

TEACHERS' PERSPECTIVES OF INSTRUCTIONAL COACHES' IMPACT ON STUDENT
ACHIEVEMENT IN MIDDLE SCHOOL

by

Tullie McAuther Westmoreland, Jr.

Liberty University

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Education

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this qualitative, transcendental phenomenology study was to describe middle school teachers' perspectives of role of the instructional coach in student achievement at Pleasant Valley Middle School. Pleasant Valley Middle School is a pseudonym used to protect teachers and the instructional coach being used in the research. The instructional coach provided professional learning to meet instructional needs of teachers, helped teachers use formative assessments to plan for instruction and implement differentiation strategies, and modeled scientifically-based instructional strategies to help teachers integrate new learning. Individual interviews and a focus group were conducted with teachers who worked with the instructional coach. These teachers also completed journals of their experience implementing new instructional strategies recommended by the instructional coach to provide data. The interviews, journals, and focus group were designed to answer three research questions. What are teachers' perceptions about how the instructional coach provided professional learning for teachers that impact classroom instruction and student achievement? What are teachers' perceptions about the instructional coach using data to help teachers plan for instruction: formative assessments, differentiation, best practices, etc.? What are teachers' perceptions on the effectiveness of the instructional coach observing lessons and providing feedback? Data analysis was achieved as outlined by Moustakas (1994) when transcendental phenomenological reductionism was conducted. The themes that emerged from the data were: (a) Current educational practices, (b) collaborating to integrate successful strategies, (c) identifying needs and validating themes, (d) modeling to provide support and build confidence, and (e) inspecting and what is expected.

Keywords: Instructional coach, professional learning, student achievement, phenomenology

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Overview

Chapter One of this study provides a history and rationale of the existence of instructional coaches in schools to support teachers. With the problem described as understanding teachers' perceptions on how the role of the instructional coach in middle school impacts student achievement, the researcher used a phenomenological approach to answer three research questions. Along with the research plan and limitations and delimitations, the researcher also describes the personal connection to this study.

Background

Since the enactment of the No Child Left Behind Act (2001), schools have been held more accountable for student success. Schools in areas with high poverty, special needs, or diverse student populations are required to produce the same academic achievement as schools in more affluent areas. School leaders feel pressure to increase student achievement more than ever. To improve student achievement, administrative school personnel target instructional practices as key to providing the best education for students. Teachers must be well-versed in the most effective instructional practices, and they must carry them out with fidelity (Knight, 2005). Providing professional learning for teachers is pertinent. However, traditional professional learning where teachers are exposed to best practices but do not receive follow-up support is ineffective (Knight, 2009a).

Instructional coaching has become the medium for delivering professional development in schools throughout the United States. These coaches provide intensive and on-going, job-embedded professional learning that focuses on professional practice (Knight, 2009a). Instructional coaching engages teachers in active professional learning through modeling,

collaboration, and support as they increase the use of scientifically-based instructional practices (Gross, 2012). Low-performing schools improved significantly when instructional coaches worked with teachers on lesson planning, modeling, observing instruction, and reviewing data and facilitating professional learning meetings (Fullan & Knight, 2011).

Even with academic achievement on the rise, instructional coaches face teachers who resist support and wish to continue with antiquated teaching practices (Knight, 2011b). Many such educators may intentionally try to disregard the intended help and encouragement and view instructional coaches' efforts as intrusive (Lynch & Ferguson, 2010). When teachers understand the role of the instructional coach and how this role plays in student achievement, they are less likely to feel threatened by the coach and more likely to take advantage of the experience and skills that are offered (Steiner & Kowal, 2007).

Significant research exists to describe the role of the instructional coach. Researchers have explained the impact that instructional coaches make on student achievement. Some studies reference the perspectives of coaches on their role in schools and principals' points of view. The gap in the literature to be addressed in this study is understanding teachers' perspectives of the role of the instructional coach and the impact they make on student achievement.

Situation to Self

Having served as an instructional coach, I have witnessed the impact this role has on student achievement every day. When I went into classrooms and modeled lessons, students asked me to come back. They told me how easy I made the lesson. I saw the impact instructional coaching made. There were days when struggling teachers grasped the concepts of

differentiation or tiered interventions when I knew my efforts were worth every bit of stress and resistance.

Yet when I spent hours planning with teachers, providing them instructional strategies and modeling in their classrooms, I was not sure that they perceived what the instructional coach provided for them. My motivation in this research was to understand teachers' perspectives of the role of the instructional coach on student achievement in the middle school.

Problem Statement

The problem studied was middle school teachers' perspectives of the role of the instructional coach on student achievement. Most research focuses on the practices and role of the academic coach (Collet, 2012; Gibson, 2011; Gross, 2012; Kretlow, Cooke, & Wood, 2012). Lutrick and Szabo (2012) conducted research to assess principals' and assistant principals' beliefs about effective professionals. Five themes emerged from the data: that effective professional learning is on-going, data-driven, interest-driven, interactive, and involves collaboration. This type of professional development is an example of Vygotsky's zone of proximal development. Interaction among the participants must exist to increase the learning experience. Elementary literacy coaches have been polled on their roles and have shared their perspectives of serving as an instructional coach (Lynch & Ferguson, 2010; Mraz, Algozzine, & Watson, 2008), and researchers have studied literacy coaching from the coaches' perspective (Smith, 2011). Teemant, Wink, and Tyra (2010) conducted research on the effects of coaching on classroom practice. The results indicated that targeted-based coaching closed the achievement gap between high- and low-achieving students when the coaching was tailored within teachers' zone of proximal development. Also, instructional coaching increased teachers' use of quality instructional strategies. An identifiable gap in the literature exists where the

classroom teachers are concerned. Research needs to be conducted to determine how teachers' perceive the job of the instructional coach, how they perceive professional learning under the tutelage of an instructional coach, and how they perceive a coach's feedback and guidance on instructional practices. Conducting this research will assist principals, system-level administrators, and coaches in building better relationships with teachers and making the instructional coach the most positive and effective role for providing professional learning.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this qualitative study was to examine middle school teachers' perspectives on the instructional coach's role in student achievement. Data collection consisted of teacher interviews, a focus group interview, and journals that were kept by teachers to collect teachers' perceptions on how those roles impact achievement. Using these non-threatening means, teachers were able to share their feelings, ideas, and personal experiences about the role of the instructional coach.

Significance of the Study

The significance of this study was to provide a reflection or a way of expression (Moustakas, 1994) for middle school teachers who have performed their teaching duties with the assistance of an instructional coach. This study offered teachers a better understanding of the role of the instructional coach. More importantly, this study allowed instructional coaches and school administrators to understand how classroom teachers perceived the instructional coach's assistance. Instructional coaches and administrators can apply the findings to making appropriate changes in the ways the instructional coach supports teachers to create a more positive and productive school environment. By examining teachers' perspectives of

instructional coaches, coaches and administrators can have a better understand of planning and providing professional learning opportunities, integrating new instructional strategies, and building a better and more influential working environment. At that point, instructional coaches can be more positive, more respected agents of change.

Research Questions

“In phenomenological research, the question grows out of an intense interest in a particular problem or topic” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 104). The use of instructional coaches as part of school improvement programs has become increasingly popular and has been expanding across the country (Marsh, McCombs, & Martorell, 2010). This topic has drawn interest from school administrators due to its impact on student achievement. However, there is little research that studies teachers’ perceptions on the role of instructional coaches. Research question number one was written to determine how teachers perceive the professional learning experiences they have with instructional coaches and if they impact student achievement.

Research Question One

1. What are teachers’ perceptions about how the instructional coach provides professional learning for teachers that impact classroom instruction and student achievement?

Lemov (2010) stated that the most effective teachers analyze student work for clues regarding student thinking. This strategy helps teachers look at student assessments to plan for instruction. Research question two explored teachers’ perception of the instructional coach’s time helping teachers analyze data and training teachers to use the data to inform instruction.

Research Question Two

2. What are teachers’ perceptions about the instructional coach using data to help teachers plan for instruction: formative assessments, differentiation, best practices, etc.?

Gross (2012) described instructional coaching as a constructivist approach to professional learning. Teachers are provided experiences and not just pushed out to integrate new skills without support and reflection. Research question three was written to conclude how teachers perceive individual critiques of integrating prior professional learning in their classrooms with feedback from the instructional coach.

Research Question Three

3. What are teachers' perceptions on the effectiveness of the instructional coach observing lessons and providing feedback?

Much of the literature surrounding instructional coaching deals with the effectiveness of instructional coaching and is quantitative in nature (Doherty & Hilberg 2008; Fullan & Knight, 2011; L'Allier, Elish-Piper, & Bean, 2010). Research-based studies on teachers' perspectives of instructional coaches are rare.

Research Plan

Creswell (2013) describes qualitative research as inquiring about a problem, collecting data from people and places in natural settings, and then looking for themes to emerge from the data. The results or findings should simply be a reflection of the participants. At the end of the research, there should be a description of the problem and an appeal to mend the problem.

This study was conducted using a phenomenological approach. In this phenomenological study, the researcher collected data from teachers who had experienced the phenomenon of working with an instructional coach. This collection of experiences was vital in gaining a deeper understanding of the phenomenon. This allowed the researcher to pinpoint ideas and experiences that participants had in common to answer the questions of what they experienced and how they experienced it (Moustakas, 1994).

Limitations and Delimitations

One limitation to this study was that only one school experience was studied. The teachers had only experienced one instructional coach were only able to share their perceptions from that experience. Another limitation was the small number of faculty members to interview and survey. Yet, this collection of samples allowed the researcher to determine common themes and connections.

One delimitation of this study was the focus of the questioning. Other possible themes could be developed and pursued with a broader range of research questions. However, it was important for this study to focus on teachers' perceptions of the instructional coach in the parameters of professional learning, planning for instruction, and professional feedback.

CHAPTER TWO: REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Overview

Chapter Two is a review of the most current literature surrounding instructional coaching. In this chapter, the theoretical ideas of Vygotsky and Piaget are explained in their relationships to instructional coaching. The development of instructional coaching and the types of instructional coaches are addressed. Major roles and responsibilities of instructional coaching such as professional learning, providing effective instruction, gradual release of responsibility, and building relationships are defined.

Theoretical Framework

This study is a transcendental phenomenology study. The research occurred in the working environment of teachers and the instructional coach. As instructional coaching is developed to help teachers change current practices and to prepare teachers to implement more research-based instructional strategies, this study determined how teachers viewed the assistance and role of the instructional coach. Details, such as the instructional coach providing professional learning and the relationship of the coach with teachers, were examined to make generalizations.

The instructional coach worked in the school providing professional learning and supporting teachers as they implemented change from antiquated practices to research-based strategies. Vygotsky's sociocultural approach suggests that change comes by looking at the process of change (Miller, 2011). For change to occur in a culture or environment, the change must come from within the culture or environment. Effective professional learning is individualized but affects the community. The sociocultural approach explains stages in the learning process. Through the process, individuals learn to think through interactions with one another. Individuals become owners of their own learning in the context of their own work.

Teachers talk about and act upon what they have learned with others (Gallucci, Van Lare, Yoon, & Boatright, 2010).

Each teacher in a school has individual strengths and weaknesses. Instructional coaches identify the areas where teachers need assistance and design professional learning to help teachers perform at a desired level. Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development suggests that students thrive when instruction is developed to meet their personal needs. Just as students benefit from attention to specific instructional needs, so do teachers. To prepare to provide effective professional development for teachers, instructional coaches must assess what teachers do well, where they need help, and what should be the next priority of development. Teachers, just as students, get frustrated when learning is too far outside their zone of proximal development (Casey, 2006). When a learner is provided scaffolding (assistance), he begins to acquire a new skill. As he becomes confident in the new skill, the scaffolding is removed and he can function independently. When coaches scaffold learning for teachers, it is known as a Gradual Release of Responsibility (Aguliar, 2013).

Using on Piaget's theory of cognitive development, Callison (2001) addressed instructional coaching with the constructivism theory. Constructivism is the belief that learning comes from experience and the ability to solve problems from involving prior knowledge. Meaning for life or reality of interactions with other is how people perceive it. Building knowledge requires talking, expressing, and representing what is to be learned. Therefore, constructivism is constructing meaning from experiences rather than memorizing. Through collaboration meetings, instructional coaches provide teachers with the opportunity to share their learning experiences. When instructional coaches model lessons in classrooms, they allow the teacher to see what is expected and give them the opportunity to incorporate what they learn.

Both Vygotsky's and Piaget's theories are based on learning from experience. They both approach learning with hands-on involvement building from one's prior experiences. In the Bible, Jesus served as a teacher leader who taught the disciples, and they were commissioned to go out and emulate what they had been taught. In the Bible, Jesus told His disciples:

And Jesus came and spake unto them, saying, "All power is given unto me in heaven and in earth. Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost: Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and, lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world. Amen." (Matthew 28:18-20)

He modeled procedures and practices and backed them up with God's Word. The instructional coach must do the same. It is imperative for instructional coaches to model good instruction and help teachers adopt effective practices that improve academic achievement.

Related Literature

Professional Learning

The No Child Left Behind Act (2001) has changed the way schools are held accountable for helping students achieve academic success. All students, including students with disabilities, minority students, and students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, must meet a level of achievement that is equal to that of their school-level peers. Teachers must be highly qualified by being certified in the content area which they are teaching students. With schools following the mandates of No Child Left Behind (2001), an achievement gap remains. Teachers and principals are being held at highly accountable; if requirements are not met, educators can lose their jobs (Aguilar, 2013). The question for so many school systems which are narrowing curriculum and increasing test preparation is "How do we close the achievement gap?"

The No Child Left Behind Act (2001) boosts professional development that inspires teachers to use scientifically-based instructional practices (Kretlow et al., 2012). With these new requirements, school administrators soon realized that change would only come when educators were prepared to operate with a new set of strategies, values, and paradigms. (Aguilar, 2013). To tackle the new guidelines, school leaders considered the most effective way to deliver professional development (Lutrick & Szabo, 2012). Professional development that occurs in a one-meeting workshop and is never supported or inspected for implementation and fidelity is not effective. Effective professional development must be on-going and job-embedded. It must be developed based on the challenges teachers face in providing instruction for students (Mundy, Ross, & Leko, 2012).

Educators often resist change and new practices in their classroom instruction if they cannot see the relevance or necessity for change. They look for change that will increase student engagement and achievement and help students enjoy learning. Teachers often feel they are asked to change in ways that will not make a difference. Educational leaders must help teachers find the tools that are highly effective and provide teachers with support for quality application. New teaching strategies are so sophisticated that teachers cannot be expected to learn and implement the skills without the opportunities to watch model lessons, get support as they try the new practices, and receive high-quality feedback (Knight, 2007).

Fink and Markholt (2011) proposed that instructional coaching changes teacher practice. When teachers change, student achievement levels rise. Although instructional coaches are called on to perform many tasks such as observing classrooms, designing curriculum, and facilitating learning teams, the research describes instructional coaches as agents of change. To lead change, instructional coaches must focus on instructional practices, which are embedded in

professional learning, to help reform antiquated classroom instruction for standards-based classroom instruction.

Elena Aguilar has been an instructional coach and educational consultant in all areas of K-12 curriculum. She offered ideas and research-based strategies for instructional coaches when writing for *Edutopia* and *Teacher Magazine*. In her book *The Art of Coaching*, she described instructional coaching as professional development that determines teachers' strengths and helps them build those skills in the classroom (Aguilar, 2013). Instructional coaches also design professional learning to meet the instructional needs of teachers in areas they have identified as their weaknesses or areas the coaches have determined as weaknesses from classroom observations (Casey, 2006). Coaching also helps construct collaborative teams where teachers meet and discuss their students' mastery and ways of improving areas where students are not meeting achievement. Teachers learn to use data and meet with instructional coaches when making instructional decisions and plans for students to master standards (Aguilar, 2013).

Coaching in the academic area has been used for helping teachers develop as instructors in a variety of ways. Peer coaching has been used when fellow teachers provide help and support in planning and instructing. Literacy coaches have been used to model and share special reading and writing strategies. No matter the specific title given to academic coaches, the primary role of the coach is to provide job-embedded, content-specific, instructional support that helps to improve instruction and therefore raises student achievement (Casey, 2006). Instructional coaching promotes environments where teachers can reflect on the strategies they use and are not afraid to take risks in an effort to improve student achievement and professional practices. This builds a learning community where educators feel safe (Aguilar, 2013).

School districts have turned to instructional coaching as a means of effectively influencing student achievement. Just as athletic coaches are recognized in their ability to lead teams to success by calling good plays that lead them to victory, instructional coaches call “plays” that push for change. They encourage the teachers to try new strategies until they understand them and can incorporate them successfully in the classroom (Aguilar, 2013). Instructional coaches are on-site professional developers who provide professional learning and also model and provide feedback on instructional strategies that are being implemented. Three main goals of the instructional coaches are to provide professional development, to improve teaching practices by working directly with teachers, and to help align instruction with state required standards and assessments (Stock & Duncan, 2010).

Aguilar (2013) concluded that the best way to define what an instructional coach should be is to first identify what he should not be. First, instructional coaches should never be used as evaluators or the curriculum police. When coaches become enforcers, they lose the trust of the very people they exist to help. Next, instructional coaches should not be forced on teachers or principals. Instructional coaching is a form of professional learning, and coaching will not be effective if the teachers are not engaged. Also, instructional coaching is not developed to be therapy for teachers. That does not mean an instructional coach cannot lend an ear when a teacher just needs to talk; however, instructional coaching should focus on professional learning and developing new skills. Finally, instructional coaches are not consultants. They are not there to teach all teachers to teach one specific way or use a particular program. The purpose of instructional coaching is to equip teachers with the strategies and skills to positively impact instruction for all learners.

To provide the best professional development and support for teachers, instructional coaches should be chosen based on experience and content knowledge. Jim Knight, the director of the Kansas Coaching Project at the University of Kansas, has written books and conducted several research projects on instructional coaching. His work has been published in professional magazines, such as: *Principal Leadership*, *The School Administrator*, and the *Journal of Staff Development*. Knight (2011) stated that principals should employ coaches who are master classroom teachers. They should be teachers who have displayed high-quality instructional strategies in their own classrooms. Aguilar (2013) suggested that an instructional coach should be a dynamic and effective teacher for at least five years before working with teachers. Without that foundational experience, a coach would not have empathy and or understanding that teachers need for support.

Instructional coaches must be able to determine teachers' areas of strengths and encourage them in those areas. Once those areas are identified, instructional coaches must also create a plan to provide professional learning to help teachers improve in those instructional areas. To be effective, instructional coaches must also stay abreast of new and current educational theories and methods. Instructional coaches must work closely with principals- who serve as the instructional leader of the school (Vanderburg & Stephens, 2010).

Directive coaching. The main purpose of directive coaching, otherwise known as instructive coaching, is to change behaviors. Instructional coaches who are considered experts in their content or instructional strategies prepare lessons for teachers, model lessons, or make constructive suggestions to help teachers become experts in the same content areas or instructional strategies. Directive coaching is often used when schools are implementing a new curriculum for teacher support. Because directive coaching only focuses on changing a few

behaviors, it is less likely to change teacher practice. This type coaching does not lead teachers to change their thinking strategies or to reflect on curriculum decisions. Teachers only change instructional practices for a limited time and return to prior skills (Aguilar, 2013).

Facilitative coaching. Facilitative coaching is a system that helps teachers experience a paradigm shift in their instructional practices. Coaches lead teachers in professional development that teaches them to reflect, analyze, observe, and experiment. The instructional coach does not come in as a content expert, but he determines the prior knowledge and skills of teachers and builds upon those skills and beliefs that will encourage the teacher to implement new strategies in any area of instruction.

In this model, the instructional coach scaffolds learning. Using Vygotsky's zone of proximal development, the instructional coach determines what teachers can do on their own, and then they scaffold the learning process by providing modeling and support. As the teachers master the new skills and strategies, the coach gradually releases the responsibility to the teachers so they can perform independently (Aguilar, 2013).

One type of facilitative coaching is cognitive coaching. Cognitive coaching focuses on changing the way one thinks. Changing thinking changes instructional performance. Teachers learn to reflect on their teaching practices and become self-directed learners (Aguilar, 2013). When teachers increase their cognitive functioning, teaching will improve and students will have more effective learning experiences (Knight, 2011).

Transformational coaching. Transformational coaching is a mixture of directive and facilitative coaching. Transformational coaching affects the teachers and their beliefs, behaviors, and being, the school and its students, teachers, and administrators, and the broader social systems. Transformational coaching does not attempt to make changes in isolation; rather, its

purpose is to change thinking so that all the people involved begin to see interrelationships and patterns of change. Transformation is more effective when learners see the big picture of why and where the change is needed (Aguilar, 2013).

The No Child Left Behind Act (2001) describes professional learning as activities that improve teachers' content knowledge and enable teachers to be highly qualified professionals. Another purpose of professional learning is to increase teacher and administrator knowledge of scientifically-based instructional strategies. This professional development is geared to veteran and new teachers. As new teachers enter the profession, they quickly find they need more content knowledge, pedagogical skills, and support when they are in the front lines of education (Aguilar, 2013). In the past, professional development consisted of teachers leaving their classrooms to attend conferences to be taught practices and strategies to incorporate in their classes. However, teachers were not supported, nor were they held accountable for implementing the newly learned strategies; therefore, little professional development was successful (Knight, 2009). This kind of professional development rarely made significant change in teachers' skills or student learning (Aguilar, 2013). Effective professional learning must be job-embedded and ongoing (L'Allier et al., 2010). To make sure new initiatives are being implemented with fidelity, there should be classroom evidence such as lesson plans and student work that demonstrate implementation (Knight, 2011b).

The creation of more rigorous achievement goals by schools and teachers does not automatically increase student achievement. The only way to improve student achievement is to improve the quality of classroom instruction. When teachers learn highly effective instructional strategies and incorporate them into their classrooms, student achievement will accelerate. These instructional strategies encourage students to participate in class, and they helps them retain what

they have been taught. Instructional coaches are skilled teachers who know these strategies and can lead teachers in using them effectively in their own classrooms (McEwan, 2002).

Jim Knight (2007), researcher and professional development specialist in the area of instructional coaching, suggested that the main goal of instructional coaching is to enable teachers to implement learning strategies that help them improve instruction for students. Professional learning provided by coaches help teachers to create lesson plans, explore content, reflect, and implement new strategies (Knight, 2009). Effective lessons are based on student needs, which are determined through formative assessment and learning mastery that indicates what students need next (Casey, 2006).

Instructional coaching focuses on instructional improvement. Instructional coaches must identify teachers' needs, teach while checking for understanding, and look for evidence of achievement (Casey, 2006). Coaching provides professional learning that takes place in the context of the teaching environment. Instructional improvement occurs when teachers gain knowledge through interactions (Neumerski, 2012). After coaches observe a lesson, they should have discussions with teachers about the things that happened in the class. They can then plan together to enhance the lesson or strategize to better meet the needs of all learners (Gibson, 2011). In essence, instructional coaching is professional development that helps educators make immediate and long-term changes that ultimately allow schools to provide the best learning experiences for students and teachers to become master teachers (Aguilar, 2013).

Kise (2006) identified four essential questions that instructional coaches and other professional developers must consider to make the professional learning teacher-centered. First, how do teachers perceive that students learn? Some teachers believe in hands-on instruction while others prefer other delivery models. For professional development to be successful,

teachers' beliefs often have to be changed. Second, how are these beliefs tied to teachers' strengths? Teachers should teach using their strengths, but they must also understand that they must teach outside of their strengths to reach students who need a different instructional approach. The third question is what do teachers believe are their roles in student achievement? Teachers have to believe they can find ways to motivate and engage students. If teachers allow students to fall through the cracks, student success rates will falter. Finally, what keeps teachers from integrating new instructional strategies? Change adds to a teacher's workload. Teachers are also afraid to change if they believe their instruction is working for the majority of their students. Teachers are also afraid to change because they lack understanding of new strategies.

Effective professional learning will change the culture of a classroom or an entire school. The skills, habits, and beliefs of classroom teachers must be transformed from the status quo to scientifically-based strategies that are used to meet the individual needs of students. Effective staff development requires six key elements to be present. First, the use of a common framework allows coaches and teachers to stay away from perceived biases. Secondly, the instructional coach should identify the strengths and beliefs of each teacher. Instructional coaches cannot make teachers adopt their beliefs; attempting to do so encourages teacher resistance to change. A third element in effective staff development is providing teachers with evidence about how students learn. When they see the evidence, they begin to embrace new ideas. The fourth element of effective staff development is instructional coaching in classrooms to meet the specific needs and questions for teachers, which is where good transitions begin. Element five is to focus on problems teachers want to solve. This focus helps identify problems and work through the problems. Finally, encourage teacher collaboration. School culture is more likely to

experience sustained change when teachers discuss what works best in their classes and receive ideas from their peers (Kise, 2006).

Aguilar (2013) suggested that instructional coaching helps change the way teachers think and prepare for teaching through reflection, analysis, observation, and experimentation. Instructional coaches identify teachers' strengths and provide professional learning that helps teachers adopt new skills, knowledge, and beliefs that will prepare them to incorporate new strategies in the future. This premise is based on Vygotsky's zone of proximal development. Instructional coaches determine through observation what a teacher can do without help and where he can go with help. The instructional coach then provides "scaffolding," or tools and support, until the teacher can successfully achieve the new skills. As the teacher becomes successful, the coach pulls away to allow the teacher to grow in confidence and work independently. This is known as gradual release of responsibility.

Gradual Release of Responsibility

As teachers begin to add new instructional strategies to their repertoire and feel more comfortable using these strategies, the instructional coach can begin allowing teachers to plan and implement on their own. The instructional coach can begin to have less involvement. This is called gradual release of responsibility.

Gradual Release of Responsibility was introduced in 1983 by Pearson and Gallagher. It was used to help teachers become established literacy teachers. This framework describes six stages that helps to lead students, or in this case, teachers who are receiving instructional coaching, to independence. In the first stages, teachers rely heavily on the instructional coach as they are introduced to new instructional strategies. Teachers and coaches soon begin to work collaboratively as teachers feel safer and more comfortable implementing new strategies.

Finally, the instructional coach releases the responsibility to the teachers, giving them responsibility of their new learning (Plaut, 2009).

Lemov (2010) labels the Gradual Release of Responsibility as what I do, what we do, and what you do to successfully master a lesson. First, “I” (the instructional coach) model and provide the pertinent information that I want teachers to learn. Then, “we” (coach and teacher) work together to gradually allow the teacher to more control and less support. Finally, “you” (the teacher) independently practice making the new strategies and skills part of your own repertoire.

Direct instruction. The first stage of Gradual Release of Responsibility is direct instruction. After the instructional coach has observed and pinpointed a teacher’s area of weakness, he devises a plan of specific skills that the teacher needs to acquire to be a more effective teacher. The instructional coach conferences with the teacher and provides a list and definitions of the new skills and strategies that are necessary to make classroom instruction more effective (Plaut, 2009). The instructional coach needs as much data and information as possible to target the needs of the teacher. By identifying trends and patterns through conversations, observations, and data analysis, including formative and summative assessments, the instructional coach creates a plan for how to meet the professional learning needs of the teachers and the staff (Casey, 2006).

Modeling. The second stage of Gradual Release of Responsibility is modeling. Modeling is crucial. Most learners demonstrate mastery earlier when they are shown how to do something rather than being told how to do something (Plaut, 2009). When instructional coaches model in classrooms, the classroom teacher is able to see what professional practices look like and how to employ them in a classroom. By seeing these modeling examples, classroom

teachers can adopt the new practice and use it just as the instructional coach modeled it, or they can take what they have been taught and mold it into the instructional strategy that will provide the best learning experience for their students (Casey, 2006). Additionally, modeling builds relationships with classroom teachers. Teachers obtain a deeper understanding of the instructional practice, but they also gain respect of the instructional coach as a teacher and mentor (Knight, 2007).

Marzano and Simms (2013) suggested that modeling in classrooms by instructional coaches should take place in authentic environments. When teachers see lessons in their own classrooms, in their own content, and with their own students, their questions or concerns about integrating new strategies are alleviated. Videoing lessons allows teachers to watch the lessons to ensure they fully grasped what they witnessed and may allow them to see ways to improve the strategy for their students. Finally, the instructional coach should model the strategy multiple times. This allows teachers to see the same strategies in action in a variety of lesson types.

Guided practice. The third stage in Gradual Release of Responsibility is guided practice. After modeling new strategies, the instructional coach co-teaches or supports the teacher as he begins to implement the new strategies. Guided practice is the easiest way coaches can check for understanding. The instructional coach can observe the teacher's level of mastery to focus on areas where the teacher may need additional support. With support, teachers feel more confident in trying a new strategy. When teachers and coaches work together, it creates a culture of success (Plaut, 2009).

Collaboration. The fourth stage in Gradual Release of Responsibility is collaborative work. This shift in the process is very important. The instructional coach has provided a great deal of support in the first three stages (Plaut, 2009). When teachers collaborate, they are able to

share with their peers and the instructional coach the productive strategies they have experienced with students. It is also productive to share the less successful teaching experiences to glean suggestions and assistance from the instructional coach and peers. It is during collaboration that partnerships begin to form. Teachers and instructional coaches are able to share ideas, and the collaboration is non-threatening; therefore, collaboration becomes a time of constructive learning and planning (Knight, 2007). During this collaboration, teachers examine their teaching strategies, and they assess student work to plan instruction for specific student needs. As teachers listen to one another and share ideas and plans with the instructional coach in order to design effective lessons, professional learning occurs (Casey, 2006). When principals, teachers, and coaches are involved in collaboration, the entire staff feels ownership and responsibility for leading school improvement efforts (Aguilar, 2013).

To make collaboration work, principals and instructional coaches must create a dedicated time to weekly vertical and/or horizontal collaboration. When these instructional teams collaborate, it is important that data and student work are assessed. Using collaboration to reflect on current practices and establish goals helps teachers obtain desired outcomes. New goals can be set each week or by curriculum units (Neuman & Cunningham, 2009).

Observation. Stage five of Gradual Release of Responsibility is independence. Teachers put new skills and strategies into practice and demonstrate their ability to successfully perform on their own (Plaut, 2009). To help teachers make sure they are incorporating strategies and interventions that the instructional coach provides in professional learning, the instructional coach should observe teachers as they implement the strategies and provide them with feedback that will help them understand what went well and identify. The instructional coaches can then make suggestions for improvement in weak areas (Knight, 2007). Teachers and instructional

coaches should plan the observation so the teacher knows what the instructional coaching is coming to see, and the instructional coach can observe how the new instructional strategy is affecting students (Casey, 2006).

Sharing and reflection. To achieve high-level performance, professionals must have feedback that guides their performance. If professionals do not know how well or how poorly they are performing, they think they are proficient at all skills. If teachers think they are doing well, they have no reason or initiative to change their practices (Fournies, 2000).

Sharing and reflection is the final stage of Gradual Release of Responsibility. Teachers use their new skills and reflect with the instructional coach and other educators on the process of learning and how the new skills and strategies impacted student achievement. When teachers can identify what they have learned and feel successful, the new skills and strategies become part of their repertoire. In turn, they will share success stories with other educators, which will encourage new learning and more success (Plaut, 2009).

Building Relationships

Educators can view professional learning and instructional coaching as an infringement rather than support. Having an instructional coach in the classroom observing and taking notes makes teachers feel apprehensive (Fisher, Frey, & Pumpian, 2012). Often, teachers do not appreciate coaching expertise that supports the long-term changes in instructional strategies and building teacher student relationships that bring about significant achievement growth (Fink & Markholt, 2011).

Instructional coaching supports teachers to engage in new ways of thinking. Instructional coaches assist teachers in learning to reflect, analyze, observe, and experiment. When teachers become aware of the skills they have and the skills they need, their behavior is influenced. The

instructional coach builds on teachers' prior knowledge to build new skills that develop teachers' confidence and relationships with the instructional coach (Aguilar, 2013).

To have a successful coaching program, teachers and coaches must have a trusting relationship. Coaches cannot be evaluators, but they must provide support. When a teacher trusts a coach, he feels free to have productive conversations about specific teaching strategies or classroom problems. To create a culture of change and take advantage of the instructional coaches' expertise, teachers must be able to discuss successes and limitations without the fear of getting a bad evaluation (Habegger & Hodanbosi, 2011).

For instructional coaches to be viewed as a resource for teachers, a trusting relationship must exist between them. Teachers should feel comfortable discussing weakness and strengths with the instructional coach to develop strategies for improvement. Teachers embrace the assistance of the instructional coach when they feel they are part of an equal partnership (Knight, 2011a). Having one-on-one conversations in which teachers discuss areas they believe to be their strengths and weaknesses and how the coach can help or support them affords teachers and coaches the opportunity to build relationships. These conversations allow them to create a plan that will guide them in the best ways to work together (Casey, 2009).

To make instructional coaching relationships work, teachers want to be respected. They, too, have expertise and like to be treated as a professional in their fields. Teachers buy into instructional coaching when they are given the opportunity to choose the practices they want to incorporate and when to incorporate them. Teachers feel empowered when they are part of the decision-making process (Knight, 2009b).

In a study conducted by Vanderburg and Stephens (2010), teachers made changes in their instruction because they felt supported by their coaches. Four types of change identified in the

study were: trying new teaching practices, using more authentic assessments, using more educational theory, and incorporating differentiation to meet the specific needs of each student. When instructional coaches worked side by side with teachers and modeled new or better practices, teachers gained the skills and confidence to achieve success in their classrooms (Casey, 2009).

Knight (2011a) suggested five target areas that help build relationships. First, teachers do not always perceive their need for help. Second, when teachers are embarrassed or feel put down, they resist help. People tend to take criticism personally. If a teacher is handed a scripted plan which they have had no part in designing, they will resist the plan. Finally, each person needs his own goal; one is not motivated to follow the goal of another.

Building partnerships or relationships comes from equality, choice, voice, reflection, dialogue, praxis, and reciprocity. Teachers should have equal value in the professional learning opportunities. Every opinion should be equal, and everyone feels safe to share. They should be given a choice in how they learn. When coaches or administrators take away choice, they are likely to receive resistance from teachers. Teachers should feel empowered by the professional learning in which they participate. They should feel free to voice their experiences to help themselves and others. Teachers can reflect on their current practices and determine where they need development. Opportunities to have dialogue with peers and coaches help stir imagination and creativity. Thinking together inspires others. Reflection is simply the process of seeking to enhance strategies and the impact in new opportunities. Praxis occurs when teachers apply what they have learned in a real-life situation. Finally, reciprocity is an individual provides as much help as he expects to receive from others (Knight, 2011a).

Finally, for an instructional coach to build relationships with teachers and gain respect among the faculty, the principal's support is imperative. The principal serves as the instructional leader of the school; therefore, instructional coaches cannot be completely effective without the support of the principal. It is important that the role of the instructional coach does not conflict with the role of the administration. The principal and the instructional coach must share a vision of job responsibilities and collaborate on the efforts to be implemented in the school (Casey, 2006).

To be effective, instructional coaches must have effective principals as instructional leaders. There must be a shared vision of what the instructional coach can accomplish. The principal and the instructional coach must aim for the specific need for professional learning and define the target to teachers. The instructional coach can then provide professional learning that breaks the target down and provides support to teachers through explanation and modeling. Then teachers understand the target and know how to use the best practices to achieve mastery in the classroom (Knight, 2011).

Data-Driven Instruction

In today's classrooms including students of every diverse background, such as poverty, minority, and exceptionally challenged, teachers are expected to reach every child and help him meet state achievement requirements. To address this need, teachers must be informed of their students' academic strengths and weaknesses. Gathering data on students' abilities will help teachers create lessons that are engaging and appropriate for the learners in their classes (Oberg, 2010).

One of the most valuable tools in good instruction data used to plan for instruction (Marsh et al., 2010). Using data to drive instruction requires teachers to use formative

assessments to check for student understanding and level of mastery. Teachers and instructional coaches should examine data such as student work, surveys, benchmark data, attendance, and other formative and summative data (Aguilar, 2013). Teachers can then plan instruction to fill in any gaps students may have in mastery of standards (Lemov, 2010).

Data analysis cannot just exist in a computer spreadsheet. Teachers should collaborate with their peers to discuss results, pinpoint standards that need attention, and determine what is working well and what is not working. To effectively use data to improve student learning, Fisher et al. (2012) suggested that assessment should be organized for collaborative work, build assessment literacy, create data overview, dig into student data, examine instruction, develop an action plan, plan to assess progress, and act and assess.

Instructional coaches analyze data to help determine root causes of student mastery or the lack of mastery of curriculum standards. They collaborate with teachers looking at data to plan for remediation and enrichment lessons to help students master standards (Jorissen, Salazar, Morrison, & Foster, 2008). Instructional coaches help teachers address their needs and implement new strategies through collaboration or modeling in classrooms (Knight, 2005). Data is then used to monitor the impact of the new instructional strategies (Knight, 2009a).

Instruction Strategies

Instructional coaches are employed with the expectations of knowing and sharing the most current scientifically-based instructional strategies with teachers. These instructional strategies must yield high student achievement as measured by formative and summative assessments. Marzano (2001) has researched and identified nine high-yielding instructional strategies that make the greatest impact on student achievement:

Marzano's first strategy indicates that students should identify similarities and differences by comparing, classifying, or creating graphic representations. The second strategy states students should learn to summarize important information and put concepts in their own words. Strategy three says teachers should hold high expectations for students and recognize their successes. The fourth strategy encourages educators to keep parents involved in homework, goals and objectives students are required to meet. Strategy five says give students opportunities to problem-solve and use hands-on activities. Strategy six says allow students to work in groups and have academic discussions and explanations. In his seventh strategy, Marzano stated teachers should create goals where students have choices; teachers must also provide timely feedback. Strategy eight says students need opportunities to identify a thesis or hypothesis and have the opportunities to problem solve and discover.

Doherty and Hilberg (2008) identified five standards that are effective when used with at-risk students. Standard one says that teachers and students should complete activities together. Secondly, students should understand the language of the instruction and become well-versed in literacy across the curriculum. The third standard suggested that instruction should be embedded in student interest and have real-life connections. Next, students should be challenged to think more complexly. Using the cognitive model to scaffold learning will impact complex thinking. Finally, standard five says that students learn more when they are engaged in dialogue about the subject matter rather than listening to the teacher provide all the instruction.

For student learning to occur that will transfer to all disciplines, students must be taught to recognize patterns and procedures and be able to apply them. In this instruction, teachers must establish the purpose for what is to be learned, expose students to the thinking process required

to comprehend the skill, scaffold learning, and give students opportunity to engage in fruitful group work (Fisher et al., 2012).

First, students should be introduced to the new concept so they will understand the relevance and see the concept in a natural, real-life context in which the concept is to be learned. Teachers should then model a lesson, allowing students to use think-aloud strategies to help them gain understanding. The lesson then flows into guided learning. The teacher assesses what conclusions students have drawn from their prior knowledge and experience and then scaffold learning for student based on their needs. The next phase is collaborative learning. Students should be allowed to share in cooperative groups to clarify what they know and also improve their knowledge to bring comprehension. Students finally are engaged in independent learning. The teacher provides feedback and discussions with students to help them gain mastery (Fisher et al., 2012).

Teacher Efficacy

Just as instructional strategies improve student achievement, professional learning provides teachers with the skills to implement these strategies; teachers must complete the cycle with efficacy. Teacher efficacy is the extent to which an educator believes he can make an impact on student achievement. Teachers must understand that the work they do is significant and valuable. When teacher efficacy increases for an individual or a school, student achievement increases.

Three areas that make a huge impact on teacher efficacy are student engagement, instructional strategies, and classroom management (Fisher et al., 2012). First, teachers must believe that they can relate to their students and keep them engaged. Students who are engaged work harder and their achievement increases. To be effective, teachers must play an important

role in encouraging students to think critically and use their creative ideas. When teachers believe they can get through to students, students believe they can accomplish learning goals, and student success increases (Fisher et al., 2012).

Along with engagement, teachers must understand effective instructional strategies, and they must believe these strategies work. Effective teachers trust that answering student questions, checking for comprehension, differentiating instruction, and providing needs-based instruction is part of their professional repertoire. Using effective instructional strategies is the most critical area of teacher efficacy. When teachers are confident in their instructional skills, students benefit (Fisher et al., 2012).

Classroom management is the final key to teacher efficacy. Without good classroom management skills, teachers cannot create the structured environment necessary for student success. Policies and procedures should be in place. Teachers' expectations must be clear. If discipline issues arise, teachers must be confident in handling the situation with dignity for themselves and their students (Fisher et al., 2012).

For teachers to be well-versed and effective in student engagement, instructional strategies, and classroom management, they need effective professional learning in these areas. Past professional learning activities in which teachers participated were generally one day workshops where teachers were introduced to a new idea, but they were not required to take it back into their classrooms and implement it. In most cases, administration did not inspect to see whether new strategies or practices were implemented into classrooms. Therefore, professional learning was often unsuccessful (Knight, 2009b). Gains in student achievement lessen when teaching instructional practices are inconsistent (Kretlow & Bartholomew, 2010). Instructional coaches have become the job-embedded provider of professional learning who provide learning

based on the needs of the teachers. Instructional coaches help teachers pinpoint the standards that students have mastered and plan other activities to provide more and different instruction for students who have not achieved at the required levels (Bianco, 2010).

Instructional coaching improves accurate implementation of scientifically-based best practices, such as peer tutoring, direct instruction, and positive behavior support. When teachers are engaged as learners in small group professional learning that is followed by observations, feedback, and modeling, the consequence is improved student achievement (Kretlow & Bartholomew, 2010). As the instructional coach inspects student data from formative assessments, he can determine if the interventions planned by the classroom teachers are being effective or implemented with fidelity. If students are not making progress, the coach can offer assistance, model lessons, and discuss and plan other interventions to increase fidelity (Bianco, 2010).

Knight (2011a) illustrated the research he conducted using instructional coaches. Fifty teachers were provided an afterschool workshop on using unit organizers. From those 50 original teachers, 25 names were drawn and those teachers were assigned an instructional coach to assist implementing the new strategy. The other 25 did not receive any more assistance after the workshop. The instructional coaches helped teachers modify the material to meet their instructional needs, modeled in classrooms, observed the teachers using the unit organizer, and provided feedback.

To determine if coaching had an impact on classroom instruction, all 50 of the original teachers were observed. A checklist was created describing effective teaching strategies for integrating the unit organizer. Interviews were also conducted with participants to determine if they would continue using the unit organizer.

Teachers who did not receive help from the instructional coach only implemented the new strategy 36 percent of the time. Teachers who received coaching implemented the new strategy 92 percent of the time. Post interviews, conducted with teachers who received help from the instructional coach, revealed that 100 percent of teachers felt the unit organizer helped students learn (Knight, 2011a).

To increase teacher efficacy, Marzano and Simms (2013) proposed that teachers self-audit across elements of effective teaching. First, teachers should score themselves on elements identifying strengths and weaknesses. Then, teachers should select growth goals from the elements they feel will make the biggest impact in their classrooms. The third step allows the instructional coach to verify teachers' selections. This is to make sure teachers understand the chosen elements and there is an agreement on implementation of new strategies. Finally, the teacher writes a plan for integrating and obtaining the growth goals. The instructional coach and teachers can use rubrics or checklists to determine how often and how effectively the new goals are being met.

Professional Learning for the Instructional Coach

Just as teachers depend on professional learning opportunities to improve classroom instruction, instructional coaches should continuously increase their knowledge of content, instructional practices, and coaching skills. An instructional coach may completely understand a particular content, but if he lacks coaching skills, he will be ineffective in leading teachers to change their practices (Aguilar, 2013).

One effective way instructional coaches stay abreast to new strategies and coaching skills is collaboration with other instructional coaches. Open dialogue between coaches provides them with success stories from other schools and how the strategies were implemented. Targeting

concepts, such as Response to Intervention, ensures all the instructional coaches in a school district are providing the same guidelines to the teachers in their schools (Steiner & Kowal, 2007).

Summary

The literature review of this topic focuses on the roles of instructional coaches and teachers and the relationships instructional coaches must build with teachers and principals. Much of the literature uses terms such as academic coach, peer coach, cognitive coach, or even specific content coaches such as math or literacy coach instead of the general instructional coach. Regardless of the job title, the coach's main role is professional development (Knight, 2009a).

Professional development is successful when teachers are engaged in change and are supported in implementing their new strategies. When teachers have the support of an instructional coach, they receive professional learning and support that lend themselves specifically to school initiatives and specific instructional needs. Teachers learn to collaborate to share ideas. Coaches model new strategies to build teachers' confidence. Non-evaluative observations are provided to give teachers feedback to help them grow in using affective strategies, such as collaboration to identify and address concerns, help in selecting materials that will benefit instruction, modeling instruction in teachers' classroom, observing teachers as they use interventions, and always providing feedback that supports teachers' growing and glowing (Knight, 2009a).

For an instructional coach to be successful in his role, he must be credible as an educator with experience and knowledge. Teachers must be able to rely on the coach to provide the professional learning or instructional material promised. The instructional coach has to be able to communicate with teachers in a productive, non-threatening way. Then, positive relationships

will be built. Instructional coaches must always focus on teachers and students and not become self-focused (Knight, 2007).

For instructional coaching to be successful, a culture of coaching must exist within a school. The coach plans and leads professional learning under the direction of the principal and system-level administration. Principal leadership is the most important aspect of school reform. It spans from school-level to teacher-level to student-level. The coach must be supported by the principal or developing the culture of coaching in the building will be very limited. Professional learning goals should be based on the identified system and school-level school improvement plans. Helping teachers gain strategies and experiences to help improve student achievement is the focus goal. The coach shares best practices while building trusting relationships with teachers. If teachers do not feel supported by the instructional coach in a non-threatening environment, resistance to the professional learning may occur. Collaboration, modeling, and data-driven instruction are pertinent to a successful coaching experience (Kretlow et al., 2012).

Instructional Coaching can offer teachers and schools the professional learning and support that can impact student achievement with immediate and long-term changes. Change created from master teachers coaching others into using scientifically-based strategies will transform schools from covering material to creating learning experiences for students who can excel as learners (Aguilar, 2013).

The literature reviewed strongly suggests that instructional coaching provides a great professional learning environment that changes the quality of instruction provided to students. As the instructional level improves, student achievement increases. Little of the literature addresses teachers' perspectives on the role of the instructional coach. Therefore, the following questions remain: Do teachers realize they are improving instructionally through the effort of the

instructional coach? Do teachers realize that the effort of the instructional coach in essence makes an impact on student achievement?

CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

Overview

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to understand teachers' perspectives of the impact instructional coaches make in academic achievement. Thirteen teachers from Pleasant Valley Middle School served as participants in this study. Interviews, journals, and a focus group were used to collect data. In this chapter, the design, research questions, setting, participants, data collection methods, and procedures for analysis are identified.

Design

This study was a qualitative study which used the transcendental phenomenology design. The transcendental approach is used when a phenomenon is identified, data is collected from several people who have experienced the phenomenon, and the data is then organized into themes (Moustakas, 1994). This study included teachers who had experienced the phenomenon of working with an instructional coach. The data collected from teacher interviews, focus groups, and journals was organized into themes to help answer the research questions. These procedures, along with the number of participants, lent themselves to a transcendental phenomenological design. This study was implemented in the spring quarter of the 2014 school year.

Research Questions

1. What are teachers' perceptions about how the instructional coach provides professional learning for teachers that impact classroom instruction and student achievement?
2. What are teachers' perceptions about the instructional coach using data to help teachers plan for instruction: formative assessments, differentiation, best practices, etc.?

3. What are teachers' perceptions on the effectiveness of the instructional coach observing lessons and providing feedback?

Site

The study took place in the Pleasant Valley Middle School in a rural system in Northwest Georgia. This site was chosen because it was one of two middle schools in the surrounding area that employed an instructional coach. The school enrolled approximately 600 students in grades 7 and 8. There were thirty-five certified teachers, one principal, one assistant principal, and one instructional coach who were employed within the school. Seventy-nine percent of the student population received free and reduced lunches. Pleasant Valley Middle School was a Title I school and received federal funds to provide learning support to all students. The student population consisted of 78% Caucasian, 17% Hispanic, 5% African-American, 1% Bi-racial, and 4% other.

Participants

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenology was to obtain teachers' perspectives of a phenomenon they had all experienced. In an attempt to get the most accurate view of teachers' perceptions, the researcher attempted to include thirteen of the twenty-six academic teachers in the middle school in the research. Due to attrition, only half of the academic staff remained who had experienced the phenomenon of working before and during the employment of an instructional coach. The teachers considered for the study had worked with an instructional coach through data interpretation, collaboration, and professional learning opportunities. Criterion sampling was used as all the individuals studied had experienced the phenomenon (Creswell, 2013). This study included both male and female teachers with a range of two years

to 32 years of teaching experience. Before any research was conducted, approval from school administration and the Institutional Review Board (IRB) was established. Pseudonyms were created for all the teachers participating in this study (Moustakas, 1994).

Procedures

After approval from IRB was granted, the research was able to take place (Doctoral Dissertation Handbook, 2014). A letter was emailed to all the teachers who were identified as having teaching experience prior to the introduction of instructional coaches and who were currently working with an instructional coach to ask them to participate in the study. A receipt request was attached for certainty of delivery. A timeline was connected to encourage prompt responses.

This study included semi-structured interviews, focus groups, and journaling as vehicles for collecting data (Creswell, 2013; Moustakas, 1994; Van Manen, 1990). In this phenomenological study, participants responded to questions to recreate their lived experiences (Seidman, 2013). The researcher analyzed the data and assembled the textual and structural descriptions that qualitative study allows (Creswell, 2013). The researcher contemplated the truth and established evidence of the truth (Seidman, 2013).

The Researcher's Role

Saldana (2011) described the researcher as the “primary instrument” (p. 22) in a research project. The life experiences, training, and relationship to the participants play a role in how the researcher conducts the study. In phenomenological research, Moustakas (1994) stated that the researcher must refrain from allowing his own experiences and biases to overshadow what is being shared by the participants.

I currently serve as an elementary school assistant principal. I began my career in 1992 as a special education paraprofessional. I worked full-time during the day while working on my bachelor's degree at night. I began teaching middle school English, reading, and social studies in 1997. In my first five years of teaching, I completed a master's degree, specialist degree, gifted certification, and teacher support specialist certification. Through those experiences, my repertoire of teaching strategies began to grow and become quite eclectic.

In 2002, I was asked by the local high school principal to come and teach English. During my three years there, I added on secondary English certification and some of the classes that I took led me to become very interested in reading instruction. So, I also added the reading endorsement to my teaching certificate. During these years, the Georgia Writing assessment changed, and I was the delegate for my system to be trained and redeliver to all the middle and high school English teachers.

In the summer of 2007, I became the curriculum and instruction facilitator (instructional coach) in the middle school. As the instructional coach, it was my job to share professional learning with teachers to make sure they were incorporating the scientifically-based strategies that were mandated by the Georgia Department of Education and the local school system. In the seven years I held this position, the school I served transformed from being on the Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) "needs improvement" list to becoming the middle school with the highest student achievement in the area.

I also teach Reading Certification and Gifted Certification for the Regional Educational Service Agency (RESA). I have had the opportunity to work as a consultant in the areas of writing instruction and literacy across the curriculum. I also teach a course titled Teaching of Reading online.

Data Collection

The object of phenomenological research is the lived experience. The researcher interprets information from the lived experiences of others to better understand the significance of the human experience (Van Manen, 1990). Data was collected by the researcher. In this transcendental phenomenology, interviews with academic teachers, focus groups, and journals were used for data collection. All data was documented and accurately recorded.

Seidman (2006) encouraged researchers to pilot interview questions with a small number of participants. Piloting these questions provides clarity for the participants being interviewed. This allows the researcher to know if the chosen structure is appropriate for the study. Two participants were asked to respond to the interview questions, and two participants were asked to respond to the focus group questions. Questions were manipulated as necessary for clarity.

Interviews

Interviews are one method of investigation which allows a researcher to understand the meaning people involved in a phenomenon take from their life experience. Moustakas (1994) supported the idea that phenomenological interviews involve an informal process of interactions which are formulated around open-ended questions. Asking appropriate questions and relying on the participants to divulge the meaning of their life experience requires patience and skill for the researcher (Creswell, 2013).

The researcher conducted semi-structured interviews of 13 academic teachers. The interviews were audio taped and transcribed (Creswell, 2013). The open-ended questions focused on the teachers' perceptions of the role of the instructional coach in professional learning, using data to plan for instruction, and working as a classroom model. The interviews were written to take only 25-30 minutes of time. Appointments were set on the calendar and

conducted within a 20-day time frame. The interview questions were written to reflect the research questions (Appendix D).

Focus Groups

Irregularities may occur in interviews if participants who are being questioned withhold information or are ambiguous about their life experience. To avoid irregularities, the researcher can use collaborative interviewing or focus groups (Creswell, 2013).

The researcher conducted a focus group of six academic teachers who were asked to volunteer for the group. The open-ended questions used in the focus group varied from the questions used in the individual interviews. Participants are more open to share when they share among interviewees who have experienced the same phenomenon. These questions allowed the researcher to focus on the shared experience of the group. This group was homogeneous in the sense that all participants had the experience of teaching before an instructional coach was part of the faculty and since an instructional coach had become part of the faculty. This group was able to share their lived experiences with the phenomenon more clearly because they reflected on the experiences together. The instructional coach worked with all the academic teachers in the school daily. The focus group allowed teachers be more explicative of the culture of coaching in the school. Data from criterion sampling was gathered from individuals who had experienced the phenomenon. The results were grouped into meaningful themes to answer the research questions (Creswell, 2013).

Journaling

In phenomenological studies, journaling helps participants to reflect on lived experiences. Journal writing also helps to encourage learners to reflect on experiences and discover things

they may not easily recognize. Journals help keep a record of learning experiences and show patterns of work and activities (Van Manen, 1990).

The researcher asked for 13 academic teachers to volunteer to keep a journal of professional learning activities and classroom experiences with the instructional coach for one month. As teachers recorded their experiences, broad themes began to develop. The researcher analyzed significant statements to identify themes. These journals were collected and criterion sampling was used to gather data from the individuals who had experienced the phenomenon. The results were grouped into meaningful themes to answer the research questions (Creswell, 2013).

Data Analysis

Transcendental phenomenological reduction (Moustakas, 1994) was used to interpret the data in this study. After conducting interviews and focus groups and collecting journals completed by the participants, the researcher reviewed the transcriptions of each to first determine patterns of shared experiences from the data. As these patterns were identified, the researcher began to categorize these patterns into appropriate groups. By categorizing, the researcher could examine how these patterns and categories interrelated. The next step for the researcher was to inspect how each category operated and how, or if, each category influenced another. Data was examined to determine if sequential orders existed or if one category was contingent to the others. At this point, patterns and categories became an organizational framework (Saldana, 2011).

The researcher must see things as the data describes, not from his own personal prior knowledge and experience (Moustakas, 1994). Moustakas (1994) stated:

In Phenomenological Reduction, the task is describing in textural language just what ones sees, not in terms of the external object but also the internal act of consciousness, the experience as such, the rhythm and relationship between the phenomenon and self (p. 90)

Analysis of themes was used to interpret the data collected in this study. The data collected was interpreted through coding. The researcher took the evidence provided from the focus groups, interviews, and journals to identify themes within the context of the study. Using these three sources of data achieved triangulation to provide validity to the study (Creswell, 2013).

Coding Data

Saldana (2011) described coding as the way of discovering and classifying in phenomenological studies. Once the interviews and focus group interviews were transcribed, the data analysis began. After multiple reads of the transcripts and journals, process coding, or using gerunds to find action in data, was used to code participants' answers. A code was applied each time the interview changed focus or shifted ideas. These codes were numbered and named. There are key words or phrases that are linked to the research questions. The same codes were used when topics were similar. The researcher highlighted statements that reflected each of the three research questions. Yellow was used to highlight teachers' feelings on the role the instructional coach plays in professional learning, blue was used for data pertaining to instruction, and green was used for statements regarding observation and feedback (Seidman, 2006).

Analysis of Themes

Once the raw data was coded, the codes were classified into similar clusters. These categories were also named or labeled using gerunds. Finally, these categories were turned into an analytic memo which reflected the phenomena and the process. The analytical memo put the

researcher's interpretation of the data into words. By doing so, the pieces of the puzzle began to form a picture revealing the perceptions of the participants. Quotes from the participants were used to support the ideas presented (Saldana, 2011).

Peer Review

Peer review was used to ensure trustworthiness. Dr. Brock, an elementary instructional coach who has conducted a phenomenological study and is knowledgeable of qualitative research reviewed the study and questioned the researcher about methods, meanings, and interpretations. Both the researcher and peer reviewer kept a journal of meetings (Creswell, 2013).

Prolonged Engagement

Prolonged engagement was incorporated to ensure trustworthiness. The researcher conducted the research in the natural setting with participants to build trust and to better understand the culture of the study. This required long-term interaction with the participants (Creswell, 2013).

Trustworthiness

Creswell (2013) suggested that researchers build trust with participants in the studies they conduct. The researcher should be engaged in the culture and learning the culture as to understand and be able to filter misinformation. In this study, triangulation was achieved by using multiple sources for information, such as interviews, focus groups, and journals.

In the middle school setting, the instructional coach had a significant amount of teaching experience and had served as an instructional coach for seven years. Teachers included in this study all had multiple years of experience with this coach, which establishes the credibility and

the transferability of the data. Dependability and confirmability were addressed through interviews and is interpreted by the researcher.

Once the transcripts from the interviews and focus groups were transcribed, those interviewed were asked to review the transcripts or provide a member check. Conducting a member check helped to establish trustworthiness and credibility (Saldana, 2011).

Ethical Considerations

Before the study began, the researcher procured consent from the Institutional Review Board of Liberty University and from Pleasant Valley Middle School. As human participants were used in this study, an informed consent form (Appendix D) was required for teachers to participate.

As teachers may fear sharing their honest views and ideas during the interviews, the researcher used pseudonyms and not the names of the participants. Although the data was available for participant perusal, all responses were kept confidential. All records were kept locked in a fireproof filing cabinet until the research was completed. Once the dissertation process was complete and the researcher graduated, all documentation was shredded.

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

Overview

The purpose of this chapter is to present the findings and data analysis of the interviews, journals, and focus group that align with the research questions. The basis for this study was to determine teachers' perspectives on the role of the middle school instructional coach on student achievement. The data presented in this study will assist teachers, administrators, and instructional coaches to understand how teachers perceive the role of the instructional coach and his impact on student achievement.

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to discover the perceptions of middle school teachers on the role of the instructional coach in student achievement by allowing them to share their lived experiences through interviews, journals, and a focus group. Through this research, teachers were given a voice to share their thoughts, personal experiences, and feelings regarding working with an instructional coach. Using phenomenological reduction, the researcher uncovered the experience of others and described it textural words (Moustakas, 1994). Interviews, focus groups, and journals were used to collect data to determine middle school teachers' perspectives on the role of the instructional coach in student achievement. Thirteen teachers were interviewed and kept journals of their experiences with the instructional coach. Six of the 13 participants contributed in the focus group discussion. Once the data was collected, patterns that emerged in the data were organized through coding.

This qualitative research was guided by focusing on three research questions. Research Question 1 sought to discover teachers' perspectives on the professional learning that was conducted by the instructional coach and the impact it made on student achievement. Research Question 2 focused on learning how teachers perceived the instructional coach's use of data to

help teachers plan for instruction through collaboration and specific instructional strategies.

Finally, Research Question 3 explored teachers' perceptions on having the instructional coach model lessons, observe teachers teaching, and provide constructive feedback.

After obtaining permission from the school superintendent and achieving IRB approval from Liberty University, I sent out a request to middle school teachers to participate in this study. Once the consent forms were signed, teacher journals were the first method used in data collection. Teachers were asked to complete the journals for the following four weeks, noting their interactions with the instructional coach. Once the journals were assigned to the thirteen participants, interviews began. These interviews were one-on-one with the interviewer, and they were digitally recorded. These interviews allowed teachers to share their individual perceptions about the role of the instructional coach. The focus group session allowed teachers to link their ideas to better explain their experiences.

Participants

Thirteen academic middle school teachers volunteered to participate in this study. All thirteen participated in the interviews and journaling. Six of the 13 volunteered to participate in the focus group. These teachers' teaching experience ranged from three years to 33 years. All participants were Caucasian. Eight of the participants were female, and five of the participants were male. All thirteen were academic teachers, and every academic area was represented. All participants were assigned pseudonyms.

Table 1

Participant Overview

Participant	Age	Grade	Years of Experience	Subject
Bertha	50s	8	26	Math
Angel	30s	8	10	English
Cinnamon	30s	7	13	Science
Gertrude	30s	7	16	Social Studies
David	20s	7	3	English
Alan	30s	7/8	16	ELA/SS
Frank	50s	8	10	Science
Ivy	30s	7	16	Science
Freedom	40s	7	6	Math
Annie	20s	7	5	English
Summer	40s	8	25	English
Magnum	30s	7/8	11	Science
Ray	50s	8	33	ELA/SS

Below is a descriptive synopsis of each participant involved in this study. Each includes the number of years teaching experience of each participant, number of instructional coaches with whom he/she has worked, number of years teaching, degree level, and content area taught.

Bertha

Bertha is a wife and mother of two. Her eldest child graduated as valedictorian of his high school class. Her entire career of 26 years has been spent teaching 8th grade math. She described herself as a mediocre student, and math was not her best subject. She believed she was a good math teacher because she struggled and understood how her students felt in class when math was not their best subject. She holds a master's degree in middle grades education. Her first

encounter with an instructional coach was nine years ago. Since that time, she worked with three different instructional coaches. When asked how the instructional coach helped her improve student academic achievement, she said, “He tries to help with gap kids. Most of them were performing, but you have those who are falling through the cracks. We have a data room set aside that shows all the gap kids. That way we focus primarily on them for certain objectives.”

Angel

Angel is the mother of four children ranging in age from 3 to 16. She started teaching after working in mental health for 10 years, and she became a certified teacher through an alternative route. Her 10 years in education have been diverse. For the first eight years, she served as a special education inclusion teacher. At the time this research took place, Angela was in her second year as an 8th grade English teacher. Teaching content English/Language Arts after serving as an inclusion teacher was a significant change for her professionally. She holds a master’s degree in special education. She, too, has worked with three different instructional coaches. When asked how instructional coach has supported her in content knowledge or instructional strategies where she were personally struggling, she commented, “Creating tiered lesson plans and reaching the gap kids is what we are practicing right now. He has helped create tiered lessons, plan for differentiation [*sic*], and modeled writing lessons in my class.”

Cinnamon

Cinnamon had been a middle school science teacher for four of her 13 years as a teacher at the time this research took place. Prior to working in a middle school, she was a high school biology teacher. She returned to teaching after taking a few years off with her first child. Teaching middle school was a different experience from high school. Middle school students require more attention and support. She holds a master’s degree in secondary science. She has

worked with 2 different instructional coaches at the middle school. When asked what kind of impact the instructional coach's modeling, observing, or providing feedback had made in her personal classroom, she answered, "I believe it has made me grow as an instructor and just to try some new ideas."

Gertrude

Gertrude worked several years in elementary school before moving to middle school, where she had been for seven years. She was a single woman who put a great deal of time in her job and planning for instruction. Her first role in middle school was to work as a reading interventionist. She then became a 7th grade social studies teacher. She holds a specialist degree in educational leadership. She has worked with an instructional coach in elementary school and two different instructional coaches in middle school. When asked what she saw as the benefits of having an instructional coach in her school, she stated, "It's nice when you are stuck on how to reach a certain student that there is someone who can help with strategies that you have not thought to try. There is always one student where I think I have tried everything in my toolbox and you need new ideas and suggestions."

David

This study took place during David's third year teaching. He was a newlywed, and he also coached middle school boys' basketball. He taught 7th grade English. He holds a bachelor's degree in English education, and was pursuing his master's in secondary English education. He worked one year without an instructional coach and two years with different instructional coaches. When asked how the instructional coach supported him in content knowledge or instructional strategies where he was personally struggling, he responded, "I am such a young teacher coming straight out of college where they taught us lots of strategies to use in the

classroom. But there is such a huge array of strategies, it's hard to pick which ones will be most effective for kids who are struggling with particular aspects of lessons. Having an instructional coach who has been in the game longer than I have is very beneficial in that respect. He can suggest strategies based on the situation. That has helped a lot.”

Alan

Alan is a husband and father of two and serves as minister of music in his church and serves the athletic director of this school. He was a high energy teacher who loved school spirit and engaged students in learning. At the time of this study, he had been teaching middle school for 16 years. During that time, he taught self-contained special education, 6th grade social studies, 8th grade social studies, 8th grade English, and was currently teaching 8th grade English and social studies on a team with only gifted students. He holds a specialist degree in educational leadership. Alan had experienced two different instructional coaches. When asked what kind of impact the instructional coach's modeling, observing, or providing feedback made in his personal classroom, he stated, “Language Arts would admittedly be my weakest subject. I've had the instructional coach to come in my class and teach my first period, a writing lesson, for me. Based on that, he kind of gave me the wings and let me fly myself the rest of the day. That helped me, I believe, to have successful writing scores.”

Frank

Frank taught middle school one year when he finished college, and then he left teaching to work in the construction world. When the economy began to falter and real estate sales decline, he decided to return to teaching. He has a wife, who is a teacher of gifted students, and two college-age sons. He reentered his teaching career teaching a reading class, but he quickly moved into science. His bachelor's degree is in vocal performance, but he has a master's degree

in curriculum. He has 10 years of teaching experience. Frank has experienced three different instructional coaches. When asked what the benefits of having an instructional coach in his school were, he stated, “There is someone there to go to for instructional advice other than an administrator. That’s what I see as a benefit. And they are able to get done what teachers may not have time to investigate.”

Ivy

Ivy had some of the most diverse teaching experiences. She began her career teaching in middle school. She then taught Pre-K for several years. One year, she taught at an alternative school, and at the time of this study, she was teaching 7th grade science. Ivy holds an education specialist’s degree in instructional technology. She has experienced instructional coaches in elementary, alternative, and middle school. She has a husband and two sons. At 6’3”, she was a college basketball star. She was the middle school track coach. When asked how the instructional coach helped her improve student achievement, she said, “He has shown me how to look at the class as a whole but individualizing to students to meet their needs. It has made my job easier.”

Freedom

Freedom began her career in the military. Upon completion of her required tour, she began teaching. This research took place during her 6th year of teaching. Her specialty areas were math and English. She holds a bachelor’s degree in middle grades education. Freedom has experienced two different instructional coaches. When asked how collaboration with the instructional coach changed or impacted her instruction, she answered, “It makes me more aware of what I can do better in the classroom. It helps me tweak or change instruction to help reach certain children that I may not be reaching.”

Annie

This study took place during Annie's 5th year teaching. Her degree is in early childhood education, but she has taught 7th and 8th grade English her entire career. She has completed a master's degree in Secondary English Education, and she was pursuing her specialist degree in the same field. While doing all this, she and her husband have added two sons to the family. She was also enrolled to complete the gifted endorsement program. She has experienced two different instructional coaches. When asked in what ways the instructional coach helped her improve student academic achievement, she answered, "By proving different strategies and showing me how to use them by modeling because we do not always know how to teach a specific standard."

Summer

Summer was a non-traditional student. She quit high school and started a family at a very young age. Then, she gained her GED and completed a bachelor's degree in Early Childhood Education. She began her career teaching in self-contained special education. After 15 years, she moved into middle school reading and Language Arts, which she had been doing for the past 10 years. She holds a specialist degree in educational leadership. She has experienced three different instructional coaches. When asked what the benefits of having an instructional coach in her school were, she replied, "They are always giving us the latest strategies. They also give us the extra push when we need it."

Magnum

Magnum had been teaching 11 years. He was teaching 7th and 8th grade science to students who are gifted at the time of this study. He has a secondary biology background. His classroom is a 21st Century classroom that focuses on student use of technology. He has worked

with two different instructional coaches. He was seeking his doctoral degree in curriculum and instruction. When asked in what ways the instructional coach helped him improve student achievement, he said, “I guess accountability in the lesson has helped me improve. Fresh ideas have come as a result of the instructional coach being there.”

Ray

After 33 years of teaching, Ray planned to retire at the end of the school year. He began teaching in the junior high era, and then transitioned into the middle school concept. He is the local historian in the area who had been honored by Georgia’s governor for his work in preserving history. He was teaching 8th grade social studies. He has a bachelor’s degree in history, a master’s degree in English, and a specialist’s degree in middle grades education. He has worked with three different instructional coaches.

Results

Interviews, journals, and a focus group were used to obtain data for this qualitative study. The interviews were conducted one-on-one so that participants would feel comfortable answering questions. Each participant answered eleven questions that were created from the ideas shared in the literature review and were reflective of the research questions and the theoretical framework.

To make sure the interview questions were clear and precise, I piloted the questions with teachers who were familiar with the role of the instructional coach but would not be considered for this study (Seidman, 2006). One interview question was reworded for clarity. The rest were satisfactory as written. The interviews were transcribed by a transcriptionist. Once I received the transcriptions, I conducted a recheck to make sure any needed minor corrections were made.

The transcriptions were then given to each individual participant for the purpose of a member check. All participants verified the accuracy of their individual interview transcription (Seidman, 2006).

Themes

Once the data was collected from the interviews, the focus group, and journals, the transcriptions were used to identify substantial statements. A thorough examination of the data revealed 112 codes. These codes are revealed in Tables 2-9.

Table 2

Coding: Teacher Interview Questions

What do you see as the role or job responsibilities of the instructional coach?
Support
New ideas
Fresh ideas
Planning
Strategies
Content support
Re-deliver
Modeling
Continued support
Liaison (admin-teachers)
Professional learning
Assist with needs
Teacher effectiveness
Support methods
Support content
Complement strengths
Support with current trends
Support with new curriculum and standards

What are the benefits of having an instructional coach in your school?

New ideas

Observations

Sharing ideas

Data

Collaboration

Experienced educator

On-hand professional learning

Resources

Intervention

Hone skills

Valid suggestions

How did the idea and practice of professional learning and instructional support change when an instructional coach was employed?

Stopped traveling

In-house professional learning

Advocate

Provide ideas

Supports integration

School-wide needs

Individual needs

Accountability

Meaningful professional learning

Highlighted version

Not leaving my class

Hit or miss versus school/teacher specific

Re-deliver

What were your initial feelings of having an instructional coach monitoring your lesson plans, offering to model lessons in your classroom, looking at your state and local assessment scores, and helping you plan differentiation to meet students' needs based on the data?

Better myself

Better my students
 Helping identifying needs
 Support
 Feedback
 Assistance
 Positive support
 Better teaching
 Fresh ideas
 Big brother
 Advice
 Constructive criticism

How has collaboration with the instructional coach changed or impacted your instruction?
 (Vygotsky-Sociocultural Approach)

Fresh ideas
 Support
 Resources
 New strategies
 Support with implementation
 Effective strategies
 Different ways
 Data
 Target bubble students
 Consider alternatives
 Validation

How has the instructional coach supported you in content knowledge or instructional strategies
 where you were personally struggling? (Vygotsky- Zone of Proximal Development)

Collaboration with content colleagues
 Modeling
 Validation
 Differentiation
 Target needs

Professional learning for specific skills

Weak writing strategies

Weak ELA strategies

Needs-based instruction

Diversity of methods

Co-teaching for support

Availability

Literacy skills

Resources

Integrating technology

Instructional coaches model lessons, observe teachers teaching, and provide teachers with feedback. What kind of impact has this made in your personal classroom or teaching assignment?

Cheerleader

Support

Encourage

Strategies

Modeling

Build confidence

Opens my eyes

Gives me wings

Accountability

Reflection

Validation

Confirmation

In what ways does the instructional coach help you implement new strategies that have been part of professional learning?

Teach new strategies

Model

Differentiation (tiered lessons)

Monitoring

Student data
 Feedback
 Intervention strategies
 Show examples
 Weekly professional learning
 Bridging gaps
 Flexible
 Modeling
 Re-delivery

In what ways has the instructional coach helped you improve student academic achievement?

Looking at data
 Identifying individual student needs
 Effective strategies
 Reaching gap students
 Modeling strategies
 Teaching skills
 Accountability
 New strategies
 Awareness of curriculum changes/expectations

The codes that developed in the interview questions were supported by the codes in the teacher journals. The interview questions asked teachers what they saw as the role of the instructional coach and if these responsibilities were being performed. The teacher journals were kept as a record of the interactions the teachers had with the instructional coach for a four week time period. These journal entries reflected that the instructional coach modeled lessons, provided professional learning, planned based on data, and observed and monitored lesson plans.

Table 3

Coding: Teacher Journals

How has the instructional coach been involved in your lesson planning and instruction this week? (Vygotsky- Sociocultural Approach)

Week	Response
1	Quarterly data, Identify strengths/weaknesses, Plan differentiation, Identify struggling students, Using GoFAR technology
2	Walk-through to check plans
3	Find resources, New math progress monitoring
4	Plan for underachieving gifted using data

What key instructional strategies have you used this week in class that you learned from professional learning with the instructional coach? (Piaget- Constructivism)

Week	Response
1	Writing prompt for assessment, Writing constructed responses
2	Double bubble map, Close reading, Tiered lesson
3	Summarizing activity, stations for needs-based instruction, incorporate literacy in math
4	Identify student needs, Provide explanations and examples for students to understand expectations

What impact have the new strategies had on student achievement?

Week	Response
1	Assess student mastery, Helps students organize thoughts/recall, Students can cite evidence
2	Student plan for writing, Students identify important information, All levels were taught based on needs
3	Lesson was easier to teach, Identifying student need
4	To be determined, Students were more engaged and needed less support

How has the instructional coach supported your personal instructional practices this week (modeling, observing with feedback, planning using data)? (Vygotsky- Zone of Proximal Development)

Week	Response
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1	Coach modeled strategy, Lesson plans based on data, PL on Go FAR
2	Observing students using double bubble map, Observing lesson with feedback
3	Collaboration, Observation and feedback, Modeling literacy/math
4	Planning with data, Collaboration, Identifying gap students

The codes that developed in the interviews and journals were supported again in the focus group discussion. The group of teachers who participated explained how the instructional coach provided professional learning, the ways his job made an impact in their classrooms, and if they believed the role of the instructional coach impacted student achievement.

Table 4

Coding: Focus Group

In what ways does the instructional coach provide professional learning in your school?

Data days

Discuss differentiation

Plan tiered lessons

Introduce new strategies

Modeling lessons

Provide resources

Has modeling from the instructional coach helped in your classroom instruction? (Piaget-Constructivism)

(collectively) Yes, yes, definitely.

What strategies incorporated by the instructional coach do you feel have made the greatest impact on student achievement?

Modeling lessons

Developing needs-based groups and strategies

Response to Intervention documentation

When the instructional coach observes in your class, what is the purpose of feedback? Does it make a difference in your classroom instruction? (Vygotsky- Sociocultural Approach)

Identify areas of weakness to make instruction more effective

Identify strengths to keep using

We collaborate to share our strengths with one another

Do group professional learning activities, classroom observations with feedback, or the instructional coach modeling strategies have a greater influence on you integrating new strategies? (Vygotsky- Sociocultural Approach)

Modeling (5)

Subject area collaboration

When you sit down with the instructional coach to disaggregate data from benchmarks, student work, or state assessments, how do the meetings help you plan for instruction?

Identify weak areas

Identify students who need help

Celebrate strong areas

Collaboration: sharing ideas that work

How has the instructional coach supported you in an area where you felt you were struggling? (Vygotsky- Zone of Proximal Development)

Modeled writing strategies

Modeling reading strategies

Provided various levels of text

Planning and integrating tiered lessons

Recall the first time you implemented a new strategy the instructional coach provided and you saw positive student outcomes.

Hands-on grammar activity- clauses (using highlighters)

Modeled a lesson on argumentative writing

Modeled writing

Thinking Maps integration

“Hot Seat” review game

Helped me better plan my own lesson

From these codes, themes began to materialize. The major themes were (a) Keeping with current educational practices, (b) Collaborating to integrate successful strategies, (c) Identifying

needs and validating strengths, (d) Modeling to provide support and build confidence, and (e) inspecting what is expected.

Keeping with Current Educational Practices

Major changes in state approved curriculum and instructional strategies, along with the demand to integrate technology and to provide more progress monitoring, leave teachers unsure of which techniques and strategies are most appropriate to help their students learn and master the newest standards. There are so many new initiatives, teachers need help understanding what is being required of them. The journals, interviews, and focus group revealed that teachers expressed a desire for professional learning on incorporating effective instructional strategies 47 times.

During the interviews, Ray said the role of the instructional coach “is to help teachers stay abreast of current trends and the changing expectations, different standards and all that.” Bertha said she thought the role of the instructional coach “is to help teachers be effective teachers. To help us find activities that would help us with struggling students.” Angel stated, “The instructional coach is the liaison between the administration and the teachers. Another role would be to provide professional development for teachers to aid us in being the most effective we can be.” Cinnamon said, “The instructional coach, I feel like, should provide opportunities for the teacher to develop new strategies for students ... come in our classrooms and just give us any more ideas that they may have found.” Gertrude explained, “I see that person as someone who brings in instructional techniques for us to practice or watch us with an instructional strategy.”

In the focus group, Annie stated, “I have asked the instructional coach about teaching reading in middle school to those students who are non-readers, and he provided me with

different texts and different strategies to use in my classroom.” Ray said, “I have also been given different texts and new strategies to make my instruction more academically challenging instead of just simple, basic things to go more in depth and think about things differently.”

All 13 participants reflected that the instructional coach provided the same professional learning school-wide during week one of keeping the journal. Every teacher was required to participate in Thinking Map training. That particular week’s training focused on using the double-bubble map to help students organize information for taking notes or writing after learning a new concept in class. These graphic organizers can be used in all academic areas.

Table 5

Theme: Keeping with Current Educational Practices

Codes	Data Source(s)
New ideas	Interviews, Focus Group
Content support	Interviews, Journals, Focus Group
Support with current tends	Interviews, Journals, Focus Group
Support with new curriculum and standards	Interviews, Focus Group
New strategies	Interviews, Journals, Focus Group
Awareness of curriculum changes/expectations	Interviews, Focus Group

Collaborating to Integrate Successful Strategies

During the interviews and the focus group, teachers shared how important collaboration had become in the school. The instructional coach met with teachers who taught the same grade and subject to look at data and talk about what was working to help students increase their achievement. Having the instructional coach on hand in the school also allowed teachers to use the coach as a consultant when they felt they needed immediate assistance or direction.

In the interviews, David said, “Having an instructional coach at my school is beneficial because as a teacher I know there is one person I can go to and bounce ideas off regarding instructional strategies.” Angel stated, “Collaborating with the instructional coach has helped me to apply the most effective teaching strategies that will help the kids better.” Annie said, “I take those things when we collaborate that I may see one way, but our instructional coach has something to add to that and it helps me see it in a different way. I can take the new information and apply it to all the different needs of my students.” Alan added, “Collaborating with the instructional coach has helped me to target students that I need to support more so than I would have probably by myself.” Frank said, “It’s changed my instruction in that I tend to be real linear, and it makes me more cognitive of other people’s points of view because I tend to forget about other people and I do what I understand. But then when someone else says ‘I don’t understand,’ then it forces me to consider alternatives when normally I wouldn’t.” Cinnamon stated, “Collaborating with the instructional coach has helped me create lessons that exceed ... a little higher level because we have a few kids who really need that stretch and focus to move to the next level. I think it has helped in that respect.” Freedom said, “Collaborating with the instructional coach makes me more aware of what I can do better in the classroom, what I could perhaps tweak or change to help reach certain children that I may or may not be reaching in the most popular fashion.”

During the focus group, Annie said, “And I feel like the group collaboration as professional learning works best for me because we can bounce ideas back off of each other. If David’s doing it in his classroom and he’s saying it working then I trust more of what he’s saying because he’s put it into action not just here’s some things you can put in your classroom if you want to. Knowing someone has actually tried it in his classroom ... I think that helps me

more put faith into it.” Alan added, “We’ve been working on finding students that are doing poorly on certain standards because of their benchmarks, and that helps us with needs-based instruction and developing the groups we need to develop. David also stated, “I think those meetings help us identify our weak areas, student achievement weak areas, and students we’ve identified as gap kids. Then we can better focus on not letting them fall through the cracks.”

All 13 journals reflected that collaboration with the instructional coach happened by department. All departments met to discuss benchmark data. They also planned instruction for students who were struggling. The teachers whose students demonstrated more growth shared strategies that were successful in their classes. The instructional coach helped teachers identify gap students, and they created a remediation schedule for addressing student needs.

Table 6

Theme: Collaborating to Integrate Successful Strategies

Codes	Data Source(s)
Sharing ideas	Interviews, Focus Group
Collaboration	Interviews, Focus Group
Supports integration	Interviews
Consider alternative strategies	Interviews, Journals, Focus Group
Collaboration with content colleagues	Interviews, Journals, Focus Group
Planning differentiation	Interviews, Journals, Focus Group
Writing across the curriculum	Journals
New math progress monitoring	Journals
Plan for underachieving gifted	Journals
Using data to plan for bubble students	Journals, Focus Group
Data days	Focus Group
Integrating technology	Interviews, Journals
Developing needs-based groups and strategies	Focus Group
Collaboration to share our strengths	Focus Group

Helped me better plan my own lessons

Focus Group

Student Data

Interview, Journals, Focus Group

Identifying Needs and Validating Strengths

Using student data from progress monitoring and state mandated testing is a great way to pinpoint areas of strengths and weaknesses. An instructional coach can collaborate with teachers to discuss these areas and create a plan to improve weak areas and celebrate strengths. To help teachers improve in their areas of weakness, the instructional coach will assist teacher in developing lessons and even model lessons.

In the interviews, Alan said, “The once a week meeting is more about data. It’s also about students we consider bubble students that are close to passing or just barely passed the test.” Freedom added, “I was excited for help. I always welcome any advice to make myself a better instructor.” Ivy said, “I’m a lifetime learner. So, if I had someone coming in looking at those things then I’m bettering myself. It’s helping me become better for my students.” David said, “... that’s just another set of eyes you have looking at student data and that’s another person you can get good reliable effective means of delivering instruction to students.”

In the focus group, Angel said, “I think those meetings help us to identify our weak areas, student achievement weak areas, and students we’ve identified as gap kids. We can better focus on not letting them fall through the cracks.” Alan added, “And usually those meetings are in conjunction with our content area and content area teachers. We can collaborate more effectively and not just get information from the instructional coach.” Cinnamon said, “I think what I do is good because most of my students get it and are ready to move on. With the coach helping with data or looking at my lesson plans, he can often see where I need to try some

differentiation to help those not getting or to make it higher order for those who need challenged.”

Again, all 13 participants mentioned data meetings with the instructional coach. These meetings were held to identify students who were not mastering standards on benchmark assessments. Teachers were creating data walls and plans to reteach students to make sure they were achieving mastery on standards.

Table 7

Theme: Identifying Needs and Validating Strengths

Codes	Data Source(s)
Professional learning (for specific skills)	Interviews, Journals, Focus Group
Assist with needs	Interviews, Focus Group
Teacher effectiveness	Interviews, Focus Group
Complement strengths	Interviews, Focus Group
Observation	Interviews, Journals, Focus Group
Honing skills	Interviews
Individual needs	Interviews, Focus Group
Positive support	Interviews
Assistance	Interviews
Feedback	Interviews
Constructive criticism	Interviews
Advice	Interviews, Focus Group
Validation	Interviews, Focus Group
Confirmation	Interviews, Focus Group
Look at data to identify strengths and weaknesses	Interviews, Journals, Focus Group
Identify areas of weakness to make instruction more effective	Interviews, Journals, Focus Group
Identify strengths to continue to use	Interviews, Focus Group
Target needs	Interviews

Modeling to Provide Support and Build Confidence

When these teachers were struggling with new ideas or exactly how to teach a lesson, the instructional coach was able to go into the classrooms and teach the lesson with scientifically-based strategies. The teacher and the coach would then co-teach the class, and finally, the teacher would totally take over the class, emulating the ideas and strategies that the instructional coach started. This would allow the teacher to gradually become more comfortable with the topic, and the instructional coach modeled and provided support.

In the interviews, Summer said, “It’s given me new ideas, watching them perform and do things in a different way.” Magnum said, “The instructional coach has come into my classroom to help with live activities with the scientific method and has been very helpful. He’s come in and worked with some specific things like potential/kinetic energy and come up with some great ideas that I can use in my classroom along the way.” Gertrude stated, “Oftentimes they’ve come in and modeled new strategies. I know when we first started doing read-alouds, I remember the instructional coach coming in and going step-by-step with those cards and it’s stuff you know but until you see somebody actually do it, you go, okay ... I like being shown how it should look, you know, and things like that.” Annie added, “I feel like coming in and modeling lessons because then, um, the teachers understand more how the standard should be taught or the strategies to use to increase student achievement.” Cinnamon said, “Me, personally, I feel that the modeling helps me most, because I can better take that and adapt that to my strategies with the kids.” David said, “Going along with modeling, I can go to training and hear all these awesome strategies all day long, but those usually presented are like it would be happening in an ideal world. So, seeing somebody come in and model that strategy and having to roll with the punches like we do every day, that is very helpful to me, seeing that put into action in an actual

classroom- not just in theory.” Alan said, “As a personal experience, I needed help writing strategies, and the instructional coach came in and helped me. He modeled for my first period and then let me go to do the rest of my classes on my own. And so, I wasn’t just sitting there watching him all day long. They showed me how to do it first period, and I was able to do it myself.” Cinnamon continued, “And I was in the same situation that the instructional coach came in and modeled in my first period, and I felt like it gave me much more confidence to go through the rest of the day.”

In the focus group, Annie stated, “I feel like coming in and modeling has made the greatest impact because then the teachers understand more of how the standard should be taught or strategies that should be used to increase student achievement.” Angel said, “Me, personally, I feel that modeling helps me the most because I can better take that and adapt that to my strategies with the kids.” David said, “I can go to a training all day long and hear those awesome strategies, but those presented are as if it were happening in an ideal world. Obviously, our classrooms are never an idea world, so seeing somebody come in and model that strategy and having to roll with the punches like we do every day that is very helpful to me seeing that put into action in an actual classroom not just in theory.” Alan stated, “I had a tough time teaching sentence types, and the instructional coach came in and brought a bunch of independent clauses and dependent clauses that students had to cut up, paste, and put them into groups and make the sentences makes sense. That helped tremendously with students understanding the concept.” Angel continued, “Again, with writing, the students always dread and dislike writing. And the instructional coach came in and gave it a different spin and a different outlook on things and the kids really enjoyed it.”

During the four weeks that the 13 participants kept the journals, modeling from the instructional coach was only documented by Magnum as modeling the use of an app called Popplet in his gifted science classes. The purpose of the lesson was student engagement with vocabulary lessons. Frank documented that the instructional coach modeled using a writing prompt as assessment in his science class.

Table 8

Theme: Modeling to Provide Support and Build Confidence

Codes	Data Source(s)
Modeling (lessons, strategies, planning)	Interviews, Journals, Focus Group
Re-delivering	Interviews, Journals, Focus Group
Hands-on professional learning	Interviews, Focus Group
Intervention	Interviews, Focus Group
Teacher-specific professional learning	Interviews
Co-teaching for support	Interviews
Build confidence	Interviews, Focus Group
Opens my eyes	Interviews
Gives me wings	Interviews
Cheerleader	Interviews
Support	Interviews, Focus Group
Validating suggestions	Interviews, Focus Group
Provide resources	Interviews, Journals, Focus Group
Modeling (writing strategies)	Interviews, Journals, Focus Group
Modeling (reading strategies)	Interviews, Focus Group
Modeling (differentiation strategies)	Interviews, Focus Group
Modeling (thinking strategies)	Interviews, Journals, Focus Group

Inspecting What is Expected

When new strategies are introduced in professional learning meetings, teachers may or may not like the new strategies. The instructional coach provides the training for the teachers. Then the instructional coach must make sure that teachers are using the new strategies correctly and with integrity. The coach may observe in classrooms or simply check lesson plans for implementation. If the instructional coach does not inspect for what is expected, often teachers who do like a new strategy will simply not implement the strategy.

In the interviews, David said, “Well, just the monitoring, the checking lesson plans, seeing if we’re implementing effective strategies is helpful. Having periodic meetings just to discuss that student data to see if the trends that we are seeing are what we want to see. Do we need to change strategies to make it go a different way? So, just that monitoring and that feedback, that’s really what helps.” Annie stated, “I feel like the instructional coach made us more accountable for what we were supposed to be taking from the professional development because they are coming in to make sure we are doing those things that we learn in professional development. So I think it has makes me more accountable.” Frank said, “Usually there will be a redelivery and then a request of ‘Hey, I’d like to see this.’ It kind of at whatever level you need. I’ve had experience with someone saying, ‘I want to see you do this.’ And then there is feedback that way of if there’s ‘I don’t know how to do this’ then there’s ‘Well, let me show you’ and then we work it together. So, the instructional coach helps with strategies, but he makes sure we are using them and know how to use them.” Magnum added, “It brings accountability to your instruction because you want to do a good job as a teacher and knowing somebody is going to be coming in and observing lessons or activities the students are doing or look over lesson plans and offering advice or critical or constructive criticism adds to how you

think more about what you are doing in the classroom.” Cinnamon said, “At first I guess it does feel like somebody’s kind of looking at every single thing you are doing and you’re being critiqued. Then you see they are actually trying to help you and not tell you everything you are doing wrong.”

In the focus group, David stated, “It [observation and feedback] helps identify areas of weakness. It helps the teacher pinpoint what isn’t as effective as other parts of the lesson. So, the feedback allows us to revamp parts that need revamping in order to make sure we are providing the most effective instruction.” Angel said, “Keeping with feedback, we also get our strengths identified which also helps us to know what to work on as well as keep what we’re doing that does work.” David continued, “And those strengths we can teach other teachers. Hey, this worked for me so this may work for you, too.”

The journals reflected that the instructional coach inspected lesson plans of all 13 participants and gave teachers feedback. He also observed two of the teachers and introduced the double bubble Thinking Maps. One teacher was observed during small-group, needs-based instruction and was given encouraging feedback.

Table 9

Theme: Inspecting What Is Expected

Codes	Data Source(s)
Observations	Interviews, Focus Group
Feedback	Interviews, Focus Group
Accountability	Interviews, Focus Group
Big brother	Interview
Reflection	Interview
Walk-through observations	Interviews, Journals, Focus Group
Walk-through to check lesson plans	Interviews, Journals, Focus Group

Observing students using Thinking Maps Journals

Research Question Results

This study was conducted for the purpose of understanding teachers' perspectives of instructional coaches' impact on student achievement in middle school. To gain understanding of these perspectives, findings of the research questions must be addressed.

Research Question 1. What are teachers' perceptions about how the instructional coach provides professional learning for teachers that impact classroom instruction and student achievement?

The teachers who participated in this study recognized that professional learning makes an impact on their instruction; therefore, professional learning was also making an impact on the academic achievement of their students. Through interviews, the focus group, and the journals, teachers shared how that on-site professional learning was prescribed to meet the needs of the school, department, and individual teachers. Their collective perspective was that professional learning allowed them to become better teachers through instructional strategies, modeling, and collaboration.

During the interviews, Freedom stated, "Professional learning became more personal. It means more to us as teachers instead of just a training that you go to and you come back and try to implement on your own. Now we have someone there to insure you are able to implement it on a regular basis." Ivy stated that the instructional coach "supports teachers giving new and fresh ideas. He has helped us with teaching strategies and content area support. He makes sure we have the things we need." Cinnamon added, "The instructional coach at our school has presented new information, like Thinking Maps, and different instructional strategies that I would not have known if it had not been for him. Being able to take the information he gives me and apply it in my classroom and actually see results that has impacted my instruction." Angel

stated, “The instructional coach has become almost the professional development leader in our school. He conducts the professional learning school-wide as opposed to sending individuals out for training. This helps me apply the most effective teaching strategies that help the kids better.” Alan stated, “The instructional coach uses professional learning to assist us into making it more meaningful to our curriculum, and they look to find things that they think will be interesting to our particular subject or topic.” Annie said, “He may come in and model after professional development. He gathers examples of things and shows us how we can use those in our classrooms in different ways. Some of those are things that help out.”

During the four-week period in which teachers kept journals, the instructional coach provided all teachers professional learning using Thinking Maps. He also modeled using constructive responses in a language arts class and a science class. He provided teachers with a session on using GoFAR, a technology-based program that helps prepare students for the new Georgia Milestones testing.

In the focus group, teachers shared that the instructional coach had provided a great deal of modeling, especially in the area of writing across the curriculum. Angel said, “I feel like modeling helps me most because I can take that and adapt that to my strategies with kids.” Alan added, “As a personal experience, I needed help with writing strategies, and the instructional coach came in and helped me. He modeled for my first period and then let me go to do the rest of the classes on my own. And so, I wasn’t just sitting there watching him all day long. He showed me how to do it, and then I was able to do it myself.” Angel responded, “And I was in the same situation. The instructional coach came in and modeled in my first period, and I felt like it gave me much more confidence to go through the rest of the day.” Cinnamon stated,

“We’ve had concept map training, and training for tiered lessons for social studies and science. That has helped me in my class.”

Research Question 2. What are teachers’ perceptions about the instructional coach using data to help teachers plan for instruction: formative assessments, differentiation, best practices, etc.?

In this study, teachers said that the instructional coach helped them pinpoint areas of student weakness that showed up in benchmarks and other formative assessments and worked with the teachers to create a plan of action for instruction. The instructional coach may assist with developing needs-based groups, lesson plans, or other activities that will help the teachers provide instruction that meets student needs.

When these teachers met with the instructional coach, it was often for collaboration. Teachers who taught the same subject area met together and could discuss their successes and the instructional strategies that may have been different than the other teachers. This also helped teachers identify trends that gave them clues for adopting new strategies in their instruction. These discussions allowed the teachers to learn from one another and build community. Hearing others’ personal experiences makes teachers aware of what they can do better or make more engaging for students.

During the focus group, David said, “During data days, the instructional strategies are always the focus when looking at student data so we specifically know what to target.” Alan said, “We’ve been working finding students who are doing poorly on certain standards because of their benchmarks, and that helps us create needs-based groups and developing learning groups.” Angel stated, “We also have students who are going through the RTI process, and the instructional coach has helped us identify interventions we can use with those children.” Angel

later said, “I think those meetings help us identify our instructional week areas, student achievement weak areas, and we’ve identified as gap kids. That way we can better focus on not letting students fall through the cracks.” Ray said, “And usually those meetings that you’re talking about having in conjunction with our content area and the same content area teachers. It is like Annie was saying, we can collaborate more effectively and not just get information from the instructional coach.”

The journals reflected that the instructional coach met with all the grade levels to look at student progress monitoring data. The teachers and the coach then began to identify students who were not mastering standards. By department, the teachers and coach created differentiated lesson plans to help struggling students master standards. The teachers on the gifted team also worked with the instructional coach to devise a plan for the underachieving gifted students.

In the interviews, Bertha indicated that the instructional coach helped improve student achievement “by helping us focus on the gap kids. Most of our students show mastery, but we have those who are falling through the cracks. We have a room that is set aside, a data room that shows all the gap kids. That way we can focus primarily on the on certain objectives.” Frank said, “There has been an emphasis on numbers that I’m not wired to. Where there is someone asking, ‘Does the data support this?’ Normally, you could just kind of teach and do our own thing and let it go. But with the instructional coach, we constantly have a reminder in our head or in the back of the room saying, ‘Let’s talk about student needs. We can’t ignore this.’”

Summer said, “The instructional coach has really stressed the importance of differentiation with the students and grouping and working. We’ve learned to work with them one-on-one. He’s helpful and always willing to help.” Gertrude stated, “When we’re looking at data, it really helps me to see where my areas of weakness are. Lots of times if you aren’t asked to sit down and

look at something, you don't. On our data days, we sit down and look at trends. If my students are improving, I know I am doing a good job teaching in this area. If my students are not being successful, then I need to look at different strategies.”

Research Question 3. What are teachers' perceptions on the effectiveness of the instructional coach observing lessons and providing feedback?

Teachers in this study believed that having in-house, non-threatening help allowed them to improve as teachers. They enjoyed having someone support their classroom efforts and provide them with new ideas and strategies that would improve instruction for their students. They liked the observations and feedback because it gave them more accountability to provide the best, most effective instruction for their students.

Teachers' journals reflected that in a four-week period, the instructional coach completed a walk-through observation of nine of the 13 participants. All nine received an observation with feedback; however, each teacher responded on the specific skill the instructional coach came to observe. Freedom was observed using small group instruction as an intervention time. Bertha was observed using a starter as an intervention. The instructional coach observed and paid special attention to Frank's lesson plans. Ray was observed integrating vocabulary in the content area. Cinnamon and Ivy were observed focusing on the use of higher order thinking questioning in class. Magnum was observed integrating Thinking Maps in his gifted science class to introduce a writing across the curriculum assignment, while Annie and David were observed creating a more challenging environment while differentiating using a tiered lesson plan. Ivy was observed using a tiered lesson using leveled text and a rubric for the assignment. Rubrics were also leveled based on student readiness.

In the interviews, Magnum stated, “Having the instructional coach to observe and provide feedback brings more accountability to your instruction because you want to be a good teacher and knowing somebody is going to be coming in observing lessons or activities the students are doing or looking over lesson plans and offering advice of constructive criticism adds to how you think more about what you are doing in the classroom.” Ray said, “Well, even veteran teachers, who might be considered old and set in their ways, like to be told they are doing something right. Even getting a sticky note on a lesson plan with a smiley face or saying good job matters a great deal. It made us feel better about what we were doing. Also, in a subtle way, we would respond better to suggestions to do new ways if we knew the person also saw that we were doing some things right.” Cinnamon said, “Every time we’ve had professional learning, he will come in and monitor to see that we’re implementing and giving us feedback. I believe that having that accountability when it comes to looking back at your data and keeping us focused when we have our data meetings, that helps me stay focused.” Gertrude said, “I think it makes me want to strive to better than I think I am. I really want to strive for excellence every time I do a lesson. I know somebody is going to be looking at and monitoring me, I think that’s accountability that’s needed, and I think that’s something we’ve always wanted but really didn’t have until this position was put in place. That’s how I look at it when they come in to either watch me do a lesson or show me a lesson model. That helps me re-do or re-teach. I think that’s beneficial.” Freedom said, “It’s made me aware of what I can do better in the classroom or how I can do it a different way. Because we as teachers can, I don’t want to say become complacent, but set in our ways of doing something specifically or in a specific manner. When you see someone else do it differently, the light bulb comes on that you can do it that way as well.” Annie stated, “It just... makes me a better teacher because it opens my eyes to the many different things I can use

in my classroom and what I should be doing in my classroom. It's nice to have an outside view. Sometimes you're stuck in what you do every day, and you don't see other things you can be doing."

In the focus group, David said, "It (observations and feedback) helps us identify weakness. It helps the teacher pinpoint what isn't as effective as other parts of the lesson. So, feedback allows us to revamp parts that need revamping in order to make sure we are providing the most effective instruction." Angel added, "And I think keeping with feedback, our strengths are also identified as well which also helps us know what to work on as well as keep what we're doing that works." David continued, "And those strengths we can teach other teachers: 'Hey, this worked for me, so this may work for you, too.'"

Summary

This study was conducted for the purpose of understanding Teachers' Perspectives of Instructional Coaches' Impact on Student Achievement in Middle School. Through the use of interviews, a focus group, and journals, five themes emerged. They were (a) keeping with current educational practices, (b) collaborating to integrate successful strategies, (c) identifying needs and validating strengths, (d) modeling to provide support and build confidence, and (e) inspecting what is expected. The research questions were answered from that data obtained in this study.

The textural description focuses on the teachers' perceptions of the role of the instructional coach and the impact that role made on student achievement in middle school. Although most of these teachers were uncertain of the instructional coach's role when one was first employed nine years prior, they developed an appreciation of the instructional coach's role as a mentor, resource, coach, and fellow educator. These teachers appreciated having an

experienced educator who they could go to for help and share their honest concerns without worry of evaluation or being perceived as inadequate.

While the instructional coach provided professional learning classes and feedback from observations, all the teachers felt that modeling instruction had the most impact in their instruction. Having the opportunity to watch an experienced educator teach a lesson where another less-experienced educator felt a lack of confidence not only helped them understand the strategies, but it also built confidence in the learner and developed a positive relationship with the instructional coach and the teacher.

CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Overview

The purpose of this chapter is to share the insights that were gained from conducting this study. The purpose of this phenomenological study was to interpret the perceptions middle school teachers had on the role of an instructional coach and how that role affected student achievement. This chapter will address a summary of findings from the data collected. It will also provide discussion, implications, limitations, and recommendations for future research.

Summary of Findings

This study was completed to understand middle school teachers' perspectives on the role of the instructional coach on student achievement. A review of literature was compiled and used to study the history and the function of instructional coaching. Established from the literature review, three research questions guided this study. Each of the questions is discussed below based on the data collected.

Research Question One

What are teachers' perceptions about how the instructional coach provides professional learning for teachers that impact classroom and student achievement? From the data gained through the interviews, journals, and focus group, teachers like having an instructional coach in their building who understands their personal needs. Teachers stated that they used the instructional coach to help them find resources to use in class. The instructional coach provided trainings in the school for teachers to share new instructional strategies. Teachers believed that having on-site professional learning allowed them to learn, implement, and have support.

According to the participants, many of the strategies from the professional learning sessions they attended were never implemented because they did not fully understand the

concept or they did not have the materials and support to implement the new strategies with fidelity. David mentioned that going away to professional learning and hearing about strategies was nice, but the strategies were often simulated for a typical classroom. He said that all too often, the strategies were not easily adapted to the real-world classroom. Yet, having an instructional coach who could teach the strategy and model implementing it made changing much easier.

When the teachers were able to use new strategies in their classrooms, they felt that the professional learning opportunities were making a difference in their instruction. Therefore, the participants in this study agreed that classroom instruction and student achievement improved as a result of the instructional coach's role in professional learning.

Research Question Two

What are teachers' perceptions about the instructional coach using data to help teachers plan for instruction: formative assessments, differentiation, best practices, etc.? The participants in this study quickly learned that looking at data to plan for instruction made a huge impact on student success. All of these teachers gave quarterly benchmark assessments to progress monitor student growth and to identify whether students were mastering standards.

After each administration of the benchmark assessment, these teachers determined which students were progressing and which students needed remediation and support to master the standards. They looked at student work to assess where in the process students were lacking. Then the teachers created lesson plans using needs-based groups, tiered lesson plans, and review stations to reteach based on individual student needs. The teachers often collaborated to share strategies that worked best for them.

Before the instructional coach was hired, these teachers did not use data to guide their instruction. Lesson plans existed to remind them what they taught and what they needed to teach. They were not developed to meet the specific needs of individual students. After the teachers began to work with the instructional coach and collaboratively with one another, student achievement improved.

Research Question Three

What are teachers' perceptions on the effectiveness of the instructional coach observing lesson and providing feedback? Ivy accurately described the situation when she said, "I'm a life-long learner. So, if I have someone coming in looking at those things, then I'm bettering myself. It's helping me to become better for my students." The participants liked having an extra set of eyes looking at their lesson plans, observing, and providing feedback because they found that it helped them be more creative. They also suggested that they used new strategies more frequently because they knew the instructional coach would be checking.

Accountability is crucial in changing school or classroom cultures. Having the instructional coach observe and provide feedback allows teachers to become part of a partnership to make instruction effective for students. With the teachers knowing that the instructional coach will observe, they tend to be proactive in including new strategies in their lessons.

In this study, 13 participants were interviewed and kept journals. Six of these 13 also participated in a focus group. Using the transcriptions, or the word of the participants, five themes emerged. They were (a) keeping with current educational practices, (b) collaborating to integrate successful strategies, (c) identifying needs and validating strengths, (d) modeling to provide support and build confidence, and (e) inspecting what is expected.

Keeping with current educational practices emerged as a theme. Many of the veteran teachers who had not participated in graduate school or other endorsement programs were quite satisfied with the instructional practices they had used for years. Regretfully, when progress monitoring occurred, often their students were not achieving as well as the students of less experienced teachers. Also, these veteran teachers were being required to integrate technology and new state mandated standards that were out of their comfort zone.

Having an instructional coach brought professional learning to these veteran teachers and likewise provided them with support as they learned to integrate the new strategies and concepts in their classrooms. They believed that having someone on staff who understood their content area and the new requirements helped them reach their students without having to miss instructional time in class. Having a good, non-threatening relationship helped them feel validated in their teaching and did not make them feel out of touch.

Another theme that evolved was collaborating to integrate successful strategies. The old idea of “teach to the middle” is an idea that is forever in the past. With high-stakes testing, teachers are much more in-tune to the individual needs of students. All students must master the standards for the teacher and school to achieve success. Having enough creative concepts can be overwhelming for educators.

Teachers have learned that when they met together as an instructional team, they can share ideas and strategies that one person alone may not consider. During data days, the instructional coach and one content area group of teachers met and discussed what was working and where they needed more help and support to create success. These teachers liked learning from one another. Collaboration encouraged a team spirit so that all the teachers tried to help

create success and mastery for all students. When the teachers needed fresh ideas or were stumped, they had the instructional coach to help them plan lessons.

Another theme that emerge was identifying needs and validating strengths. Teachers, just like students, need validation that they are performing satisfactorily. Yet, every teacher who participated in this study was wise enough to know that there is always room for improvement. When the instructional coach was first hired, teachers were not sure about having another educator looking at their data and lesson plans. It took time for the teachers to see the instructional coach as a non-punitive person who was present for their support. Once they trusted the instructional coach, they very often enlisted his help and ideas for their classrooms. Subtle suggestions in the areas of need made teachers feel like they were working as a team with the instructional coach to make good things happen for students. Very quickly, teachers gained respect for the instructional coach and coveted help and validation when things were going well. The most veteran teacher, Ray, said, "...teachers, who might be old and set in their ways, like to be told they are doing something right, and, ... even a sticky note on a lesson plan saying 'Good job' or a smiley face, even among us old folks mattered a great deal and, ... made us feel better about what we were doing and it also was a subtle way we would respond better to suggestions to do new ways if we knew the person also saw that we were doing some things right."

The most popular of the themes was modeling to provide support and build confidence. Twelve of the 13 teachers in the study liked having the instructional coach come into their rooms and model lessons. This helped them see the instructional coach in action. Often, teachers are provided ideas for new strategies, but they are not sure how to implement them. Watching the instructional coach took away any fears the teachers had about certain lessons or standards.

Teachers were then able to emulate what they saw and eventually teach the lesson with their own spin, but the lesson was still rooted in the modeled lesson in the real classroom setting.

Finally, the theme inspecting what is expected developed. Teachers believed that having someone to look at lesson plans made them more accountable for using new strategies. Each year, system-level directors mandated that certain strategies or programs must be used in classrooms system-wide. The instructional coach at the school was responsible for providing teachers with the professional learning need to implement the new programs and tools. Frequently, teachers continued using strategies that were comfortable to them personally and were much easier to execute in class. They said that when they went to training, the instructional coach asked for certain areas to be addressed in lesson plans, and he came to class to observe teachers using the strategies to make sure they were comfortable integrating and to ensure that the strategies are being implemented with fidelity.

Discussion

To make connections between current literature and this study, this discussion will reflect the literature cited in Chapter Two and create comparisons to the data revealed in this study.

Comparison to Current Literature

The role of the instructional coach became prevalent when the rigors of good professional learning became imperative with the No Child Left Behind Act (2001). Teachers and schools were required to provide an education to all students with the goal that every child meet or exceed the academic standards mandated state by state. For teachers to be the most effective educators they could be, administrators quickly determined that the idea of professional learning had to change. The practice of giving teachers one day off to go to a conference to get excited

about a strategy or program and never implementing the change in the classroom had to be replaced (Knight, 2009a). To make a significant change in teachers' skills and student learning, professional development needed to be job-embedded, ongoing, and supported (L'Allier et al., 2010).

Professional learning that makes a difference in student achievement must be geared to meet the instructional needs of teachers. Instructional needs should be determined through data from student and teacher assessments. Using that data, lessons must be created, content can be explored, mastery can be reflected upon, and new strategies must be implemented (Knight, 2011a). If the professional development is effective, it will change the culture of a classroom or an entire school. Skills and beliefs must change to meet individual needs of teachers and students (Kise, 2006).

In this study, teachers' responses fully support the idea that the status quo of professional learning needs to change. Teachers described the old way of professional learning as going to hear an expert of one particular strategy or program speak to teachers as a salesperson. The ideas were often very good, but when teachers returned to school, they were not sure how to implement the new strategy, and there was no one to help them. Therefore, the time away from their classrooms was viewed as a loss of instructional time that could not be afforded by students.

The teachers in this study also believed that the professional learning that was mandated from the system administration did not always meet the needs of their particular school. At times, the entire system would go through trainings that did not lend themselves to the middle grades teachers or learners. The teachers were required to participate in professional learning that had no bearing on content area courses.

At the time this study was completed, teachers believed that the instructional coach provided professional learning that more strongly related to what was needed in their particular school and necessary for these particular teachers. Instructional coaches attended trainings and redeliver to the teachers. In the prior three years, professional learning in teaching literacy across the curriculum was relevant in all academic areas. Most teachers who did not have a language arts background felt very inadequate to teach reading and writing. Through the professional learning provided by the instructional coach, teachers quickly learned that it is easy to provide a literacy-rich environment in all academic areas.

Another area where the instructional coach provided frequent modeling was the area of writing. When the writing standards changed in Georgia, teachers who did not have strong English backgrounds needed support. The standard changed from a broad persuasive writing to a more narrow argumentative writing. The instructional coach was able to build PowerPoint presentations to help the teachers understand the elements required in argumentative writing and used the same Power Point to teach the lesson to the students. He also wrote a few example papers so that students and teachers could identify the elements required to master the standards. Teacher found this particular type of professional learning most helpful. It also made the teachers feel more confident teaching the new standards.

Teachers described their experience with professional learning that emulated Gradual Release of Responsibility by Plaut (2009). During the interviews and focus group, teachers explained that the instructional coach would often introduce new strategies during professional learning session (Direct Instruction). Then, he would come into their classrooms for a class or two and model using the strategy with students (Modeling). He would then ask the teacher to present the same lesson to the next class while he observed and was there to support if needed

(Guided Practice and Collaborative Work). Next, the teachers would take the strategy and make it their own (Independent Work). Finally, teachers would share their experiences and give ideas to their peers who taught the same content area (Share and Reflect) (Plaut, 2009).

The experiences of the teachers support the idea that job-embedded professional learning made a significant difference in their approaches to instruction. They viewed the instructional coach as a resource for content needs and strategies. They also knew that they could go to the instructional coach and share their needs and concerns without fear of retribution.

As an instructional coach, building relationships with the faculty and staff is very important. Teachers and the instructional coach should have a trusting relationship. When teachers feel that they can trust the instructional coach, they are more likely to have dynamic conversations about teaching strategies or problems that occur in the classroom. If teachers are afraid that letting their weaknesses or concerns be known will get them a bad evaluation or reprimanded, they will not to seek the help they need (Habegger & Hodanbosi, 2011).

When teachers feel like they are in an equal relationship with the instructional coach, they are more willing to embrace the strategies and skills the instructional coach has to offer (Knight, 2011b). Knight (2007) described his partnership philosophy that says building positive relationships comes from equality; the teacher and the instructional coach are on the same level. Teachers should be given a choice in how the changes are made; the instructional coach should not mandate. Teachers must be free to voice their experiences to help themselves and their peers. Reflecting on practices and to measure their impact is key to adopting new strategies. Praxis is the application of the new strategies. Reciprocity is a working relationship in which teachers help others as much as they want to receive from others.

The teachers in this study described times of sitting down one-on-one with the instructional coach to share ideas before implementing them in class. They worked together on the ideas to make integrating the new strategies easy for the teacher while providing scaffolding for the students. The instructional coach provided resources that the teachers had difficulty finding. Teachers met weekly with the instructional coach to share what they were doing to pinpoint the needs of struggling students and plan together to help students achieve mastery.

In summary, these teachers were excited to have the instructional coach to observe in their classrooms and provide them with feedback. They wished to be the most effective teachers they possibly could be. Of the teachers who participated in the study, they all enjoyed when the instructional coach took time to model and be involved in their classrooms. Modeling built confidence in the teachers; it did not discourage them.

Helping teachers gain the scientifically-based instructional strategies is the most important role of the instructional coach. Changing instructional practices will increase student achievement. The instructional strategies must be high yielding and measure through formative and summative assessments to identify the impact on student achievement (Marzano, 2001).

Five standards identified by Doherty and Hilberg (2008) have proven effective when used to teach at-risk students:

1. Students should complete activities with the teacher. By having the teacher close at hand when new concepts are being introduced, students feel supported and less anxious about tackling new problems.
2. Students should understand the language of what is being taught. They need to connect vocabulary and concepts to prior knowledge. This standard also includes using literacy across the curriculum.

3. Learning should have real-life connections. Students who struggle need to apply what they are learning to what they live daily. For some students to put forth the effort, they have to see relevance.
4. Students should be challenged to think more complexly. When they have a full grasp of the basic skill, teachers should make tasks more rigorous to help students not only apply what they have learned but use it in a more complex way.
5. Students learn more when they are doing the talking rather than the teacher. When students discuss the task at hand, they are more likely to problem solve and learn from one another.

In this study, teachers described how they met weekly with the instructional coach to plan lessons that involved these type strategies. They examined student data from formative assessments, and then they began to plan activities to differentiate instruction. In the four weeks teachers kept the journals of activities with the instructional coach, together they designed and planned lessons as follows:

1. Tiered lessons that included floating stations, vocabulary and writing, and technology. Students were placed in tiers based on mastery demonstrated in the formative assessment.
 - a. Tier one: Students only had a basic knowledge of a concept and needed intense intervention. Often, tier one students worked in a small group with the teacher.
 - b. Tier two: Students were teetering on mastery, but they needed a little more support to push them into mastery. This was a less intense intervention. They often worked in small groups or used assistive technology.

- c. Tier three: Students totally understood the concept and received a more rigorous and deeper understanding of the concept. These students did research and prepared a presentation for the class.
2. Constructed response to complete math tasks. They used the CARE method: Compute, Answer, Restate, and Explain. The instructional coach modeled this lesson in the classroom for the teacher.
3. Thinking Maps in all academic classrooms. Thinking Maps, a specific brand of graphic organizers, helped students create an order or sequence to concepts they were learning in class. These maps helped students put things in order, compare and contrast, and predict.
4. Integration of a closing activity that helped the teacher assess student mastery. The coach modeled the technique and then observed the teacher using the technique later in the day.
5. Close reading, PALS (Peer-Assisted Learning Strategies), and clustering in classrooms to help students read for information and apply information to assignments/tasks. Students read as partners to look for important information. They then plan together to accomplish the assignment. These strategies are ideal for students who are reluctant readers.
6. Quarterly benchmark tests, SRI (Scholastic Reading Inventory) used for gaining student Lexile scores (reading proficiency levels), and classroom formative assessments to provide data for planning and differentiation. Teachers also use a standards map for each students to mark as students complete mastery for a standard.

All the training and professional learning in the world will not make a significant difference in student achievement if teachers do not implement what they learn with fidelity. Teacher efficacy occurs when teachers believe what they do is important and valuable. When teacher efficacy rises, student achievement rises (Fisher et al., 2012).

Teachers must also do everything they can do to keep students engaged in learning. Students who are engaged learn more and experience a growth in achievement. Teachers have to believe in themselves and their students. Students have to believe they can accomplish the goals that have been established for them (Fisher et al., 2012).

Teachers must understand effective instruction and believe in the instructional methods and strategies they are using. Answering student questions, checking for comprehension, differentiating instruction, and providing needs-based instruction are strategies effective teachers use to raise student achievement. This also includes classroom management techniques that create a positive learning environment (Fisher et al., 2012).

In his studies, Knight (2011a, 2011b) concluded that teachers who are served by an instructional coach planned interventions and effective strategies with more fidelity than teachers who did not have instructional coaches. He reported that teachers who did not have an instructional coach only implemented new strategies 36 percent of the time they were asked to use them. Teachers with an instructional coach implemented the strategies 92 percent of the time they were asked.

Teachers involved in this study liked having an instructional coach who helped them stay focused on using effective strategies. They also appreciated having someone checking their lesson plans and observing because it encouraged them to use the strategies and gave them support to make sure they were implementing them correctly. Teachers liked getting feedback

that helped them improve their instruction. Cinnamon mentioned that accountability really helped her stay focused on the new strategies instead of falling back into what was easiest for her. Ivy said, “The instructional coach does not condemn me ... he’ll give me a positive of what he’s just seen, what he’s seen in the classroom and the he’ll show me how to take it a little farther, higher to reach.”

Theoretical Implications

Vygotsky’s sociocultural approach (1978) was part of the theoretical framework used in this study. The sociocultural approach describes when someone with more skill supports and builds on the competencies that exist in the less skilled to help him grow into a greater potential. Learning does not have to be a traditional classroom experience, but learning can occur when one observes and is involved in everyday responsibilities. Then, with guidance, learners collaborate with the more skilled teacher, and soon learners are able to adapt their new knowledge in new situations (Miller, 2011).

As shown in the results, teachers believe they learn more and more easily adapt new strategies and concepts when they have a more experienced colleague to observe and use as a resource. Teachers who have a great foundation in educational pedagogy need to take their basic knowledge and skills to a higher level. Only at a higher, more diverse level will teachers be able to reach students who are on target, students who are struggling, and students who are above and beyond the expected educational level.

The participants in this study discussed that watching the instructional coach teach a lesson in the classroom made an impact on their understanding because the strategy was no longer an idea or theory, but it was in practice. Then, when the teachers took the lesson and taught it themselves, they felt more confident and were able to meet the needs of their students.

Another theoretical consideration was Vygotsky's zone of proximal development. In this theory, students are said to thrive when instruction is designed to meet the specific needs of the learner. The teachers must determine where learners are functioning to get them to the next level. Through this scaffolding, learners do not get frustrated. The teacher tackles what makes sense to do next (Casey, 2006).

In this study, the participants mentioned how the instructional coach came into their classrooms to help them in areas where they felt weak. For example, Gertrude was struggling with middle school readers who were far behind in comprehension and literacy skills. The instructional coach came in and observed. Then, he gave her step-by-step strategies to incorporate. First, Gertrude was given simple strategies to help her become comfortable. Once the easier tasks were stable, the instructional coach began providing her with more intense strategies to try. Feeling success from the easier strategies, she was more comfortable integrating the more intense strategies.

Finally, constructivism, based on Piaget's theory of cognitive development, was used in the theoretical framework of this study. Learning happens through experiences. New learning is attached to prior knowledge. Therefore, speaking about experiences and collaboration are positive ways for teachers to build on the good strategies and concepts they already know and learn from the experiences of others (Callison, 2001).

During the focus group session, David and Annie talked about how helpful it was for them to bounce ideas off one another. They both taught the same grade and subject. So, when they had collaboration time, they shared what was working well and what was not. There is a bond and a trust the teachers share that make them want to support one another's efforts. They

also share the creative ideas that they have incorporated they created on their own or that were shared from the instructional coach.

Empirical Implications

High stakes testing and school accountability cause system-level administrators, school-level administrators, and teachers to strive to provide the best education possible for students. Poverty, special needs, or cultural diversity labels for students do not change the fact that all students must obtain satisfactory growth as based on the No Child Left Behind Act (2001). To improve student achievement, administrators have targeted teacher practices to ensure all students receive the best education a school can provide.

With all the pressure of improving instructional methods, administrators knew that traditional teacher training was not effective. Having one or two teachers going to a conference without an administrator or a specific goal was not productive. For professional development to create change in a school culture, it must be specific to the instructional needs of teachers, it must be supported, and it must be implemented with fidelity. To obtain these goals, instructional coach positions have been created to provide teachers with on-site professional learning that shares a variety of effective instructional practices that changes the culture of teaching (Knight, 2009a).

The results in this study support the notion that having an experienced teacher working as an instructional coach in the school is more effective than any one-day training ever could be. Teachers learning new skills and strategies, watch someone implement them, and then collaborate with peers for support. Being involved in the school-based professional learning keeps goals and achievements fresh in the minds of teachers. Working together with the

instructional coach has helped teachers provide better instruction for students; therefore, student achievement is rising.

Prior research described the reluctance of teachers to trust instructional coaches. Teachers viewed instructional coaches as intruders or people who were hired to report any negative views to administration (Lynch & Ferguson, 2010). The hardest teachers to win over were the more veteran teachers who had great student achievement in the past and did not want to change their antiquated teaching styles (Knight, 2011a). Most of this confusion is caused because administrators often do not clearly explaining the role of the instructional coach to the staff. It is possible that these administrators do not completely understand the role themselves (Steiner & Kowal, 2007).

This study supports these claims of teacher reluctance to trust instructional coaches. Teachers said they were intimidated when the role of the instructional coach was first implemented. They just thought there was one more person to give them one more thing to do. They felt like there was a spy in the school. Once they began meeting with the coach and understanding that his role was to support the teachers, they very quickly accepted this role and used it to their benefit. They gained strategies, resources, learned to plan by looking at data, and integrated strategies that were modeled to make them feel confident in their roles as teachers.

Practical Implications

Having an instructional coach in the middle school gives teachers support that they would most likely never have if they depended on a principal or assistant principal to be involved in curriculum and instruction. Teachers should have a non-threatening person who is like a walking buddy; he is there to work together, share ideas, and provide accountability. Building

this relationship allows teachers to grow professionally. It also allows them to be part of the decision-making process of the changes that occur in their classrooms (Aguilar, 2013).

Georgia has adopted a new teacher evaluation program called Teacher Keys Effectiveness Systems or TKES. This evaluation system has ten performance standards that include professional knowledge, instructional planning, instructional strategies, differentiated instruction, assessment strategies, assessment uses, positive learning environment, academically challenging environment, professionalism, and communication. Schools that have instructional coaches will have more teachers who score as proficient and exemplary because of the instructional support. With the instructional coach involved in planning of instruction and providing professional learning, teachers will have more opportunities to improve their instruction to meet these new standards.

Recommendations for Teachers

Teachers are never too old to learn new strategies. Often, we feel that we have arrived when we achieve some accomplishment. It is always a good practice to share our successes with other teachers so they can learn from our mistakes and triumphs. Proverbs 16:18 states, “Pride goeth before destruction, and an haughty spirit before a fall.” Take help when it is needed. Ask for help when you are unsure. These are not signs of weakness, but they are signs of a teacher who is willing to go to any lengths to be the best teacher his students can have.

Teachers who take advantage of the knowledge and skill of an instructional coach will improve instruction for students. Build a working relationship that allows you to work together for the common good of the students. Working together will bring school improvement to a whole new level. By improving their own skills, teachers will provide better and more engaging

learning for students. When students are engaged and are being taught with the best strategies, their achievement will increase.

Recommendations for Administrators

The most significant issue with administrators is the lack of communication. The instructional coach and the teachers need a clear picture of the role of the instructional coach. The instructional coach should not be viewed as part of the administration; rather, he should be viewed as a valuable resource for teachers. The instructional coach must build a trusting relationship with teachers or the change in the culture will be very limited.

Hire instructional coaches who have great reputations as a teacher. Hire individuals who have enough varied experience that they can help anyone in any academic area with the most recent and scientifically-based strategies. If teachers cannot look at the instructional coach as an expert teacher, he will be set up to experience failure in helping change the culture of the school.

Also, as the instructional leaders of the school, principals should be very involved in the professional learning and charting data. The instructional coach should really be the principal's right-hand man. Together, they should share the vision of instructional goals and support one another in achieving those goals. Behavior problems and learning issues dissolve when good instruction occurs in the school. Parent complaints and teacher complaints also change to compliments when the community sees and hears about the wonderful teaching that is going on in the school.

Recommendations for Instructional Coaches

Finally, instructional coaches are, and will forever be, teachers. Build relationships with the teachers you serve. When they have successes with students, you share in that success. The

role of the instructional coach is vital in creating great school cultures where teaching and learning are priority.

Professional learning is imperative for instructional coaches. Jim Knight, Elena Aguilar, and Katherine Casey have written excellent books about instructional coaching. They address the roles, effective strategies, building relationships, and how to make the best impact on student achievement. These books would make great book studies for the coach and the administrative staff. Read teaching journals and attend professional learning sessions that will inspire you with new strategies that you can share with teachers. Never think you have all the answers. Research and collaborate to find the best solutions to issues that arise.

Recommendations for Central Office Administration

As a school system, there should be concrete guidelines and expectations for teachers who apply for jobs as instructional coaches. For an instructional coach to be effective in helping to bring change into a school, he or she must have a legitimate and varied amount of classroom experience. Peer educators are less likely to build good working relationships with an instructional coach who they feel is a novice teacher. Becoming a coach implies that one is well-versed in his field. Teachers will be more accepting of help from a proven winner.

Limitations

Limitations in this study derive from the lack of diversity available for this study. All of the participants were Caucasian. Most of the teachers who agreed to participate were language arts and social studies teachers. There were only two math teachers who participated.

Another limitation was that all these teachers work in a small school that has a family feel. The staff at this school, from the principal to the custodians, supported one another like a

family. In a larger school with a greater number of diverse teachers and varied personalities, I believe that the potential for more assorted responses would be greater.

Recommendations for Future Research

This study sought to understand how teachers perceive the role of the instructional coach and if the role made any impact on student achievement. Future research that would be interesting would be to determine if instructional coaches with particular content backgrounds would be more effective than an instructional coach with a general education background. In other words, would an instructional coach with a math content background be better equipped to support math teachers? Currently, the instructional coaches in this system are hired to support all content areas with effective, scientifically-based strategies with the idea that each content teacher knows his subject area.

Replicating this study in a more urban area would be interesting. In an urban area, the diversity of the population and socioeconomics could make a profound difference in the results of this study. If the school is extremely large, one instructional coach might not be able to provide as much individual attention to teachers' needs.

Another recommendation is to conduct this same research at the high school level. The teachers in high school must teach rigorous content. An instructional coach in a high school would have a difficult time modeling in content areas without having a content background or even high school teaching experience. An instructional coach could teach the staff new strategies, but might have a difficult time demonstrating these strategies in a chemistry or calculus class.

Finally, a quantitative study could be conducted on the effectiveness of instructional coaching on student achievement in middle school. This study would allow teachers to see the

professional learning that was conducted and the student response through data collection of formative and summative assessments. A researcher could measure the impact of instructional coaching and effective strategies.

Summary

The purpose of this study was to determine middle school teachers' perspectives on the role of the instructional coach in student achievement. Thirteen participants shared their experiences through journals, interviews, and a focus group. These teachers shared their apprehensions of beginning to work with the instructional coach but also shared how that soon dissolved into a great working relationship. They viewed the instructional coach as a valuable resource to support their efforts in improving instruction. Collaboration meetings with their fellow teachers and the instructional coach helped them pinpoint students who needed different instructional strategies, and they worked together to help those students master the state mandated standards. The most reflected practice of the instructional coach is modeling. Teachers loved seeing the instructional coach providing them with new ideas in the front line. That made teachers feel supported while making them feel like an instructional team. These teachers believed that having an instructional coach in their school made an impact on student achievement by helping teachers provide the best instruction possible.

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APPENDIX A

Timeline and Budget

December 2012- Complete all course work and the Comprehensive Exam (\$3,000)

December 2014- Defend dissertation proposal and submit plan to IRB for approval (\$600)

January 2015- Seek approval for the research site

February 2015- Conduct research (\$0)

March-May 2015- Write dissertation (\$0)

June 2014- Peer Review and corrections (\$1000)

July 2015- Defend dissertation (\$1000)

August 2015- Graduation (\$500)

APPENDIX B

Consent Form

December 2014

Dear Teachers of the Pleasant Valley School System:

I am a student at Liberty University. I am working on my doctoral degree in Curriculum and Instruction. My research topic deals with the role of the instructional coach and your perspectives of the instructional coach.

For my qualitative research project, I will be conducting interviews with teachers, asking teachers to participate in a focus group, and asking teachers to complete a journal of experience with the instructional coach. This data will be used to assess teachers' perspectives on the role of the instructional coach in academic achievement.

The data that is collected will become the property of the researcher; however, any results may be shared with teachers, administrators, or instructional coaches. Information gleaned in this process will be kept confidential and only disclosed with written permission from the Pleasant Valley School System. Data will be controlled according to the guidelines specified by the American Psychological Association.

If you have any questions, please contact me at phone number or email address.

Thank you for your consideration,

Tullie (Toby) Westmoreland, Ed.S.

Assistant Principal

Tullie, I have read and I understand the information provided above. I agree to participate in your study, and I realize I may discontinue my participation at any time.

Participant's Name: _____ School: _____

Participant's Signature: _____ Date: _____

APPENDIX C

Focus Group Questions

- 1) How does the instructional coach provide professional learning in your school?
- 2) What strategies incorporated by the instructional coach do you feel have made the greatest impact on student achievement?
- 3) Has modeling from the instructional coach helped in your classroom instruction? (Piaget-Constructivism)
- 4) When the instructional coach observes in your class, what is the purpose of feedback? How does it make a difference in your classroom instruction? (Vygotsky- Sociocultural Approach)
- 5) Do professional learning meetings or instructional observations have a greater influence on your use of new instructional strategies? (Vygotsky- Sociocultural Approach)
- 6) When you sit down with the instructional coach to disaggregate data from benchmarks, student work, or state assessments, how do the meetings help you plan for instruction?
- 7) How has the instructional coach supported you in an area where you felt you were struggling? (Vygotsky- Zone of Proximal Development)
- 8) Recall the first time you implemented a new strategy the instructional coach provided and you saw positive student outcomes?

APPENDIX D

Teacher Interview Questions

- 1) What academic area do you primarily teach?
- 2) How many years have you been teaching?
- 3) What do you see as the role or job responsibilities of the instructional coach?
- 4) What are the benefits of having an instructional coach in your school?
- 5) How did the idea and practice of professional learning and instructional support change when an instructional coach was employed?
- 6) What were your initial feelings of having an instructional coach monitoring your lesson plans, offering to model lessons in your classroom, looking at your state and local assessment scores, and helping you plan differentiation to meet students' needs based on the data?
- 7) How has collaboration with the instructional coach changed or impacted your instruction? (Vygotsky- Sociocultural Approach)
- 8) How has the instructional coach supported you in content knowledge or instructional strategies where you were personally struggling? (Vygotsky- Zone of Proximal Development)
- 9) Instructional coaches model lessons, observe teachers teaching, and provide teachers with feedback. What kind of impact has this made in your personal classroom or teaching assignment?
- 10) In what ways does the instructional coach help you implement new strategies that have been part of professional learning? (Piaget- Constructivism)

11) In what ways has the instructional coach helped you improve student academic achievement?

APPENDIX E

Journal Template

1. How has the instructional coach been involved in your lesson planning and instruction this week? (Vygotsky- Sociocultural Approach)

2. What key instructional strategies have you used this week in class that you learned from professional learning with the instructional coach? (Piaget- Constructivism)

3. What impact have the new strategies had on student achievement?

4. How has the instructional coach supported your personal instructional practices this week (modeling, observing with feedback, planning using data)? (Vygotsky- Zone of Proximal Development)

