



MENTORING AND COACHING IN EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP: FOSTERING REFLECTIVE AND STRATEGIC SCHOOL LEADERS

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Abstract:

In the context of increasingly complex and demanding educational environments, school leadership must evolve through sustained, reflective, and context-responsive professional development. This paper examines the integral role of mentoring and coaching as dual modalities for cultivating adaptive, inclusive, and strategic educational leaders. Drawing on recent literature in leadership development, organizational learning, and adult education, we delineate the conceptual boundaries and synergies between mentoring—grounded in relational trust, identity formation, and professional socialization—and coaching, which emphasizes structured reflection, feedback, and performance-oriented goal setting. We explore theoretical models such as the GROW

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framework, reflective practice theory, and identity-centered leadership to frame how these practices operate within formal and informal developmental structures. Emphasis is placed on the necessity of embedding these approaches into leadership pipelines, school improvement plans, and peer collaboration systems. Through an integrative review of contemporary empirical findings, we argue that mentoring and coaching are not peripheral but foundational to leadership capacity building in Gymnasia (lower secondary schools), General Lyceums (upper secondary general schools), and EPAL (vocational upper secondary schools) institutions. The paper further advocates for equity-responsive, context-specific, and longitudinally evaluated mentoring and coaching systems as a means to foster resilient, emotionally intelligent, and socially responsive school leaders.

Keywords: educational leadership, instructional coaching, mentorship in schools, school principal development, GROW model

1. Introduction

The role of educational leadership has evolved significantly over the past two decades, shaped by shifting policy landscapes, accountability measures, and increasingly complex school environments. School leaders are now expected to respond not only to instructional and administrative demands but also to the social, emotional, and operational needs of diverse educational communities. These challenges require adaptive expertise, emotional intelligence, strategic decision-making, and a commitment to equity and inclusion (Balckman, 2010; Eriksen et al., 2019; Odimmega et al., 2021).

In response to these multifaceted demands, there is growing recognition that formal qualifications alone are insufficient for sustained leadership effectiveness. Instead, continuous professional learning—grounded in reflective, dialogic, and relational processes—is now seen as critical for leadership development (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017). Within this context, mentoring and coaching have emerged as two of the most prominent strategies for supporting leaders across career stages. These approaches provide structured yet personalized support mechanisms that enable educational leaders to refine their practice, strengthen their professional identity, and foster collective capacity within their institutions.

Despite the widespread adoption of mentoring and coaching across education (Abetang et al., 2020) and various professional sectors, their integration into educational leadership remains inconsistent and under-theorized (Robertson, 2016; Barnett and O'Mahony, 2008). Often treated as interchangeable, mentoring and coaching are in fact distinct in purpose, structure, and process. Mentoring typically involves a more experienced professional providing career guidance, psychosocial support, and role modeling for a less experienced mentee. This relationship often spans a longer duration and emphasizes professional socialization, identity formation, and career navigation

(Zachary, 2012). Coaching, by contrast, is a goal-oriented, non-directive process that facilitates critical reflection and problem-solving through active listening, questioning, and feedback. Coaches do not necessarily have more experience but are trained to support individuals in identifying and achieving their own professional goals (Knight, 2018).

In the field of educational leadership, both mentoring and coaching have demonstrated potential in enhancing leadership efficacy, building resilience, and promoting reflective practice. Leaders engaged in coaching relationships often report greater clarity in decision-making, improved communication skills, and increased confidence in navigating complex school environments (Aguilar, 2013). Mentoring relationships, particularly when aligned with structured leadership development programs, have been shown to support novice leaders in role adaptation, community engagement, and professional networking (Cranston, 2013).

Moreover, coaching and mentoring can serve as critical mechanisms for advancing equity and diversity in leadership. Research suggests that women and leaders from marginalized backgrounds often face unique challenges in accessing informal networks of support and advancement opportunities. Formalized coaching and mentoring programs can help address these barriers by creating safe spaces for reflection, empowerment, and skill-building (Cele and Maphalala, 2025; Vongalis-Macrow, 2014; Schoenberger, 2015; Archard, 2012; Lumby and Coleman, 2007).

The theoretical underpinnings of mentoring and coaching in leadership are varied but share a commitment to adult learning principles, social constructivism, and systems thinking. Notably, frameworks such as Donald Schön's (1983) Reflective Practitioner model, emphasize the importance of reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action in complex professional contexts. Similarly, the GROW Model (Whitmore, 2009), a widely adopted coaching framework, structures professional conversations around Goal-setting, exploring the current Reality, generating Options, and establishing the Will to act. These frameworks enable leaders to engage in structured dialogue that promotes clarity, accountability, and growth.

In school systems, however, the success of coaching and mentoring initiatives depends not only on individual commitment but also on broader organizational factors. Research underscores the significance of psychological safety, trust, and a learning-oriented culture in ensuring the effectiveness of developmental relationships (Kools and Stoll, 2016). Without such enabling conditions, mentoring can become perfunctory, and coaching can be misinterpreted as performance evaluation rather than developmental support. Leaders must therefore navigate the tensions between accountability and growth while fostering environments where vulnerability and feedback are normalized. While several countries have incorporated mentoring and coaching into national leadership standards and preparation frameworks, such as the UK's National Professional Qualifications (NPQs) and Australia's Principal Standard, implementation varies significantly by context. In many school systems, coaching is often perceived as a

remedial intervention rather than a proactive leadership strategy. Similarly, mentoring is often informal, poorly structured, or dependent on interpersonal dynamics rather than professional criteria (Bush, 2009). These inconsistencies highlight the need for more rigorous conceptualization, system-wide integration, and evaluation of mentoring and coaching practices in educational leadership.

This paper contributes to that need by offering a critical synthesis of research and practice on mentoring and coaching within school leadership. It aims to clarify the conceptual distinctions and complementarities between mentoring and coaching; examine evidence-based models and frameworks used in educational leadership development; identify key success conditions and institutional strategies for embedding mentoring and coaching, and explore implications for policy, leadership preparation, and professional learning systems. In doing so, the paper positions mentoring and coaching not as auxiliary practices but as core elements for building sustainable, reflective, and equity-centered educational leadership. By reframing these approaches as professional necessities rather than optional extras, school systems can better support leaders to thrive in complexity, build collective capacity, and drive transformative change.

2. Mentoring in Educational Leadership

The evolving landscape of educational leadership necessitates a multidimensional skill set that transcends traditional administrative functions. As illustrated in Figure 1, contemporary educational leaders are increasingly expected to embody four interrelated roles: Mentor, Coach, Innovator, and Collaborator. These roles reflect a paradigm shift toward relational, adaptive, and learning-centered leadership. As Mentors, leaders provide developmental guidance and identity affirmation to emerging professionals. In the role of Coach, they facilitate reflective inquiry and goal-oriented growth. As Innovators, they champion change, promote creative problem-solving, and lead pedagogical transformation. Finally, as Collaborators, they build trust-based networks, foster distributed leadership, and cultivate inclusive school cultures. Understanding and operationalizing these interconnected roles is critical for leaders navigating complexity and striving for systemic equity in education.

In contemporary education systems, mentoring has emerged as a foundational strategy for supporting the development of effective and adaptive school leaders. Far from being a remedial or peripheral activity, mentoring is now widely recognized as a structured, relational, and intentional process that enhances leadership capacity through guided reflection, professional socialization, and contextually relevant support (Hobson and Maxwell, 2017; DeWitt, 2020). The complexities faced by school leaders—ranging from instructional leadership and staff management to crisis response and inclusion—necessitate professional development models that are dialogic, sustained, and grounded in trust.

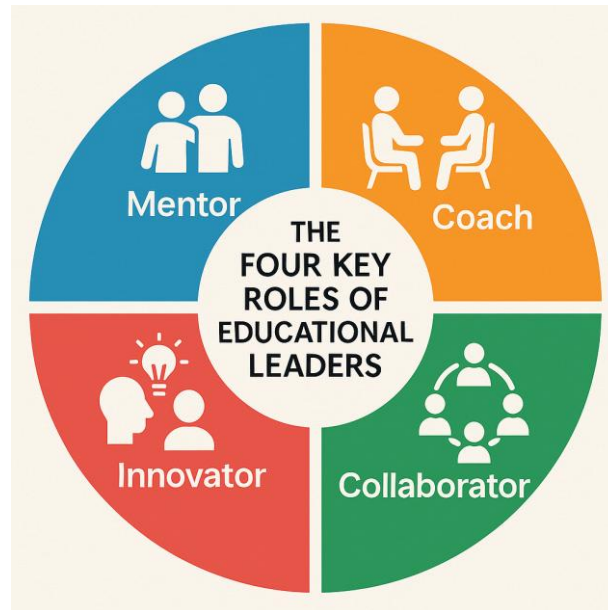


Figure 1: The Four Key Roles of Educational Leaders:
Mentor, Coach, Innovator, Collaborator

Mentoring in educational leadership is informed by adult learning theory (Merriam and Bierema, 2014), social learning theory (Bandura, 1977), and situated professional learning (Webster-Wright, 2009). It typically involves a more experienced leader supporting a less experienced colleague in navigating professional challenges, expanding their leadership identity, and developing resilience in dynamic school environments. This process is developmental rather than evaluative, emphasizing mutual engagement, reflective dialogue, and the co-construction of professional knowledge.

Contemporary models of mentoring increasingly emphasize a shift from directive, advice-giving roles to more facilitative and learner-centered approaches. For example, the Reciprocal Mentoring Model (Zachary and Fischler, 2019) reframes the mentoring relationship as a mutual learning partnership, while the Developmental Mentoring Framework (Jenkins, 2013) outlines stages of mentee growth and emphasizes the importance of psychological safety and goal alignment. These approaches align with broader educational leadership paradigms that prioritize emotional intelligence, relational trust, and reflective practice.

Empirical research supports the effectiveness of mentoring programs in promoting novice school leaders' confidence, role clarity, and retention (Griffin et al., 2020; Perry, 2019; Ingersoll and Strong, 2011; Dubois et al., 2002). Formal mentoring arrangements—particularly when embedded in leadership development frameworks—provide mentees with opportunities for identity formation, career guidance, and ethical decision-making. Moreover, mentors themselves often report reciprocal benefits, including renewed commitment to leadership values and enhanced reflective capacity

(Pickett, 2022; Lamm et al., 2020; Dziczkowski, 2013; Crisp and Alvarado-Young, 2018; Stead, 2005).

Importantly, mentoring has also been recognized as a vehicle for advancing diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) in school leadership pipelines. Structured mentoring opportunities can help address systemic barriers faced by women, racialized educators, and leaders from marginalized backgrounds by offering access to insider knowledge, affirming leadership identity, and reducing isolation (Lewis and Diamond, 2023). Initiatives such as identity-congruent mentoring (Wilkerson and Reynolds, 2021) highlight the value of shared experience and cultural relevance in effective mentorship. Nonetheless, mentoring is not without its challenges. Poorly implemented programs, lacking structure, training, or institutional support, can lead to role confusion, dependency, or superficial engagement (Hobson, 2021). To avoid such outcomes, effective mentoring systems should establish clear expectations, offer mentor training, match participants based on developmental goals, and integrate regular evaluation and feedback mechanisms.

As education systems continue to confront learning difficulties, leadership succession gaps, equity challenges, and complexity in school governance, mentoring must be positioned as a strategic investment rather than an ancillary support (Vagelas and Leontopoulos, 2023; Leontopoulos et al., 2024a; Leontopoulos et al., 2024b; European Commission, 2023; National Mentoring Research Center, 2019). When intentionally embedded within leadership development policies, mentoring offers a high-impact, low-cost approach to building reflective, resilient, and equity-focused school leaders.

3. Coaching in Educational Leadership

Coaching has increasingly gained traction as a powerful, evidence-based strategy for fostering leadership capacity in education. Distinct from mentoring, coaching is typically non-hierarchical, short- to medium-term, and highly goal-driven, focusing on the facilitation of reflection, decision-making, and action planning. In the context of educational leadership, coaching enables school leaders to engage in focused professional dialogue, build self-awareness, and respond adaptively to complex leadership challenges (Robertson, 2016; Kraft et al., 2018).

The theoretical grounding of coaching lies in constructivist learning theory (Bruner, 1996), transformative learning (Mezirow, 2000), and positive psychology (Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi, 2014). Coaching fosters deep reflection through structured questioning, active listening, and non-directive guidance. The role of the coach is not to provide solutions, but rather to support those he manages in uncovering knowledge and committing them to actionable steps. This dynamic aligns closely with contemporary leadership theories that value reflective practice, distributed leadership, and adaptive expertise (Hargreaves and Fullan, 2020).

One of the most widely used coaching models in education is the GROW Model (Whitmore, 2009), which structures conversations around four progressive stages: Goal, Reality, Options, and Will (Figure 2). This framework provides a scaffolded approach that supports clarity, autonomy, and accountability. Similarly, Instructional Coaching (Knight, 2018) has become influential in school improvement efforts, offering embedded, ongoing support for principals and teacher-leaders with a focus on instructional practice, equity, and school culture.

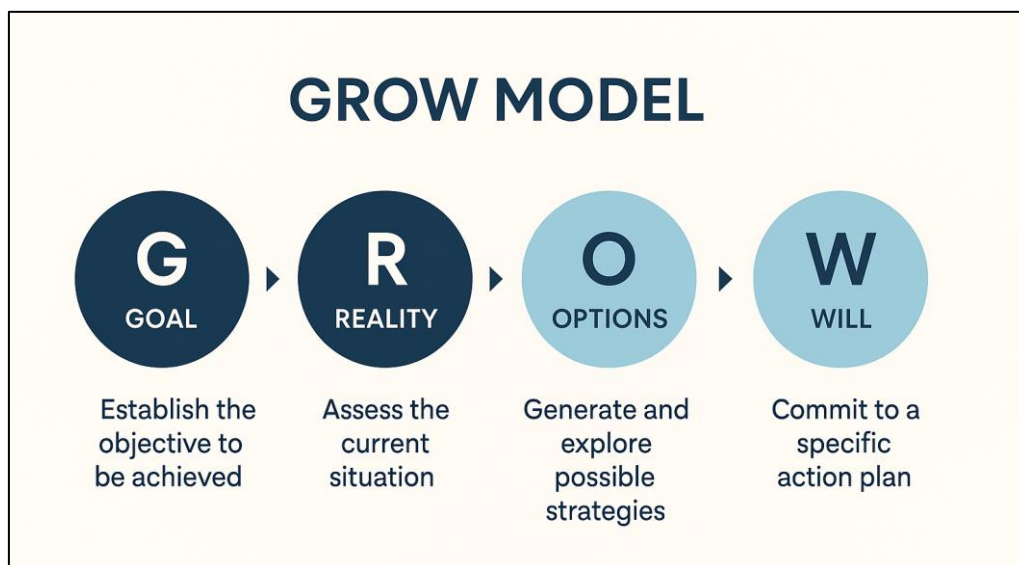


Figure 2: The GROW Model: A Structured Framework for Coaching in Educational Leadership

Recent empirical studies have highlighted the impact of coaching on leadership effectiveness, emotional intelligence, and resilience. For example, research by Aguilar and Dana (2020) found that leaders who engage in structured coaching demonstrate higher levels of reflective capacity and professional confidence. Furthermore, coaching has been associated with improved strategic decision-making, reduced burnout, and enhanced team leadership (Cerni et al., 2021; Hanley et al., 2008).

Importantly, coaching is also being recognized as a key strategy for supporting inclusive and equitable leadership. Equity-focused coaching enables leaders to critically examine bias, systemic inequities, and exclusionary practices within their schools. Identity-responsive coaching frameworks (Lazarus, 2025) emphasize culturally sustaining practices and aim to strengthen leadership practices that promote belonging and justice.

Despite its benefits, the implementation of coaching in education requires intentional design. Effective coaching programs depend on trained coaches, confidentiality agreements, clear goal-setting processes, and a culture of psychological safety. Misapplications, such as conflating coaching with performance evaluation, can undermine trust and effectiveness (Tschannen-Moran and Tschannen-Moran, 2016). As such, coaching must be framed as developmental, not supervisory.

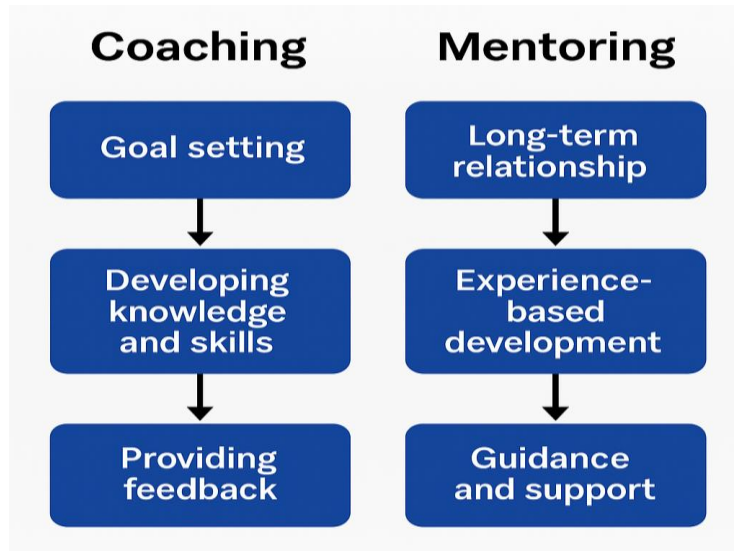


Figure 3: Conceptual Comparison Between Mentoring and Coaching in Educational Leadership

As educational leaders face increasing accountability pressures and emotionally demanding roles, coaching offers a timely and impactful approach for sustained professional learning. When embedded within school improvement strategies or leadership development frameworks, coaching has the potential to support reflective, adaptive, and equity-focused leadership at all levels of the education system.

Table 1: Comparison of Mentoring and Coaching in Educational Leadership

Aspect	Mentoring	Coaching
Primary Focus	Long-term professional growth	Goal-oriented performance improvement
Relationship Type	Hierarchical (senior-junior)	Peer or external partnership
Role of Facilitator	Advisor, role model	Facilitator, reflective partner
Duration	Long-term, evolving	Short to medium-term
Structure	May be informal or semi-structured	Highly structured (e.g., GROW)
Typical Goals	Career development, identity, navigation	Skill enhancement, decision-making, and reflection
Feedback Style	Experience-based, narrative	Question-based, facilitative
Power Dynamics	Imbalanced (mentor guides mentee)	Balanced (equal partnership)
Applicability in Leadership	Early career support, succession planning	Transformational leadership, decision support

Table 1 and Figure 1 provide a conceptual comparison between mentoring and coaching as distinct yet complementary strategies within educational leadership development. While both approaches are rooted in relational trust, reflective dialogue, and professional growth, they differ in purpose, structure, and application. Mentoring is typically characterized by a long-term, developmental orientation, emphasizing identity

formation, role socialization, and emotional support through hierarchical, experience-based relationships. In contrast, coaching is a short- to medium-term, goal-focused practice that centers on facilitation, inquiry, and self-directed problem solving, often within a non-hierarchical framework. The comparison underscores how each model addresses different dimensions of leadership development—mentoring being particularly suited for career transitions and psychosocial support, and coaching for enhancing decision-making, goal attainment, and adaptive expertise. Understanding these distinctions allows for more strategic integration of both models into school leadership programs and professional learning frameworks.

4. Applications of Coaching and Mentoring in Educational Leadership

The integration of coaching and mentoring practices into educational leadership development has been increasingly acknowledged as an essential component of systemic professional learning strategies. Beyond their conceptual distinctions, both practices have demonstrated empirical value in cultivating leadership capacity, fostering resilience, and advancing equity within diverse school contexts (Aguilar, 2020; Knight, 2018; Gooden et al., 2023). This section presents illustrative applications of coaching and mentoring in educational settings, grounded in recent empirical research, to elucidate their multifaceted impact on leadership development.

4.1 Structured Mentoring for Novice Principals

Recent mentoring initiatives have focused on the systematic support of novice school leaders during their initial years in principalship. For instance, several research studies have analyzed the mentoring program in Canada wherein early-career principals were paired with experienced mentors. The findings revealed enhanced role clarity, improved conflict resolution, and a stronger sense of professional identity among mentees. Additionally, mentors benefited from renewed professional engagement and opportunities for reflective leadership practice (Kutsyuruba et al., 2019; Kutsyuruba et al., 2013; Walker and Kutsyuruba, 2019).

4.2 Instructional Coaching in School Improvement

Instructional coaching has emerged as a critical lever for school improvement and leadership support, particularly in under-resourced contexts. Knight (2018) documented the implementation of coaching programs in urban U.S. school districts where leadership coaches worked directly with principals and teacher leaders to improve instructional practices. The outcomes included increased instructional coherence, enhanced collaborative culture, and improved leadership efficacy in driving change. Instructional coaching is increasingly recognized not only as a pedagogical support mechanism but as a strategic leadership development tool.

Moreover, Cobanoglou (2020) in his study analyzed the level of shared leadership of the schools in terms of the teachers' perception; measurement of job satisfaction and organizational trust levels of the teachers; and settling the relationship among these variables. In compliance with the results of the research, levels of shared leadership, job satisfaction and organizational trust at primary schools are high. Shared leadership at primary school predicts job satisfaction and organizational trust of the teachers in a positive and significant manner.

Additionally, Sezer (2018) determined the managerial characteristics of school principals and their effects on student development. The findings of his study showed that school principals exhibit both positive and negative personal characteristics. Among them, the most frequent positive personal characteristics of school principals were being good-humored, neat, sympathetic, fair, tolerant, and respectful, whereas the most frequent negative personal characteristics were authoritarian, punitive, normative, strict, and distant attitudes. School principals also exhibit negative administrative characteristics such as a punitive attitude, an excessively restrictive attitude, a distant demeanour, and an overly formal or bureaucratic manner. The most frequent instructional leadership characteristics of school principals included focusing on the school's educational success, motivating students to learn, caring for all students in order to establish an effective learning environment, leading the teaching process and appreciating students' achievements. Positive attitudes of school principals were found to foster in students' feelings of self-confidence, self-respect, a sense of self-worth, gratitude, awareness, love and courage. Conversely, negative attitudes were associated with students' feelings of fear, experiences of violence, humiliation, low self-confidence, lack of motivation, and timidity.

Furthermore, El Oraiby (2025) analyses teacher professional development in Morocco, considering the unique opportunities and challenges of its educational system. More specifically, in his work, the main professional development issues faced by teachers in Moroccan schools are highlighted, and a synthesis of challenges encountered is presented along with possible leadership strategies and opportunities for teachers' professional development. The study concluded, based on a review of the literature, that problems related to teacher professional development fall into two main categories: the quality and pertinence of teacher professional development programs, and the government's efforts and initiatives. As for the possible strategies, four main approaches were suggested: enhancing the quality of teacher professional development programs, developing online approaches, incorporating participatory and needs-analysis approaches, and adopting religious and role model-based approaches.

However, the findings of Mallillin et al. (2024) who examined the functions of human resource management -such as recruitment and hiring, employee and employer relationships, training and development, compensation, rewards, benefits, and disciplinary actions- showed that there is no significant correlation between these

functions of human resource management and their contribution to educational management practices or the responsibilities of HR in shaping such practices.

Finally, Sug-ang and Namocot (2025) examined the correlation between academic motivation, resilience, and academic competence. Results showed significant positive correlations between both academic motivation and resilience with academic competence, with resilience emerging as the strongest predictor.

4.3 Equity-Centered Coaching for Marginalized Leaders

Equity-oriented coaching approaches have gained prominence as schools confront persistent disparities in leadership representation and inclusion. Moorosi (2010) investigated the gender gap in secondary education, while Dyantyi (2025) studied the female principals in secondary school leadership in South Africa.

Moreover, Gonaim and Peters (2017) in their study identified effective leadership practices, characteristics and behaviors that contribute to the effectiveness of female academic department chairs and the challenges they face. Their findings indicated that effective chairs are distinguished by a combination of skills, knowledge, behaviors and attitudes. The findings also indicated that, despite the centralized leadership system in Saudi Arabia, there is evidence of a shift toward more collaborative leadership that promotes collegiality and collective interest.

Additionally, Amponsah et al. (2024) investigated the instructional leadership practices of school heads in Ghana and examined the extent to which headteachers' gender, professional qualification, and work experience differentiated their instructional leadership practices in public basic schools. The findings established that gender accounted for differences among headteachers in promoting a positive school climate, with male headteachers rating higher than their female peers.

Through a blend of scenario-based reflection and individualized coaching sessions, participants reported heightened leadership confidence, improved decision-making, and enhanced access to leadership roles previously constrained by structural gender barriers.

4.4 Peer Mentoring within Distributed Leadership Frameworks

Mentoring is also being adapted within distributed leadership paradigms to encourage reciprocal and collaborative leadership learning. In New Zealand, Robertson (2016) documented peer mentoring models that engage middle leaders in mutual, non-hierarchical support structures. Such initiatives have been proven effective in enhancing collective leadership capacity, fostering shared accountability, and mitigating professional isolation. Peer mentoring aligns with current trends toward flattening leadership hierarchies and promoting communities of practice.

Furthermore, Jato et al. (2022) investigated how the mentorship roles of headteachers as school cultural builders influence the performance of the newly deployed/transferred teachers in Kenya. The findings revealed that the mentorship roles

of head-teachers can significantly influence the performance of newly deployed/transferred teachers. However, it was revealed that most of the head-teachers provided insufficient coaching, limited supervision and inadequate feedback on lesson planning. The study concluded that effective mentoring of newly deployed/transferred teachers was hindered by factors including mentors' inadequate knowledge and skills in mentoring, head-teachers' work overload and head-teachers' insufficient leadership abilities.

4.5 Identity-Responsive Coaching in Culturally Diverse Schools

In culturally and linguistically diverse educational contexts, identity-responsive coaching frameworks are being employed to support leaders in fostering equity-focused school environments (Marinos, 2021). Carey et al. (2011) presented a review of coaching models that integrates critical reflection on identity, positionality, and bias within leadership development. Leaders who engaged in these models reported a deeper understanding of structural inequities and increased confidence in enacting culturally sustaining leadership practices. This coaching approach situates leadership development within broader commitments to social justice and anti-oppressive practice.

Furthermore, Chukwuma et al. (2020) examined staff perceptions on the sources of occupational stress so that appropriate measures are put in place to improve workers' wellbeing and productivity.

Skenderidou et al. (2025) studied the causes, the consequences, and mentioned the appropriate strategies for prevention of school dropout, while Papachristou (2023) investigated and identified the reasons that reinforce the phenomenon of school dropout among Roma students. The conclusion drawn is that the cultural-socioeconomic background of the Roma is a deterrent to their normal schooling. Thus, a more targeted approach of this cultural minority must be applied by the education leaders and authorities.

In addition, Tzianakopoulou and Manesis (2021) conducted a survey using semi-structured interviews on a number of principals of secondary education school units within Attica Prefecture, relative to the way in which they promote organizational culture in their school unit, the role that other stakeholders have, the promotion of cooperative climate and the association of culture and learning outcomes. The findings of their study revealed a clear lack of strategic orientation in promoting culture. The ways in which the members of the educational community are involved in organizational culture, cumulatively evaluated, indicate a strategic handling of the promotion of organizational culture. Evaluated, though, separately they are deprived of potency and reassert the incapability in approaching culture holistically.

Furthermore, Yue and Feng (2020), through content analysis, explored cultural leadership in the sustainable development of schools. In their study, the researchers synthesized relevant literature and research results and found that school leaders need to understand the importance of multiculturalism and diversity before they can

understand the school culture that still reflects group values. They also mentioned that cultural leadership is an important means to maintain school development and should be regarded as a crucial guiding force in education. They also identified cultural leadership strategies such as training teachers on how to teach diverse students, dealing with cultural diversity issues, integrating cross-cultural issues into curricula, supporting teachers to become cultural leaders, strengthening learning communities, and setting goals for building inclusive and diverse communities.

Collectively, these applications underscore the adaptability of mentoring and coaching to a range of educational leadership needs and contexts. Whether implemented as structured mentoring programs, instructional coaching partnerships, or equity-focused reflective models, these practices represent dynamic, relational, and contextually responsive strategies for enhancing school leadership effectiveness.

5. School Leadership Across Different Secondary School Types: Comparing Gymnasia, General Lyceums, and Vocational Lyceums (EPAL)

5.1 Introduction

Educational leadership in secondary as in primary schools (Koti and Gourgiotou, 2022) is not a monolithic function but rather a differentiated practice shaped by institutional goals, student demographics, curricular demands, and the socio-economic contexts of schools. Although principals had adopted some aspects of modern leadership models, it is necessary for them to acquire knowledge and skills for the other dimensions also and to act accordingly (Kolosidou and Kakana, 2023).

In Greece, as in many European systems, three distinct types of secondary institutions coexist: Gymnasia, General Lyceums, and Vocational Lyceums (EPAL). Although these school types operate under the same regulatory framework, leadership in each is exercised under markedly different pressures, requiring context-sensitive approaches and adaptive competencies (Gkoros, 2021).

5.2 Institutional Mission and Administrative Focus

Gymnasia (lower secondary schools) are designed to provide a broad-based general education, typically for students aged 12–15. School leadership is centered on developmental support, socio-emotional monitoring, and the management of early adolescence. Heads of Gymnasia often adopt a more pastoral and pedagogical leadership role, focusing on inclusion, student well-being, and basic skills acquisition (OECD, 2020). In contrast, General Lyceums are highly academic and exam-oriented institutions. The primary leadership focuses on instructional management, exam preparation, and academic outcomes, particularly in light of the pressures associated with the Panhellenic university entrance examinations. Principals in these settings often act as instructional supervisors and bureaucratic managers, with limited space for innovation due to national curriculum rigidity (Anastasiou and Papanoum, 2023).

Vocational Lyceums (EPAL), however, combine general and technical education, which adds considerable complexity to the leadership role. Principals of EPAL must manage dual curricula, coordinate work-based learning, and establish partnerships with industry, local government, and vocational trainers. Leadership here is more networked and externally oriented, requiring ongoing negotiation between the demands of the educational system and those of the labor market (Skenderidis et al., 2024; Parks, 1983; OECD, 2021; Hartinah et al., 2019; Ioannidou, 2014).

5.3 Student Profile and Equity Demands

Student demographics across these institutions further differentiate the leadership context. Gymnasia leaders must support students during a sensitive developmental phase marked by identity formation and emerging learning needs. Their leadership must balance discipline, inclusivity, and differentiated instruction.

General Lyceums attract more academically-inclined students, often from families with higher cultural capital. Leaders are expected to sustain high academic standards, manage parental expectations, and ensure smooth pathways for university preparation. This strong emphasis on achievement may reduce attention to student voice, inclusion, or emotional resilience.

Conversely, EPAL schools frequently serve students from working-class, immigrant, or educationally marginalized backgrounds. Leadership in EPAL thus involves social justice-oriented strategies, personalized support, and strategies for re-engagement and motivation. Many leaders adopt a transformational and empathetic leadership style, emphasizing a sense of belonging and alternative career pathways (Negoro and Wibowo, 2020; Onan et al., 2025; OECD, 2023). Muga et al. (2017) further concluded that even though teachers perceived their principals as more transformational than transactional, one's leadership style cannot be explicitly categorized, as both styles complement each other.

5.4 Curriculum and Pedagogical Complexity

The curriculum structure significantly influences leadership practice. Gymnasia provide a unified curriculum across subjects, encouraging interdisciplinary collaboration and holistic supervision. Leaders often work closely with teaching teams to embed cross-curricular competencies such as digital literacy, citizenship, and inclusivity.

General Lyceums emphasize discipline-specific expertise and external examination alignment. This often leads to fragmented leadership, with little collaboration across subjects. Principals may act more as administrative coordinators than pedagogical facilitators, focusing on performance indicators rather than educational innovation.

In EPAL, curriculum leadership is highly complex. School heads must oversee general education teachers, technical instructors, and external trainers, ensuring curricular coherence across classroom and workplace learning. EPAL principals need

both pedagogical vision and organizational agility, often navigating staff shortages, outdated infrastructure, and inconsistent vocational guidance policies (CEDEFOP, 2022). Katsari et al. (2025) investigated the motivations of educators at Greek Higher Vocational Training Schools for adopting innovative practices in education. They explored both internal and external factors influencing innovation. The findings revealed that internal motivations and the perceived needs of students and educational units are key drivers of innovation, whereas gender and age do not significantly correlate with motivation. Furthermore, experienced educators show a greater inclination toward innovation, associating it with professional prestige and collaboration satisfaction. External mandates, such as government policies, often lack effectiveness unless adequately supported. As a conclusion, Katsaris' et al. (2025) study emphasizes that educational innovation should stem from intrinsic motivation, collaborative environments, and student-centered approaches, and highlights the crucial role of internal leadership.

5.5 Professional Development and Collaboration

Leadership strategies also vary in promoting teacher development. In Gymnasia, a culture of collaboration is more easily fostered due to shared student needs and manageable class sizes. Principals typically facilitate inclusive dialogue and professional learning communities.

In General Lyceums, hierarchical subject domains and individual exam accountability often inhibit collaboration. Leadership interventions must therefore intentionally build cross-disciplinary dialogue, countering the “silo effect” of high-stakes academic culture.

EPAL schools, by contrast, necessitate interdisciplinary coordination, especially in organizing apprenticeship placements and ensuring curricular relevance. Leaders often serve as boundary spanners, facilitating horizontal (within school) and vertical (with external actors) integration.

The evidence suggests that one-size-fits-all leadership approaches are insufficient for the diverse challenges of Gymnasia, General Lyceums, and Vocational Lyceums. Each school type operates with a distinct institutional logic, requiring differentiated leadership strategies that align with student profiles, curriculum demands, and external expectations (Figure 4).

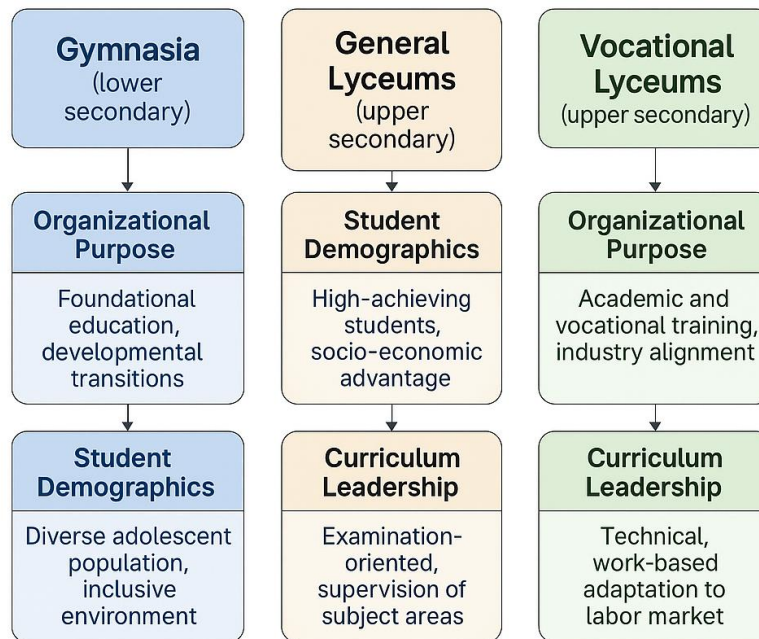


Figure 4: Differences in School Leadership Across Lower Secondary, General, and Vocational Upper Secondary Schools

Leadership in Gymnasia must remain developmentally responsive, fostering inclusion and early academic engagement. In General Lyceums, it should combine instructional discipline with emotional sensitivity, counterbalancing the pressures of performance. In EPAL schools, leadership must be transformational, strategic, and community-linked, with an emphasis on student equity and career readiness.

Ultimately, strengthening school leadership requires contextualized policy design, targeted professional development, and adaptive leadership models that reflect the complexities of contemporary schooling.

6. Discussion

The findings of this study affirm the vital role of mentoring and coaching as foundational, not auxiliary, components of educational leadership development. In an era where school leaders navigate increasingly complex, high-stakes, and emotionally demanding environments, these relational learning processes offer structured, reflective, and adaptive mechanisms for building leadership capacity across all school levels and types. Mentoring emerges as a deeply developmental process, rooted in trust, identity affirmation, and professional socialization. It supports novice leaders in navigating the transition into complex leadership roles while also advancing equity by offering identity-congruent support to underrepresented leaders (Griffin et al., 2020; Perry, 2019). Coaching, on the other hand, provides a dynamic, evidence-based strategy for enhancing reflective practice, emotional intelligence, and strategic agility. Its alignment with adult learning theory and transformative leadership underscores its potential to recalibrate

school leadership practices (Aguilar and Dana, 2020; Sasan et al., 2023; Alzoraiki et al., 2024).

This synthesis also reveals that the application of coaching and mentoring must be context-sensitive, especially when applied across differentiated school types such as Gymnasia, General Lyceums, and EPAL. As demonstrated, each institutional setting imposes unique leadership demands—whether developmental responsiveness in Gymnasia, academic performance management in Lyceums, or networked strategic leadership in EPAL (Gkoros, 2021; OECD, 2023). Therefore, one-size-fits-all professional development models are both ineffective and inequitable.

To operationalize the benefits of mentoring and coaching, we recommend a system-wide strategy that includes:

- **Institutionalization in Policy and Practice:** Embed mentoring and coaching within formal leadership standards, evaluation systems, and career progression frameworks, ensuring they are not left to discretionary or informal implementation (Bush, 2020).
- **Professional Training and Accreditation:** Establish structured training programs for mentors and coaches to ensure high-quality, ethical, and evidence-based practice (Jenkins, 2013; Knight, 2018).
- **Equity-Responsive Design:** Develop programs that specifically support women, immigrant educators, and leaders from underrepresented backgrounds through culturally sustaining and identity-responsive frameworks (Lewis and Diamond, 2023).
- **Contextual Differentiation:** Align mentoring and coaching models with the institutional profiles of different school types. For example, career guidance and psychosocial support are critical in EPAL settings, while academic leadership strategies are essential in General Lyceums.
- **Longitudinal Evaluation and Feedback:** Create monitoring systems to evaluate outcomes related to leadership efficacy, student equity, and institutional climate over time (Kools and Stoll, 2016; Hanley et al., 2008).
- **Culture of Reflective Practice:** Foster organizational cultures that support vulnerability, trust, and feedback by embedding coaching and mentoring in leadership routines and peer networks.

The future of educational leadership development lies not in periodic workshops or prescriptive training modules, but in relational, dialogic, and adaptive learning systems. Mentoring and coaching, when implemented with intentionality and supported by policy, offer a powerful pathway toward developing reflective, inclusive, and resilient leaders capable of responding to the shifting challenges of education in the 21st century.

7. Conclusions

The findings of this study underscore the multifaceted and context-sensitive nature of educational leadership, particularly in systems that include diverse institutional types such as Gymnasias, General Lyceums, and Vocational Lyceums. Leadership cannot be effectively exercised through a uniform framework; instead, it must respond dynamically to each school's pedagogical mission, student profile, and operational demands. In this context, mentoring and coaching emerge not merely as ancillary tools but as foundational practices for cultivating reflective, resilient, and equity-oriented leaders. Mentoring provides long-term, trust-based developmental support that fosters professional identity, confidence, and a strong sense of belonging, especially for early-career and underrepresented leaders. Coaching, by contrast, is characterized by its structured, goal-focused, and inquiry-based nature, helping leaders navigate complexity, strengthen decision-making, and cultivate adaptive expertise. When these practices are embedded systematically, supported by institutional commitment, structured training, and a culture of continuous feedback, they contribute to the formation of leadership that is not only effective but transformative. Moving forward, educational systems must reframe mentoring and coaching as core components of strategic leadership development, fully integrated into policy, practice, and professional learning pathways. Only through such intentional, embedded approaches can we prepare school leaders capable of fostering inclusive school cultures, driving innovation, and responding with agility to the evolving challenges of contemporary education.

Supplementary Materials

Not applicable.

Author Contributions

Conceptualization, I.S., S.L., P.S., K.P., and N.S.; investigation, I.S., S.L., K.P., and P.S., writing—original draft preparation, I.S., S.L., P.S., K.P., and N.S.; writing—review and editing, I.S., S.L., P.S., K.P., and N.S.; visualization, I.S., S.L., P.S., K.P., and N.S.; supervision, P.S. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of this manuscript.

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