

Instructional Coaching for School Principals: Lessons and findings from the Peruvian Principal Mentoring Programme

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Abstract

In Peru, the role of principals has been traditionally associated with administrative duties at school. However, in recent years the Ministry of Education of Peru (MINEDU) has been promoting an education reform oriented towards the improvement of school management, which implies empowering principals in their role as pedagogical leaders. This reform has become even more critical considering the poor principal performance both in the results of the National Principal evaluation and in the national school management indicators (MINEDU,2018), showing that for the most part, principals in the country are still unclear about the best practices to improve their pedagogical leadership strategies. Given this scenario, the MINEDU launched in 2019 a principal instructional mentoring pilot programme for government schools, aimed at strengthening principals' leadership skills. The programme promotes the use of school evidence to enhance pedagogical practice, school planning and collaborative work. The programme has now been implemented nationwide and its design has been adapted to address the new challenges posed to principals in the scenario of home school learning faced by COVID-19. By using the programme baseline and monitoring data, the study will explore the impact of the programme on principal's performance. Our findings show that the MINEDU mentoring programme has been significantly successful in enhancing principal skills to effectively support pedagogical practice, the creation of professional learning communities and school planning. These preliminary results show the relevance of developing further studies to better understand the importance of developing programs that use school evidence and data to improve school management.

Keywords: Leadership, Mentoring, School Principals, Principal'S Training

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Introduction

A principal plays a crucial role in the success of school, especially over teaching practice and student's performance (Sebring & Montgomery, 2014). Nearly 60% of a school's impact on student achievement is attributable to principal and teacher effectiveness (Sammons et.al., 2014). Yet, for several years the school principal's role was mainly associated with administrative and managerial duties, leaving aside their role as school leaders (Day & Sammons,2014). With the latest reforms carried out by governments and policymakers to make schools more accountable for students' outcomes, the pressure for principals to demonstrate that they are able to translate this reform into improvement for their schools, has increased considerably (Vega Rodriguez, 2018). This policy shift has led to the question, how well principals are prepared and supported to succeed in improving education quality on their schools.

In this sense, mentoring and induction programs have been recognized as essential for principal preparation (Villani, 2005; Leithwood, 2013). Mentoring approaches have grown popular over the past decade, especially in developed countries like the United States, United Kingdom, Canada, Australia and New Zealand (Carrasco & González, 2016). In Latin America, the use of mentoring strategies for principal professional learning is still incipient, with Chile, Argentina, Brazil, and most recently Peru being the pioneering programs in the region (GSL, 2020). International experiences portray principal mentoring and coaching as a highly promising strategy to principal professional development and to improving student achievement (GSL,2020), but there has been a lack of evidence on the effects of principals' preparation programs (Arshan et.al, 2019; Clifford et.al, 2016) and how to scale these programs in developing contexts, especially in Latin America.

In Peru, the focus of the reforms conducted by the Peruvian Government, has been mainly directed towards teacher training. It was not until 2016 that the Ministry of Education (MINEDU) started prioritizing policies targeting school principals, with the implementation of an induction programme and the formalization of a professional mobility scheme for principals (MINEDU,2019). In spite of this reform, the situation of principal training is still a matter of concern, where more than 60% of principals still show low performance on school management indicators (MPE, 2019). This situation clearly exposes that most part of principals in the country are still unclear about the best practices to improve their pedagogical leadership strategies.

Given this context, in 2019 the MINEDU implemented a mentoring training pilot programme addressed to school leaders in low-performance schools, which has escalated into a national policy for 2020. The mentoring strategy promotes an intensive use of data for school improvement. It comprises three main pillars addressed to build instructional leadership capacity: (a) school planning; (b) instructional coaching; and (c) the promotion of professional learning communities in the school. The programme content has been adapted to a remote learning strategy given the COVID-19 context, using a blended methodology that involves asynchronous and synchronous learning methods.

The purpose of the present study is to discuss the findings and lessons from the principal mentoring programme. The first part of this paper provides a background of school leadership in Peru. The second part presents the programme design and

methodology features. Finally, in the third part, using the analysis of the programme baseline and monitoring data collected during 2019-20, and drawing on survey data from a sample of principals who received the mentoring sessions, we examine the main programme outcomes to gain important insights on its effectiveness on improving principal practice.

1. School leadership and management background in Peru

In Peru, the role of principals has been traditionally associated with administrative duties at school. However, in recent years the MINEDU has been promoting a specific education reform, oriented towards the improvement of school management, resulting in empowering principals in their role as pedagogical leaders.

This reform has become even more critical considering the poor principal performance in the national school management indicators. An analysis of the results from the MINEDU school management monitoring system and from the National Principal Evaluation, reveals that school principals' performance on leadership and school management, specially concerning instructional coaching and school planning indicators, is poor and has not presented significant improvements throughout different historical measurements (MINEDU,2018). Figure 1 shows that while in most schools (42.4%) there is a participative school planning process, there is no following up of the programmed activities. In addition, more than 50% of schools are between level 1 and level 2 in the school planning indicator, meaning that in these schools there is not an institutional planning process: no institutional diagnostic, goals or activities planning.

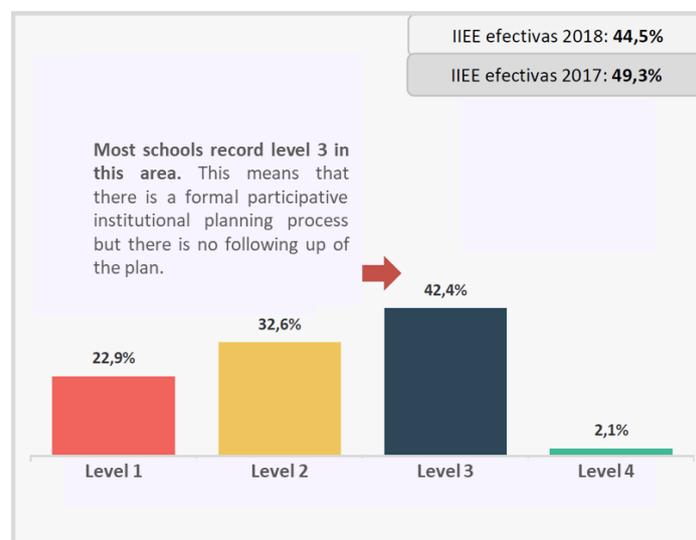


Figure 1: School Planning indicator, 2018

Similarly, the outcomes of the indicator for teacher monitoring (Figure 2) demonstrate how most schools are stagnated between level 1 and 2. This means principals do not have a teacher monitoring plan or, if there is, class observations are mostly not implemented.

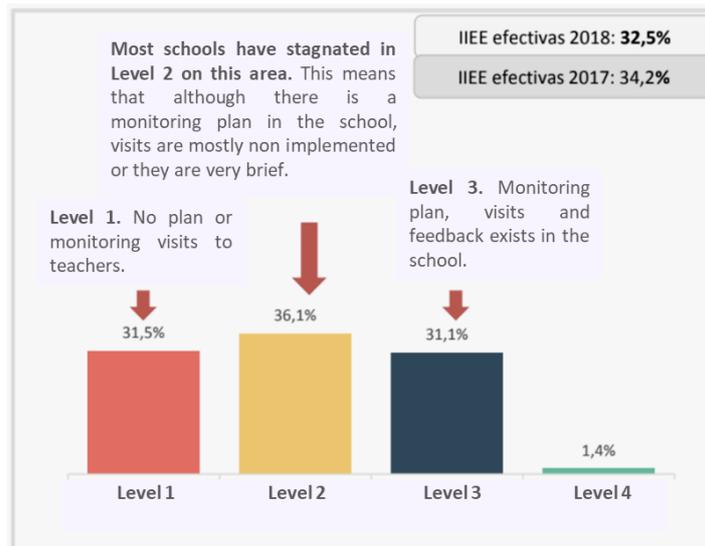


Figure 2: Teacher monitoring indicator, 2018

Further corroborating these initial evaluations, the results of the National Principal Evaluation (EDD) (Figure3) reveal that 67% of principals do not reach an effective level in the area of “monitoring pedagogical practices”. This shows that the principals are unable to either conduct class observations, or teacher feedback. Similarly, in the “Promote teacher collaborative learning” area, it was found that 43% of principals do not carry out activities for strengthening pedagogical practices in their schools. If they do undertake such activities, the same are not based on a teacher needs assessment or in school data. This situation clearly exposes that most part of principals in the country are still unclear about the best practices to improve their pedagogical leadership strategies.

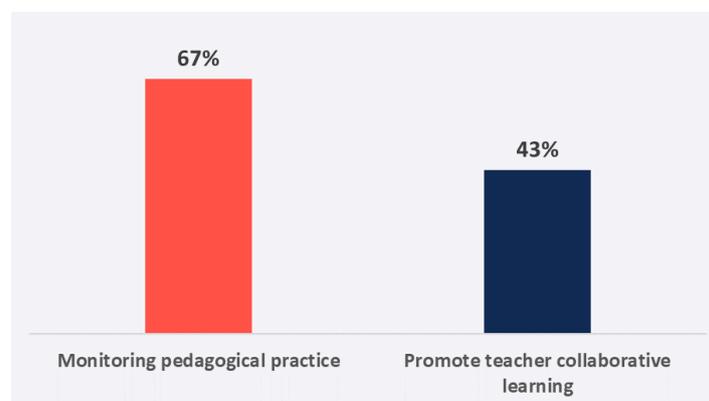


Figure 3: Principal performance evaluation, 2018

The evidence from a correlation analysis between students’ performance in the National Student Assessment (ECE) and the results of the Principal performance Evaluation for 2018, also reveals a statistically significant relationship between principal performance and student achievement. Thus, the percentage of primary and secondary-level students with a satisfactory level in the ECE 2018 in both reading and mathematics rises by almost 5% in the schools where principals have a better performance on monitoring pedagogical practices in the EDD.

Area assessed: Monitoring pedagogical practices				
EDD Score	% Primary Students with satisfactory level on Reading	% Primary Students with satisfactory level on Mathematics*	% Secondary Students with satisfactory level on Reading*	% Secondary Students with satisfactory level on Mathematics*
1 o 2	26.9	24.6	19.4	16.4
3 o 4	29.1	27.0	23.2	21.0

Table 1: Correlation between student achievement and principal performance

2. Principal Mentoring Programme

2.1 Programme design

Based on the analysis of the school leadership and management situation in Peru, the MINEDU decided, in 2019, to implement a mentoring pilot programme focusing on school leaders. The programme was created with the aim of strengthening principals' instructional and distributional leadership capacities through specialized in-house mentoring sessions.

The programme design draws on international evidence from other principal mentoring and coaching experiences, that are linked to improved principal practice, reflected in an improvement of school leadership (Nannyonjo,2017; Alonso, 2018; OEI,2020). The findings also show that offering mentoring and coaching training to principal significantly increases student achievements and improve teaching quality (Fryer,2017, Arshan et.al, 2019; Barros et.al, 2019; Jacobs et.al,2015). Taking this evidence into consideration, the Peruvian mentoring programme was expected to impact principal practice in the short term, teaching practice in the intermediate term, and finally students' achievement in the long term.

The programme was created as a remedial mentoring programme targeting experienced principals (with +4 years tenure) in low-performance schools and, therefore, who are in need of in-house training. The intervention assists primary and secondary level schools from urban and rural areas and each cohort receives the mentoring for two years.

The programme pilot was implemented in 2019 for 5 months, covering 215 primary schools and 259 principals in 21 (out of 25) regions of Peru. For 2020, the intervention increased its coverage to 536 schools, working with 593 principals in 23 regions for 10 months. Given the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, the intervention has shifted from face-to-face visits into a remote learning strategy, which also led to an adaptation of the mentoring protocols and instruments to a virtual mode. For 2021, the 2020 cohort will continue to receive the second year of mentoring.

2.2 Mentoring pillars

The delivery of the mentoring sessions contemplates a training design based on three main pillars in order to enhance principal instructional and distributional leadership:

- a) Institutional planning oriented to improve teaching practice and learning outcomes
- b) Strategies for improving instructional coaching to promote the strengthening of teacher practice.
- c) Promotion of Professional Learning Communities (PLC) based on school data to promote collaborative work in schools.

The three pillars are interconnected and oriented towards the improvement of leadership practice. On the one hand, the mentoring imparts principals with strategies for developing school planning oriented to improve teacher performance. Simultaneously, the programme also provides principals with strategies for enhancing instructional coaching and teacher feedback, from where it is expected the principal will obtain data from teachers' performance, they can use for improving collaborative work on their schools through the implementation of professional learning communities (PLC). It is believed these three pillars will led into an effective instructional and distributional leadership performance.

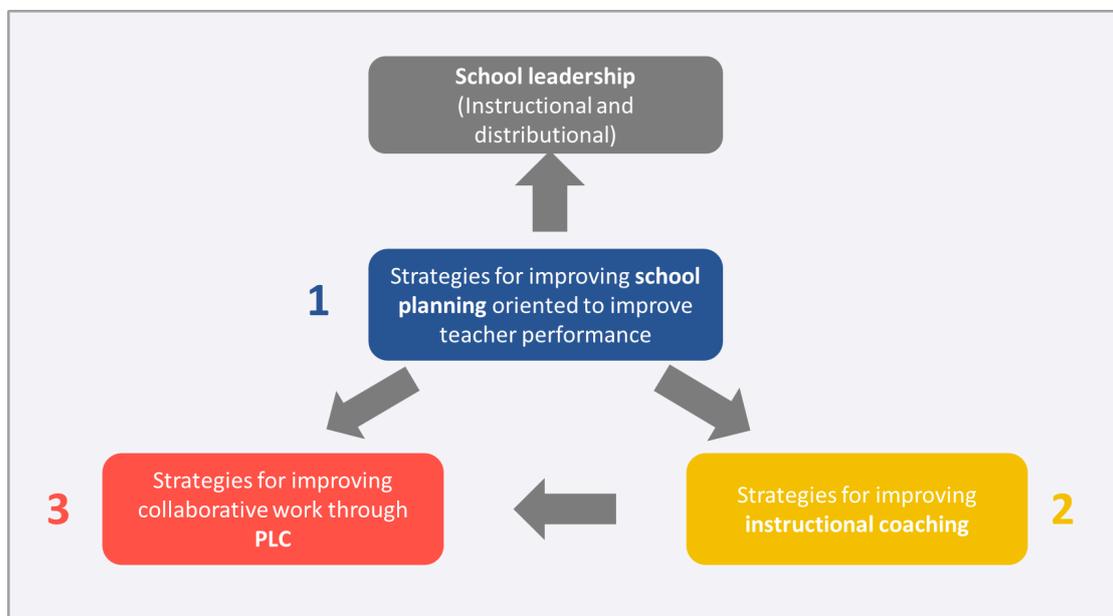


Figure 4: Mentoring Pillars

The '*school planning*' pillar comprises two areas of work with principals: planning process and remote learning strategies. In the planning process we support principals in the school-self-evaluation process, considering school strengths and limitations from the perspective of the whole-school community. Principals are also guided on the use of school data for goals establishment and activities addressed to improve the quality of teaching and learning. The second dimension was designed in the context of remote learning given COVID-19. On this dimension, principals are delivered with support in the use of the technology needed for distance learning (skype, zoom, google classroom, etc.) and in identifying the connectivity conditions of school members in the context of remote learning.

The '*instructional coaching*' pillar, comprises three main areas of work with principals: monitoring planning process, teacher feedback, and the use of monitoring outcomes data. Under monitoring planning, principals are mentored on how they can

design a class observation plan for the school year and guided in the development of an observation rubric (adapted to the characteristics of virtual learning). In the second dimension, principals are mentored on the teacher feedback process. This provides them with strategies for collecting and analyzing pedagogical evidence for understanding strengths and improvement areas of pedagogical practice, and equips principals with strategies for providing effective feedback to teachers based on evidence. Finally, within the third-dimension principals are guided on how to use monitoring outcomes for goals establishment and improve teaching practice.

The third and last pillar of *'promotion of PLC'* comprises two main areas of work: PLC planning and organization process and the use of school data for PLC implementation. Firstly, the principal is mentored in the methodology for the development of PLC, helping them to identify and analyse school data from pedagogical practice and students learning outcomes for the organization of PLC. Secondly, principals are guided in the distribution of roles for the PLC implementation, in the setting goals process from the results of PLC to improve teaching practice, and in implementing and adjusting teachers' practices to meet the needs of all learners.

2.3 Mentoring sessions

The mentoring sessions are organized in six meetings with the principal during the school year. During 2020, the sessions' content and instruments have been adapted to a virtual mode, to facilitate remote learning. Each session duration is 2 days long, during which the mentor works with principals in synchronous and asynchronous learning. Each mentor assists between eight (8) and eleven (11) principals.

The mentoring sessions consists in three main parts, as it is show in Figure 5: the mentor starts the session by making a personalized diagnostic of the principal needs on the three programme pillars, using a mix research methodology that involves interviews, documentary revision, etc. Based on the analysis of this evidence, the mentors fill up the principal needs' assessment instrument. Once identified the principals' strengths and needs, the mentor provides them with a reflective feedback and they engage into a practical workshop where the mentor promotes the use of the material from the in-house mentoring toolbox that can fit the principal needs. Finally, the session ends with the mentor and principal establishing a personalized improvement plan, on which they set the mentoring goals and agreements.

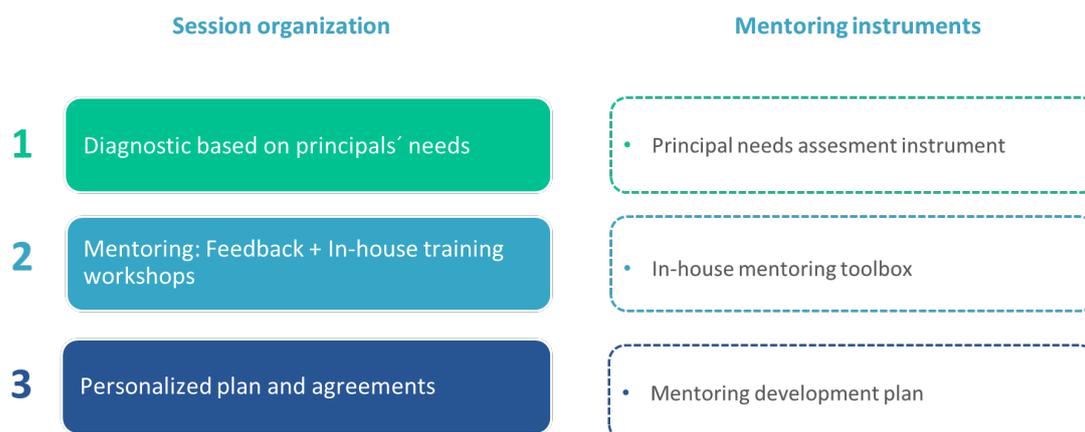


Figure 5: Structure of mentoring sessions

The mentoring methodology is grounded on the use of different education research tools to prepare a personalized diagnostic of the principal's needs, which are transversal to all three pillars. This methodology involves an interview with the principal and teachers to collect evidence on their practice regarding the three pillars, followed by the documentation revision of the school plan, a virtual observation of principal feedback to teachers; the analysis of teacher feedback to students (synchronous and asynchronous) for the instructional coaching pillar and, for the PLC pillar, involves a modelling PLC meeting organized by the mentor and a virtual observation of a PLC leader by the principal.

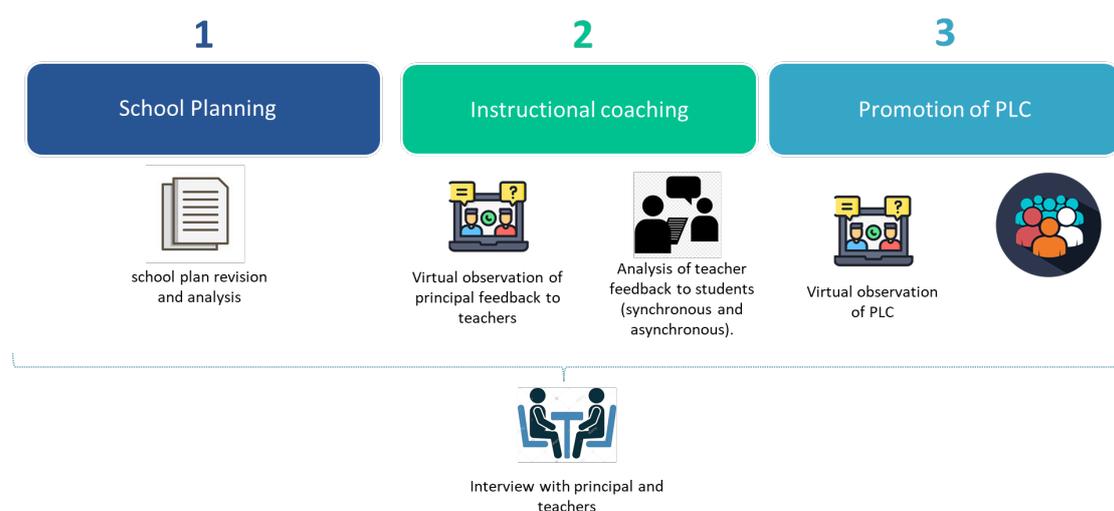


Figure 6: Mentoring methodology

2.4 Impact of school leadership training on school leaders' practice

Throughout the time of the programme implementation, our findings show that the mentoring programme has been significantly successful in enhancing principal skills to effectively support pedagogical practice, the creation of professional learning communities and school planning.

Using the baseline and monitoring data from the mentoring sessions reported during 2019-2020 by mentors, an analysis on school leaders' performance was conducted by the programme based on their progress on the programme indicators for the three

pillars (school planning, instructional coaching and PLC). For the 2019 pilot, the intervention prepared a final balance report in December 2019, presenting the results from the three mentoring sessions. For 2020, we collected baseline information from a new cohort of school leaders during the first three mentoring sessions and following up information for the other three. To date, three reports have been prepared up to the fifth mentoring session.

The 2019 pilot results showed a significant change on school leaders' practice for all three pillars and in particular for instructional coaching and promotion of PLC. As depicted in Figures 7 and 8, the percentage of principals who use monitoring outcomes for goals establishment and improve teaching practice increased in almost seven times in a span of three mentoring visits and the percentage of principals promoting PLC in their schools raised up from 22% to 94.5% by the end of the third visit.

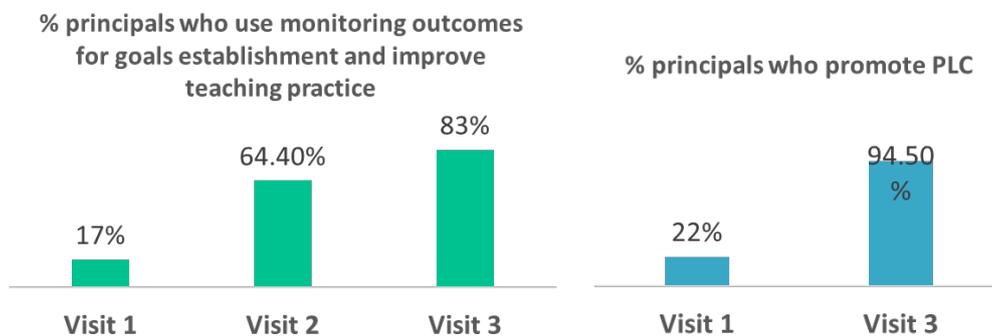


Figure 7: Instructional coaching indicator, 2019 Figure 8: PLC indicator, 2019

The implementation of the 2020 virtual mentoring strategy also displayed a positive progress on principals' practice. The latest programme monitoring report from October 2020, compared baseline information collected during the three first mentoring sessions with the results from the fourth and fifth sessions, conducted in September and October, respectively. Following a similar trend of the pilot, the results for 2020 confirm there is a significant progress in the instructional coaching and PLC pillar.

Thus, the percentage of schools with a monitoring plan raised progressively between sessions 3 and 5, with 90% of principals having an observation rubric, and 93% having a monitoring calendar by the fifth session. There is also significant progress in the percentage of principals who provide feedback to teachers, raising from 14.4% to 74% by the fifth session. The percentage of leaders using monitoring outcomes for improving teaching practice also increased from 3% in the baseline session to 72% by the fifth session.

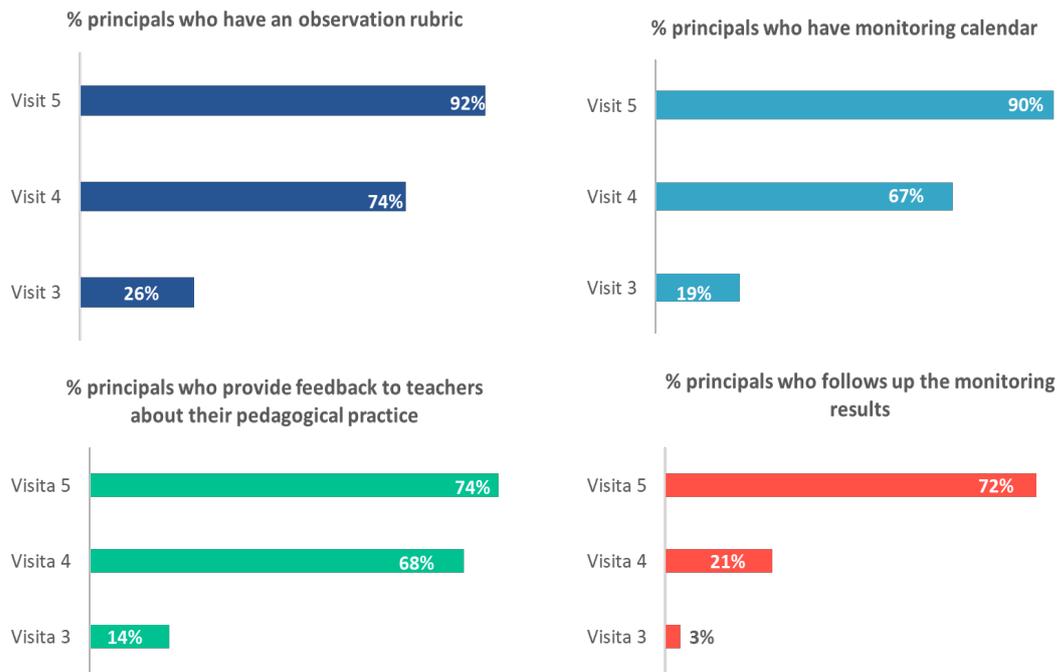


Figure 9: Instructional coaching indicators, 2020

In addition, the evidence shows that the number of schools implementing PLC based on data have progressively increased. As such, the percentage of school leaders organizing PLC in their schools rose from 50% in the baseline, to 86% on the fifth mentoring session. Similarly, and the percentage of principals that use school data for PLC implementation increased from 16% to 71% by the fifth session.

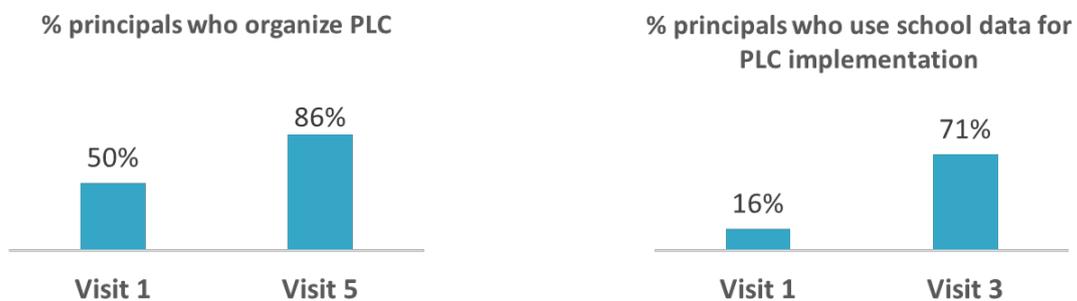


Figure 10: PLC indicators, 2020

As part of programme quality measuring, a satisfaction survey addressed to participant school leaders was implemented by the end of the third session in August. From the 345 respondents, 96.8% would recommend the mentoring programme to other colleagues. In addition, more than 90% of the respondents considered the programme to be 'useful' and 'very useful' to improve school planning, instructional coaching and collaborative work and that the level of satisfaction with the feedback provided by the mentor is more than 90%.

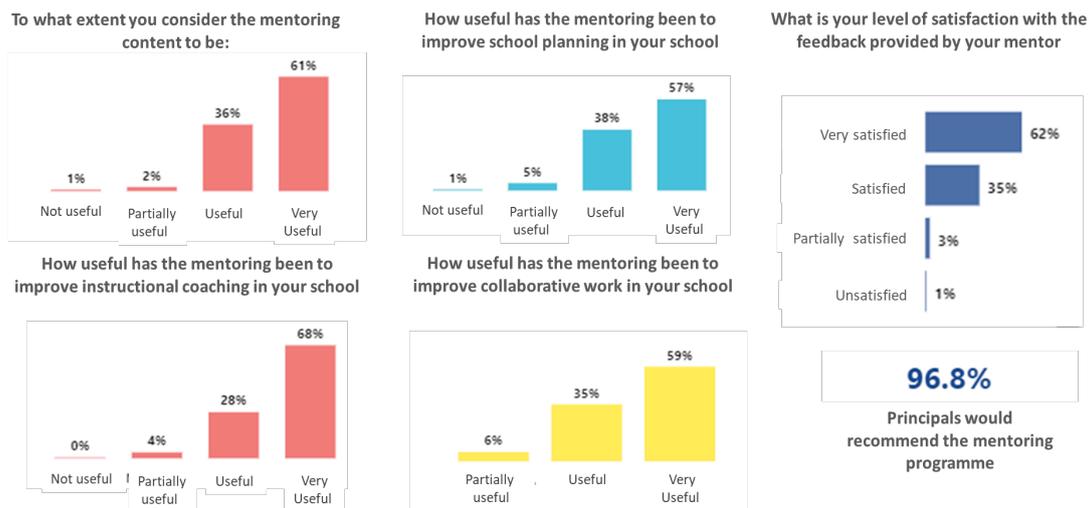


Figure 11: Programme quality survey outcomes

3. Lessons for implementing high- quality leadership mentoring programs

From the experience implementing the mentoring programme over these two years, we have identified certain lessons that can be useful for the design and implementation of high-quality leadership mentoring programmes:

Quality of mentors training

The mentor role is a crucial factor for achieving a change on school leaders' practice. This is why the programme conducts a meticulous selection process to guarantee they will be a good match for the principals. Part of the recruitment process involves an immersive workshop on mentoring and education research tools. This workshop is key for the mentor's preparation since, even when the prospective mentors are experienced principals, they are not necessarily trained on mentoring and coaching or in education research approaches. Therefore, it is crucial for the programme to conduct a sensitization process to ensure they understand the horizontal leadership focus we want them to promote in the school.

In this sense, mentors' training and sensitization are crucial for breaking with traditional hierarchical leadership models. It is vital to immerse mentors in the culture of distributional and instructional leadership so they can transmit this to principals and break with the common fear of feeling evaluated.

In addition to this, the programme provides support for the mentors, who are in charge of providing guidance to principals in the use of the programme protocols and instruments. Therefore, we look up for professionals with former experience on education research and social background for the mentor support profile, who also receive an immersive workshop on the mentoring tools.

Developing a bottom-up approach

We found a need to consider a bottom-up approach, to develop in-house training tools, in order to have a real impact on principal practice. Most leader training programs are designed from the policymakers' view without considering and

understanding the needs and motivations from local educational stakeholders, or in this case, to school leaders.

In this sense, it is pivotal for this type of programmes to receive constant feedback from mentors and school leaders in order to improve protocols and develop mentoring instruments that fits the beneficiaries needs. Taking this in consideration, the Peruvian mentoring experience, through consultation, focus groups, and surveys addressed to principals, is constantly collecting evidence from beneficiaries' satisfaction level with the programme as well as alerts, recommendations and good practices identified by mentors, which are taken into consideration in order to adapt and improve the mentoring tools and protocols to principals' needs.

Finally, flexibility and adaptation are crucial to succeed. Although there are official protocols and guidelines developed by the programme, it is important to consider that each school context is different, so the mentoring process should be flexible and adapted to each school and principals' needs and context.

Conclusions

The study presented the lessons and findings from the Peruvian experience of the first mentoring programme addressed to school leaders in the country. The results from the programme pilot and monitoring data reveals that the MINEDU mentoring programme has been significantly successful in enhancing principal skills to effectively support pedagogical practice and the creation of professional learning communities.

One of the most significant effects from the mentoring programme in the peruvian context has been the shifting from the traditional management model to a distributional and instructional leadership, reflected in the promotion of regular PLC, participative and collaborative institutional planning process. In this sense, there is reasonable evidence to believe that the mentoring process is leading into a progressive change on school leaders' practice towards a data based-decision making. Further research needs to be conducted on the effects of the mentoring on teaching and student achievement.

The mentoring programme methodology approach involving education research tools- such as triangulation, ethnography, interviews, observations-, represents an innovative strategy to make a solid diagnostic centred on principals' needs. Also, important to mention is the adaptation of the mentoring methodology given the remote learning context, which required thinking outside the box to adapt the mentoring protocols and instruments. This involved the development of an innovative methodology for collecting pedagogical and student evidence through synchronous and asynchronous methods for different connectivity scenarios.

Finally, in order to deliver high quality leadership mentoring programs, it is crucial to provide high quality mentor training and to consider a bottom-up approach that takes in consideration feedback and good practices from the protagonists: school leaders and mentors.

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