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Abstract

This action research project examined teachers' perceptions of instructional coaches at a public, rural school in central Iowa. Thirty teachers participated in a confidential survey which examined their coaching experiences, their perceptions about coaching barriers and strategies to overcome those barriers. After the surveys were analyzed, six of the teachers were invited to engage in a follow-up interview to further explore common themes. One notable difference between teachers was found in the perceived role and responsibilities of an instructional coach. Findings of the study suggest that a lack of school structure and norms can greatly impede the teachers' perceptions of an instructional coach.

Document Type

Thesis

Degree Name

Master of Education (MEd)

Department

Graduate Education

First Advisor

Patricia C. Kornelis

Keywords

teachers, perception, instructional coaches, public schools, rural schools, Iowa

Subject Categories

Curriculum and Instruction | Education

Comments

Action Research Project Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Master of Education

TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS OF INSTRUCTIONAL COACHES

Teachers' Perceptions of Instructional Coaches

by

Melanie Sharp

B.A. University of Northern Iowa, 2002

Action Research Project
Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the
Degree of Master of Education

Department of Education
Dordt University
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May 2022

Acknowledgements

In completing this action research project, I would first like to thank God for granting me the countless blessings and strength to persevere through the tough times. An enormous thanks to my husband and children for understanding my commitment to this project and supporting me along the way. Accomplishing this project could not have happened without the encouragement from my friends who listened to my progress, offered advice, and prayed for me. I would also like to thank my colleagues for their willingness to participate in the study and their desire to support me along the way.

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Abstract

This action research project examined teachers' perceptions of instructional coaches at a public, rural school in central Iowa. Thirty teachers participated in a confidential survey which examined their coaching experiences, their perceptions about coaching barriers and strategies to overcome those barriers. After the surveys were analyzed, six of the teachers were invited to engage in a follow-up interview to further explore common themes. One notable difference between teachers was found in the perceived role and responsibilities of an instructional coach. Findings of the study suggest that a lack of school structure and norms can greatly impede the teachers' perceptions of an instructional coach.

In response to increased accountability placed on schools from the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) of 2001, many states and districts turned to instructional coaches as a means of improving individual and system-level instructional change (Woulfin & Rigby, 2017, p. 1). Teachers needed to learn new ways of teaching, often much different than their current practices. To respond to the demands of NCLB, teachers needed embedded learning opportunities that included instructional coaches and content experts (Woulfin & Rigby, 2017, p. 1). “Armed with specific instructional and content expertise, coaches have the potential to conduct this heavy educative lifting to bring about instructional change” (Woulfin & Rigby, 2017, p. 1). The purpose of instructional coaches is to serve as partners with teachers to help them improve teaching and learning so students are more successful. “A coach can foster conditions in which deep reflection and learning can take place, where a teacher can take risks to change her practice, where powerful conversations can take place, and where growth is recognized and celebrated” (Aguilar, 2013, para. 3)

There are many powerful benefits of engaging in instructional coaching. The most comprehensive study on coaching was conducted in 2004 by Annenberg Foundation for Education Reform. This study provided powerful evidence in favor of instructional coaching. The results of the study found that effective coaching encouraged partnership and reflective practices between the coach and the teacher. Working with a coach allowed teachers to apply their learning more deeply, frequently, and consistently than teachers working alone (Aguilar, 2013, para. 5). A second result from the study found that effective professional learning increased positive cultural change in a school. This new culture encouraged teachers and coaches to continuously grow together to improve their craft and make better-informed decisions about student’s learning (Aguilar, 2013, para. 6). The report also found that when teachers worked with

coaching programs that used data to drive decisions, they were better able to make decisions based on evidence rather than individual opinions (Aguilar, 2013, para. 7). Lastly, the report found that coaching helped to create conversations built around change and ways to improve student outcomes (Aguilar 2013, para. 9).

However, are a variety of barriers that may stand in the way of teachers utilizing coaching services. Zwart et al., (2009) explained that change is a hard process especially in terms of teachers being exposed to new forms of professional development and expected outcomes (p. 13). Their study found that along with change comes the fear and anxiety of being observed by a colleague (p. 14). Trust was listed as an important factor when it comes to coaching because a teacher needs to trust the new strategies the coach is bringing into the class as well as the feedback the coach has to offer (Zwart et al., 2009, p. 10). Mason's (2007) research supported this idea and explained that if teachers do not see validity in what the coach is doing then coaching will just be viewed as another short-lived professional development idea that teachers do not want to invest in (p. 76).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to gather information about teachers' perceptions of instructional coaches at all levels, grades K-12, to determine the barriers that stand in the way of teachers utilizing them. The following research questions were explored in this study:

1. What do teachers at this school district perceive as important characteristics of effective instructional coaches?
2. What are teachers' perceptions of the benefits of instructional coaching at this school district?
3. What barriers do teachers at this school district perceive as standing in their way of utilizing instructional coaches?

4. What strategies do teachers at this district perceive as important to enabling instructional coaches?

Definition of Terms

The following terms are used in this study. These definitions are provided for clarity and are the researcher's own unless otherwise specified.

Impact Cycle- "A coaching process that coaches use to partner with teacher to help them have a positive impact on students' learning and well-being. The three stages of the cycle are identify, learn, improve" (Knight, 2018 p. ix).

Instructional Coach- an educational leader who partners with teachers to help them improve teaching and learning so students become successful (Knight, 2018, p. 2)

Instructional Playbook- "is a concise, precise document that summarizes the essential information about evidence-based teaching strategies that instructional coaches use to support teachers and students" (Knight, Hoffman, & Harris, 2020, p. 3).

Partnership Approach- "A coaching relationship that is based on the principles of equality, choice, voice, dialogue, reflection, praxis, and reciprocity" (Knight, 2007a, p. 37).

Pedagogical Knowledge- "consists of an understanding and experiential base of how students learn with an ability to effectively use questioning and classroom management techniques" (Anderson & Wallin, 2018, p. 54).

Principal Support- "being knowledgeable about the role, responsibilities, functions, and goals of an instructional coach in order to provide support" (Mangin & Stoelinga, 2010, p. 53).

Literature Review

The standards movement of the 1990's Race to the Top and the Common Core reform placed instructional improvements at the center of reform efforts and further, the No Child Left

Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB) brought into the spotlight the way teachers teach and students learn. Knight (2007b) explained that after the passing of the No Child Left Behind Act, schools started looking for proven ways to improve students' scores and to help their schools achieve Annual Yearly Progress (AYP) (p. 1). The old model of "sit and get" professional development was not effective in the classroom and left teachers feeling frustrated and disappointed in the system (Knight, 2007b, p. 1). In response to NCLB Act, millions of dollars in federal funding were allotted to instructional coaching and policymakers turned their focus on the instructional practices taking place in the classroom (Woulfin & Rigby, 2017, p. 1). The pressure to improve instruction in schools is greater now than ever in the history of American education (Knight, 2007b, p.1).

Research studies on school organizations showed that coaches can support teacher learning and change in classroom instruction (Knight, 2007a, p .38). The concept of coaching originated from the premise that effective teachers could coach colleagues into becoming effective as well, thereby positively affecting teachers and students" (Anderson & Wallin, 2018, p. 53). "When coaches are trained properly and are confident in their work, they can achieve positive outcomes for principals, teachers, and students" (Anderson & Wallin, 2018, p. 54). While the research showed that instructional coaches can and do make a difference in instructional practices, there are still many teachers who are reluctant to invite instructional coaches into their classroom.

Characteristics of Effective Coaches

There are many known characteristics of an effective coach. Knight (2007b) focused on a coach being respectful, patient, honest, and most importantly, having the ability to provide honest feedback (p. 15). Walkowiak's (2016) research supported these ideas and offered up four

common characteristics of successful coaches: good communicators, trustworthy, value teacher ideas, and focused on student learning (p. 1).

Communication

Communication practices were listed as one of the most important elements of coaching as Anderson and Wallin (2018) explained that the coach and teacher should have a shared partnership where both partners are comfortable sharing ideas and making decisions together (p. 55). Knight (2011) also supported the idea of good conversations by explaining that coaches and teachers should engage in dialogue that allows both partners to have a voice instead of one pushing for their point of view to be heard (p. 2). A study conducted by Zwart, et al. (2009) looked at the characteristics of peer coaching, perceived through the digital diaries of teachers who had worked with coaches. A common theme in the diaries was that teachers valued the peer coaching relationship because it allowed them to have open trusted conversations about classroom experiences which brought about feedback on students' behaviors and teaching strategies (p. 10).

Trustworthy

The idea of having an instructional coach in the room can seem intimidating to many teachers if there is not an established trust (Walkowiak, 2016, p. 2). In a study conducted by Zwart, et al. (2009) teachers explained that change brought a lot of fear, and it was important that they have a safe and respectful environment established to discuss ideas and opinions openly (p. 10). This study also showed that once a teacher feels that they are working in a trusted environment, they are more willing to share their own opinions and more open to listening to new ideas (p. 10). Anderson and Wallin (2018) explained that coaches need to recognize that every teacher is unique in their practices and needs. These authors further explained that because

the relationship is built on trust, it is important for teachers to watch coaches fail, reflect and reteach (p. 54). Coaches must be flexible and equipped with the right tools and skills to address the level of support that each teacher needs.

Value Teacher Ideas

Coaches must demonstrate humility and value for teaching ideas. One way to show value for teachers' ideas is to start with small suggestions for change. Coaches should never come in and try to redo a lesson (Walkowiak, 2016, p. 2). The Zwart et. al, (2009) study found that teachers were more willing to experiment with new teaching strategies if they felt like a coach was coming in to observe but not evaluate their teaching (p. 10). In addition, the study showed that taking part in a coaching cycle allowed teachers to share their own ideas while also learning new strategies from the coach (p. 10). Teachers explained that these conversations were only productive because there was a mutual respect for ideas (p. 10). Anderson and Wallin (2018) explained that valuing a teacher's opinion, builds trust and encourages them to improve their practices in the classroom which in return improves student learning (p. 54).

Focused on Student Learning

Finally, an important characteristic of effective instructional coaches is their focus on improved student learning. This evidence should be more than just assessment evidence but overall evidence of a students' understanding or lack of understanding during a given lesson (Walkowiak, 2016, p. 2). "Providing specific examples of student learning or misunderstanding contributes to professional growth and requires analyses of all sources of evidence" (p. 2). Walkowiak (2016) further supported this idea by explaining if teachers know that the conversations will be centered around student learning then there will be improved conversation and better dialogue (p. 2).

Contexts that Can Enable Growth or Create Barriers

Instructional coaches can make a difference in the instructional practices of teachers if they have the essential support and guidance needed to make them successful. When contextual factors are in place, instructional coaches are more likely to be successful. At the same time, if these contexts are not present, it can place barriers in the way of teachers utilizing coaches (Mangin & Stoelinga, 2010, p. 52). The contexts found in the research were the following: content and coaching knowledge, principal leadership, school norms, and school structure (p. 52).

Content and Coaching Knowledge

When coaches are properly trained in their work, they can achieve positive outcomes (Anderson & Wallin, 2018, p. 53). In 2010, the standards for Reading Specialist/Literacy Coach recommended that for teachers to be literacy coaches, they should meet the following requirements: have previous teaching experience and a master's degree in reading and writing education (Heinke & Polnick, 2013, p. 50). These authors further explained that education for coaches should include courses that develop expertise in leadership and coaching practices, as well as supervised practicum experience (Heinke & Polnick, 2013, p. 51). The authors shared an example of four coaches they had previously worked with. They found that the two coaches that had obtained a master's degree in reading and a reading specialist certification were far more successful in their roles than the other two coaches that had no specialized training or additional schooling (p. 51). These authors observed that the teachers who worked with the coaches with credentials talked about their knowledge of the content area and instructional strategies and found both coaches to be credible (p. 51). In addition, they also discussed their own instructional practices and how these coaches had influenced their own work. On the other hand, the teachers

who work with the non-credentialed coaches identified very few instructional practices that impacted their teaching and explained that lack of necessary expertise created a barrier between them and the coach (p. 51). Coaching is a challenging position that takes proper training and support from the administration (Heineke & Polinick, 2013, p. 50).

Principal Leadership

Research studies indicate that support from a principal was critical to the success of an instructional coach (Walkowiak, 2016, p. 1). Principals who were knowledgeable about the responsibilities, functions, and goals of teacher leadership were more likely to provide support to the coach. Principals provided support by setting expectations for teachers to improve instruction and to interact with the teacher leader (p. 1). Ippolito and Bean (2019) explained that in schools where coaching is successful, principals have worked hard to develop and maintain a building environment that nurtures the coaching frame of mind (p. 1). Since principals have the overall power to determine how coaches will function in the school, they must develop a theory of coaching and continued support and communicate that theory to their staff (Ippolito & Bean, 2019, p. 2).

In contrast, the lack of principal support creates a barrier between the coach and the teacher. A lack of knowledge and support from the principal communicates to teachers that growth and professional learning are not important (Maging & Stolenga, 2009, p. 3). Mason (2007) further explained that if teachers do not see that principals are supportive of the coach, then they perceive instructional coaches as just another strategy that will come and then go, and they will not invest time in it (p. 76).

School Norms

School norms greatly impact the support for instructional coaches. The coach and principal must work together to clearly define and publicize the role of the coach. Coaches should never be viewed as staff evaluators and principals need to make it clear to the coaches and the teachers that they do not want or expect coaches to evaluate teachers (Mangin & Stoelinga, 2010, p. 49-50). The coach's role needs to be defined as a supportive, collaborative, and problem-solving role with teachers (p. 50).

Not defining the role of a coach creates barriers to trust as coaches are seen as evaluators when they enter the classroom and this makes them lose all credibility (Dewitt, 2020, p. 4). "In the absence of professional norms of collaboration, dialogue, and trust, teachers may be reticent to share instructional practices (Stoelinga, 2008, as cited in Mangin & Stoelinga, 2010, p. 54). Additional research shows that trust is a huge barrier when it comes to teachers feeling comfortable working with a coach. A study conducted by Zwart et al. (2009) indicated that feeling safe and knowing they are working in a trustworthy environment was another main outcome in determining the willingness of a teacher to work with a coach (p. 12). This study further explained that trust comes through reciprocal peer coaching where teachers would alternate between being coached and sharing their own ideas. However, in some cases, this did not happen which left the teacher feeling like the coaching cycle was very one-sided (Zwart et al. 2009, p. 14). Teachers in the study indicated that they needed see the coaching process as a dyad partnership where both the coach and teacher were going through the process and learning from each other (p. 14). Teachers need to trust coaches enough to have those hard conversations about their weaknesses and learning needs without being scared that information is going to go right back to their principal (Heineke & Polinick, 2013, p. 50).

School Structure

Principals need to support coaches by developing time in the schedule for coaches to meet with grade-level or content-specific teachers within the school day (Heineke & Polinick, 2013, p. 50). Principals must build time into the schedule to allow teachers to discuss and share instructional practices. Dedicating this time to teacher leadership communicates the message that institutional improvement is important (Mangin & Stoelinga, 2010, p. 54). Heineke and Polinick (2013) furthered this idea and explained for coaches to make a difference, administrators must create a school structure that values adult learning (p. 50). This might mean using professional development dollars to bring in substitute teachers to allow for extended collaboration between coaches and teachers (p. 50). “Organizational decisions made by administrators must provide the climate, time, and opportunities for teachers and coaches to work together — growing, learning, and problem-solving” (p. 50).

In contrast, time and scheduling can create barriers for both the teacher and coach if there is no purposeful time set aside for collaboration. Mangin and Stoelinga (2010) explained that when coaches are spread too thin, they lack the time and ability to be effective (p. 54). Ippolito and Bean (2019) supported this idea and explained that if coaches are being asked on a regular basis to take on additional responsibilities, their work as a coach gets minimized which sends a message to teachers that coaching is not a priority (p. 2). Coaches and teachers must work together to create an environment of continual improvement. If we want to support coaches and make them impactful, we have to focus on implementation and specific strategies to overcome the barriers (p. 2).

Strategies

Many strategies can inhibit effective instructional coaching; however, the most effective strategies found in the research were focused on having a partnership approach, using effective communication, developing an instructional playbook, and developing a coaching process.

Partnership Approach

The Partnership Approach is based on the principles of equality, choice, voice, dialogue, reflection, praxis, and reciprocity (Knight, 2007a, p. 37). In the Partnership Approach, instructional coaches and teachers are equal partners. Knight (2007a) explained that teachers' opinions must be counted in if they are to be seen as an equal party. Equality means that both parties' opinions are important and worth hearing (p. 41).

The Partnership Approach connects to the characteristic of a successful coach outlined by Anderson & Wallin (2018) indicating that the coach and the teacher should have a shared partnership where both parties are comfortable sharing ideas and working through decisions together (p. 55) Knight (2007a) explained that one reason traditional professional development fails is we take the teacher's choice of learning away which makes them less likely to teach with fidelity and to implement learning strategies and teaching routines (p. 42). Learning should empower and respect the teacher, "Dialogue brings people together as equals so they can share ideas, create new knowledge, and learn" (p. 42). Along with authentic dialogue comes the idea of reflection. When teachers have the freedom to choose what they are learning and implementing in their classroom they are more likely to explore the concept further and actually apply it in their classroom (Knight, 2007a, p. 49). Lastly, Knight believed when coaches expect to get as much as they give, there is mutual respect. Both coaches and teachers should be invested in learning from each other. All of these principles are necessary for an effective partnership

approach and if one is missing or violated, it can greatly impact the coaching relationship (Knight, 2007a, p. 40).

Effective Communication

Effective communication is key to breaking down the barriers of instructional coaching. One of the most valued characteristics of a coach was the ability to have effective communication in a coaching relationship because it allowed them to have hard conversations about the classroom experience (p. 10). Wall and Palmer (2015) offered strategies through Paulo Freire's (1993) conditions for dialogue as a tool for creating powerful collaborations between the coach and the teacher. Having open conversations and reflections allowed the teacher and coach to talk about the role of the coach and how language impacts the coaching process (Wall & Palmer 2015, p. 628). "How could we structure our language in a way that allows us to balance time requirements while also inviting teachers to begin to trust their own beliefs about how children learn?" (Wall & Palmer, 2015, p. 628). Freire (1993) outlined five conditions that must be in place for effective dialogue to occur. Those five conditions are love, humility, faith in humankind, hope, and critical thinking. Freire explained that these elements offer a relationship of mutual trust between dialoguers (Freire, 1993, as cited in Wall & Palmer, 2015, p. 629). To further support the idea of communication, Wall and Palmer (2015) conducted a study where they videotaped the interactions with teachers to study language. Both parties came together twice a month to review the interactions and dialogue used (p. 628). "By capturing our coaching interactions on tape and then viewing and discussing them with each other, we created a space for honest reflection and self-examination that had not previously existed" (p. 628).

Instructional Playbook

Creating an instructional playbook to help communicate instructional priorities to the district prepares coaches to discuss instructional strategies with teachers as a part of the collaboration process (Knight et al., 2020, p. 5). Playbooks are a way to help coaches focus on high-impact teaching strategies so they can then explain those strategies to teachers so the teachers and their students can meet powerful, student-focused goals (p. 5). There are many different strategies available for coaches, but the playbook allows coaches to organize and implement the strategies that have the highest impact (p. 5). Research from Knight (2007b) further explained that instructional playbooks also lead to a deepening in knowledge (p. 6). Teachers are expected to implement so many new strategies but often teachers need additional support to implement the strategy correctly (p.6). Instructional playbooks enable both the teacher and the coach to acquire a new, deeper understanding of the strategy (p. 6). Along with a deeper understanding of the strategy comes new vocabulary. Knight (2007b) explained that many coaches do not realize that there is a learning curve when it comes to key educational terms. The idea of creating a shared language helps clear the way for better conversations (p. 6). Lastly, instructional playbooks foster hope. Knight (2007b) explained that when teachers have hope, they have a goal, they know where they want to go and they know how to get there (p. 7). The idea of a playbook closely aligns Knight's coaching process known as the Impact Cycle.

Coaching Process

The Impact Cycle is a clear, step-by-step process that guides coaches through three stages -- identify, learn improve – to help teachers experience deep learning that they can employ on their own (Knight, 2018b, p. 19). Each step of the process is organized to help coaches and teachers work together to create goals, gather data, and monitor progress (p. 19).

Identify. In the first stage: “identify,” coaches identify the current reality of the room, identify a student-focused goal to work through the problem, and identify a teaching strategy that the teacher can use to try to solve the goal (Kelly & Knight, 2019, para. 4). In the identity stage, coaches and teachers work together to set goals and discuss strategies to use (Kelly & Knight, 2019, para. 4). The idea of goal setting connected back to research from Walkowiak (2016) that indicated effective coaches help teachers set narrow and focused goals which allowed for better communication and common ground for the coach and the teacher (p. 2).

Learn. During the second stage: “learn,” coaches explain and model the strategy to ensure that the teacher has a good understanding of the strategy and the way to differentiate the instruction to meet the needs of all students (Kelly & Knight, 2019, para. 5). During this stage, the coach and the teacher work together to determine how to implement the new strategy (Kelly & Knight, 2019, para. 5). The instructional playbook is helpful during this stage because it allows team members to collaborate to determine the most impactful strategies for the classroom (Knight et al., 2020, p. 36). The playbook offers many approaches and strategies, acknowledging that every student is different and what works for one might not work for the another (Knight et al., 2020, p. 43). Coaches can complete this step by sharing videos, modeling the practices, or having teachers observe the strategy in other classrooms (Kelly & Knight, 2019, para. 5).

Improve. During the last stage, “improve,” the coach works with the teacher to adjust or make changes which may even include changing the teaching strategy (Kelly & Knight, 2019, para.5) The playbook should remain a living document that should change as teachers and coaches collaborate and learn new strategies from each other (p. 47).

Conclusion

Instructional coaches are an increasingly important asset in today's education system. Research has proven that when coaches are trained and utilized correctly, they can help teachers improve instructional practices in the classroom (Anderson & Wallin, 2018, p. 53). Addressing potential barriers that stand in the way of teachers utilizing instructional coaches can help improve the relationships with teachers and increase teacher implementation of this proven practice.

Methods

This was a mixed-method research design (descriptive quantitative-qualitative) study of the general education, K-12 teachers in a small, rural school district in the Midwest. The data was collected in two stages to determine its results: a survey and a series of interviews. In the first stage, teachers were surveyed and then their responses were analyzed to discover coaching experiences, coaching barriers, and strategies to overcome barriers. The survey consisted of two demographic questions, one yes/no, one Likert scale, and four matrix rating scale questions (See Appendix A). The second part of the study was conducted through interviews (See Appendix B). The interviewees were selected based on a good demographic cross-section and the willingness of the participant. The concept of doing an interview following a survey was to better understand specific experiences and responses from teachers (Mulder, 2016, p. 7).

This study was piloted to ensure its intent and to check for feasibility as well validity and reliability. The study was piloted at a local rural district, approximately 20 miles northeast of the study's participant school district. This district was picked because it served a similar population of students and had the same coaching structure as the district participating in this study. Feedback from the pilot group suggested provisions be altered in the first three questions of the

survey to ensure only one option was available. The feedback also suggested that a specific time frame be given to complete the survey.

Participants

The participants for this study came from a public, rural school district in the Midwest. The school serves all grade levels, with approximately 500 students K–12, in one building. All 44 teachers at the district were invited to participate in the survey. Of the 44 teachers, four were instructional coaches and were excluded from the research. Thirty teachers took part in a survey in the first stage of the research and a purposeful sample of six teachers participated in a second phase of the research, a semi-structured interview.

Procedures

The research study began with the researcher being granted permission to conduct the survey by the principal of the elementary/middle school and the principal of the high school. The survey used in the study was created through Google Forms. An explanation of the survey and a timeline were emailed, and a printed copy was placed in the mailbox of each teacher. The timeline for completing the survey was set at one week to ensure that teachers had time to complete the survey and a reminder was sent out via email, mid-week.

After the survey results were collected, the researcher used information from the surveys to gather quantitative data on the four major areas of interest: characteristics of an effective coach, benefits of a coach, barriers to utilizing a coach, and strategies to enabling instructional coaches to gain preliminary analysis of any possible trends.

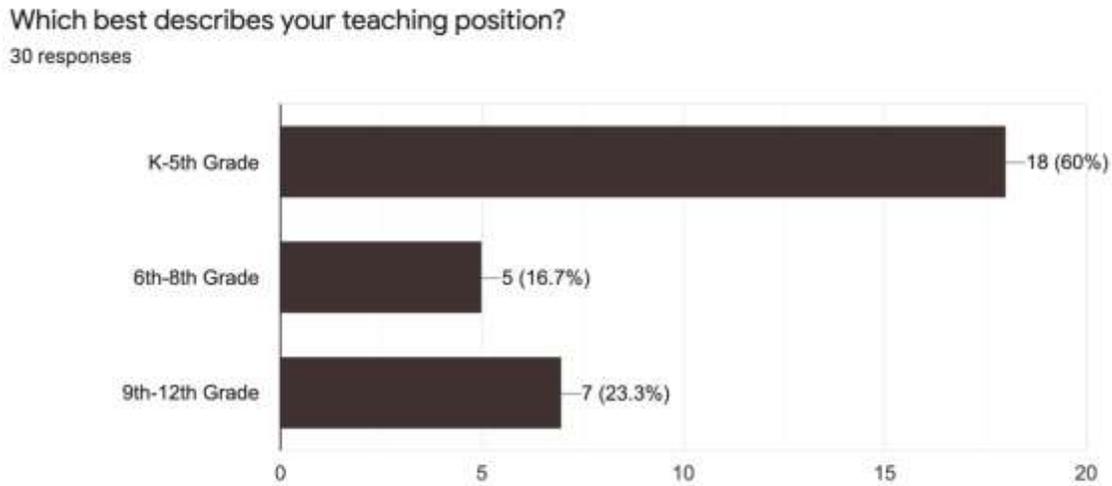
The researcher then selected interviewees based on a good demographic cross-section and the willingness of the participant. To prevent additional stress to the participants, the teachers were given a copy of the interview questions and a consent form two days before the interview took place (See Appendix B & C). In each interview, the participants were asked the

same set of questions. Each interview was recorded and transcribed. The researcher engaged in a mixed coding process using descriptive, conceptual, and In Vivo (direct quotations) on each transcript to better identify shared experiences and themes.

Results

The purpose of this study was to gather information about teachers' perceptions of instructional coaches at all levels, grades K-12, and to determine the perceived barriers that prevent teachers from utilizing instructional coaching. These two research questions framed the study:

1. What do teachers at this school district perceive as important characteristics of effective instructional coaches?
2. What are teachers' perceptions of the benefits of instructional coaching at this school district?
3. What barriers do teachers at this school district perceive as standing in their way of utilizing instructional coaches?
4. What strategies do teachers at this district perceive as important to enabling instructional coaches?

Figure 1*Teaching Experience*

The survey had a response rate of 75% (30 out of 40 teachers). Of the teachers that completed the survey, 60% taught in K-5th grade, 16.7% taught in 6th -8th, and 23.3% taught in grades 9th -12th (see Figure 1).

The first question of the survey asked if teachers had worked with a coach in the past. Of the 30 teachers that completed the survey, 93% had worked with a coach in the past.

Figure 2*Support of an Instructional Coach*

Do you support the use/need of instructional coaches in the building?

30 responses

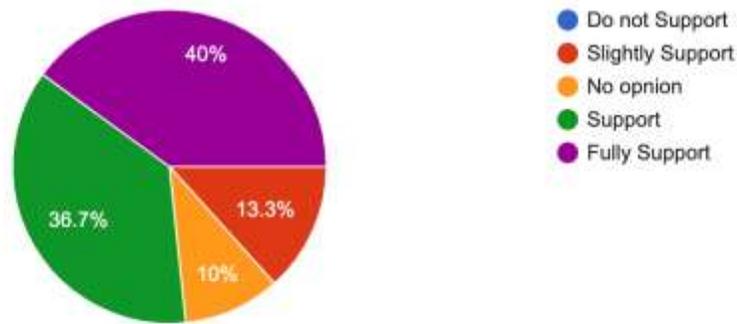


Figure 2 provides information on the general support of instructional coaches in the building. Twenty-three of the 30 teachers said they fully supported/supported the use/need of an instructional coach in the building. Four of the 30 teachers slightly supported the need/use of an instructional coach in the building and three of the 30 teachers had no opinion when asked if they supported the use/need of an instructional coach in the building.

To calculate the results, the surveys were scored, analyzed, and compared with interview answers. Since the survey was made up of four categories including characteristics of a coach, benefits of a coach, barriers to teachers utilizing a coach, and ways to improve the coaching cycle, each section required individual attention and ratings given for each component.

Research Question One: What are the Characteristics of an Effective Coach?**Table 1***Mean Response per Likert-Scale Questions for Characteristics of an Effective Coach*

Characteristics of an effective coach Likert Scale from (1= strongly disagree) to (5= Strongly agree)	Mean	SD
Excellent communicators	4.66	0.47
Provides honest feedback	4.60	0.67
Possess knowledge of the coaching process	4.43	0.56
Flexible	4.46	0.50
Trustworthy	4.83	0.37
Pedagogical experts	3.93	0.63
Respects the opinions/ideas of all teachers	4.50	0.68
Content experts	3.66	0.99
Establishes meaningful working relationships	4.80	0.40
Establishes narrow and focused goals/data-driven	4.16	0.64

Table 1 shows that teachers reported the most significant characteristic of an effective coach as “trustworthy” by a slight margin 4.83 out of 5 compared with the next highest-ranked characteristic of a coach as “establishes meaningful working relationships” (4.80). The standard deviations for both these characteristics, “trustworthy” (0.37) and “establishes meaningful working relationships” (0.40) were low, meaning that all teachers who took the survey agreed that being trustworthy and establishing meaningful relationships were effective characteristics of a coach.

Figure 3

Bar Graph Response per Likert-Scale Questions for Characteristics of an Effective Coach

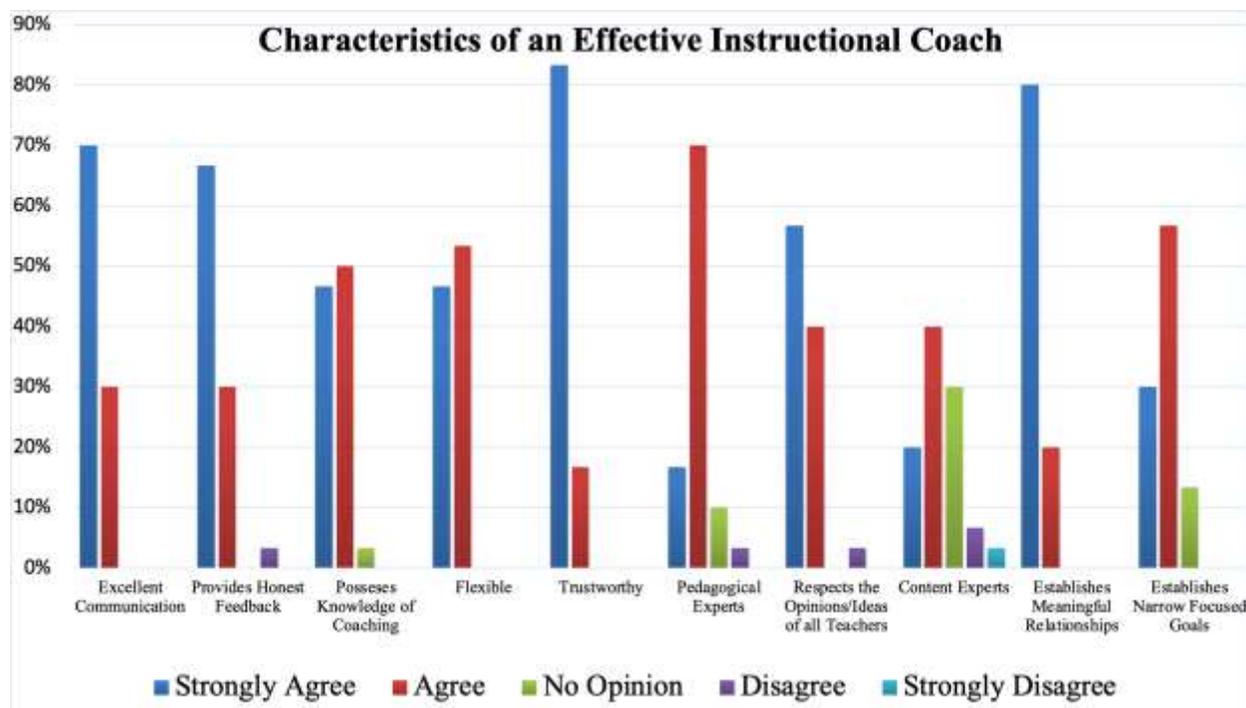


Figure 3 shows the survey responses in the form of percentages to give a better idea of each educator's response. Teachers reported that in four out of the ten characteristics (establishes a meaningful relationship, trustworthy, flexible, and excellent communication), 100% strongly agreed/agreed that those characteristics were ones of an effective instructional coach. In three out of the ten characteristics (respects the opinions/idea of all teachers, pedagogical experts, and provides honest feedback), a very small number (1%) disagreed that these characteristics were those of an effective instructional coach. The characteristic that reported the highest number of disagreements (10%) was "content experts."

Research Question Two: What are the Benefits of Being Coached?**Table 2***Mean Response per Likert-Scale Questions for the Benefits of Being Coached*

The benefits of being coached Likert Scale from (1= strongly disagree) to (5= Strongly agree)	Mean	SD
Exposure to new learning experiences	4.30	0.59
Availability of new resources from coach	4.26	0.58
Getting immediate feedback	4.36	0.61
Coach's modeling of lessons in classroom	4.00	0.69
Availability of help when needed	4.30	0.70
Feeling of collegiality	4.20	0.80
Continuous learning opportunities	4.43	0.50
One-on-one help	4.40	0.62
Ability to have open conversations about classroom experiences	4.66	0.54

Table 2 shows that teachers reported the “ability to have open conversations about classroom experiences” as the most significant benefit to being coached at 4.66 out of 5 with the second lowest standard deviation (0.54) for this question. The next highest ranked benefit of being coached was “continuous learning opportunities” at (4.43) with the lowest standard deviation (0.50). These low standard deviations show that the majority of teachers agreed that these two benefits were among the most important benefits of being coached. A slight margin lower, “one-on-one help” was reported (4.40) with “getting immediate feedback” (4.36) reported as the next highest benefit. The lowest ranked benefit of being coached was “coach’s modeling of lessons in classroom” (4.0) with the third highest standard deviation meaning the teachers were somewhat split on their responses to this question.

Figure 4

Bar Graph Response per Likert-Scale Questions for the Benefits of Being Coached

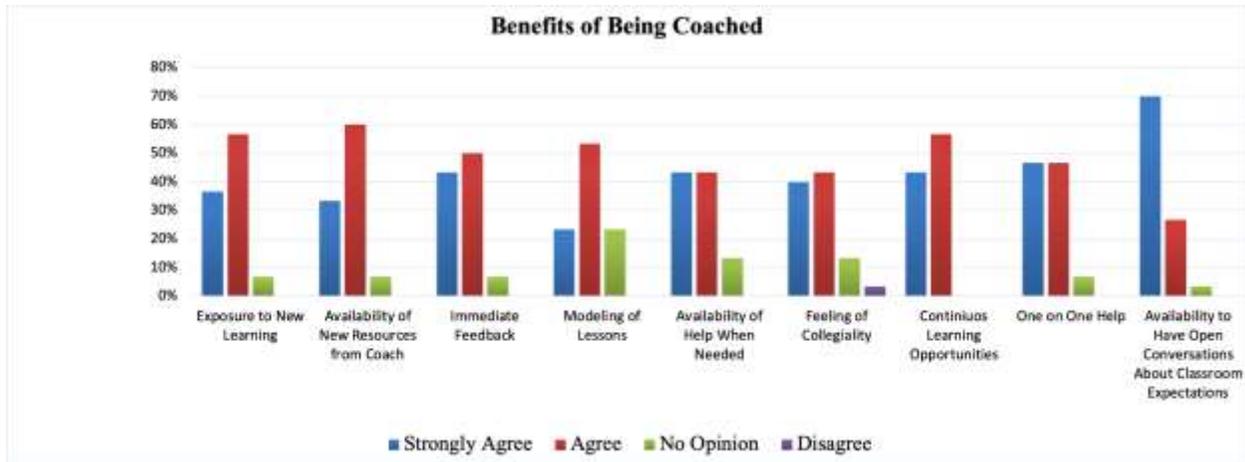


Figure 4 shows that four of the benefits (one-on-one help, immediate feedback, availability of new resources from the coach, and exposure to new learning) had a very similar breakdown in that 93% of teachers reported that they strongly agreed/agreed with the benefit while 3 % disagreed. In contrast, teachers reported the same percentage of strongly agree (23%) to “modeling of a lesson” as they did to disagree (23%) showing the split in educators’ opinions on this benefit. This benefit had the lowest percentages of overall disagreements. In addition, only one educator out of the 30 responded that they strongly disagreed with any of the benefits of being coached “feeling of collegiality.”

Research Question Three: What are the Barriers that Stand in the Way of Teachers Utilizing Coaches?

Table 3

Mean Response per Likert-Scale Questions for Barriers that Stand in the Way of Teachers Utilizing Coaches

Barriers that stand in the way of teachers utilizing coaches Likert Scale from (1= strongly disagree) to (5= Strongly agree)	Mean	SD
Misunderstanding of the role	3.63	0.92
Lack of trust	3.03	1.03
Coaching process not seen as a partnership	3.43	1.00
Coach not viewed as credible source	2.90	0.95
Coach viewed as an evaluator	3.66	1.09
Coach not properly trained or qualified	2.63	0.99
School structure doesn't support the coaching process	3.70	1.11
School norms don't support instructional coaches	3.53	1.04

Table 3 shows that one of the most significant barriers that many of the teachers recognized was “school structure doesn't support the coaching process” with a mean response of (3.7). Teachers were somewhat split on this question as it had a high standard deviation of (1.11). In fact, teachers were split on nearly all of the barriers as the standard deviations of each response were around 1.

Figure 5

Bar Graph Response per Likert-Scale Questions for the Barriers that Stand in the Way of Teachers Utilizing Coaches

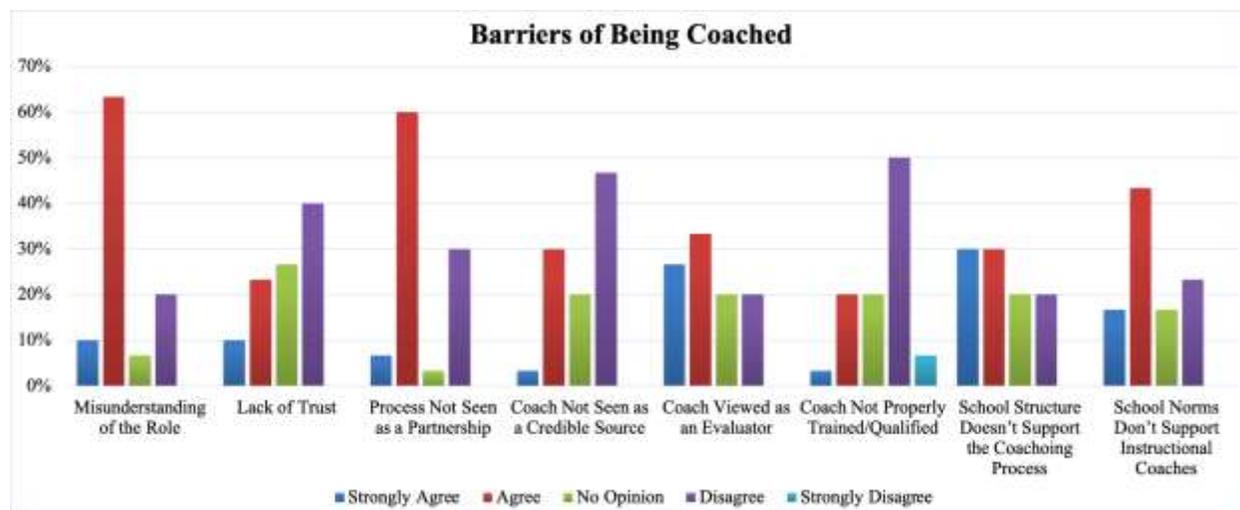


Figure 5 shows that 73% of teachers reported a “misunderstanding of the role.” The next highest reported barrier “process not seen as a partnership” was reported at 67%. The third highest barrier reported at 60% was a “school structure that does not support the coaching process” but 20 % had no opinion and another 20 % disagreed. This data is not consistent with question #4 on the survey where teachers were asked about “ways to improve the coaching process” in which 93% of teachers reported the most significant way to improve the coaching process was to “establish a school structure that supports the coaching process.” Overall, there were a high number of “no opinions” reported by teachers which could be related to the misunderstanding of the role of a coach. In contrast, 57% of teachers reported that a “coach not properly trained /qualified” was not a barrier that concerned them.

Research Question Four: What are the Ways to Improve the Coaching Process?**Table 4***Mean Response per Likert-Scale Questions for Ways to Improve the Coaching Process*

Ways to improve the coaching process Likert Scale from (1= strongly disagree) to (5= Strongly agree)	Mean	SD
Training/Education requirements for coaches	3.70	0.79
Establishing school norms that support the coaching process	4.03	0.49
Establishing a better understanding of the role of the coach	4.03	0.71
Improving communication	3.70	0.91
Creating a partnership approach with the teacher	4.20	0.80
Developing a coaching process	3.80	0.88
Developing an instructional playbook	3.56	0.89
Establish a school structure that supports the coaching process	4.40	0.62

Table 4 demonstrates that teachers indicated that the most significant way to improve the coaching process was “establish a school structure that supports the coaching process” with a 4.40 out of 5. This strategy had one of the lowest standard deviations (0.62) meaning teachers agreed that this strategy could improve the coaching process. The next most significant way to improve the coaching process was “creating a partnership approach with the teacher” (4.20) but this is strategy reported a significantly higher standard deviation (0.80) showing that teachers were split on their response to this question. In contrast, “developing an instructional playbook” was reported as the least significant way to improve the coaching process (3.56).

Figure 6

Bar Graph Response per Likert-Scale Questions for Ways to Improve the Coaching Experience



Figure 6 shows that 94 % of teachers reported “establishing a school structure that supports the coaching process” as the best way to improve the coaching experience. Figure 6 also shows that 90 % of teachers reported “establishing school norms that support the coaching process” as the second-best way to improve the coaching process. Although 10% of teachers had no opinion on this, no teachers disagreed with this improvement. School structure, school norms, and the role of the coach appear to be closely related as Figure 6 shows that 90% of teachers also felt that “establishing a better understanding of the role of the coach” was important.

Qualitative Results

Six teachers were chosen, two from each building (K-5th, 6th-8th, 9th-12) to represent a good cross section of study participants. The interviews took place during the week following the survey. The interviews provided the researcher with the opportunity to gain a deeper understanding of teachers' experiences working with an instructional coach. Teachers were also able to elaborate on their survey responses.

The researcher engaged in a mixed coding process using descriptive, conceptual, and direct quotations on each transcript to better identify shared experiences and themes. The three

overarching themes that emerged were that the role of the instructional coach is not clear, the current structure does not support the coaching process, and that trusting relationships and communication are key to an effective coach.

The Role of the Instructional Coach is not Clear

While all six teachers had different definitions of the role of the instructional coach, all noted that the role of an instructional coach often feels evaluative because most teachers at the school were unaware of the actual job description of the coach. One teacher said, “when you have someone come into your class, but you are not sure if they are there to support you or evaluate you, it instantly causes a panic” (Participant #3, personal communication, January 22, 2021).

Teachers noted that they thought of the role of the coach as being someone who leads professional development. Some of the teachers believed that coaches were in charge of researching and planning professional development, while three of the six teachers believed that the role of the coach was evaluative and included checking to see if teachers were adhering to what was taught in professional development. One educator stated, “I’m not sure if coaches are coming in to see if I’m following the newest teaching strategies presented in professional development or if they are coming in to actually support me as a teacher” (Participant #4, personal communication, January 22, 2022). By contrast, three out of the six teachers thought that having coaches lead professional development was beneficial because in this school district, coaches were teachers as well and, therefore, understood what strategies work in the classroom and how to help teachers implement new strategies in their own classrooms.

Four out of the six teachers also reported that a coach should be a mentor to other teachers and help them grow in their practice. In addition, three of the six teachers explained the

role of the coach as an educator who could model lessons in the class or teach new learning strategies. Two of the six teachers noted that a coach should be able to help find the strengths and weaknesses of the educator and be able to help them grow. For example, one educator mentioned, “a coach should be able to meet teachers where they are and help them be better teachers by continuously supporting what they are doing well and improving their weaknesses” (Participant #6, personal communication, January 22, 2022).

By contrast, all six teachers remarked that they did not expect a coach to be a content expert but did think that the coach also serves as a researcher or someone who is able to find the right resources to be helpful. One educator mentioned,

When I worked with a coach from my previous school, I knew I could go to her anytime for help or resources. If she did not have the resources then she had connections to help me get the resources I needed. It is different here because I cannot just walk to the coach's office anytime because there is not an office and they are not free when I'm free. (Participant #3, personal communication, January 22, 2022)

One educator also remarked that even though she does not expect a coach to be a subject matter expert in her field, it would be helpful if a coach sat in on data day meetings. She added, “having a coach at our data day meetings would make them aware of where my students need help.” This educator went on to explain, “coaches do not need to have all the answers right away, but the data could give them a place to start looking for resources” (Participant #2, personal communication, January 22, 2022).

Current School Structure Does Not Support the Coaching Process

Having a culture that does not support instructional coaches was a theme embedded in all six interviews. The current coaching structure at this school district includes six part-time coaches, who are out of their room 10% of the time (once every other week). One of the biggest barriers noted by all teachers interviewed was the role of the coach is not being clearly defined, which in turn, causes a misunderstanding of the work of a coach. All teachers interviewed mentioned that the school's leaders need to create an environment that values working with a coach and allows time for it.

Two out of the six teachers reported that the current school structure did not mandate coaching. Both of these teachers preferred the coaching cycle be mandatory at some level as they believed some teachers would never take advantage of a coach even if a coach is needed. One educator mentioned,

It's not ideal the way it is set up right now. Coaches need to be in rooms to be effective. If a teacher is not going to allow a coach in then the administration needs to make coaching mandatory at some level. All teachers should want to grow. (Participant #2, personal communication, January 22, 2022)

By contrast, three of the six teachers noted that they wanted coaches to be utilized more often but thought making the coaching cycle mandatory could create even more tension between the role of the coach and the educator because the coaching role would be viewed as evaluative. All teachers agreed that they would like more one-on-one time with a coach but the current schedule they have just does not allow for it. For example, one educator stated, "I would like to have more one-on-one time with a coach. When I am free, they are not, and vice versa. I would like to have someone I can go to during the day with quick questions" (Participant #3,

personal communication, January 22nd, 2022). Three of the six teachers agreed having fewer coaches that were available a higher percentage of the time might improve the consistency of availability.

Trusting Relationships and Communication are Key to an Effective Coach

Every educator interviewed noted the importance of trust and the impact of supportive relationships with coaches. For example, one educator stated,

If you have a trusting, working relationship with an instructional coach a lot can be accomplished. I appreciate collaborating and being able to share/expand on ideas. Teaching can be isolating and frustrating so having someone on your side, someone who truly knows you and appreciates you is great. (Participant #1, personal communication, January 22nd, 2022)

Two teachers reported the need for mutual respect and the time to get to know the coach. This can be problematic as coaches can change each year, making it hard to get to know and trust one.

One teacher stated,

A teacher has to know that the coach supports them and has their best intentions. If you have that then you can let personal differences go and just know that you are working together and doing what's best for the students. (Participant #4, personal communication, January 22nd, 2022)

In addition, all teachers reported not expecting the coach to be a subject matter expert, instead a partner to collaborate and with whom to make decisions.

Analysis

Research Question One: What are the Characteristics of an Effective Coach?

The quantitative data showed that all teachers strongly agreed/agreed that the most significant characteristics of an effective coach were, “trustworthy,” “establishes a meaningful relationship,” and “excellent communicators.” The qualitative data supported this as all six teachers interviewed mentioned a trusting relationship as one of the most significant things in making the coaching cycle effective. In addition, five out of the six teachers interviewed mentioned that having a coach who listened and who was available is key. For example, one educator stated,

Communication and having a coach who knows you and understands you is one of the most important aspects to developing trust. When I see that my coach is in the trenches with me, it builds a kind of trust and relationship that says, we are in this together. (Personal communication, January 22, 2022)

All teachers interviewed noted that having coaches that are also full-time teachers creates the barrier of time, but it also adds an element of trust in knowing the coaches are also teachers who are dealing with the same classroom issues.

The two characteristics that teachers reported as least significant were “content experts” and “pedagogical experts” (See Table #1). To further support this idea, all teachers who were interviewed mentioned that they were not looking for content experts but support to run ideas by. For example, one educator stated, “I know my content so I don’t expect coaches to come into my classroom and be content experts. What I need is another set of eyes, another view on why my students might be struggling with a concept” (Participant #4, personal communication, January 22nd, 2021).

Research Question Two: What are the Benefits of Being Coached?

The quantitative data showed that the majority of teachers reported that “continuous learning opportunities” and “the ability to have open conversation about classroom experiences” were among the top two benefits of being coached (See Table #2). This data was somewhat consistent with the interviews as even though none of the teachers mentioned specific learning opportunities as a benefit of being coached, five out of the six mentioned the importance of communication and having conversations about classroom experiences. One teacher mentioned, “having additional eyes on during any lesson opens the door to conversations about new teaching strategies and approaches that I might not have thought about” (Participant #3, personal communication, January 22nd, 2021).

In contrast, survey results showed that “modeling of a lesson” scored the lowest overall benefit to being coached (See Table #2). This was consistent with the interviews as “modeling a lesson” was not mentioned by any of the six teachers interviewed.

Research Question Three: What Barriers Stand in the Way of Teachers Utilizing Coaches?

The quantitative data showed that the top three barriers in the way of teachers utilizing a coach were “school structure doesn't support the coaching process,” “coach viewed as an evaluator,” and “misunderstanding of the role” (See Table #3). “School structure that doesn't support the coaching process” had the highest mean (3.70) reported in terms of barriers that prevent teachers utilizing coaches yet showed mixed responses overall as 60% agreed that this was a barrier but 20 % had no opinion and another 20 % disagreed. This could be due to confusion about the term “school structure.” All six interviewed teachers stated different aspects of the school structure as barriers preventing teachers from utilizing coaches. For example, one educator stated, “[We] currently have full-time teachers who are also trying to be coaches part of

the time and this isn't working. I need a coach/coaches available when I need help, not two weeks later when I've already moved on to a new concept or unit" (Participant #1, personal communication, January 22nd). Teachers reported that the current coaching structure has four part-time coaches who are full-time teachers but serve as coaches for 10% of their load. All teachers agreed this was a barrier and more one-on-one time with a coach would benefit the coaching cycle immensely.

The next highest ranked barriers preventing teachers from utilizing coaches were "coach viewed as an evaluator" and "misunderstanding of the role of the coach." There seems to be a correlation between these two barriers as teachers reported that because there is not a clear role outlined for the coach, they tend to be seen in an evaluative light. This idea was supported through all six interviews that mentioned that teachers are hesitant to have coaches in their classroom because the role of the coach is not clear. For example, one educator mentioned,

No one wants to feel evaluated but that's the immediate feeling I have when a coach walks in the room. It takes a certain amount of vulnerability to let a coach in. Teaching is already hard and when you take hits in a lot of areas, the idea of taking another hit somewhere else just isn't something you want to sign up for (Participant #1, personal communication, January 22nd, 2022).

All six teachers interviewed mentioned the fact that even though they have been told the instructional coach is not an evaluator, they are still apprehensive when a coach comes into their classroom.

By contrast, on the survey, "coach not properly trained or qualified" was scored as the least significant barrier impacting teachers. This idea was supported by all six interviews where

teachers stressed the idea that they were looking for a support in terms of someone to share ideas with but did not expect the coach to be a subject matter expert. For example, one educator stated, “I know my content so I don’t expect coaches to come into my classroom and be content experts. What I need is another set of eyes, another view on why my students might be struggling with a concept” (Participant #4, personal communication, January 22nd, 2021).

Research Question Four: Ways to Improve the Coaching Cycle?

The quantitative data showed that the most significant way to improve the coaching process was “establish a school structure that supports the coaching process (See Table #4). This was a consistent theme also found in the six teachers interviewed. All six teachers mentioned making instructional coaching cycles more meaningful by allowing more time for teachers to work with coaches. In addition, all six teachers also mentioned that they wanted access to a coach on their time when they needed a coach instead of just when the coach was available.

“Establishing school norms that support the coaching process” and “establishing a better understanding of the role of the coach” was the second best way to improve the coaching process (See Table #4). This data is also supported through all six interviews as all teachers mentioned that the role of the coach in their building was not clear. Three out of the six teachers mentioned that the role of the coach is to lead professional development, while four out of the six teachers felt that the coach is to function as a model teacher. An overall theme was that the role is not clear which causes many teachers to look at it as an evaluative position. One educator mentioned, “I often feel like I’m being critiqued when a coach comes into my room. Maybe it’s because I’m not sure what their purpose is. I’ve been told they aren’t there to evaluate me but it feels like” (Participant #2, personal communication, January 22).

Discussion

Overview of the Study

The purpose of this study was to evaluate teachers' perceptions of instructional coaching at a small, public, rural school district in the Midwest. A review of relevant literature revealed the key factors in making the coaching cycle more effective were the characteristics of a coach, the benefits of being coached, the barriers that stand in the way of teachers utilizing coaches, and the strategies that could be implemented to improve the coaching process. To answer the research questions, the researcher conducted a mixed-methods study where teachers completed a closed-response survey and six teachers participated in semi-structured interviews. Teachers were asked about their perceptions of instructional coaches at all levels, grades K-12, to determine the barriers that stand in the way of teachers utilizing them.

Connections to Other Research on Instructional Coaching

The data collected through surveys and interviews revealed that 93% of teachers had used a coach in the past and teachers generally supported the use/need of an instructional coach in the building.

Characteristics of an Effective Coach

The first research question examined the characteristics of an effective coach. According to Anderson and Wallin (2018), communication practices were listed as one of the most important elements of coaching as the coach and teacher should have a mutual relationship where both voices are being shared and heard (p. 55) Zwart, et al. (2009) supported this idea through the digital diaries of teachers who had worked with coaches. These studies suggest that communication and trust are significantly related. The survey and interview results of this research study supported previous research quite well as 100% of teachers strongly agreed/agreed that being trustworthy and having excellent communication were characteristics of

an effective coach. This data was further supported through the interviews conducted where all six teachers reported that having a trusted relationship made them comfortable engaging in conversations where they shared their ideas.

In contrast, previous research mentioned the importance of coaches being content experts. These previous studies suggested that coaches who are content experts and have a thorough understanding of the subject are more likely to develop narrow and focused goals (Anderson & Wallin, 2018, p. 54). Results from this study varied from previous research in that the two characteristics that teachers reported as least significant were “content experts” (3.66) and “pedagogical experts” (3.93) (See Table 1). In these same survey results, teachers also reported the highest number of disagreements in the category of “content experts” (10%) (See Figure 2). To expand on these results, teachers elaborated on their content and workload and noted that they do not need another educator to be a subject matter expert in their content. Instead, they are looking for another set of eyes, a trusted outside opinion to run things by.

Benefits of Utilizing a Coach

The second research question explored the benefits of being coached. Previous research found communication and a dyad partnership at the top of the benefits (Anderson & Wallin, 2018, p. 55). Further, a previous study explained that coaching should benefit the teacher and coach as they should be going through the process together, learning from each other, and sharing their ideas (Zwart et al., 2009, p. 14). The survey results of this study supported previous research quite well as “the ability to have an open conversation about classroom experiences” was reported as the most significant benefit to being coached with a mean of (4.66) (See Table 2). This data was further supported through interviews where all teachers commented on the idea that having as many eyes on a lesson as possible allows for additional continuous growth and learning. This idea was supported through the survey which reported the next highest-ranked

benefit of being coached as “continuous learning opportunities” at (4.43) with the lowest standard deviation (0.50) (See Table 2).

Another benefit noted through previous research was using a coach to help develop narrow, focused, content-specific goals (Walkowiak, 2016, p. 2). Previous research found that when coaches have a good understanding of the content then they can model effective teaching strategies to help the teacher (Anderson & Wallin, 2018, p. 55). This benefit was not supported by the survey results where “coach’s modeling of lessons in the classroom” was reported as the lowest benefit of being coached with a mean of (4.0) (See Table 2). This benefit was also not supported by teachers who reported in a previous question (What are the characteristics of an effective coach), the two least significant characteristics as “content experts” (3.66) and “pedagogical experts” (3.93). Further, all teachers who were interviewed mentioned that they were not looking for content experts but support to run ideas by.

Barriers that Stand in the Way of Teachers Utilizing Coaches

The third research question explored the barriers that stood in the way of teachers utilizing coaches. Previous research showed that school structure greatly impacts the success of an instructional coach and lack of support from an administrator can greatly impact the effectiveness of a coach (Heinke and Polnick, 2013, p. 54) Previous research also showed that if principals do not develop time and schedules that allow teachers and coaches to meet, then they communicate the message that institutional improvement is not important (Heinke and Polnick, 2013, p.54). Survey results in this study supported previous data and reported the most significant barrier that many of the teachers recognized was “school structure doesn't support the coaching process” (3.7) (See Table 3). All six teachers that were interviewed also supported this data and mentioned that since their district had four part-time coaches who are out of their room only 10% of the time, it makes it hard to find time to meet everyone's schedule.

Previous research also showed that a misunderstanding of the role of a coach can become a huge barrier if the principal and the coach have not worked together to clearly define the role. This research further explained that if norms and trust are not established between the coach and teacher, then teachers are going to be less likely to want to share with a coach (Mangin & Stoelinga, 2010, p. 54). The survey results of this study supported this idea and reported the second highest-ranked barrier that stood in the way of teachers utilizing coaches as “coach viewed as an evaluator” (3.66). This barrier was supported through all six interviewees that mentioned their hesitancy to have a coach in their room when the role of the coach is not defined by the administrator.

By contrast, previous research reported teachers had no interest in working with a coach if they didn't think the coach was properly trained (Mason, 2007, p.76). This idea was not supported by survey results of this study as teachers reported that a “coach not properly trained or qualified” at (2.63) was not seen as a barrier that stood in the way of teachers utilizing coaches (See Table 3).

Ways to Improve the Coaching Process

The last research question explored ways to improve the coaching process. Previous research showed that some of the most effective strategies were having a partnership approach, using effective communication, developing an instructional playbook, and developing a coaching process (Walkowiak, 2016, p. 1) In this study, survey results supported previous data as 90% of teachers reported “creating a partnership approach” as one of the most effective ways to improve the coaching process (See Figure 5).

Previous research reported that creating an instructional playbook could help to communicate instructional priorities and better prepare coaches to have a conversation centered around instructional strategies (Knight et al., 2020, p.5). Interestingly, survey results in this study

did not support this approach as only 56% of teachers supported this idea (See Figure 5). This strategy was reported as the least significant way to improve the coaching process, with the lowest overall mean of (3.56) and a standard deviation of (0.89) (See Table 4). Similarly, in this study, “developing a coaching process” did not score at the top of the list in terms of effective ways to improve the process either. Only 76% of teachers reported “developing a coaching process” as an effective way to improve the coaching process (See Figure 5). Additionally, “developing a coaching process” fell close to the middle with an overall mean of 3.80 and a standard deviation of 0.88, meaning teachers were split on this strategy (See Table 4).

Previous research reported that instructional coaches can make a difference in instructional practices if they have support and guidance from school leadership. Two major contexts that impacted this success were school norms and school structure. (Mangin & Stoelinga, 2010, p. 52). In this study, survey results supported this idea as 93% of teachers reported the most significant way to improve the coaching process as “establish a school structure that supports the coaching process” with a mean of (4.40). This strategy also had one of the lowest standard deviations (0.62) meaning teachers agreed that this strategy could improve the coaching process (See Table 4). This theme was also supported through all six interviews where coaches reported that their current school structure is not supportive of the coaching cycle for many different reasons to include the limited and specific time the coaches are available and a misunderstanding of the role and capabilities of a coach.

Previous research also reported that administrators needed to work with the coach to clearly define the role and work to publicize the role of the coach in the school (Mangin & Stoelings, 2010, p.53). This idea was closely supported by the 90 % of teachers in this study who reported that “creating norms” and “establishing a better understanding of the role of the coach” were effective ways to improve the coaching process (See Figure 5). This idea is further

supported through the survey results where “coach viewed as an evaluator” with a mean of (3.66) was the highest ranked barrier that stood in the way of teachers utilizing coaches (See Table 3). In addition, all six teachers interviewed mentioned the role of the coach was not clearly defined which caused teachers to be hesitant to welcome coaches in.

Recommendations

The study results suggest that school faculty would benefit from clarifying the coaching vision and articulating clear roles and responsibilities of coaches. District leaders should educate teachers on the many ways coaching enables teacher growth. This could be done in the form of professional development with the support of the Area Education Agency (AEA). Educating teachers about the many capabilities of coaches would enable all teachers to hold a common understanding of the role of a coach (Woulfin & Rigby, 2017, p. 5).

School faculty would also benefit from building time into the schedules of teachers and coaches so they could meet regularly. Making the time for teachers and coaches to have one-on-one interactions is what brings about change (Anderson & Wallin, 2018, p. 57). Allowing time in the schedule for teachers to meet with a coach will help teachers understand how to make decisions about assessments and different teaching strategies (p. 57). “Helping teachers to make data-driven decisions is one of the best uses of an instructional coach’s time (Anderson & Wallin, 2018, p. 58)

With the allotted time for coaches and teachers to meet, the school faculty would benefit from adopting a coaching cycle to guide the coaching process. Implementing a coaching cycle could improve the quality of instruction as well as build confidence in teachers and coaches (Woulfin & Rigby 2017, p. 5). Knight’s (2018) Impact Cycle would be an excellent coaching cycle to implement as it offers specific guidelines and resources for both the teacher and the coach. One of the major findings in Knight’s (2018) research was that coaches will not succeed

unless teachers and coaches both clearly see what is happening in the classroom (p. 27).

Allowing time for teachers to plan with coaches regularly will help both the teacher and the coach to gather a clear picture of the reality which would establish a baseline for growth.

(Knight, 2018, p. 27).

Limitations

Results of this study are limited by the size and diversity of the participating school district. The size of the single school district was relatively small compared to neighboring districts which may have impacted the teachers' experiences working with a coach. In addition, instructional coaching models tend to vary from district to district and site to site. Lastly, the researcher of this study worked as a coach in the same building as the participants, which may have impacted their responses.

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Appendix A

Survey

The purpose of this survey is to gain a better understanding of what potential barriers stand in the way of teachers utilizing instructional coaches as well as what strategies might be available to break down coaching barriers to improve the relationships with teachers and increase teacher implementation of this proven practice. Please read the questions carefully and select the option that most accurately describes your experience.

1. Which best describes your teaching position:

1. K-5th
2. 6th-8th
3. 9th-12th

2. Which best describes your teaching experiences?

1. 1-5 years
2. 6 -10 or more
3. 10 plus years

3. In your teaching career, have you worked directly with an instructional coach

1. Yes
2. No

4. Do you support the use/need of instructional coaches in the building?

1. Do not support
2. Slightly support
3. Support
4. Fully support

5. Reasons someone might take advantage of an instructional coach are

Reason	Strongly Agree (5)	Agree (4)	No Opinion (3)	Disagree (2)	Strongly Disagree (1)
Needed help with a strategy					
My principal recommended it					
The instructional coach was teaching something interesting					
Struggling with student engagement					
Needed help reaching a personal goal for the classroom					

6. The benefits of being coached are

Benefits	Strongly Agree (5)	Agree (4)	No opinion (3)	Disagree (2)	Strongly Disagree (1)
Learning a new strategy					
Availability of resources from coach					
Getting Immediate feedback					
Coach's modeling of lessons in classroom					
Availability of help when needed					
Feeling of collegiality					
Continuous learning opportunities					
One-on-one help					

7. Barriers that stand in the way of teachers utilizing coaches are

Reason	Strongly Agree (5)	Agree (4)	No Opinion (3)	Disagree (2)	Strongly Disagree (1)
Misunderstanding of the role					
Lack of trust					
Not seen as a dyad partnership					
Coach not a credible Source					
Coach viewed as an evaluator					
Coach not properly trained/qualified					

8. Ways to improve the coaching experience?

Reason	Strongly Agree (5)	Agree (4)	No Opinion (3)	Disagree (2)	Strongly Disagree (1)
Training for coaches					
Outlining the role of the coach					
Improving communication					
Creating a partnership approach with the teacher					
Developing a coaching process					
Creating an instructional playbook					
Building more time in the schedule for teachers to work with a coach					

Appendix B

Interview Questions

1. Tell me about your teaching background.
 - How many years have you been teaching?
 - How many years have you been teaching in your current district?
 - What grade levels have you taught?
 - What grade level are you currently teaching?
 - What motivated you to become a teacher?
2. What do you see as the role or job responsibilities of the instructional coach?
3. What are the benefits of having an instructional coach in your school?
4. Describe your experience working with an instructional coach, has working with a coach impacted your practice? (If yes, in what ways?)
5. Why do you think that some teachers may feel hesitant or feel anxious when it comes to working with a coach?
6. How do you think the coaching program could be improved?
7. Is there anything that you would like to add with regard to the coaching program in your district?

Appendix C

Informed Consent Form

Researcher: Melanie Sharp

Information and Purpose: The interview, for which you are being asked to participate in, is a part of a research study that is focused on examining the experiences and perceptions of K-12th grade teachers with instructional coaches. The purpose of this study is to gain a better understanding of what potential barriers stand in the way of teachers utilizing instructional coaches as well as what strategies might be available to break down coaching barriers to improve the relationships with teachers and increase teacher implementation of this proven practice.

Your Participation: Your participation in this study will consist of answering five interview questions about your experience with instructional coaches at the Lynnville-Sully school district.

Benefits and Risks: The benefit of your participation in this study will be the contribution of information to the school community about teachers' perspectives on instructional coaches and how to improve the practice. The findings of this study may benefit you, incoming teachers, and present colleagues. There are no known risks associated with participating in the study.

Confidentiality: The interview results will be analyzed for themes. Your name and identifying information will not be associated with any part of the written report of the research. The information obtained from the interview will be published as part of the researcher's action research project but will be presented as aggregate data.

If you have any questions, please call me, Melanie Sharp, at 641-417-9688. You can also email me at sharp@lshawks.com. If you have any additional questions, you can contact my thesis advisor, Dr. Patricia Kornelis, at Pat.Kornelis@dordt.edu.

By signing below, I acknowledge that I have read and understand the above information. I am aware that the experiences I share may be used in the written research while maintaining my anonymity. Your signature below indicates that you have decided to participate.

Signature _____ Date _____