Article

Building a Coaching Culture in Irish Schools; Challenges and Opportunities: A Mixed-Methods Study

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Abstract: Coaching is a relatively new leadership style in Irish schools, but its potential is being supported by the Department of Education and Skills since 2015. This study considers the challenges and obstacles to building a coaching culture within Irish schools, recognising that as a leadership style, it is relatively unknown. It considers school cultures and the challenges as well as the opportunities leaders face in building a coaching culture. A mixed methods study consisting of a quantitative survey (n = 48) followed by semi-structured interviews (n = 12) was the chosen method, using statistical analysis (SPSS) and thematic analysis (Nvivo) to analyse the data. The results indicate that leadership coaching facilitates reflective practice for leaders and those they manage, leading to a distribution of practice that facilitates distributed leadership, therein building leadership capacity and enhancing teacher/leader well-being. However, time, workload and creating a culture of coaching in schools are still challenges, as leadership coaching is still a new and unknown leadership concept. The findings suggest that it is vital that the support services endorse its value, that time is allocated to supporting coaching and that staff need both CPD and further education on what coaching entails in order to build a coaching culture in Irish schools.

Keywords: coaching; culture; leadership

1. Introduction

Recent years have seen a major reform in educational leadership with a more business-focused accountability evident and performativity at the core of what school success entails [1–3]. With the rapid development of economies and the continuous updating of information, organisations are continuously reorganising, resulting in an increased quality of employee [4]. Within this new environment, a new type of leadership is required with coaching leadership being suggested as a suitable approach for 'improvement and development of employee capabilities' [4] (p. 92). Kegan and Lahey [5] call this a re-authoring process of how organisations should be run, and schools as organisations are no different.

School principals play an important role in ensuring both the smooth running of schools and in addition effective teaching and learning outcomes [6,7]. However, they now find themselves facing a myriad of new emerging responsibilities that require this business/performance style of leadership [8,9]. Therefore, it is not surprising that in 2015, the Department of Education and Skills recognised the need for the upskilling of school principals and offered coaching support to school principals through the setting up of the Centre for School Leadership (CSL). The aim of coaching was to upskill Irish school principals to become a 'more in-depth talented leader' [10] (p. 1).

1.1. Coaching as a Leadership Style

In recent years, coaching has emerged as a significant development intervention in schools across such countries as Australia, the United Kingdom and the USA and is used to help develop principals, teachers, and students while also supporting school improvement and development. While it is often seen in the corporate world as an executive leadership

development approach, in schools, it is being used in a range of different conversational contexts [11–13]. Internationally, many organisations including schools have aimed to demonstrate the positive impact coaching can have on enhanced leadership performance. However, for Irish educational leadership, coaching as a leadership approach is relatively unknown. While it may still be an approach under question [14,15], further empirical evidence is required to assess its impact.

1.2. Coaching Definition

Coaching has become a multi-billion-dollar industry worldwide [16,17], with many studies demonstrating its positive impact on leadership and company performance [18–22]. Coaching in leadership entails a one-to-one relationship between a coach and a coachee, where one-to-one conversations take place. These conversations 'facilitate development for a leader' [23] (p. 582) and are designed to be an empowering process. Coaches use skills such as effective listening and the use of probing questions with the aim to motivate the coachee to take responsibility for action. A further aim of coaching is to draw out solutions to problems from within the coachee, thus enabling the coachee to draw out suitable solutions to issues they are presented with [24] that are best suited to the person's own environment and experience. Thus, the coachee takes ownership [25] of the problem they are dealing with, using their own skill set and resources. Coaching normally uses a framework or model such as the GROW model which stands for Goal, Reality, Options and Way forward/wrap-up [21].

While there are many empirical studies that suggest that coaching can impact positively on the performance and self-development of staff [22–28], leadership coaching is still gaining traction and may not be considered a leadership style by and of itself. However, it may have merit as an approach to be used within a leadership style. Fay [29] suggests that coaching is a significant strategy for bringing about change with Robinson [30] positing that many of the models of leadership such as distributed leadership are at an early stage and therefore often lack an effective framework for delivering such a model of change effectively. Leadership coaching can help manage such change in organisations and supports the building of such leadership styles, for example helping to "deliver a co-operative approach to distributed leadership" [31] (p. 38). While for some it may not be considered an independent model of leadership in its own right, it may compliment models of leadership through the blending of coaching skills, within an overarching model such as distributed leadership or transformational leadership models. Anthony [24] highlights how coaching contributes toward a more transformational type of leadership, highlighting that coaching builds leadership capacity through the effective distribution of tasks. Thus, coaching when used in a blended capacity with other leadership styles can be effective.

Berg and Karlsen [32] view coaching as a leadership style within the model of situational leadership and suggest that while there may be many leadership styles and theories, in a coaching leadership style (CLS), the leader uses coaching skills as the main method with which to achieve the desired results. This is similar to coaching in sports, where a coach enables an athlete to transform physical and psychological strengths into improvements in performance. In a similar way in leadership, the leader can coach the employee through empowerment and towards a type of self-leadership, building on their own personal strengths. Coaching as a leadership style involves a "mutual partnership in learning" built on trust and relationships, adjusting goals and constantly learning from the process [32] (p. 3). While there are debates of where leadership coaching sits within the wider styles of leadership style, its application may support the implementation of various leadership styles.

Peterson (2011) [21] suggests however that there are some limitations on how coaching can be delivered effectively. These include certain personalities that may make coaching difficult, such as staff who may have a fixed mindset and be resistant to change, with others perhaps feeling they are being forced into coaching against their will, thus thinking the process lacks trust and openness and the possibility that they may perceive coaching as

a process that may be about manipulating staff towards more output. He also posits that people with emotional and mental issues may pose a problem for a coach, resulting in people refusing to engage in coaching and those who do not wish to be forced "to change in ways that others want them to change" [21] (p. 547). While he also posits that often such people are the people who need coaching the most, it still leaves a challenge for leaders to implement a coaching approach to leadership.

1.3. Creating a Coaching Culture in Schools

Culture has its roots in the corporate environment, often providing a notion of direction that would make an organisation more efficient or a more stable learning environment [33]. While as a general concept an organisational culture can be viewed as the way we do things here [34], often set in rituals or symbols or historical processes, it can also include such things as values and beliefs, and for schools, it often lies in 'the commonly held beliefs of teachers, students and principals' [35] (p. 2). Organisational culture stems from both espoused and enacted values and practices that are part of daily life [34].

According to Dewitt [36], schools are complex organisations, and leadership within a school is a complex one in itself. School principals have a very important part to play in influencing school culture, and they need to be supported in strategically letting go of the leadership by focusing on the development of school culture and in doing so support professional learning [37]. Bush [6] posits that the role of a school principal is vital for school success generally even including building a culture of well-being in a school. Factors that influence a school culture include environment, personalities, values, beliefs, and the ontological viewpoint of many stakeholders resulting in many behavioural outcomes. Mc Govern [38] suggests that leadership theory does not always translate into leadership practice and that a culture of collegial respect and mutual trust is required for leadership practices to work. Thus, building a culture of leadership coaching in Irish school is a challenging one.

To compound this challenge, the field of education has no clear definition of what school culture looks like, often referring to such things as ethos or climate. Despite this, effective school leaders help develop school cultures that embody shared values and beliefs and promote caring and trust among all members [39]. If culture is about 'the way we do things around here' [34] (p. 3), then building a coaching culture is about embedding a conversational culture that contributes to a learning environment, focused on constant improvement, where everyone feels confident and motivated in their roles [40].

Stolp [33] suggests that there is much empirical research to support the notion that culture correlates strongly with increased student motivation and achievement and also impacts teachers' productivity and satisfaction. Therefore, culture is an important aspect of what happens in any school setting, as it sets a scene of how things are handled and also how they contribute to school successes. It also suggests that in order to change a school culture, it involves understanding the current culture, relationships and systems, which is an important precursor to looking at any potential change. It is also important that the school vision would influence and impact any future change in the systems that make a school culture. These include rituals, ceremonies, and routines with the suggestion that the school principal should develop such a vision, conscious of current practices, but rooted in history [34], values and beliefs of what the school should be [33]. Thus, seeking to promote such a new initiative as coaching in schools, something that may not be rooted in school history, rituals, or systems, may present with quite a challenge.

It is difficult to improve schools significantly; however, research has attempted to put forward ideas that do work. A system that combines them successfully is complex with educators often disagreeing about how best to approach it [41].

The strategies suggested that do work and that help the concept of school culture of how people work together and make them work better include the following:

1. The human resource approach rooted in psychology focused on the skills of educators (coaching as a process would be in this category);

2. Formal structures and operations of schools rooted in sociology;
3. Political relationships amongst the school community;
4. Market mechanisms or economics based on school choice and monopoly;
5. School culture a concept rooted in anthropology [41].

According to Deal and Peterson [41], principals are at the core of any culture change, and considering implementing a change without considering staff needs, goals and roles and the power of conflict and skills will have limited effect. In addition, trying to embed a culture of coaching in schools where staff have limited understanding of coaching can certainly impact the successful development of a coaching culture in schools.

For Van Nieuwerburgh [42], there are several issues and challenges for implementing a coaching culture:

(1) The closed-door culture that exists in some schools resulting in a defensive approach from teachers about what happens in their classrooms. In this circumstance, a coach–coachee relationship has not been formally established despite the use of coaching skills having potential (active listening, well-structured questions, presence, empathy, in other words using a 'coaching approach').

(2) The relationship of coaching is well set out in training programmes such as those endorsed by the European Mentoring and Coaching Council (EMCC) or the Institute of Coaching (AOC) with particular emphasis on ethical considerations to ensure a referral on to qualified specialists should issues arise during the process. However, while these may be considered adequate in most situations, they have a larger impact in school settings, especially where students may be involved. Careful thought needs to be considered in an education setting to allow the development of staff and students in an empowering way rather than through a means of control. Robinson [30] explains this as the careful management of the dynamics of power and control, such as force, coercion and manipulation and that leaders should create conditions where staff can think and act differently through empowerment rather than through a controlling environment.

(3) There are critical skills involved in effective coaching and coaching skills development. Significant training and intentional reflection is required in order to build an appropriate skill set amongst educational leaders. Such skills need to be raised beyond the introduction to coaching that is often happening with university postgraduate programmes.

(4) Positive psychology and coaching in education have some overlap. There is much to be gained from exploring how both contexts could be integrated to encourage human flourishing and well-being.

(5) Coaching culture in schools has emerged to describe how coaching is being implemented across an organisation. There is an implicit assumption this is a positive development, but there is a lack of clarity about what a coaching culture actually entails, especially in schools. Further research would be of considerable benefit to educators in order to develop a plan to take coaching beyond the initial successful steps that have begun to emerge.

Many school leaders are committed to providing coaching to teachers and have endeavoured to promote a culture of coaching in their schools, but many obstacles have emerged. Often, this is because they have not taken the time to communicate a clear definition of coaching to the school and, especially, set up a clear structure for a coaching program. Aguilar, [43] an education consultant and respected author on coaching, describes the 10 elements leaders who want coaching to be effective and embedded in their school's culture need to decide about: (1) a definition of coaching and vision statement, (2) the context for coaching, (3) a coaching model, (4) goals, (5) the qualities of coaches to hire, (6) the coaching relationship, (7) the coaching work, (8) communication, (9) evaluation of coaches, and (10) professional development for coaches. Aligning these elements and communicating clearly the schoolwide decisions about how each element will function in the school's coaching effort is essential also.

However, in the Irish context, many of these aspects are missing from what is necessary in order to embed such a coaching context [31]. Training with school principals is somewhat ad hoc with a lack of accredited training and development for principals. Coaching as an approach to school development is somewhat referenced in school documents such as the six-step process for school evaluation and for school development and is a core remit within the Droichead training framework for new teachers (from which a small number of teachers are training up in schools). However, a coaching approach from a human resources management perspective [41] is something that school staff do not either understand or consider as an approach to school management.

1.4. Culture Challenges

There have been many new initiatives aimed at enhancing the leadership and management of Irish schools in recent years. The roll out of School Self-Improvement and School Self-Evaluation, issued in 2016 and revised in 2022 [44], and the introduction of a new policy of in school management and leadership recruitment have become mandatory. This combined with the Looking at Our Schools evaluation suggested a change in culture in schools towards a process of self-evaluation and improvement. These documents focused on the four leadership and management domains of leading learning and teaching, managing the organisation, leading school development, and developing leadership capacity. They suggested that leaders promote collaboration, a culture of improvement, communication and developing an aspect of self-accountability for monitoring such changes within school management itself. To enable this to evolve, schools needed to adapt to a culture of dialogue, involvement and joint decision making, collaboration, building relationships and also develop leadership capacity within the school that is now focused on ability rather than years of service. While the pace of change has been rapid, schools generally have adapted well to the new culture of school 'self-evaluation' [45] despite staff having witnessed a new faster pace of accountability.

1.5. Centre for School Leadership

As many of these new initiatives were being embedded in schools, this coincided with the setting up of the Centre for School Leadership in 2015 to support principals in their roles. Coaching was made available to principals for the first time in Ireland. According to the Centre for School Leadership (CSL) by engaging in coaching, school leaders will gain the following benefits:

- Increased ability to prioritise and manage demands;
- Renewed enthusiasm for the job;
- Enable the management of change more successfully;
- Assist in creating a coaching culture in the school;
- Provide time and space for reflection [10].

While the initial uptake of the service was quite small, in time, more principals began to engage with the process. Principals who did avail of the service found it very supportive, a great reflective space and enabled them to learn about their own leadership style while also developing skills on problem solving. However, one of the challenges emerging was that on returning to school, staff were unaware of what coaching is and were suspect of its merits and aims; thus, principals have discovered that building a coaching culture has been a challenge.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. School Culture and Reciprocal Determinism

Principals' ability to use their leadership coaching training to affect behaviour change can be restrained or enhanced by any part of what Bandura calls reciprocal determinism, [46] as represented in Figure 1. Environmental factors such as school culture vary from school to school, and the merits of coaching as a model of leadership may not be accepted by all staff. This may result in an unworkable approach by principals. The personal factors of

the principal (personality type, values, and beliefs) may also affect the success of leadership coaching. This has impacts on the principal's own behaviour and that of the staff being coached. Both coaches (principals) and coachees (teachers) have their own ontological viewpoint of the world, resulting in many different contextual and behavioural outcomes in schools [38]. These factors could certainly influence the perceptions of participants and their beliefs in a coaching model. Hence, Bandura's [46] framework was used as a lens to interpret the data using an interpretive paradigm as a philosophical underpinning.
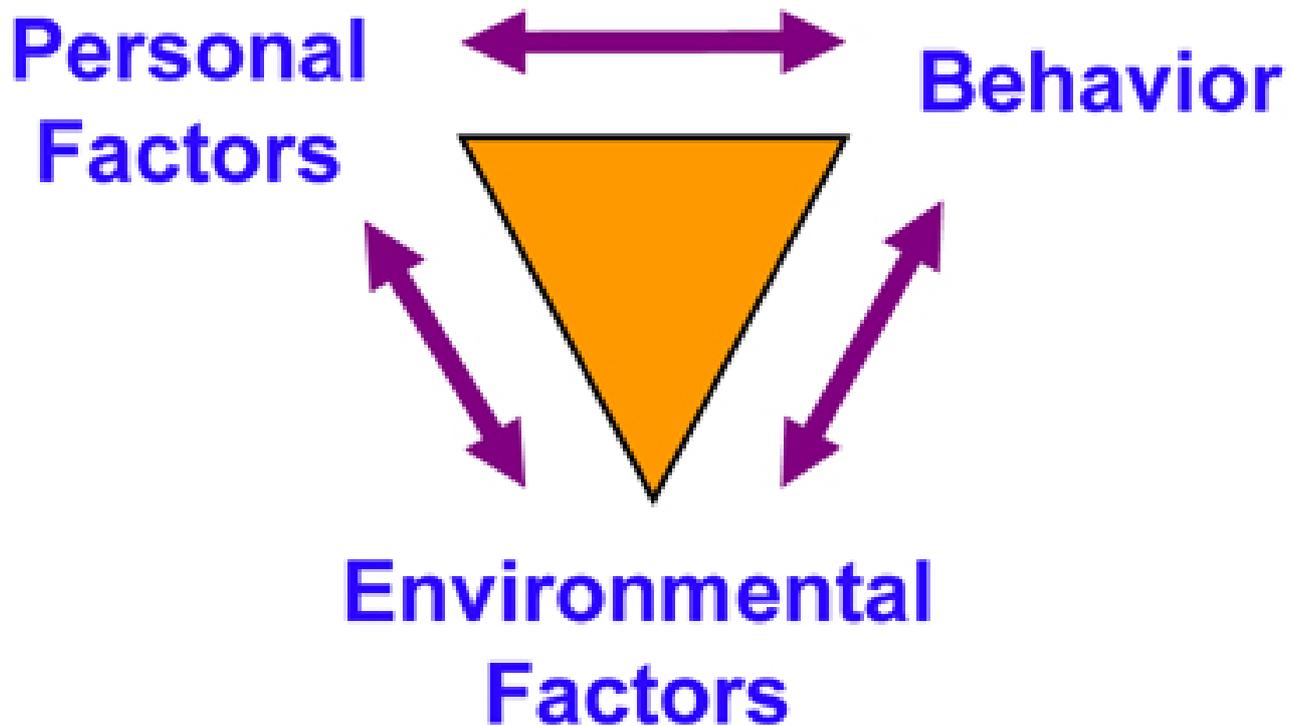

Figure 1. Reciprocal determinism (Bandura, 1978) [46].

This paper gathered data from principals of Irish Primary and Post-primary schools including senior leaders on secondment from such positions. Data were collected using a mixed-methods approach using a sequential design of a quantitative survey through survey monkey, which was followed by semi-structured interviews. Using an interpretivist paradigm and with Bandura's theory of reciprocal determinism framing the study, 48 participants completed the survey with 12 subsequently participating in a follow-up semi-structured interview. An important element of the research was what Dewitt [36] referred to as self-efficacy and the ability of participants to implement learnings from training undertaken; therefore, participants of the study were required to have sufficient knowledge of coaching. Participants were therefore required to have completed a Diploma in Coaching with a minimum level 6 (QQI) component. This was required so that participants had the practical experience, theory, and academic accreditation to contribute satisfactorily to the data collected.

Statistical analysis using SPSS (version 25.0, IBM Corp, Armonk, NY, USA) was performed. The quantitative data were analysed using Braun and Clarke's [47] six-step thematic analysis with Saldaňa's [48] emotional coding used to analyse the data. The use of both qualitative and quantitative data aimed to further validate the study [49] with the results triangulated [50] to give greater credibility. Participants in the study incorporated a mix of gender, experience, age, and experience in number of years. This is presented in Table 1 below.

Table 1. Characteristics of respondents [51].

Characteristics of Respondents, n = 48		
	n	**(%) ***
Age (n = 47)		
25–34	3	(6)
35–44	9	(19)
45–54	18	(38)
55–64	16	(34)
65+	1	(2)
Role		
Primary Administrative	19	(40)
Primary Teaching	7	(15)
Post-Primary Principal	6	(13)
Deputy Principal (Primary/Post Primary)	3	(6)
AP1/AP2	5	(10)
Other	8	(17)
School type	2	(2.0)
Urban	35	(73)
Rural	13	(27)
School classification		
Non Deis	25	(52)
Deis	17	(35)
Gaelscoil	1	(2)
Other	5	(10)
Number of years as a school principal (n = 45)		
0–5	8	(18)
5–10	10	(22)
10–15	12	(27)
15+	15	(33)
Highest educational qualification (n = 47)		
B.Ed	10	(21)
Primary Degree and Postgraduate Diploma in Education	12	(26)
Postgraduate diploma	5	(11)
M.Ed	16	(34)
MBA	1	(2)
PhD/Ed. D	3	(6)
Diploma in Coaching		
Yes	36	(75)
No	12	(25)

* unless otherwise stated.

The survey was distributed through the network of Education Centres in Ireland (ATECI), the Irish Primary Principals Network (IPPN), the coaching training colleges and with consultation from the Centre for School Leadership (CSL) to identify all possible participants.

A total of 48 principals/deputy principals responded to the questionnaire from a potential identified pool of 54 qualifying participants with 12 subsequently agreeing to a semi-structured interview. Pseudonyms were assigned to participants of the semi-structured interviews to ensure confidentiality and to assist with the identification of gender preferences. This is represented in Table 2 below.

Table 2. Pseudonyms assigned [51].

Participant 1 = Mary	Participant 2 = John	Participant 3 = Michelle	Participant 4 = Amanda
Participant 5 = Edel	Participant 6 = Imelda	Participant 7 = Fred	Participant 8 = Amy
Participant 9 = Liam	Participant 10 = Betty	Participant = Fidelma	Participant = Dolores

2.2. Software Coding

Descriptive statistics were calculated such as demographics, looking at patterns and correlations. The demographics that were identified as suitable to this study included age, gender, school type, school size, leadership role, qualifications. Subsequently, the study aimed to investigate the correlations between these demographics and the impact of leadership coaching. Certain demographic comparisons were also calculated with the initial data collected. Fisher's Exact Test and Spearman's Rho correlation test were also used to investigate the association between two ordinal categorical variables. These tests examined correlation variables such as gender, principal experience, age, qualifications, school size, and status of the principal (teaching or administrative). Some of the responses to open questions were also exported into Nvivo for independent coding, as these could not be explored statistically.

Fisher's test was used to determine if there were non-random associations between two categorical variables with Spearman's Rho used to investigate the association between two ordinal categorical variables. The study sought to investigate the magnitude of relationships [52] for both measure increases and inverse relationships. The qualitative data were transcribed and imported into Nvivo. Braun and Clarke's [47] thematic analysis was used with a second round of coding applied through the lens of Saldaňa's [48] emotional coding, which identified participants experiences of coaching through emotions recalled and experienced by participants or inferred about the participant.

3. Results

Data were extracted using the framework for the study under the headings of behaviour, environment, and personal factors [46]. Participants of this study highlighted the very positive impact that coaching can have in school settings. For the participants, coaching is a reflective practice which leads to a change in practice (not solving others' problems with solutions), it builds leadership capacity and leads to enhanced well-being for both the teacher (coachee) and principal (coach). This is represented in Figure 2 below [31].

Figure 2. The impact of leadership coaching [31].

In addition, coaching helped problem solving, raised self-awareness, and helped participants examine their own strengths and weakness.

While 98% of participants acknowledged that the role of school principal is stressful, they noted that coaching helps to build resilience and helps manage particularly the accountability aspects of the role, noting that coaching did not necessarily improve stress. However, it helped principals deal with or react to stress. Interestingly, there was no difference in responses whether the principal was a teaching principal or an administrative principal (Fisher's test $p = 0.116$). Overall, 82% of participants either agreed or strongly agreed that coaching supports teaching and learning with 93% of participants stating that coaching helps to build leader resilience. This is represented in Figure 3.
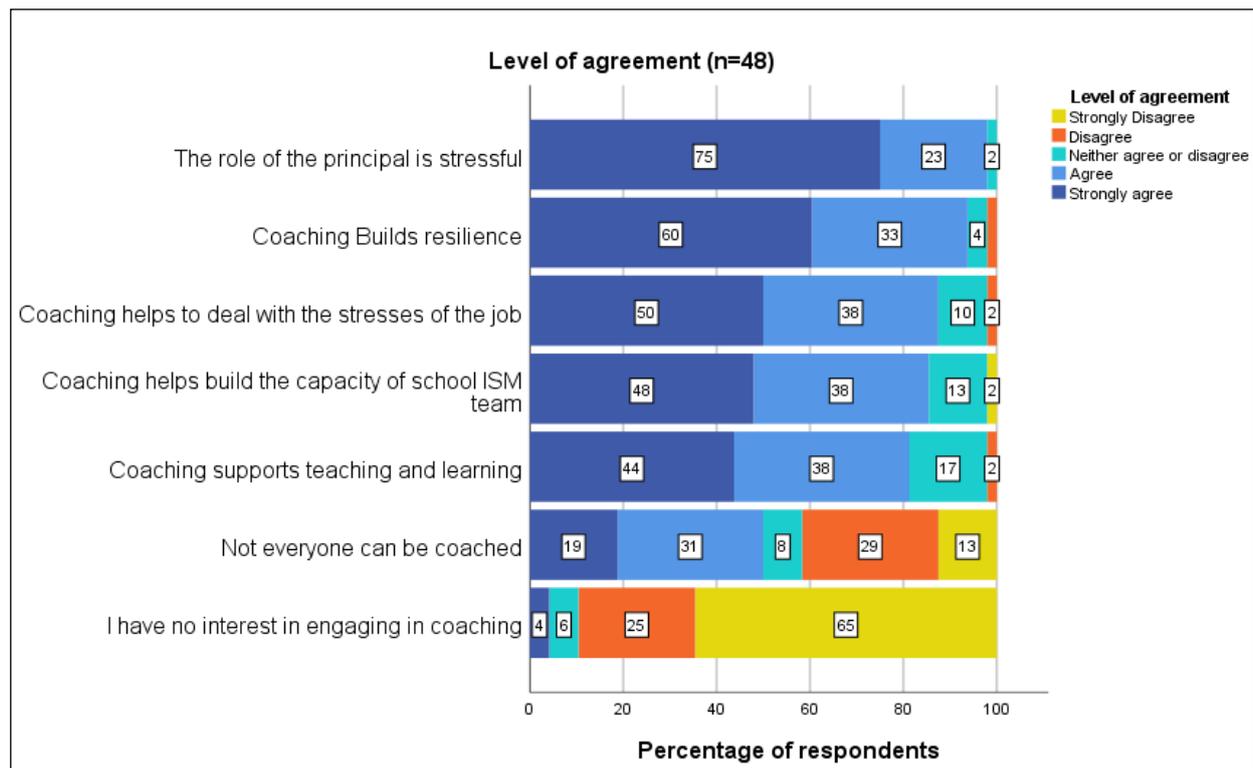

Figure 3. Level of agreement with coaching statements [51].

Under the behavioural heading, participants outlined how coaching helped them to problem solve at school, to manage conflict, and to build more respectful and trusting relationships, thus building leadership capacity within the school. It enhanced their confidence, allowing them to be able to 'not take on the problems of others' where others could solve them themselves.

Under the heading of environment, they noted the challenge of building a culture of coaching in schools, the sustainability of principal workload and the lack of understanding of the coaching process as barriers to the implementation of coaching leadership in schools. They did believe, however, that coaching helped to build rapport and empathy with staff and allowed staff take on more responsibility. It assisted principals with facilitating the understanding of values and mutual collaboration on tasks and duties with coaching skills enabling the principal to motivate staff intrinsically.

Under the heading of personal factors, participants noted how coaching improved communication skills (effective questioning, listening, summarising), allowed the delivery of feedback in a more empathetic manner and allowed the development of rapport with colleagues. It also helped manage conflict between staff, as the principal had learned about themselves as leadership practitioners and how to understand the values of others. Most importantly, principals developed the skills to say no to areas that were not their responsibility, enabling others to take responsibility for that which was within their own

remit. This subsequently gave them the confidence to be able to do this collaboratively while developing the staff member in the process.

Overall, 86% of principals in the study acknowledged that coaching helped to build the leadership capacity of the in-school management team (ISM), which led to enhancing a culture of distributed leadership. They felt better able to delegate responsibilities through the skills they had developed (listening skills, building rapport, effective questioning) and to do so in a more collaborative manner, moving away from an 'imposition of duties onto ISM team members.' They also noted a distribution of practice whereby they no longer took on the responsibilities of what belonged to others, noting the coaching premise that people have the ability to self-solve problems from within their own expertise through guided coaching by the principal. This is represented in Figure 4 below [51].
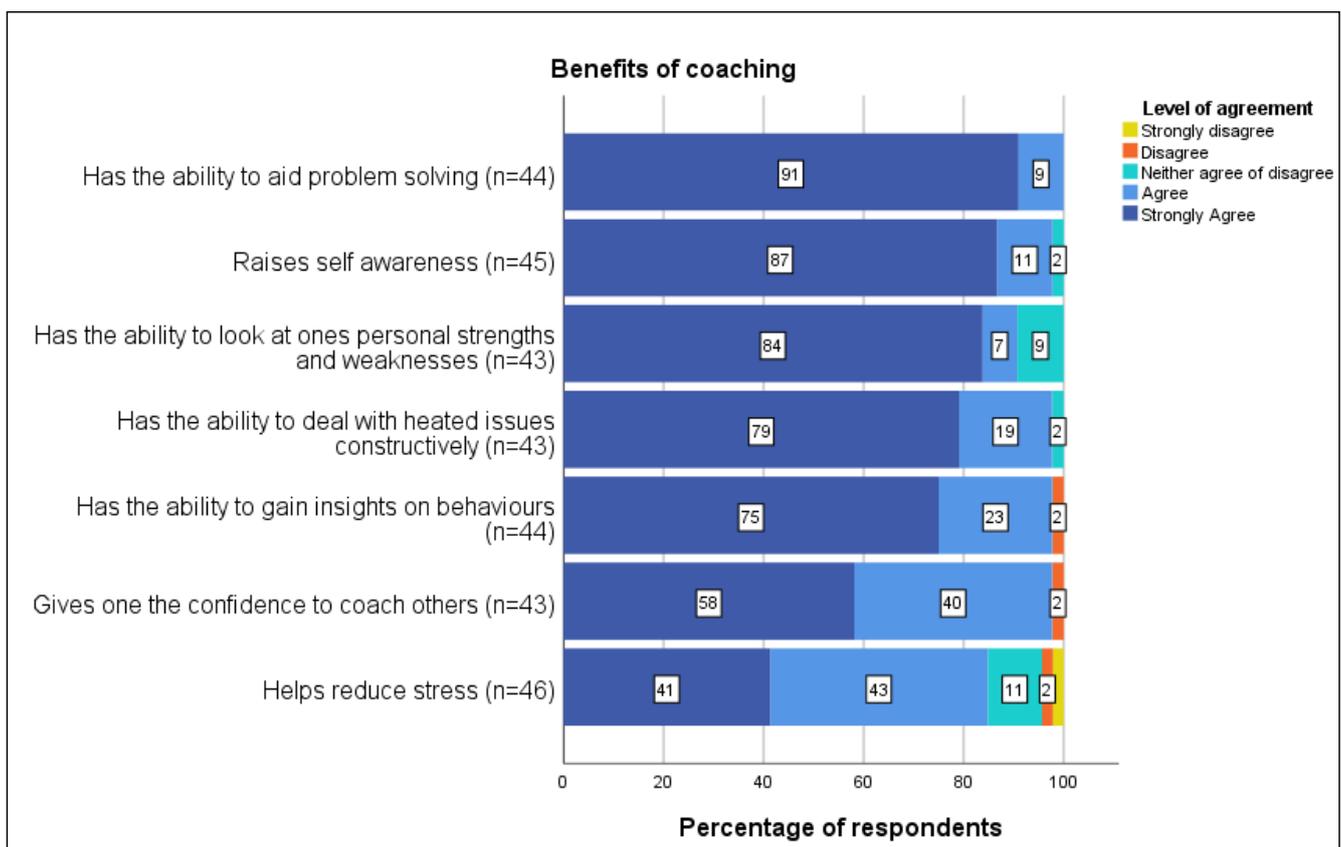

Figure 4. Level of agreement with statements about the benefits of coaching [51].

An interesting finding from the research was that by changing the practice from 'I will solve this' to 'what can you as teacher do about this issue?' enhanced the self-efficacy of the teacher and the principal with participants reporting enhanced well-being from this process.

Fred noted how this takes the 'burden off the principal's shoulders and helps others (teachers) solve their own problems'. He called this a 'distributed leadership mindset', noting the ability to 'expand peoples' capacity and confidence in acting for themselves.' Betty also noted this reflecting on her own 'dialogues I was having' now allowing her staff to have 'the freedom to make their own decisions and set goals.' Amanda also concurred with this, realising that coaching was a powerful skill, but it needed to 'tease out of others, solutions to their own problems suggesting it has to come from the person.' Coaching helped principals manage conflict better and improve communication skills, with 76% of participants of the survey citing better relationships with colleagues as a result of the coaching skills developed.

Challenges of Building a Coaching Culture

Participants noted that there are many challenges to building a successful coaching culture in schools. This would ultimately become a principal's duty:

'O time, time, I mean there's absolutely no time in schools for anything' (Betty)

Participants throughout this study noted the challenges associated with trying to build an effective culture of coaching in Irish schools. Overall, 79% of survey respondents noted the problem of time that would be needed to implement such a labour-intensive activity for the principal alone with 81% highlighting that curriculum overload was also a problem with time. Meanwhile, 86% of respondents highlighted how in the main, staff did not know what coaching was or understand the process with 75% noting there really was a lack of training available (unless participants paid for their own course outside of school time) for principals to be able to have a coaching culture embedded in their school.

For Amanda, building a school culture of coaching was going to be difficult when it stays so 'informal and the time it takes combined with scepticism all a challenge.' John also highlighted time as a factor impacting a coaching culture with work overload an issue. For him, the time it would take for the coachee and coach to have a coaching relationship across a large school would be a role in itself. This is represented in Figure 5 and Table 3 below.
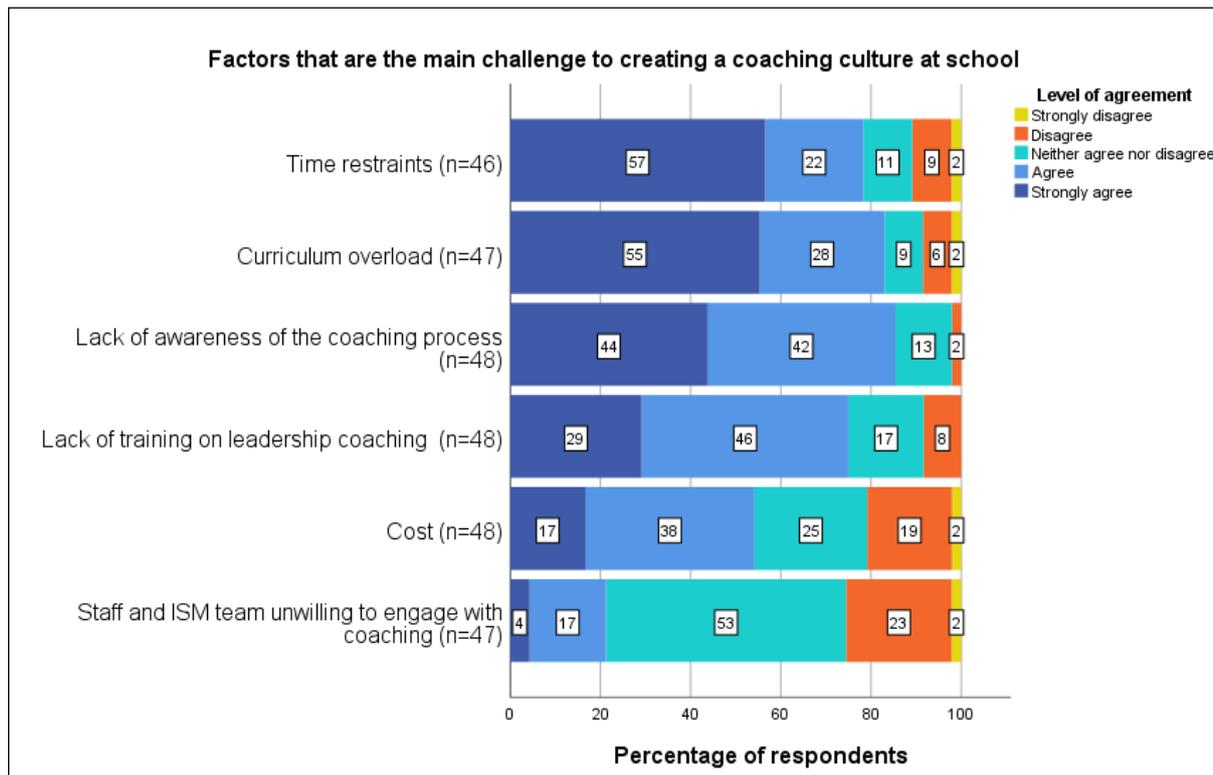

Figure 5. Level of agreement with factors that are the main challenge to creating a coaching culture at school [51].

Table 3. Tine restraints as a main challenge to creating a coaching culture in schools [51].

Time Restraints Are a Main Challenge to Creating a Coaching Culture at School										
	Strongly Disagree		Disagree		Neither Agree nor Disagree		Agree		Strongly Agree	
	%	(n)	%	(n)	%	(n)	%	(n)	%	(n)	*p*-Value [1]
Role											0.116
Administration/Other (n = 32)	(3.1)	1	(12.5)	4	(6.3)	2	(28.1)	9	(50.0)	16	
Teaching (n = 14)	(0.0)	0	(0.0)	0	(21.4)	3	(7.1)	1	(71.4)	10	

[1] from Fisher's exact test.

For John, recognition and understanding of what leadership coaching was and its potential impact was a big issue. He cited his recent experience being a candidate for a promotion at an interview, where his experience discussing the attributes of leadership coaching was somewhat lost amongst the panel. He discovered that he was interviewing for a senior leadership position, but yet none of the panel knew what coaching was, citing 'he did not know whether this was because they did not understand leadership coaching or was it a relatively unknown leadership phenomenon?' His motivation for taking up the course in coaching was to enhance his leadership potential at interview, thus suggesting that there is still lots to do to get the message out to the relevant bodies of what coaching entails in leadership.

This was also echoed by other participants with several participants highlighting how the support bodies including the inspectorate needed to 'support coaching as an endeavour' in order for it to be validated as a suitable process in schools and the potential for it to be a 'capacity building endeavour'. They also highlighted the need for empirical research to be carried out by the Department of Education and Skills (DES) to ensure school staff became aware that coaching could be a recognised system of leadership just as distributed leadership is in schools.

Mary suggested that coaching was still a little 'informal' in order for it to be recognised as a valid process in schools. She highlighted the complexity of the duality of role of coach (the need for the coach to build rapport, trust and motivation with the coachee) and principal role, where at times the principal may need to discipline the same person causing a 'role clash with your responsibility as school leader' and a very 'grey area' for principals to manage. This may be one the reasons that the CSL model works well due to its external nature with no accountability role between the two parties.

While Fred acknowledged the 'empowering' nature of coaching and how it had impacted him positively in both his professional and private life, he outlined how principals give 'so much to the job over and above most peoples' realisation' and suggested that the DES need to provide funding and support for coaching to be effective in schools. While all the participants noted the positive impacts of leadership coaching, there are still many challenges that remain for it to become established practice in school settings.

4. Discussion

The findings of this study provide valuable insights into how principals view coaching as a leadership model and the challenges of building a coaching culture in schools. This study highlighted 54 principals who were qualified coaches, who had trained of their own free will and often cost in order to enhance their leadership skills within their school. The fact that most principals will have no formal training in coaching, other than ad hoc occasional training days through the CSL and the Professional Development Service for Principals (PDST), suggests that building a coaching culture in schools in Ireland is a long way from becoming a reality. Only 33% of participants of this study availed of CSL training themselves despite their commitment to an academic training programme in coaching. While 15% were planning to avail of coaching in the future, 52% had still no plans to engage with CSL's coaching programme despite their enhanced knowledge and endorsement of coaching as a successful leadership endeavour. This is represented in Figure 6.

4.1. Personal Factors

Participants of this study acknowledged the benefits of trying to build a coaching culture in Irish schools. Participants highlighted changes in practices to their leadership style, outlining enhanced listening skills, the ability to empower others more effectively, the ability to manage stresses of the job more competently, the ability to manage conflict and the ability to motivate others to take responsibility, thus building leadership capacity and enhancing well-being. They cited enhanced personal skills through effective questioning and summarising and working collaboratively with others in a reflective manner. Participants noted the reflective nature of coaching as a process and overall how it enhanced

their personal and self-awareness skills. However, they were met with many challenges in endeavouring to build out a school culture of coaching despite their extra training in this area.
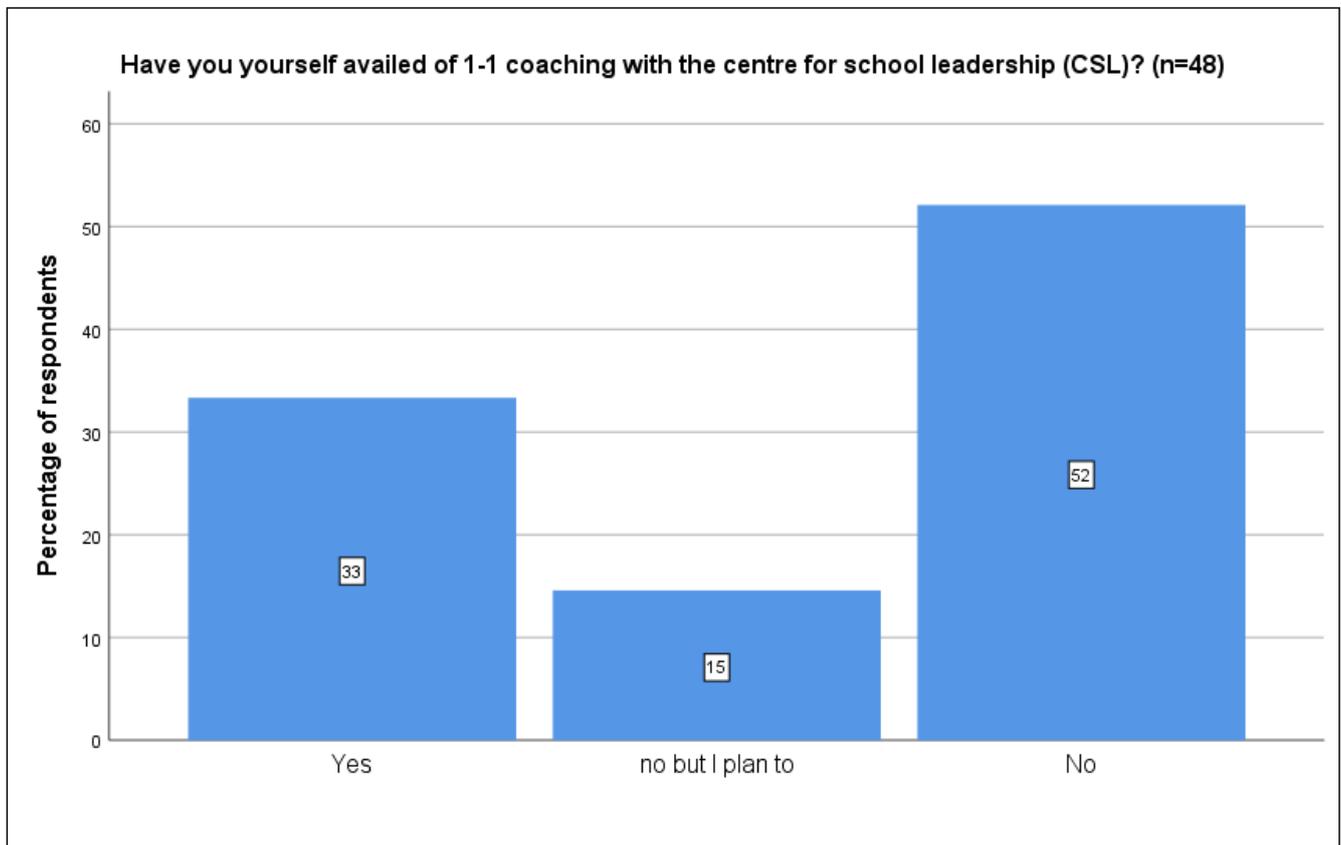

Figure 6. Availed of 1-1 coaching with the centre for school leadership [51].

Most participants cited the fact that coaching training for school principals was not fully supported, and while engaging with CSL would be useful on a personal level as a coachee, it did not necessarily mean one could transfer these skills to become a successful coach back at school. The fact of the matter remains that school principals are being encouraged to use coaching skills to enhance their leadership practice; however, training to a level that would be required to coach staff successfully and with the relevant competence is not available. It is difficult to support the premise that some ad hoc training day will give the skills set required to build a coaching culture in schools with much more in depth and possible accredited training required before this could even be considered [36].

4.2. Environment

Participants also cited that staff are unaware of what coaching is with some suspicion of its merits and aims evident. There is also an absence of recognition of coaching approaches to leadership across the various services such as PDST, the inspectorate, the Cathoilic Primary School Management Association (CPSMA), IPPN, the Irish National Teachers Organisation (INTO) and the National Council for Special Education (NCSE). While CSL and the IPPN are both providing support to principals in this area and endorsing the credentials of coaching, the merits of coaching skills are not evident on interview panel assessments, and they are not recognised as such. In addition, it is not something that is evaluated by the inspectorate, thus reducing its merits for practicing teachers. The fact that coaching is still generally an unknown concept [14,15] and even more so in Irish schools suggests that building a coaching culture in schools requires much more information sharing and endorsement by the supporting bodies and that a consistent message on

coaching as a means to enhance leadership practice in schools needs to be addressed and shared across the school community. There is also a requirement that school principals are upskilled as necessary in order to have the skillset to build such a coaching culture and that a national supported model of coaching is endorsed for school implementation [21,41].

4.3. Distribution of Practice

Participants experienced the value of coaching in being able to distribute responsibilities [5] in a more collaborative manner than pure distributed leadership, which can often be task driven as opposed to person and process driven. However, time was a significant factor in being able to do this in an impactful way, combined with staff unaware or even perhaps sceptical of coaching as a process. It also led to a conflict of the duality of the role of both the principal (formal role in the school) vs. the coach (supportive, non-judgemental), thus suggesting that an external model of coaching is often more successful as a process than in house coaching by a 'boss.' There was ambiguity about the role of principal as internal coach, suggesting that building a coaching culture in schools will require an open and transparent model that is being promoted by the DES and supporting bodies in order to break down possible resistance while enhancing understanding.

4.4. Building Leadership Capacity

It was noted during the study that principals were able to use coaching skills to build leadership capacity and especially that of the ISM team, and they now had the personal skills to do this more collaboratively, suggesting that coaching helps to build a model of distributed leadership in a more impactful and effective way [43]. However, there were environmental impacts in various schools, with school culture issues in some schools working in a favourable manner to this new coaching approach, while other schools were unable or unwilling to see its value.

4.5. Well-Being

It is significant that participants of this study cited enhanced well-being for both themselves and the teachers being coached [53] once they worked together in a coaching relationship. Principals felt empowered to say no, to not take on the responsibilities of what they deemed to belong to the individual and had now a body of skills to encourage the coachee to consider self-solving their own problems through their own skill sets. This led to an increase in the coachee/teachers' self-efficacy and helped principals manage the stressors of the role, which is something that could contribute to a culture of well-being in schools.

5. Conclusions

This study aimed to examine the challenges and opportunities that exist in building a coaching culture in Irish schools. The participants outlined the benefits that impact school development when coaching as a leadership style is used in schools. However, it was particularly noted that despite the arguments for such a practice, principals do not receive adequate training or support, yet they are being encouraged to build coaching cultures in their schools. The willingness of principals to try and build a culture of coaching was evident in the study but the challenges remain. These include the duality of the role, time, curriculum overload and the fact that coaching remains unknown. It also includes the fact that coaching training that is sufficient in accreditation and practice is not yet available to principals unless they wish to self-fund and take up the training without any external support. The role of the school principal has become very challenging in recent years with workload, stress, and isolation factors of concern [54] without the extra challenge of having to coach all the staff, which would be a very difficult task on top of existing responsibilities. Therefore, it needs adequate funding, administrative support and a model that is supported by all school support systems.

This study highlighted that coaching supports a distribution of practice and supports the development of the ISM team, thus enhancing what is broadly supported as a distributed model of school leadership. Therefore, coaching as a process has a lot to offer to further support distributed leadership.

The findings reflect international trends in coaching in education that suggest that coaching as a leadership endeavour has many advantages for leadership practice, but for it to be a successful endeavour, it needs more than anecdotal training for a small number of school principals. While the CSL, PDST and IPPN leadership teams have accomplished outstanding work in supporting school leaders in coaching, it needs further development and support from the DES and wider support services.

The literature highlights the need for recognised structures and processes for coaching to take place successfully supported with knowledge and awareness by staff of coaching as a process [41,42]. It also suggests that it needs an agreed model and suitable professional development for all, which are items that will hinder the successful establishment of coaching cultures in Irish schools [43]. Thus, there are a number of issues and challenges that remain for implementing a coaching culture in Irish schools.

5.1. Limitations

Participants of this study were existing school leaders who had completed a Diploma in Coaching. The study aimed to garner data from leaders who had both the technical experience and academic rigor and was guided by Dewitt's [36] theory of teacher efficacy and the ability of participants to implement learnings from training undertaken. However, this study was a self-reporting study with possible bias from the participants due to their commitment to the programme of coaching study undertaken and should be viewed in the context of these limitations. Nevertheless, the findings do concur with some similar findings noted in the literature review.

5.2. Future Direction

Participants of this study recognise the value of coaching for school leadership, highlighting that further training up to and including coaching accreditation should be available for school leaders. While not making it a compulsory process, most of the participants supported further training and that support bodies should be endorsing its merits. They also suggest it needs more time and that the workload would need to be managed in order to make this possible (which in effect means release time for teaching principals and deputy principals in administrative schools). The fact that coaching supports a distributed model of leadership may in time help manage a more sustainable workload for principals, hence the need for continued support and funding for coaching training. This is highlighted in Figures 7 and 8.

Can a culture exist where coaching as a leadership approach can be supported by all staff in Irish schools? Clearly, coaching as a process has some benefits, and there may be pockets of very good practice in some schools, where school principals have taken the time and self-motivation to upskill and educate their staff on its merits. However, to be impactful on a national level, until school principals have received the relevant accredited training and until such time as staff are educated in the process and a centralised model of coaching is embedded, it will still be met with resistance that will disempower any hope that principals have of building a coaching culture in Irish schools.
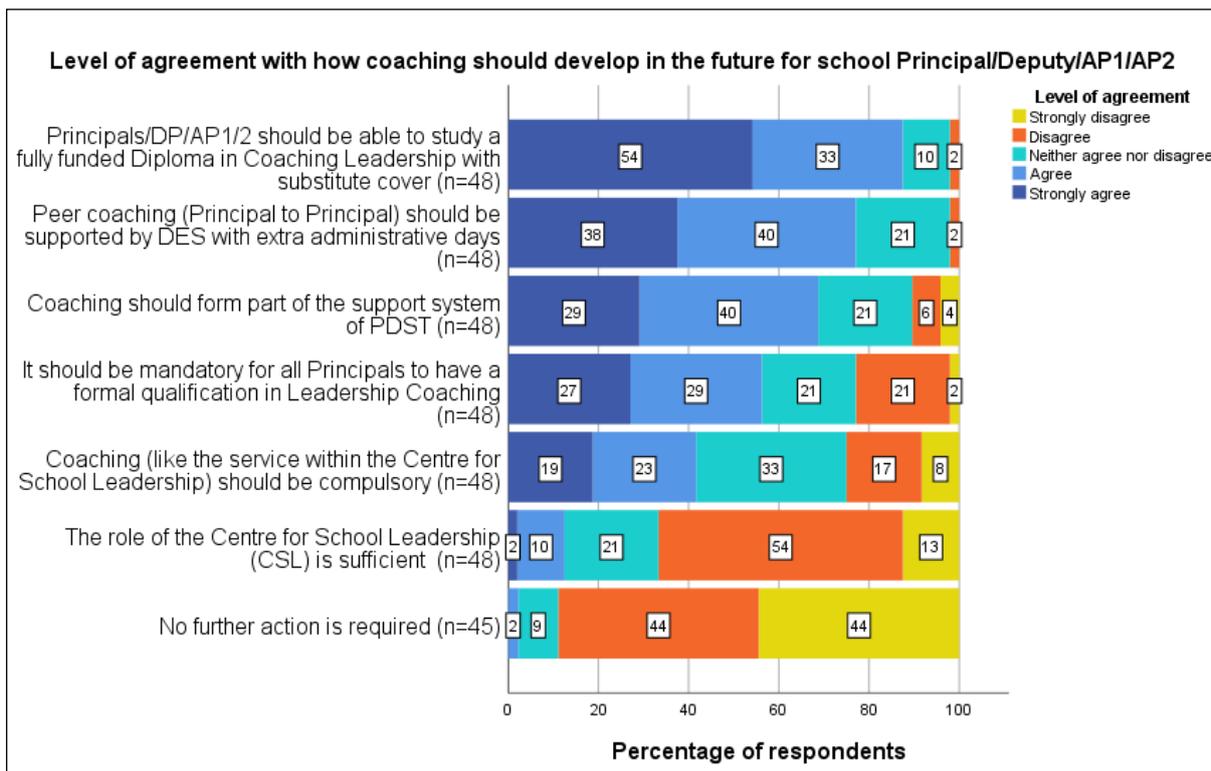
Figure 7. Level of agreement with how coaching should develop in the future for school principals [51].
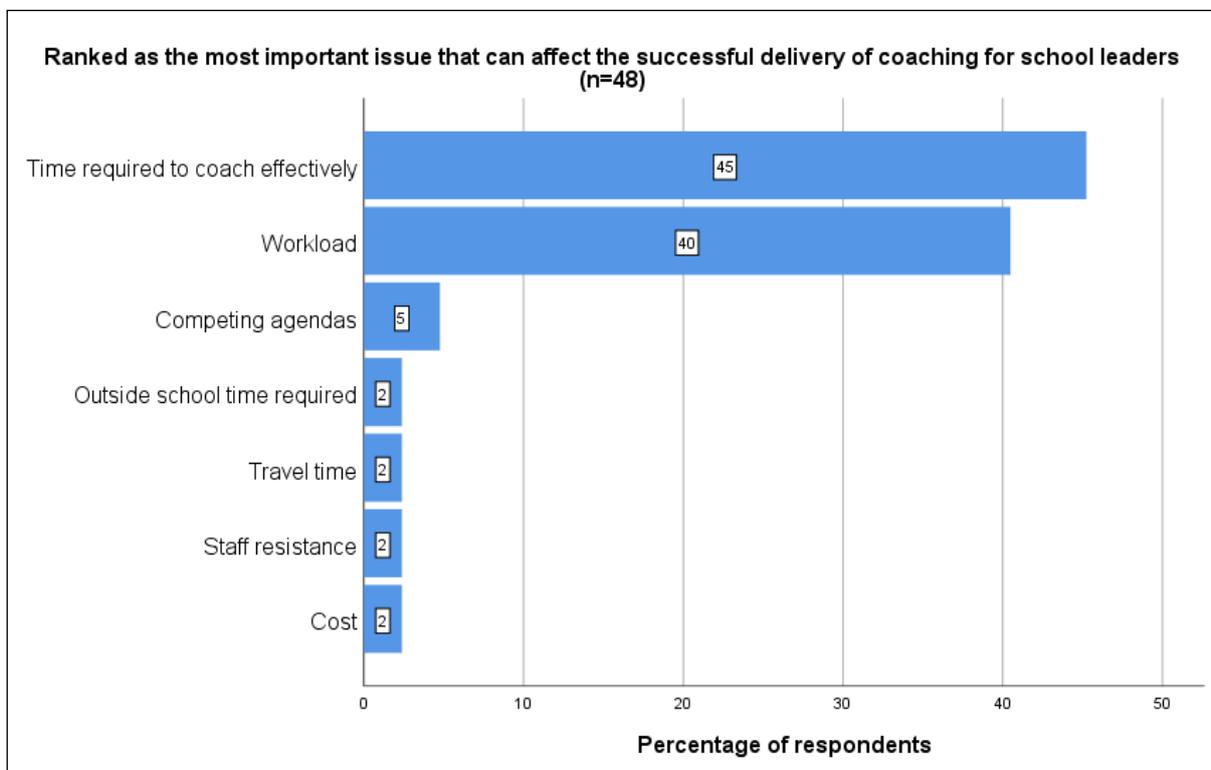

Figure 8. Most important issues affecting the successful delivery of coaching for school leaders [51].

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