenge within a supportive climate (van Nieuwerburgh, 2012; Adams, 2016). Together, these concepts provide a framework for understanding how teachers develop the confidence and skills to navigate professional complexities. This study argues that an ecological agency perspective offers valuable insights into how coaching enables teachers to respond to evolving student and school needs. By fostering self-

awareness, critical reflection, and relational understanding, coaching cultivates the adaptability required in today's dynamic education landscape.

Research Questions:

1. How do coaching practices support the development of ecological agency in teachers?
2. What role do coaching cultures play in shaping teacher agency?
3. What school conditions facilitate or hinder the link between coaching and ecological agency?

This research explores how coaching empowers teachers and enhances school functioning, positioning it as a key tool for professional growth and systemic change. The first author (Miller) draws on her experiences of coaching to examine its impact on teacher agency and leadership. Miller's interest in coaching and agency has evolved over 20 years, shaped by her experiences as a teacher and leader. Early in her career, she worked in an agency-enabling environment, tasked with expanding autism provision in a new school. Given autonomy and resources, she explored best practices, attended professional learning, and built a supportive environment for students—highlighting the importance of institutional support, access to knowledge, and the freedom to innovate (Biesta et al., 2015). These early experiences reinforced her understanding of how professional agency is shaped by the structures and cultures within schools. As her career progressed, she turned to coaching to enhance her leadership practice, aiming to better understand herself and create a positive impact on pupils, staff, and parents. Engaging with coaching models reshaped her communication, improved work-life balance, and strengthened her ability to navigate the complexities of headship. These insights inform the research presented in this paper, contributing to the emerging field of coaching and ecological agency in education.

While coaching is widely recognised as a tool for professional development, integrating ecological agency offers deeper insight into how teachers navigate their profession. Recent studies (Andrews & Munro, 2020) suggest coaching should empower teachers to exercise agency in response to student and school needs. The growing research in this area (Lofthouse, 2019; van Nieuwerburgh, 2017) highlights how teachers' personal characteristics influence their ability to enact professional agency and drive educational change.

Literature Review

The Evolution of Coaching

Coaching has evolved from diverse theoretical and practical traditions, particularly in personal and professional development. It gained prominence in the 1970s with Tim Gallwey's (1974) work on performance coaching, which emphasised the inner game—a focus on self-awareness and mental strategies to enhance success. By the early 2000s, coaching became more structured, with organisations like the International Coaching Federation (ICF) and European Mentoring and Coaching Council (EMCC) establishing global standards (Brock, 2014). Despite the lack of a universally accepted definition, coaching is broadly recognised as a reflective, goal-oriented process that fosters self-awareness, accountability, and professional growth (Whitmore, 2017; van Nieuwerburgh, 2012). A key

critique of coaching is its conceptual ambiguity (van Nieuwerburgh, 2017). While its effectiveness is widely acknowledged, the absence of a standardised legal framework raises questions about consistency in practice. Nevertheless, coaching remains a powerful tool for professional development, supporting individuals in self-actualisation—a concept aligned with Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs (1943).

Coaching, Mentoring, and Supervision: Distinction and Overlaps

Though coaching, mentoring, and supervision share a commitment to professional development, they differ in structure and intent.

- Coaching is non-directive, focused on self-discovery and goal setting through questioning, reflection, and challenge (Whitmore, 2017; van Nieuwerburgh, 2012).
- Mentoring is typically directive, where an experienced mentor provides guidance, expertise, and knowledge transfer to a less experienced mentee (Clutterbuck, 2004). It is commonly used in early career teacher development (Lofthouse & Hall, 2014).
- Supervision in coaching serves two purposes: ensuring professional accountability and supporting ongoing development. It involves reflective dialogue to uphold ethical standards and refine practice (Hawkins & Smith, 2013). In education, supervision also entails evaluative oversight (Zeus & Skiffington, 2002).

While these approaches differ, they are interconnected. Coaching can incorporate mentoring elements when expertise is required, and supervision can integrate coaching techniques to enhance reflective practice. A blended model that draws on all three can enhance teacher agency, professional learning, and school improvement.

Ecological Agency: A Framework for Teacher Agency

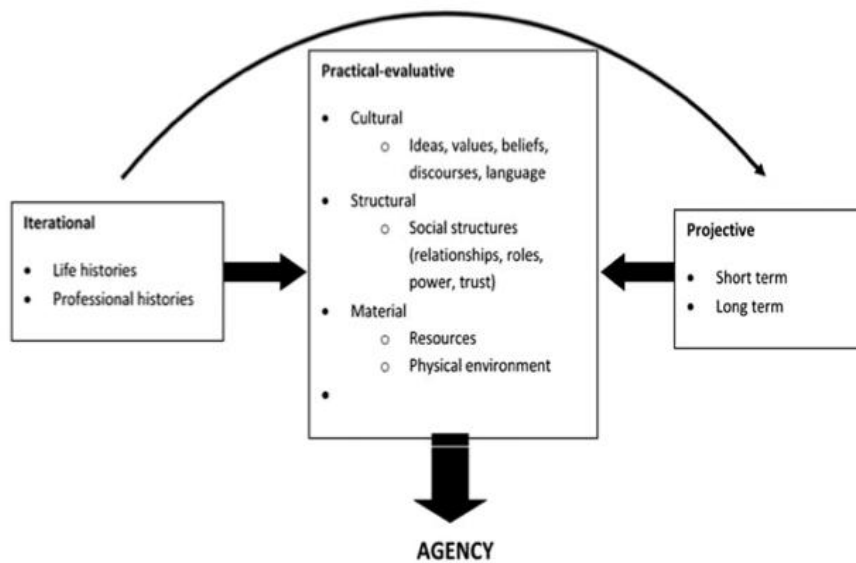
Despite the rise of coaching in education, limited research explores how policy contexts shape teacher agency (Biesta et al., 2015; Toom et al., 2015; Vongalis-Macrow, 2007).

Traditionally, agency has been seen as a fixed individual trait, but Biesta et al.

(2015) challenge this by proposing ecological agency, which is achieved rather than possessed. Drawing on Emirbayer and Mische (1998), they identify three interdependent dimensions of agency:

1. Iterational – Past experiences shape an individual’s ability to act. Teachers with diverse professional experiences may exercise agency more effectively.
2. Projective – A forward-looking element, enabling teachers to set goals and imagine multiple pathways for action.
3. Practical-Evaluative – Agency is enacted in the present, shaped by available resources, constraints, and professional judgments.

Figure 1: A model for understanding the achievement of agency



Understanding agency as an ecological construct shifts the focus from individual capacity to the interplay between personal, relational, and structural factors, making it a useful lens for examining how coaching supports teachers in navigating educational challenges.

Connecting Coaching and Ecological Agency

Coaching fosters learning environments that enable personal and professional growth. Whitmore (2017, p.6) states, “Coaching is not teaching at all; it is about creating the conditions for learning and growing.” This aligns closely with ecological agency, as both emphasise contextual conditions that enable action. This study explores how coaching practices, and coaching cultures contribute to teacher agency within schools. By fostering self-awareness, critical reflection, and adaptability, coaching helps teachers develop the confidence and resilience needed to navigate complex educational environments (Priestley et al., 2015; Lofthouse, 2018). In education, coaching supports self-directed growth through questioning, active listening, and supportive challenge (van Nieuwerburgh, 2012; Adams, 2016). Core coaching principles—differentiation, choice, performance, and change—align with the iterational, projective, and practical-evaluative dimensions of ecological agency (van Nieuwerburgh, 2017).

Synthesis of Coaching and Agency in Education

The intersection of coaching and agency in education is an emerging field with significant potential for improving teacher effectiveness, professional development, and school culture. Studies suggest that coaching enhances:

- Staff performance & professional learning (Adams, 2016; Barr & van Nieuwerburgh, 2015).
- Well-being & resilience (Birkeland et al., 2015).
- Reflective practice & instructional effectiveness (Lofthouse, 2019).

However, implementing a coaching culture in schools remains challenging, partly due to limited national standards and qualifications for educational coaches (Anthony &

Nieuwerburgh, 2018). The ecological agency framework (Biesta et al., 2015) provides a valuable lens for understanding how coaching influences teacher agency. By focusing on interactions between individual capacities and environmental factors, coaching helps educators develop the skills, mindset, and adaptability required to navigate complex school environments effectively (Whitmore, 2017; van Nieuwerburgh, 2012).

Summary

The synergy between coaching and ecological agency presents a promising pathway for teacher empowerment and school improvement. Coaching enhances teacher agency by fostering self-awareness, reflective practice, and strategic goal setting. However, more research is needed to explore its long-term impact on educational policy and systemic change. Further investigation into coaching's role in shaping agency within different educational contexts will be essential for optimising professional development practices and creating more responsive school environments.

Methodology

This study explores the intersection of coaching and ecological agency in education, examining how coaching practices contribute to teacher empowerment and school functioning. An experiential qualitative research methodology was adopted (Smith et al., 2009), employing Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to understand teacher experiences and agency development through coaching.

Research Approach

A phenomenological approach was chosen to capture teachers' lived experiences, providing deep insights into how coaching influences their sense of agency and professional growth. IPA is particularly suited for exploring subjective meaning-making, making it an ideal framework for examining coaching's impact on ecological agency (Smith et al., 2009). By focusing on individual experiences within broader school contexts, this approach allows for a nuanced understanding of coaching's role in fostering teacher empowerment. Prior to data collection, ethics approval was obtained from the University of Stirling, ensuring that the study adhered to ethical research guidelines. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, with assurances of confidentiality and voluntary participation in line with the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) Framework for Research Ethics.

Sampling Strategy

A purposive sampling strategy (Palinkas et al., 2015) was employed to ensure diverse representation of teachers across different educational contexts, school types, and leadership roles. While IPA traditionally favours homogenous samples, this study intentionally included a broader range of participants to explore variations in coaching experiences across national systems. Participants were drawn from Scotland, England, and Australia, enabling comparisons across different educational frameworks and coaching cultures. The study also included teachers from local authority primary and secondary schools, a school for complex learning needs, and independent schools, ensuring insights into how coaching manifests in varied institutional settings. Participants ranged from class

teachers to senior leaders and former teachers turned professional coaches, allowing for an exploration of how coaching influences agency at different hierarchical levels. This diverse sample provides a comprehensive understanding of how ecological agency develops within and across schools.

Data Collection and Adaptation Due to COVID-19

Originally, face-to-face interviews were planned, but due to the COVID-19 pandemic, data collection was adapted to virtual methods. Virtual interviews, increasingly recognised as a valid qualitative research method (Braun & Clarke, 2013, 2021), provided several advantages:

- Allowed for geographically diverse participation, increasing sample representativeness.
- Offered flexibility for participants, enhancing engagement.
- Maintained the depth and structure of semi-structured interviews while ensuring participant safety.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted via Zoom in May and June 2020, facilitating in-depth conversations while ensuring alignment with research objectives.

Figure 2: Anonymised participant overview

Participant	Gender	Country	Role	School type
P1	Male	Scotland	PE Teacher	Independent
P2	Male	Scotland	Music Teacher	Independent
P3	Female	Scotland	Class Teacher	Independent
P4	Male	Scotland	Middle Leader	Independent
P5	Male	England	Coach	Local Authority
P6	Female	Scotland	Class Teacher	Independent
P7	Female	England	Head Teacher	Local Authority
P8	Male	Scotland	Deputy Head Teacher	Independent
P9	Female	England	Deputy Head Teacher	Local Authority
P10	Male	England	Classroom Teacher	Local Authority
P11	Female	England	Assistant Head Teacher	Local Authority

P12	Female	England	Deputy Head Teacher	Local Authority
P13	Female	Scotland	Head Teacher	Independent
P14	Male	Australia	Coach	Local Authority
P15	Female	England	Middle Leader	Local Authority
P16	Male	Scotland	Middle Leader	Independent
P17	Male	England	Coach	Local Authority
P18	Female	Australia	Teacher and Coach	Local Authority
P19	Female	England	Deputy Head Teacher	Local Authority

Justification for Research Design

The phenomenological approach, combined with semi-structured interviews, provides a robust framework for understanding how coaching fosters ecological agency and teacher empowerment. Experiential thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2013, 2021) ensures a participant-centred, flexible approach, allowing for a comprehensive exploration of how teachers interpret coaching's impact on their professional agency. This methodological choice aligns with the research aim while accommodating the diverse experiences of teachers across different school systems. By capturing multiple perspectives, this study enhances understanding of coaching's potential to cultivate ecological agency in the teaching profession.

Analysis

This study employed a rigorous thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2013, 2021) to examine the rich qualitative data collected from teachers and coaches, exploring their lived experiences with coaching and its impact on ecological agency. The analysis was designed to identify, interpret, and report meaningful patterns in the data, ensuring a deep understanding of how coaching supports teacher empowerment and professional agency. A reflexive thematic analysis approach was adopted, acknowledging the researcher's role in shaping the interpretation of data (Braun & Clarke, 2019). This approach allowed for flexibility in identifying emergent themes, while ensuring systematic coding and pattern recognition. The six-phase process of thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2013, 2021) was followed:

1. Familiarisation with the Data

The first stage of analysis began with the transcription of participant interviews. Each interview was transcribed verbatim to capture all words and utterances accurately. This process involved listening repeatedly to small segments of the recordings to ensure completeness. The nineteen transcripts were reviewed multiple times,

alongside the audio recordings, to confirm orthographic accuracy. To maintain participant confidentiality, all transcripts were anonymised by assigning pseudonyms and removing any identifying information, including specific workplace details.

2. Generating Initial Codes

In the second stage, the data was manually coded to preserve a close connection to the original content. Each transcript was coded independently at least six times, with codes being reviewed and adjusted as necessary. This manual approach allowed for a nuanced understanding of the data, maintaining the integrity of participants' experiences. Codes were organised according to the questions posed during interviews.

3. Searching for Themes

Following coding, initial themes were generated by grouping related codes together. This process involved creating a thematic map to visualise how the coded data related to the research questions. The provisional themes identified in this map provided a preliminary structure for understanding the data and were instrumental in highlighting relevant patterns and insights related to coaching practices and ecological agency.

4. Reviewing Themes

The provisional themes were then developed and reviewed to ensure their relevance and coherence. This involved refining the themes to better capture the essence of the data and to align with the research aims. Each theme was assessed for its consistency with the dataset and its capacity to address the research questions.

5. Defining and Naming Themes

In this stage, the themes were further refined, defined, and named. This process involved clarifying the scope and focus of each theme, ensuring that they accurately represented the data and addressed key aspects of the research aim. Themes were named in a way that reflected their core content and significance.

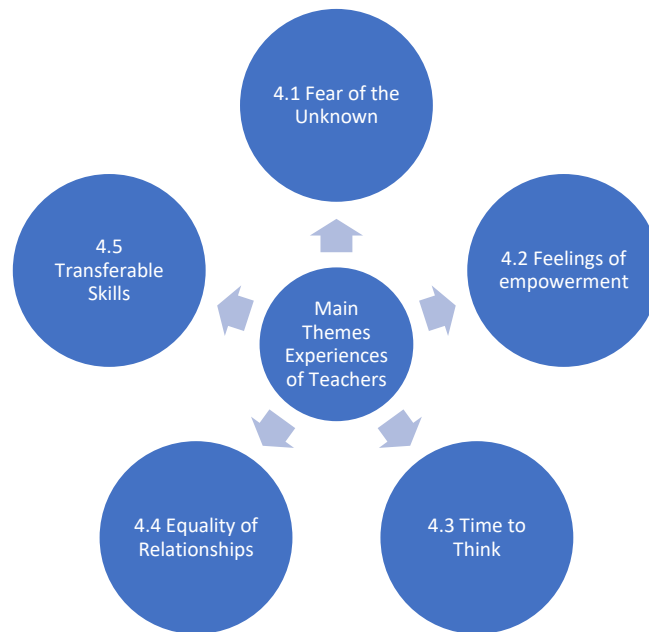
6. Producing the Report

The final stage involved writing up the findings, integrating the themes into a coherent narrative that addresses the research questions. The analysis was presented in a way that highlighted the connections between coaching practices, ecological agency, and teacher empowerment.

Researcher reflexivity was maintained throughout the process, recognising potential biases and ensuring a transparent analytical approach. The systematic thematic analysis provided nuanced insights into how coaching contributes to teacher agency, revealing the interplay between individual experiences, school culture, and systematic factors in fostering ecological agency.

The thematic map, illustrated in Figure 3, displays the main themes derived from the analysis of the teachers' experiences. It visually represents the key areas of insight gained from the study and their relevance to the research aim. This approach to thematic analysis provided a structured and detailed exploration of the data, enabling a thorough understanding of how coaching practices intersect with ecological agency in the teaching profession.

Figure 3: Main themes and experiences of teachers who participated in the study



Findings

This section presents the findings of the study on coaching practices and their impact on teacher ecological agency. The five emergent themes—Fear of the Unknown, Empowerment, Time to Think, Equality of Relationships, and Transferable Skills—are explored in depth, with participant experiences illustrating each theme and references to existing literature providing context and validation.

Theme 1: Fear of the Unknown

Many participants expressed initial apprehension and uncertainty about coaching, often citing a lack of clarity about its purpose and benefits. This uncertainty was exacerbated when coaching was introduced without clear explanation or context.

Uncertainty About Coaching

Several participants admitted they were unsure what coaching entailed when it was first introduced in their schools. Participant P3 noted,

"...to be honest I initially didn't know what coaching was about. It was organised by the head, and she said it's good for your career...but I wasn't sure what to expect."

Similarly, Participant P12 described feeling sceptical: *"It felt a bit vague at first. I wasn't sure if it was going to be like mentoring or performance management."*

These reflections align with research highlighting that uncertainty and scepticism are common reactions to new professional development initiatives (Doherty & Horne, 2002).

Resistance to Change and the Implementation Dip

Some participants acknowledged that their initial resistance was rooted in a fear of change

and a perceived lack of control. Participant P7 explained, *"I didn't like the idea at first because I thought it was just another thing being added to my workload. It took time to understand that coaching wasn't about checking up on us."*

This response reflects Fullan's (2001) concept of the "implementation dip", which describes the temporary decrease in confidence or performance when individuals adopt new practices. Such resistance is often compounded when changes are not introduced transparently (Griffin & Tyrrell, 2015).

The Need for Clear Communication

Several participants emphasised that clear communication and reassurance from leadership were crucial in overcoming their initial apprehension. Participant P16 highlighted, *"It helped when the school actually explained what coaching was about and let us see examples. Once I understood it wasn't an evaluation tool, I became more open to it."*

This aligns with Biesta et al. (2015), who emphasise that addressing educators' concerns through transparent dialogue can significantly reduce resistance. Fullan (2001) similarly stresses that well-communicated professional development initiatives are more likely to be positively received and successfully implemented.

Building Trust and Overcoming Apprehension

Some participants reflected on how their perception of coaching evolved once they engaged in the process. Participant P9 shared, *"at first, I thought coaching was going to be uncomfortable, but after a few sessions, I realised it was about supporting me, not judging me."*

This shift in perspective underscores the importance of sustained support beyond initial implementation. Effective coaching programs should not only introduce coaching clearly but also provide continuous reassurance and space for reflection (Fullan, 2001).

Summary of Theme 1

The fear of the unknown emerged as a key barrier to initial engagement with coaching, driven by uncertainty, misconceptions, and resistance to change. However, participants' reflections demonstrate that clear communication, visible examples, and ongoing reassurance played a crucial role in shifting perceptions and fostering engagement. These findings reinforce the need for leadership teams to proactively address concerns, ensuring that coaching is understood as a developmental, rather than evaluative, tool. By doing so, schools can create an environment where teachers feel supported, rather than apprehensive, about coaching initiatives.

Theme 2: Empowerment

The theme of Empowerment emerged prominently from the data, with participants frequently highlighting how coaching fostered self-discovery, confidence, and professional agency. Coaching was often described as a transformative process, enabling teachers to reconnect with their professional aspirations and take ownership of their development.

Initial Reactions - The Transformative Impact of Coaching

Several participants described an immediate and profound sense of empowerment after engaging in coaching. Participant P5 captured this transformation, stating, *"Within forty-five minutes of that first session, I was absolutely hooked. I suddenly had clarity about what I wanted and why I was feeling stuck."*

Similarly, Participant P14 reflected on how coaching helped reframe professional challenges, stating, *"I came into the session feeling overwhelmed, but by the end, I felt like I had choices. Coaching gave me a sense of control over my own direction."*

These reflections align with Biesta et al.'s (2015) ecological model of agency, which emphasises that agency is not just the ability to act, but the confidence and self-awareness that enable teachers to act effectively. Coaching fosters this agency by encouraging reflection, self-efficacy, and proactive goal setting.

Elements of Empowerment Through Coaching

Participants identified four key aspects of how coaching contributed to their sense of empowerment:

Reconnection with Professional Goals

Coaching encouraged teachers to revisit their motivations and aspirations. Participant P9 described, *"I had lost sight of why I went into teaching. Coaching helped me reconnect with what mattered most to me."*

This aligns with Lasky (2005), who argues that teachers thrive when their actions align with their professional values and goals.

Fostering Ownership and Confidence

Several participants reported that coaching shifted their mindset from feeling reactive to feeling in control. Participant P16 stated, *"Instead of waiting for someone else to tell me what to do, I started setting my own goals and making things happen."*

This echoes Bakkenes et al. (2010), who emphasize that teachers with greater self-efficacy **are** more proactive and engaged in their practice.

Encouragement of Self-Reflection and Goal setting

Coaching provided a structured space for self-reflection, enabling teachers to continuously assess and refine their objectives. Participant P7 explained, *"I used to feel stuck in certain patterns, but coaching made me step back and ask myself what I really wanted to change."*

Biesta et al. (2015) argue that intentional reflection is a key driver of teacher agency, helping educators navigate challenges with greater clarity and purpose.

Personal Growth and Professional Development

Participants described coaching as an ongoing process of growth, helping them develop new skills and a stronger sense of professional identity. Participant P18 shared, *"I feel more confident in making decisions—not just in my teaching but in leadership roles as well."*

Van der Heijden et al. (2015) highlight that empowered teachers are more likely to embrace new practices and drive innovation, reinforcing the broader impact of coaching on school improvement.

The Role of Coaching in Strengthening Teacher Agency

These findings support the notion that teacher agency is strengthened by empowerment. Teachers who feel in control of their development are more likely to engage proactively with educational change (Bakkenes et al., 2010). Participant P12 reflected,

"Coaching gave me permission to take risks and try new things in my teaching. Before, I was waiting for approval; now, I trust my own judgment more."

This observation aligns with research showing that empowered teachers are key change agents within schools, actively shaping teaching practices and school culture (Van der Heijden et al., 2015).

Summary of Theme 2

The empowerment theme highlights how coaching enhances teacher agency by fostering self-reflection, confidence, and ownership over professional development. The participants' experiences demonstrate that when coaching supports clarity, goal-setting, and personal growth, teachers feel more engaged, capable, and willing to drive change. For coaching programmes to be most effective, they must be designed to encourage reflection, build confidence, and create space for professional autonomy. By doing so, coaching can help educators develop a stronger sense of agency, leading to more effective teaching and a more supportive school environment.

Theme 3: Time to Think

The theme of Time to Think emerged prominently from the data, with participants consistently valuing the reflective opportunities provided by coaching. Many described coaching as a rare and invaluable chance for deep self-reflection, offering a structured pause from the demands of teaching.

Coaching as a Space for Reflection

Participants highlighted how coaching provided dedicated time for self-reflection, which was often missing from their daily routines. Participant P2 noted, *"a chance to self-reflect on my practice... I think that has stuck out for me the most."*

Similarly, Participant P11 shared, *"It was the first time in a long time I had space to actually think about my teaching rather than just react to what was happening day to day."*

This feedback highlights the critical role of structured reflection in coaching. Biesta et al. (2015) argue that teacher agency requires reflective time to consider past experiences, future possibilities, and present constraints. Coaching provides this structured environment, enabling teachers to assess their practice, explore new approaches, and plan intentional actions (Anthony & van Nieuwerburgh, 2018).

Key Benefits of Reflective Time in Coaching

Participants identified several ways in which the time to think offered by coaching contributed to their professional growth and agency:

1. Space for Deep Reflection

Teachers frequently described coaching as an opportunity to step back from their busy routines and engage in deeper thinking about their practice. Participant P8 explained, *"Normally, I rush from one thing to the next, but coaching made me stop and think about what*

was actually working in my classroom and what wasn't."

Unlike the fragmented, reactive nature of daily teaching, coaching provided a systematic and intentional approach to reflection. Kline (1999) emphasises that structured reflection helps teachers critically evaluate their methods, leading to more informed and deliberate improvements in practice.

2. Managing Stress and Complexity

Several participants emphasized that coaching helped them process the complexities and pressures of teaching. Participant P16 described,

"I felt like I was carrying so much in my head. Coaching gave me a space to make sense of everything, rather than just feeling overwhelmed."

This aligns with Griffin & Tyrrell (2015), who argue that structured reflection supports emotional regulation and helps teachers navigate professional challenges with greater clarity and resilience. By providing a space for sense-making, coaching can reduce stress and improve teacher well-being.

3. Enhancing Professional Growth and Goal Setting

Reflective time was also linked to ongoing professional growth. Many participants highlighted how coaching encouraged goal setting and forward-thinking development. Participant P14 noted, *"having the space to think helped me focus on my next steps rather than just firefighting problems."*

This supports findings by Anthony & van Nieuwerburgh (2018), who argue that reflective coaching enhances teacher motivation and engagement by enabling them to align their daily practice with long-term goals.

4. Facilitating Adaptation and Innovation

Participants also discussed how time for reflection encouraged adaptability and innovation. Participant P7 shared,

"I realised I had been doing things the same way for years. Coaching made me rethink my approach and try new strategies in the classroom."

Kline (1999) suggests that teachers who engage in regular reflection are better equipped to adapt to their students' evolving needs. By experimenting with new teaching strategies, coaching participants became more responsive and flexible in their practice.

5. Fostering a Reflective Culture in Schools

Beyond individual benefits, some participants noted that coaching contributed to a wider culture of reflection within their schools. Participant P9 observed,

"Once coaching became part of our school, people started having deeper conversations about teaching. It changed how we talked about challenges."

This supports Griffin & Tyrrell's (2015) argument that when reflection becomes embedded in professional culture, it fosters collaboration, knowledge sharing, and continuous improvement across school teams.

Summary of Theme 3

The Time to Think theme highlights how coaching provides a structured space for reflection, allowing teachers to manage stress, refine their practice, and pursue professional growth.

Participants' experiences demonstrate that intentional reflection time enhances teacher agency, enabling them to adapt, innovate, and align their actions with their values and goals. To maximise the impact of coaching, schools should prioritise reflective time, ensuring that teachers have dedicated opportunities to step back, process their experiences, and develop their practice in a thoughtful and meaningful way.

Theme 4: Equality of Relationships

The theme of Equality of Relationships emerged as a key finding in this study, illustrating how coaching can transform hierarchical school interactions into more collaborative, supportive, and egalitarian dialogues. Participants described coaching as a shift away from top-down authority structures, instead fostering open communication and mutual respect.

Coaching as a Shift Toward Collaboration

Many participants emphasised how coaching redefined professional relationships, creating a space for dialogue rather than directive instruction. Participant P3 reflected,

"A coaching conversation is led by the individual and enables them the opportunity to talk about 'me as the teacher' rather than just following instructions."

This shift aligns with Biesta et al.'s (2015) practical-evaluative dimension of ecological agency, which highlights that agency is shaped by relational dynamics. Coaching supports agency by moving from hierarchical to collaborative interactions, enabling teachers to feel heard, valued, and empowered in their professional roles.

Key Aspects of Equality in Coaching Relationships

Participants identified six ways in which coaching contributed to more equal relationships within schools:

1. Shift from Hierarchical to Collaborative Relationships

Many participants noted that coaching helped move away from the traditional "top-down" leadership approach. Participant P7 described how *"coaching doesn't feel like someone evaluating me. It's a conversation where I can explore ideas without worrying about being judged."*

This reflection supports Fullan's (2001) argument that effective school change requires shifting away from rigid hierarchies toward more participatory models. Coaching enables teachers to take an active role in their development, promoting shared responsibility for professional growth.

2. Strengthening Interpersonal Dynamics

Several participants described coaching as improving communication and trust within their schools. Participant P14 noted, *"it changed how I interact with colleagues. Instead of just receiving feedback, I feel like we're having real conversations."* Similarly, Participant P11 highlighted how coaching improved team dynamics: *"I've noticed that people listen more carefully now—there's a culture of actually hearing each other, rather than just waiting for a turn to speak."*

These findings align with Lofthouse (2015, 2018), who argues that coaching cultivates open communication, leading to stronger interpersonal relationships and greater professional collaboration.

3. Empowerment through Voice

Participants expressed that coaching provided them with a platform to voice their concerns and ideas, something that was often absent in traditional school structures. Participant P9 stated that *"for the first time, I felt like what I was saying really mattered, not just as a teacher but as a professional with valuable insights."*

This reflects Stillman and Anderson's (2015) findings that coaching empowers teachers by giving them an active role in shaping their professional growth, rather than being passive recipients of top-down directives.

4. Fostering Mutual Respect

Coaching helped redefine power dynamics, reinforcing that all voices—regardless of position—are valued. Participant P16 shared how *"even when I was being coached by someone senior, I never felt like they were 'above' me. It was about working together, not about rank,"* thus resonating with Lofthouse (2015), who argues that egalitarian coaching interactions promote shared professional learning, fostering a culture where mutual respect enhances collaboration and trust.

5. Support for Organisational Change

Participants also identified coaching as a key driver of positive school-wide change, making professional interactions more open and constructive. Participant P12 observed, *'it's shifted how we work as a staff. People are more willing to engage in professional discussions because they know it's not just about criticism—it's about growth.'*

Fullan's (2001) work, which emphasises that successful organisational change requires a culture of support, trust, and collaboration. Coaching facilitates this shift by embedding these principles into everyday professional interactions.

6. Developing of a Positive School Culture

Beyond individual relationships, participants noted that coaching contributed to a more inclusive and collaborative school culture. Participant P18 reflected, *"the more people engaged in coaching, the more it started to influence how we talked to each other—even outside coaching sessions,"* mirroring Stillman and Anderson's (2015) findings that suggest coaching not only improves individual relationships but also fosters a school-wide culture of continuous learning and support.

Summary of Theme 4

The theme of Equality of Relationships highlights how coaching transforms traditional school hierarchies into more collaborative and empowering spaces. By fostering mutual respect, open communication, and shared professional growth, coaching supports the development of a more inclusive and dynamic school culture. Participants' experiences demonstrate that when coaching prioritizes dialogue over evaluation, it creates a culture where teachers feel valued, empowered, and actively engaged in their professional development. This shift is crucial for organisational change, staff well-being, and the overall effectiveness of teaching and learning in schools.

Theme 5: Transferable Skills

The theme of Transferable Skills emerged prominently in the study, highlighting how coaching enhances both professional and personal development. Participants consistently reported that coaching improved their communication, questioning techniques, self-awareness, and ability to apply these skills across different contexts.

Coaching as a Tool for Skills Development

Many participants described how coaching equipped them with valuable skills that extended beyond their immediate teaching practice. Participant P5 reflected, *"I'm more aware of what I say, how it may come across, and how my own thoughts, my own principles, shape the way I interact."*

This supports research by Anthony and van Nieuwerburgh (2018), which suggests that coaching fosters self-awareness and effective communication, benefiting professional relationships and classroom interactions.

Key Transferable Skills Developed Through Coaching

Participants identified six specific skills that were strengthened through coaching and applied across multiple areas of their professional and personal lives:

1. Enhanced Communication Skills

A frequently reported benefit was improved communication, with participants noting that coaching helped them become more mindful of their language, tone, and non-verbal cues. Participant P14 shared: *"I've become much more intentional in how I speak to both students and colleagues. I listen more and choose my words more carefully."*

Similarly, Participant P9 observed, *"I used to rush conversations, but coaching has made me pause and think before responding."*

Again, this aligns with Lofthouse (2019), who found that coaching enhances both verbal and non-verbal communication, leading to more effective professional interactions.

2. Refined Questioning Techniques

Coaching also improved participants' questioning skills, helping them adopt more reflective and strategic questioning techniques. Participant P7 noted, *"Instead of giving students the answers, I now ask better questions that help them think critically."* Participant P12 similarly highlighted the shift in interactions with colleagues: *"I've started using open-ended questions in meetings, and it has completely changed the conversations we have as a team."*

This aligns with Joel (2018) and Anthony & van Nieuwerburgh (2018), who argue that coaching strengthens questioning skills, leading to deeper engagement and more effective dialogue in both teaching and leadership settings.

3. Increased Self-Awareness

Many participants emphasised that coaching enhanced their self-awareness, making them more conscious of their strengths, challenges, and professional identity. Participant P11 reflected, *"Coaching made me step back and actually recognise how my emotions and mindset affect my teaching."* Similarly, Participant P18 shared, *"I now notice patterns in my reactions and behaviours that I wouldn't have been aware of before."*

These findings align with Biesta et al. (2015), who argue that self-awareness is essential for

teacher agency, as it enables educators to make intentional, informed decisions about their practice.

4. Application of Skills Across Contexts

Participants frequently noted that the skills they developed through coaching extended beyond the classroom, influencing their professional development, teamwork, and even personal relationships. Participant P16 noted, *"I find myself using coaching techniques when talking to my own kids. It's made me a better listener at home as well."* Similarly, Participant P3 reflected on how coaching had reshaped professional interactions:

"In leadership meetings, I now listen differently. Instead of jumping to solutions, I ask more questions and help others come to their own conclusions."

This finding aligns with Bakkenes et al. (2010), who reported that coaching fosters the development of broadly applicable skills that enhance both workplace and personal interactions.

5. Strengthening Professional Relationships

Several participants emphasised that improved communication and self-awareness had a direct impact on their relationships with colleagues and students. For example, participant P8 shared, *"Because I communicate more effectively now, I feel more connected to my colleagues. There's a greater sense of trust."* Also, participant P5 also noted the change in student interactions: *"My relationships with students have improved because I'm listening more and reacting with more thought."*

These findings align with Lofthouse (2019) and Anthony and van Nieuwerburgh (2018), who argue that coaching enhances relational dynamics in schools, contributing to a more collaborative and engaged professional environment.

6. Contribution to a Supportive Educational Environment

Participants highlighted that coaching's impact extended to the wider school culture, fostering a more reflective and supportive professional environment. Participant P12 explained, *"coaching isn't just about individual skills—it's changed how we work as a team. There's more respect, more listening, and more willingness to collaborate."*

Similarly, Participant P18 noted, *"we've started applying coaching strategies in staff development sessions, and it's making a real difference in how we support each other."*

This is in line with Biesta et al. (2015), who emphasize that coaching plays a role in shaping a positive, agency-enabling school culture, ultimately improving teacher well-being and student outcomes.

Summary of Theme 5

The Transferable Skills theme highlights how coaching enhances key professional and personal competencies, including communication, questioning techniques, self-awareness, and relationship-building. Participants reported that these skills were not only beneficial in teaching but also applied in leadership, teamwork, and personal interactions. By developing broadly applicable skills, coaching strengthens professional relationships, contributes to school-wide collaboration, and fosters a more reflective and supportive educational environment. These findings underscore the long-term value of coaching

beyond immediate teaching practices, reinforcing its role in shaping resilient, adaptable, and engaged educators.

Discussion

The findings of this study highlight the multifaceted impact of coaching on teacher ecological agency. Coaching has been shown to address initial fears, foster empowerment, facilitate self-reflection, enhance relational dynamics, and develop transferable skills, all of which contribute to a more engaged and proactive teaching workforce. By aligning coaching practices with these dimensions, schools can better support teachers in achieving their professional goals, fostering collaboration, and creating a culture of continuous learning and improvement.

This study has several key implications for teachers, school leaders, coaches, and policymakers. First, it underscores the importance of clear, supportive coaching frameworks that are explicitly communicated and designed to address teachers' specific needs. Without structured and well-articulated coaching initiatives, educators may experience confusion or resistance, limiting the potential impact of coaching on their professional development. Schools should embed coaching into their professional learning structures rather than treating it as an isolated initiative.

Second, the findings emphasise the role of reflection and self-awareness in fostering teacher agency. Coaching provides educators with a structured opportunity to critically evaluate their practices, identify strengths and areas for growth, and align their teaching approaches with their values and goals. Reflective practices should be an ongoing feature of coaching, ensuring that teachers continue to engage in purposeful self-examination and professional learning.

Furthermore, this study highlights the importance of egalitarian relationships within coaching interactions. Coaching encourages a shift away from traditional hierarchical school structures, fostering a culture where all voices are valued and respected. This finding has significant implications for school leadership: coaching should not be positioned as a top-down evaluative tool, but rather as a collaborative and developmental process that empowers teachers rather than assessing them. Leadership teams should take active steps to integrate coaching cultures into their schools by modelling open, non-hierarchical conversations, engaging in coaching themselves, and fostering an environment where professional dialogue and reflection are the norm.

In addition to these school-based implications, the findings suggest broader policy considerations. Policymakers should consider integrating coaching into national professional development frameworks, ensuring that coaching is recognized as an essential element of teacher growth rather than an optional intervention. Standardising coaching practices through national guidelines, accreditation processes, or school improvement strategies would ensure greater consistency and sustainability of coaching programmes across educational systems.

From a research perspective, this study adds to the growing discourse on coaching and ecological agency, reinforcing the interdisciplinary nature of coaching as a professional development tool. Future research could explore the long-term impact of coaching on teacher agency, examining how coaching practices influence retention, leadership progression, and overall job satisfaction in different school settings. Additionally, further research could investigate how coaching contributes to system-wide change and whether embedding coaching into initial teacher training programmes could help early-career teachers build agency from the outset.

Ultimately, the findings of this study emphasise that coaching is not just a tool for improving individual teacher performance; it is a catalyst for transforming educational culture, fostering collaborative relationships, reflective practice, and professional growth at all levels.

Conclusion

This study contributes significantly to the understanding of coaching practices within educational settings, particularly through the lens of ecological agency. The findings illuminate how coaching serves as a transformative tool, affecting not only individual teachers but also broader school cultures and dynamics. By employing the ecological agency framework, this research highlights the complex interplay between coaching, teacher development, and school environments. The ecological agency framework provides a valuable perspective for examining how coaching influences teachers' ability to navigate change, develop self-awareness, and build stronger professional relationships. The findings demonstrate that coaching enhances various dimensions of agency, including:

- Personal empowerment – enabling teachers to develop confidence and take ownership of their professional growth.
- Reflective practice – encouraging self-examination and ongoing learning.
- Relational dynamics – fostering trust, collaboration, and open communication in schools.

By integrating these dimensions, coaching helps teachers move beyond reactive responses to change, equipping them with the skills and mindset to engage proactively with new challenges.

The fear of the unknown, as identified in this study, underscores the need for clear, transparent, and supportive coaching practices to mitigate initial resistance and build trust. Schools must ensure that coaching initiatives are framed positively, with clear objectives and long-term commitments to sustain engagement and impact. Coaching should not be seen as an isolated intervention but as a foundational element of professional development that is embedded into the culture of teaching and learning.

Furthermore, empowerment through coaching enables teachers to harness their aspirations and strengths, aligning with the ecological agency model's emphasis on individual and collective capacity (Biesta et al., 2015). The theme of time to think reinforces the importance

of dedicated reflective spaces, which support teachers in evaluating their practices, making informed decisions, and refining their professional identity. These findings align with Anthony & van Nieuwerburgh (2018), who argue that structured coaching conversations enhance teacher agency and well-being.

The study also highlights the role of coaching in fostering equality of relationships, shifting traditional hierarchical interactions into collaborative partnerships (Fullan, 2001). This change is essential for creating more inclusive school cultures, where teachers feel valued, respected, and empowered to contribute to decision-making processes. Coaching supports a culture of shared learning, where leadership and staff engage in constructive, reflective dialogue rather than directive management.

The transferability of coaching skills further emphasises the broad impact of coaching, demonstrating its value beyond individual teacher growth. Improved communication, questioning techniques, and self-awareness contribute to stronger professional relationships, enhanced school leadership, and better student outcomes. These findings reinforce Lofthouse (2019), who asserts that coaching has a lasting impact on school effectiveness by promoting reflective and collaborative teaching practices.

Future Directions and Final Reflections

This study provides a nuanced understanding of how coaching supports teacher agency, school culture, and professional development. However, future research should explore coaching across a wider range of educational settings. Key areas for further investigation include:

- Longitudinal studies on coaching's impact on teacher retention, leadership progression, and professional growth.
- Comparative studies examining how different coaching models shape school cultures across national and policy contexts.
- Teacher-led coaching initiatives, exploring how educators implement and sustain coaching programmes in their schools.

For practitioners, this study offers recommendations for embedding coaching effectively. Reflection, training, and leadership commitment are key to sustaining impact. This research highlights the intersection of coaching, school culture, and ecological agency. By showcasing coaching's transformative potential, it lays a foundation for future research and practice. As coaching evolves, this study reinforces its role in empowering teachers, strengthening collaboration, and enhancing student learning.

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