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How Principals influence, Facilitate, and Support instructional Coaching Programs

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This qualitative, multicase study examined how principals perceived the role of instructional coaches and how they facilitated, influenced, and supported teachers’ professional learning through the instructional coaching program. Including the researcher as a participant, 16 participants from three suburban school districts—including district-level administrators, principals, instructional coaches, and teachers—engaged in semistructured interviews. This study was framed by Desimone’s core conceptual framework for professional development and Spillane’s distributed leadership model. Data analysis revealed principals viewed instructional coaches as their partners in instructional leadership and professional learning facilitators. Principals facilitated and influenced the instructional coaching program by empowering teachers, promoting collaboration, and establishing a strong professional learning culture. Principals supported teaching engagement in coaching activities by clearly establishing the instructional coaching role, allowing for teaching-initiated professional learning, and ensuring coaches had the autonomy to work with teachers, including establishing goals. The findings identified several aspects of principal leadership that impacted the effectiveness of the instructional coaching program. These aspects included recognizing the importance of intrinsic motivation for professional learning and leveraging the partnership with the instructional coach to engage in their professional development and facilitate a culture of professional learning in their school.
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A tremendous amount of change is constant in education; new standards, new materials, new methods of evaluation, and the influx of technology are among the most impactful changes in 21st century classrooms (Mangin & Dunsmore, 2015). Teachers find they must change their teaching practices, integrate unfamiliar programs aligned to new standards, and meet the needs of an increasingly diverse student population in terms of language, culture, and economic status (Darling-Hammond, 2000; Denton & Hasbrouck, 2009). Furthermore, rigorous accountability measures and evaluation systems that compare student outcomes across classrooms, schools, and districts have added extraordinary pressure for school improvement, including ambitious student achievement goals (Coburn et al., 2016). Achieving sustainable change in classroom practices requires schools to develop systematic support for teachers, along with school leaders, for guiding and directing teacher learning (Elmore, 2003; Spillane et al., 2001; Supovitz, 2006).

School accountability efforts place expectations on schools to engage in continuous improvement. The school administrator as the instructional leader is expected to possess the skills to lead the staff through the improvement process. There is increased attention in local districts to policy and fiscal matters concerning learning opportunities for teachers who facilitate change (Every Student Succeeds Act, 2015). Local communities and states expect that the investments in professional learning pay off (Wallace Foundation, 2013). The Every Student
Succeeds Act (2015) outlined 11 specific instances where state and local agencies are encouraged to develop, train, and compensate instructional coaches to work with teachers to interpret data, design differentiated instruction, and develop assessments aligned to rigorous standards.

Bringing about standards-based reform requires a great deal of effort to reshape teacher practices to ensure students are prepared for their futures. To facilitate change, professional learning experiences need to (a) involve active participation, (b) promote collaboration between professionals, and (c) be job embedded or take place during the school day in the schools and classrooms to closely relate to the teachers’ specific context (Desimone et al., 2002; Garet et al., 2001). Instructional coaching as a professional development model includes the attributes of high-quality professional development, including (a) taking place over a sustained period of time, (b) involving collaboration with peers, and (c) organizing around specific problems of practices that originates in teachers’ own work with their students (Bean & Eisenberg, 2009).

**Statement of the Problem**

Instructional coaching programs are the primary choice of school districts in response to policy initiatives that include provisions for professional learning (Desimone & Pak, 2017). However, employing an instructional coach in an organization does not guarantee the individual will provide quality coaching (Coggins et al., 2003; Deussen et al., 2007). The efficacy of the instructional coaching program as a professional development initiative depends in part on how the coaching role is defined. To begin, principals, teachers, and coaches need a shared understanding that the coaching role includes sustained interaction with teachers with a focus on instructional improvement (Coburn & Russell, 2008; Fullan & Knight, 2011; Killion & Harrison,
Often, coaches find themselves immersed in administrative tasks, such as coordinating standardized testing or working with small groups of students. These tasks have little to do with providing effective professional development to improve instructional classroom practices (Coburn & Russell, 2008). In addition, although principals are supposed to be the primary instructional leader in the schools, they may not have enough knowledge of the district and school initiatives to fully understand or effectively lead the professional learning process. They can unwittingly sabotage the success of the professional development program by assigning coaches to administrative or clerical work rather than focusing on improving instruction (Fullan & Knight, 2011; Knight, 2009; Neumerski, 2013). Principals cannot afford to set up conditions where coaches are perceived as ancillary to enhancing the quality of teaching (Bean et al., 2010; Fullan & Knight, 2011). An investigation of how principals support the work of instructional coaches is important and relevant.

**Purpose and Research Questions**

The purpose of this study was to investigate how principals perceived the role of instructional coach, and how they facilitated, influenced, and supported the professional learning of teachers through the instructional coaching program.

The research questions for this study were:

- How do principals perceive the role of the instructional coach?
- How does the principal facilitate and influence the instructional coaching program?
- How does principal leadership support teacher engagement in instructional coaching activities?
This study was framed by Desimone’s (2009) core conceptual framework for professional development and Spillane’s (2006) distributed leadership model. Because professional development and instructional leadership play critical roles in school improvement efforts, it is useful to understand the interaction between the two concepts.

Core Conceptual Framework of Professional Development

After an extensive literature review that spanned 10 years, Desimone (2009) presented a framework that served as a means to inform research on professional development. The five-featured framework for professional development shapes the understanding of the complex nature of teacher professional learning. The features are (a) content focus, (b) active learning, (c) coherence, (d) duration, and (e) collective participation. Content focus refers to what teachers learn, including knowledge of subject matter and knowledge of how students learn. Active learning is the extent to which learning experiences provide the opportunity to be engaged in the analysis of teaching and learning. Coherence is the extent to which professional development is consistent with school, district, and state policies and reforms. Coherence also refers to how the learning experience is aligned with teachers’ knowledge and beliefs. Duration is the length of time and contact hours over which the learning experience takes place. Collective participation refers to learning experiences that involve multiple teachers. Effective professional development experiences that include all of these components increase teachers’ knowledge and skills, and can change their attitudes and beliefs. As a result of this growth, teachers are more likely to change their teaching practices, which can lead to improved student learning. The ideas from
Desimone’s (2009) professional development framework were meaningful to this research study because the features were consistent with tenets of instructional coaching. Instructional coaching is a powerful mechanism for teacher learning, in large part because it reflects the five features of effective professional learning: (a) content focus, (b) active learning, (c) duration, (d) collective participation, and (e) coherence (Desimone & Pak, 2017).

**Distributed Leadership**

Distributed leadership theory was developed in the 1980s and early 1990s. Drawing on previous research on the social context as an integral part of understanding individual cognition, Spillane et al. (2001) developed a theory of leadership based on the interdependence of people and their specific environment. Activities are distributed in a collective web of individuals, resources, and their situations. In a more recent model of this framework, Spillane (2006) proposed thinking about and analyzing leadership focused on three essential elements: (a) leaders, (b) followers, and (c) situations. Spillane et al. (2001) stressed the term leadership was not in reference to one particular person, such as the principal; rather, it encompassed a number of formal and informal leadership positions in the school. School leadership is a collaborative effort requiring multiple leaders to work together to enact leadership tasks. Distributed leadership can shed light on the importance of reciprocal relationships that further the goals of increasing teacher effectiveness.

The distributed model of leadership is a way to examine the how and why of leadership practice rather than the roles, strategies, and traits of the individual who occupies the formal role of school leader. The distributed leadership lens can help researchers capture how and why the instructional leaders do what they do rather than simply presenting a conditional relationship
(i.e., principal support is a condition for successful instructional coaching). These frameworks were used to formulate the research study in a way that provided insight into how principal actions impacted the work of instructional coaches. Another goal was for the research to compel principals to reflect on how their own day-to-day instructional leadership practice and decision making influenced, facilitated, and supported the work of instructional coaches. The distributed lens was used to analyze interactions among principals, instructional coaches, and teachers to shed light on how the professional learning function was stretched across a number of leaders, regardless of their formal roles. Specifically examining how and why principals distribute leadership to improve instruction (Spillane & Diamond, 2007) in professional learning through instructional coaches provided a more comprehensive understanding of leadership practices. Desimone’s (2009) professional development framework—with its disposition toward collaboration among learners, inquiry, and coherence with the school’s reform efforts—is aligned with the collective action to bring about organizational change.

**Researcher Positionality**

To address my own potential bias as a researcher, it was important to disclose my role as an insider in administration and coaching. At the time of the study, I had been a technology integration coach for 14 years and an instructional coaching program coordinator for 8 years. My first-hand experience as a coach and a coordinator of a coaching program made me interested to learn how building leadership can impact an instructional coaching program. My collegial relationships in my district with the instructional coaches and principals drew me to my research topic; they motivated me to explore how the behaviors of principals can empower coaches or prevent them from meeting the potential of high-quality professional development providers. As
the director of technology, teaching, and learning, one of my duties was to coordinate the instructional coaching program. We met as a group monthly, and I met with each of the coaches frequently. At the time of the study, I was also one of the evaluators for one of the coaches shared between two elementary schools.

Principals in my district had the instructional coaches coordinate the state and district assessments, work with small groups of students for intervention, and compile data into spreadsheets. While working with the instructional coaches in the first 2 years of the program, several issues emerged. The job description was ambiguous and led to confusion as to how the principals could use their coaches and what duties coaches could be assigned. The job description was so broad it was almost impossible to evaluate their performance. The coaches received no training on how to work with colleagues or administrators. This lack of training was particularly problematic because the principals treated the coaches as pseudo administrators. Teachers did not recognize coaches could be valuable resources to support their professional learning because the principal did not seem to value the potential of the instructional coach program. Coaches did not know how to advocate for themselves with their principals, nor did they know how to enlist teachers to engage them as professional learning partners.

In the 8 years prior to the study, the district administrators had taken significant steps to intervene. The coaches went to extensive training on various models. There were several opportunities to network with other coaches in neighboring school districts. The instructional coaches helped me write an instructional coach handbook for the district based on extensive research. I provided professional development opportunities to the district’s principals on the expectations of the instructional coaching program and the components of the handbook. The
superintendent had also become much more knowledgeable and could hold the principals accountable to honor the instructional coaching program goals and practices.

From my personal experiences, I became passionate about the role of an instructional coach and the conditions that we set up as administrators to ensure the program’s success. Through my interactions with coaches in many surrounding school districts, I learned some instructional coaches become frustrated with their ability to make an impact. They may even leave their positions after just 1–2 years due to the lack of support from their school administrators. I hoped this research could shed light on how principals can leverage instructional coaches as a valuable resource that aligns with and enhances their instructional leadership.

**Significance of the Study**

Teachers everywhere are immersed in accountability-driven reforms (Elmore, 2003). Teachers need a great deal of guidance concerning teaching to standards, aligning assessment methods, and selecting and organizing instructional materials. Simultaneously, teachers are learning how to plan and implement entirely new models of classroom instruction. There is an increased emphasis on accessing, interpreting, and using data to drive instruction (Elish-Piper & L’Allier, 2011; Gallucci et al., 2010; Marsh et al., 2015). Given the need for professional learning in this environment, research has suggested incorporating an instructional coaching program as part of a school improvement plan could support the implementation of new initiatives and improve classroom practices (Desimone & Pak, 2017; Neuman & Cunningham, 2009). Classroom teachers can rely on their coach for support as they design new learning environments that provide differentiated instruction aligned to the standards, and based on
assessment data. However, when policy or school culture prevent the effective implementation of the instructional coaching program, teachers are unable to leverage valuable professional development opportunities.

Principals have more influence on school reform than any other staff member because they direct school change and create learning environments that support teachers to meet the needs of all students (Blase & Blase, 1999; Fullan, 2007; Waldron & McLeskey, 2010; Wallace Foundation, 2013). Along with the principal, the instructional coach is a vital participant in the instructional change process (Fullan & Knight, 2011).

This study sought to inform the work of school and district leaders as they developed highly effective instructional coaching programs. Matsumura et al. (2009) showed an instructional coaches’ effectiveness is directly impacted by a principal’s actions. Therefore, research to understand specifically what principals do to support their instructional coaches will contribute to a growing knowledge base on how coaches and principals can share in the professional learning of teachers. This research could also play a part in providing models and guidelines for instructional coaching programs. Such knowledge could serve as valuable content for principals’ or school district leaders’ professional development, particularly in settings with new instructional coaching programs. Results from this research will be useful for policymakers, such as district and school leaders, to provide guidance for the development of highly effective instructional coaching programs.

**Delimitations and Limitations**

Due to the research design, the study was subject to a number of delimitations. The participant sample was small and limited to three school district teams, each composed of (a) one
or two principals, (b) one or two instructional coaches, (c) one or two teachers, and (d) the district-level administrator who coordinated the instructional coaching program. The study was also limited to the principal, instructional coach, and teacher teams in elementary schools. Teachers in elementary schools are typically generalists, teaching all basic content areas. Limiting the study to elementary schools minimized the impact of specialization of both the teacher and instructional coach. There is a range of instructional coach roles (e.g., technology coach, literacy coach, math coach) and, although the research was focused on the actions of the principal to facilitate coaching for professional learning regardless of the content area focus, specialization could have had an impact on the transferability of the study results. The applicability of the findings was limited to the participant sample and may or may not transfer to other principal, coach, and teacher teams (Creswell & Miller, 2000).

Overview of the Methodology

For this research study, I used a qualitative, multicase study design to investigate how principals’ actions influenced the work of instructional coaches. The data sources were semistructured interviews. I collected data from five school teams from three districts. Each team included the elementary building principal, an instructional coach, and a district-level administrator. In all but one case, at least one teacher who had worked with the principal and coach was included in the data collection. I also audio recorded and transcribed interviews verbatim and took field notes during interviews.
Organization

This study is organized into five chapters. Chapter 1 is an introduction to the study. Chapter 2 provides a review of the literature. I describe the methodology in detail in Chapter 3 and present findings in Chapter 4. In Chapter 5, I discuss findings, conclusions, implications, and areas for further research.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I provided an introduction to the research. The statement of the problem described accountability and reform efforts that require instructional coaching as a professional development model. I introduced the conceptual framework for the study and described the significance of the study, the research questions, and a brief overview of the methodology. In the following chapter, I will provide a review of the literature related to principal leadership, high-quality professional development, and instructional coaching as a mechanism for improved teacher practices.
CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

There is a significant amount of literature on the instructional leadership of schools, and the majority is focused on the principal (Hallinger, 2005; Neumerski, 2013). However, the work of improving teaching and learning not only rests in the hands of the principal, but is also distributed across a number of other leaders, including teacher leaders and instructional coaches (Neumerski, 2013; Spillane & Diamond, 2007). Despite the proliferation of research on the leadership of principals, teacher leaders, and instructional coaches, the knowledge of how leaders improve teaching is limited (Neumerski, 2013). Although research has listed the behaviors necessary to improve instruction, little is known about how the behaviors are accomplished (Spillane et al., 2003).

The work of principals, instructional coaches, and teachers is intertwined as they collaborate for the benefit of their students (Spillane et al., 2004). This study integrated the work of the principal, the instructional coach, and the teacher as a team of instructional leaders to learn about how principals perceived the coach’s role and how they enacted their day-to-day work to facilitate, influence, and support instructional coaching.

As discussed in Chapter 1, the conceptual framework for this study consisted of two components: professional development and distributed leadership. These two theories formed the basis for the literature review.
More specifically, I examined literature on the various theories of principal leadership and attempts to connect how principals support student achievement through the development of a school culture that elevates the professional learning of teachers. The discussion also includes research that addresses shared leadership and collaboration. Next, I review the literature that examined how instructional coaching encompasses the elements of high-quality professional development. In the final section, I present literature that addressed how principals influence the operation of instructional coaching programs.

**Principal Leadership**

Some literature has identified principals as having a significant influence on school reform and more impact than any other staff member as they direct school change and create learning environments that support teachers to meet the needs of all students (Blase & Blase, 1999; Fullan, 2007; Waldron & McLeskey, 2010; Wallace Foundation, 2013). As vital participants in school reform, the leadership style of the school principal should be considered because of the influence the principal has on the success of their school, including the culture, teacher attitudes, and student academic achievement (Bogler, 2005).

Little is known about how school leadership is integrated into the professional learning of teachers (Coggins et al., 2003; Gallucci, 2008). Research has shown how principals are the key to organizational change when they demonstrate strong instructional leadership; however, limited research is available that clearly defines how the principal’s role directly impacts how individuals build capacity for changing instructional practices (Coggins et al., 2003; Gallucci et al., 2010; Matsumura et al., 2010). Coggins et al. (2003) pointed out much of the research reflects the function of instructional leadership at a higher level and includes providing a vision,
designing school improvement strategies, and allocating resources toward instruction, which is far removed from providing teachers with the skills they need to improve instruction.

Principal leadership theories have been described in terms of behaviors and characteristics that support student learning and professional growth (Hallinger, 2003; Leithwood & Jantzi, 2000). Influenced by the work of Hallinger (2003), a specific set of performance standards called the Inter-state School Leadership Licensure Consortium policy standards were established for principals. These standards to which principals are held accountable, and are critical to teaching and learning, are: (a) creating a vision, and promoting a culture and climate conducive to teaching and learning; (b) focusing on professional development; (c) promoting shared leadership; (d) working with the community; (e) managing people and systems; (f) having high levels of ethics; and (g) influencing the educational and political systems. These standards are all imperative to the role of principal (Council of Chief State School Officers, 2008; Wallace Foundation, 2013). Many of these standards are consistent with the behaviors mentioned in the research of leadership theories, and the principal behaviors that directly and indirectly impact teachers’ professional learning and student achievement (Hallinger, 2003; Leithwood & Jantzi, 2000).

The list of Inter-state School Leadership Licensure Consortium standards provides a general sense of school leadership functions. Although instructional leadership is included, the standards cover what is needed for school administration in general. Most states use the standards to guide principal training programs and evaluation systems. According to Neumerski (2013), this list provides a general sense of what school administrators should do. However, the list does not provide a full understanding of the process behind executing these behaviors. The concepts do not provide a clear sense of how the work is done.
Theories of leadership focus attention on how principals can best create successful outcomes in their schools by demonstrating specific leadership behaviors. According to Robinson et al. (2008), the two dominant theories in the research on principal leadership are transformational leadership and instructional leadership. The research not only describes how specific actions of those who practice transformational leadership or instructional leadership indirectly impact student achievement, but also sheds light on how the professional learning of teachers is influenced. There is overlap between the attributes of the two theories of leadership; however, the differences are distinct enough to be compared and interpreted separately.

**Transformational Leadership**

The concept of transformational leadership was introduced as a means to describe political leaders (Burns, 1979). It is also used to describe leaders in business and industries outside of education. Universally, transformational leadership theory recognizes the need for leaders to leverage human capital by including consideration for individuals in the organization (Bass, 1990). After Bass (1998) recognized the implications for leadership in education and called for additional research on the applicability of transformational leadership in schools, Leithwood (1992) continued that work with appropriate additions and adaptations to apply leadership theory to education (Leithwood, 1994). In a later model, Griffith (2004) combined two dimensions from Bass into charisma and inspiration. Transformational leaders demonstrate characteristics essential to their effectiveness as a leader. The following list is a compilation of Leithwood’s (1994) and Griffith’s (2004) theory of transformational leadership:

- Charisma and inspiration: Principals identify and articulate a vision, giving teachers a sense of direction. The school principal must have the skills to motivate their staff to work together to identify and accept group goals, and find new opportunities to
improve teaching through discourse and collaboration. The principal influences their staff by example with the display of conviction and connection to others on an emotional level.

- High-performance expectations: Principals establish expectations for excellence, quality, and high performance on the part of the staff.
- Appropriate models: Principals set an appropriate example for the staff to follow and are consistent with the values communicated to all stakeholders.
- Intellectual stimulation: Principals create a climate that challenges staff norms, reexamines some of the assumptions about their work, and invites teachers to rethink how instruction can be improved. By involving teachers in the decision-making process and offering some degree of autonomy to the staff on improvement plans, principals encourage divergent thinking and risk taking.
- Individualized support: Principals demonstrate respect for individual members of the staff, and show concern for their personal feelings and needs as they work toward improvement. Open relationships facilitate honest feedback on reciprocal work toward school improvement.

The transformational leadership attributes focus on organizational change (DuBrin, 2006).

Research has shown this model has positive outcomes in the school environment, but less impact on student achievement (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2000; Ross & Gray, 2006).

Because the characteristics of transformational leadership are well suited for substantial change and reform, Leithwood and Jantzi (2006) believed this style of leadership was best for schools. Principals who apply transformational leadership behaviors see increased teacher motivation and commitment to make necessary school reform changes (Leithwood, 1994). Transformational leadership theory claims when organization members are given adequate support they are motivated by the leader’s vision and goals and become engaged in the work associated with those goals. This idea is particularly true when members and leaders share a belief system (Sun & Leithwood, 2015). However, improving student achievement requires more than what transformational leadership can offer. For student achievement to improve, teacher practices must change. Transformational leadership does little to predict the specific changes in practices.
In a study of 2,465 teachers in Canada, Leithwood and Jantzi (2000) found transformational leadership had a significant effect on organizational conditions, but only a weak, indirect effect on student engagement. Their research tracked national literacy exams and other school variables for 4 years. The research showed transformational leadership had positive outcomes on teachers’ motivation and the school environment; however, there seemed to be little connection to student achievement on national exams.

In later research conducted in seven school districts in Canada, Leithwood et al. (2006) tracked student data as the school was implementing a school improvement model. They found the traits of transformational leadership accounted for the most significant proportion of variance ($R^2 = .23$) in perceived student outcomes in comparison to other factors, including parental participation, support from outside the classroom, and other elements of the improvement process. Although there were significant findings for perceived student outcomes, there was not a significant relationship between transformational leadership and actual student achievement scores. These findings suggested transformational leadership has a strong impact on the school environment and teacher relations, but a weaker impact on student achievement.

Other researchers have come to similar conclusions as Leithwood et al. (2006). For example, Ross and Gray (2006) collected data from 205 schools in Canada using a questionnaire that addressed how well teachers thought students could learn based on their capabilities as teachers. They measured teacher commitment by items that addressed commitment to school mission and school-community partnerships. Nationally mandated tests measured the student achievement component. The research results showed although there were no direct results of transformational leadership on student achievement, principals had a positive impact on teachers’
beliefs about their own abilities in the classroom. Teachers also demonstrated a commitment to shared values, which can indirectly impact students.

To assess transformational leadership, Griffith (2004) administered surveys to school staff assessing their principal’s transformational leadership and teachers’ job satisfaction. They assessed job satisfaction for teachers through a three-question survey, along with teacher turnover rates. They also examined student achievement data by calculating the change in each student’s test scores from Grades 3 to 5 and calculating a change score as a positive or negative overall achievement. The key finding, in this case, was principals were able to increase teacher job satisfaction through transformational leadership, but indirectly affected student achievement.

Research has shown a vital role of the principal is to establish a school environment that promotes learning (Robinson et al., 2008). Additionally, principals’ transformational leadership style has a stronger influence over school climate than any other factor, as measured by teachers’ perceptions of their work conditions and classroom practices (Hallinger et al., 1996; Leithwood & Jantzi, 2000, 2006). Hallinger and Heck (1998) contended that much of the research on principals’ leadership indicated principals have more of a direct effect on school climate than student outcomes, which may suggest the focus on school culture may influence student outcomes.

Transformational leadership is open to criticism because it lacks the necessary focus on curriculum and instruction (Marks & Printy, 2003). The management of the instructional program, which includes tasks that ensure a viable curriculum and high-quality teaching practices, is one of the critical leadership functions. The effectiveness of the school depends greatly on the principal’s focus on classroom instruction (Blase & Blase, 2000; Hallinger & Heck, 1998; Leithwood et al., 2009). Changing teachers’ instructional practices requires more
than just attention to climate and teacher motivation (Blase & Blase, 2000; Mangin & Dunsmore, 2015; Marks & Printy; 2003). The competing theory of instructional leadership shifts the focus for principals directly into the classroom.

**Instructional Leadership**

Instructional leadership is the construct wherein leaders primarily focus on teacher instruction and student learning and promoting school goals that relate to curriculum, teaching, and learning (Hallinger & Heck, 1998; Marks & Printy, 2003; Robinson et al., 2008). Goddard et al. (2015) argued there is an important link between the instructional leadership of the principal and the teachers’ collaborative work concerning improving classroom practices.

The model of instructional leadership that has been the most widely used in research proposes three dimensions for the role of the instructional leader: (a) defining the mission of the school, (b) managing the instructional program, and (c) promoting positive learning climate (Hallinger, 2005). Hallinger (2005) believed defining the mission of the school, along with framing and communicating school goals, are among the principal’s primary responsibilities. An instructional leader sets effectively framed goals that are clear, measurable, and time based, focused on academics and directing the work of the school community. Although the principal could collaborate with staff in goal development, it is more important that all members of the staff support the goal and incorporate it into their daily work. To illustrate this idea, Hallinger cited an interview with a teacher where the teacher described how she had to set aside activities she liked to do with her students to spend more time on what the principal expected instead, which was to spend as much time on literacy and math as possible. She stated the principal’s
Managing the instructional program requires a set of functions that include supervision and evaluation, curriculum coordination, and student data monitoring (Hallinger, 2005). These functions require school leaders have a level of expertise in teaching and learning and they must be fully immersed in all aspects of the school’s instructional program. As an example, Hallinger and Murphy’s (1985) study featured a principal who was observed by his teachers as knowing the reading level and achievement growth of every student in his school. This knowledge demonstrated the characteristic of a strong instructional leader because this principal’s engagement in managing the instructional program was obvious to members of his staff.

Several administrative functions are needed to promote a positive climate for learning (Hallinger, 2005). Principals must do the following to support a climate of continuous improvement: (a) protect instructional time, (b) make professional learning a priority, (c) maintain high visibility, (d) promote high expectations, and (e) provide incentives for teachers and students. Hallinger (2005) believed these functions are broader in scope, and are necessary to create effective schools.

In an attempt to shed light on the paths that link instructional leadership to student learning, Heck and Hallinger (2014) conducted a 3-year quantitative study that included longitudinal data from students and teachers in 60 elementary schools. The results were consistent with other studies because they found student achievement was positively related to the instructional environment of the school and teacher effectiveness. Leadership focused on instruction has a positive effect on the school-level environment, which has a positive but indirect effect on student achievement scores. Specific aspects of the school’s instructional
environment included collaboration among teachers, and participation in professional
development activities. Additionally, the manner in which leadership shaped the instructional
environment and coordinated teacher efforts predicted levels of teacher effectiveness. The results
of this study also showed students performed better when they had more effective teachers. Heck
and Hallinger (2014) believed the findings of this study highlighted the role of the instructional
leader in impacting the overall teacher effectiveness, providing a more consistently strong
learning environment throughout students’ educational careers in their school. Leadership
strategies, such as selecting high-quality teachers; organizing professional development
activities, including coaching; and emphasizing support for quality teaching and learning are
vital targets that impact student learning (Hallinger, 2011; Hallinger & Heck, 1998; Leithwood et
al., 2006, 2010).

Blase and Blase (1999) examined effective instructional leadership through teachers’
perspectives by investigating what characteristics of school principals influenced classroom
instruction. Over 800 teachers responded to an open-ended questionnaire referred to as the
Inventory of Strategies Used by Principals to Influence Classroom Teaching. Based on the data,
researchers identified two major themes of effective instructional leadership: promoting
reflection and promoting professional growth. The researchers contended instructional leaders
should make suggestions and give feedback to improve teaching and learning, model effective
teaching strategies, and solicit advice from staff and community members. Principals promote
professional growth by implementing data-based decisions, supporting collaboration among
teachers, developing coaching relationships, and applying adult learning strategies to all phases
of staff development.
Integrated Leadership

There are both overlap and distinct differences between instructional and transformational leadership. The differences are found in the distribution of leadership and the involvement of staff members in the decision-making process (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2000). The principal is not the only leader in a transformational leadership environment who creates conditions for success. Other staff members are empowered to be leaders and make significant contributions to the vision and the climate of the school. Additionally, transformational leadership focuses on the individual staff member and their needs rather than creating a coordinated effort to focus on curriculum and instruction (Marks & Printy, 2003). To be effective, transformational leaders need to focus on the improvement of teaching and learning. The term integrated leadership is one that reflects this combination of efforts for the purpose of school improvement.

When comparing instructional leadership to transformational leadership to determine the success in predicting student achievement, Robinson et al. (2008) conducted a meta-analysis that compared the two leadership theories in 22 studies that examined the relationship between leadership and student achievement outcomes. Out of the 22 studies, 12 studies used the instructional leadership framework, five studies used the transformational leadership framework, and the remainder used a variety of other leadership models. Four of the studies examined student well-being, academic self-concept, and engagement with school. A majority of the researchers looked at standardized test scores as a means to measure academic achievement. Robinson et al. converted to a z score and used as the effect size statistic. The mean effect size for instructional leadership ($ES = 0.42$) was almost 4 times that of transformational leadership.
(ES = 0.11), and higher than the other leadership theories (ES = 0.30). This analysis, although it requires some caution in interpretation, seems to support instructional leadership as more impactful on student outcomes. This concept is also supported by Marks and Printy’s (2003) claim that transformational leadership lacks application to education and practices of an effective principal.

Robinson et al. (2008) reached a similar conclusion from their analysis of 27 studies of the relationship between leadership and student achievement. As they addressed the relative impact of instructional and transformational leadership, the researchers found that, in general, leadership focused on teaching and learning had higher student outcomes. Instructional leadership was 3 to 4 times more impactful than transformational leadership. Instructional leaders tended to be stronger instructional resources for teachers and actively participated along with teachers in professional development activities. Transformational leadership was more focused on the relationship between leaders and those who work with them. In a second analysis, they addressed specific leadership practices, referred to as leadership dimensions. These practices included goal setting, aligning resources, curriculum work, promoting teacher learning, and ensuring a supportive environment. The most powerful leadership dimension was that of promoting and participating in teacher professional learning, including participation by the leader in both formal and informal professional learning activities alongside the teachers. By participating in teacher professional learning, leaders developed a deep understanding of what was required to enable teachers to sustain meaningful change for improved student outcomes. The results showed the more teachers reported the participation of their principals in professional learning, the higher the impact on student achievement.
Impact of School Leadership

When reviewing the literature for the effects of school leadership on student achievement, most research on the models are presented in terms of the indirect effect of leadership (Hendriks & Sheerens, 2013). When school-level conditions such as climate and teachers’ perceptions influence or mediate the effects of leadership, the model presents an indirect effect (Dumay et al., 2013; Hendriks & Sheerens, 2013). Researchers agreed the influence of principal leadership on student achievement is generally indirect (Hallinger & Heck, 1996; Leithwood & Sun, 2012). Principal leadership and the effect on student learning is mediated by the conditions and processes established by principals’ leadership (Hallinger & Heck, 1996). Hendriks and Scheerens (2013) summarized the phenomena by explaining:

It makes a lot of sense to see the influence of school leadership behaviour on student outcomes as indirect, and as the result of a hypothetical causal chain, through which school heads directly operate on school organizational and instructional conditions, which in their turn influence student achievement. (p. 374)

Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning (McREL) conducted a meta-analysis of school-level leadership and its impact on student achievement (Waters et al., 2003). After reviewing 5,000 studies that examined the effects of principal leadership on student achievement, McREL selected 70 of those studies based on the research criteria for design, data analysis, and rigor. The 70 studies included more than 14,000 teacher ratings for over 2,800 principals. That research provided three significant findings. First, principal leadership behavior makes a positive impact on student achievement. The average effect size—expressed as a correlation—between leadership and student achievement was 0.25, indicating student achievement improves as leadership improves (Waters et al., 2003). Additionally, the researchers identified a set of 21 research-based leadership responsibilities, each with a specific set of practices that correlate with
student achievement. From this research, a framework referred to as McREL’s balanced leadership framework was established. The balanced leadership framework takes the 21 leadership responsibilities (e.g., culture, curriculum and instruction, resources) and groups them into four categories, which serve to organize the responsibilities of school leaders: (a) leadership, (b) focus, (c) magnitude of change, and (d) purposeful community. The balanced leadership framework is believed to help school leaders connect their vision of why they do what they do, to action and knowing how to apply their leadership skills to transform their schools (Waters & Cameron, 2007).

The key areas of the 21 responsibilities are (a) affirmation; (b) change agent; (c) contingent rewards; (d) communication; (e) culture; (f) discipline; (g) flexibility; (h) focus; (i) ideas and beliefs; (j) input; (k) intellectual stimulation; (l) involvement in curriculum, instruction, and assessment; (m) knowledge of curriculum, instruction, and assessment; (n) monitoring and evaluation; (o) optimizing; (p) order; (q) outreach; (r) relationships; (s) resources; (t) situational awareness; and (u) visibility (Waters & Cameron, 2007). These findings took the term instructional leadership from the abstract to the concrete (Wallace Foundation, 2013).

Additionally, not all principals who were highly rated by their teachers had a positive impact on student achievement. There are leadership responsibilities characterized as effective, but the intensity of the focus is what translates to student results. The principal must focus time and energy on practices that will provide a strong influence on student achievement.

In addition to the 21 leadership responsibilities examined as part of the balanced leadership framework, there are two areas of interest that directly relate to change initiatives: (a) knowledge of curriculum and instruction and (b) optimizing the leadership of new and challenging innovations (Waters & Cameron, 2007). When principals are knowledgeable about
the current curriculum and best practices of instruction and assessment methods, they can use this knowledge to guide teachers. By inspiring teachers and communicating high expectations for successfully implementing new practices, principals can advance the change they want to help their schools achieve (Waters & Cameron, 2007).

Jacob et al. (2015) assessed the impact of the balanced leadership framework on principal leadership, instructional climate, principal efficacy, teacher retention, and student achievement. In their study, half of 126 rural Michigan school principals participated in professional development in balanced leadership and the other half acted as a control group and did not receive the same professional development. The goal of the professional development program was to help principals understand and implement the 21 leadership responsibilities with the ultimate goal of managing change and creating professional communities. Data were collected using surveys of the principals and teachers in both the treatment and control schools. The researchers expected the professional development program would influence principals’ leadership practices, increase their knowledge of curriculum and instruction, and lead to an improved climate that would facilitate collaboration around improving teaching and learning. Principals who received the professional development reported using more effective leadership practices—resulting in a better instructional climate—than principals in the control group. However, the teachers in their schools reported nothing had changed. Teachers did not acknowledge the same sense of improvement as their principals reported with regard to leadership, collaboration, climate, or norms for instructional practices. Regardless of attendance at professional development activities, the levels of leadership, teacher collaboration, school climate, and differentiated instruction were reported to be the same in both the treatment and the control schools. Also, there was no impact on student achievement. One of the explanations the
researchers gave for this lack of impact was that changes in leadership practices may not have been substantial enough for teachers to notice. Researchers also believed changes in leadership practices alone may not result in an impact on student achievement. The efforts must involve teachers and directly target reform efforts and the instructional climate of the school. Principal leadership is only part of what is needed for school-wide reform (Bryk et al., 2010; Jacob et al., 2015).

Robinson et al. (2008) conducted a meta-analysis of effective leadership practices and found five leadership characteristics that had the largest effect on student outcomes. The effect sizes ranged from 0.11 to 0.42, depending on the specific leadership model. These findings supported the concept that leadership may have a direct—albeit small or moderate—effect on student achievement. The attributes included: (a) establishing goals and expectations ($ES = 0.42$); (b) strategic resourcing ($ES = 0.31$); (c) planning, coordinating, and evaluating teaching and the curriculum ($ES = 0.42$); (d) promoting and participating in teacher learning and development ($ES = 0.84$); and (e) ensuring an orderly and supportive environment ($ES = 0.27$). Promoting and participating in teacher learning and professional development activities was the leadership practice that was most impactful on student achievement, with the effect size of 0.084. This effect size was 2 to 3 times larger than the other leadership practices analyzed in the study. Robinson et al. described this attribute as not just promoting professional learning, but also participating in the learning both formally and informally. Principal participation in professional development was the first step to increased teacher learning. With the large effect size, this study provided empirical support for principals to be viewed by teachers as lead learners in their schools. When principals take this approach, teachers are more likely to have more respect for
their principals as knowledgeable leaders, and are more likely to approach them for instructional advice.

In a study of 44 principals and 274 teachers from 49 schools in three large cities, Quint et al. (2007) examined the impact of the principal as an instructional leader, along with the connection between teacher quality and student achievement. They found principals who received professional development were more likely to disseminate information to their teachers. For example, principals spent more time in classrooms ensuring new methods were implemented with fidelity. The more principals leveraged high-quality professional development for the improvement of instructional practices, the higher the impact on student achievement. This research defined principals who were strong instructional leaders as those who are knowledgeable about teaching and learning and have high expectations for teachers and students. Principals who were scored higher by their teachers as instructional leaders were more actively engaged in professional learning alongside their teachers, and effectively conveyed what they learned to their staff.

Teacher Collaboration and Shared Leadership

Research has indicated the critical elements of effective principal leadership include creating a school culture that is supportive of teachers, developing teachers as leaders in the school (i.e., shared leadership), and working to develop a collaborative professional learning community to support teacher learning (Blase & Blase, 2000; Waldron & McLeskey, 2010).

Goddard et al. (2010) studied the importance of teacher collaboration facilitated by principal leadership. Half of the principals in the study were provided training on the balanced leadership framework. The purpose of the study was to test whether student achievement was
impacted positively by teacher collaboration. The researchers had three hypotheses: (a) shared instructional leadership would predict the degree teachers collaborate to improve student outcomes, (b) principals would have an indirect impact on student achievement through their influence on teacher collaboration, and (c) teachers would engage in activities that would result in instructional improvement when leaders created opportunities for collaboration. The findings confirmed all three hypotheses. The conclusion was student achievement was directly affected by the collaborative practices of the teachers. When principals monitored instruction, shared in decision making, and acted as knowledgeable instructional leaders, teachers worked closely with their peers around instruction.

Recognizing the importance of the relationships and interactions between and among school leaders and teachers, Wahlstrom and Louis (2008) examined this issue. The researchers surveyed 4,165 teachers in 39 districts and 138 schools. The survey was developed for the national research project *Learning from Leadership*, funded by the Wallace Foundation. Their investigation focused on how teachers’ instructional practices were affected by (a) principal behaviors, (b) relationships between teachers, and (c) self-efficacy of the individual teacher. The researchers pointed out a research limitation was they did not measure principal behavior, only the teachers’ perceptions of how their principals behaved. They also concluded leadership practices targeted directly at improving instruction had a significant direct effect on the working relationships of teachers. Effective leadership strengthened the professional community and encouraged teachers to work together to improve their classroom practices to ultimately improve student learning. Regardless of how caring and supportive a principal is perceived to be by teachers, trust in the principal’s impact on instructional practices is not nearly as important as
trust among teachers in professional learning communities (Tschanmen-Moran, 2004; Wahlstrom & Louis, 2008).

Wahlstrom and Louis’s (2008) research affirmed that of Marks and Printy (2003), suggesting expanding decision-making roles to include staff outside of administration is an important step to support long-term efforts to improve instruction. When leadership was shared between teachers and principals, and there were broadened opportunities for teacher collaboration, teachers’ working relationships were stronger. The norms of the professional community of teachers, reinforced by shared leadership, were important in determining instructional practice. When teachers shared in the instructional leadership with their principals, improvement of teaching and learning was significant, which positively impacted student achievement (Blase & Blase, 2000; Marks & Printy, 2003; Wahlstrom & Louis, 2008).

The strength of the professional community has an impact on the principal’s instructional leadership role. Wahlstrom and Louis (2008) pointed out there is less dependence on the principal for their expertise and direct support when teachers shared knowledge and ideas about professional practice, including modeling and discussion. When the professional communities of teachers as learners are strong, the principal’s instructional support is characterized as passive or quiet, rather than visible and direct. The researchers concluded the quality of instruction is improved when the power differential between principals and teachers decreases. This improvement occurs when principals take the important steps to include teachers in decision making and execution of initiatives that will have a positive outcome for teaching and learning.
Distributed Leadership

Throughout the literature on principal leadership, the view of effective leadership is vague. The explanation of exactly how principals make their schools more successful is missing (Neumerski, 2013). Unsatisfied with traditional approaches to studying school leadership, the distributed perspective was built as a conceptual framework for research that focused on enacting tasks that impact teaching and learning (Diamond & Spillane, 2016). Typical approaches to studying school leadership tend to focus primarily on the school leader, emphasize the traits and characteristics of leaders, and focus on leaders’ thinking rather than their actions (Diamond & Spillane, 2016). Leadership practice is a product of the interactions of leaders, followers, and the situation, recognizing that people move in and out of leadership roles regardless of their title or position. Leadership, from the distributed perspective, is made up of the organizational structure that shapes people’s interaction and the cultural context (Spillane et al., 2001, 2004). Analyzing leadership practices from the distributed perspective focuses on what people do together with what resources, how they do what they do, and why.

Spillane et al. (2001) made a distinction between leadership functions and leadership tasks. Examples of leadership functions found in the instructional leadership literature are constructing a vision, developing a culture of trust and collaboration, and monitoring instruction. Analyzing school leadership does not address the day-to-day work of leadership. To understand the leadership function, it is important to analyze the tasks through which the functions were executed. For example, the function of developing a culture of collaboration requires tasks that include building a schedule for teachers to work together. The function of developing teachers requires tasks that include analysis and interpretation of data, identification of instructional
needs, dissemination of strategies, scheduling time for professional learning, and allowing for reflection.

Investigating leadership practices from the distributed perspective makes it necessary to explore the enactment of leadership tasks, shedding light on how school leaders interact with others throughout the process of defining and carrying out those tasks through their daily work. It is also necessary to understand how the leaders’ knowledge and skills impact the moves they make. Consider the interaction between members of a curriculum committee as an example of how the interdependency of leaders, followers, and context constitutes a leadership task. Each member of the group—perhaps including the principal, an instructional coach, and a teacher—comes with their own knowledge, skills, and interests. The facilitation of the committee is made up of interactions among three leaders and the artifacts (e.g., curriculum map, core resources) they use. During any given meeting, members of the team may argue their point based on their own perspective. As the conversation progresses, the group reaches a consensus for the decision as a result of the collaborative interaction. Spillane et al. (2001) referred to this concept as reciprocal interdependencies because individual members of the group play off one another. What one member does can only be fully understood when taking into account what the others do in collaboration with each other. The group performing a task is stronger collectively than the sum of each individual’s skill and knowledge.

Distributed leadership moves away from role-based views of leadership; instead, it focuses on leadership tasks and the entire organization. The work of improving teaching does not rest solely in the hands of the principal as the official school leader. Instead, it is distributed across many other leaders (Spillane et al., 2003), including instructional coaches and teachers. Spillane’s distributed perspective on leadership helps educational leaders examine how improved
instruction emerges as a result of efforts to build the capacity of teachers, including aspects of professional development as part of the systemwide change efforts (Coburn, 2001; Mangin & Dunsmore, 2015; Neumerski, 2013). Principals who function as instructional leaders cannot ensure high-quality instruction alone. Next, I highlight literature on the distributed leadership efforts to improve classroom practices in the examination of instructional coaching as a model of professional learning.

**Instructional Coaching**

Joyce and Showers (1996) first studied instructional coaching as a method for professional development when they first discovered as few as 10% of participants in traditional training implemented what they learned in the training. Traditional training is a presentation of information, facilitator demonstration, and little time for practice. Joyce and Showers (1981, 1996) transformed traditional methods of teacher training into the concept of peer coaching. The term *coach* refers to an individual with a higher level of content area expertise who offers personalized support and learning experiences for teachers that result in improved instructional practices (Joyce & Showers, 1996; Killion & Harrison, 2006; Knight, 2007; Matsumura & Wang, 2014). Joyce and Showers stated traditional training methods, such as workshops or seminars, did not lead to changes in classrooms. Teachers were unable to transfer the skills and knowledge in a manner that benefited students; however, through peer coaching, teachers were able to put into practice their new learning about instructional methods.
High-Quality Professional Development

Reform efforts are not possible without carefully planned and effectively implemented professional development activities (Guskey, 2009). Given the wide variety of professional development models, it is important to understand they all have a shared purpose of improving student learning. Because of the significant investment school districts make in professional development activities, administrators are focused on finding models that can promise systematic improvements in instructional practices and student achievement (Kraft et al., 2016). Researchers have reached a consensus on the critical characteristics of high-quality professional development, including:

- **Job embedded**, with experiences grounded in day-to-day teaching and are directly related to the work of the teachers and informed by what teachers are doing and need to do (Joyce & Showers, 1996; Knight, 2007; Matsumura et al., 2010; Poglinco et al., 2003);

- **Collaborative**, where teachers learn from and with colleagues (Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 1995; Desimone & Pak, 2017);

- **Inquiry based, active learning**, when teachers are engaged in concrete tasks based on student experiences (Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 1995; Desimone & Pak, 2017; Garet et al., 2001; Poglinco et al., 2003);

- **Continuous cycle of sustained learning experience**, including modeling, classroom observation, feedback, conferencing, and reflection as a continuous cycle (Coburn & Russell, 2008; Desimone & Pak, 2017; Knight, 2007);

- **Content area knowledge focused**, with foundational skills and in-depth subject matter understanding in the context of teachers’ own classrooms (Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 1995; Desimone & Pak, 2017; Garet et al., 2001; Poglinco et al., 2003).

Instructional Coaching Programs

Instructional coaching is defined as ongoing and job-embedded professional development that results in the improvement of instructional practices (Joyce & Showers, 1996; Killion & Harrison, 2006; Knight, 2007; Matsumura & Wang, 2014). It is a model for high-quality
professional development because of the ability to differentiate and attend to content area knowledge along with pedagogy, with the goal of enhancing student achievement (Killion & Harrison, 2006; Knight, 2007; Neufeld & Roper, 2003; Poglinco et al., 2003). Coaches are change agents with whom teachers are more likely to make a meaningful improvement in their teaching and their students’ learning because they are on-site resources who can provide targeted professional learning that meets teachers’ specific needs (Coburn & Woulfin, 2012; Fullan & Knight, 2011; Gallucci et al., 2010; Mangin & Dunsmore, 2015). Through coaching, teachers can learn new skills through collaborative inquiry and ongoing support using a wide variety of activities that include classroom observation, conferencing, modeling, reflection, and interpreting assessment data (Elish-Piper & L’Allier, 2011; Marsh et al., 2015).

Research has suggested that incorporating an instructional coaching program as part of a district improvement plan can help support the implementation of new initiatives and improve classroom practices (Desimone & Pak, 2017; Neuman & Cunningham, 2009). To implement and sustain a model of professional development consistent with these characteristics, many school districts are employing instructional coaches to support teachers through the change process (Coburn & Woulfin, 2012; Gallucci, 2008; Neufeld & Roper, 2003). Instructional coaching programs include the characteristics of high-quality professional development; therefore, they are gaining in popularity as a means of improving teacher practices (Coburn & Woulfin, 2012). Neufeld and Roper (2003) wrote, “Coaching, at its best, adheres to these principles: it is grounded in inquiry, collaborative, sustained, connected to and derived from teachers’ work with their students, and tied explicitly to improving practice” (p. 3).

Instructional coaching can improve teachers’ instructional practices, teacher efficacy, and organizational self-efficacy. All these factors are correlated with increasing student achievement
Instructional coaches, as change agents, can provide meaningful support for reform. Fullan and Knight (2011) described a study of the York Region District School Board in Ontario, Canada, with 192 schools and 130,000 students. Literacy coaches worked with the district leadership, principals, and teachers of 17 low-performing schools. As a result of the instructional coaching program, the district experienced an improvement in student achievement of more than 20%. According to Fullan and Knight (2011), “Next to the principal, coaches are the most crucial change agent in a school” (p. 50). The work of the instructional coach is often associated with change, so it is relevant and important to look at ways in which principals support those change efforts (Gallucci et al., 2010).

A core element of instructional coaching is supporting individual teachers using a specific model referred to as a coaching cycle. The coaching cycle, which is referenced in the list of high-quality professional development characteristics, includes identifying a concept for teacher learning, modeling lessons, observing teachers, providing feedback, gathering data, and engaging teachers in dialogue (Elish-Piper & L’Allier, 2011; Gallucci et al., 2010; Knight, 2007; Marsch & Farrel, 2015; Neumerski, 2013). The structured process when the work of the coach and teacher includes those components of the coaching cycle—planning, observation, modeling, debriefing, and actionable feedback—is necessary for gains in student achievement and sustained improvement in instructional practices (Neumerski, 2013; Teemant, 2014).

Principal Support of Instructional Coaching Programs

Research has suggested principal leadership is an essential factor in how coaches fit into the school culture (Matsumura et al., 2009, 2010). The degree to which the instructional coaching program has an impact is primarily determined by the principal’s active support for the
initiative (Poglinco et al., 2003). Implementing instructional coaching requires hard work and dedication to the entire process from everyone involved (Tanner et al., 2017).

Matsumura et al. (2010) surveyed 96 teachers and interviewed coaches in 29 elementary schools with one of two coaching experiences. One experience was a specific professional development program called content focused coaching (CFC), which was a comprehensive literacy coaching program. The other experience was the typical literacy coaching the teacher had always had. Matsumura et al. found principal leadership was vital in supporting the implementation of the CFC program and was a positive predictor in teacher participation. Teachers participated in coaching activities more frequently, including an emphasis on planning and reflection, in schools where principals publicly endorsed coaches as a source of expertise. In the schools where the principal engaged in shared leadership, providing autonomy to the teachers and treating them as partners positively influenced teachers’ engagement with coaches. Conversely, principals who tended to be more top down in their leadership style did not permit teachers to stray from mandated processes and were less likely to promote the instructional coaches, or even portrayed the coaches in a negative light, such as implementing punishment for poor performance (Matsumura et al., 2010). Principals who allowed autonomy with teachers also did the same with the coaches. This practice was evident in creating the coaches’ schedules and managing their activities. This practice, in turn, allowed coaches to engage in activities that supported teachers (e.g., planning, modeling, observing lessons) rather than other activities that took away from those opportunities (e.g., administration of assessments, clerical tasks). The coaches’ work was also hampered by principals who had negative relationships with teachers. In summary, principals supported coaches by introducing the program to staff, participating in the
program themselves, identifying coaches as critical resources, and allowing coaches to create their schedules to focus on working with teachers.

Instructional Coaches’ Role

The role of an instructional coach is complex and often quite vague (Neumerski, 2013). Researchers have described the purpose of coaching differently, and coaches themselves have varied in the way they defined their role (Matsumura et al., 2010). The lack of a standard definition of instructional coaching makes it challenging to understand exactly how coaches improve teaching (Neumerski, 2013).

Principals who lack clarity in the role of the instructional coach tend to task their coaches with duties that keep the coaches too busy to spend time with teachers. In many cases, principals expect coaches to perform a range of tasks that include administrative duties, coordinating assessments, or supporting struggling students (Matsumura & Wang, 2014). This interpretation of the role takes time away from the availability of coaches to help teachers improve their practice (Bean et al., 2010; Matsumura et al., 2009).

Lancaster (2016) conducted a mixed method study in a large school district in Texas. Lancaster surveyed 90 instructional coaches and interviewed four coaches who had left the position and uncovered significant challenges faced by instructional coaches. The root cause of these challenges was a lack of structure in the role of an instructional coach. The district gave principals some guidelines; however, the ultimate responsibility for implementing the instructional coaching program, including the determination of the roles and responsibilities, fell on the principals. Coaches expected they would spend most of their time with teachers impacting classroom instruction, when, in reality, other assigned tasks such as administrative paperwork,
substituting for teachers, or conducting meetings filled much of their time. This reality caused frustration and confusion, and ultimately impacted the ability of the coaches to work with teachers in their classrooms. Successful coaches had a common vision with their administrators of their roles and responsibilities.

Fullan and Knight (2011) stated too many districts have squandered the potential of their instructional coaching programs by not being explicit about the roles and responsibilities of coaches, and by assigning tasks that are not related to coaching. Fullan and Knight surveyed 50 coaches and asked them about the amount of time they spent working with teachers. A majority of coaches spent less than 25% of their time engaged in coaching activities. Instead, coaches stated they spent time with administrative tasks, such as filing documents, making copies, and ordering supplies. As Bean et al. (2010) pointed out, when coaches engage in clerical tasks, it is not only time away from coaching that is eroded, but also the impressions others have about the coach. The teacher who saw their coaches spend time on management tasks had a more negative perception of them, rather than perceiving them as professionals who could make a valuable contribution to professional learning.

Matsumura et al. (2009) interviewed 15 principals and 11 coaches and surveyed teachers. They asked four research questions: (a) What is the relationship between principal leadership and the frequency of teacher participation in specific coaching activities?; (b) What principal actions most support teacher participation in specific coaching activities?; (c) What is the relationship between a principal’s conception of the role and duties of a coach and teachers’ participation in specific activities?; and (d) What dimensions of principal leadership do coaches perceive as being supportive of their work with teachers? Their research found teachers were more likely to work closely with the instructional coaches when principals treated instructional coaches as
professionals and valued members of the leadership teams. Participating in team meetings and professional development opportunities with coaches and teachers, publicly endorsing the coach as an expert, and encouraging teachers to work with coaches showed the school leader was fully engaged in the improvement process. When principals expressed their understanding of the coaches’ role as a resource to help teachers improve their practices, coaches spent more time in classrooms providing personalized professional development. Conversely, when principals viewed the coaches as something other than a highly skilled professional development provider, coaches were more likely to spend more time engaged in tasks that did not impact teaching and learning, such as coordinating standardized tests or organizing schoolwide data.

Matsumura and Wang (2014) conducted a 3-year study of seven Title I schools, once again using either the CFC or the typical literacy coaching they had previously been using. Schools were either assigned to work with a CFC coach, which was a formalized literacy coaching program designed to support principals and teachers, or they participated in other types of professional development, including their typical literacy coaching. The researchers interviewed principals and coaches and uncovered significant variations of how instructional coaches executed their role as professional development providers. The differences between the actions of the coaches were influenced by how principals viewed their expertise and their role. In schools where the principal supported their role, coaches were able to maintain their focus on helping teachers learn high-quality instructional strategies. Some principals were so focused on student results on state accountability tests that they did not appreciate the work coaches were doing because they did not see the potential connection between the teaching strategies and positive test results. The district’s vision of having students engage in higher-order learning activities conflicted with the principals’ preference to emphasize test-taking practice. This
conditionally supportive attitude from the principals put the coach in the position of supporting the status quo, rather than moving the school forward in change or reform. In these cases, coaches were heavily involved in preparing students for test taking. Principals did not use the coaches for their expertise; instead, they assigned them to activities that did not relate to coaching, such as organizing materials for intervention students, conducting tutoring sessions, or making copies. The coaches did not receive the exposure or respect from principals, and teachers did not see them as leaders; therefore, the teachers were not interested in working with coaches to improve instructional practices. There was a direct correlation between the success of coaching programs and principal support. The researchers found principals who did not believe in the new practices positioned the coaches to focus their efforts on maintaining the status quo. In the case of their study, this practice was to maintain the focus on standardized tests rather than helping teachers develop methods that would promote higher-order thinking. Principals who were not in support of the vision were more likely to assign coaches to other administrative duties. The status of coaches was elevated when the principal included coaches in the leadership team, had them provide inservice during faculty meetings, and signaled to teachers that coaches possessed specialized knowledge that benefited the entire staff (Matsumura & Wang, 2014; Poglinco et al., 2003). Principals needed direct knowledge of the initiatives that were being implemented. It is imperative principals understand the complexity of the implementation process, including the challenges of significant change. This understanding is imperative so the coach and the principal can work hand in hand to support the teachers in their efforts to change their teaching practices (Poglinco et al., 2003).
**Time as a Resource**

Principals must also show the importance of coaching by organizing schedules that provide time for professional learning, coaching, and team planning (Chval et al., 2010; Tanner et al., 2017). Teachers need time in their schedule that provides opportunities for interactions with coaches and other colleagues to maximize the benefit of the instructional coaching program, including time to observe in classrooms, time to debrief with teachers, or time to collaborate with others (Marsh et al., 2008; Neufeld & Roper, 2003; Poglinco et al., 2003). In a study of Reading First schools, Bean et al. (2010) found a direct connection between student achievement and the amount of instructional coaching. Similarly, L’Allier et al. (2010) cited the results of the Valley District Study by indicating the higher the number of interactions between the literacy coach and teachers, the higher the average student reading gains. Knight (2009) stated the effectiveness of instructional coaches is ensured by providing sufficient time to coach, adding, “Principals and other district leaders need to ensure they do not ask coaches to do so many noncoaching tasks that they rarely have the opportunity for sustained coaching” (p. 19).

Researchers stressed coaches should spend a significant amount of their time interacting with individual teachers (Elish-Piper & L’Allier, 2011; Garet et al., 2001; Knight, 2009; Rush & Young, 2011). Simply put, when teachers received more coaching, students made greater gains. The time coaches spent working directly with teachers facilitated sustainable changes, particularly when coaches engaged in coaching activities that include modeling, conferencing, and interpreting data. Coaches and teachers must also engage in productive, in-depth discussion and obtain meaningful feedback (Garet et al., 2001).
If coaching positions are not monitored closely, coaches can lose focus on the true purpose of their role (Coggins et al., 2003; Deussen et al., 2007). When principals assign coaches significant management and administrative duties, they not only limit the time coaches have to offer instructional support, but they also create ambiguity for the coach’s role itself (Bean et al., 2010; Coburn & Russell, 2008; Neumerski, 2013). Some research has indicated that, in a majority of schools that employ coaches, principals expect them to coordinate assessments and tutor students (Matsumura & Wang, 2014). Gallucci and Boatright (2007) argued principals need to adhere to the structure of the coaching program to maximize the benefit for the implementation of new initiatives.

**Principal as Lead Learner**

Just as principals cannot afford for their coaches to be perceived as an unimportant part of the improvement process by letting them focus on clerical or managerial tasks (Bean et al., 2010; Fullan & Knight, 2011), coaches cannot shoulder the full burden of reform efforts (Killion, 2009; Kral, 2007). According to Steiner and Kowal (2007), school leaders or principals direct the instructional coaching program in their building as the chief coach. When coaches and administrators coordinate their school improvement efforts, professional growth is more consistent, and the advancements in student achievement are more likely (Hall & Simeral, 2008).

Regardless of the presence of teacher leaders, the principal is the lead learner (Knight, 2007). Knight (2007) stated, “no matter how much a coach knows, and no matter how effective a coach is, the principal’s voice is ultimately the voice most important to teachers” (p. 52). When teachers realize the principal supports and uses the instructional coaches for their own professional growth, these coaches are respected and viewed as being more effective
For an instructional coach to make a difference in a building and lead to change in an efficient amount of time, a coach has to be supported by the principal through collaborative relationships (Norton, 2007).

One way administrators can show support for the program is to participate in the very activities in which the staff members are expected to participate (Kral, 2007; Neufeld & Roper, 2002). From Boston’s Collaborative Coaching and Learning initiative, Neufeld and Roper (2002) explained how principals’ participation in professional development contributed to the effectiveness of the instructional coaching program. Principals modeled the value of ongoing professional learning by reading the same text coaches assigned to teachers. Also, by being observed demonstrating lessons and conferencing with students, they were able to assure teachers they were safe to take risks when learning new teaching methods. The change in the culture of the professional learning experience and the teacher engagement in the learning were due to principal involvement.

Kral (2007) pointed out teachers are aware of principals’ interactions with, and attitudes toward, the instructional coaches. Kral (2007) stated, “Teachers need to know that the principal is learning along with them, or is at least very involved in their learning” (p. 1). When the coaches and the principals appear out of alignment, teachers will not demonstrate a sense of urgency with any practices or procedures offered by the coaches.

Professional Development for Coaches

For coaches to build credibility and be able to support teachers with research-based instructional practices, coaches need content knowledge and a thorough understanding of pedagogy. Much of the available research has described the implementation of literacy coaching
programs. In cases where coaches were supporting teachers’ content knowledge in literacy, the researchers specifically pointed out that reading specialist certification was imperative because expertise in literacy through an articulated program of study was necessary for the coach to be effective (Elish-Piper & L’Allier, 2011; L’Allier et al., 2010). However, other researchers described how coaches acquire knowledge about new standards, and new methods of teaching and assessment, by participating in professional development opportunities with consultants and content-area experts right alongside the teachers (Gallucci et al., 2010). When the coach approaches every interaction as a colearner, the work they do with each teacher provides opportunities for the coach to sharpen their skills (Gallucci et al., 2010; Huguet et al., 2014).

In a study to analyze the impact of literacy coaching for the South Carolina Reading Initiative, Vanderburg and Stephens (2010) interviewed 35 elementary teachers. The researchers found the impact of the literacy coaches was extremely successful. Coaches were able to get teachers to change their teaching methods to include authentic assessment and a student-centered curriculum. However, the researchers pointed out coaches in their study experienced 3 years of professional development, along with monthly meetings with other coaches, and regular interaction with a program coordinator. The researchers actually used the significant professional development the coaches received as a limitation of the study (Vanderburg & Stephens, 2010). Many researchers pointed out successful instructional coaching programs were coordinated by one specific leader, typically from the district office (Mangin, 2014; Vanderberg & Stephens, 2010). In addition to the value of that individual acting as a mentor, facilitating weekly or monthly meetings where coaches could work collaboratively to problem solve and share ideas provided further professional development to both teachers and coaches as colearners (Gallucci et al., 2010; Mangin & Dunsmore, 2015; Marsh et al., 2010; Morgan & Clonts, 2008).
In a study focused on the learning of instructional coaches themselves, Gallucci et al. (2010) conducted an investigation that lasted 4 years. The investigation included multiple interviews with a coach and teachers, principals, and external consultants who worked with the coach. The researchers observed and documented the coaching practices. The study showed professional development systems for the coach are needed. When coaches learn along with teachers, they are viewed as leaders in the building. The coach needs continued learning, including content-area knowledge and other areas specific to the coach’s role. The work of the instructional coach is complex because they lead teachers through reform efforts. To support the instructional coaching program, it is imperative that building administrators seek professional development on the implementation and support of the instructional coaching program (Gallucci et al., 2010).

Being an effective coach requires more than content-area knowledge and skill in pedagogy. To strengthen the effectiveness of instructional coaching, coaches need a full understanding of the skills and knowledge to support adult learners (Blamey et al., 2008; Huguet et al., 2014; L’Allier et al., 2010; Marsh et al., 2012). Knowles (1984) stated adults are most open to learning concepts that are directly related to their own job, and when learning is problem centered. Marsh et al. (2012) conducted a study in Florida and surveyed principals, reading coaches, and 10 teachers in 112 Florida school districts to link the characteristics of quality coaching to teacher and student outcomes. One of the significant findings of this study was instructional coaches need professional development in the area of working with adult learners. Teachers reported a more positive influence of coaches when they demonstrated a better understanding of how to support adult learners; however, over half the coaches in the study did not feel prepared in this area. Another interesting outcome of the research was the discovery that
number of years teaching reading ahead of becoming a coach was negatively associated with the ability to influence teacher practice. Effectiveness in teaching children does not translate to the ability to teach adults; teaching children and teaching adults requires entirely different skills. Knowles et al. (2011) described facilitating adult learning, referred to as andragogy, with key principals that are consistent with the Desimone’s (2009) professional development framework. Adult learners are provided learning experiences that draw upon the personal experiences and current context, and that connect to their own personal goals. Discussion and reflection with colleagues, along with the modeling from an expert and immediate feedback, are also important parts of the learning process (Knowles et al., 2011).

**Conclusion**

The literature discussed in this chapter acknowledges the work of principals, instructional coaches, and teachers are intertwined as they collaborate for the benefit of their students (Spillane et al., 2004). With an understanding of principals’ significant influence on the professional learning of the staff, this study provided further insight into the work of the leadership team—which includes the principal, the instructional coach, and the teacher—to support school improvement. The next chapter provides the details of the methodology used in this research study.
CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study was to investigate how principals perceived the role of instructional coach, and how they facilitated, influenced, and supported the professional learning of teachers through the instructional coaching program. This chapter begins with the research design. I also include a description of participants and methods and procedures to collect, analyze, and interpret data. The following research questions guided this study:

- How do principals perceive the role of the instructional coach?
- How does the principal facilitate and influence the instructional coaching program?
- How does principal leadership support teacher engagement in instructional coaching activities?

Research Design

Qualitative research finds meaning in a specific context to understand a phenomenon from the participant’s perspective. The three research questions lend themselves to a qualitative study that uses a multi-case study design to investigate how principals’ actions influenced the work of instructional coaches. Case study research involves study in a real-life setting through in-depth data collection (Yin, 2016). This study attempted to employ the case study design with several (i.e., from five to six) interviews in a case (i.e., school district) to gain multiple views and perspectives of participants who held various positions. The use of multiple cases (i.e., school
districts) helped me develop a cross comparison of the cases. In each case, researching the multiple views and perspectives of various participants in a setting provided me the opportunity for data triangulation (Merriam, 2009; Yin, 2016). This method of study was appropriate because it enabled me to use data from various sources from interviews where participants shared their stories in the context and settings that helped me understand principals’ influence on instructional coaching (Creswell, 2007; Yin, 2016). Cross case analysis (Yin, 2016) allowed me to compare commonalities and differences in the responses, activities, and processes of people in three districts. Yin (2016) indicated qualitative studies explain how and why something is occurring. Many of the behaviors are necessary to improve instruction, but it is important to know how leaders enacted these behaviors through their ongoing, daily work (Spillane et al., 2003).

Using multicase sampling, researchers can look at a range of cases to find similarities or dissimilarities, which adds confidence to the study (Yin, 2016). If one setting provides a finding supported in other similar settings, the findings are more powerful (Miles et al., 2014). Through the comparisons of cases, the researcher can conduct a more thorough analysis that represents participants’ perceptions and experiences. The research design allows for comprehensive data collection, and the synthesis of findings is aggregated in a manner that allows the researcher to draw valuable conclusions (Yin, 2016).

I collected and analyzed data on the experiences from teams each composed of a principal, coach, district-level administrator, and teachers who had worked with the coach. Each principal and coach team were from a different elementary school. Analyzing and interpreting the findings of the interview data with those from various positions—including principals,
coaches, teachers, and district-level administrators—shed light on how principals enacted their influence and support for instructional coaching.

**Participants and Settings**

The study used qualitative data collected from instructional coaches, principals with whom they worked, teachers whom they had coached, and district-level administrators. To gather the most relevant data, I used purposive sampling where participants were selected based on a specific set of characteristics (Creswell, 2012). In this study, the selection of particular settings was justified because the schools had instructional coaching programs for at least 2 years prior to the study. I attempted to minimize the impact of being new to the school or the position. To obtain comprehensive data and an understanding of the universality or site dependence of the data, I conducted research in multiple school settings at the elementary level.

The inclusion criteria for selecting principals were:

- the principal had worked as an administrator at a school served by at least one instructional coach, and
- the principal had worked in the same position in the same district or school for a minimum of 2 years.

The inclusion criteria for selecting instructional coaches were:

- the instructional coach had worked as a coach for a minimum of 2 years,
- the instructional coach knew the selected principal in a professional capacity for a minimum of 2 years before the study, and
- the instructional coach engaged in coaching cycles with at least some of the teachers in the school(s) where they worked.

The inclusion criteria for selecting district-level administrators were:

- the director had worked in that capacity for at least 2 years, and
- the director had been directly involved in the implementation and development of the instructional coaching program.
The inclusion criteria for selecting teachers were:

- the teachers worked with the selected instructional coach in at least one coaching cycle in 1 year of the study; and
- the teachers worked at the same school for a minimum of 2 years, giving them the opportunity to work with the principal.

I also included the length of time the principal, coach, teacher, and district administrator had worked in the same building or district, and with each other, in the selection criteria. Knight (2007) stated relationships are impactful to the effectiveness of the instructional coach and the professional development they provide. Ensuring the coach, principal, district-level administrator, and teacher had some time to work together before the study took place confirmed they had time to build a working relationship. Because I asked respondents to identify specific leadership actions and behaviors, instructional coaches and teachers needed time to acclimate to the culture of their building. The selection criteria for teachers and coaches must align with the rigorous professional learning experiences consistent with Desimone’s (2009) professional development framework. For this reason, the selection criteria included the aspect of the coaching cycle. Knight (2009) identified the coaching cycle as a professional learning experience with a specific focus, such as developing a specific set of teaching practices that are critical, including classroom management, content planning, or instructional methods. The cycle provides a structure to the professional learning experience that is comprised of goal setting, reflection, classroom observation, modeling of a lesson, enacting learned strategies, and data collection (Knight, 2009). The nature of the coaching cycle is aligned with Desimone’s five-feature professional development framework because it is a collaborative, inquiry-based process that takes place over an extended period of time, connects directly to the concepts being taught in the classroom, and is focused on the teacher’s goals.
I conducted this study during the 2020–2021 school year, which was significantly impacted by the COVID-19 global pandemic. Along with the detailed description of the settings and participants, I include an explanation of the implications of the COVID-19 global pandemic on the study design in the next sections.

**Study Setting (Center Grove School District)**

Center Grove School District (pseudonym) is a PreK–8 school district located in the western suburbs of Chicago. At the time of the study, Center Grove served approximately 3,300 students in eight schools, per the information available from the district’s website. The school district served a diverse population of students, with 35% of the students being Hispanic, 8% Black, and 8% Asian. Approximately 40% of students qualified for free or reduced lunch, and 25% were English learners. Each school in the district, except for the early childhood center, had an instructional coach. During the COVID-19 global pandemic, all teachers used video conferencing to teach remote students while simultaneously teaching in-person students. The district’s director of teaching and learning coordinated the instructional coaching program. At the time of the study, Jennifer (pseudonym) had been in the district for 23 years in various capacities, and was in her 2nd year in her position as director of teaching and learning.

At the time of the study, Greenwood Elementary School (pseudonym) served approximately 450 students, per the information available from the school’s website. The school had the largest percentage of low-income students in the district (i.e., 49%). In addition, the school was the most diverse. Approximately 54% of the students were Hispanic and 44% were English learners. Greenwood’s student achievement was lower than the district average. Scott (pseudonym) had been the principal of Greenwood for 5 years. His instructional coach, Nicole
(pseudonym), had been in the district for over 15 years. She had been a coach for 10 years. Scott
and Nicole worked together on district-level projects, and, at the start of the school year, Nicole
took on the role of instructional coach at Greenwood. Nicole continued her instructional
coaching role full time during the pandemic and maintained weekly meetings with her principal,
Scott, and the assistant principal. Although Nicole shifted her focus to supporting teachers using
technology for teaching and learning during remote learning, her primary role of professional
development provider did not change throughout the school year. I conducted interviews with
two teachers who had worked with the instructional coach. Heather (pseudonym) had been a
teacher for 4 years and taught fourth grade. Rachel (pseudonym) was a special education
resource teacher and had been in the position for 11 years.

The director of teaching and learning, Jennifer, reported the coaching program had gone
through a couple of iterations since its inception. Approximately 8 years prior, the district
changed the gifted and accelerated learning teachers’ jobs to be dual teacher and instructional
coach roles. The teachers went from full-time teachers of gifted students to half-time gifted and
half-time instructional coaches. The district also put reading specialists in a coaching role.
According to Jennifer, the dual role did not work very well, primarily because there was no
direction about the instructional coaching role. The instructional coaching program was not a
formal program. No one received any training about how to be a coach and there was no
oversight from the district leadership. Jennifer characterized what the district did as imposing the
job shift on those gifted teachers. Their teaching assignments went from teaching students full
time to teaching students half time and coaching adults. Jennifer also described the toxic
environment caused by the superintendent at the time, which was another element of the earlier
coaching program. During her walkthroughs in the buildings, the superintendent would say,
“This teacher is terrible. Put her with a coach.” So, the common belief among the staff was you were a bad teacher if you were working with a coach. That attitude persisted no matter how the other administrators tried to promote the benefits of coaching to all teachers. Jennifer reported the district needed to revamp the instructional coaching program. Along with a new superintendent who recognized the value of instructional coaches, the conditions in the district changed completely. As the director of teaching and learning, Jennifer was committed to instructional coaching as a model for professional learning. About 4 years before the interview with Jenner, the district hired teachers who wanted the position of full-time instructional coaches. The district had brought in Joellen Killion to work with the coaches and the principals. The instructional coaches reported to the director of teaching and learning, but were an integral part of the instructional leadership in their assigned school.

Study Setting (Concord School District)

Concord School District (pseudonym) is a small, PreK–12 school district in suburban Chicago. At the time of the study, Concord School District served approximately 1,300 students in five schools, according to the district’s website. The school district served a diverse population of students, with 22% of students being Hispanic, 8% Black, and 8% Asian. Approximately 35% of students qualified for free or reduced lunch and 22% were English learners. Starting the year of the study, the two K–5 elementary schools switched to grade-level centers to facilitate small class sizes that would allow for COVID-19 safety protocols, including social distancing. The instructional coach, Dana (pseudonym), had been with the district for 7 years and was shared between the two elementary schools. I had been the curriculum director in the district for 7 years. In that position, I coordinated the instructional coaching program. In the other settings, the
participants included the district-level administrator who also coordinated the instructional coach program. This inclusion meant I had to also be a participant in this study. Being part of the district being studied, I needed to bracket my biases and preconceptions (Hatch, 2002). As one of the methods of bracketing, I engaged in writing memos throughout data collection and analysis to document insights, hunches, and presuppositions (Tufford & Newman, 2012).

At the time of the study, Peachtree Elementary School (pseudonym) served approximately 200 students in kindergarten and first grade. Previous to switching to grade-level centers, Peachtree housed the K–5 dual language program. It also had the highest percentage of Hispanic and low-income students. In the current configuration it had during the study, the ethnic and racial makeup was consistent with the district. Peachtree had one remote teacher per grade level during the pandemic who taught students remotely throughout the year. All other classroom teachers taught their students in person or remotely, depending on the COVID-19 global pandemic restrictions status. Because of the two designated remote teachers, the other teachers did not simultaneously work with remote and in-person students. Susan (pseudonym) had been the principal of Peachtree for 5 years. Dana continued to provide coaching support to teachers at Peachtree. Although she did not have a set schedule of meetings with Susan, they frequently spoke through video conferencing or in person. I also interviewed a teacher who had worked with the instructional coach. Leah (pseudonym) had been a teacher in the district for 28 years and in had been in her position as a kindergarten teacher for 13 years.

The elementary school in the district is Bradford Elementary School (pseudonym). At the time of the study, the school served approximately 400 students in Grades 2 through 5. Before the 2020–2021 school year, Bradford had the smallest percentage of low-income students at around 20%, with only 12% Hispanic students. With the switch to grade-level centers,
Bradford’s racial, ethnic, and low-income makeup was more diverse and consistent with the district. During the COVID-19 global pandemic, all teachers instructed remote students and in-person students simultaneously. Ashley (pseudonym) had been in the district for 8 years. She moved from the high school assistant principal to the principal of Bradford 4 years prior. Dana maintained her instructional coaching role at Bradford, but her focus often shifted to instructional technology support. Dana also had to take on administrative duties, such as supervising arrival and dismissal, interacting with parents to provide technical support, and occasionally subbing for teachers. Ashley did her best to protect Dana’s instructional coaching role and even maintained their regularly scheduled weekly meetings. I also interviewed a teacher who had worked with the instructional coach. At the time of the study, Grace (pseudonym) had been a teacher in the district for 3 years and spent 2 years in her position as a second-grade teacher.

About 10 years prior to the study, the district was undergoing a great deal of change. The district hired a new superintendent; in a couple of years, all the schools had new principals. One of the assistant principals became the curriculum coordinator and led the curriculum development task force to address the new Common Core standards. At the same time, the teachers were receiving training from a consultant to learn to differentiate instruction. About 7 years prior, the superintendent had made two significant changes: creating a curriculum director position and eliminating the gifted and accelerated teachers to bring instructional coaches to each building. The superintendent charged the curriculum director (i.e., researcher), a former instructional technology coach, to coordinate the instructional coaching program. The concept of instructional coaching was new to the principals and the teachers. The coaches had a difficult time defining their roles. The coaches engaged in several professional learning opportunities to build their capacity, including networking with other instructional coaches in Illinois, attending
workshops, and book studies. The coaches and curriculum director developed an instructional coaching policy. The policy clearly defined the instructional coaching role and set boundaries to prevent principals from using coaches as pseudo administrators with accountability measures to ensure coaches spent most of their time working with teachers. In recent years, one of the elementary instructional coaches went back into the classroom, leaving one coach for two buildings. The two building principals shared the instructional coach. However, the district hired another elementary instructional coach the year the study began. The coach reported to the principals and the curriculum director was in an advisory role.

Study Setting (Howard School District)

Howard School District (pseudonym) is a PreK–8 school district located in the southwestern suburbs of Chicago. At the time of the study, Howard School District served approximately 2,600 students in three schools, according to the district’s website. The school district students were 80% White, 6% Hispanic, 7% Black, and 3% Asian. About 3% of students qualified for free or reduced lunch, and approximately 2% were English learners. The schools were all on exemplary status from the Illinois State Board of Education, reflecting they performed at the top 10% of the schools statewide. The district had five coaches, including three instructional coaches and two technology coaches. During typical school years, the two schools shared the instructional coaches. Due to the COVID-19 global pandemic, the instructional coaches changed their position to remote learning teachers. The Board of Education decided to repurpose staff to eliminate the simultaneous teaching of remote and in-person students. As a result, the instructional coaches had limited opportunities to work with teachers and did not maintain regular meetings with the principals. The district’s curriculum director coordinated the
instructional coaching program. At the time of the study, Erica (pseudonym) had been in the district for 12 years in her position as curriculum director.

At the time of the study, Carson Elementary School (pseudonym) served approximately 830 PreK through second-grade students. Consistent with the school district, they were primarily White, with few low-income students and English learners. Courtney (pseudonym) had been the principal for 3 years and was previously the assistant principal. Although the two schools shared instructional coaches, Courtney typically worked with Kelsey (pseudonym). Kelsey had been in the district for 8 years, and the year I conducted the study would have been her 4th year as a coach. Because of the COVID-19 global pandemic, Kelsey was working with remote learning students. She had planned to return to her full-time instructional coach position in the following school year because it was presumed learning would be entirely in person. I also interviewed a teacher who worked with the instructional coach. At the time of the study, Vanessa (pseudonym) had been a teacher in the district for 7 years and in her position as a kindergarten teacher for 3 years.

At the time of the study, Fairview Elementary School (pseudonym) served just over 800 students in Grades 3–5. As with the other schools in Howard School District, Fairview students were primarily White with very few low-income students or English learners. Diana (pseudonym) had been the principal for 3 years. Although the schools shared the instructional coaches, Diana typically worked with Tiffany (pseudonym). Tiffany had been in the district for 23 years, and the year of the study would have been her 3rd year as an instructional coach. Because of the COVID-19 global pandemic, Tiffany had been working with remote students. She planned to return to her full-time instructional coach position in the following school year because it was presumed learning would be entirely in person.
About 12 years prior to the study, when Erica, the curriculum director, started in the district, the state adopted the Common Core standards. The curriculum director led a curriculum steering committee to unpack the standards. Seeing there were no published textbook series aligned to the standards, the committee created a curriculum. Eventually, the district adopted a fully aligned math program. Along with the curriculum development, the focus had shifted to instruction. The new standards demanded a reorganization of teaching and learning. The principals led buildings with over 800 students. The demands on the instructional leaders to lift the level of rigor in all the classrooms were unrealistic. Erica wrote a proposal for the superintendent and the Board of Education for an instructional coaching program. After several years, the Board of Education adopted the proposal, and the district hired six instructional coaches. Two coaches focused on technology, and the other four focused on core content area curriculum and instruction. The program had been in place for about 6 years prior to the study. The instructional coaches collaborated closely with the principals and reported to the curriculum director. Overall, there were 17 participants from the three districts (see Table 1).

Implications of the COVID-19 Global Pandemic on the Study

During the spring semester of the 2019–2020 school year, the COVID-19 global pandemic created one of the most significant disruptions to the educational system in U.S. history. School district administrators, teachers, students, and parents were left scrambling to pivot to entirely new teaching and learning methods. The massive disruption included the closure of schools and the shift to distance learning using video conferencing. The work of school administrators shifted to ensuring the health and safety of staff and students, and helping their team navigate teaching in a remote setting. Teachers were navigating a wide range of digital
Table 1

Overview of Study Settings and Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School</th>
<th>Principal</th>
<th>Years in position</th>
<th>Instructional coach</th>
<th>Years in position</th>
<th>Teacher</th>
<th>Years in position</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Greenwood</td>
<td>Scott</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Nicole (assigned to Greenwood)</td>
<td>10 / 1st year at Greenwood</td>
<td>Heather</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Rachel</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Leah</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peachtree</td>
<td>Susan</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Dana (shared with Bradford)</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>Leah</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elementary</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Grace</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bradford</td>
<td>Ashley</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Dana (shared with Peachtree)</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>Grace</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elementary</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Vanessa</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carson</td>
<td>Courtney</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Kelsey (shared with Fairview)</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Vanessa</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elementary</td>
<td>Diana</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Tiffany (shared with Carson)</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Greenwood was in the Center Grove District and Jennifer had been the director of teaching and learning for 2 years. Peachtree and Bradford were in the Concord District and the researcher had been the director of teaching and learning for 7 years. Carson and Fairview were in the Howard District and Erica had been the curriculum director for 12 years.
tools to convert to online instructional practices. The work of instructional coaches included supporting teachers as they tackled the dramatic shift to virtual learning. Two primary challenges with the qualitative research study in the COVID-19 global pandemic context were access to research participants and data collection methods.

The COVID-19 global pandemic made it necessary to redesign this research project. The original design of this study was to work with three district teams that included a principal, the instructional coach, and a teacher who had all worked together for at least 1 year. I had initially planned to use interviews, observations of meetings that included the team, and documents to triangulate the data. Two of the three district teams retracted their agreement to participate in the study, and the third delayed participation for several months. My search for new participants turned up unanswered messages, emails, and phone calls. When I finally secured participants, the circumstances and conditions in their districts also changed the data collection methods.

The teams of principals, instructional coaches—and, in most cases, teachers—made themselves available for interviews. I conducted the first round of interviews with the school principals for each team. It was during this time that I learned there were considerable demands on the coaches’ time due to the COVID-19 global pandemic. Only two of the five principals were scheduling regular meetings with their coaches during the period of time that I was collecting data. Although I was originally going to use observations and artifacts—such as meeting agendas—as methods of data collection, the conditions at the participating sites made that plan impractical. My original plan did not include interviews with the district-level administrator. During the data collection process, I determined interviewing the district-level administrator who coordinated the instruction coaching program was valuable for understanding the historical context of the instructional coaching program. For two districts, including my own,
this person was the director of teaching and learning; for the other district, it was the curriculum
director. I referenced the district level administrators in each of the interviews with the principals
and the coaches.

The Greenwood principal agreed to participate in the study in early 2020; however, she
became unavailable for interviews until the second quarter of the 2020–2021 school year. She
was assigned a new instructional coach right before the school year began. The principal and her
new coach worked together on district projects and the coach held her position as an instructional
coach for several years in another school in the district. Although the coach and the principal had
been working together for just a short time, I decided to include the team in the study.

Through another personal connection, I found a principal who was willing to participate
in the study. In her district, two principals shared two instructional coaches. Both coaches also
agreed to participate along with the other principal. The circumstances in the district were not
ideal because instructional coaches were not performing coaching duties full time during the
2020–2021 school year. The coaches were assigned to work with remote students. Although I did
not initially plan to include my district, the lack of access to other district teams necessitated
asking my colleagues if they would be willing to participate in the study to have sufficient data.
The instructional coach worked with two principals, and they all agreed to participate in the
study. Because I was both a researcher and a participant in this study, I had to take steps to
 bracket my biases. Conducting research in my own backyard comes with risks because my prior
knowledge may have influenced my interpretation of the data or raise issues with my colleagues
(Glesne & Peshkin, 1992). Due to my ongoing collegial relationship with the members of my
own educational community, my colleagues expressed a willingness to provide open and honest
answers to my data collection question. I presented them with a confidentiality agreement and
assured them I would not share the content of our interviews. Although I brought my own opinions, beliefs, and biases to this study, I took measures to ensure I analyzed and interpreted the data accurately. These measures included member checking, where participants had the opportunity to review not only the transcripts, but also the notes and interpretations to offer confirmation of events and context. I used direct quotes from my interviews to provide a pure representation of the data. Being an insider helped me support the rich description of the context of the stories that were shared (Creswell, 2009). Throughout the data collection and analysis, I engaged in writing memos to document insights, hunches, and presuppositions (Tufford & Newman, 2012). Additional strategies that impacted credibility and minimized personal bias included triangulation of data, the piloting process, and peer review.

Finding teachers to participate was the biggest challenge. In one school, the teachers that the principal introduced declined to participate. In another school, the teachers knew the coach very well, but had only been working together for a short time. The original plan was to work with teams of principals, coaches, and teachers. I adjusted the data collection plan based on the availability of teachers to participate in the study.

The original study design included conducting interviews, observing meetings, and reviewing meeting agendas and calendars. The COVID-19 global pandemic changed the conditions of the instructional coaching program for most participants. In one district, the two participating principals and their shared instructional coaches were not meeting during the time I was collecting data. Another coach was meeting formerly with only one of her principals. I was not able to observe meetings in all of the districts; therefore, I did not include that data source in the study. Without regular meetings and scheduled coaching cycles with teachers, documents were not a valuable tool for the study.
After I interviewed the principals and the instructional coaches, I expanded the participants to include district-level administrators. I determined the districts’ administrators who coordinated the coaching programs would add valuable insight. Interviews with the district-level administrators from each of the districts provided a consistent method of triangulation. I am the curriculum director and became a participant in the study. In my role as researcher, I needed to take steps to bracket my biases. As a member of the district included in the study, I had to be sensitive to the information being shared, maintain confidentiality, and ensure participants’ reflections were not influenced by my position in the district. I used reflective memos instead of an interview when I was a research participant. Due to the COVID-19 global pandemic, I was not able to meet with participants from other districts in person. Instead of conducting in-person interviews, we used video conferencing.

My original intent was to investigate how principals perceived the role of instructional coach and how they facilitated, influenced, and supported the professional learning of teachers through the instructional coaching program. Although the implication of the COVID-19 global pandemic heavily impacted the original plan for data collection, the subsequent method was able to provide sufficient data to analyze. Because the research involved three school districts and 17 interview participants, I was able to obtain multiple levels of comparison and a level of complexity that returned rich descriptive analysis.

**Data Collection**

Leadership practices are defined by interactions between the leaders, and the material artifacts or documentation of their work. As Diamond and Spillane (2016) stated, “To study leadership practice, we need to study leaders in action” (p. 28). The data collection process
included a triangulation of data that consisted of interviews of coaches and their principals along with the district-level administrator. When possible, I also included interviews with teachers.

**Semistructured Interviews**

The use of interviews as the primary data source for the study was based on the idea that an interview provides the opportunity to gain insight into the participants’ perceptions through a conversation that is focused and intentional (Bogdan & Biklen, 1997). For this research, I conducted a series of semistructured interviews with four teams, each including (a) the principal; (b) instructional coach; (c) district-level administrator who coordinated the coaching program; and, (d) when available, a teacher who worked with the coach and principal in the same school. I interviewed each participant once. In some cases, I interviewed each participant a second time to ask follow-up questions. I conducted all of the interviews through video conferencing and audio recorded them all.

With semistructured interviews, I had the opportunity to gather information by asking open-ended questions, which allowed for flexibility (Merriam, 2009). For example, if new or interesting information emerged during the conversation, I reframed follow-up questions to gain clarity (Merriam, 2009; Yin, 2016). Creswell (2012) recommended the researcher develop an interview protocol for asking and recording answers during the interview. I used the interview protocol as a fieldnote-taking tool. The purpose of the notes was to help me reflect on the important aspects of the interview and to consider what information was left out and needed to be revisited during the follow-up interview (Creswell, 2012). The protocol included an introduction that outlined the reason for the interview, the procedures put in place to protect confidentiality, and icebreaker questions to put the subject at ease. After the introduction, open-
ended interview questions dug deep into understanding the impact of building leadership on the role of instructional coaches as interpreted by principals, coaches, and teachers. Through interviewing the district-level administrator, I was able to gain important background information about the instructional coaching program as a whole.

I crafted interview questions to elicit responses that directly addressed the research questions. The initial interview of each of the team members took approximately 60 minutes. The interview included questions that provided insights into the participants’ perceptions of various elements of instructional leadership tasks. I included questions that delved into the interaction between teachers and coaches, the interaction between principals and coaches, fidelity to the role, recognition of a change in teacher practices, alignment to school improvement goals, and goals of implementation of initiatives or learner-directed goals. The line of questioning was based on the core conceptual framework of professional development (Desimone, 2009) and distributed leadership (Spillane et al., 2001).

I asked the principals questions that elicited descriptions of the support they provided to the coach(es) to advance, rather than hinder, the work of the instructional coach(es). The protocol I used for principal interviews followed a similar line of questioning as Matsumura et al. (2009). The line of questioning addressed specific behaviors that influenced instructional coaches. Questions included: “How would you describe the role of your coach?” (Matsumura et al., 2009, p. 666), “What kinds of activities are important to the coaching model?” (p. 666), and “What do you do to support the work of your coach?” (p. 666). The principal’s conceptualization of the instructional coach can be acquired by asking principals to describe the role of the coach and to list the specific tasks coaches do in their school (Matsumura et al., 2009).
I interviewed the coach from each of the schools to gain their perspective. As consistent with Matsumura et al. (2009), I asked the coaches questions that included: “What does your principal specifically do to support your work as a coach?” (p. 666), “Please provide an example of one of the most supportive steps taken by your principal to assist you and your work” (p. 666) and “How does your principal demonstrate [their] understanding of professional learning that leads to lasting change in the classroom?” (p. 666).

For all but one school, I interviewed the teacher who had worked with the instructional coach to seek insight into two concepts. First, I asked the teachers to share their experiences with working with an instructional coach and their perspectives on the coach’s role and effectiveness. In addition, the teachers shed light on how they believed the principals’ views and actions impacted the learning culture of the school. I asked teachers questions that included: “How does your principal promote the instructional coach as a resource to support teachers?” (Matsumura et al., 2009, p. 666), “Describe the work you do with the coach to facilitate change in teaching practices” (p. 666), and “How does your principal demonstrate his/her understanding of professional learning?” (p. 666).

Finally, I asked the district-level administrators who coordinated the program questions about the district’s vision of the instructional coaching program. The insights of the administrators provided context to the expectations and accountability factors for school leadership to enact the roles of instructional coach in their building. In each of the districts, the district-level administrators were part of the implementation of the instructional coaching program. The historical context of the program, and the why and how the program was developed was important to the study. Teachers were influenced by the history of the instructional coaching program.
I took measures to be respectful of participants throughout the interviews. The use of the interview protocol kept the interview focused on the data collection for the study, made good use of time, and maintained a neutral position throughout the process.

**Piloting the Data Collection Tools**

To pilot the data collection methods and tools, I enlisted the support of a principal, instructional coach, and teacher who did not participate in the study. Prior to collecting data, I piloted the semistructured interview questions with one principal, one coach, and one teacher to determine the adequacy and appropriateness of the interview questions to answer the research questions. I asked colleagues from my district to participate in the pilot. The principal, coach, and teacher were not the same team as the ones in the study. I asked them to conduct a 60-minute semistructured interview to confirm the appropriateness of the structure, the interview protocol, and the questions. Based on the pilot, I had the opportunity to revise interview questions to ensure the questions thoroughly addressed the research questions and provided an adequate flow to the conversation. Additionally, I observed one meeting with an instructional coach and principal, and one meeting that included a principal, instructional coach, and teachers. I recorded the pilot interviews and took detailed notes on the draft interview protocol with the intention of modifying the questions. The pilot process was valuable to me because it allowed me to revise questions and change the order to make the interview flow. The pilot process helped me improve my interview questions and practice taking relevant notes during the interviews. When the conditions of the study precluded me from the ability to observe meetings for most of the study settings, the pilot study made me confident the change in direction for the study was still going to be effective.
Data Analysis

For this qualitative study, I analyzed data from interviews simultaneously with data collection to ensure data collected were organized and analyzed effectively to develop assertions (Glaser & Strauss, 2009).

Stage 1: Open Coding and In Vivo Coding

In the first stage, I prepared the data for analysis. I also audio recorded the interviews and transcribed them verbatim. I numbered interview participants according to the school so I could compare the answers. The coding technique was open coding with the use of in vivo coding. Open coding is coding without predetermined codes. In vivo coding uses the participants’ words as codes (Merriam, 2009). In vivo coding was helpful in situations and settings where the participants used specific terms and language particular to their context, and allowed me to note particular words, moments, and occurrences that were important. I indicated in vivo coding with quotation marks because they were taken directly from what the participant said (Saldaña, 2009).

Stage 2: Axial Coding and In-Process Memos

The second stage of coding provided the opportunity to reorganize and reanalyze the data (Saldaña, 2009). As patterns emerged from the second stage of reviewing the data, second-cycle, axial coding (Saldaña, 2009) brought together themes that were most highlighted in the data and provided the organization of concepts (Merriam, 2009). I characterized patterns by similarities, differences, frequency, sequence, correspondence, and causation (Saldaña, 2009). Axial coding
allowed me to recognize codes that were expected because they were present in the literature. I organized dominant codes systematically and eliminated reductant codes.

I used in-process, analytic memos to support reflections about the data and document my thinking about the data. As I coded the data, I used the analytic memo as I synthesized the process of constructing categories (Creswell & Creswell, 2017).

Stage 3: Assertion Development

After data collection, I engaged in an intensive analysis that included looking back at field notes, interview protocol, and transcripts. During that process, I delved further into the data to make inferences about the links among the categories. The categories were an essential element to creating assertions (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). I interpreted the data by making inferences about the link among the categories to address the research questions (Merriam, 2009). In addition, I used analytic memos to construct credible and trustworthy statements based on the data (Saldaña, 2009). I analyzed data for emerging themes, and from those themes, constructed statements into assertions. I wrote the assertions as arguments using evidence from the data. I reviewed the coded data and memos I created during analysis, and constructed statements that are presented as assertions. The assertions summarize the evidence from the data (Saldaña, 2009).

Credibility

According to Yin (2016), case study research can be challenging due to potential subjectivity. To increase credibility, I used multiple sources of evidence to minimize biases in the inquiry. Creswell (2007) identified procedures for verifying qualitative research findings,
including triangulation; peer review; clarifying research bias; member checking; and the presence of rich, thick descriptions. Using multiple sources of evidence provided multiple measures of the same phenomenon and contributed to credibility because I could use those multiple measures to triangulate the data (Merriam, 1995; Yin, 2016). By using triangulation, I searched for convergence among the multiple sources for the investigation to form themes. I gained multiple perspectives through the interviews with the 16 participants who had various positions including principals, coaches, and district-level administrators. The rich, thick descriptions gained from data collection provided validating evidence of the emerging themes (Creswell & Miller, 2000). By engaging in multiple interviews over the span of the study, I listened for consistency of the explanations (Creswell & Miller, 2000; Merriam, 1995).

Another method for ensuring data accuracy is member checking. Member checking allowed me to share the analysis of the data with participants by requesting feedback to ensure an accurate representation of the investigated phenomenon (Creswell, 2012; Creswell & Miller, 2000; Merriam, 1995). This method also helped me establish trust and rapport with the participants and reduce bias (Creswell, 2012).

Shortly after each interview, I provided participants their interview transcript so they could review it. Participants had the opportunity to confirm the account or clarify anything they said. I incorporated the participants’ comments and feedback into the final narrative, which added credibility to the study.

**Peer Review**

The use of peer review positively impacted the trustworthiness of the research (Mertens, 2010). Once I conducted the initial interpretation of the data, the manuscript underwent peer
Two colleagues who were practicing instructional coaches provided input. These colleagues had completed their doctoral studies and dissertations on instructional coaching programs. The peer reviewers and I met virtually 3 times. I provided my colleagues with the constructed categories, the analysis, the participants’ quotes, and my interpretation of the data. They reviewed the codes and themes and provided feedback following data transcription and initial coding to audit the process. We discussed the analysis process, findings, and conclusions. We also discussed the analysis drafts to ensure the data supported the assertions. The peer reviewers found a gap based on their observations of the data and recommended an additional assertion. Based on their knowledge and expertise of the content, this recommendation provided a valuable addition to the analysis. Another benefit of engaging with the peer reviewers was the writing process was more collaborative and provided the opportunity for me to think critically about the research. Because of their familiarity with instructional coaching programs, the peer reviewers became valuable thought partners and our collaboration resulted in stronger analysis of the data.

Methodological Considerations for Researcher Positionality

One significant threat to credibility is bias (Maxwell, 2012). As a qualitative researcher, I need to make my position explicit and recognize the concept of reflexivity. Reflexivity involves examining how biases, judgments, and belief systems impact the data collection process and the interpretation of the findings. I needed to be intentional in recognizing my background, history, values, and personal experiences and bracket or suspend biases throughout the study (Creswell, 2012; Creswell & Miller, 2000). In addition, I used bracketing to put aside assumptions, previous experiences, and background knowledge as data were being gathered and analyzed. Because of
my positions as coach and coordinator of the coaching program, I had to address the potential for bias in all parts of this study and take steps to bracket my biases (Creswell, 2009; Hatch, 2002). Conducting research in my own backyard came with risks because my prior knowledge may have influenced my interpretation of the data or raised issues with my colleagues (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992). Although I brought my own opinions, beliefs, and biases to this study, I took measures to ensure I analyzed and interpreted the data accurately. I used member checking, where participants had the opportunity to review the transcripts and the notes and interpretations to offer confirmation of events and context. I used direct quotes from interviews to fully represent the data. Being an insider helped me support the detailed description of the context of the shared stories (Creswell, 2009). Throughout the data collection and analysis, I wrote memos to document insights, hunches, and presuppositions (Tufford & Newman, 2012). Additional strategies I used to support credibility and minimize personal bias were triangulation of data, piloting, and peer review.

Summary

This chapter described in detail the methodology of this study, including the data collection and data analysis processes. Chapter 4 will provide the findings of the data analysis.
CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

The purpose of this study was to investigate how principals perceived the role of instructional coaches and how they facilitated, influenced, and supported the professional learning of teachers through the instructional coaching program. Study participants came from three different suburban school districts and included five elementary school principals and four instructional coaches. At the time of the study, I was the curriculum director of one of the districts, and my reflections about my district were included in the data. I also interviewed five teachers and two curriculum directors to triangulate the data. This chapter provides the results of the data analysis that addressed the following research questions:

- How do principals perceive the role of the instructional coach?
- How does the principal facilitate and influence the instructional coaching program?
- How does principal leadership support teacher engagement in instructional coaching activities?

Instructional Coaching Program Implementation

Teachers’ views of the instructional coaching process were influenced by how and why the program was implemented. This section will provide context to how each of the three school districts implemented the instructional coaching program, including the vision of the school district leadership, and current conditions that impacted the original plan. Two scenarios
emerged in the data in this study. For one district, the initial focus of the instructional coaching program was to implement a new curriculum and core material. According to the data in this study, teachers’ engagement in coaching activities may decrease once the staff completes curriculum implementation. Once teachers felt competent with the materials, they did not feel compelled to engage in coaching activities. Effective professional development experiences increase teachers’ knowledge and skills, and change their attitudes and beliefs (Desimone, 2009; Desimone & Pak, 2017). In the cases when the focus of the instructional coaching program was to improve instructional practices, teachers remained open to working with instructional coaches. Teachers are inclined to change their attitudes and beliefs about teaching when they observe the impact on their students. In this type of environment, teachers continue to engage with the instructional coach.

Howard School District

It took curriculum director, Erica, 9 years to get the instructional coaching program up and running at Howard School District. As the Common Core initiative rolled out, the district established a steering committee to unpack the standards. Because the work took place long before any completely aligned core resources were available, the district developed its own homegrown curriculum for English language arts. The district did eventually adopt a published math program. Erica stated:

I knew I had to focus on instruction, and the only way that anything different was going to happen in the classroom to lift the level of rigor was to write a proposal for instructional coaches to support our new curriculum.

The district established several coaching positions. Erica did her research, developing a vision for the instructional coaching program. She said, “In my research, I had to think about the
structure and what support would look like. We did a lot of brainstorming, trial and error, and thinking about where we needed support.” In the meantime, the coaches were a significant part of the district’s effort to write most of its curriculum materials, including assessment writing. Then, the coaches led all the professional development activities around the curriculum.

About 6 years after the program’s onset, the instructional coaches at Howard were still conducting regular professional development sessions. The coaches conducted whole-school professional development sessions for teachers in the morning once a week. Attendance was mandatory, and the agenda was predetermined by the principal, with their coach’s help. The coaches conducted these professional development sessions twice a week until the teachers’ union fought to decrease the frequency of those coach-led professional development sessions.

For Diana, one of the principals at Howard School District, that professional development model was not working. She said:

The initial vision and the reason why professional development is delivered [to teachers in the morning sessions] was because we had a new math curriculum. We had new things to give them, like to go over how we’re teaching this in the math series.

After implementing the curriculum materials, Diana believed the coaches ran out of relevant content, saying:

It has always been, here’s my [professional development] I’m delivering, 2 days a week, every week of the year. That’s tough. What content are you delivering that is not repetitive? We’re not going to get it right every single week.

Teachers in Diana’s building were resistant to the weekly training. Diana said:

They’re not opposed to the people; they’re opposed to losing plan time. “I could be doing other things.” They’re really critical, and if we don’t hit a home run on what we’re delivering, they’ll be like, “I could have been doing something better.”

Kelsey, one of the coaches in his district, confirmed this notion, sharing:
It was like, the biggest union issue. So, they’re constantly fighting because they don’t feel the need for professional development. So that’s kind of where we’re at. And I think that has a lot to do with our roles as instructional coaches. If you feel like you know it and you don’t need any professional development. They also feel like they don’t really need an instructional coach, but that also probably goes back to our role.

Kelsey, a coach who worked in Diana’s building, reported teachers were accustomed to instructional coaches, but their role as professional development providers was not promoted.

She stated:

If I pick two teachers and ask them the role of an instructional coach, they would describe our position completely differently. . . . We are no longer being introduced, and our jobs are never explained. I don’t think people really know what we’re here for.

Another critical characteristic of Howard’s instructional coaching program was the requirement that all new teachers work with the instructional coach during their first 2 years in the district. In recent years, Carson, Courtney’s school, had a significant turnover. She hired 10 new kindergarten teachers in 1 year, which made up almost the entire team. This new crop of teachers kept the coaches very busy. The instructional coaches fulfilled Erica’s vision of engaging in individual coaching cycles, but not with all teachers. Based on the information shared by the coaches, principals, and the teacher, the instructional coaches did most of the job-embedded coaching cycles with new teachers.

The instructional coaches in Howard School District were known for writing curriculum, delivering weekly professional development, and working with new teachers. The historical context of the program impacted the interest level and engagement of the teacher. Data from the principals, coaches, and teacher from Howard School District reflected an overall resistance by many, except for new teachers, to work with an instructional coach for professional learning. The data also indicated teachers generally did not value the work of the instructional coaches.
Center Grove School District

The instructional coaching program at Center Grove School District had gone through a couple of iterations over the years. About 8 years prior to the study, the district administration realigned the jobs of teachers who taught in the gifted and talented program, along with reading specialists. They went from full-time teaching positions to half-time teacher and half-time coach. Jennifer, Center Grove’s director of teaching and learning, reported:

The dual role just wasn’t working very well, mostly because there was no direction and no formal coaching program, per se, and no one to oversee them. They didn’t have a robust coaching program and professional development around how to be a coach.

Over 8 years ago, Center Grove established the curriculum director position, and Jennifer’s predecessor completely revamped the program. The teachers of the gifted program and the reading specialists went back to the jobs they previously had, and the district hired instructional coaches who had a genuine interest in coaching. The instructional coaches went through intense instructional coach training with Jim Knight.

In recent years, Center Grove and Jennifer continued to rebrand the program, including contracting with Joellen Killion to work with both the coaches and administrators. Any potential adverse effects of the past were not evident in the current program. Jennifer reported, “This coaching role or model has our vision and mission as a district. The charge is to support teachers’ success that positively impacts student achievement.” In the conversations with other district members, it seemed the instructional coaches played a vital role for all teachers. Based on the instructional coaching program questions, teachers were not resistant to working with the instructional coach.
Concord School District

About 9 years ago, several converging factors caused the superintendent of Concord School District to consider an instructional coaching program for his schools. One aspect was what the data showed him about the impact of the elementary gifted program. Data from the high school showed students from the gifted program in the elementary grades were not performing well on standardized tests. He hired a consultant to work with all teachers and administrators on differentiation in the classroom, believing that differentiation, not acceleration, would best benefit the students.

The second factor was the need to address literacy instruction. The superintendent became highly interested in shifting literacy instruction from a teacher-directed model to a more student-directed, comprehensive literacy model. He hired consultants to train teachers on a comprehensive literacy model to improve classroom instruction and align with the Common Core standards. After a couple of years of attempting to implement change through consultants and a committee of teachers and administrators to upgrade the curriculum, the superintendent made some staffing changes to support his vision for school improvement. He eliminated the gifted program and hired three instructional coaches. He also hired the director of teaching and learning to support the administrators and teachers and coordinate the instructional coaching program. I am the director of teaching and learning that was hired for Concord School District. I am also the researcher. With many years of experience as a coach, my vision for the instructional coaching program aligned with the superintendent. The work of the instructional coaches was to support teachers by providing explicit and intentional differentiated instruction centered on the needs of all students. The administrators, teachers, and coaches worked with consultants to
implement the Common Core with a new curriculum and resources. The emphasis for the instructional coaches has always been instructional practices.

The approach of Concord School District was different from Howard School District. For Concord School District, changing the instructional practices was the primary focus. The district did bring in new curriculum materials for teachers. The new materials helped the coaches’ efforts because the teachers were overwhelmed with finding or creating materials. There was no time for meaningful professional learning. The district brought in resources to support the coaches’ work because they had more time to focus on improving instruction. Ashley shared:

We helped as admin to get the curriculum [materials] and the assessments in place so that wouldn’t be in the way of her coaching. We helped to get those things in place. [Dana] was trying to coach, and the curriculum was getting in the way, assessments were getting in the way, report cards or whatever it may be were getting in the way. She knew that those things were needed in order to get to the coaching, so we helped as admin to get those things in place so she could really focus on the instruction. It’s never perfect, but that’s what we want her to focus on the instruction.

During the first 2 years of the instructional coaching program, I engaged with the coaches in several professional development opportunities. These opportunities included book studies, networking with other district coaches, workshops, and conferences. Also, during the first couple of years of the instructional coaches, the principals began taking advantage of the presence of a pseudo administrator and disrupting the intent of the program. For example, the principals assigned the coaches to tasks like coordinating standardized testing, organizing resources purchased for the new curriculum, working with small groups of students for intervention, and subbing in classrooms. During the weekly meetings with myself and the coaches, they expressed their frustration with the tasks that were taking away from their time with teachers. I conducted workshops for the principals about the role of the instructional coach. Along with the superintendent, I provided explicit directives to the principals to create the best environment for
coaching, and to refrain from assigning the coaches to tasks that took time away from working with teachers. The coaches helped me write a district instructional coaching handbook to shore up the new program and ensure the purpose aligned with the superintendent’s vision. The handbook outlined the roles and responsibilities of the instructional coaches based on the research of Jim Knight, Joellen Killion, and others. The concept stuck with Susan, who said, “I just have to always put myself in check to make sure: is this a leadership or administrative task that we’re asking her to do, or does it lead anything to better teaching and learning?”

There have been a few shifts in principals and coaches since the district hired the first instructional coaches. Dana, one of the district’s first coaches, was considered by her principals and district administrators to be instrumental in creating an effective and successful instructional coaching program. Ashley, the principal in one of the elementary buildings, was the high school teaching and learning coordinator and a coaching team member. She was a big part of the design of the instructional coaching program. As a result, Ashley had a solid commitment to the success of the instructional coaching program and her longtime teammate, Dana. Dana shared:

I’m lucky that [Ashley] is a huge fan of coaching. She’s always advocating for coaching and is a true believer that coaches make a difference and can help teachers. So, she definitely supports my role and my work and does everything she can to understand that role and to promote instructional coaching to teachers.

Recapping Implementation Context

The district-level administrators from each school district provided valuable insight into how the district implemented the instructional coaching program. They described the original purposes of bringing coaches into the district. All the district and school administrators had strong commitments to teaching and learning and believed instructional coaches provided
valuable support for teachers to improve instruction. The responses from the study participants revealed that, although everyone had the best intentions, the historical context of the instructional coaching program had an impact on teachers’ views and their inclination to engage with an instructional coach.

Assertions

Assertions provide insight into the data holistically, and will address the topics in the study, the conceptual framework, the literature review, and the research questions. The assertions are based on the themes that emerged during the data analysis. As I reviewed the coded data and memos I created during analysis, I constructed statements that are presented as assertions, which summarize the evidence from the data (Saldaña, 2009). After data analysis, the assertions were not structured to answer any specific research question, but to instead focus on the perspectives of the principals, instructional coaches, teachers, and district-level administrators holistically. Their voices can be heard directly in the assertions as they attempted to help educators understand how the characteristics and behaviors of the principals impacted the interaction of the instructional coaches and teachers. More direct links to the conceptual framework, literature review, and research questions are presented in Chapter 5.

The first assertion, vital to success, sets the stage for all the other assertions. The instructional coaches were valued members of the school community. Their principals had high regard for their role and their expertise. The following three assertions draw attention to the potential of instructional coaches to bring positive change. They also draw attention to the importance of a supportive dynamic between the administration and instructional coaches to help coaches fully realize their potential.
The second assertion, mandated coaching risks relationships, addressed Research Questions 2 and 3. All administrators were similar in the way they articulated the role of the instructional coach. Coaches were a resource for teachers, and it is the teacher who should engage the coach for support. However, tying the coach’s work to teachers’ evaluations impacted the nature of the relationships with teachers. Therefore, the principal’s influence on the program and teacher engagement contradicted the articulated role of the instructional coach.

The third assertion, accountability is key, also addressed Research Questions 2 and 3. Coaches wanted to hold their principals accountable for their instructional leadership. Coaches also wanted principals to hold teachers accountable for high-quality teaching and engagement in professional learning.

The fourth assertion, the importance of partnerships, featured relationships. The data called attention to the impact of the principal’s behavior, their relationship with their coaches, and how these things facilitated teachers’ professional learning. The reciprocal relationships in the school community led to answers to all three research questions.

The final assertion, coach as community member, addresses the potential impact of the instructional coaches’ participation in professional learning communities (PLC). This assertion connects all the research questions. Through involvement with PLCs, coaches gained valuable insight into the mindset of the teachers, which ultimately supported the work of the principals. The respondents made a strong connection to the principals’ instructional leadership, and how their coaches supported those efforts. The degree to which the principal demonstrated their instructional leadership impacted their ability to influence the instructional coaching program and compelled teachers to engage in professional learning.
The in-depth descriptions that follow do a deep dive into each assertion. The descriptions include the participants’ voices to provide evidence for the findings.

**Assertion 1: Coaches Are Vital to Success**

The data were clear that all participants held the instructional coaches in high regard. All the principals praised the coaches and agreed instructional coaches were a valuable asset. Diana and Courtney, the principals from Howard School District, praised their coaches as professionals. However, they had varying levels of success with their instructional coaching programs in their buildings. Courtney said, “They are vital to the success of the school because they are able to get in on the ground level and support teachers.” Courtney also pointed out she saw how her staff had realized the connection between the coach/teacher relationship and their success as professionals. Her coach, Kelsey, felt supported and appreciated the consistent “shoutouts” with the staff. Kelsey said she also appreciated how Courtney always included the coaches in everything she did with her staff. Courtney’s colleague, Diana, was also very complimentary to her coaches. Diana said, “An instructional coach is there, in a supportive fashion to help teachers reach their greatest level of potential.” On a personal level, Diana said, “I’m really thankful for them. They’ve helped me a lot.” These statements, along with similar claims from the other principals, developed as a theme across all of the data. Principals appreciate the instructional coaches for their partnership and instructional leadership. As findings from the data are discussed in the rest of this chapter, it becomes clear the success of the instructional coaches is more complex.

Coaches are vital to the school’s success, but principals are essential to the coaches’ success. For example, Leah, an experienced kindergarten teacher who worked for Susan, pointed
out both the principal and coach worked as a team to facilitate a culture of professional learning. Susan said, “I think [Dana] has worked a lot of magic here.” One of Dana’s magical things was to engage even the most seasoned teacher in coaching activities. Leah admitted it took several years to invite Dana into her classroom for a coaching cycle. Leah respected Dana a great deal, but always thought she could make any necessary changes in her instruction without Dana’s help. Leah said both Susan and Dana encouraged the teachers to try new strategies in the classroom. Leah noted:

[Susan and Dana are] both positive, and excited and passionate about learning, and they convey that when they’re talking to us. They’re both very appreciative when we do try something new, and I think they’re both open to our ideas.

Susan’s enthusiasm for professional learning impacted Dana’s success as a coach.

Dana was a coach in two buildings. Susan’s colleague, Ashley, was Dana’s other principal. Ashley pointed out she could tell Dana was successful and impactful because her calendar was “packed with appointments.” In addition, Ashley saw evidence of Dana’s work everywhere in her building. Ashley said, “You see her footprint literally in every classroom in some way, shape, or form.” To support Dana, Ashley and Susan demonstrated their trust in her. Dana had complete autonomy over her schedule, who she worked with, and how she worked with them. In addition, they constantly heaped praise for her work with the staff. During meetings, they asked her questions, allowed her to present topics to teachers, and publicly gave her “shoutouts” for her guidance and support. Dana appreciated her principal’s constant support by talking about her with their staff.

Similarly, Scott from Center Grove School District always made his coach, Nicole, an integral part of meetings with her staff. Nicole also said Scott publicly recognized her “all the time.” Scott would say, “[Nicole] is here to support you,” in his weekly newsletter, in emails to
his staff, or during meetings. He even told certified staff members other than teachers, such as interventionists, that the coach was available to “support them in whatever they need.” Scott said his coach “actually leads with the administrators” and “it is all about supporting [the teachers].” Scott’s teacher, Heather, pointed out teachers picked up on the learning culture that Scott intended. Heather said her principal created an environment where it was “Okay to ask for help.” Another one of Scott’s teachers referred to working with Nicole as “our safe place.” Scott valued the coach and made his appreciation for the coach evident to his staff through his actions.

Recapping Assertion 1: Vital to Success

The data clearly showed principals and teachers greatly appreciated instructional coaches’ work to impact teaching and learning positively. The coaches themselves recognized and appreciated their principals for their support. For participants in this study, the instructional coaches were embedded in all aspects of professional learning and ultimately improved instructional practices.

Assertion 2: Mandated Coaching Risks Relationships

Instructional coach participants stressed they were colearners who worked side by side with teachers as they grew professionally. They were not experts who prescribed solutions. Trusting relationships between the instructional coach and the teacher was imperative to this process. When principals assigned teachers to work with a coach to avoid disciplinary action or correct something the principal identified as an instructional deficiency, the teacher-coach relationship took on a whole new meaning. The instructional coach was put into a position to
expect compliance from the teacher rather than to offer support. This type of relationship contributed to teachers’ resistance to engaging in coaching.

Jennifer, Center Grove’s director of teaching and learning, gave an example. She shared: “The district had a superintendent who had no understanding of the role of the coach. She used to walk around the building, and she would essentially say, ‘That teacher’s terrible, put them with a coach.’ It was really toxic.” The teachers viewed coaching as only for teachers who were not performing well. Although the principals tried to spin coaching as a positive thing because they knew all teachers would benefit from coaching, they believed teachers only worked with a coach if they were a bad teacher. Those conditions existed many years ago, and Center Grove’s instructional coaching program has evolved. Coaches, such as Nicole from Greenwood Elementary School, later worked with all teachers.

The “Cleanup Crew”

Principals in Howard School District explicitly assigned teachers to work with a coach if the teachers were perceived by their principals to be weak or deficient. Kelsey, one of the coaches, said:

When we first got this coaching, we really tried the student-centered [coaching]. We’re very student centered. We are here to just focus on the students, and that quickly shifted, and it did turn into, “Hey, this teacher needs help. We need you to go in there and start working with them.”

Kelsey described the “back door approach,” where the coach would find a way into the classroom without telling the teacher the principal directed the coach to work with them. The coaches would find ways to work their way into the classroom. Tiffany, Kelsey’s colleague, told a similar story. Tiffany shared:
When I have a principal saying, “Hey, they’re not doing this. We need [the coaches] to get in here,” but I can’t say, “Hey, your principal just said you need to fix this. You’re broken.” And so, I think that’s that view on it. I didn’t realize any of that. I would be sent in to help teachers without teachers knowing that the principals are talking to me. So, that was hard. We’re just used as the cleanup crew now.

Kelsey’s back door approach and Tiffany’s reference to being part of the cleanup crew negatively affected their role as instructional coaches. They knew that, to get teachers to buy into the changes they were trying to support, the teachers needed to initiate the instructional support. Principal-mandated instructional coaching contradicted everything coaches knew about the motivation for adult learners. All the administrators from Howard, including Erica, Courtney, and Diana, acknowledged the importance of teacher choice when it came to coaching. Erica said, “It’s a teacher’s choice whether or not they want to cycle. That’s the first thing.” Courtney stated, “Coaching is nonevaluative so that teachers don’t feel threatened.” Her colleague, Diana, also agreed coaching is not evaluative, sharing: “It is not administrative. It is really collegial in the sense that they should be there as another set of eyes and expertise to support in whatever fashion the teachers need.” Despite that acknowledgement, Diana also admitted that, when she saw a significant deficiency in teaching, she would tell teachers they would have to work with a coach. Diana stated, “If I’m in the evaluation cycles with people and they’re not cutting it, I will require them to work with a coach.” These behaviors defined the role of the instructional coach.

Kelsey, the coach, stated:

If a teacher needs help or they have a bad rating, they’re kind of encouraged to work with an instructional coach. And I think that’s where it gets sticky, right? When they see ‘help’ and the coach, it’s almost like that’s where we’re there if you need help, instead of just wanting to grow as an educator. It’s probably where that fine line goes—are we viewed more as the help? When I have a problem, I go into the coach instead of, “Hey, I want to grow as an educator. I’m going to go to the coach.”

Diana claimed the teachers in her building were the most resistant to working with instructional coaches. Requiring teachers to work with a coach may have contributed to that condition. Kelsey
described her principals’ approach: “Let’s hurry. Let’s bring in the instructional coaches. We’re going to come try to fix everything.” There was a subtle—yet, distinct—difference between the way the principals communicated. Although the principals at Howard told teachers they were going to bring in the coach to fix things, other principals told teachers the coach could be a consultant to help them problem solve together.

**Careful Communication**

Most principals indicated they were sensitive to the potential impact of mandating instructional coaching. They were careful about communicating with teachers to avoid putting the coaches in a position requiring compliance to participate in coaching. Scott said:

> I know I have to be very intentional, and I have to be very mindful about what I asked them to do so that they are not in a situation where they’re not trusted and then no one’s reaching out. What I aim for is for our coaches to not be put in a predicament where they’re ever having to demand things from teachers, but always having teachers feel comfortable to ask for their support.

Ashley carefully crafted her statements to teachers to avoid sounding like she required the teachers to work with the coach. She still set expectations that teachers must use the coach as a resource for professional learning and growth. However, she did not directly tell teachers they needed to use instructional coaching to correct some deficiencies in their teaching. Ashley said:

> The piece that I’ve built in specifically is to offer up a suggestion of going to the coach when I’m in one-on-one conversations with teachers. “Hey, can I offer you a piece of advice? [The coach] is really good at this. Maybe if you are ok with it, I could reach out to her, or you could reach out to her and say, can you help me with this?” So, it’s in a way that feels safe for everyone, being able to say, “Hey, this is a great resource to use, as a reminder, this is a strength of [the coach’s] she could help you with.” That is the great thing about [the coach]. She works with all different types of teachers. She works with really strong teachers. She works with teachers who are still making their way. She works with all different types. Does that stigma still present itself in terms of that she only works with the broken ones? Possibly, but she’s built a name for herself that goes beyond that.
Ashley was intentional when she promoted the coach as a resource to protect the coach-teacher relationship. She knew teachers needed to feel safe to learn without feeling judged. She also acknowledged that, because she evaluated teachers, and to facilitate trust, the coach “keeps certain pieces confidential on her side.” The conversations between the coach and the teacher were confidential unless the teacher disclosed that information. Dana’s principals were aware the success of Dana’s instructional coaching depended on the confidential nature of her relationships with the teachers.

Dana recognized Ashley was intentional with how she talked to teachers about Dana’s ability to help them. She appreciated how Ashley supported her work by referencing Dana as a valuable resource. Dana said Ashley would say things like, “Have you checked with Dana on that? You know, maybe Dana has some ideas for some strategies to help you with that. Just throwing that out there.” Ashley was careful to avoid sounding like she was mandating her teachers to work with a coach.

Dana appreciated the approach of her two principals, Susan and Ashley. Dana said she believed the most significant detriment to a coach’s success was “having an administrator tell someone they must be coached—or else.” A misstep of one of her first principals negatively impacted her. Dana’s principal forced her to work with a specific teacher. The principal had told the teacher she must work with Dana to correct some issues during her evaluation. Dana said:

It just gave her a bad taste in her mouth. She was being told to work with me. The goal wasn’t internal. Well, you know, she didn’t want to learn something because she was being forced to, and it was tied to her evaluation, which really hinders that. A coach shouldn’t be tied to that concept, you must do this to keep your job or anything, and so, that didn’t work.

Dana reported her relationship with the teacher many years later was still impacted. The superintendent and the director of teaching and learning knew this situation and other similar
situations over the years had negatively impacted the fidelity of the instructional coaching program. The district administration had advised the principals to take the lead to provide support to teachers who were less than proficient on their evaluations. The coach could be one resource to help teachers, but other options were made available. Principals, not instructional coaches, were required to supervise the professional learning of those teachers rather than the coach.

Teachers knew the difference between coaching that emphasized shortcomings or failure versus coaching that emphasized improvement. Leah, an experienced teacher in Susan’s building, described how Dana approached her work, saying:

It’s not like she’s coming in saying, “Oh, you’re doing this wrong. I want you to do it this way.” She’ll just say what she observes, which is, you know, fact, this is what I saw. And if you choose you can try this or this. So, she presented in a nonthreatening way. I also think it makes people more open to wanting her to come in and watch. And yeah, because they know that she’s going to be open to what you’re doing and provide good feedback. But in a nonjudgmental or nonthreatening way because otherwise nobody would want her to come into their class.

Leah’s comments described Dana’s skill as a coach. She also helped illustrate the contrast between an effective approach to coaching that facilitates intrinsic motivation and a coaching experience that requires compliance.

Recapping Assertion 2: Mandated Coaching

The stories from the instructional coaches and teachers reinforced the negative impact of directing teachers to engage in coaching. The data showed mandating teachers to work with a coach can significantly hinder the trusting relationships between the coach and the teachers. The administration must demonstrate support of instructional coaching by framing teacher participation in a way that does not feel like a punishment; rather, it should be framed as
something to benefit the teachers. It is not the role of the coach to supervise teachers. Therefore, it is not the role of the coach to intervene when teachers are not performing their duties to the standards. The coach is a peer and cannot make teachers change their instructional practices. Change in instructional practices has to start with the teacher. The coach supports the teacher through that change. The school administrator must be the one who intervenes when teachers are not meeting their expectations.

Assertion 3: Accountability Is Key

When asked questions about how principals promoted a professional learning culture, the concept of accountability emerged. Instructional coaches wanted to hold principals accountable for their instructional leadership. Principals demonstrated strong instructional leadership by (a) ensuring they had a deep understanding of high-quality teaching and learning; (b) communicating expectations to teachers about quality instructional practices; and (c) creating a culture where teachers were reflective and engaged in professional learning, including working with an instructional coach.

Principals Hold Teachers Accountable

Knowledgeable principals can identify standards-aligned teaching and can communicate with their teachers about instruction using specific and actionable feedback. This feedback is not to say that principals were mandating teachers to work with an instructional coach. To be clear, coaches wanted principals to have high expectations for their teachers and make space for the professional learning necessary to move their staff forward. Jennifer, the curriculum director from the Center Grove School District, explained principal accountability impacted the work of
the instructional coach. If principals did not hold teachers accountable for high-quality instruction, “You’ve got people who can opt out of hard work, and the coach is really just left to this light coaching—keep everybody feeling good and feeling happy.”

Scott, from Greenwood School, believed it was the principal, not the coach, who directed the teachers to align with initiative and perhaps to change teaching practices. However, Scott expressed to his teachers that coaching was valuable and teachers would get the resources they needed to move forward. Scott said:

I think that, if teachers know what to do and what is expected of them, whether they like it or not, they’re going to do it. It’s almost like setting her up for success, and it’s not [the coach] saying, “This is something you have to do.” This is the admin saying, “These are the systems we’re putting in place, and [the coach] is a person that says, how can I help you fulfill that?

Scott’s statement showed he trusted his teachers to do the right thing. He set high standards with his teachers and pointed to the coach for support. Rachel, the special education teacher from Scott’s school, pointed out teachers still needed the principal to ensure follow through. It was the principal, not the coach, that held teachers accountable. Rachel stated:

There’s sometimes a disconnect with the follow through of it, so like, when we’re getting the initial [professional development], she’s so involved, she’s there. He wants to know what’s going on, but when teachers are asked to carry it out to make sure she assumes that it’s happening because he respects us as professionals. But honestly, if you don’t have that accountability piece built in there, there are errors that are allowed. Then it might be something so small, but if you don’t follow through on one thing, then it is kind of domino effects and snowballs into a bigger issue.

Susan, the principal from Peachtree Elementary School in Concord School District, also expressed the importance of holding teachers accountable. She recognized how the principal communicated with his teachers impacted Dana’s relationships with teachers. This recognition was not always the case. When Dana and Susan first started working together, Susan equated leadership with the permission to confront teachers who were resistant to change. Dana worked
very hard to help her principals understand it was her job to support teachers, but it was the principal’s job to hold teachers accountable. Susan and Dana were very intentional with the way they communicated with teachers to protect the trusting relationship between the coach and the teachers. Susan stated:

The one thing she has argued, and debated, and embedded in our minds over and over is her relationship with people is number one. If we want people to work with her, understanding that relationships are number one. Her leadership and her voice are also at the same level, so I just don’t want to put her in a position where someone is not going to listen to her because she’s trying to help hold people accountable for things that are more my responsibility.

Susan recognized Dana did hold teachers accountable, but it was a different type of accountability. Susan said that, for Dana, “It’s more of a ‘Hey, that was not a good lesson. Let’s make it better,’ instead of, ‘Hey, that wasn’t a good lesson. You’re going to get dinged on your evaluation for it.’” Susan recognized Dana was a leader, but at the same time, she needed to “stay on the same level with staff.” The formula Susan used with her teachers seemed to be working. Susan reported, “I think when she talks, people listen. That’s the sign of a good leader.”

However, holding teachers accountable is a very delicate balance. Dana had difficulty making headway when working with teachers in one team on school goals. The district and school goals were to leverage small group instruction and guided reading practices. Dana worked with the second-grade teachers and did her best to lead them toward change. She showed them data and attempted to help them reflect on their teaching practices. Dana worked through a coaching cycle with one of the second-grade teachers, Grace. Grace experienced success and could see the changes in her practices were benefiting her students. Dana tried to use Grace’s success to compel the other team members to shift instruction in their classrooms. She was not making much progress, and the second-grade data showed a sense of urgency to change what
they were doing. Susan and her colleague, Ashley, knew the standards and the instructional strategies. They could give teachers meaningful feedback. Susan said:

I think second-grade teachers always put on a good game face. But, when you look at standards or if kids are mastering things, second grade definitely was not where they needed to be. She has full reign to work with them until she says, “Hey, they need you guys in there.” There’s been quite a lot of times she’ll say, “I’ve taken them as far as I can lead them.” She brings us in when she feels like there needs to be more administrator support in decisions and accountability.

Principal’s Capacity to Know Curriculum

Tiffany, one of the coaches from the Howard School District, stressed the importance of the principal’s personal and professional capacity as she compared her two principals, Diana and Courtney. Diana, the principal of Fairview Elementary School, did not fully understand the standards and how to align classroom instruction. She did not hold teachers accountable for improving their teaching because she did not know what to look for in the classroom. This lack of accountability negatively affected the learning culture and hindered the work of the instructional coaches. On the other hand, Courtney and her assistant principal had a greater understanding of high-quality instructional practices. They were able to use that knowledge to more effectively support professional learning.

Tiffany was frustrated by Diana’s lack of understanding of the standards and the learning process, sharing: “It’s really hard for us to support instruction. [The principal] is the one saying plan, plan, plan, but she doesn’t know those standards really well. She doesn’t know how to teach those standards really well.” When the principal talked to teachers, she did not use the language of the standard to talk about what goes on in the classroom. Without actionable feedback from the principal, the teacher does not have the opportunity to reflect on their practices. Tiffany explained:
Whereas in [Fairview School], you know, I don’t feel either one of the principals or assistant principal knows them well enough to be able to go and support it. So, how does that affect that learning culture? I think it negatively affects it when the principals aren’t supporting it and not even that they’re not supporting it, when they don’t know it, right? I don’t know how you walk in and evaluate when you don’t know. Yeah, you might know how to evaluate, but what are you evaluating?

Tiffany expected her principal to have conversations about standards-aligned instructional practices on a deeper level. Diana’s feedback was too general and did not move teachers to reflect on their instructional practices. She believed there was a strong connection between the principal’s content knowledge and their ability to lead their staff toward engaging in professional learning for improvement. Tiffany explained:

He can look at the test and say, “Oh yeah, standard 4.2. is there. Great.” But, is it a great question? How is it being taught? How are the kids understanding it? What’s their independent level with that standard? Is the teacher guiding them through it the whole time and then at the very end saying to the kids, “Ok, now it’s your turn.” Are those teachers providing opportunities for those kids throughout to say you try it without me?

Tiffany expected her principals to know the standards well enough to provide actionable feedback, and make suggestions and encourage teachers to try new strategies they had learned from the coaches. She stated, “The coaches can give them [professional development], but how do you support it when you’re evaluating them?” Tiffany explained that, without the follow up from her principal, the teachers were not compelled to change. Tiffany said, “I see teachers just fall back to what’s easiest all the time.” Tiffany explained:

I’m not an administrator. I’m not evaluating you. So, can I go in and say, ‘Hey, we can work on this, and how about if you try this?’ But if no one’s coming in behind me, backing me up or coming in and saying, ‘Wow, that’s great. I noticed that you did a, b, and c. That was great.’ Unless the teacher is going to take some of that to heart and to change some of (what they are doing), it’ll be (the coach) said this to me. I’m going to do it while she’s here. And then I’m going right back to my packet that I used last week.

Diana acknowledged there was room for improvement. She also admitted she did not have a strong vision for the curriculum, saying, “It is not my strength.” This lack of vision
worried her, and she felt she could not support the coaches because of her lack of curriculum knowledge. Although she was not explicit about the connection to her weakness in this area, Diana said she wanted coaches to take the lead with the teachers. Although Tiffany wanted Diana to know what to look for in the classroom and speak to teachers using specifics, Diana did not hold this belief. She did not think she must tell the teachers how to do things in the classroom and thought it should come from the coaches. Diana said:

"They feel like they don’t want to step on anyone’s toes and be the boss. They often want the boss to give the expectations and then be like, “Hey, I’m just doing what the boss is telling me, so let’s do it.” I try to tell them like it’s not about who’s making the decision. It is what’s best for the organization and the kids in the organization, and so the fact that you might suggest this is how we should do it does not mean you are their superior or their supervisor.

Tiffany never expressed fear that she would offend her principal or overstep her bounds. Instead, Tiffany wanted her principals to show strength and “lay down the law.” She believed it was not her job. If Diana were to hold the teachers of Fairview accountable, it would “make them angry,” implying it was the teachers who would be offended. Tiffany said, “I shouldn’t be the one that has to make them angry. I should be the one that helps them succeed.” Diana wanted Tiffany to take the lead and set the expectations for teachers to change their practices. Tiffany believed Diana should do that, even if the teachers were not happy. Diana’s lack of confidence to address curriculum issues with her teachers put Tiffany in a precarious position. She would not be overstepping her bounds as a leader or using Diana as the scapegoat. Instead, she recognized teachers had no compelling reason to change. Their principal thought they were doing a fine job just the way they were.

Courtney from Carson School approached her teachers quite differently. Tiffany stressed that Courtney, and particularly, her assistant principal, “[knew] the standards like the back of her hand and [held] those teachers accountable every single day.” In contrast to Diana, Tiffany
believed Courtney could provide actionable feedback and was not afraid to confront teachers who were not meeting expectations. Courtney stated, “As the leader, you set that tone. These are the standards. I’ll talk with them openly about what my non-negotiables are.” Tiffany recognized that Courtney communicated her expectations to her teachers, saying, “She doesn’t have that fear to go in and just say you’re doing it wrong. You have to change. This is not okay. This is not what’s best for students.” However, rather than making her teachers mad, she wanted them to feel supported. Courtney said, “You just got to kind of stay the course and cheer them on and say, you’re doing a great job. But this is the expectation. This is what the kids need.” Courtney held teachers accountable but showed them she was willing to work hard with them. Vanessa was one of Courtney’s teachers. She taught for about 7 years, with 3 of those years teaching with Courtney. Of her principal, Vanessa said:

> She is super encouraging. She’s willing to dive in. She’s always said that she’s more than willing to come teach a lesson or give an example of something that might be new in the curriculum. She asks us what we want for professional development, what we need more of, keeping a positive attitude, making sure like you know the open-door policy, I think that puts people at ease and know that you know, hey, if my principal is willing to come give this guided reading lesson, then I can do that too.

Courtney’s capacity to understand teaching and learning made her more confident to demand specific instructional practices from her teachers. Courtney had a greater interest and ability for curriculum. This interest made her more confident to demand specific instructional practices.

**Recapping Assertion 3: Accountability Is Key**

When analyzing the importance of accountability, it is helpful to connect the concept of distributed leadership. Tiffany expected her principals to have the capacity to be engaged in the professional learning process. In a way, Tiffany wanted to hold her principals accountable to be
the lead learner. This practice is consistent with the research from Knight (2009) that stressed the importance of principals actively engaging in the same professional learning as teachers. However, the principals needed to know how to do what was expected to be held accountable. Principals needed to have the skill and knowledge to enact their tasks as leaders. Participants in this study helped illustrate that, without the capacity to understand teaching and learning on the same level as the coaches, principals cannot adequately support the role of instructional coaches. The data shed light on the importance of reciprocal relationships between the instructional coach and the principal to work together toward increasing teacher effectiveness.

Assertion 4: The Importance of Partnerships

One of the predominant features of the data is the concept of partnership. Once again, distributed leadership was evident in the data through the interaction between principals, coaches, and teachers. I will examine the partnership of the coach and the principal plus the partnerships between teachers and coaches. There are three elements to developing those partnerships, including: (a) the impact of proximity because productive partnerships require participants to spend time together; (b) the collaborative nature of the relationship, including what each party brings to the leadership tasks; and (c) the collegial relationship, including how the parties demonstrate trust and reliance on each other. As Ashley said, “You build up people’s areas of expertise to build distributed leadership. I help lead [my coach], and [she] helps build others, who can then lead their peers.” As Scott pointed out, “Our instructional coach is that person that can allow us to be able to do the many things that we dream of doing that we just don’t have the time for.” She reported the coach was her “partner in that process.”
Frequent Meetings

All the coaches and principals indicated they had a weekly meeting and interacted informally throughout the week. It did not matter if it was the 1st year the coach had been working with the principal or the 8th year. The meetings were consistent and valuable to both principals and coaches. When principals committed to their time together, the coaches felt their role was valued. The principals said those weekly meetings were essential because the coaches kept them informed about the teachers’ feelings, the general state of instruction, and their view on what was needed to move the school forward. Sometimes there was a specific agenda, and the coaches and principals documented the discussions. Most of the time, the purpose of their time together was to contribute ideas to solve problems. Scott said, “We have a weekly meeting with our coach, and at those meetings is where we do the heavy lifting.” Scott’s coach, Nicole, stated the weekly meetings were “very supportive.” Ashley said the regular meetings with Dana were an opportunity to “plan, revisit, brainstorm, and reflect.” Kelsey said that, at the meetings with Diana, they “do a lot of brainstorming together.” Diana reported, “We meet weekly, and we would go over our list of approaches, problems, and how we’re going to handle their concerns.”

Principal Goals Versus the Voice of the Teachers

Principals appreciated their coaches’ ability to see reality when it comes to the capacity of teachers to embrace change. All the principals acknowledged the instructional coaches had the pulse of the teachers. They had a clear understanding of the collective mindset of the staff. The principals needed the coaches’ expertise to achieve their goals. Goals gave direction to coaching. However, the goals needed to be something teachers cared about. The insights of the
instructional coaches pointed out the principals’ goals did not always align with the teachers’ priorities. Data showed the instructional coaches worked very hard to help their principals navigate through moving teachers forward toward the school goals, while at the same time, balancing the support teachers needed.

In Concord School District, Ashley believed that Dana, the instructional coach, was not just a coach for the teachers, but also her coach. Ashley said:

I use her as a coach. She coaches me. Through the process of coaching, she allows me to professionally grow. She is that connector between the classroom, and I am on the other side. She helps to bring in, where I feel disconnected because I am not in the classroom day to day. She is able to help me feel connected and help me to develop plans that are going to be best for our teachers moving forward.

Dana’s role as Ashley’s coach helped Ashley set goals based on reality. Dana helped Ashley navigate the change process in her school and with her teachers. Ashley said, “We’re all in this together. I’m not the master of all. Being a colearner is really important.”

Members of Howard School District, unlike the other districts, talked a lot about building goals when defining the role of instructional coach. For example, when asked to explain the role of the instructional coach, the two coaches from Howard both addressed how they helped their principals implement their school goals. Kelsey stated one of her “biggest goals” was “to help the principals carry out their building goals.” Tiffany had a similar answer, saying, “I would define [the role of instructional coach] as a position where we take principals’ goals, agendas, ideas and try to roll that out to staff.” Erica, their curriculum director, coordinated the instructional coaching program. She expressed her definition of instructional coaches’ role by saying, “First and foremost, they are there for the teachers.” However, she also stated coaches were “the right arm to the building principals, so they’re really an extension of the building goals, so any district or building curricular goal they support through professional development.”
The focus on principal goals, building goals, and district curricular goals seemed to leave out the teacher’s personal goals. The Howard coaches were keenly aware their ability to balance the principals’ goals with their understanding of the teachers’ needs was one of the most valuable aspects of the coach–principal partnership. About her work with her principals, Tiffany said, “It becomes that balance of being able to say to them, ‘hey, I get that this is your goal. But this is where your teachers are struggling. We need to address this too.’” Tiffany believed “having a good relationship with the principal is really key,” because it was her job to balance the “voice of the teachers on their needs,” and to “bring new ideas and initiatives back to those teachers.” Although the Howard instructional coaching program seemed to be defined by the district’s initiatives and the principals’ goals, the coaches knew what was happening in the classrooms. The instructional coaches had the most accurate view of the teachers’ capacity to accept and put those initiatives into practice. As Tiffany said, “We’re kind of their eyes and ears in the building.” Principals acknowledged that strength and recognized their partnerships depended greatly on what coaches brought to the problem solving and improvement process.

Data from the principals from Concord School District showed a greater focus on the needs of the teachers. The Concord principals also acknowledged the coaches had a pulse on the needs of teachers. Susan said, “She is always wanting to meet teachers where they’re at and then start from there. I think that’s a gift that [Dana] has.” Dana pointed out she helped the principals understand how teachers were feeling. When referring to how she helped Susan, Dana said, “I think I had to really help her to understand how they process information.” Principals leveraged Dana’s expertise as they problem solved the current status of their building and planned for the future. Ashley explained how she could look at data and have a vision for her building, but she needed Dana’s insight into “where the teachers are and their needs.” Ashely said:
From a leader’s perspective, we start with our goals and our needs assessments. And, we’re looking at data. Those are all great pieces, and they do paint a picture. But, there’s a whole other side. Where are teachers at? Where is their comfort level? How are they feeling? So, the goal is to try to merge those two things together to find a path that people can get behind and support. And she provides that, greatly.

Scott, the principal from Greenwood School District, never mentioned his specific goals in any of his comments. However, he focused on student achievement. His school was underperforming, and there was a big push to use data to support instructional improvement. Similar to the principals from Concord, Scott relied heavily on his coach Nicole’s expertise and insight into what the teachers needed. Scott said, “She has a pulse on what’s happening in our building, across all grade levels.”

**Authentic Relationships**

Jennifer, the director of teaching and learning from Center Grove School District, described the coach and the principal’s relationships as “pure and authentic.” She said those relationships required open and honest communication. Jennifer believes that “it is really critical that it’s an authentic partnership and not, ‘I’m your boss and so you’re going to do what I tell you to do,’ even though maybe then the coach doesn’t respect or agree with it.” An authentic partnership required the coach and principal to challenge each other. Jennifer added:

The conditions are that it has to be a true partnership, there has to be honesty, an authenticity that is the foundation of it all. It should be a place where there’s a lot of dialogue and healthy debate, and, you know, discussion around practice and pedagogy, and, you know, things that are hard, and then there needs to be a lot of trust.

Susan also appreciated the relationship with the coach, saying, “She has always been my right hand.” She admired “the outside the box thinking; creative thinking of how to get teachers more engaged with our main focus, which is getting students engaged. I think she’s worked a lot
of magic here at [Peachtree School].” However, both Susan and the coach, Dana, admitted they
did challenge each other, and through that productive struggle, they become better. Susan said:

I respect her enough to disagree with her as well. It’s not like it’s all what [the coach] says goes or what Susan says goes. She challenges me. I challenge her, and I think that’s where we make each other better. . . . It’s good to struggle. It’s always good to know that even though we debate, and even though we struggle, and even though we don’t see eye to eye all the time, we’re coming back to really understanding what each other is going through and building those bridges of understanding.

Dana provided an example of how her partnership with Susan helped her. Dana found her
interactions with one particular teacher had been challenging. Susan used her own experiences
with the teacher to coach Dana, saying:

She’s pointed out things that I need to hear. She really helps me to see things that I need to work on. There was a situation where I was having a hard time with one teacher. She’s made her own observations during their conversations and has given me some listening tips. Even questioning techniques with [the teacher] based on things that she’s found successful with this person and then has helped me to hone those skills myself, to improve as a coach myself.

The same idea is true for Dana’s other principal, Ashley. Dana referred to Ashley as her cocoach.
Dana said, “She has taught me to listen and then get to the root of the problem by asking lots of questions.” Their collaboration and brainstorming supported Dana’s coaching efforts and
Ashley’s leadership. Ashley said she learned from Dana every day. Dana said it was she who
learned the most from Ashley. Dana appreciated Ashley’s expertise and knowledge about
students and teachers and how to support them. Dana soaked up what Ashley had to teach her,
saying, “A lot of it just comes up in conversation. We’ll have lightbulb moments when we’re just
talking, and then she’ll say something.”

This partnership was also evident to the teachers. Leah, a teacher in Susan’s school,
called the coach “an integral part of the system.” She described how they worked in tandem,
saying, “Sometimes [Dana] meets with us, and sometimes [Susan] meets with us. They kind of
bounce off of each other. They both might be working on the same thing, but they’ll divide the workload.”

Coach as a Thought Partner for Teachers

The administrators had deep respect for the ability of the coaches to develop and nurture trusting relationships with the teachers. Jennifer, the director of teaching and learning from Center Grove School District, referred to the unique partnership between teachers and coaches as “thought partners.” She explained:

I actually firmly believe that when teachers are able to engage honestly and authentically with coaches, I think that actually that in and of itself adds a sense of value to who they are, because at that point you’re not just somebody who’s in the system. Just doing what you do, you are somebody that has the potential to make a big impact on students, and I think that when teachers really feel that they are able to make [changes]. That’s self-efficacy. When they feel that they are able to make an impact and that what they do makes a difference, I think that that goes a long way for the majority of teachers that I’ve worked with. There’s always a few who are in it for the wrong reasons. Generally speaking, the majority of teachers I’ve worked with, if you can tap into that place with them I think you’re able to get to that intrinsic motivation, you know why they do what they do, and I think that the coach is the person in the system whose most uniquely able to do that if the conditions are right.

Jennifer presented a powerful vision for what was possible when teachers leveraged the instructional coach as a colearner. Jennifer painted a picture of how the coach and the teacher worked together to impact students. Heather, who was one of Scott’s teachers from the same district, described the intrinsic motivation that Jennifer referenced in her comments. Heather said, “I think as teachers, we really need to be lifelong learners.” Heather believed that, because the profession is constantly changing, “professional development can’t stop.” She stated, “Any chance I can get to learn, I’ll take it.” Heather described how her coach supported her professional learning. Her coach asked questions and “[presented] some pictures” for new
strategies through modeling strategies. Then, the coach went to Heather’s classroom and observed Heather teach and provided feedback. Heather said her coach, Nicole, was a problem solver and a critical thinker, which are essential. Heather said it was so important the coach “be able to listen to what the teacher is asking and know what the goal is, and be able to take that information and problem solve, and to be able to help the teacher reach that goal.”

Jennifer also referenced how the coach could do their job “if conditions are right.” Heather shed some light on how her principal, Scott, set up those conditions. To answer the question of how Scott impacted the learning culture in her school, Heather said:

I think [Scott] is all about it! I think he understands [education] is an evolving field. So, in order to stay on top of it, in order for us to be the best and to provide best practices for our students, we need to stay on top of it. We need to be developing professionally.

The partnership between teachers and coaches was essential to professional learning. As Jennifer pointed out, coaches were uniquely positioned to impact students through the trusting relationship with the teachers. Heather reinforced these ideas by communicating her commitment to professional learning, and a description of how her coach and her principal facilitated those opportunities.

Coherence and Relevance Keeps Teachers Engaged

“Meeting teachers where they are at” was a phrase almost everyone used. The data solidified how creating learning experiences where teachers could see change must begin with what is meaningful and relevant to them. Although her teachers were resistant to work with coaches, Diana summed up how relevance connected to permanence in professional learning, saying:
I think when professional learning is, at its best, and teachers that are open to it, it will help break down the doors of resistance to change. Because when you really are hit by a professional learning experience, and you bring that to your classroom, it’s only going to take a matter of time of getting successful at it where it becomes permanent.

Diana articulated the connection between relevance and internalizing professional learning. Her statement supported many of the things said by others, particularly by teachers. Unfortunately, according to her coach, Diana found that concept challenging to practice. Tiffany described her observation of her two principals. They had different approaches to professional learning in the real-world setting. Tiffany explained:

[Diana] will say these are the things we’re doing. I have to plan every week. We are going to work on standards. We are going to work as a group of 12, planning those standards. We are going to get every teacher on board with those standards. And then you have [Courtney] who’s like, “Wait a minute. What if the teachers are great with standards? Maybe they need help with reading groups. Maybe they need help with writing. Maybe they need help with figuring out how to schedule something. Maybe they need help with whatever it might be.”

Tiffany was describing personalized learning. Although the instructional coaches presented topics to large groups during staff meetings, the meaningful and lasting change occurred when teachers experienced intrinsic motivation. Scott called it “ownership.” She said that, when professional development comes from the needs of the teachers, “that’s the type that really sticks.” As Leah, the veteran teacher who worked with Dana, stated, “When you can make a connection to what they’re saying, and you can see the relevance for it in your classroom, and how it can make a difference, you’re going to be more willing to try it.” Leah also said that, when students respond positively to what has been learned, the change will become permanent.

Ashley summed up professional learning that sticks by saying:

When it’s teacher directed. When it’s a reflective process, that’s not evaluative. So, there’s intrinsic value for teachers. And when they can see results. So, they see the efforts of their labor and their learning have a positive impact on their students.
When principals articulated the value of personalized learning, starting with the needs of the teachers and intrinsic motivation, they promoted instructional coaching as something that everyone could benefit from. Scott explained this idea was his vision for the coach and his school. The coach was the person the teachers felt they could trust. The coach had the pulse of what was happening throughout the building across all grade levels. Scott said, the coach was “someone who knows how to differentiate the needs of our staff” and develops relationships to “get the teachers to trust them but also know how to push our staff to grow.”

Recapping Assertion 4: The Importance of Partnerships

The participants stressed the importance of strong relationships and productive partnerships. The principal–coach relationship was essential for reaching school-improvement goals. Each party brought their own roles, responsibilities, and strengths to the leadership tasks. The coaches and the principals in the study met frequently and spent that time together aligning their goals and plans. The teacher–coach relationship was honored because teachers relied on their coach for support as they set their own goals for improvement. As expressed by principals in the study, those relationships made it possible for the coaches to have the pulse on what was happening throughout the building.

Assertion 5: Coach as Community Member

All the schools in the study used the PLC model. As PLC schools, teachers worked together in collaborative team meetings to work on curriculum, reflect on teaching and learning, and make decisions based on their data. In contrast to other professional development models, PLCs are a model where leaders are intentional about setting up the systems that optimize
teacher collaboration, including setting a clear purpose and process to access data (Coburn & Russell, 2008; DuFour & Fullan, 2013; Knight, 2007). As Coburn and Russell (2008) pointed out, not all collaborative conversations are the same. PLCs help teachers dive deeper into teaching routines that impact students’ learning. These conversations are distinctly different from simply showing teachers how to use the curriculum materials. Also, as the participants pointed out, coaching collaborative teams is distinctly different from personalized professional development for individual teachers. The instructional coach works right alongside teachers in most schools during their PLC meetings. The data showed the instructional coaches used PLCs in four ways, including: (a) to build trusting relationships with teachers, (b) to facilitate problem solving, (c) to support teachers’ efforts by making the data accessible, and (d) to help the coach keep their finger on the pulse of what was happening throughout the building across all grade levels.

Howard School District

Erica, the curriculum director from Howard School District, explained instructional coaches did not participate in PLCs in her district. Teachers worked with data and talked about student growth without the support of instructional coaches. If teachers determined they needed help with problem solving, they could reach out to a coach. Based on the data, the Howard teachers did not typically call upon instructional coaches as a result of the PLC conversations. Erica did not explain why coaches did not work with teachers during PLCs. Diana, one of the principals from Howard, wanted to change that norm. When asked about her vision for the instructional coaches, she said, “I believe in a professional learning community model, first and foremost.” Diana knew a lot about PLCs from her former positions in other districts, and she
believed they were valuable in the professional learning process. Diana pointed out the contrast between PLC conversations and those surface-level weekly professional development sessions that were a big part of the district’s program. Diana said, “There’s a difference between a PLC environment versus the coaches leading professional development,” pointing out the weekly professional development sessions were out of context and not directly connected to classroom data. Diana asked, “How are we having reflective professional conversations about the instructional processes in our classrooms and that is not done in isolation?” Diana saw the “discussion around our instruction and planning together” as a more meaningful way for coaches to engage with the teachers. She added, “Let’s have professional conversations centered around our assessments and around the [specific needs of the teachers.]” Diana also pointed out the coaches could guide those PLC conversations to stay focused. She was frustrated teachers often “go off on tangents” and talked about class parties and field trips. Diana wanted to see a change in the way her district approached PLCs. Diana was committed to changing the PLC model to include the instructional coaches. She had, in fact, reached out to consultants to work with the staff to ensure PLCs in the building looked different in the coming years.

Center Grove School District

Scott, the principal from Greenwood School in Central Grove School District, described the PLC structure in his school to explain how PLC meetings allowed reciprocal information sharing and distributed leadership. He said:

We have [a school leadership team, which] is really the place for [instructional leadership]. We develop our smart goals together as [a school leadership team], and we have every group represented on that team, and so they are really the creators of their smart goals. They then funnel down information into their PLCs, and the PLC’s add to the information. And so again, we’re trying to create that ownership, trying to build up
our leaders, trying to get the leaders then get their teams which are the PLCs involved in the process. That’s worked really nicely for us.

The team leaders ran the PLC meetings in the schools of Center Grove School District where Scott was principal. However, coaches participated in the PLC meetings. Nicole, Scott’s coach, said it was one of her roles to set up “effective PLCs” and coach the team leaders who ran the PLCs in her district “to be effective team leaders in the process.” Although the team leaders ran the PLC meetings, coaches supported those efforts in various ways. For example, the coach may have front-loaded some data work ahead of the meeting. Rachel described how Nicole set up structures for the PLC, saying, “We want the best use of time because 30 minutes goes by very quickly [and] if things need to get done ahead of time, that’s communicated so that everybody comes prepared and ready.” Other times, the coach could provide coaching to teams to effectively collaborate. Rachel explained, “The team sets norms at the beginning of the year.” Those norms were honored, and the teachers respected each other. The PLC collaboration was always positive and, for the most part, productive. However, according to Rachel, some grade-level teams “were a little bit more challenging.” When teams needed support, the principal and the coach worked together to “differentiate what kinds of supports [were needed] to help make that team be able to be successful.” Scott described how he, his assistant principal, and the coach used what Nicole learned during PLC meetings to develop systems of support. Scott said, “She’s very in tune with what the teachers need. I think she is really good at listening to the teachers and knowing when to speak and knowing when to just sit back and take it in.” Nicole would bring back information she thought was important for the principal, explaining, “This is what we noticed. These are the questions that I need to find out to see if I can support them.”

According to Rachel, Nicole’s presence at the meetings was essential. First of all, Rachel said participating in PLCs helped Nicole build relationships. Rachel said, “I love when [Nicole]
goes into PLC meetings. She remembers things about people, so she asks about things. It’s building that level of trust. She understands. She’s really good at coming in and observing what’s going on.” Rachel also believed teachers were more comfortable with Nicole’s attendance at those PLC meetings than when the administrators attended. Teachers were more comfortable and less self-conscious when discussing data or instruction with the coach. Rachel said, “The instructional coach brings all the pieces together and helps support those systems of improvement.” Rachel explained that “teachers could think they’re doing everything correctly” because they were thinking just about their class or grade level; however, the coach understood the “big picture.” Nicole used her coaching skills and content area expertise in the meetings to help the teachers problem solve. Regarding the importance of PLCs for Nicole, Scott said:

She’s a part of the PLCs so I think that in itself shows how much she supports PLCs. That speaks volumes. So, I think having her attend our PLCs that’s a time when issues are going to come up. She’s going to be right there to problem solve. If teachers don’t know, [the coach] is a person that gets the answers for them. Once they see that happening, oh my goodness, then they start reaching out to her for so many other things. She shares resources with them. If teachers need something. . . . “Oh here, let me show you [on the spot] all the resources or if not [right then], let me compile that and get back to you.” Or, “let me pop in your room and model lessons for you.” So, once teachers get a taste of that, then they’re like, how did we ever live without this?

Nicole set up conditions to develop trusting relationships and a safe environment for teachers to talk about their data and classroom practices. One of Scott’s teachers, Heather, also appreciated how the coach leveraged expertise from the district office. She acted “as a go between for the teachers and admin or the curriculum office.” Nicole had brought in an expert from the district office to consult with the teachers. Scott reinforced Heather’s observations. Although Nicole was highly skilled and knowledgeable, she was comfortable finding resources to help build her capacity. Scott complimented Nicole’s efforts to become acquainted with the school’s culture, saying:
So, she’s really good about listening to the teams and their needs. She’s really good about offering suggestions when teachers are having a meeting, or if teachers are reaching out for support. She’s really good with resources. She’s very knowledgeable. So, she has a lot of resources to be able to share with everyone. Yeah, she’s just, she has a good pulse on what teachers need [as] she’s learning about [our school]. She’s also very good about, “I’m learning about [Greenwood School] and the culture, and the kids, and the needs. I need to ramp up my skills on let’s just say ELs, right? So many I’m going to reach out to our bilingual district coach and I’m inviting her to some of our meetings.”

Rachel, the special education teacher from Greenwood School, said coaches were “essential in helping the data conversations.” This help was especially true because “teachers [weren’t] as necessarily comfortable with the data.” Coaches “provide accommodations and supports and structures that will allow the teachers to feel more comfortable and be more successful.” Scott also believed coaches were essential in supporting the data conversations.

Scott also added that instructional coaches helped teachers think about the data. Coaches asked questions to shift the conversation from merely identifying a child’s deficit to thinking more deeply about what the data were saying. Scott explained:

So, I think that that is a big piece, and really just getting on the PLC questions and really answering those [through] the data that we have. So always bringing them back to, “How do we know?” Teaching them how to use the data, that’s been huge for us. It is not just that we’re going to talk about Johnny. Well, why are we talking about Johnny? Show us why Johnny’s on your radar by the data? What data have you collected that tells you that he’s having issues? Is it a skill deficit? He has issues with reading? Well, what specifically about reading? Teaching our staff to really look at that. You can’t just say he has a problem in math. Well what specifically in math is he having an issue with? Breaking down [benchmark assessment data], looking at the different strands. I think assessment is a huge part of a culture because it really taps into everything that a teacher does and could help answer any question that anyone could have.

Scott’s teachers, Rachel and Heather, reinforced the story he told. Rachel said that, during PLC meetings, Nicole asked questions. In fact, Rachel noted that sometimes Nicole asked so many questions that she felt bad. Rachel said, “What she doesn’t realize is that her questions actually help us double check things and to make sure we’re on the right path.” Heather, another teacher who worked with Nicole, reinforced that idea. Heather said that “by asking questions, she helps
teachers paint a picture.” Scott and his teachers told the story of Nicole’s gift for prompting her teachers to use what they saw in the data to think about teaching and learning. Heather said:

Just the attendance of the instructional coach during our PLC’s is huge. Because then she’s there to listen. If we’re talking about data, she’s able to kind of guide us, “Oh, this is what needs to be,” or, “This is the next step.” And she doesn’t ever tell us what to do, but she says, “Think, think about these steps or think about this,” or, ‘Have you thought about…?’ and so that’s very helpful.

In addition to supporting teachers’ data analysis, the coach helped teams of teachers try new instructional strategies as a result of PLC discussions. According to Heather, Nicole sometimes presented different strategies during PLC and followed up with visits to the classroom. Rachel also found it very helpful when teachers worked collaboratively to make changes in their instructional practices. Rachel described the process where teachers from grade-level teams set goals to make changes in their teaching. Then, teachers went into classrooms and observed their peers. During PLC, the teachers provided feedback to their peers. The instructional coach was there along the way to support the teachers.

Scott and his team from Greenwood provided a compelling story about the importance of PLCs, and particularly the importance of participation of the instructional coach. For Scott’s teachers, Nicole helped them analyze the data and supported instructional practice changes. Nicole set up conditions to develop trusting relationships and a safe environment for teachers to talk about their data and classroom practices. Nicole’s colleagues praised her problem solving, critical thinking skills, and her gift for asking questions to help her teachers better reflect on high-quality instruction.
The participants from Concord School District told a similar story. Ashley and Susan’s coach, Dana, was also an integral part of PLCs. Dana said collaborating with the teachers during PLCs was a big part of her role, sharing, “being part of PLCs is essential to instructional coaching because you’re in it with them, and you are their partner in it.” Susan said Dana helped teachers become more comfortable with data. Dana used the school’s learning management system or spreadsheets to make the data accessible to teachers during PLC meetings. She stressed Dana’s work went far beyond setting up the data. Susan knew Dana used PLCs to facilitate relationships among the team members to ensure PLCs were productive. Susan said that, during PLC meetings, Dana was “always fine tuning what teachers need to be better teammates with their grade-level team or their department teams,” referring to Dana’s role of developing and facilitating relationships across teams and between her as the coach with the team. Similarly, Ashley, the other principal from Concord School District, said Dana had a significant role in helping peers collaborate. Ashley said, “There is a lot of power behind being able to collaborate with peers.” Ashley believed Dana “knew how to have really great conversations and collaborate.” Dana leveraged this skill during PLC conversations to help teachers bring out the best in one another for the benefit of their students.

Dana’s consistent presence during PLC meetings helped her build trusting relationships with the teachers. Dana did a lot of listening and asking questions. She spent time working with teams to learn about their strengths and weaknesses. Dana said, when “you just show up once in a while, [the teachers believe] you don’t know all the struggles.” Dana said she liked being part of those discussions and being “an integral part of their team.” However, being part of the PLC
discussions was only part of the process. Dana said she still had to go into the classroom to see instructional practices in action. She said, “Because it’s hard to offer relevant comments or feedback, if you don’t actually see it, or you don’t actually understand the inner workings of the group.” For example, when teachers engaged in collaborative, problem-solving conversations about specific data, teachers may have been looking for answers and feedback. Dana asked questions and prompted teachers to think about what was happening in the classroom. Dana said she did not typically offer suggestions for strategies in the PLC meeting. Dana would first visit the classrooms and observe instructional practices. Then, she would work with that teacher individually. Essentially, she would use PLC conversations to then provide individualized professional learning to the teachers in that team. For these reasons, Dana and her principals valued her active participation in PLCs.

Cautionary Tales

The participants told stories and shared their positive experiences of PLCs. However, a couple of participants indicated there could be caveats principals should consider. One example was Jennifer, the director of teaching and learning from the Center Grove School District. Jennifer said she had “pretty strong feelings” about coaches’ participation in PLCs. Although there could be opportunities for a coach to help professional learning communities “become established, grow, and develop,” coaches needed to be careful not to take too much ownership. Jennifer explained:

It’s a razor’s edge. I think that, when you put a coach into a team dynamic, I think it becomes really complicated. In our district, I will just say this: our coaches are the owners of PLCs, and they shouldn’t be. It should be the teachers that own their own PLCs because if they don’t own their own PLCs, then I would argue it’s not a PLC. I would argue it’s a team of teachers working together mostly because the coach is there.
Jennifer said her predecessor set expectations for coaches to attend all the PLC meetings. She was concerned if the coach attended all the PLC meetings, there would be no time to do anything else, especially in a large school community like Scott’s school. Jennifer went on to say:

I also think it’s become a little bit of that codependency. [The coaches] are getting their sense of worth, and they feel perhaps their value is seen [by the district] through their ability to keep PLCs going. Like, that’s what the district wants them to do, and it’s actually undermining. I firmly believe it’s undermining our ability to move from where PLCs are a point of compliance to where PLCs are a part of the need. We do this because it is vital to me personally as a teacher. I cannot be the best teacher I can be without my PLC.

Jennifer believed the coaches thought the district expected them to shore up PLCs. However, this approach could undermine the effectiveness of PLCs when teachers are simply complying with the expectations rather than really using a high-functioning PLC to make them better teachers.

When asked to define the coaching role, some of what Nicole said may reinforce Jennifer’s attitude. Nicole, Scott’s coach, said, “I’m coaching more teams. So, that would be my shift from more individualized coaching to now, to coaching teams and seeing students not just as belonging to one classroom teacher but belonging to the school as a whole.” Nicole did feel that through coaching teams, she was supporting students. Nicole was under the impression it was the district’s vision that instructional coaches support PLCs, which was contrary to what Jennifer thought. Nicole said the coach’s role had evolved to “setting up effective PLCs and coaching leaders to be effective team leaders in the PLC process.” Jennifer had two concerns about the coaches’ involvement in PLCs, including the investment of time to attend all PLC meetings, and establishing ownership to the teachers rather than being retained by the coach. Nicole seemed to reinforce these concerns.

One of the compelling reasons why principals, coaches, and teachers supported the presence of instructional coaches in PLC meetings was the opportunity to collaborate with
teachers and help problem solve. Also, participating in PLC meetings helped coaches take the pulse of the organization and bring information back to the principals. In their interviews, two of the teachers told stories that provided insight into how coaches needed to use caution when communicating with their principals. One example was from Nicole’s colleague, Rachel, who was a teacher in her building. Rachel was very complementary to Nicole because she protected the teachers and made them feel safe during PLC conversations. Sometimes, the data could paint a negative picture; however, through Rachel’s carefully crafted questions and problem solving, she could make her teachers feel safe to be honest and take risks. In contrast, Rachel said:

In the past, with the former instructional coach, there were times that teachers said something or shared something at a PLC that was just teachers, and it got back to administration, and so that was. It’s this breaching of confidentiality and the trust that hinders everything because people immediately put up a wall.

It is important to note Rachel told this story to contrast what happened in the past with the current conditions that had been set up by her coach, Nicole. Nicole did take what she had learned in PLCs and brought it back to her principal, Scott. However, she managed to protect her trusting relationship with the teachers.

Dana, the coach for Concord School District, also experienced similar challenges. Dana worked closely with her teachers during PLCs and frequently supported teachers in their classrooms based on problem-solving discussions during meetings. Dana made every effort to protect her trusting relationships with teachers. However, when Dana was working with the second-grade PLC a couple of years prior, she needed support from her principals, Susan and Ashley. Susan called them a “tricky team.” Recalling the story from Susan in the section about accountability in the chapter, Dana found herself needing to rely on the school administrators, Susan and Ashley, to intervene with the second-grade team after she had some concerns during
her work with them during PLC. The data from the second-grade team had been some of the lowest among all grade levels. Therefore, they were scrutinized by the administration. Rather than accepting support from the administrators and the coach, they resisted change. Grace, who joined the second-grade team most recently, said when it came to her colleagues, they “don’t want to look vulnerable” or appear to be doing something wrong. During PLC conversations, Grace would suggest the team ask Dana questions or get her help. Their response was, “Don’t ask [the instructional coach], or let’s not ask [the instructional coach] because then it might show this vulnerability that we’re not following the math [curriculum] correctly or we aren’t doing something correctly.” Grace used the term “mole” when describing her team’s resistance to involve Dana in their PLC discussions. However, for Grace, who worked closely with Dana on her instructional practices, she had “never gotten the impression from [Dana] that she’s like running off and telling admin anything that’s going on.” In reality, Dana had to tell her administrators most teachers resisted her attempts to support them as they reflected on their data and attempted to improve their instructional practices.

Recapping Assertion 5: Coach as Community Member

For most study participants, the instructional coaches used the PLC as an opportunity to embed reflection, problem solve, and improve instructional practices. Taking an active role in the regular PLC meetings helped coaches develop trusting relationships with teachers and fully understand their classroom, supporting principals as they set goals and plan for school improvement. A few participants presented the challenges that should be considered, such as the complexity of working with teams of teachers and confidentiality issues. Those caveats were
important to the findings because they impact the implications for school administrators when they structure their school’s PLC model.

**Conclusion**

In this chapter, I presented the results of the data analysis. I explained the data through several assertions connected to the research questions. The descriptions of the assertions provided insight into the work of the principals as seen through the eyes of the instructional coaches and teachers. The comments from the curriculum directors offered additional insights into the various instructional coaching programs. Chapter 5 provides further connections between the assertions, literature, and research questions. I also share implications for practice and discuss areas for further research.
DISCUSSION

In this chapter, I will discuss the data and assertions from Chapter 4 to answer the research questions. The participants’ descriptions provided insight into how the actions of the school principal impacted the instructional coaching programs. Specifically, it provided insight into how the school principal’s view of the coach’s role, strategies of support for the program, and attitudes and behaviors compelled teachers to engage with instructional coaches for professional development.

Participants in this study included principals, instructional coaches, teachers, and curriculum directors from three suburban elementary school districts. The primary participants were five principals and four instructional coaches. I also included data collected from interviews with five teachers and three district-level administrators.

Another critical component of this study was the impact of the COVID-19 global pandemic. All the interviews were conducted online during the pandemic. It is essential to acknowledge the implications of conducting research during that difficult time.

This chapter provides the discussion that will address the following research questions:

- How do principals perceive the role of the instructional coach?
- How does the principal facilitate and influence the instructional coaching program?
- How does principal leadership support teacher engagement in instructional coaching activities?
There is a crossover between the research questions; however, I will attempt to differentiate between the three questions in the discussion of the findings. First, the discussion will address the principals’ own words to describe their perceptions of the role of the instructional coach, including their vision for the coaching program and the working relationship between the principal and instructional coach. Input from other members of the principals’ team validated the principals’ views. The next question addressed how principals facilitated and influenced the instructional coaching program. The discussion will focus on the cultural aspects of the school, including how the principals strengthened teacher empowerment, collaboration, and professional learning. Finally, the last question asked what principals did to ensure teachers engaged with coaches for professional development. The discussion will also address the principals’ specific behaviors and conditions that compelled teachers to seek out the instructional coach for support.

Discussion of Findings

Principals impacted the school’s culture more than any other staff member as they guided the reform process and facilitated the learning environment for their teachers (Blase & Blase, 1999; Fullan, 2007; Waldron & McLeskey, 2010; Wallace Foundation, 2013). However, school leadership is a collaborative effort. Multiple staff members, through distributive leadership, worked together to perform the leadership tasks that encompassed the school’s operation. Distributed leadership could shed light on the importance of reciprocal relationships that furthered the goals of increasing teacher effectiveness (Spillane et al., 2001). The distributive leadership lens helped frame the relationship between principals and their instructional coaches as they worked together to benefit the learning environment. Although principals’ roles,
individual traits, and behaviors are highly influential, the distributive leadership lens helped educators understand how and why principals do what they do as they work to facilitate a professional learning culture in their buildings.

Question 1: Principals’ Perceptions of Instructional Coaches

Support for teachers can take on many forms. Those forms depend on the principal’s beliefs and actions, and the trusting relationships between the principal and the instructional coach. The first research question asked: How do principals perceive the role of the instructional coach? Principal participants stated the primary roles of an instructional coach are to support teachers by facilitating professional learning and support principals with their strong partnerships.

Coaches Facilitate Professional Learning

According to research, principals, teachers, and coaches need a shared understanding that the primary focus of the role of a coach is instructional improvement (Coburn & Russell, 2008; Fullan & Knight, 2011; Killion & Harrison, 2006; Tschannen-Moran & Tschannen-Moran, 2011). There were several examples of this idea in the findings. Scott’s teacher, Rachel, made an important observation that illustrated how school leaders, teachers, and the coach worked together. Rachel said the principal and assistant principal had “the big plan,” and the teachers were “the ones carrying out the plan.” The instructional coach is there to help the teachers “get the plan carried out.” Rachel’s comments demonstrated she recognized the teachers were doing the important work and the coaches were there to support them. The coach’s role was clearly defined to the teachers as their partner throughout the improvement process. Research from
Hallinger (2005) aligned with the concept that it is the principal’s responsibility to define and communicate the vision and goals, and the staff must incorporate those goals into their daily work. Susan, another principal, stressed the importance of focusing on specific pedagogical goals. The example Susan talked about was their guided reading initiative. Rather than focusing on “10 different things,” Susan believed prioritizing goals was more effective. Susan said, “One thing I’ve noticed in working in 6 years with an instructional coach here at [Peachtree School] is that the more we talk about our goals, the better chance we have of reaching our goals.” Susan’s leadership function was to articulate her goal that emphasized high-quality literacy instruction. Susan talked about her goal with teachers and provided actionable feedback in the classroom. Susan’s teachers were responsible for executing the goal with their students. Dana, her coach, supported teachers by helping them interpret data, learn the new strategies, and reflect on instructional practices. The interconnectedness of Susan’s school leadership functions and Dana’s tasks to enact that leadership is explained by Spillane et al.’s (2001) analysis of leadership practices from the distributed perspective. Most participants understood how the principal, the coach, and teachers worked together, each having their distinct roles in the process.

Successful instructional coaches understand a critical premise. Improvement of instructional practice is learner directed and involves intrinsic motivation. As Susan, the principal of Peachtree Elementary School, stated, instructional coaches are “interventionists for the teachers.” Principals recognized the secret to sustainable change was for the coach to spend time with teachers in their classroom and frequently engage in coaching cycles. Coaches begin the process of helping teachers change their practices by first establishing a clear understanding of their readiness for change. Principal and teacher participants acknowledged their instructional coaches listened well, asked questions, and guided teachers toward setting goals. Working with
teachers in their classrooms promoted learning in a relevant context and gave teachers ownership.

The change process is complex and goes beyond the professional development workshops delivered weekly or at the occasional staff meeting. As Ashley explained, workshops “can inspire you,” but the tools teachers “put into practice are what create change.” Ashley said this change happens through a process that is “ongoing, focused, revisited, and cyclical.” Ashley valued the instructional coaching model referred to as coaching cycles. She knew sustainable change was only possible when teachers engaged in inquiry, which takes time, and was directly connected to teachers’ methods and included reflection. These findings are consistent with the research literature that described how teachers learned new skills through coaching. The research described the mechanisms used by instructional coaches to support teachers as they improved their instruction. Instructional coaches provided collaborative inquiry and ongoing support. Together, teachers and coaches engaged in various activities that included classroom observation, conferencing, modeling, reflection, and interpreting assessment data (Elish-Piper & L’Allier, 2011; Marsh et al., 2015).

A deep dive into the data revealed all participants, including the principals, teachers, and instructional coaches, understood the necessary elements of professional development that led to lasting change in the classroom. The findings were aligned with Desimone’s (2009) five-featured framework for professional development that included content focus, active learning, coherence, duration, and collective participation. Without identifying these components explicitly, participants described how the instructional coach facilitated instructional improvements. The principals consistently expressed that the coach’s role was to support teachers in their efforts to improve teaching and learning.
Consistent with the concepts of content focus and coherence, professional development must be relevant to the teacher’s classroom and personalized to their specific needs while still being aligned to school and district goals. “Teacher directed” was the phrase used by Ashley, one of the principals, to describe professional learning that “sticks.” As Leah, one of the teachers, pointed out, when new techniques and strategies make a difference for students and teachers can see the results, teachers are willing to change their practices. Professional learning is content focused because it addresses specific subject matter and knowledge of student learning but is also coherent with teachers’ knowledge and beliefs. All the principals acknowledged professional development needed to start with the teachers’ needs, and be aligned with school improvement goals set by the principal.

Teachers needed to spend a significant amount of time, typically several weeks, working with the coach to put new strategies into practice. Ashley, one of the principals, worried when her coach, Dana, engaged in what she called “fly-by coaching.” When Dana saw a teacher needed a resource for a lesson or an updated assessment, she took care of it for the teacher. Ashley knew it is sometimes necessary to “help get them from point A to point B,” but feared teachers would take advantage of Dana if she did that too much. Ashley said a “true coaching model” takes time and the “investment of time means more success in coaching.” Dana and the other coaches worked with teachers through a cycle that included goal setting, classroom observation, modeling, enacting learned strategies, and reflection. Some teachers, like Grace, called upon Dana for multiple coaching cycles throughout the year. Most teachers spent a few weeks working with a coach on a teaching strategy with periodic follow-up visits from the coach for a check in.
With all of its components, the coaching cycle is also a way to describe active learning. With the coach acting as a learning partner, the teachers engaged in several activities connected to professional development, including observing others, being observed, and reflecting on the results of change. To illustrate the importance of these activities, it is helpful to call upon data that were the opposite of active learning. Diana, the principal from Howard School District, described the focus of the professional learning in her district’s professional development program as the weekly coach-led workshops. Although Diana and her coaches try to plan carefully to make the content relevant, “the teachers think it is a waste of time.” There was strong union pushback from the teachers, and Kelsey, Diana’s coach said, “We try to bribe teachers with jeans week if they come to a lunch and learn.” The research from Joyce and Showers (1981, 1996) and others revealed passive professional development methods such as workshops or seminars did not help teachers transfer new skills and knowledge into the classroom in ways that benefit students. The teachers saw the passive nature of workshops as ineffective. The prevalence of this model at Howard School District impacted the effectiveness of the instructional coaching program.

Conversely, Knight (2007) and other researchers identified the characteristics of effective professional learning in another way. Professional learning is effective when it includes a cycle of inquiry that allows time for teachers to set goals, observe modeled lessons, have their lessons observed, and reflect on their teaching practices (Coburn & Russell, 2008; Desimone & Pak, 2017; Knight, 2007). Researchers stressed that, the more time coaches spend working directly with teachers that facilitate sustainable change, the greater the impact (Elish-Piper & L’Allier, 2011; Garet et al., 2001; Knight, 2009; Rush & Young, 2011).
Collective participation refers to the collaborative nature of professional learning. The findings from the study demonstrated principals made an effort to strengthen the professional community by encouraging teachers to work together to improve student learning. For example, some principals encouraged teachers to observe each other in the classroom. Leah said Susan “always kind of pushes us to teach each other [and] go and observe each other.” Heather said her principal, Courtney, would “highlight a teacher’s instructional practices” and encourage other teachers to observe her classroom. Aside from these examples, no other setting had a more profound impact on collaboration among teachers than professional learning communities (PLC). Some coaches in the study leveraged PLCs as an opportunity to develop trusting relationships with the teachers, learn about their efforts to improve instruction, and gauge their readiness for school improvement initiatives. Teachers and principals praised their coaches’ support to make student data accessible to facilitate rich discussions around student progress. The coaches listened, asked questions, and prompted problem solving and reflection. Consistent with the research done by Goddard et al. (2010), when principals nurtured teacher collaboration, teachers engaged in activities that would result in improved student outcomes. The trusting relationship between teachers in the PLC was essential to improving instructional practices (Tschannen-Moran, 2004; Wahlstrom & Louis, 2008).

Almost all principals and teachers characterized their instructional coaches as an integral component of their school’s improvement efforts. One of the principals, along with his instructional coaches, could not make that claim. The story of Howard School District illustrates an important contrast from the other districts in the study. Unlike the other principals in the study, including Courtney, his colleague, Diana, the principal from Fairview Elementary School, did not experience the same success with his instructional coaches. When asked to define the role
of an instructional coach, just like every other principal in the study, Diana said it was the
coach’s role to support teachers. Diana noted coaches help teachers “reach their greatest
potential.” However, when the instructional coaches were asked the same question, they stated
their role was to support principals’ “goals, agendas, and ideas, and roll them out to staff.” Also,
more than the other two coaches in the study, the responses from the Howard coaches reflected a
deficit lens. Kelsey stated she supported those teachers “who need to learn the curriculum or
need help.” Tiffany said, “When we are seeing teachers struggling in certain areas, we report that
we need a little more [professional development] in these areas.” The contrast between how the
principals framed their vision of the instructional coaching program and how the coaches saw
their role reveals something about how their role is enacted. The Howard School District
instructional coaches stated they were viewed as those who wrote curriculum, delivered weekly
whole-group professional development, and helped new or weak teachers. These tasks indirectly
supported teachers and directly supported the principals. Although the Howard principals
claimed the coaches facilitated professional learning for teachers, their instructional coaches saw
themselves as an extension of their administrators. The lack of alignment between how the
principals expressed the instructional coaches’ role and how the coaches themselves viewed their
role revealed that, regardless of what principals said about their view of coaches, principals’
behavior was more impactful than how they articulated their beliefs. As Matsumura et al. (2009)
pointed out, teachers were more likely to work closely with coaches when principals
demonstrated how they valued the instructional coaches by making them an integral part of
meetings, publicly endorsing their work, and encouraging teachers to work with coaches.
Coaches are the Principals’ Partners

According to the data, the principals and their coaches had trusting relationships and strong partnerships. Through these partnerships, principals could achieve a great deal more in the way of instructional leadership. Coaches provided principals with guidance, feedback, advice, and a sounding board. Through planning and leading together, the principal and the coach worked to positively impact the learning environment. The principal brought their vision to the conversation, and the coach provided insight into the teachers’ capacity to implement that vision. As Susan put it, her coach helped “her see her vision through the teacher’s lens.” These findings are consistent with Spillane et al. (2001), who stressed leadership does not refer to only what the principal does. Leadership includes all formal and informal leadership positions in the school; school leadership is a collaborative effort. Principals, instructional coaches, and teachers work together to make the school better. This process is enhanced by the partnership between the principals and the instructional coaches.

The teachers explicitly stated they knew they had a strong partnership between their principals and the instructional coaches. They knew their coaches and principals met frequently and worked together on goals. As Leah, Susan’s teacher, said of her and her coach, Dana, “I know they work together all the time and kind of divide and conquer.” The principals and coaches worked together on school improvement efforts to ensure professional learning activities were meaningful and consistent. Scott, another principal, said he and his coach, Nicole, were “very collaborative” and were “constantly chatting and texting with each other.” They sent each other resources, ideas, and feedback on “what supports the teachers need.” This finding aligned with research that, when coaches and administrators coordinate their school improvement efforts,
professional growth is more consistent, and advancing student achievement is more likely (Hall & Simeral, 2008).

When principals considered instructional coaches to be their coaches, they modeled the value of ongoing professional learning and showed their teachers the coaches were respected participants in the school improvement process (Danielson, 2007; Norton, 2007). Ashley enthusiastically acknowledged Dana had coached her. Ashley had a thorough understanding of instructional practices, standards, aligned assessments, and her knowledge and skills were primarily due to her openness to learn from Dana. These examples from the findings aligned with Kral (2007), who pointed out teachers needed their principals to be learning right alongside them. Ashley also modeled the value of ongoing professional learning, which according to research, contributed to the effectiveness of the instructional coaching program (Kral, 2007; Neufeld & Roper, 2002).

The characterization of partnership is most evident with instructional coach Dana and her principals, Susan and Ashley. Dana had been working with her principals for several years. Although Ashley had been a principal for 4 years at the time of data collection, Ashley was previously part of the coaching team in the district for 3 years. During that time, she developed a relationship with Dana. Although Dana claimed she dedicated most of her time supporting teachers, the findings showed she devoted a great deal of energy supporting her principals. That support defined their partnership. In addition to regular meetings, Dana communicated with her principals daily through email, text messages, and informal drop-in meetings. Dana was embedded in every part of the planning, leading, and assessing of the principals’ goals. Susan and Ashley relied on Dana’s insight and wisdom as they used her as a sounding board. As Ashely said about Dana, “She has a real perspective that needs to be valued.” Conversely, Dana
used her principals’ guidance to build her own leadership capacity. She listened and responded to
their feedback about her work. Although Dana and her principal, Susan, sometimes disagreed
and challenged each other, they were always aligned on the outcome. Principals Susan and
Ashley developed the vision, coordinated the school-improvement strategies, and allocated
needed resources. Dana bridged those elements with the teachers by providing them with support
to improve their instruction and impact the students. The partnership between coaches and
principals positioned the coaches as valued members of the leadership team. Matsumura et al.
(2009) found teachers were more likely to work closely with the instructional coaches when this
role was evident to teachers. The strong partnership relationships between coaches and principals
supported the instructional coaching program.

Summary of Principal Perceptions

Principal Perceptions

Principals who participated in the study identified the primary role of their instructional
coach as a professional development provider who supported teachers with instructional
improvement. Connecting the findings to Desimone’s (2009) professional development
framework and Spillane’s (2006) distributed leadership framework clearly established the
coaches’ roles. Research from Matsumura and Wang (2014) reinforced how the effectiveness of
the instructional coaching program depended partly on the clarity of their roles. When principals
appreciated their impact and expertise, coaches could maintain their focus on helping teachers
improve their instructional practices.
Principal leadership was an essential factor in how coaches fit into the school culture (Matsumura et al., 2009, 2010). The second research question asked: How does the principal facilitate and influence the instructional coaching program? The findings showed that, when principals set up the culture for professional learning in their schools, including empowering teachers to elevate their strengths as educators and becoming lead learners themselves, they facilitated the coaching program. All principals in the study expected their teachers to work alongside each other through professional learning opportunities, ensuring the coach was integral to those PLCs; however, only three principals held themselves and their teachers accountable for high-quality instruction. Uncovering the differences between how the principals in the study established the culture for professional learning provided a thought-provoking view of the findings.

It is also important to recognize there were conditions that existed as a result of the original implementation of the program that may have impacted the culture of the individual schools at the time of the study. The actions of the principal were influenced by these conditions. The perception of the instructional coach’s role was influenced by how and why the instructional coaches came to the district in the first place. Depending on the historical context of the program, the principal communicated their support of the program differently.

**Empowering Teachers**

The teachers who participated in the study provided valuable insight into how principals empowered their teachers. One of those ways was demonstrating how they valued professional
learning and trying new instructional strategies to benefit students. For example, teachers described their principals as having a positive attitude, particularly when trying new strategies in the classroom. Vanessa, one of Courtney’s teachers from Howard School District, said her principal was “super encouraging” and “willing to dive in.” Leah, one of Susan’s teachers from Concord School District, said her principal wanted teachers to use Dana, the coach, as a resource to provide guidance, and pushed her teachers to get into each other’s classroom and mentor each other. Rachel, one of Scott’s teachers from Center Grove School District, appreciated how her principal was “positive and honest.” When teachers felt uneasy about change, Rachel also said Scott explained to teachers “the why” for the improvement. The teachers’ insights into how their principals impacted the learning culture of their buildings were essential to this study and set the stage for the information provided by the principals themselves.

Principals appreciated their coaches’ close connection to the teachers in their building, and they relied on their coaches’ perspectives because of their strong ties to their teachers. Coaches clearly understood teachers’ viewpoints from working with individual teachers and participating in team meetings. In schools where coaches felt successful, they participated in PLCs. Two of the instructional coach participants, Nicole and Dana, used their schools’ PLC meetings to connect with teachers and understand their challenges. This idea directly connects to the research indicating student learning improved when principals strengthened the professional community and encouraged teachers to work together to improve their classroom practices. The trust among the teachers and the reliance on each other in PLCs was more important than their principal’s trust (Tschanne-Moran, 2004; Wahlstrom & Louis, 2008).

The support of the PLC is an example of how teachers were empowered. With an effective PLC model, teachers collaboratively shared knowledge and ideas about their
professional practices. In this setting, the principals’ support was indirect. The principals in this study attended some PLC meetings, but they were not there to share expertise or provide direct support. As Wahlstrom and Louis (2008) pointed out, effective professional communities are characterized by an essential shift in leadership between principal and teachers. The teachers themselves did all the hard work. The researchers concluded the quality of instruction was improved when the teachers took the lead in the improvement process. In this study, the instructional coaches worked alongside the teachers for two school districts, not as direct leaders, but as colearners. They guided the inquiry-based professional learning opportunity with their guiding questions, advice, and follow-up visits to teachers’ classrooms.

Another way instructional coaches in the study were efficient and effective was by making the data accessible to teachers. Researchers have stated school improvement efforts emphasize accessing, interpreting, and using data to drive instruction (Elish-Piper & L’Allier, 2011; Gallucci et al., 2010; Marsh et al., 2015). There is no setting where teachers engage in those functions more than in PLC meetings. As the principals and teachers pointed out, teachers were not always comfortable with the software or learning management systems used to display data to tell the story of how instruction impacted students. As Garet et al. (2001) and Guskey (2009) described in their research, the help coaches provided by processing the data in a way that teachers could use it gave teachers more time to do the important work of self-evaluation, collaboration, and reflection.

**Principals as Lead Learners**

All of the principals in the study acknowledged an essential part of their job as a leader included managing the instructional program. The functions for that aspect of principalship
included supervision and evaluation of teachers, coordinating the curriculum, and monitoring student data. This description is consistent with Hallinger’s (2005) definition of instructional leadership. However, managing the instructional program does not go far enough to contribute to the professional learning culture of the school. The findings showed principals needed to have a deep understanding of the standards and high-quality instruction. The participants in the study, including coaches and teachers, expressed the importance of principals’ professional skills and knowledge for all things teaching and learning. Most principals learned right alongside teachers. For almost all of the principals in the study, learning included engaging with the instructional coaches to make them better leaders. This learning is also what Hallinger found in instructional leadership research. His research revealed principals must make professional learning a priority to promote a positive climate for learning and continuous improvement.

Most coaches and teachers in the study claimed their principals were knowledgeable on standards, curriculum, and teaching methods. In most cases, the coaches and teachers described how the principals and coaches seemed to pick up where each other left off when it came to teaching and learning. The teachers in the study stated they considered their principals to be a valuable resource for guidance on curriculum and instructional practices. One principal could not make that claim. Diana from Howard School District admitted curriculum was not her strength or passion, which frustrated the coaches. The coaches who worked with Diana observed she supported the curriculum on only a superficial level. Tiffany gave several examples of how Diana’s lack of skill and knowledge impacted her work. Diana could not give her teachers accurate and actionable feedback. Therefore, her teachers were not compelled to improve their practices. Diana deferred that role to her coaches and wanted her coaches to hold teachers accountable. She put her coaches in situations where they had to have uncomfortable
conversations or cross the boundary between administrator and colleague. Knowing that the teachers were the most resistant to instructional coaching, the inference can be made that this disinterest in building her capacity as a knowledgeable instructional leader impacted the culture in the building. The research from Robinson et al. (2008) supported this concept. The researchers concluded leaders need to develop a deep understanding of what is required for teachers to sustain meaningful change. Principals who participate in learning alongside teachers facilitate a stronger professional learning culture. This enhanced learning culture has a profound impact on student achievement.

Across all cases, the principals valued their instructional coaches and appreciated their skills and knowledge. All principal and coach teams had great relationships. Most, but not all, principals had meaningful and productive partnerships. When the principals talked about the coaches to the staff, asked questions of the coaches in public settings such as staff meetings, and referenced the coach in the staff correspondence, the partnerships were visible to teachers. During day-to-day interactions in the hallways, the classrooms, or in meetings, the principals referenced the coach and wondered aloud what they would do differently. Principals were excited to learn from their coaches, and the coaches were thankful for the principal’s leadership and mentoring. Principals encouraged teachers to take risks, welcomed opportunities to improve instructional practices, and pointed to the coach to partner with teachers throughout the process. Teachers felt supported; their success, or even effort toward success, was celebrated. Instructional coaches were embedded in all aspects of professional learning. Coaches were not only valued for their skill and knowledge, they were celebrated for their efforts toward school improvement, making them vital to the success of their school.
Instructional coaching programs are a primary choice of school districts in response to policy initiatives that include provisions for professional learning (Desimone & Pak, 2017). The data called attention to two scenarios in which school districts implemented instructional coaching programs. School districts, like Howard, were implementing a new set of standards and core instructional materials. As Erica from Howard School District described, the onset of the Common Core standards meant all aspects of teaching and learning needed to be changed. Teaching techniques and student materials were not rigorous enough to meet the standards. The administrators recognized the shift was too overwhelming for teachers to do on their own, or even with their team members. Instructional coaches were brought in for the express purpose of helping teachers increase the rigor of their teaching and learn how to use the core resources to support those efforts. Kelsey, the coach from Howard, said the year she spent implementing the new math program was her best year. She stated, “All the teachers were panicking.” Once the teachers learned the new programs, the role of the instructional coach became less relevant and less needed. When I was collecting data for this research, the coaches were struggling. They continued to conduct weekly professional development sessions for teachers, which were a holdover from years earlier when coaches were conducting training sessions on the curriculum and resources. The teachers’ union efforts to cut back on those sessions reflected their inability to support teachers effectively. This inability put the instructional coaches in a negative light.

For the other school districts in the study, the timing was similar. Common Core was driving the district and school goals. The goals of the instructional coaching program were more holistic. The focus was on supporting all teachers with a wide range of instructional needs. The
principals had a more agile approach to the instructional coaching program. For example, by working very closely with the teachers to provide individualized support, Dana, the coach from Concord School District, came to the conclusion that teachers needed more core resources for math and literacy. The time spent to “home grow” their curriculum and assessments was taking away from addressing instructional practices. As the schools were implementing the core resources, Dana spent a lot of time training teachers on how to use the program. Once the teachers became familiar with the standards and the materials, she went back to focusing on high-quality teaching methods. Another example of the agility of Concord’s instructional program was the implementation of what Dana called “learning labs.” Dana and her principals recognized the importance of getting teachers into each other’s classrooms to observe their peers’ teaching practices. Dana networked with other coaches in neighboring schools and came up with a protocol for a team of teachers to observe a peer’s lesson and then discuss what they saw, ask questions, and set a goal for their own professional learning. The feedback from teachers had been extremely positive. The case of Concord School District contrasting with Howard School District illustrated the original implementation of the coaching programs influenced teachers’ perceptions of the coach and their acceptance of the coach as a resource for professional learning.

Summary of Principals’ Facilitation and Influence of the Instructional Coaching Program

The participants recognized their principal’s efforts to establish a culture in their buildings where professional learning was valued and celebrated. Leadership that promoted teacher empowerment through collaboration influenced the instructional coaching program. Instructional coaches were embedded in the PLC, and with their specialized skills and
knowledge, they helped teachers improve their practice. As Dana said, “Teachers are already stars, and I just help them shine.” Also, instructional coaches in the study stressed the importance of principals acting as lead learners in their building. They demonstrated the value of professional learning and the role of the instructional coach.

**Question 3: Principals’ Support of Teacher Engagement in Coaching Activities**

The third research question asked: How does principal leadership support teacher engagement in coaching activities? Active support included the words and actions of the principals and the conditions they set that contributed to teacher engagement with an instructional coach. The participants stressed that conditions included: (a) clearly defining the role of the instructional coach, (b) ensuring professional learning was teacher initiated, and (c) ensuring coaches were provided with autonomy over their time and methods for working with teachers. Principal participants did not underestimate the importance of supporting the instructional coaches in their efforts to support the teachers.

**The Instructional Coach’s Role**

One of the crucial ways principals in the study advanced the instructional coaching program was articulating the coach’s role clearly and promoting them as a resource to teachers. Most principals promoted the coaches through consistent communication to their teachers about specific ways the coach could support them. For example, Rachel, one of Scott’s teachers, said Scott and the coach talked to the staff members about the coach’s role at staff meetings at the beginning of the year. They “clearly [identified] her role” for the staff. Rachel said this identification was important because “instructional coach can be a very dicey position because
they may be looked at as a semi-administrator.” Kelsey, one of the coaches from Howard School District, complained teachers in her schools did not know “what we’re here for.” She thought the lack of understanding was one of the reasons many teachers did not call upon her and her colleague for support.

Dana, the coach from Concord School District, was successful, evidenced by the comment made by her principal, Ashley, who shared: “You can literally see her footprint in every classroom in some way, shape, or form.” Dana’s principals, Ashley and Susan, promoted Dana’s role in explicit and implicit ways. Dana talked to teachers at staff meetings about how she could support their teaching and learning. Ashley and Susan frequently asked Dana questions during meetings in front of the teachers. Sometimes, the principals already knew the answers to the questions; they just wanted to use the opportunity to promote Dana’s role as a team member. Ashley commented on how she supported Dana, sharing:

She needs support from administration, visible support from the administration so that teachers buy into what she is doing and how powerful it is. She needs the space to be flexible. She can’t be bogged down. She has to be a true coach.

Ashley’s comment references how she made Dana’s role evident to teachers, but also ensured she provided Dana with autonomy to do her job. These actions publicly endorsed the instructional coaches as a valuable resource. As the research shows, the principals elevated Dana’s status and showed the teachers she had specialized knowledge and skills that benefitted the entire staff, including the principals (Matsumura & Wang, 2014; Poglinco et al., 2003). As Matsumura et al. (2010) described, when principals publicly endorsed coaches as a source of expertise, teachers engaged in coaching more frequently.

Dana also appreciated how her principals often said things like, “Have you asked Dana about this?” or “Let’s check with Dana.” These types of comments implicitly promoted her role
as support for the teachers and the principals. The teachers who worked with Dana, Leah, and Grace said they could see the coach and the principal were a team. One teacher seemed to pick up where the other left off. As far as the teachers were concerned, both the principals and the coaches were knowledgeable about the initiatives but understood the challenges teachers experienced when implementing that change. When Ashley and Susan deferred to Dana, they showed the teachers they did not have all the answers; because Dana was a valued member of the team, they were as interested in her feedback as the teachers. This idea aligns with the research. By deferring to their coach, principals can demonstrate their understanding of the complexity of initiatives. The principals and their coaches work hand in hand to support teachers in their efforts to change their teaching practices (Poglinco et al., 2003).

By clearly defining the coaches’ role, principals elevated the coach’s position for the teachers and monitored the role. One principal that was clear and explicit in their effort to maintain the structure and focus was Susan. As Susan pointed out, everything the coach did was in service to the teachers. As Susan stated, she thought about everything Dana did as a means to help teachers be better at their job. By clearly defining her role this way, Susan avoids filling Dana’s time with tasks like administrative paperwork, coordinating state tests, and substituting for teachers.

**Teacher-Initiated Professional Learning**

As the instructional coach presents the teachers with new ideas for improved classroom practices, they invite teachers to think about the impact of the practices on their students. Reflecting on Jennifer, the director of teaching and learning from Center Grove School District who referred to the unique relationship between coaches and teachers as “thought partners,” she
was referring to how coaches can tap into intrinsic motivation and promote self-efficacy. Coaches stressed that lasting change in the classroom needed to start with teacher-initiated professional goals and reflection. However, when the principals and coaches talked about the big picture—the district and school goals and initiatives, including alignment to state and national standards—the principals led the charge. As Scott from Greenwood School pointed out, the principal, not the coach, provides directives for teachers to improve or change teaching practices. Functions like supervision and evaluation, coordinating the curriculum, and monitoring student data were all functions of managing the instructional program, which was ultimately the principal’s responsibility (Hallinger, 2005). As the coaches from Howard School District pointed out, these functions required principals have expertise in teaching and learning. They must be fully engaged in all aspects of the school’s instructional program, including a thorough understanding of the standards, how to teach those standards, and how to assess those standards. When Tiffany expressed her frustration that Diana did not have these skills and could not have deeper level conversations with her teachers, her experiences aligned with the research. Tiffany and the other coaches held their principals accountable to effectively evaluate classroom instruction and provided actionable feedback to the teachers. Gaining these skills meant principals participated in professional learning alongside their teachers (Robinson et al., 2008).

The principals in this study explicitly mentioned classroom instruction as they talked about their school and their leadership. One of the principals from Howard School District, Diana, was the only principal that referenced the focus on improving test scores. According to the coach, Tiffany, Diana was not as focused on instructional practices as on data. According to Heck and Hallinger (2014), teachers are more likely to participate in professional development activities when leadership focuses on the instructional environment, including collaboration.
among the teachers. Diana’s leadership seemed to be top down. She had more control over the content and context of professional learning, whereas the other principals were more flexible and allowed for more autonomy.

Another way that Diana was more directive was in situations where she mandated certain teachers to engage in coaching. Outside of the fact that the district required new teachers to work with coaches, Diana was the only principal in the study who explicitly said that, if teachers “weren’t cutting it,” she would require them to work with a coach. She would also send a coach to a teacher that she identified as weak or needing remediation. These conditions put the coaches in precarious situations. As Tiffany, one of the coaches, described, she had to navigate “tricky conversations” with the teachers, trying to help them reflect on their teaching practices and improve without explicitly saying the principal was watching. Other participants told similar stories of the negative impact of associating instructional coaching with correcting poor-quality instruction. Participants pointed out that tying instructional coaching to teacher evaluation was counterproductive to promoting a favorable climate for professional learning. As Matsumura et al. (2010) determined, portraying instructional coaches in a negative light, such as punishment for poor performance, negatively impacted the instructional coaches’ role.

Coaches’ Autonomy to Work With Teachers

Principals in the study stated they trusted their coaches. They allowed their coaches to have complete autonomy to create their own schedules and work with teachers in their classrooms. Susan, one of the principals, said she trusted her coach Dana and knew she was a creative problem solver. Susan said her coach, Dana, “definitely earned the autonomy.” Ashley’s comment referenced previously about allowing Dana “space” also demonstrated Ashley
understood the importance of autonomy. One of the critical reasons principals in the study gave their coaches autonomy was to keep their work with teachers confidential. Almost all the principals addressed the importance of protecting the coaches’ trusting relationships with teachers by helping the coaches maintain confidentiality. The principals did not typically know who the coach was working with unless the teacher told the principals themselves. This confidentiality created an environment where the teachers felt safe to take risks without the fear of being judged.

Ashley also said time as a resource increased Dana’s effectiveness. Grace, Ashley’s teacher, said her principal respected Dana’s schedule. Dana never canceled, and her principals never pulled her to do other tasks. Heather, Scott’s teacher, said very similar things about her principal. Scott gave his coach, Nicole, autonomy and ensured she was not “bogged down” with additional assignments that would keep her from spending most of her time with teachers. The views of participants were consistent with the research. Matsumura et al. (2010) stated principals supported an instructional coaching program by giving coaches autonomy to create their own schedules and manage their own activities that supported teachers. Participants in this study said principals supported the instructional coaching program by ensuring their coaches had time to work with teachers. Teachers noticed principals did not assign their coaches to other tasks that took away from their primary responsibilities of helping teachers. As Knight (2009) stated, the effectiveness of instructional coaches is ensured by providing sufficient time to coach, adding, “Principals and other district leaders need to ensure that they do not ask coaches to do so many noncoaching tasks that they rarely have the opportunity for sustained coaching” (p. 19).
Summary of Principals’ Support of Teacher Engagement in Coaching Activities

Data revealed how principals supported the instructional coaching program that would maximize the chances of success. Respondents provided examples of how their principals clearly articulated the role of the instructional coach and promoted them as an essential resource for teachers. Principals who publicly acknowledged their coaches and celebrated their skills and knowledge demonstrated to their teachers they valued their role and their support. Closely connected to a carefully articulated role was the advice from the participants to avoid connecting coaching to teachers’ evaluation. Many participants stressed the importance of teacher-directed professional learning to encourage buy in and engagement. Finally, the principals noted they allowed their coaches complete autonomy, space, and time to work with teachers. They trusted their coaches as professionals and minimized their own direct involvement with coaching activities to protect the confidential nature of the coach’s work.

Implications for Practice

The instructional coaches’ potential to bring positive change depends largely on the learning culture of their building, which is built by their principals. The findings in this chapter build an argument that, although principals understand the role of the instructional coach, communicating that understanding to teachers through words and actions elevates the professional learning culture in their school.
The original purpose of the instructional coaching program had an impact on teachers’ views of the role of the instructional coach. If the original purpose of the program was to roll out new standards, curriculum, and core materials, principals need to be attuned to the progress of the implementation. If teachers are resistant to coaching, principals can delve into what can be done to encourage a culture for professional learning. Principals and the district-level administration need to collaborate to ensure the instructional coaching program remains agile and shifts the focus from implementation of district goals to meeting the needs of teachers. In addition, principals can ensure instructional coaches have the autonomy to change professional learning strategies to meet the needs of the teachers. If teachers are not responsive to the manner in which coaches are attempting to engage teachers, there must be opportunities for teachers to offer input to drive the direction of the program. It is essential principals ensure the instructional coaching program is clearly defined and has a structure that includes all the critical components of professional development, such as content focus, active learning, coherence, duration, and collective participation. If the instructional coaches spend more time planning and executing whole-group professional development than individualized coaching, principals can help the coaches refocus their efforts. Overall, historical factors heavily influence the teachers’ view of the program. The principal must be intentional about communicating their expectations about teachers’ engagement in professional learning. Sometimes, the principal must attempt to counteract misconceptions by changing their behavior toward promoting the instructional coach as a resource.
Coaches Are Vital to Success

Principals in this study understood the critical importance of instructional coaching to support professional development in school improvement efforts. Based on this finding, the implication for principals is to take steps to facilitate a culture of professional learning. Principals must welcome risk taking and trying new strategies, and approach teachers’ new ideas and improved practices with enthusiasm and celebration. Teachers who see their principal as a champion for professional learning will recognize the coach as a key resource. To support instructional coaching, principals must also reinforce how teachers are not expected to acquire new knowledge and skills on their own, and learning is amplified when teachers work with coaches as a team.

Mandated Coaching Risks Relationships

Instructional coaches are skilled and knowledgeable educators. Coaches can feel immense pressure to promote change in the classroom, particularly when students’ needs are not being met. However, instructional coaches in this study recognized the importance of teachers’ intrinsic motivation to produce an interest in learning new strategies and practices. Principals should understand the role of accountability. If the primary objective of professional learning is to adhere to a mandated instructional program or initiative, the responsibility for decision making lies outside the teacher. As soon as the principal stops looking, the teacher is likely to return to the familiar teaching methods. Also, if students are not performing well, teachers can blame the initiative or the implemented program. Principals who hold themselves and their teachers accountable for the improvement process work collaboratively to benefit their students.
Coaching conversations that identify areas of concern, promote new methods, and improve instructional practices can support the improvement process.

Mandated coaching, where the principal ties instructional coaching to teacher evaluation, sends the message that an instructional coach works with teachers who are in trouble. There is potential for an adversarial relationship between teachers and coaches when professional development is imposed. When the principal assigns the coach to work with a specific teacher, there is no expectation of confidentiality among the teacher, coach, and principal, which causes a breakdown in trust. Potentially, other teachers will not trust the coach because they view the coach as an extension of administration.

Principals are encouraged to avoid putting their instructional coach in the position of seeking compliance with professional development. It is not the coaches’ role or responsibility to supervise teachers. Principals can help instructional coaches maintain their trusting relationships with the teachers who are their peers. If teachers need intervention, principals must take the lead in their efforts to improve. Principals can offer teachers various options to learn, such as reading professional literature, reviewing videos of effective teaching, observing a peer, or enlisting the involvement of the instructional coach on their own. If teachers approach the coach for help, the nature of their work should be kept confidential. The responsibility of follow up with progress toward improvement remains with the principal.

**Accountability Is Key**

By fully engaging in the same professional learning as the teachers, principals can build their capacity to be a strong instructional leader. Coaches expect principals to be strong instructional leaders. Coaches want to hold their principals accountable for knowing and
understanding the standards and effective instructional practices. Principals who have instructional and curricular knowledge and skill know what to look for in the classroom and can provide teachers with actionable feedback. Principals who work closely with their instructional coaches to build their own capacity for knowledge support the instructional coaching program and ensure they work collaboratively toward school improvement.

The Importance of Partnerships

Collegial relationships between the instructional coach and the principal are vital to the success of school improvement efforts. Frequent meetings with the principal and coach provide opportunities for sharing information, brainstorming, problem solving, and aligning goals. Principals and their coaches should schedule meetings with agendas and goals, but also leverage informal communication methods so the coach always has access to the principal. Principals benefit from a strong partnership with their coach for several reasons. First of all, the coach has the pulse on what is happening in the building. This information is invaluable for principals because they set goals for the school. Coaches can ensure plans are realistic, and they can be a champion for the principal’s goals among the teachers. Also, principals should engage in coaching cycles similar to the teachers where they set goals and use the coach as a learning partner to reflect on their progress toward those goals. Making their professional learning visible to the teachers is another way to facilitate a strong culture that supports sustainable improvement.
Coach as Community Member

Professional learning communities are invaluable opportunities for teachers to reflect, problem solve, and engage in discussion around improvement of instructional practices. Allowing the instructional coach to take an active role in PLC meetings helps the coaches develop trusting relationships with teachers and gain valuable insight. Coaches can help the PLCs be more effective in several ways. Coaches help the group by aggregating student data and making them accessible to teachers. They can also help the team develop norms, engage in productive conversations, and leverage opportunities to observe classroom practices. Depending on the size of the building and the number of PLC teams, coaches could spend a great deal of time in meetings. It may be necessary for coaches to rotate through grade level teams by quarter or semester to ensure they are not spending too much time in meetings. Coaches must ensure they are leveraging the time in PLCs to listen to the discussion, ask probing questions, and follow up with classroom observations with the goal of engaging teachers in instructional coaching cycles.

Implications for Future Research

Although this study contributes to an understanding of how principals support the work of instructional coaches, there are needs for other related areas of research. First, this research was done during the COVID-19 global pandemic, which caused significant disruption in the systems and processes of participating schools. Conducting research with a similar purpose and research questions when the principals, coaches, and teachers were in a more typical school setting may be of interest. Researching without the cloud of a pandemic would ensure the
understanding and behavior of participants would be authentic and typical to the culture of the school, and not influenced by the challenges that disrupted the teaching environment. For example, during the data collection process, schools were conducting classes remotely, which significantly impacted teaching and learning. Coaches were not meeting with teachers for the typical types of professional development experiences. The selection of participants was impeded by the pandemic. For example, the original selection criteria were to find coaches and principals who worked with each other for more than a year. In the case of Center Grove School District, the coach had been in the school for less than a year. The ability to ensure the instructional coaches worked with the principals and teachers for a longer period of time may provide different results. In the case of Howard School District, a classroom teacher from Diana’s school was not available to participate. Data from one of Diana’s teachers may have provided additional insight into their instructional coaching program.

Research methods for this study were impacted by the COVID-19 global pandemic. Further research would benefit from observations of meetings between principals and coaches, or meetings that include teachers. Future research could be conducted by using observations along with the interviews. Observations would allow the researcher to enhance understanding of the relationship of leadership of a principal with the work of an instructional coach in the setting and through the participant’s eyes (Hatch, 2002). Observing real-life applications of what was said during the interviews would substantiate and triangulate the data available from the interviews.

This study did not address the type of training coaches and principals received on coaching programs. The central office staff in this study mentioned doing book studies or bringing in consultants to work with either instructional coaches, principals, or both. Adding the component of principal and coach training to future research studies could provide insight into
the impact on principals’ behaviors with training. For example, future research could focus on the research question: Do principals behave differently because they received training from an expert in instructional coaching?

This study was limited to participants in elementary schools. The structure of middle schools or high schools are much different. It may be interesting to see how principal attitudes and behaviors impact coaching in middle and high schools where teaching is content-area focused.

**Limitations**

Several limitations of this study must be considered. First, data were collected during the COVID-19 global pandemic. Due to safety protocols, schools were conducting classes at least partially remotely. This remote environment impacted access to participants and, due to the change in school structure, may have impacted participant’s state of mind. I conducted all interviews through video conferencing software. Although data were collected by interviewing a variety of participants, I was not able to talk to teachers from every school. In addition, participants needed to speak about conditions that would have been typical, rather than what may have been happening during the time data were collected. For example, participants said “before COVID” or “when we are not in a pandemic” when referring to frequency of meetings or the focus of professional learning.

Another limitation was the only source of data were interviews. I was unable to attend and observe meetings. Observations and collection of documents would have been a source of triangulation.
Final Thoughts

As I analyzed the data, I wrote reflective memos for two purposes. First, because I was a participant in the study, the reflective memos replaced what would have otherwise been an interview transcript. The other purpose was to document my observations about contradictions in the data, my wonderings, and further questions during analysis. Reviewing my reflections was extremely valuable to the process of data analysis. The research data prompted observations, questions, and wonderings that were articulated in those memos.

One of my observations was the inconsistency of the Howard School District participants’ responses to the request to define the role of an instructional coach. I wrote in my reflective notes that the inconsistency of respondents’ answers was striking. The Howard principals believed the coach’s primary role was to support teachers. Courtney said coaches impacted student growth through working with teachers, and Diana stated the coach helps the teacher “reach their greatest level of potential.” Erica, the curriculum director, supported these ideas with her initial response. She said an instructional coach was a “critical friend for teachers.” Erica went on to say the coaches act as the right arm of the principals to extend the building goals. However, the view from the classroom was quite different. Vanessa, the teacher, stated providing curriculum resources is a primary coach’s role. The coaches both said their role was to support principals’ building goals. In my reflection, I wondered why there was an inconsistency in the statements of the Howard School District principals, coaches, and teachers.

Another observation I made was inconsistency between the curriculum director and the coaches. Erica expressed excitement and enthusiasm about the impact her coaches made on student achievement in her district. She pointed out her district was a high-achieving district as a
direct result of the efforts of her coaches. I wondered how Erica could make that claim when her coaches told me their union pushed back on their role and teachers were resistant to working with coaches. Erica coordinated the instructional coaching program; before the COVID-19 global pandemic, she met with the coaches regularly. I wondered if she knew how frustrated they were. Because their responses were the most inconsistent of the three settings for the study, I wondered if the inconsistency was potentially another indicator of the weakness of the instructional coaching program in the district. The conflicting responses from the Howard participants may be evidence the district was not cultivating a robust professional learning culture that valued the work of instructional coaches.

Another concept I recorded in my reflective memos was the impact of “light coaching” and “heavy coaching.” Killion (2008) coined the phrase to distinguish between what coaches do for teachers to build and maintain relationships rather than improve teaching and learning. Some principals and district leaders, such as Ashley, Scott, Jennifer, and myself, were familiar with those terms and knew the difference. Light coaching includes providing teachers with resources, offering supportive comments, or offering quick feedback or suggestions. When coaches do heavy coaching, they are typically engaged in coaching cycles that last several weeks and includes collaboration and reflection. The participants discussed these two concepts during their interviews. I used to think light coaching had little value, although sometimes the instructional coaches spent a great deal of time engaged in activities that could be characterized as light coaching when it came to lasting change. Coaches do many things for teachers to be of service to build trust and help teachers feel supported, particularly with teachers who are reluctant to work with a coach. Ashley challenged my thinking about the value of light coaching. Ashley said sometimes teachers need to get the right resources or have their questions answered quickly to
help move them forward. When Dana or Nicole, Ashley, and Scott’s coaches rewrite a test or share a professional article, they build relationships and credibility with teachers. Ashley did say she feared too much light coaching would lead to burnout for her coach, Dana. Jennifer admitted she used to think light coaching would be enough to lead to positive outcomes for students. Later, she realized coaches cannot remain in the light coaching model. In my reflection, I noted these principals and district leaders were aware of the difference between acts of service that coaches do for teachers to build relationships and professional learning activities that have the potential for lasting change. Even the awareness was a significant step toward developing and maintaining a successful instructional coaching program. Ashley and Scott can ensure their coaches do not get trapped and spend more time working for teachers than with teachers.

Finally, the situation I was most curious about that I recorded in the reflective memos was the perceived control the principals had over the instructional coaching program. I knew I worked closely with the principals of my district, Ashley and Susan. Often in discussions around curriculum, classroom practices, and data, the conversation has come around to Dana’s role in supporting the teachers. We have reminded each other of what Dana can do to help teachers and what she should not do because it would be a waste of her valuable time. The principals consulted with me about Dana’s tasks and how she executed her role. We collaboratively planned professional learning opportunities, and Dana typically took the lead because she knew where the teachers were at with skills and knowledge. Dana has not hesitated to call me or stop in my office to talk about challenges, ask for guidance, or celebrate successes.

Based on my conversations with the team from Greenwood School, it sounds like Scott, Nicole, and Jennifer had a similar collaborative relationship. Scott and Nicole knew each other from district-level meetings before working with one another. Nicole had been a coach long
before Jennifer was assigned to the district office, and they knew each other well. Based on the information obtained in my interviews, there seemed to be a great deal of collaboration around professional learning.

All of the Center Grove and Concord school districts participants seemed very positive about their instructional coaching program. The coaches stated they made progress with teachers and felt supported by their principals. I wrote in my reflection that respondents in these districts were in alignment and consistent with the story they told about their instructional coaching program. Even Courtney from Howard School District was excited to tell me about how her coaches made an impact with her teachers, although the teachers’ union seemed to disagree. After several years of resistance from her teachers, I wondered why Diana did not do more to change the model of professional learning in her school. She characterized the whole group workshops conducted in her building once or twice a month as ineffective. As Diana said, the teachers had nothing against the coaches, they just did not like the professional development model. I wondered why Diana and the coaches did not work with Erica, the curriculum director who was passionate about the success of the instructional coaching program, to find ways to rework the model to meet the needs of the teachers better. Also, I wondered if Erica knew Diana was assigning her coaches to work with the teachers she perceived as weak and “not cutting it.” Mandating an ineffective teacher to work with a coach must have contributed to the fact that her teachers were so resistant. Diana was not making that connection. In my reflection, I recognized that principals significantly impacted their instructional coaching program. Still, they need support from their district administrators in professional learning and problem solving to leverage the resource effectively.
Education is more complex and challenging than ever. Teachers are constantly challenged to learn new standards while integrating new materials and resources. Rigorous accountability measures and a diverse student population create conditions where teachers continuously strive to improve their teaching practices. Principals struggle to balance their roles as instructional leaders and manage the school’s day-to-day operations, including frequent needs to address discipline, personnel, and parent issues. Principals have the best intentions and want to make classroom interactions their priority, but it is not always realistic.

Instructional coaches are an essential part of the learning community. Coaches choose the role because they want to positively impact student learning by helping teachers gain confidence and competence in their skills. Instructional coaches are highly skilled and knowledgeable educators, and they are also strong teacher leaders. They are especially adept at building trusting relationships and bringing out the best in others.

Together, principals and instructional coaches lead the work of curriculum and instruction. They collaborate on setting goals and developing processes to lead professional learning. As a team of instructional leaders, they guide the capacity-building efforts of teachers with coaching, ongoing feedback, and reflection to improve practices.

The efficacy of the instructional coaching program as a professional development initiative depends on many factors that principals control. Principals can take steps to ensure the instructional coaching program is valued as a vital part of a positive school climate and culture and is not squandered instead. Principals can promote the instructional coach as a valued learning community member and define their role as a professional development provider focused on student outcomes rather than fixing teachers. When principals use a strength-based approach rather than a deficit lens to elevate teachers’ knowledge and skills, celebrate success,
and provide opportunities for teachers to collaborate and observe each other, they raise the level of learning for everyone. Principals should address the implications of the history of the program. If the professional development model does not promote personalized learning for the staff, changes should be made. Principals must ensure the school culture embodies a valued and supported staff. They must address the professional growth goals with all teachers and be intentional about communicating expectations about teachers’ engagement in personalized professional learning. Staff should see the principal is a learner who is present and engaged in professional development activities and committed to building their capacity. Instructional leadership requires a significant degree of knowledge and skill. Principals should let the coach be their coach. Principals need to clearly understand the components of professional learning and ensure conditions are optimal for teachers to engage with instructional coaches. These components include providing time, autonomy, and opportunities to collaborate through PLCs.
REFERENCES


