The Experiences and Perceptions of Instructional Coaches in a Large Urban City: A Phenomenological Study

Submitted by

Sadiyah Lewis-El

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

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APPROVED BY:

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Abstract

The purpose of this phenomenological study is to understand the experiences and perceptions of instructional leadership for instructional coaches in a large, urban city. The theories guiding this study are Hallinger's theory on instructional leadership, providing a lens for understanding how instructional leadership may be both perceived and enacted by instructional coaches, as well as Bandura's self-efficacy theory, offering insights into how instructional coaches' experiences of instructional leadership may impact their performance. A qualitative research design was used to allow for an in-depth exploration of the phenomenon. A sample of 10 instructional coaches across K-12 schools in a large urban setting in the northeastern United States were interviewed to examine the various experiences of instructional leadership within different organizational structures. A sample of 15 teachers who collaborate with the instructional coaches participated in focus groups to explore how the instructional coaches' instructional leadership is perceived. Both sets of data were transcribed, coded, and thematically analyzed. Three central themes emerged from the data, with findings indicating that standardization of instructional coaches' responsibilities and inclusion in a distributive instructional leadership framework may support instructional coaches' self-efficacy, success, and ultimately their experiences and perceptions of leadership.

Keywords: instructional coaching, instructional leadership, school leadership, self-efficacy

Dedication

I dedicate this dissertation to my loved ones, who helped me through this journey in ways seen and unseen.

To my father, Robert Ellerbe, who instilled a love of academics in me at an early age and took an earnest interest in my dissertation journey. I love you!

To my children, Samaria, Derrick Jr., and Serenity. You all have had to sacrifice much throughout my doctoral journey. Thank you for your sacrifice; may I return it back manifold. I love you more deeply than you could ever know.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Overview

Although instructional leadership is a relatively new concept in American education, it plays a vital role in a school's overall functioning (Cuban, 1988; Hallinger, 2005; Hallinger & Murphy, 1985). Instructional leadership influences the caliber of teaching, learning, and the general learning environment in a school, thereby impacting teacher performance and student outcomes (Hallinger, 2005; Hallinger & Murphy, 1985; Leithwood, 1994; Shatzer et al., 2014). Instructional coaches can be integral members of an instructional leadership team; unfortunately, many instructional coaches experience various impediments to enacting this role (Galey-Horn & Woulfin, 2021; Miller et al., 2019). In this chapter, a contextual background of instructional leadership and instructional coaches will be explored, including the historical, social, and theoretical contexts. The research problem, specific research questions, purpose of the study, and significance of the research are included in this chapter. Relevant definitions for the reader will be provided. Finally, a summary will conclude the chapter.

Background

A cursory background on instructional leadership and instructional coaching is necessary to understand how instructional coaches may be hindered in their instructional leadership. The following section will provide such a contextualized background. Specifically, it will contain a summary of the historical, social, and theoretical contexts of instructional coaches as instructional leaders.

Historical Context of Instructional Leadership

Instructional leadership is a relatively new concept, with its historical basis in school

leadership. In the 19th century United States, urban schools grew from one- or two-room buildings to multiple-room buildings in response to an increase in population (Rousmaniere, 2007). Larger buildings with more students required a more centralized system of management; school leadership began in the form of a teacher managing the schoolhouse and the students within the schoolhouse (Rousmaniere, 2007). Eventually, this role transformed into that of a head-teacher, then a teaching-principal, and finally a building principal (Hallinger, 1992). Each step in the evolution of school leadership lessened leaders' instructional duties and increased their managerial and administrative responsibilities, such as overseeing student discipline and hiring staff. Although the only prerequisite for 19th century school leaders was prior teaching experience, by the early 20th century school principals needed to meet certain standards and qualifications to be considered for the role (Hallinger, 1992). In the 1950s and 1960s, most states had academic qualifications for aspiring principals, although little to none of the preparation for school leaders focused on their ability to instructionally lead a school (Rousmaniere, 2007).

An examination of the impact of school leadership evolved out of an examination of student outcomes. Educational studies in the 1970s and early 1980s noted a disparity in student outcomes across the nation (Ravitch, 1990). Research during this period showed that, when controls for various demographic variables were put in place, student achievement in some schools consistently outperformed those in other comparable schools. This led researchers to investigate these "effective schools" in an attempt to identify the commonalities among these schools that led to their success. One of the major conclusions of the "effective schools" research was that the leadership enacted by a school's principal was a significant factor influencing student outcomes (Hallinger, 2005). These principals directly influenced the quality of instruction and indirectly influenced student learning in their schools in various ways. These

effective school principals were deemed the instructional leaders of their school, with the facilitation of teaching and learning to be a core component of their professional responsibilities (Hallinger, 2005). Thus, instructional leadership saw its rise in the 1980s as educational leaders and various educational stakeholders sought ways to improve student learning and academic performance.

Instructional leaders sought ways to improve teachers' instructional practices, ultimately increasing student achievement in schools. A logical vehicle for this improvement was professional development and training sessions for teachers. Unfortunately, school leaders and educational researchers across the country found that many professional development efforts did not lead to long lasting improvements in teaching or learning (Ravitch, 1990; Showers & Joyce, 1996). To sustain ongoing improvement, teachers needed ongoing professional development, assistance\ implementing best instructional practices, and feedback on their instruction. Peer coaching models were introduced to address some of the shortcomings of other reform efforts (Showers & Joyce, 1996). The peer coaching model hinged on the supposition that pairing teachers with expert peer consultants would allow for ongoing modeling of new skills, practicing new skills, and receiving feedback on the use of new skills (Baker & Showers, 1984; Showers, 1982). This, in turn, would lead to longer-lasting and more proficient implementation of new practices than single-event training. Research on the instructional coaching model confirmed that regular and consistent coaching experiences result in more transfer of newly learned instructional practices than training alone (Baker & Showers, 1984; Showers, 1982; Showers, 1987).

Thereafter, instructional coaching became a core vehicle of instructional improvement and increased student achievement in many schools. Although many different models of instructional coaching were developed, nothing in the way of a standard definition or universal

qualifications for instructional coaching coalesced in the United States. Instructional coaching has been implemented in a variety of ways; instructional coaches' experiences have varied widely (Brandmo et al., 2021; Comstock & Margolis, 2021; Eadens & Ceballos, 2023; Galey-Horn & Woulfin, 2021; Munson & Saclarides, 2022). While some instructional coaches are core members of an instructional leadership team and critical to schools' instructional well-being, other instructional coaches face numerous barriers to effectively impact teaching and learning.

Social Context of Instructional Leadership

An examination of the instructional leadership of instructional coaches is particularly meaningful given the decline of student academic performance in recent years. A 2023 Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study, or TIMSS, study found that math proficiency scores for American 4th graders' scores fell 18 points after 2019 and 27 points for American 8th graders' scores (Schwartz, 2024). Similar drops were found in reading scores, with 2024 National Assessment of Educational Progress assessment scores for American 4th and 8th grade students falling to a new all-time low (Schwartz, 2025). Some theorize that strong instructional leadership can reverse these downward trends in students' achievement (Ciccone, 2024). With schools and districts investing large amounts of material and financial resources to hire instructional coaches as additions to their instructional leadership teams (Knight, 2012; Knight & Skrtic, 2021), the findings of this study are relevant to those wanting a return on their investments.

Additionally, the social context of American education in a post-COVID society renders this study especially apropos. Many researchers believe that students experienced "learning loss" during their COVID pandemic-related learning experiences, a loss which has yet to be made up (Donnelly & Patrinos, 2022; Khan & Ahmed, 2021). Teachers and school leaders alike struggle

to address the post-pandemic needs of students while still supporting students to reach pre-pandemic expectations and standards (Donnelly & Patrinos, 2022; Khan & Ahmed, 2021; Zhao & Watterston, 2021). New ways of teaching have been introduced into the American education system post-pandemic as well, to both continue incorporating the new technologies of COVID education and to address students' seeming loss of social skills related to the pandemic (Ratten, 2023; Zhao & Watterston, 2021). Teachers report experiencing professional burnout at alarming rates post-COVID as they try to adapt to the post-pandemic instructional landscape, expressing the need for continuous support in this new educational terrain (Etxebarria et al., 2023).

Theoretical Context of Instruction Leadership

Because of the lack of a standard conceptualization of instructional coaching, there is a dearth of research on instructional coaches as instructional leaders. Educational researcher Jim Knight has emerged as a leading voice on the role of instructional coaches. His works have described how instructional coaches must be experts in high-impact instruction and data gathering, use adult learning theory to design capacity-building professional development experiences for teachers, and collaborate with school and systems leaders to affect sustainable change on a large-scale level (Knight, 2017; Knight, 2019; Knight, 2021; Knight & Skrtic, 2021). Although the connection is not explicitly stated, an analysis of this research reveals that instructional coaches are core instructional leaders as defined by Hallinger's instructional leadership theory (2005). In particular, instructional coaches functioning as instructional leaders is an example of the distributed leadership associated with more recent research about instructional leadership theory (McBrayer et al., 2018).

This current research will attempt to more explicitly situate instructional coaches within the framework of instructional leadership. Specifically, this research will extend the existing

research on how instructional coaches see themselves as instructional leaders. Additionally, this research will explore how instructional coaches are able or unable to enact their instructional leadership. As the ability or inability of instructional coaches to enact instructional leadership is explored, a conversation of self-efficacy will naturally be included. Thus, self-efficacy theory will be reviewed (Bandura, 1977). Self-efficacy theory posits that a person's perception of his or her capacity to successfully complete a task will influence how successful he or she is at doing that task. This current study will use self-efficacy theory to explore the impact that instructional coaches' ability to be instructional leaders has on instructional coaches' perception of performance of their responsibilities.

Problem Statement

The problem is that instructional coaches are uniquely able to function as instructional leaders, but various factors in different contexts affect whether and how instructional coaches can enact their instructional leadership. Without a standard model for implementing instructional coaching in a school or across schools, instructional coaches can be used in a variety of ways (Kho, et al., 2019; Galey-Horn & Woulfin, 2021; Miller et al., 2019). Some coaches may find that their lived professional duties afford them opportunities to both influence teaching and learning and be seen as a leader in their setting; other instructional coaches experience a sense that they are not functioning in a way that makes a significance impact on the learning environment and student achievement (Anderson & Wallin, 2018; Comstock & Margolis, 2021; Hashim, 2020). Additionally, even if a setting is ripe for an instructional coach to act as an instructional leader, a lack of standard prerequisites for becoming an instructional coach will indubitably influence both how prepared a coach is to be an instructional leader and how the coach perceives him- or herself as an instructional leader (Dami et al., 2022; Gulmez & Isik,

2020; Highland & Woods, 2024; Lewis, 2019; Lozano, 2024). As more schools, districts, and K-12 learning institutions turn to instructional coaching as a means to buoy teaching and learning, a study of the interaction between instructional coaching and instructional leadership is especially relevant.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this phenomenological study is to understand the experiences of enacting instructional leadership for instructional coaches in a large, urban city. At this stage in the research, instructional leadership will be defined as leadership (both perceived and assigned) that supports the development of teaching and learning through three avenues: defining the school mission, managing instructional programming, and cultivating the learning environment (Hallinger, 2003).

Significance of the Study

This study will contribute to a small but growing body of research on instructional leadership and instructional coaches. Specifically, the significance of this study can be explored from a theoretical, empirical, and practical perspective. From a theoretical perspective, this study will extend instructional leadership theory to a class of educators who are not traditionally viewed as instructional leaders. For an empirical point of view, this study will be an addition to a body of research around an aspect of instructional coaching that is currently limited. Finally, from a practical perspective, this study is of import to large, urban educational leaders who are interested in efficiently optimizing the instructional leadership of their instructional coaches.

Theoretical Significance

Hallinger's (2005) instructional leadership theory has evolved and been added to throughout the years. One of the significant changes to instructional leadership theory since its

inception is the acknowledgement that instructional leadership is not vested in the school principal alone (McBrayer et al., 2018). While a principal is head of school and has a duty to act as an instructional leader, he or she can distribute some of the responsibility for the instructional well-being of the school to other members of the school team (Jimerson & Quebec-Fuentes, 2021; Lipscombe et al., 2023). Recently, assistant principals, department chairs, and even teacher leaders have been considered important members of a school's instructional leadership team (Jimerson & Quebec-Fuentes, 2021; Lipscombe et al., 2023). This current research seeks to explore whether instructional coaches are able to act as instructional leaders and thereby contribute an important, under-researched perspective to this body of knowledge.

Empirical Significance

There is a strong body of literature regarding various aspects of instructional coaching. For example, instructional coaching as job-embedded professional development has been extensively studied since the 1990s (Hargreaves & Dawe, 1990; Loucks-Horsley, 1995; Moche, 2000; Warnock et al., 2022). There are also many studies about the impact of instructional coaching on teachers' instructional practices and student outcomes (Cox & Mullen, 2023; Devine et al., 2013; Glover et al., 2023; Reddy et al., 2021). Although instructional leadership involves influencing instruction and students' learning, the concept of instructional coaches as instructional leaders, however, is not currently well researched. This research will add to current literature on this aspect of instructional coaching while offering opportunities for various follow-up studies.

Practical Significance

The current study seeks to understand instructional coaches' experiences of instructional leadership. Specifically, it will examine whether they are able to act as instructional leaders and

how this impacts their professional self-efficacy. Findings from this study will be particularly relevant to educational leaders at the school and district levels who either currently use or are exploring the use of instructional coaches. This research can help leaders create the conditions necessary for instructional coaches to positively impact teaching and learning; being perceived and perceiving themselves as key leaders in the learning environment. Although this study is relegated to a large, urban city, future researchers may decide to conduct similar research in suburban or rural areas. Additionally, future researchers may use the findings of this phenomenological study to engage in experimental research aimed at determining which factors have the most impact on instructional coaches' ability to be instructional leaders as well as which factors have the most impact on instructional coaches' self-efficacy for instructional leadership.

Research Questions

Instructional coaches can often fulfill instructional leadership roles that more traditional school leaders, like principals and assistant principals, are unable to fulfill. A gap in the literature surrounding the nexus between instructional leadership and instructional coaching demonstrates a need for this current study. Additionally, whether and how instructional coaches can act as instructional leaders may impact instructional coaches' sense of self-efficacy for their work. Because professional self-efficacy has such an influence on professional performance, there also needs to be specific research examining how instructional coaches' self-efficacy for instructional leadership both impacts and is impacted by their work. The central research question and two sub-questions address these areas of interest.

Central Research Question

What are the instructional leadership experiences of instructional coaches in a large, urban city?

Sub-Question One

How do instructional coaches perceive and enact instructional leadership?

Sub-Question Two

What factors influence how instructional coaches perceive and enact instructional leadership?

Definitions

1. *Instructional coach* – An educator who partners with teachers to help teachers incorporate research-based instructional practices into their teaching and improve student learning (Knight, 2007).
2. *Instructional leadership*- Leadership (both perceived and assigned) that supports the development of teaching and learning through three avenues: defining the school mission, managing instructional programming, and cultivating the learning environment (Hallinger, 2003).
3. *Self-efficacy* – An individual's belief in his or her capacity to execute behaviors necessary to produce specific performance attainments (Bandura, 1977).

Summary

In this introductory chapter, a contextual background of instructional leadership and instructional coaches was explored from historical, social, and theoretical contexts. The problem of this study is that although instructional coaches can be important members of a school's instructional leadership team (Anderson & Wallin, 2018; Comstock & Margolis, 2021; Hashim, 2020), they may be hindered from functioning in instructional leadership capacities for a variety of reasons, potentially impacting their self-efficacy as instructional leaders. The purpose of this study is to understand factors that support or impede instructional coaches from viewing

themselves and acting as instructional leaders, as well as to determine whether and how instructional coaches' self-efficacy for instructional leadership is consequently impacted.

There is a strong significance for this study. From a theoretical perspective, this study will extend the understandings of the instructional leadership theory to instructional coaches, who are not traditionally seen as instructional leaders but are uniquely positioned to be instructional leaders. From an empirical perspective, this study will add to the bodies of knowledge about instructional leadership and instructional coaches, with each individual body of literature lacking research around the interaction of these two. From a practical perspective, this study has implications for school leaders, educational stakeholders, and future researchers. This chapter concluded with definitions of terms central to this study.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview

A literature review is "a synthesis of a selection of relevant literature that covers a specific topic and related research studies" (Claxton & Dolan, 2022, p. 2). This literature review is intended to provide a synthesis of current research surrounding the instructional leadership of instructional coaches. The literature review is grounded in Hallinger's (2005) instructional leadership theory, as this research will explore how instructional coaches experience their instructional leadership. Additionally, this study will explore how instructional coaches' self-efficacy is impacted by their experiences enacting instructional leadership; thus, Bandura's (1977) self-efficacy theory is also a grounding theoretical framework for this research.

This literature review will first explore instructional leadership research, providing a historical context of instructional leadership, exploring the impact of instructional leadership, and discussing the factors limiting school principals' enactment of instructional leadership. Next, the literature review will examine instructional coaches as possible instructional leaders, examining instructional coaching best practices, characteristics that uniquely qualify instructional coaches to be instructional leaders, and obstacles that impact instructional coaches' ability to act and be perceived as instructional leaders. Then, an examination of factors impacting educators' self-efficacy will be undertaken. Lastly, a case for this current study will be made by explaining how this study narrows a gap in the body of research on this topic.

As school principals' responsibilities continue to grow in an evolving educational landscape, principals are limited in their ability to perform instructional leadership functions. Various middle leaders - such as instructional coaches - will carry out instructional leadership roles so that schools can function well. Consequently, it is necessary to explore the impact of

instructional leadership experiences and perceptions of instructional coaches, to address hindrances to their instructional leadership and increase their positive impact on schools.

Theoretical Framework

A theoretical framework is a set of concepts and theories that serve as a blueprint for understanding and interpreting research findings (Grant & Osanloo, 2014). It offers the researcher a lens through which the research topic can be examined. There are two theoretical frameworks grounding this research: instructional leadership theory and self-efficacy theory.

Instructional Leadership Theory

Instructional leadership theory is one of two theoretical frameworks supporting this research. School leaders such as principals and heads of school perform a variety of duties to oversee the successful functioning of schools. Some of these duties include hiring and evaluating staff, managing budgets, handling student discipline, overseeing the upkeep of school facilities, and maintaining partnerships with families and community members (Cuban, 1988). The responsibilities of school leaders can be categorized into managerial, political, and instructional tasks (Hallinger, 2005; McBrayer et.al, 2018). Effective school leadership is often characterized by the ability to skillfully balance these responsibilities (McBrayer et al., 2018).

In the 1980's and 1990's, educational researchers took a closer look at the effectiveness of schools in terms of the academic achievement of students (Hallinger, 2005). Studies at the time found that effective schools had school leaders in place who devoted much of their time to overseeing the instruction of the school (Hallinger, 2005; Hallinger & Murphy, 1985; Leithwood, 1994). A closer look at school leader preparation ensued, with a specific focus on instructional leadership theory. Hallinger and Murphy (1985) produced seminal work around the instructional leadership theory, identifying the instructional roles and responsibilities school

leaders perform that have the biggest impact on student achievement. Instructional leadership is characterized by leadership that gives precedence to instructional responsibilities such as setting clear teaching and learning expectations, highlighting student achievement, prioritizing staff time for instructional collaboration and reflection, and creating opportunities for professional learning (Hallinger & Murphy, 1985).

Instructional leadership theory came to be characterized as consisting of three specific goals for school leaders: defining the mission of the school, managing the instructional program, and promoting a positive learning climate (Hallinger, 2005). Researchers found that school leaders' actions that prioritized instructional tasks for teachers, invested in professional development to build teachers' capacity, promoted teachers' continued learning of content knowledge and skills, and created a culture of growth mindset and continuous improvement contributed to students' achievement (Hallinger, 2005: Leithwood, 1994; Shatzer et al., 2014). Students' motivation to do well academically and teachers' collective self-efficacy have been shown to be influenced by school leaders' instructional leadership (McCormick et al., 2002).

More recent studies grounded in instructional leadership theory have explored how instructional leadership is influenced by distributed leadership practices. Despite the strong influence that principals' instructional leadership has on the overall academic wellbeing of the school, principals' responsibilities pull their focus in many directions, and they are not always able to prioritize their instructional duties (Cuban, 1988; McBrayer et al., 2018). Additionally, principals do not always have the preparation, adult learning understanding, or specific content knowledge needed to effectively support teachers' professional growth (Anderson & Wallin, 2018). Distributed leadership calls on school leaders at the highest level -such as school principals and heads of school- to empower middle level school leaders -such as assistant

principals, instructional coaches, and teacher leaders- to take responsibility for core leadership duties. Instructional coaches have been identified as particularly able to carry out many instructional leadership capacities if they have received appropriate preparation for instructional leadership and systems are in place to support their instructional leadership (Anderson & Wallin, 2018; Comstock & Margolis, 2021). Grounding this dissertation in instructional leadership theory will allow for an examination of what instructional coaches understand as core responsibilities of their work. Exploring instructional coaches from the instructional leadership theory will also allow for an exploration of how instructional coaches perceive their work as contributing to student achievement and teachers' professional growth.

Self-Efficacy Theory

The second of the two theoretical frameworks guiding this research is self-efficacy theory. In his seminal work on the self-efficacy theory, Bandura (1977) defines efficacy expectation as "the convictions that one can successfully execute the behavior required to produce the outcomes" (p. 194). Self-efficacy is different from outcome expectancy, which characterizes a person's belief that performing certain actions will lead to a particular outcome. Self-efficacy theory assumes that a person's beliefs about whether they can successfully perform those actions necessary for a particular outcome will determine whether they engage in the actions at all (Bandura, 1977). Bandura and Locke's (2003) meta-analysis on self-efficacy research confirmed that having core beliefs about one's inability to produce desired effects decreases one's motivation to engage in target activities and typically will decrease actual engagement in target activities, particularly because there is little incentive to productively struggle as the target task grows complex. Therefore, self-efficacy is a predictor of both behavior and functioning (Bandura & Locke, 2003).

Self-efficacy theory explains that self-efficacy is not a general self-concept but rather domain specific. For instance, a person may have high self-efficacy for one of their professional responsibilities and low self-efficacy in another professional responsibility (Bong & Clark, 1999). This important nuance in self-efficacy theory is particularly useful for examining the impact of specific self-efficacies on professionals with varied responsibilities, such as instructional leaders. Dami et al. (2022) found that principals' self-efficacy for instructional leadership tasks -as opposed to other managerial tasks- was positively correlated to work engagement and job satisfaction and negatively correlated to the motivation to leave their jobs; feelings of low instructional leadership efficacy coincided with the desire to quit the principal position. Dami et al. (2022) suggested that improving principals' training in the instructional leadership responsibilities and allotting them more time to engage in these tasks can increase their self-efficacy, job satisfactory, work engagement, and lessen the desire to quit. Similarly, McBrayer et al. (2018) found that school leaders experience higher rates of professional self-efficacy as they engaged in more instructional tasks and lower rates of professional self-efficacy as they engaged in more managerial tasks.

Self-efficacy theory is a useful theoretical framework for this dissertation as it will afford an exploration of instructional coaches' beliefs about their ability to actively serve as instructional leaders. Hiring instructional coaches is often a substantial investment of finances, material resources, and time for individual schools, school districts, and larger school systems (Knight & Skrtic, 2021). Because self-efficacy has such predictive power for achievement of target tasks, instructional coaches' self-efficacy for instructional leadership is highly influential to the capacity-building of teachers, professional development of all school staff, and learning outcomes of students. The implications of this should be apparent to educational leaders: namely,

that resources, structures, and supports should be put in place to increase and maintain instructional coaches' instructional leadership self-efficacy.

Related Literature

Reviews of literature primarily serve three purposes: to present an argument for the need to study a topic or phenomenon more extensively, to present research that possibly solves a problem, or to detail how research findings can possibly enhance current practices (Claxton & Dolan, 2022). This literature review intends to identify a gap in the literature about instructional coaches' experiences and perceptions of their instructional leadership. Although there is much research about instructional leadership and instructional coaches, both as individual topics and as the nexus between the two topics, there is little research that specifically explores how instructional coaches explain and explore their instructional leadership. There is also a dearth of literature examining how instructional coaches' ability or inability to be instructional leaders impacts their beliefs about their ability to be effective instructional coaches. Current literature around instructional leadership, instructional coaches as instructional leaders, and factors impacting educators' self-efficacy are examined in this literature review.

Instructional Leadership

Instructional leadership is the central construct in this research. While discussions of instructional leadership are pervasive, the concept is understood and implemented in different and nuanced ways across the globe. This review of literature surrounding instructional leadership will synthesize various understandings on this subject. First, the historical context of instructional leadership is explored. Next, the impact of instructional leadership is reviewed. Last, the factors that limit principals' ability to act as instructional leaders are discussed.

Historical Context

Instructional leadership is often defined as school leadership that focuses on improving the learning and instruction of the school (Eadens & Ceballos, 2023; Hallinger, 2005; Hallinger

et al., 1996; Leithwood & Montgomery, 1982). It can be characterized by school leaders creating conditions to deepen teachers' professional learning, improve actual instructional practices, and advance students' academic achievement (Murphy et al., 2016). More often than being explicitly defined, instructional leadership is most understood by three dimensions of its role in schools: defining the school's mission, managing the instructional program, and promoting a positive learning climate (Hallinger, 2005). The first dimension, defining the school's mission, involves setting clear, measurable goals and action steps around student academic outcomes for staff and stakeholders. Through this dimension, instructional leaders lay out a vision for the work of all in the school (Sanchez & Watson, 2021). The second dimension, managing the instructional program, includes the core leadership tasks of supervising instruction, managing curricula and resources, and monitoring student progress (Hallinger, 2005; Sanchez & Watson, 2021). It is through the exercise of this aspect of instructional leadership that school staff are equipped with resources to execute the schools' goals, reflect on progress to goals, and get feedback on their efforts in executing school goals. The final dimension of instructional leadership, promoting a positive learning climate, involves duties that promote an environment of rigorous expectations. These duties include prioritizing and providing professional development opportunities as well as creating external and internal motivations for students and teachers to meet goals (Sanchez & Watson, 2021).

The concept of instructional leadership can trace most of its substantive roots in the United States back to 1980s. During this time, American society began to take a critical look at the effectiveness of schools to educate students at rigorous levels. Findings such as those in the National Commission on Excellence in Education's 1981 report *A Nation at Risk* led to concern about the quality of instruction delivered in American schools (Ravitch, 1990). Research into

instructionally effective schools found that schools with principals who were strong directive leaders, held high expectations for students and staff alike, and focused on data-driven student outcome goals delivered higher quality instruction than schools whose principals did not have those characteristics (Hallinger, 2005). Thus, the notion of the principal as the instructional leader of the school came into clearer view, with instructional leaders needing to have a level of curriculum, content, and pedagogical expertise as well as a strong interpersonal skillset to work directly with teachers and, at times, students (Cuban, 1984; Hallinger, 2005; Hallinger et al., 1996; Leithwood & Montgomery, 1982).

With this notion of principal as instructional leader came the need to prepare aspiring school leaders for their instructional leadership. One area of preparation needed for instructional leaders is the sheer ability to balance the time spent in the different roles of their school leadership (McBrayer et al., 2018). Prior to the intense focus on teaching and learning beginning in the 1980s, much of school leaders' tasks revolved around managerial-administrative duties that see to the basic functioning of the school, such as budgeting, staffing, and operational duties (Hallinger, 2005). A shift towards instructional leadership saw the need for school leaders to develop the ability to carry out two different sets of tasks – managerial-administrative tasks and instructional leadership tasks- within the same timeframe in which they had been used to carrying out solely managerial-administrative tasks. These new responsibilities required that school leaders develop an understanding of how to balance these duties, such as by delegating work and engaging in distributed leadership practices (Lozano, 2024).

Additionally, the mere act of engaging in instructional leadership requires a particular knowledge base and skillset that must be developed in order to effectively fulfill this role. Instructional leaders should have extensive and current knowledge about instruction, especially

different models of instruction and the pedagogical theories underlying them (Lozano, 2024). Instructional leaders should be familiar with various curricula, as well as methods and criteria for evaluating curricula and resources to supplement and improve curricula (Hallinger et al., 1996). Assessment principles, procedures, and data analysis should also be a part of instructional leaders' knowledge base (Anderson & Wallin, 2018). Additionally, instructional leaders should possess strong interpersonal skills, such as the ability to communicate clearly, build relationships, and empower others (Anderson & Wallin, 2018; Lozano, 2024). Instructional leaders must also be skilled in resource management and planning (Hallinger et al., 1996; Lozano, 2024). The extant literature maintains that instructional leaders carry out a complex role that requires an expansive and nuanced cadre of talents.

Impact of Instructional Leadership

Instructional leadership has been found to have an impact on student achievement. This impact is largely indirect, through the learning environment and professional climate that instructional leadership cultivates in schools (Hallinger, 2005). In their capacity to manage the instructional program, instructional leaders create conditions for teachers to obtain and analyze student data, collaboratively adjust curriculum and plan to meet students' instructional needs, and procure and distribute resources (Cox & Mullen, 2023). These duties of the instructional leaders set the foundation for high-quality instruction in schools, thereby indirectly influencing students' academic achievement.

A climate of high academic expectations for students is cultivated through school leaders' visibility as they fulfill their duties; strong instructional leadership is associated with school leaders who are regularly present in classrooms to observe both instruction and learning and consequently offer clear, effectively feedback with hands-on coaching when needed (Cox &

Mullen, 2023; Tremont & Templeton, 2019). Through fostering a strong climate with a clear focus on instruction and student learning, principals' instructional leadership contributes to students' academic achievement gains (Cox & Mullen, 2023; Tremont & Templeton, 2019; Pietsch et al., 2023). Pietsch et al.'s (2023) metanalysis of instructional leadership impact has shown that the relationship between instructional leadership and student achievement has an effect size range of -.48 to .44, depending on the global context where the instructional leadership is carried out, with larger impacts experienced in Anglo-influenced settings.

Instructional leadership has also been found to have an indirect effect on student achievement through its impact on teacher efficacy. Hayward and Ohlson's (2023) study revealed that aspects of instructional leadership such as strong communication, being empowering, demonstrating flexibility, having consideration, and exerting discipline had strong influence on teachers' self-efficacy, with communication having the greatest impact on teacher's self-efficacy. A core facet of instructional leadership is communication: duties such a vision setting, designing the school's mission, setting school goals, creating plans to reach school goals, developing schedules and structures to foster collaboration amongst teachers, identifying supports for teachers, and offering feedback all require clear communication from school leaders to staff members (Hallinger, 2005). Furthermore, Goddard et al.'s (2020) study has shown that for every standard deviation increase in school leaders' self-efficacy for instructional leadership, teachers' collective self-efficacy increased by .2 standard deviations. Similarly, Elfira et al.'s study of Indonesian high school teachers found a 72.1% direct effect of principal instructional leadership on teacher self-efficacy (2021). The beliefs a school leader has about their ability to be an effective instructional leader influence the way the leader is experienced by teachers, and this in turn influences the beliefs teachers individually and collectively have about their ability to

cultivate students' learning (Goddard, et al., 2021). Teacher efficacy, in turn, has been found to effect student achievement (Goddard et al., 2019; Goddard et al., 2021; Wang, 2022). Thus, instructional leadership, through its connection to teachers' beliefs in their ability to do their jobs well, impacts student learning outcomes. School leaders, through their instructional leadership, are driving forces behind the effectiveness of schools' ability to educate students.

Factors Impacting Principals as Instructional Leaders

At the conception of the instructional leadership construct, school principals were believed to be the only school staff members responsible for this role. Despite their obvious contributions to teaching and learning, teachers, content area department heads, assistant principals, and others in school leadership roles were not typically studied in early discussions of instructional leadership (Hallinger, 2005). While numerous studies demonstrate the importance of school principals to schools' effectiveness and student learning outcomes (Dami et al., 2022; Gulmez & Isik, 2020; Hayward & Ohlson, 2023; Lozano, 2024), there are various factors that prohibit principals from consistently acting as instructional leaders. Chief among these factors are principals' variety of responsibilities to perform, principals' duties requiring them to act in conflicting roles, and principals often having an inadequate knowledge base to fully support instructional leadership. A deeper understanding of the complexities inherent in these factors limiting principals' instructional leadership can illuminate the characteristics needed in other educators who may fill instructional leadership vacuums.

Numerous Responsibilities. Evolving school principal responsibilities require the execution of both instructional and managerial tasks, such as handling student discipline issues, supporting school maintenance staff, completing paperwork, and managing staff (McBrayer, et al., 2018). Despite principals' understanding of their need to lead the instruction in schools,

many find themselves engaged in more pressing managerial duties such as overseeing teacher attendance for schools to function at a basic level (Noor & Nawab, 2022). McBrayer et al.'s (2018) study of 27 principals and assistant principals in Georgia found that school leaders experienced higher rates of professional self-efficacy as they engaged in more instructional tasks and lower rates of professional self-efficacy as they engaged in more managerial tasks. Ninety-three percent of the study's participants spent less than 50% of their time engaged in instructional tasks, which negatively impacted their self-efficacy for instructional leadership by .06 a standard deviation for every decrease in unit of time spent on instructional tasks (McBrayer et al., 2018).

Interestingly, a focus on administrative tasks that do not seem impactful to the core mission of schools tends to impact principals' role identity. Shaked's (2022) research on the role identity of 37 Israeli principals revealed that, due to the varied responsibilities they perform in their work, 63% of participants perceived themselves as administrators but not necessarily instructional leaders. Consequently, principals' lower self-efficacy for instructional leadership negatively impacts their work engagement and job satisfaction; principals who feel like they cannot be effective instructional leaders due to competing job duties are more motivated to leave the profession (Dami et al., 2022). Although principals see the importance of their instructional leadership and feel more professionally satisfied when they can enact their instructional leadership, the many urgent needs of schools often limit their ability to do so.

Conflicting Roles. Even in schools where principals can balance job duties and show up as instructional leaders, they may do so in ineffective ways due to inefficient systems to support their simultaneous evaluative and supportive roles to teachers. One of the core tenets of instructional leadership is the development of teachers' professional practice; instructional

leaders are tasked with making sure that teachers grow in their instructional abilities (Hallinger, 2005). To do so, an instructional leader must make numerous observations of teachers' instruction, determine which practices are working well and which practices need improvement, develop a plan to support teachers in improving their practice, and offer constant feedback around growth and next steps (Özdemir, 2020). In one vein, these actions can be perceived by teachers as supportive coaching (Comstock & Margolis, 2021; Damore & Rieckhoff, 2021; Galey-Horn & Woulfin, 2021). As principals build relationships and work closely with teachers to enhance their performance, teachers receive professional development that is tailored specifically to their individual needs (Kho et al., 2019; Kho et al., 2020). Such individualized support demands a level of vulnerability and exposure of the teachers; the teacher must say and be observed in their areas of instructional weakness (Özdemir, 2020).

The vulnerability and exposure that teachers engage in during a supportive coaching relationship by instructional leaders are often avoided when teachers must be observed and given feedback in an evaluative manner (Galey-Horn & Woulfin, 2021; Kraft & Gilmour, 2016). Although there is overlap in many of the duties involved in coaching and evaluating a teacher - such as observing instruction and offering feedback- the actions are not perceived in the same way. Coaching tends to be viewed by teachers as a support, while evaluations are viewed more negatively (Comstock & Margolis, 2020; Galey-Horn & Woulfin, 2021; Kraft & Gilmour, 2016). Kraft and Gilmore's (2016) study of an urban northeast school district found that 72% of teachers had significant concerns about evaluations' impact on their job performance ratings and overall job security. This negative view, combined with a desire to protect against a perceived threat to their employment, impacted teachers' willingness to be vulnerable and expose their needs for professional growth. Thus, a conflict arises when a teacher's evaluator and professional

support are both offered by the same person, such as the school principal. When evaluation and coaching duties are both performed by the principal, roles may become blurry for both the principal and the teacher. Pallas's (2023) study of 141 teachers' experiences and perceptions with teacher evaluation systems demonstrated that 58% of teachers were less open about weaknesses and more exaggerating about growth during coaching sessions, in order to be evaluated at higher levels. Thus, coaching from evaluators can be less effective than its potential. Principals' abilities to be instructional leaders are influenced by the competing and contradictory roles they may perform.

Inadequate Knowledge Base. Another factor impacting principals' ability to be instructional leaders is a lack of knowledge required for the role. One of the prerequisites of strong instructional leadership is content, curricular, and pedagogical knowledge (Hallinger, 2005). Instructional leaders must know the nuances and particulars of the specific disciplines taught in schools, staying abreast of the latest research and shifts in content areas (Fuentes & Jimerson, 2019; Özdemir, 2020). Instructional leaders should be well-acquainted with the specific curricula used in the school as well. They must be able to support teachers in keeping with the fidelity and integrity of curriculum, as well as understanding the strengths and limitations of curricular resources (Fuentes & Jimerson, 2019; Özdemir, 2020; Shaked, 2023). Lastly, instructional leaders should have a firm understanding of general instructional best practices.

Shaked's (2023) study of 38 Israeli principals found that although all participants interviewed for the study believed that strong content knowledge was a requirement for teachers, 58% of them did not believe it was not necessary for their work as instructional leaders. These principals understood how teachers' content knowledge should extend beyond that of what they

would teach their specific students, as teachers need to understand a larger vertical progression of students' learning in their content area to situate instruction in an appropriate context for students. The principals did not see, however, how their ability to effectively carry out some instructional leadership duties -such as evaluation and offering feedback- could be severely impacted by limited content knowledge (Cunningham & Lochmiller, 2020; Shaked, 2023). Similarly, principals did not have the in-depth curricular knowledge that is considered necessary for instructional leadership, with 81% of principals interviewed believing that their ability to manage the curriculum -such as distribute resources equitably and augment curriculum with supplemental materials- was a sufficient performance of their instructional leadership (Shaked, 2023). The sheer breadth of content, curricula, and grade levels for a school principal to master is cited by principals as a key factor behind their limited knowledge (Cunningham & Lochmiller, 2020; Shaked, 2023). Many principals leave such in-depth content and curricular knowledge for department heads and grade-level teacher-leaders to master, while they rely on their pedagogical knowledge to enact their instructional leadership (Shaked, 2023). Even so, principals often rely on general pedagogical knowledge and fail to recognize the importance of instructional leaders having strong pedagogical content knowledge (Cunningham & Lochmiller, 2020; Fuentes & Jimerson, 2019; Özdemir, 2020; Shaked, 2023).

While principals superficially seem like the obvious choice to be the primary instructional leaders in their school buildings, factors such as various job duties, conflicting responsibilities, and a limited knowledge base can hinder principals' instructional leadership. Nonetheless, instructional leadership is critical to a school's ability to be effective. One possible solution to this conundrum is for schools to identify school leaders other than the principal -

middle leaders- to fulfill instructional leadership duties. Hiring instructional coaches is one such avenue through with strong instructional leadership can be carried out.

Instructional Coaching

Many schools and school districts employ instructional coaches; recent students show that 59% of public schools have at least one instructional coach on their staff (Ng, 2024). The main goal of instructional coaching is to strengthen instructional practices and deepen student learning. While instructional coaches across the globe have the same goal, they work towards it in various ways through different contexts. The review of literature on instructional coaching begins with an analysis of generally accepted instructional coaching best practices. Next is an examination of the characteristics of instructional coaches that make them well-suited to be instructional leaders, followed by a review of the factors that inhibit coaches' instructional leadership.

Instructional Coaching Best Practices

Throughout the late 20th century and into the present day, instructional coaching has emerged as a form of job-embedded professional development for teachers to improve their practice and positively influence student outcomes. Instructional coaching models find their roots in Joyce and Showers (1980) peer coaching model. The peer coaching model hypothesized that partnering teachers with consultants or outside expert peers to engage in ongoing modeling new skills, practicing new skills, and receiving feedback on the use of new skills would lead to longer-lasting and more proficient implementation of new practices than a single-event training. Research confirmed that regular and consistent coaching experiences result in more transfer of new teachings than trainings alone (Baker & Showers, 1984; Showers, 1982; Showers, 1987).

Thus, instructional coaching came to supplement traditional models of professional development in many schools.

Since the 1980s, various instructional coaching models have been developed. Coaching models provide a framework for instructional coaches to support educators in growing and reaching their goals. Bambrick-Santoyo's directive incremental coaching (Bambrick-Santoyo & Saphier, 2016), Knight's (2021) impact coaching, Aguilar's (2024) transformational coaching, and content-focused coaching are leading coaching models across the United States. Despite the differences and nuances among various models concerning principles and undergirding ideologies, there are generally accepted best practices for instructional coaching. Core practices for effective instructional coaching include understanding and using adult learning principles, enacting consistent coaching cycles and structures, and directly linking teachers' coaching needs and growth to impact students.

Inherent in instructional coaching is adult learning. Adults learn in different ways and have different general learning needs than children, so instructional coaches must approach their work in different ways than they would approach classroom instruction with students (Knowles et al., 2005). Adult learning theory names the following as differentiating adult learners from child learners: a readiness to learn and intrinsic motivation when the need for learning is apparent; the desire for control and self-direction in the learning process; a desire for a problem-centered, results-driven orientation to learning; the need for practical and immediate use of new learnings, and acknowledgement of the experience and knowledge being brought to the learning (Knowles et al., 2005). Instructional coaches can use adult learning theory to support teachers' professional growth. Instructional coaches often situate teachers' practice goals through observed areas of concern in their classroom and/or instruction. Thus, coaching interactions address a

specific problem for teachers, and teachers may feel intrinsically motivated to engage in coaching. As coaches and teachers build relationships and collaborate, coaches should give teachers opportunities to direct elements of their learning, such as identifying how and when to practically apply new learnings or determining a new coaching goal (Knight, 2021; Knowles et al., 2005). Most importantly, coaches should recognize the experience and skillset that teachers come to them with, leveraging those assets to launch teachers' learning (Knight, 2021, Psencik et al., 2019).

Consistency is an important part of instructional coaching, and it can help build trust between coaches and teachers. One best practice for instructional coaches to establish consistency is to implement a coaching model with regular coaching cycles (Knight, 2021). Many coaching models establish the need for at least three coaching interactions in a cycle: a coaching meeting to plan a lesson, review student data, or discuss a problem of practice; a lesson in which either the coach models a specific strategy for the teacher or the teacher's instructional practice is observed, and a reflection session to debrief the implemented lessons, note teachers' progress, and determine next steps (Knight, 2021; Perret, 2023). Such a coaching cycle provides teachers with a framework for continuous improvement. This continuous improvement through consistent coaching can turn into a form of job embedded professional development that teachers rely on for support (Knight, 2021; Perret, 2023).

The best instructional coaching is grounded in goals (Knight & Skrtic, 2023; Perret, 2023). Through goal setting and action planning, coaches and teachers develop a clear roadmap of where the collaboration is headed and the route they will take to get there. Because the ultimate purpose of improved teacher practice is improved student outcomes, a goal-setting best practice for coaches is to ground goals in student outcomes (Perret, 2023). When coaching goals

are set in terms of student outcomes, both teachers and instructional coaches are reminded that the school's mission is grounded in impact to students. Student-centered coaching goals are often surrounding achievement data, but they do not necessarily have to be. In lieu of student achievement data, student-centered coaching goals can revolve around student behaviors, such as time on task or the number of students actively engaged in a lesson (Perret, 2023).

Instructional Coaches as Instructional Leaders

In addition to these best practices, there are many commonalities amongst instructional coaches in a variety of settings that can characterize instructional coaching in general. Quite a few of these aspects of instructional coaching can posit coaches as uniquely able to fulfill instructional leaderships duties. Instructional coaches have the knowledge base and skillset, trusting relationships, and hierarchical position in school systems that can allow them to be effective instructional leaders.

Knowledge and Skillset. One of the characteristics of instructional coaches that supports their instructional leadership is the high level of content knowledge that they possess. While general instructional coaching positions are widely available, many instructional coaching positions are domain specific; positions such a literacy, math, or science instructional coach are common in schools and districts that offer instructional coaching. Typically, one of the requirements for being a content-specific instructional coach is demonstrating a mastery-level of the content knowledge and pedagogical content knowledge for the discipline being coached (Ippolito & Bean, 2019). While a cursory understanding of content knowledge and pedagogical content knowledge can buoy the work of a school leader, an instructional leader often needs in-depth content-specific understandings to manage schools' instructional programming. For example, decisions around curricular choices and feedback after instructional observations are

greatly informed by the extent to which the instructional leader understands the corresponding content area (Shaked, 2023). Moreover, an instructional leader should be perceived by staff as capable of leading and as someone who can be turned to for guidance and support (Anderson & Wallin, 2018; Hallinger, 2005; Hallinger et al., 1996; Lozano, 2024). Teachers may have difficulty associating instructional leadership characteristics to someone who is known to have considerably less content knowledge than other non-leaders on the staff (Cunningham & Lochmiller, 2020; Shaked, 2023). Instructional coaches, particularly content-specific instructional coaches, are often the leaders in their buildings in terms of content knowledge (Ippolito & Bean, 2019). In fact, it is often not only expected but also a professional responsibility of many instructional coaches to stay current with the latest research in their field, attending conferences and trainings to bring this information back to their schools. Because of their duty to sustain a mastery of content knowledge, instructional coaches are innately able to enact some aspects of instructional leadership.

Trusting Relationships. A tenet of instructional coaching is an emphasis on building trusting relationships (Kane & Rosenquist, 2019; Reid, 2019; Woulfin et al., 2023); collaboration grounded in trusting relationships can enable instructional coaches to act as instructional leaders. Instructional leadership requires that school leaders identify individual and collective teacher weaknesses in order to provide opportunities for development (Hallinger et al., 1996). Teachers may be wary to highlight their areas for growth, particularly if these weaknesses are exposed to someone in authority to them, such as a principal (Comstock & Margolis, 2021; Damore & Rieckhoff, 2021; Galey-Horn & Woulfin, 2021). This reluctance on the teachers' behalf can be lessened by the development of a strong relationship with the principal (Wallin, 2019). Unfortunately, many principals cite their numerous and ever-evolving job responsibilities as

prohibiting them from cultivating deep relationships with their staff that will enable their instructional leadership (Dami et al., 2021; Wallin, 2019). For instance, Wallin's (2019) qualitative study of ten rural Canadian principals noted that participants scoffed at the commonly expected notion of spending 50% of their workday supervising and providing instructional leadership. According to the principals in this study, relationship-building instructional leadership practices like classroom visits came in a distant second place to their other duties, and this led these principals to feel guilt over their poorly developed relationships with teachers.

Because developing strong rapport and relationships with teachers is a best practice of instructional coaching (Kho et al., 2019; Knight, 2021), instructional coaches may be better suited than some principals to fulfill instructional leadership roles. Successful coaching relationships can develop when teachers view the instructional coach as a partner with the teachers' desires and needs in mind, not as an outside agent with only the school's or district's aims in mind or, even worse, an adversary looking to catch teachers who are not meeting expectations (Galey-Horn & Woulfin, 2021). Munson and Saclarides's (2022) study of 28 instructional coaches in an urban, southeastern school district found that the participants' lack of evaluative authority over teachers enabled them to be seen as working in tandem with teachers, and to more easily build trust with teachers. Consequently, the study participants were able to enact relational strategies to gain enthusiastic access to classrooms, a core prerequisite of instructional leadership (Woulfin et al., 2023).

Building trust in an instructional coaching relationship starts with a foundation of partnership, reliability, consistency, and confidentiality (Cardenas et al., 2024). Most importantly, building relationships requires time. Kane and Rosenquist (2019) suggest that district instructional coaches' schedules be designed with relationships in mind, with coaches

dedicating longer amounts of time in single school buildings so that they are more visible and have opportunities to partner with teachers in meaningful ways. Similarly, Woulfin et al. (2023) recommend that instructional coaches be afforded opportunities to gain local context, deeply understanding the schools, relationships, and dynamics where they work so that they can best connect with teachers. Instructional coaches' relationships with school leaders are important as well, particularly if coaches are enacting instructional leadership duties. Kane and Rosenquist (2019) advise that principals establish regular meeting times with instructional coaches to not only evaluate the impact of coaching on student outcomes, but to also support instructional coaches as leaders in the building. Relationship building is at the core of both instructional coaching and instructional leadership, and thus instructional coaches may be primed to perform instructional leadership duties.

Hierarchical Position. Yet another quality of instructional coaching that suggests it is compatible with instructional leadership is the hierarchical position that instructional coaches occupy in many schools. In many settings, instructional coaches are viewed as a part of schools' middle leadership; while they are outside of the classroom and hierarchically above teachers, they fall below top leaders like principals and assistant principals (Shaked, 2024). Also, although instructional coaches are hierarchically above teachers, they typically do not have authority over teachers -an intentional decision to support open and transparent relationships with teachers (Munson and Saclarides, 2022). In Hashim's (2020) research, the author asserts that instructional coaches exercise an important leadership role in implementing systemic changes on school, interschool, and district levels specifically due to their hierarchical position. Coaches in this study navigated different models of brokering information amongst different educational actors, up and down organizational hierarchies. The agility and success with which instructional coaches

engaged in brokering shaped districts' abilities to implement reform, as well as schools' and individual educators' abilities to align to these reforms (Hashim 2020).

This type of systemic work in instructional improvement is afforded to instructional coaches when top-level school leaders like principals engage in distributed leadership practices. Distributed leadership practices necessitate various educational leaders existing on a leadership continuum, from quasi-leaders like teacher-leaders and instructional coaches to traditional leaders like school administrators and central office personnel (Eadens & Ceballos, 2023). Although instructional coaches in particular work in a hierarchical space between teachers and top school leaders, they perform many of the same tasks as principals. Research has found that when principals prioritize elevating and publicly giving significance to instructional personnel who occupy these middle leadership roles, such as including them in school management teams, the principal publicly showing trust and seeking counsel from the middle leader, and giving the middle leader decision-making power, middle leaders are seen as the having power and authority to enact instructional improvement in schools (Eadens & Ceballos, 2023; Shaked, 2024). These steps also help mold schools' cultural dynamics to be conducive to the middle leaders' responsibilities (Shaked, 2024).

Instructional Coaches' Ability to Be Instructional Leaders

Because of the many principles and practices they espouse, instructional coaches have the potential to be hugely influential instructional leaders in many schools. All this potential, however, may be rendered meaningless because various barriers significantly hinder instructional coaches' ability to act as instructional leaders. While some of these barriers are situational and specific to local contexts, numerous barriers are systemic and wide-reaching. Among these barriers are confusion surrounding the role of instructional coaches, the use of

instructional coaches' time, schools' infrastructure for distributed leadership, and a lack of training for instructional leadership.

Roles and Responsibilities. One of the most foundational obstacles for instructional coaches to act as instructional leaders is misunderstanding about instructional coaches' roles and responsibilities. Core responsibilities such as setting goals for schools, professionally developing staff, and engaging in organizational design cause instructional coaches to act in an instructional leadership capacity (Kho et al., 2019; L'Allier et al., 2010). Thus, to be effective, literacy coaches must both be seen as and see themselves as instructional leaders. Unfortunately, instructional coaches often play a variety of roles, and this may obfuscate their instructional leadership abilities. Some of these roles, such as resource provider, counselor, data coach, mentor, curriculum specialist, instructional specialist, school leader, align with coaches enacting their instructional leadership (Kho, et al., 2019; Galey-Horn & Woulfin, 2021; Miller et al., 2019). Other roles inhibit instructional coaches' instructional leadership perception, both of themselves and by others. For instance, Kho et al.'s (2019) study of ten Malaysian instructional coaches reported that due coaches carrying out work directly with students to tutor and provide learning interventions, their ability to instructionally lead schools may be obscured. All the coaches in this study reported feeling an inability to build meaningful professional relationships with teachers due to confusion around what their role was. Furthermore, when the instructional coaches' schedules were intentionally designed for them to perform in school support services, like field trip chaperones or making photocopies, their capacity to be seen by school staff as instructional leaders was limited. The very perception of instructional coaches' inability to act as an instructional leader has a negative impact on the actual ability to serve as instructional leader,

as it not only impacts the nature of their work but also impacts their efficacy to be instructional leaders (Voelkel et al., 2023; Woodward & Thoma, 2021).

At times, instructional coaches' professional responsibilities all align with instructional leadership, but confusion still exists about their role. This scenario occurs when no clear communication about instructional coaches' roles has been shared with teachers. Miller et al. (2019) describe how communication and messaging from school and district leaders greatly impacted how new-to-the-field instructional coaches are perceived, received, and able to perform necessary job functions. Top leaders such as district officials and school principals have a duty to clearly communicate not only the school's mission and goals, but also how each member of the school community contributes to the achievement of the school's mission and goals. When top-level leaders do not effectively communicate the capacity in which middle-level leaders like instructional coaches will work with others, confusion ensues, and middle-level leaders are limited in their ability to function well (Miller et al., 2019; Reid, 2019). District officials' and school principals' specific actions, such as clearly defining through word and deed the responsibilities of everyone affiliated with the coaching program, creating accessible time and space opportunities for teacher-coach interactions to occur, and developing multi-way trusting relationships, can enable instructional coaches to successfully focus on their coaching and instructional leadership responsibilities (Reid, 2019).

Use of Time. A related factor impacting instructional coaches' ability to exercise instructional leadership is how their time is used. As with principals, instructional coaches have a variety of responsibilities to fulfill (Kho et al., 2019; Ippolito & Bean, 2019; Neumerski, 2012; Woodward & Thoma, 2021). Some of these duties are closely aligned to coaching duties, such as planning professional development sessions, analyzing student data, meeting with teachers,

supporting scheduling to afford time for professional learning communities, planning modeled lessons, studying curricula, observing instruction, and crafting feedback (Hashim, 2020; Ippolito & Bean, 2019; Knight, 2015). Other duties that instructional coaches must perform are less aligned to coaching duties. Responsibilities such as substitute teaching, working as an administrative assistant, organizing resources and materials, coordinating field trips, and lunch and recess duty detract from instructional coaches' capacity for instructional leadership (Ippolito & Bean, 2019; Kane & Rosenquist, 2018; Miller et al., 2019). When instructional coaches spend too much of their time engaged in non-coaching duties, teachers and even school leaders can misunderstand how and whether instructional coaches can impact teacher practice and student achievement on a large-scale, systemic level (Woodward & Thoma, 2021).

Time spent in coaching duties affects instructional coaches' ability to be instructional leaders in several ways. On a superficial level, the more time teachers spend with instructional coaches, the greater the opportunity for teachers to improve their instructional practice (Hashim, 2020; Kane & Rosenquist, 2018). Most scholars agree that instructional coaching has evolved to a form of individualized, job-embedded, ongoing professional development for teachers (Kane & Rosenquist, 2018; Kho et al., 2019; Kho et al., 2020). As such, instructional coaching is more effective than other traditional models of professional development at cultivating long-lasting improvement in instruction and learning (Kane & Rosenquist, 2018, Knight & Skrtic, 2021). Instructional coaching positions teachers and coaches in a continuous feedback loop around goals that are tailored to each school's and/or teachers' specific needs (Knight & Skrtic; 2021); this contributes to instructional coaching having such transformational influences on teaching and learning. In order for teachers to access these benefits and ultimately enhance student

learning, teachers must have regular and frequent opportunities to collaborate with instructional coaches. Without them, instructional coaching loses some of its instructional leadership potency.

On a different level, spending too much time on non-coaching duties also impacts how well instructional coaches can perform their coaching duties. Building trusting relationships is a key element of successful coaching; the amount of time that instructional coaches are able to spend with teachers directly impacts their ability to cultivate trust. For instance, Kane and Rosenquist ‘s (2018) study of 23 middle school coaches across four school districts in the Midwest found that coaches hired by a school district were able to spend an average of 92% their time working directly with teachers, but struggled to build trusting relationships with teachers since they were spread across multiple buildings and met with individual teachers less frequently; school-hired coaches, on the other hand, had ease creating trusting relationships with teacher but were only able to spend 40-66% of their time directly coaching teachers due to principals assigning them to meet schools’ more urgent, immediate needs like tutoring or substitute teaching. Both district and school instructional coaches had schedules that did not allow them to build strong, trusting relationships with the teachers they coached. School leaders must create building schedules that facilitate professional learning opportunities between teachers and instructional coaches during the school day and afford instructional coaches the maximum amount of time possible to perform coaching duties (Saclarides & Munson, 2024).

Infrastructure for Distributed Leadership. Instructional coaches’ ability to be instructional leaders may also be hampered if there is a lack of infrastructure in the organizational leadership systems of the school. Because school principals have long been believed to be the instructional leader of schools, distributed leadership infrastructure must be established to support other school leaders assuming instructional leadership roles (McBrayer et

al., 2018; Tang et al., 2022). A distributed leadership framework offers systems and structures that not only support middle leaders to enact their leadership, but it also encourages others to view them as leaders (Tang et al., 2022; Voelkel et al. 2023). Key elements of distributed leadership infrastructure include access to information, decision-making power, and the ability to influence others (Neumerski, 2012). When instructional coaches work in settings whose infrastructure does not support these elements, instructional leadership is difficult to enact.

Access to various types of information is necessary for effective instructional leadership. Core responsibilities of instructional leaders include analyzing student achievement data and instructional data, setting goals, making plans to reach those goals, monitoring and evaluating the progress of those goals, adjusting plans, determining the professional learning needs of school staff, and creating whole-group, small-group, and individualized professional learning experiences for educators (Dasci et al., 2024; Hallinger, 2005). Each of these responsibilities requires that instructional leaders have access to relevant data to inform how these responsibilities are to be carried out. In order for instructional coaches to act as instructional leaders and carry out some of these responsibilities, structures must be in place for them to have regular and systematic access to pertinent information (Ippolito & Bean, 2019; Marsh et al., 2015). Such access can easily be provided through distributed leadership practices such as regularly meeting with school principals or membership in school leadership teams (Ippolito & Bean, 2019; Voelkel et al. 2023). Unfortunately, some school leaders do not extend these distributed leadership practices to instructional coaches for a variety of the aforementioned reasons like confusion around coaches' roles, poor use of coaches' time, or the principals' inability to manage their tasks (Ippolito & Bean, 2019; Kane & Rosenquist, 2018; Miller et al.,

2019; Woodward & Thoma, 2021). Without access to information, instructional coaches struggle to carry out core duties of instructional leaders.

Instructional coaches may also struggle to carry out core duties of instructional leaders if they do not have decision-making authority. Instructional leaders must make numerous decisions that impact entire school systems and a variety of stakeholders. For example, in a localized context, instructional leaders are responsible for deciding how to schedule instruction to prioritize collaboration for instructional planning and professional learning communities (Ippolito & Bean; 2019). On a larger context, instructional leaders decide how to implement educational law and policy changes, determining how many resources to allocate to different priorities, and how to allocate them equitably (Hashim, 2020). Instructional leaders have the ability to make policy, as well as advocate for policies or policy change (Hashim, 2020). In general, it is instructional leaders' duty to be influential over the instruction and learning in their context, and much of that influence is derived from the ability to make decisions. If instructional coaches are to act as instructional leaders, they must also be influential over instruction and learning through their ability to make decisions in their schools. While instructional coaches may not be afforded the ultimate decision-making authority, distributed leadership practices recommend that they at least have a seat at the proverbial decision-making table to give their input and wield their influence over decisions (Hashim, 2020; McBrayer et al., 2018). Distributed leadership infrastructures like memberships on leadership teams, school committees, and specialized taskforces allow middle leaders like instructional coaches to participate in the decision-making process. Lewis (2019) asserted that principals may not understand enough about instructional coaches' roles or preparation to even consider them for distributed leadership, systemically preferring other middle leaders for instructional leadership roles. School principals

must be intentional to not only have these structures but also to deliberately include instructional coaches in them.

Instructional Leadership Preparation. Lastly, a lack of specific preparation for instructional leadership hinders instructional coaches from enacting their instructional leadership. Neumerski's review of research on various school leaders' enactment of instructional leadership shows instructional coaches in general are rarely prepared for instructional leadership or viewed as instructional leaders by the teachers they coach (2012). Lewis's (2019) comparative case study of instructional leadership in two schools in California demonstrated that although school leaders saw instructional coaches as an extension of them with instructional expertise that gives schools the ability to reach goals and enact their vision, they believed that instructional coaches still need to have specific preparations to develop the skills and knowledge for effective instructional leadership. Similarly, Highland and Woods (2024) found that despite middle leaders like instructional coaches assuming complex and highly consequential responsibilities such as observing and giving feedback on peer teachers' instruction, formal training for their position prior to assuming the responsibilities and ongoing training while in the middle leadership role was relatively nonexistent. Although ongoing pre-service and in-service professional development can strengthen instructional coaches' and other middle leaders' capacity to positively impact student learning outcomes, many schools and districts do not have systems and structures in place to facilitate these learning experiences for instructional coaches (Highland & Woods, 2024).

Additionally, there are no specific, uniform criteria for instructional coaches to *become* instructional coaches. Instructional coaches come to the profession through various avenues. In some cases, teachers are elevated into instructional coaching positions for schools through the

direct recommendations of principals and school leaders (Highland & Woods, 2024; Lewis, 2019). In other scenarios, schools and districts require that instructional coaches have specialist certification, such as reading, math, or technology specialist certifications. This prerequisite gives some assurance that instructional coaches have a certain level of content knowledge and skill, as preparation programs for specialist certification attend to state and national standards on candidates' proficiency in various domains such as foundational knowledge, curriculum, instruction, assessment, and evaluation (International Literacy Association, National Council of Supervisors of Mathematics). Other instructional coaches must demonstrate mastery of school- or district-specific priorities, such as specific curricula or teaching methods (Lewis, 2019; Lozano, 2024). The requirements for instructional coaches to enter the profession vary widely from context to context. Because there are no standard criteria for the role, there is no way to ensure that all instructional coaches have proficiency in a basic, standardized knowledge and skill set. Without this, some instructional coaches may come to their position ill-equipped to act as instructional leaders. More importantly, there is no uniform way to determine which instructional coaches have the necessary knowledge and skills to act as instructional leaders.

Educators' Self-Efficacy

Self-efficacy describes a person's beliefs about their ability to succeed at performing a specific task (Bandura, 1977). Self-efficacy is a domain specific concept; one's self-efficacy in one task or area can be completely different and unaffected by self-efficacy in a separate task or area. Generally, our beliefs about our abilities to achieve goals arise from four sources: mastery experiences and vicarious experiences, the two primary sources of self-efficacy, as well as social persuasion and physiological states (Bandura, 1977; Hussain & Khan, 2022). Mastery experiences are those a person has of being successful in a task they are attempting while

vicarious experiences are those of another person being successful in the same task one is attempting (Gale et al., 2021). Social persuasion describes how feedback, such as encouragement or discouragement, influences a person's belief in their ability to complete tasks, and physiological states refers to how a person's emotional well-being may impact their beliefs in their ability to accomplish tasks (Hussain & Khan, 2022).

Educators' self-efficacy has become an important concept to study because it impacts many aspects of schools' functioning. For example, Caprara et al. (2006) found teachers' self-efficacy to be related to job satisfaction and job stress levels. According to Gulmez and Isik (2020), principals' self-efficacy was positively correlated to transformational leadership styles, in which principals increase the teachers', students', and staff's awareness about the importance of school goals, motivate the group to act to reach the goals, and help followers to reach lofty targets. Conversely, principals with low self-efficacy were more apt to demonstrate transactional leadership, in which school leaders and school community members engaged in isolated interactions of give and take without focus on transforming followers -school community members- to focus on school goals (Gulmez & Isik, 2020). In a similar vein, understanding how instructional coaches' self-efficacy is impacted by their instructional leadership could illuminate some high leverage influences on schools' functioning. Two key self-efficacy outcomes that may be influenced by instructional coaches' work as instructional leaders are motivation for work engagement and student achievement.

Work Engagement

Self-efficacy has been shown to impact educators' engagement in their work. In one sense, self-efficacy impacts motivation to engage in work. Dami et al. (2022) found that principals' self-efficacy for instructional leadership influenced their work engagement and

motivation to quit, with high self-efficacy for instructional leadership predicting increased motivation to work and decreased motivation to quit while low self-efficacy for instructional leadership correlating to decreased motivation to work and increased motivation to quit. Similarly, McBrayer et al. (2018) explored the connection between school leaders' self-efficacy for instructional leadership and the amount of time they spent in managerial and instructional tasks, concluding that school leaders with high self-efficacy for instructional leadership are better able to balance their tasks and spend more time in instructional leadership tasks than principals with low self-efficacy for instructional leadership. These findings may be connected to Skaalvik's (2020) findings on the connection between school leaders' self-efficacy and task avoidance. Skaalvik (2020) asserts that when an educator's self-efficacy in a domain -such as instructional leadership - is low, the educator will feel unsuccessful. Seeking to avoid the discomfort associated with limited mastery experiences, the educator will consequently avoid work tasks in that domain and effectively disengage from that work (Skaalvik, 2020).

These findings may have potentially strong implications for instructional coaches who function as instructional leaders. Several factors may hinder instructional coaches' ability to act as instructional leaders, with time usage being a significant factor (Ippolito & Bean, 2019). If instructional coaches spend too much time engaging in non-coaching work, they are limited in their capacity to be instructional leaders (Ippolito & Bean, 2019; Kane & Rosenquist, 2018; Miller et al., 2019).). This limited capacity for instructional leadership may negatively impact their self-efficacy for instructional leadership. Consequently, a lowered self-efficacy for instructional leadership tasks may lead to less engagement in instructional leadership tasks, thereby decreasing already limited amounts of time instructional coaches have for instructional leadership. Put another way, having core beliefs about one's inability to produce desired effects

decreases one's motivation to engage in target activities and typically will decrease actual engagement in target activities, particularly because there is little incentive to productively struggle as the target task grows complex (Bandura & Locke, 2003; Tamari, 2020). Because instructional coaches may fill an instructional leadership void in many settings, there is a need to examine how their feelings around their ability to be instructional leaders are influenced by and influence their motivation to engage in this work.

Student Achievement

Educators' self-efficacy is positively correlated to student achievement. Teachers with high self-efficacy can have a positive impact on students in several ways, including creating positive class environments, increasing student engagement, using more effective teaching strategies and practices, and increasing student motivation and self-efficacy (Hussain & Khan, 2023; Wang, 2022). All these factors contribute to a climate for high quality instruction, which then translates to increased student learning (Wang, 2022). Additionally, teachers' individual self-efficacies contribute to the collective self-efficacy, which is the belief that the group's capabilities can improve student learning (Goddard et al., 2021; Hayward & Ohlson, 2023; Hussain & Khan, 2023). Collective self-efficacy is developed when teachers work together to achieve goals, learn from each other, and receive support from administrators (Bozkurt et al., 2021). When teachers' collective self-efficacy grows through their experiences together, they deliver more effective instruction to struggling students, thereby growing student achievement (Bozkurt et al., 2021).

Although instructional coaches may have little direct impact on student achievement, their work with teachers directly contributes to teachers' individual and collective self-efficacy and thus instructional coaches indirectly impact student achievement through their ability to

perform instructional leadership duties. Teachers' individual self-efficacy is positively impacted when they are supported with professional learning experiences to grow their abilities, particularly their skillset for instructional challenges (Gale et al., 2021). Instructional coaches provide job-embedded opportunities for regular professional learning. Collaborating with an instructional coach can support teachers' individual self-efficacies (DeSimone, 2020). Additionally, instructional coaches often work to provide collaborative spaces to teacher learning in the form of professional learning communities or group/team coaching (Hashim, 2020; Kho et al., 2019). This regular collaborative work to increase the knowledge and skills of the group has positive impacts on teachers' collective self-efficacy (Brandmo et al., 2021; DeSimone, 2020; Goddard et al., 2021). Having a deeper understanding of instructional coaches' experiences as instructional leaders can contribute to nuanced understandings of how instructional coaches impact teacher efficacy and, ultimately, student achievement.

Summary

In this review of literature, important issues concerning instructional coaches' instructional leadership were examined. The literature review indicated instructional leadership, a relatively recent brand of leadership that involves specifically overseeing teaching and learning in schools, impacts student achievement and teacher efficacy. Traditionally, school principals were thought of as solely responsible for instructional leadership. As principals' responsibilities expand, systems fail to support the conflicting roles that they must occupy, and principal preparation programs do not equip principals with a depth of knowledge and skills to act alone as instructional leaders. Middle leaders can exercise instructional leadership, and instructional coaches are particularly well-suited to be instructional leaders due to their extensive content, curricular, and pedagogical knowledge, emphasis on building trusting relationships, and

organizational position. The review of literature indicated that several factors inhibit instructional coaches from enacting their instructional leadership, including confusion surrounding instructional coaches' role, poor use of instructional coaches' time, a lack of infrastructure for distribute leadership, and inadequate preparation for instructional leadership. Additionally, this literature review explored how educators' self-efficacy is negatively impacted when they encounter obstacles that block them from fulfilling core responsibilities. Some of these negative impacts include decreased job performance, lower student achievement, and increased motivation to quit. Considering the review of literature, a compelling case is made to study instructional coaches' experiences and perceptions of their instructional leadership, as it may have significant impact on schools and students.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

Overview

The purpose of this chapter is to introduce the research methodology for this qualitative phenomenological study exploring the experiences and perspectives of instructional coaches and their instructional leadership. A phenomenological research approach will allow for an in-depth understanding of the complexities that instructional coaches experience surrounding their instructional leadership. It will also provide a way to analyze the data to understand how these experiences and perspectives impact instructional coaches' self-efficacy. The research design, research questions, study participants, researcher positionality, procedures, data collection and analysis approach, and trustworthiness of this study are explained in this chapter.

Research Design and Rationale

The phenomena that will be explored in this study are instructional coaches' experiences as instructional leaders and perspectives about how their ability or inability to be instructional leaders impacts their self-efficacy. For this research, a qualitative study was selected. Qualitative research designs afford the researcher opportunities to deeply understand the "why" and "how" behind a phenomenon (Eddies-Hirsch, 2015). As opposed to quantitative studies, which test specific hypotheses and examine relationships among variables in generalizable ways, qualitative studies allow the researcher to explore study participants' experiences and perspectives in robust and nuanced ways (Malterud, 2011). Because this research is intended to develop a contextualized understanding of a phenomenon and to give voice to the research participants, qualitative research is appropriate for this study.

More specifically, a phenomenological research design was applied to this study. Phenomenological studies examine lived experiences and how people interpret these experiences

(Bogdan & Biklen, 1998; Busetto et al., 2020; Patton, 2014; Stolz, 2022). More specifically, phenomenology seeks to investigate the universal features of consciousness while avoiding assumptions about the external world (Atkins & Wallace, 2015; Patton, 2014). In this way, phenomenological researchers can describe phenomena as they appear to those that experience them as well as explore their significance.

Phenomenology can be subdivided into two different approaches: transcendental phenomenology and hermeneutic phenomenology. Transcendental phenomenology has its roots with Edmund Husserl. Husserl believed that a true understanding of the essences of experiences and phenomena is free from one's preconceived ideas and biases (Glendinning, 2007). This process of a researcher quarantining their preconceptions is known as bracketing (Glendinning, 2007) and is the chief difference between transcendental phenomenology and hermeneutic phenomenology. Hermeneutic phenomenology, founded by Husserl's student Martin Heidegger, focuses on how the participants in a study interpret their experiences. Through exploring the meaning that people ascribe to their specific experiences, researchers can give rich descriptions of phenomena (Eddies-Hirsch, 2015). This study will employ a hermeneutic phenomenological approach, as it will allow the researcher to acknowledge her own experiences and biases as an instructional coach, exploring how they may potentially influence interpretation of the data.

Research Questions

Central Research Question

What are the instructional leadership experiences of instructional coaches in a large, urban city?

Sub-Question One

How do instructional coaches perceive and enact instructional leadership?

Sub-Question Two

What factors influence how instructional coaches perceive and enact instructional leadership?

Setting and Participants

This study will take place in K-12 school settings in an urban school district in a major city in the northeast region of the United States. Study participants are instructional coaches at these schools and teachers who are coached by these instructional coaches.

Setting

The setting of this study includes multiple schools in a major urban northeastern city school district. These schools include elementary schools, middle schools, and high schools. These school settings were selected for this study due to the variety of administrative leadership styles, organizational structures, and distributive leadership practices present at these schools. A range of grade levels, administrative leadership styles, organizational structures, and distributed leadership practices is important to this study so that diverse experiences and perspectives could contribute to a nuanced understanding of the phenomenon.

Participants

A purposive sample composed of instructional coaches with at least five years of teaching experience and two years of instructional coaching experience was used for the interviews of this study. Purposive sampling will allow the researcher to choose participants that afford an in-depth exploration of the research questions (Patton, 2014). Saturation of data is used to determine the number of participants in a qualitative study. Saturation occurs in qualitative studies during the data collection and analysis process, when data becomes repetitive and no new themes are discerned (Patton, 2014).Saturation of data was reached at 10 instructional coaches

and thus only 10 instructional coaches were used in this study.

Additionally, a purposive sample composed of teachers who are coached by the instructional coaches was used for the focus groups in this study. In addition to being coached by the instructional coach, the teachers must also have at least two years of teaching experience and at least six months of partnership with the instructional coach beyond their first year of teaching in order to be considered for this study. These requirements helped to ensure that teachers had enough professional experience in general, understanding of coaching in their context, and interactions with their instructional coaches to offer meaningful reflections for this study.

Researcher Positionality

Interpretive Framework

The interpretive framework through which this study was conducted is social constructivism. A social constructivist framework posits that knowledge is not an objective concept to be obtained but rather a social construct that is created by people through their interactions with others and their environment (Lee, 2012; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Under this paradigm, people interpret their experiences and actively create knowledge, assigning meaning to things through shared understanding (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). As such, social constructivism is subjective; it assumes that there may be multiple truths, realities, knowledge, and ways of knowing (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Yanto & Ramdani, 2023).

As a qualitative research framework, social constructivist research revolves around the meaning-making process. Unlike positivist philosophies which focus on discerning objective truth, social constructivism explores how individuals make meaning from their experiences and perceptions. Thus, social interaction is a critical element of social constructivism. Shared experiences, societal norms, and common values are the lens through which individuals interpret

experiences and create knowledge (Vygotsky, 1978). Additionally, the context in which knowledge is created impacts how people come to various understandings. Social constructivist research seeks to explore and explain the relevant contexts, such as the physical, social, cultural, political, and historical environments through which knowers create and understand knowledge (Lee, 2012; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Yanto & Ramdani, 2023).

Owing to its socially constructed nature, research methods that capture the lived experiences and perspectives of study participants are often utilized under a social constructivist framework (Patton, 2014). Research methods common to quantitative methods, such as surveys and experimentation, focus primarily on discerning knowledge through statistical analysis of numerical data. These methods do not usually permit the subjective understandings and rich descriptions characteristic of a subjective constructivist interpretative framework. On the contrary, typical qualitative research methods like interviews, focus groups, and observations allow researchers to investigate contexts in-depth, allow participants to collaborate around shared understandings, and allow robust accounts of participants experiences and perspectives (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998; Patton, 2014).

Philosophical Assumptions

Philosophical assumptions are beliefs that one holds about reality, knowledge, truth, and values (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998; Matta, 2021; Patton, 2014). These beliefs are not chosen by a researcher for a specific research undertaking; on the contrary, philosophical assumptions describe core beliefs the researcher has that have been developed throughout his or her life, shaped by his or her experiences, culture, and societal norms (Matta, 2021). These beliefs influence how a researcher engages in research as well as how data is collected and interpreted. Therefore, a research author's philosophical beliefs influence the research. Three core

philosophical assumptions that influence researchers' work are ontological, epistemological, and axiological assumptions.

Ontological Assumption

This researcher is approaching this research from an ontological assumption that is informed by social constructivism. This researcher believes that multiple realities exist and that there is not one singular truth, but rather that truth is relative to each person. Regarding this specific study, this researcher believes that the experiences and perspectives of instructional leadership by the instructional coach participants in this study is their reality and their truth, but other instructional coaches in different settings may have different truths about their experiences and perspectives of instructional leadership. This researcher believes that all these truths are equally real, relative to their respective believers.

Epistemological Assumption

Like other qualitative researchers, this researcher has subjective orientations towards knowledge and how one comes to know what one knows. By and large, this researcher believes that rather than knowledge being discreet facts to be discovered, knowledge is based upon how people experience and perceive the world. Knowledge is created by the knower as he or she interacts with the environment and others. Moreover, this researcher believes that knowledge is a social construct. Knowers not only create knowledge but also create ways of knowing as well as evidence of knowing. What may count as knowledge in one context may not be viewed the same way in a different context.

Axiological Assumption

In a qualitative study, it is important for the reader to know the research author's values concerning the research. It is equally important for the researcher to be cognizant of his or her

positionality and bracket values and biases while gathering data, analyzing data, and interpreting results (Patton, 2014). This qualitative study will examine how instructional coaches experience and perceive their instructional leadership. This researcher has worked as an instructional coach since 2015. This researcher firmly believes that instructional coaches have the knowledge and skillset to be instructional leaders in their settings and that instructional coaches should formally engage in instructional leadership capacities. Additionally, this researcher believes that top-level school leaders, such as heads of school and principals, must play a leading role in establishing a vision, defining the culture, implementing changes in a school setting, and supporting the instructional leadership of others. While top-level leaders do not have to start these initiatives, this researcher believes that these initiatives cannot substantively take root in a school community without the intentional engagement from these leaders.

Researcher's Role

It is important to understand the researcher's role in qualitative research. Who the researcher is and how the researcher knows and interacts with participants will support readers in understanding the study. This researcher is a human instrument of this study. The researcher created the interview questions, interviewed participants, and interpreted the information gained from the interviews.

This researcher has existing friendships and has had professional relationships with several of the participants in this study. This researcher does not have, nor has she ever had, any supervisory relationship with or authority over any of the participants in this study. She does not currently work at the same site or in the same school setting as any of the participants.

As an instructional coach in urban, northeastern schools, this researcher is coming into this research with biases and assumptions that may influence the methodology. To be impartial

and unbiased, this researcher bracketed her assumptions so that interviews and data analyses were approached neutrally. During the interviews, this researcher adhered to the interview protocol and refrained from engaging in social conversation or sharing her experiences with participants, as this may have influenced their responses. The researcher did not assume that because she may have had similar experiences to the participants that she knew what they were going to say; when necessary, the researcher asked follow-up questions to gain insights on participants' responses. Lastly, if strong feelings about the data collected arose within me, this researcher journaled those feelings to not only support bracketing but to also practice reflexivity after data interpretation.

Procedures

Below are the steps this researcher followed to engage in this study. These steps are explained with enough depth and clarity that the study can be replicated, if desired.

Permissions

Data collection did not begin until the researcher received approval from the Slippery Rock University Institutional Review Board (IRB). The IRB approval letter for this study is included in the appendix of this document. Site permissions for interviews of district personnel will also be included in the appendix of this document. Study participants gave their permission to engage in the study by signing informed consent letters; the informed consent letter used for this study are also included in the appendix of this document.

Recruitment Plan

The sample pool of instructional coaches for this study included approximately125 instructional coaches employed within a major school district in a large, urban city in the northeast United States. Guest et al. (2006) recommends that qualitative studies use a sample size

ranging between 10 and 15 participants. This range is recommended because it allows for the deep insight characteristic of qualitative data. Robust, in-depth analyses and descriptions of phenomena and experiences are best gained by using a smaller group size, since it affords gathering detailed information through interviews. A sample size range of 10-15 participants also allows the researcher to gain enough data that new perspectives, experiences, and themes are unlikely to happen with the addition of more participants; this type of richness of data is known as saturation (Guest et al., 2006; Morse, 1995).

A purposive sample via snowball sampling was used for this study. Purposive sampling is characterized by choosing participants for the study based on their specific relevant experience and understandings of the research topic (Smith et al., 1995). Instructional coaches perform a variety of roles in different settings; not all sites that employ instructional coaches expect or desire for instructional coaches to serve in instructional leadership roles (Hashim, 2020; Miller et al., 2019; Neumerski, 2012). This study specifically seeks the insights of instructional coaches in settings wherein they are expected to work in an instructional leadership capacity. Using professional networks, this researcher contacted an initial group of instructional coaches who fit the needs of this study. These coaches were then asked to recommend other coaches who met the study requirements and might be interested in participating, reaching out to these instructional coaches via email for initial information and an invitation to learn more about the study. This researcher continued in this manner until the sample size range was reached. A similar method was used for the teacher participants of the focus groups. This researcher asked the instructional coaches to suggest teachers with whom they had worked for at least six months and have at least two years teaching experience that may have been interested in the study. The researcher contacted those teachers via email for initial information and an invitation to learn more about

the study.

Data Collection Plan

Data collection in qualitative studies generally involves gathering rich, detailed, non-numerical information from study participants (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998; Busetto et al., 2020; Patton, 2014; Stolz, 2022). Such information allows the study participants' perspectives and experiences to be understood in-depth. This type of information also allows a phenomenological researcher to explore the "how" and "why" of the phenomenon of study. For this study, in-depth individual interviews and focus groups were the data collection methods.

Individual Interviews Data Collection Approach

Conducting individual interviews is a common data collection approach in qualitative research (Atkins & Wallace, 2015; Knott et al., 2022; Patton, 2014). The individual interview process entails having one-on-one conversations between researcher and study participants, using open-ended questions that elicit rich information about the research topic (Atkins & Wallace, 2015; Patton, 2014; Stolz, 2022). Open-ended questions are used in qualitative research because they allow the researcher to gather detailed information, as opposed to yes/no interview questions. Additionally, open-ended interview questions help ensure that a researcher does not lead study participants towards a specific answer (Atkins & Wallace, 2015; Bogdan & Biklen, 1998; Knott et al., 2022). Individual interviews are a preferred data collection method for qualitative research because they allow the collection of contextualized and nuanced information from participants. When necessary, participants can be asked to expound on their responses and give more details, thus allowing a researcher to obtain the comprehensive data typical of qualitative research (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998; Knott et al., 2022; Patton, 2014).

This research made use of semi-structured interview questions. Semi-structured

interviews can be characterized by a researcher using a preplanned, core set of open-ended questions to gather information from study participants while also having the flexibility to not ask the questions in a specific order or phrasing (Smith et al., 1995). Additionally, semi-structured interviews permit the researcher to ask follow-up questions that are not preplanned; in this way, the researcher is able to probe more deeply into relevant responses by participants (Smith et al., 1995). The interview for this study was conducted via the Zoom video conferencing platform. Using the Zoom video conferencing platform allowed for ease of recording and transcribing the interviews, as Zoom offers these features embedded in the use of the platform.

Central Research Question

What are the instructional leadership experiences of instructional coaches in a large, urban city?

Sub-Question One

How do instructional coaches perceive and enact instructional leadership?

Sub-Question Two

What factors influence how instructional coaches perceive and enact instructional leadership?

Semi-Structured Interview Questions

1. Please describe your educational background and career to date. *Background information*
2. How long have you been an instructional coach? *Background information*
3. In what content or pedagogical areas as do you provide instructional coaching? *Background information*
4. What do you believe are the professional responsibilities of instructional coaches? *RQ1*

5. What are your specific professional duties as an instructional coach at your school/site? *RQ1*
6. How do you define instructional leadership? *RQ1*
7. In general, what role, if any, do you believe instructional coaches play in a school's instructional leadership? *RQ1*
8. In what ways do you act as an instructional leader in the site(s) in which you provide instructional coaching? *RQ1*
9. In what ways do you impact the instructional practices and programing at your school/site? *RQ1*
10. What factors support you acting as an instructional leader? *RQ2*
11. How do you influence the factors that support your instructional leadership? *RQ2*
12. What barriers prohibit you acting as an instructional leader? *RQ2*
13. How do you influence these barriers that prohibit your instructional leadership? *RQ2*
14. How do you measure your success as an instructional coach? *RQ2*
15. How would you describe your supervisor's leadership style? *RQ1*
16. What professional expectations has your supervisor communicated related to your role as an instructional coach? *RQ1*
17. How do you feel your supervisor's leadership impacts your ability to fulfill your role as an instructional coach? *RQ2*
18. How are you evaluated as an instructional coach? *RQ2*
19. What perceptions exist among the professional staff related to instructional coaches? *RQ2*
20. What else would you like to add to our discussion of your experiences and perceptions of instructional leadership as an instructional coach?

These questions were included in the interview protocol for this research for very specific reasons. Questions 1-3 serve as grand tour questions that allowed the researcher and study participants feel comfortable with each other. The interactions with these questions can facilitate deeper, more valuable responses later in the interview protocol. Questions 4-14 were intended to allow participants to reflect on their role as an instructional coach as well as their experiences with instructional leadership. Questions 15-19 were intended to gain insight on how instructional coaches believe school leaders and teachers experience and perceive their instructional leadership. Through these 19 questions, both the instructional leadership and self-efficacy theoretical frameworks were explored. Question 20 was a final question to ensure that study participants had an opportunity to share any relevant information they did not share in the previous questions. To ensure the credibility and trustworthiness of the interview protocol, all the interview questions were reviewed by experts in field and refined as necessary. Additionally, the interview protocol was administered to a small sample of instructional coaches who were not a part of this study for the purpose of addressing clarity of questions.

Individual Interview Data Analysis Plan

A thematic analysis was completed to analyze the transcribed data from the individual interviews. According to Sundler et al. (2019), thematic analysis involves a researcher closely examining data to discern repeated topics, ideas, and themes in the data. Thematic analysis allows qualitative researchers to find multiple meanings within individual units of data and use inductive reasoning to synthesize larger patterns of meaning and experience (Braun & Clarke, 2012). Below are the Braun and Clarke's five steps of thematic analysis that were used in this research (2012).

Step 1: Familiarization. During the initial step of thematic analysis, the researcher reads and rereads interview transcripts to become familiar with the data (Braun & Clarke, 2012). Sundler et al. (2019) propose that the researcher reads the data with an open-minded stance to draw meaning from the data as opposed to confirming any preconceived biases that the researcher enters the data analysis process with. During this familiarization process, the researcher takes note of initial notices, wonderings, and general thoughts.

Step 2: Coding. This stage involves systematically coding relevant portions of the data (Braun & Clarke, 2012). This coding involves two different actions. The first is to somehow set aside the specific words of the transcript that belong with each code, such as highlighting them in a specific color. The second step is to create a code corresponding with this portion of the data; the code is a shorthand way to describe the relevance of the data to the study.

Step 3: Generating Categories. During this step, codes will be examined for patterns within the codes (Sunder et al., 2019). As patterns emerge across codes, these codes are bundled together into categories. Not all codes will necessarily appear often enough to fall under a category; these codes will not be considered for the data analysis as they may lack relevance for the study.

Step 4: Identifying Themes. During this stage of thematic analysis, all categories discovered in the previous step are reviewed to ensure that they are representative of the interview transcription data. Relevancy specifically entails examining the usefulness and accuracy of the data. Then, categories were collapsed into themes can be collapsed, combined, created, and discarded to support a thorough and relevant analysis (Sunder et al., 2019).

Step 5: Defining and Naming Themes. During this step, themes from the data are refined, collapsed, and/or combined to produce the final themes. Definitions of the exact meaning of each theme are created and a concise, straightforward yet descriptive name is given to each theme.

Focus Groups Data Collection Approach

Conducting focus groups is another data collection approach commonly used in qualitative research (Busetto et al., 2020; Patton, 2014; Stewart, 1990; Williams & Katz, 2001). The focus group process entails a researcher leading a small group of participants through an open discussion guided by questions to yield deep insights on the research topic (Patton, 2014; Stewart, 1990; Williams & Katz, 2001). A homogeneous group of participants unknown to each other comprise the focus group. Homogeneity levels the playing field and reduces inhibitions among the group (Stewart, 1990). Although focus group discussions are open and free flowing, they are structured around a set of carefully predetermined questions (Williams & Katz, 2001). Ideally, participant comments will stimulate and influence the thinking and sharing of others, with some participants changing their thoughts and opinions because of their interactions with other participants during the focus group session (Stewart, 1990).

This research made use of focus groups to collect data. The participants in the focus groups consisted of teachers who have professional coaching relationships with the instructional coaches interviewed for this study. Focus groups participants represented various grade levels and subject areas. Two focus groups were conducted via Zoom with 7-8 participants in each group. These groups were homogeneous due to the commonality of their partnership with an instructional coach; individual experiences and reflections, however, were unique and personal to each participant. The data collected was analyzed to uncover themes related to instructional leadership, leadership styles, instructional coaches' roles in schools, and perceptions of instructional coaches as instructional leaders

Focus-Group Interview Questions for Teachers

1. Please describe your educational background and career through your current position. *Background information*
2. How long have you worked with the instructional coach at your school? *Background information*
3. How does the instructional coach at your school professionally support you? *Background information*
4. What do you believe are the general professional responsibilities of the instructional coach? *RQ1*
5. What professional expectations has your principal/school leadership communicated related to your instructional coach's professional duties? *RQ2*
6. How do you define instructional leadership? *RQ1*
7. Do you consider your instructional coach to be an instructional leader at your school? *RQ2*
8. How successful do you consider your instructional coach? *RQ2*
9. What factors influence your instructional coach's success? *RQ2*
10. What perceptions exist among the professional staff related to instructional coaches? *RQ2*
11. What else would you like to add to our discussion of your experiences and perceptions of instructional leadership as an instructional coach?

Focus-Group Interview Data Analysis Plan for Teachers

A thematic analysis was completed to analyze the data from each focus group session. To begin this thematic analysis, all the discussion from the focus group interviews was transcribed. After the researcher read the focus group transcripts and became intimately familiar with it, the researcher coded portions of the transcript that provided insights relevant to the research questions. Next, these codes were reviewed for patterns and subsequently grouped together according to the themes they reveal. Finally, all themes discovered in the previous step were reviewed to ensure that they are representative of the focus group transcription data. Representativeness specifically entails examining the usefulness and accuracy of the data.

Data Synthesis

Data for this research came from individual semi-structured interviews and focus group interviews. Although this research made use of two data collection approaches, the data from each approach jointly created the entire dataset for this study. As such, the data collected from each approach did not begin to be analyzed until all data from both approaches had finished being collected. Doing so allowed data from each approach to be synthesized as one cohesive data set from which themes that offer answers to the research question were discerned. This data set underwent the steps of the thematic analysis as outlined above in each approach. Because Zoom was used for both the individual semi-structured interviews and focus groups, Zoom transcription software was used to transcribe the data. After all transcripts were coded and themes emerged, themes were collapsed, combined, created, and discarded to support a thorough and relevant analysis as needed (Sunder et al., 2019).

Trustworthiness

Trustworthy research studies should measure what the researcher is attempting to measure, be consistent in their ability to produce the same results, and be as uninfluenced from personal interests, values, and biases as possible (Stahl & King, 2020). In qualitative research studies, measures of research trustworthiness include credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). The information that follows explains how the researcher attempted to achieve trustworthiness in this study.

Credibility

The trustworthiness element that measures confidence in the truth of the study's findings is credibility (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). To imbue the study with credibility, this researcher engaged in peer debriefing. Peer debriefing is "a process of exposing oneself to a disinterested peer in a manner paralleling an analytical session and for the purpose of exploring aspects of the inquiry that might otherwise remain only implicit within the inquirer's mind" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 308). Debriefing the research methods, data analysis, and findings with a peer aided in the recognition of biases and assumptions that may have been influencing the study. The peer debriefer also supported in uncovering alternate themes and findings from the data that the lone researcher may not have otherwise discerned.

Transferability

Research shows a degree of trustworthiness when the findings of the research can be applied to other contexts that were not included in the study (Drisko, 2024; Stahl & King, 2020). This element of trustworthiness is known as transferability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Although transferability cannot be guaranteed from context to context, a researcher can set the foundation for transferability to be achieved. For this study, transferability was attempted through the use of

thick description (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Through thick description, a researcher gives a robust description of the research context. This includes the setting in which the research is taking place, the subjects who participate in the study, and any other relevant background information for the study. With such detailed information, readers will be able to determine whether the research findings are transferable to other contexts.

Dependability

Another aspect of trustworthiness in research is dependability. Dependability establishes that research findings are consistent and repeatable (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). To achieve dependability in this study, this researcher conducted an inquiry audit. This inquiry audit includes having members of the dissertation committee examine the data collection and data analysis processes, as well as the findings of the research. This inquiry audit helped ensure that findings were accurate and supported by the data (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

Confirmability

Confirmability is the final aspect of trustworthiness, and it describes confidence in research findings being rooted in the participants words and experiences and not the researcher's bias (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This research employed an audit trail as well as reflexivity to assure confirmability in this study. An audit trail involves the researcher keeping record of and openly describing the data collection process, the data analysis process, and interpretation of the data, including explaining rationale behind thematic data coding choices (Malterud, 2001). Reflexivity involves the researcher actively and systematically reflecting on how their biases and background may have influenced the study. This researcher employed a reflection journal to support reflexivity and enhance the study's confirmability.

Ethical Considerations

To ensure the use of responsible, ethical practices, this researcher adhered to the rules and regulations of Slippery Rock University's Institutional Review Board. This included successfully completing a Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative Human Subjects Research on Social and Behavioral Research course. This course explores ethical research practices, federal research regulations, informed consent, participant privacy, and confidentiality.

All efforts were made to ensure that study participants were fully apprised about the study and the nature of their participation. Prior to engaging in the study, all participants in this study were provided with an informational letter to explain the study, including the use of the study and possible risks of participation. The researcher also explained to participants that their participation in the study was purely voluntary and that they had the right to withdraw from the study at any time, for any reason. Participants had explained to them that their confidentiality would be maintained by securely storing recordings of interviews and data analyses; anonymity would be kept by not using names or other uniquely identifying information in the study. Participants were be afforded the opportunity to ask questions, share concerns, and gather more information about the study from the researcher via email, telephone, Zoom, or in-person. After each participant received all pertinent information about the study and had an opportunity to address their concerns, informed consent to participate in the study was obtained.

Summary

This chapter outlined the research methods that were used in this study. A hermeneutic phenomenological research design through a social constructivist framework was used to investigate how instructional coaches perceive and enact their instructional leadership as well as the factors that influence how instructional coaches perceive and enact their instructional

leadership. Purposive, snowball sampling was used to recruit study participants. Instructional coach participants then engaged in individual interviews on the research topics; teacher participants engaged in focus groups on the research topics. Interviews and focus group sessions were transcribed, and thematic analysis was used to analyze the interview data.

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

Overview

This phenomenological study is designed to understand the experiences and perceptions of instructional leadership for instructional coaches in a large, urban city school district in the northeastern United States. As a qualitative method, phenomenological research designs afford the researcher opportunities to deeply understand the "why" and "how" behind a phenomenon (Eddies-Hirsch, 2015). More specifically, phenomenological studies examine how people interpret their lived experiences (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998; Busetto et al., 2020; Patton, 2014; Stolz, 2022). Participants for this specific research were instructional coaches and their teachers, selected for their years of experience and familiarity with instructional leadership and instructional coaching.

Because the essence of phenomenological research is a deep understanding of a phenomenon, this chapter includes robust descriptions of the site and participant groups of this study. Afterwards, the findings from the research are detailed. Themes from the data analysis are identified and explained in detail. Once all themes have been presented, a synthesis of the findings is discussed. Finally, the central research questions and sub-research questions are answered plainly.

Setting and Participants

Setting

The site for this research was an urban school district in a major city in the northeastern part of the United States. This district is a large one, serving approximately 200,000 students and employing approximately 20,000 staff members in approximately 300 schools. This district boasts high cultural and linguistic diversity, with over 50 languages being spoken by district

students. Although the city that hosts this district is socioeconomically varied, approximately 70% of the students in this district are eligible to participate in the federal free or reduced-price meals program. Since the 2020-2021 school year, this district has hired between 600-800 teachers annually. Each teacher in their first year of employment with this district is partnered with at least one of the district's approximately 125 instructional coaches. Collaboration with an instructional coach beyond this first year of employment is based on formal evaluations, teachers' desires for continued collaboration, and school leaders' discretion.

While this district's instructional coaching program has been established for several decades, recent changes within the last decade have increased the number of instructional coaches in the district. Prior to the 2019-2020 school year, the district's coaches were only for new and poorly evaluated teachers; to support other teachers, the district contracted with an outside organization to supply coaches. Starting in the 2019-2020 year, this district began a small department of instructional coaches to support teachers in specific school buildings; these teachers are either self-selected or selected by school leadership for coaching. Each year since, the number of these instructional coaches that support specific school buildings has rapidly increased, now accounting for over half of all coaches in the instructional coaching department.

Participants

Due to this research's phenomenological design, participants for this study were strategically selected to provide a variety of experiences and perspectives on instructional coaches and instructional leadership. Participants for this study can be grouped into two distinct categories: instructional coaches and teachers.

Instructional Coaches

A purposive sample of ten instructional coaches participated in this research. All ten of the instructional coaches are employed by and support teachers in the same large, urban school district in a major northeast city of the United States. These coaches, while meeting minimum prerequisites of at least five years of teaching experience and two years of instructional coaching experience, came to the study with a variety of experiences and contexts. The diversity in this group of participants allowed for a full and complex picture to be illustrated for this study. The table below details pertinent demographic information about the instructional coach participants in this study.

Table 1

Instructional Coach Participants

Participant	Years of Teaching	Years of Coaching	Content Area Coached	Grade Levels Coached	Number of Current Schools Serviced as Coach
A	5	2	ELA	K-8	1
B	7	5	ELA	K-12	5
C	20	8	ELA	K-8	1
D	13	3	Math	K-5	1
E	5	5	All	K-12	2
F	8	4	ELA	K-8	1
G	10	2	Math, ELA	K-5	1
H	12	9	All	K-12	4
I	8	7	ELA	K-5	1

J	11	5	All	K-12	5

Teachers

Fifteen teachers were included as participants in this study. All the teacher participants were suggested by the instructional coaches who participated in the study as teachers who either were currently being coached or had previously been coached by them. In this school district, all teachers who are new to the district receive coaching for their first year. After this first year, a teacher's continued collaboration with an instructional coach is dependent upon the teacher' s formal evaluation score, school leader's discretion, and/or the teacher's expressed desire to collaborate with a coach. Each of the teachers who participated in this study have met the basic requirements of having at least two years of teaching experience and having collaborated with their instructional coach for at least six months after the mandatory first year of coaching. These teachers have a variety of experiences that inform their perspectives. Below is a table detailing the demographic information for these teachers:

Table 2

Teacher Participants

Participant	Years of Teaching	Length of Time with Coach (after the initial 1st year of coaching)	Content Areas Taught	Grade Level Taught
A	6	2 years	ELA	7
B	13	6 months	ELA, Social Studies	1
C	2	1 year	Math, Science	4
D	2	1 year	ELA	2

E	9	3 years	Math	8
F	4	4 years	Art	K-8
G	3	2 years	ELA	3
H	2	8 months	ELA, Math, Social Studies, Science	K
I	5	3 years	Math	2
J	6	1 year	ELA	6
K	4	3 years	ELA	4
L	8	2 years	ELA, Math, Social Studies, Science	K
M	2	1 year	Math	10
N	3	2 years	Music	9-12
O	3	1 year	Math	3

Results

As a phenomenological study designed to understand the essence of how instructional coaches perceive and experience instructional leadership, data collection consisted of semi-structured interviews with instructional coach participants. These interviews were conducted individually via Zoom, and Zoom software was used to record and transcribe the interviews. Each instructional coach was asked 20 prepared questions, with the researcher asking follow-up and clarifying questions as necessary. At the conclusion of the researcher-prepared questions, instructional coaches were given the opportunity to share any other relevant experiences,

perceptions, and understandings of instructional coaches and instructional leadership that had not yet been uncovered during the interview. Interviews with instructional coaches lasted between 45-60 minutes each.

The second data collection method used for this study was teacher focus groups. As with the semi-structured interviews, the Zoom platform was used to conduct, record, and transcribe the focus groups. Two teacher focus groups were conducted: one consisting of seven teachers and the other consisting of eight teachers. Eleven prepared questions were asked to teachers in each of these focus groups, with the researcher asking follow-up and clarifying questions as necessary. At the conclusion of the researcher-prepared questions, focus group participants were given the opportunity to share any other relevant perceptions and understandings of instructional coaches and instructional leadership that had not yet been addressed in the focus groups. Both focus group sessions lasted for approximately 60 minutes.

Phenomenological research is intended to identify the common experiences of participants to demonstrate what the phenomenon is at its essence (Patton, 2014). Participant experiences from a variety of contexts should be closely analyzed for recurrent themes that can be used to describe the phenomenon (Atkins & Wallace, 2015). Consequently, data collected from both methods of this research were analyzed together as one collective dataset after the conclusion of all interviews and focus groups.

This combined dataset underwent a systematic, thematic analysis process to inductively move from individual raw qualitative data to the identification of three essential themes capturing study participants' shared lived experiences. The analytic progression is described below, unfolding through four iterative phases: familiarization, coding, categories, and themes:

Familiarization: The first phase of this process began with raw data, consisting of 527 pages of verbatim transcripts from ten semi-structured instructional coach interviews and two teacher focus groups. Consistent with phenomenological principles, these transcripts were treated as the foundational sources of meaning and were read multiple times in their entirety to deeply understand experiences before any formal coding occurred. During this phase, the researcher engaged in bracketing by documenting assumptions to minimize preconceived interpretations of participants' accounts.

Coding: Following the familiarization phase, transcripts were analyzed line by line to identify meaning units—segments of text that conveyed a discrete idea relevant to the instructional coaches' experiences of instructional leadership. These meaning units were grounded in participants' voices and labeled with initial in vivo codes using participants' own language when possible. During this phase, codes were descriptive rather than interpretive and remained close to the verbatim data (such as "unclear expectations" and "success with earning teachers' trust"). Approximately 1000 codes were generated at this point.

Categories: After the coding phase, related codes were grouped into broader categories that reflected recurring patterns across participants' experiences. Categories functioned to organize codes that reflected similar conditions, actions, or meanings without yet interpreting them. For example, multiple codes related to ambiguity, lack of communication, and unclear expectations were clustered into a category such as "role ambiguity". Categories were continually compared across cases using a constant comparative approach to ensure they captured shared aspects of the phenomenon rather than isolated experiences. Fifteen categories were unfolded during this phase.

Themes: During the final phase, categories were then synthesized into interpretive themes to capture the essential structures of the participants' shared lived experiences. These themes were constantly compared across transcripts to ensure that they were present in multiple participants, have substantive data to support it, and contributed to research phenomenon in a meaningful way. Themes were refined, combined, and collapsed as needed. Three final themes were discerned from the data: Role Ambiguity and Fractured Instructional Leadership, Relational Trust as an Enabler, and Perceived Agency and Coaching Self-Efficacy.

Distinguishing "Instructional Coaches' Instructional Leadership" and "Instructional Coaches as Instructional Leaders"

The ensuing discussion of this study's themes, their interpretations, and various implications will include two similar yet distinct sets of verbiage: "instructional coaches' instructional leadership" and "instructional coaches as instructional leaders." While these terms are tightly associated with each other, they are not synonymous. "Instructional coaches' instructional leadership" refers to the practices that instructional coaches perform to have impact on teaching and learning in their contexts. Conceptually, this phrase orients towards actions and processes that instructional coaches use to influence others. The concept of "instructional coaches' instructional leadership" is aligned with Spillane's (2005) distributed leadership theory, which focuses on leadership emerging through interactions with others rather than through position. Examples of "instructional coaches' instructional leadership" include persistent engagement in coaching cycles despite scheduling challenges, building relational trust with teacher colleagues to influence instruction, and dialogue with educational stakeholders around instructional responses to students' data.

On the contrary, “instructional coaches as instructional leaders” represents the actual and perceived positions that instructional coaches occupy within the instructional leadership structures at their schools. This concept is grounded not in instructional coaches’ practice but rather in their role identity and the legitimacy of their role. Discussions of “instructional coaches as instructional leaders” is most connected to notions of role clarity/ambiguity, authority, membership in instructional leadership structures, and perceptions -including both self-perceptions and perceptions of others- of leadership identity. Examples of “instructional coaches as instructional leaders” includes membership in schools’ formal instructional leadership teams, ability to initiate schoolwide instructional reform initiatives, and leadership or facilitation of professional learning structures in schools.

Role Ambiguity and Fractured Instructional Leadership

One theme that arose from the data is participants trying to come to a clear understanding of instructional coaches' roles and professional responsibilities. Within the various settings in which the participants worked, instructional coaches had different professional expectations. Without centralized communication about who the instructional coaches are, why they were chosen to support in specific schools and with specific teachers, and what that support would look like, participants used their individual experiences to define instructional coaches’ roles and responsibilities. Common trends emerged within these individual definitions.

Lack of Administrative Communication About Instructional Coaches Roles and Expectations

Consistent with the findings of Miller et al. (2019) and Woodward and Thomas (2021), all the participants in this research shared that their school administrators did not share any information with staff members about instructional coaches’ roles in the school or their responsibilities. Teacher K shared,

> I don't remember any of my administration really providing me with the expectations I should have of the instructional coach. But [the coach] herself… does do that at the beginning of the year, at least with me, she has. Every year, she's like, "This is what I intend to do, but what are your expectations, and what, you know, how can I do it?"

Teacher D added, "I don't know if our administration really knows how much work and what we do with our instructional coach and how we take what we do with her and bring it back into our classroom." Summarizing the lack of communication from school leaders to staff about instructional coaching, Teacher M plainly shared, "I don't think [school administrators] go over the coaches' duties anymore."

Many of the instructional coach participants corroborated this experience. Coach B's insight exemplified nonexistent messaging to teachers about instructional coaches' expectations, stating,

> Older teachers that have already had a coach know what to expect, but that's because they already had a coach. The new teachers, principals don't tell them anything about what we do. What it's really like to work with us.

In a similar fashion, Coach G explained,

> Principals barely have time to meet with us and tell us who we are supposed to be coaching. No, they do not tell us what they expect from us, and they do not tell teachers what to expect from us. We have to go in and explain it to the teachers themselves in our first coaching meeting.

Some participants reported that administrators explained what responsibilities teachers had to instructional coaches but did not clearly explain the responsibilities instructional coaches had to teachers, school administrators, or the school as a whole. Coach F observed,

> You know, I don't think [the principal] really tells teachers what my duties are. When I started, I didn't think he really understood what my duties were. I was his first coach. Now I do know that he tells the teachers that they have to meet with me at least once a week, that they have to work on their coaching goal with me.

Coach A reflected, "I wasn't introduced or anything. She just kind of made a blanket statement, you know, like, 'Some of you will be coached. I'll be looking for progress on coaching goals during walkthroughs.' Stuff like that." Teacher participants voiced this same one-sided messaging. Teacher J lamented, "The only thing my principal told me about the coach is that I had to meet with her at least once a week during prep and if I didn't, I would get written up." In alignment with all other shared sentiments, Teacher C stated,

> I have had no communication about what the coach is supposed to do. I've been told what I am supposed to do with the coach, after I work with the coach, or as a result of the coach. But the principal hasn't told me anything about the coach's responsibilities.

Finally, Coach E's assertions plainly explain how teachers have their coaching responsibilities explained to them without having instructional coaches' responsibilities explained,

> Only the teachers I work with really know what my duties are, and that's because I work with them. Other than that, no one knows what I do. They know that if they are assigned to work with me and they don't, the principal tells them they

> will write them up. They know that they have to have a certain amount of progress towards their goal as a part of their evaluation; the principals tell them that too. But other than that, if a teacher doesn't work with me, they have no idea what I do.

In general, participants attributed this lack of administrative communication to two core reasons: they believed that either school administrators themselves did not clearly understand instructional coaches' roles or that school administrators were deliberately vague about instructional coaches' roles in order to use instructional coaches in more ways than would be generally expected of instructional coaches. These sentiments appear to confirm the research of Kane and Rosenquist (2019), which details how instructional coaches' time use in non-coaching activities had serious implications for how they were received as leaders. For instance, Teacher D noted,

> I think, in a sense… [my instructional coach's] exact duties were kind of left vague on purpose by admin, because they do call her in to fill many roles that you would not normally expect a literacy coach to fill. She runs the PSSAs. Which… the literacy and the math piece and the science PSSAs, which would not normally, I don't think, I don't know for certain, but I don't… when I think of literacy coach, that's not the first thing that pops into my mind as a responsibility. So, I sort of do feel like… the admin at our school have left that clarification of her position and expectations intentionally vague.

Coach E expressed similar thoughts, noting,

> To my knowledge, they [school leaders] don't tell teachers what we do. And they try to act like that's because they don't really know what we do, but they know

> what we do because they ask us to do everything. I think the school leaders don't communicate expectations about us because if they did, the minute they asked us to do something that wasn't our actual job, everyone would know that we aren't supposed to do it.

Instructional Coaches Need High Content Knowledge

Without clear communication from school leaders about instructional coaches' core responsibilities, participants came to their own understanding about the core responsibilities of coaches. The more salient of these surmised professional duties is that instructional coaches are to be the content knowledge leaders in a school building. Coach G declared, "[we instructional coaches] have to educate ourselves in whatever area we are supporting," later adding, "I think instructional coaches know the whole trajectory...their content knowledge is invaluable, like, truly...because of their understanding of the whole picture of their content area." Coach D claimed,

> Coaches are instructional leaders because we lead the school with the most knowledge. We know the curriculum and know our subject better than just about anyone. It's a part of our job to. I mean, we build in time in our day or our week to study this stuff to make sure we are the leaders.

Having a deep understanding of content knowledge appeared to consistently be a defining duty and expectation of instructional coaches, similar to the expectations laid out by Knight (2021). This content knowledge was a prerequisite of the job not only to be able to grow teachers' practice but also to simply facilitate building relationships with teachers. Teacher O posed, "Honestly, I don't think veteran teachers need coaches. Like, if you've made it this far, why do you need a coach now? But honestly, things are always changing, and someone has to

help the vets learn new things." Explicitly demonstrating how high content knowledge helped instructional coaches partner with experienced teachers, Teacher B quipped, "I'll tell you what, though! When I started working with the coach, after teaching for 13 years, that coach sure as hell better know way more than I do if I'm going to respect them!" Likewise, Coach A shared,

> At first a lot of teachers didn't want to work with me, because they knew I was fresh out of the classroom and didn't have that many years actually in the classroom. But once they see that I really, really know my stuff, they come around and ask for help.

This sentiment was even true with instructional coaches who did not specialize in a specific content area. Coach H, an general instructional coach who supports teachers in all subject areas, explained,

> To drive the kind of growth and development we want to see in teachers, we have to deeply know whatever content area we are coaching in. I think that's one of the core duties of my job. Maybe I don't know the most of any one subject, but I know the most about all of the subjects put together.

Teacher N reflected,

> I feel like my coach knows everything. I know she works with me in music, and like, who would have thought someone would be a music coach, right? But she also supports teachers in academic areas too. And she is able to tell us specific things about whatever subject we teach. I don't know, I feel like one of their main professional responsibilities is to know more than everyone, if I can say that.

Compounding that reflection, Coach E claimed,

> My experience has been that principals know a little bit about reading, a little bit about math, but that's just about it. It's my job to know all the ins and outs, to know what's new in each field...so I can support the teachers but also so I can advise the principals, if they can meet with me.

Instructional coach participants owned this responsibility of being content knowledge leaders, expressing their belief that one of their most sacred professional duties is to stay abreast of current pedagogical and content area research. When speaking about the professional responsibilities of coaches, Instructional Coach F exclaimed,

> One of the reasons I enjoy being a coach is because it is a part of my job to be a part of literacy organizations, go to professional development sessions, read the research...stay in the know. Like, the literacy world is making some huge shifts right now, and as a coach, I'm supposed to know what these shifts are and how to break them down to my teachers.

Similarly, Coach B explained,

> We have to do what we have to do to make sure that we actually are experts. Principals and teachers are looking to us to know what's the right thing to do, what's new out there, what the best practice is. We have to dedicate regular time in our schedule to make sure we know that stuff. To stay educated.

Illustrating the seriousness of this duty, Coach G contended,

> It [an instructional coach's relationship with a teacher] really doesn't work well if [the teacher] knows more than me, you know. I'm supposed to be the one that knows it all and has all the answers. So, if I have to stay up all night looking something up and figuring something out, you best believe I'm doing it! As a

> matter of fact, I just enrolled in an online Science of Reading course to help my K-2 teachers with [the new foundational skills curriculum].

Instructional Coaches Not Perceived as Instructional Leaders

Research participants overwhelmingly agreed that, although instructional coaches should be instructional leaders in their building, they were not perceived as instructional leaders. For many participants, a core tenet of being an instructional leader is autonomy. Coach F contended,

> How do I define instructional leadership? A person who knows instruction and is able to lead the staff, set things up, make plans and execute them. On their own. Like, consulting other people of course, but instructional leaders have the final say at the end.

Highlighting the importance of independent decision-making ability, Coach A defines instructional leadership as, "The content knowledge to know current best instructional practices plus the authority to make decisions for schools and teachers that are in the best interest of students." Teacher I defined instructional leadership as,

> The ability to lead the instructional life of a school...by making and giving the directives, seeing them through, making sure that people follow them. Instructionally being the top on in charge; being the one to make the decisions and being responsible for the results of those decisions.

While autonomy was believed to be a defining characteristic of instructional leadership, instructional coach participants commonly asserted feeling little autonomy over their role and an inability to independently make key decisions in their work. "My job is not to make the decisions," Coach I declared, "my job is to support the decisions of the school leaders and carry

out their vision." Coach F observed, "I think there is a difference between what my role is supposed to be, I mean what instructional coaching in general is, and what I actually do. I don't have a say in that; that is out of my control and above my pay grade!" Reflecting deeply on instructional coaches and their instructional leadership, Coach J remarked,

> Most of the instructional coaches I know, we have the deep pedagogical and content knowledge to be instructional leaders. Whereas most principals have a strong disciplinary background, or were in the classroom years ago, coaches keep their eyes and ears and heads, their heads, in the instruction and instructional research. Unfortunately, though, instructional coaches don't have the power to initiate initiatives for schools, decide how curricula are implemented, evaluate teachers. We can't even tell a teacher 'You need to do such-and-such.' We have to phrase everything to a teacher as a suggestion, because as a coach we are not supposed to dictate what teachers do. We don't have that power...how can we be instructional leaders without the authority that comes with leadership?

Similarly, teacher participants noted that instructional coaches were not instructional leaders because they could not actively lead large groups of their staff. Teacher A claimed, "My coach is not an instructional leader. She can barely get the teachers she works with to make changes, so I know she couldn't lead the whole team!" Extending that sentiment, Teacher C contended,

> [My instructional coach] definitely should be an instructional leader in my school. She knows everything. Like, she knows the stuff and knows what we should do. But she doesn't have the power to make anything happen. She should be the

> leader, but without that power, she's not. She just has to hope that the principal and [assistant principal] take her advice.

Teacher M's words shed more light on how instructional leadership is perceived and why instructional coaches are not believed to be instructional leaders:

> To be an instructional leader, you have to lead. And sometimes, a lot of times, leading folks means forcing them to do something they don't want to do in order for them to see the good of that thing; bringing the horse to the well and making him drink so he can see that the water tastes good, you know, that sort of thing. Coaches can't force us to do anything. That's not their role. So, yeah, they got the instruction part down, but instructional leader? No, they can't lead us to do anything.

In alignment with instructional coaching studies such as Miller et al. (2019) and Kho et al. (2019), the roles and responsibilities of instructional coaches were vague to participants in this research. Instructional coaches we not typically perceived as instructional leaders by participants in this study; although instructional coaches had the high content knowledge for instructional leadership, both teachers and instructional coaches reported that instructional coaches do not have the authority required of instructional leaders to make autonomous decisions. Without this authority, instructional coaches resorted to using relationships as their chief mechanism for influencing others.

Relational Trust as an Enabler

In a second theme discerned in the dataset, participants revealed that the chief mechanism through which instructional coaches can impact instructional practices is intentionally building and maintaining relationships with others. This theme corroborates the findings of researchers

like Knight (2007) and Woulfin et al. (2023) that highlight the necessity of instructional coaches building strong relationships with educational stakeholders. Whereas instructional coaches did not wield the power to make teachers or school leaders change in the traditional sense of the word, their strong, trusting, honest connections with others afforded them some capacity to influence others.

Relationships with School Administrators

Many participants found that it was necessary for instructional coaches to deliberately develop a rapport with school leaders. Instructional coaches realized and respected the necessity of collaborating with principals in order to effectively coach teachers. According to Coach D, "I can't really do anything without the principal's support. I can try, but it won't be effective." Coach J reflected on the weight of principalship and the steps she takes to build a strong relationship with principals, noting,

> It's their [school administrators'] schools. It's their teachers. And at the end of the day, their names are on the line. So, I have to go through them. Which means I have to make sure I stop by the office every day, say hi, schedule regular check-ins, follow up on plans and emails. Make sure they like me.

In a similar vein, Coach B claimed,

> If [principals] don't like you, you can just forget it. It'll make your job impossible. So yes, I for sure stroke egos, put on my biggest smile, and shower the principal and the [assistant principals] with compliments. Because it means that they'll be more likely to listen to me when I have an ask or need to present them with some bad data, when I have a zany plan to address the data.

Teacher G added,

> [The school's principal and assistant principals] micromanage...They micromanage teachers, and from what I see they micromanage the coach too. So, [the instructional coach] has gotten real chummy with them, just to make sure she [the instructional coach] can do what she needs to do. Do the things that she thinks are in the teachers' best interest.

The main method of building relationships with school administrators was scheduling regular meetings between instructional coaches and school leaders. These meetings were not only meant to support co-created instructional coaching plans, but more importantly to cultivate strong interpersonal relationships between coaches and leaders. Through these meticulously nurtured partnerships, instructional coaches were able to enact some degree of instructional leadership by influencing school leaders' decision making. Coach A explains,

> The new [professional learning community] cycle? That was my idea. Very early on I could see that my work with [a teacher] wouldn't really stick unless I got all of her grade partners on board. But even though I saw that in the beginning, I had to wait a few months to present the idea to [the principal]. Because, how would I look, coming into the school and straight away suggesting big changes? Nope. I would just go to my weekly check-ins week after week, learning how he worked, who he was, and how he would be most receptive to my idea. Like, let him know that I didn't have any ulterior motives or anything.

Foundational to the relationships that instructional coaches built with school administrators was an empathy for the administrators' feelings and actively considering the school leaders' perspective. Some participants noted taking special care not to offend principals' leadership, staff, or school in general. Coach L believed,

> Principals carry the weight of the school on their shoulders. I just know that that is a heavy load. So, I have to be careful that they don't think I am criticizing them or their work. I am intentionally asset-based, friendly, and try to talk data so that they know I'm looking at impact, not...baseless critique.

Coach H's anecdote highlights how her strong sense of empathy helps stave off principals being offended by her suggestions, sharing,

> Whenever I want to do a school-to-school peer observation, I make sure that me and the principal have a good enough relationship before I ask permission for a teacher to leave the building to go to another school and look at other teachers. Because it can be insulting. I mean, a principal can find it very insulting, that I am asking for the teacher to leave their school to see someone else. Like, as if I am saying there are no good teachers in their building. If the principal feels insulted, you can just hang it up; they won't work with you. So, I do make sure they know me well enough to know that I'm not trying to slight them or their school.

Relationships with Teachers

Instructional coach and teacher participants alike overwhelmingly named building trusting relationships with teachers as one of instructional coaches' core responsibilities. The purpose of these strong connections is twofold. On the one hand, it is the chief vehicle through which coaches can enact their day-to-day instructional leadership. "It's no secret that [instructional coaches] can't make teachers do anything," asserted Coach D. "But the more the teachers know us and like us and trust us, the more they decide to at least try and do something different." Expounding on that theme, Coach A explained,

> Being an instructional coach is relational at its core. We are like these little vagabonds, with no team of our own in a school, floating in and out different classrooms, asking folks to change what they've been doing or look at something from a different point of view. No amount of data or science or research is going to convince a teacher to do something different unless they trust you first.

Coach D described how crucial building relationships with teachers is to instructional coaches' daily duties, saying, "[Teachers] literally don't even open the door if they don't like you. And according to the union, they don't have to let you in their room. You need their permission to just do your job." Teacher K's point extended this thought even more, clarifying, "I don't personally have a great relationship with my coach, but I know that a lot of teachers do. If they didn't, she wouldn't have a job."

On the other hand, building trusting relationships with teachers also served as an important way that instructional coaches were able to build some professional self-efficacy. Without the authority to make decisions or compel teachers to take certain actions, instructional coaches did not feel much ability to produce desired instructional improvements through coaching. They did, however, believe they could create the desired relationships with teachers in order to facilitate coaching, thus helping them to feel some agency in their work. Coach A contended, "I have to make sure the teachers trust me. It's one of the only things I can control in this job." Similarly, Coach I claimed, "It feels silly to say this, but it feels good to know that I have some say over how well I am coaching, even if it is only being able to connect with teachers."

Throughout the interviews, participants mentioned numerous barriers that hindered instructional coaches' collaboration with teachers. These barriers included missed prep periods

and general teacher overwhelm. Instructional coaches demonstrated that, despite the barriers, being viewed positively by teachers was of the utmost importance to their effectiveness. Coaches were willing to leverage things within their realm of control to help them be perceived as collaborators and supports to teachers in spite of the barriers. For instance, Coach D shared, "I'm not always all business with teachers. Sometimes, if a teacher has had a really bad day, and I mean in school or out of school, I intentionally choose to scrap the coaching and just have a venting session for the teacher. Just person to person." In similar fashion, Coach F explained,

> There are so many things that affect my job as a coach, but I can't control them. But I do have some control over my relationship with the teachers. So, I do what I need to do. Be consistent. Show up when I say I will. Always smile, be positive, look on the bright side. Be flexible. So, you missed your prep and now we can't meet? That's okay, I'll reschedule. And as a matter of fact, let me cover your class for a few minutes so you get a bathroom break and can run the copies you needed to make during your prep. That's not my job, but I do what I can do to make sure the teachers know I'm on their side.

Encapsulating the essence of this subtheme, Coach G contended,

> I'm pretty new to coaching, and most days I don't know if I'm doing it well or not. But if I focus on making sure that teachers feel comfortable working with me, I know I'm doing something right. And eventually, so long as teachers work with me, I will be a successful coach.

Strong and supportive relationships with teachers were not only a critical component of instructional coaches' duties, but one of the few responsibilities of instructional coaches in which coaches believed they were able to succeed.

Relationships with Other Instructional Coaches

The data analysis revealed that relationships between instructional coaches was a third category of relationships used for influence. Instructional coaches connected with each other in order to influence teachers, school leaders, and district leaders. Coach A explained, "I'm pretty new to [coaching]. When I started, I paid close attention to who the big names were in the department, and I made sure to sit by them in PDs, email them with questions, shadow them for collegial visits." Describing how coach-to-coach relationships support a coach's influence, Coach G offered,

> Teaching, I can do with my eyes closed! I was the best of the best in teaching. But do I feel successful coaching? Working with adults is a different beast and I'm still learning. I am always meeting up with other coaches to learn, "How did you decide that?" Or "How did you get your teachers to do XYZ?" Or "How would you approach blah blah blah?"

Coach C asserted,

> There's power in numbers, you know. I've been around long enough to know that if I simply tell my principal that such-and-such at this school and such-and-such at that school are making these moves, then my principal is automatically going to want to make those moves too. So, I connect with all the coaches to stay in the loop with who's doing what.

Although it did not seem to be fully understood from an outside perspective, teacher participants also recognized that coaches intentionally collaborated with other coaches. The following exchange between teachers during one focus group demonstrates their attempts to make meaning of instructional coaches' relationships with each other.

Teacher G: I think one thing everybody thinks about the coaches is, like, what are they doing all day? Like, they aren't in classrooms most of the day, so what are they doing?

Teacher B: Yeah, and like, how do they always have time to be out of the building? My coach is never in the building!

Teacher G: Me too! Mine too! Always a PD or something. Or going to visit another coach.

Teacher A: What is with that? Why are they always visiting other coaches? I can't visit other teachers the way they visit other coaches. I barely get my own prep so how can we afford to have them out of the building?

Teacher B: Well, I know when we've had other coaches in our building, they are like following my coach around to learn from her, I guess. See how she does what she does.

Teacher G: Yeah, I mean, I guess that's fair. If you're new you have to learn some kind of way...

Relationships Connections to Grounding Theoretical Frameworks

The relationships that instructional coaches held with teachers, principals, and other instructional coaches varied in their intended outcomes and thus their overall connected to the theories grounding this research- Hallinger's instructional leadership theory (2005) and Bandura's self-efficacy theory (1977)- may be obscured. Relationships with teachers were intended to support instructional coaching impact. Relationships with school leaders were built with the aim of exercising granted authority in the absence of formal distributed leadership pathways. Relationships with instructional coach peers were developed to strengthen coaching

skills. Although the intent of these three types of relationships varied, they all had the same two functions.

In one sense, instructional coaches' relationships with others were tightly interwoven with the theme of the role ambiguity they experienced, functioning as a mechanism for distributed leadership in the absence of formal structures for instructional leadership. Hallinger (2005) described three broad dimensions through which instructional leadership is enacted: defining the school mission, which includes framing and communicating school goals; managing the instructional program, which includes supervising instruction, giving instructional feedback, monitoring student data; and developing a positive school climate, which includes promoting professional development and providing incentives for teaching and learning. Instructional coaches in this study did not have formally recognized means for achieving these aims. For instance, instructional coaches were not members of schools' goal-setting committees, did not have independent access to student data, were not permitted inside classrooms to observe instruction without teachers' permission, and had no formal authority to create instructional incentives. Due to this role ambiguity, instructional coaches in this study used their relational trust to compensate for the lack of structured leadership and accomplish acts of instructional leadership. Citing these same acts, instructional coaches built strong relationships with principals to give their input around school goals and receive permission to offer incentives; additionally, they leveraged relationships with teachers to gain access to instruction and student data. Without prescribed methods for distributed instructional leadership from district or school leaders, relationships with others operated –with varying degrees of success- as instruments for enacting instructional leadership.

In another sense, instructional coaches' relationships with others also served as moderators of self-efficacy. Interpreting Bandura's (1977) self-efficacy theory in an instructional coaching context, instructional coaches' sense of self-efficacy is influenced by how they perform the tasks necessary to improve instruction. These tasks include navigating difficult conversations with various stakeholders, persisting through instructional coaching challenges like misuse of instructional coaches' time or teachers' lack of protected time for coaching, engaging in coaching feedback cycles, and broadly supporting instruction at large. High relational credibility and trust allowed instructional coaches to execute these tasks more fluidly and successfully; low relational credibility and trust had the opposite effect. As described by participants in this study, instructional coaches exercised their instructional leadership not through authority but through influence. This influence was moderated by relational trust. Strong relationships increased receptivity of instructional leadership and consequently self-efficacy. For instance, coaches' relational trust with teachers contributed to their high self-efficacy for impacting individual instruction, as illustrated by their persistent engagement in working with individual teaching despite numerous obstacles. Conversely, weak relationships were characterized by constraints and defensiveness, leading to low self-efficacy. Instructional coaches' cautious relationships with school leaders and nonexistent relationships with teachers who weren't coached contributed to low self-efficacy for impacting wide-range instruction.

Perceived Agency and Coaching Self-Efficacy

The final theme discerned in the dataset was that of instructional coaches' success and self-efficacy being experienced and measured in different areas. Factors that are commonly believed to contribute to people's professional self-efficacy, such as years of experience in a role, did not appear to have a significant impact on the self-efficacy of instructional coach participants

in this study. The biggest factor related to instructional coaches' self-efficacy was the perceived locus of control coaches' felt over various aspects of their role. In those aspects of the job over which instructional coaches believed they had a strong locus of control, they felt high self-efficacy and were perceived as successful. Conversely, in aspects of instructional coaching over which coaches believed they had little locus of control, instructional coaches felt low self-efficacy and were perceived as unsuccessful.

Strong Feelings of Success with Building Relationships with Teachers

Coaches felt and were perceived as successful in areas of their job that they had a high locus of control over. One of these areas was building relationships with teachers. Building relationships with teachers and establishing trust was seen as a core responsibility of coaches that lays the foundation for improving instructional practice and student performance. While reflecting on her success as an instructional coach, Coach J pondered,

> How do I measure my success? I think there are different ways to be successful. Or unsuccessful. You know, different parts of coaching. And I am successful in some and unsuccessful, or less successful in others. Like connecting with the teachers I coach, I'm very successful with that.

When asked to explain how she measured her success in connecting with teachers, Coach J replied,

> Their willingness to meet with me. How they contact me when it was planned and when it's not planned. And, honestly, the fact that I can make quick adjustments when I realize that the relationship is headed in the wrong direction.

Not only do these comments demonstrate that instructional coaches viewed "success" as a woven rope with multiple threads in which one can be successful; they also demonstrate that

the most success is experienced in the threads that coaches can influence. Elaborating this point more clearly, Coach G remarked,

> I think I am the most successful in making teachers feel comfortable to get coached...I can make them comfortable. I try to really know them, not as just teachers but as people. Inside the school and outside of school. Because who they are and what they go through outside of school affects how they show up at school and how they work with me.

More strongly connecting relationship building to professional self-efficacy, Coach D asserted, “I can control my rapport with the teachers. Doing little things, being available whenever they want to meet, finding the resources they need, being willing to model a lesson in their class...I am the factor that influences my success.”

Teachers also voiced that their relationships with instructional coaches were a measure of the coaches’ success. Of her coaches’ success, Teacher M shared,

> I would say the first thing to be successful with me, I got to feel comfortable with you and have some kind of relationship with you. If I don't feel like we've got good energy together, then I'm less likely to want to work with you or listen to you. So, I feel like my coach has been successful because I like to work with her.

Teacher C reported, “I will say that I know that she has come in and she has a presence. In terms of success, I think that she is a very likable person, a very personable person, very approachable.” When evaluating how successful her instructional coach has been, Teacher J said, “As far as having a relationship with people so that what they're trying to work with them on is received well, I do feel that she's successful in that.” Teacher K’s reflection explained how her

coach was able to actively improve her relationships with teachers, consequently impacting teacher practice,

> What I've found that she does really well is, it seems a little quirky at first, but she does get to try to get to know us. Personally, like, our learning styles and our personality styles. We take personality quizzes. And she just sits in our rooms in the beginning of the year just observing us. No coaching, just observing us as people. And then I feel like that helps her kind of dictate how she's going to help us in the ways that we, will be, like, receptive to it, and it will be purposeful.

Participants believed that instructional coaches' success should, in part, be measured by the quality of their relationships with the teachers they coach. Coaches reported feeling able to control the strength of their relationships with teachers, thus having self-efficacy in this domain and being perceived as successful in building relationships with teachers.

Mixed Feelings of Success with Improved Individual Teacher Practice

Although participants believed that instructional coaches were successful in building relationships with teachers, participants expressed mixed feelings about instructional coaches' ability to improve individual teachers' practice. For example, Coach G explained,

> Successful? I think with some teachers I am successful. You go into their classrooms and it's like a completely different classroom and a completely different teacher from when we started. But with other teachers, they are doing the same or worse. It just depends.

Of the success of two years of instructional coaching on her own practice, Teacher L reflected,

> I think last year was really helpful with my coach. It was my first year teaching kindergarten, and coming from fifth grade, I needed a lot of help just understanding how to work with little people. But I'm kind of wondering why I still need to be coached this year. It doesn't have the same impact that it did last year. I don't need it now.

Teacher B noted general minimal success, stating, "But when it comes to our overall school-wide data, specifically in regard to, like, PSSAs, teachers' scores have not really improved much. Even the ones [the instructional coach] supports. A little improvement but not much considering they are coached."

Some participants shared that the amount of time instructional coaches spend with teachers felt directly related to how they are able to make an impact on individual teachers' practice. For instance, Coach F asserted, "I can't help them if I barely get to work with them. Can't move the needle if I can't see them." Instructional coaches expressed limited control over how much time they are able to spend with teachers, due to a variety of reasons such as how often coaches are scheduled to be in schools, the amount of teachers on a coaching caseload, whether or not teachers are required to meet with coaches, teachers missing time with coaches due to teachers acting as substitutes for other teachers during their prep block, and coaches being pulled to do non-coaching duties during coaching times. Coach H shared,

> I'm in four different schools. So, I may only be in a certain school just one day a week. I can only meet with the teachers one day a week; I can't really see things through. I just try to set things up to make them want to do what we work on together, but in the end it's really up to them.

Similarly, Coach B claimed,

> Between me going to different schools, meeting with different admin, doing all my paperwork, and being called into surprise meetings, I can usually only see one lesson and have one coaching session with a teacher each week. If that teacher loses their prep and I can't meet with them, I have to wait until the next week. It's hard to get traction like this, but this is the job. I can't change it.

Teacher participants expressed similar views on the amount of time teachers collaborate with coaches and coaches' limited ability to influence that time. Teacher C reflected,

> I do try to meet with my coach whenever we are scheduled to, but sometimes I lose my prep because I have to cover a class. And sometimes, honestly, I just can't do it. I have other things to do and I cancel the coaching meeting. Like if grades are due or I need to call parents, sorry coach, got to cancel!

Some teachers desired more time with their coaches to strengthen their practice but realized that neither instructional coach nor teacher could change the amount of time they collaborated. Teacher D exclaimed,

> I wish I could work with my coach more. Like, the things that we work on together, I know that I am getting better with those things. But I also know that I am one of seventeen teachers, I think, that she coaches. The only way to get more time with her is for her to have less teachers. That's not up to me or her.

Low Feelings of Success with Impacting Instructional Practice at a Large Scale

Another aspect of instructional coaching that participants believed should be included in evaluations of success is instructional coaches' ability to impact instructional practices at a broad level. Participants expressed a belief that, to make truly sustained improvements in teachers' individual practice, improvement efforts would need to be targeted beyond individual teachers.

Efforts to have entire grade-levels or grade bands (at the elementary school levels) or content area departments (at the middle school and high school levels) were deemed necessary to sustain growth. Coach A contended that,

> In order to really proliferate change with a teacher, real change, I would have to work with the whole grade-level. Because grade-partners work together more than the coach ever could, so they have the potential to influence each other more than I could or anyone else.

Teacher E reported,

> I think things would be better if the coach worked with the department chair. The coach can make suggestions, but the department chair is looked at as kind of a leader. We listen to the department chair. So, if [the coach] wanted to have a bigger impact, she should have the department chair working with her.

Teacher O wished that her coach could,

> ...come and lead our PLC meetings with the grade band. We do so many great things in my one-on-one coaching, but it feels so weird going to PLCs and hearing how everyone else is doing it. I just want to say, 'Guys, there's a smarter way to do this! There's a better way to reach the students!' But that's not my job. I stay in my lane. But yes, if she could lead PLC, we'd all be better.

Instructional coaches reported not having the ability to influence instruction beyond the individual teacher level. This was especially salient among instructional coaches who supported multiple schools. Coach H, who supports teachers in four schools, believed, "It is beyond the scope of my work to build relationships with all the teachers in the grade-level, grade band, or content area department. I barely have time to get from school to school to see the teachers on

my caseload." Similarly, Coach B, who supports teachers in five schools, declared, "I have so many teachers. I can't handle anyone else. I actually wish I could coach less than what I have now." These instructional coaches who coached in multiple schools believed that they simply did not have the time or capacity to support anyone other than those who were assigned to. This was not seen as an indictment of their personal abilities, but rather a product of their working conditions, which they felt like they had not agency over.

Even instructional coaches who supported just one school expressed these same feelings. Coach D asserted that influencing instruction at broad levels would require collaboration with the school administrators. "My relationship with the principal is not strong enough to support this type of collaboration," Coach D expressed, "I feel like the principal actively avoids me. I don't even get my regular check-in with my principal, so there's no way I can talk about getting the whole math team together. I just can't make impact in that way." Still other coaches shared that school administrators do not know that instructional coaches have the capacity to support grade-level, grade band, content area department, or schoolwide instructional planning. Coach H reflected,

> I have this bird-eye perspective about the instruction at the school, and the content knowledge and relationships with teachers, but I don't think the principal even knows that I know all of this stuff. That I have ideas and can see them through, if she'd let me.

Similarly, Teacher K claimed, "[School administrators] impact [my coach's] success by.... not giving her that full autonomy to do what she believes an instructional coach should do, and what we truly need." In agreement, Teacher B added,

> I agree, just in the sense that...you know, [school administrators] kind of have the final say in it all... I'm not sure as a whole, if they're aligned with being open-minded to and allowing the coach to make decisions. They don't give the coach this space to kind of do what they think will really move things for the whole school. For specific teachers, yes. But for, like, the whole grade or whole school, no.

In summary, participants expressed a strong feeling that instructional coaches are unsuccessful in large-scale improvement of instructional practice. They acknowledge that while instructional coaches influence individual teachers while they are supporting them, the impact of coaching wanes once that coaching relationship stops because, without the authority to make higher-level decisions, individual teachers' instructional practices inevitably revert to their pre-coaching ways. In this same vein, instructional coaches had little to no influence on the instructional practice of teachers they did not coach.

Instructional Coaches' Efficacy Expectancy and Outcome Expectancy

Conversations of instructional coaches' self-efficacy require a deeper exploration of efficacy expectancy and outcome expectancy. Bandura (1977) explains that efficacy expectancy describes one's belief in their ability to successfully perform a task; in the instructional coaching context, this corresponds to instructional coaches' belief that they can perform coaching behaviors to impact instruction. For example, participants in this study noted how instructional coaches believed they could navigate scheduling conflicts to build relationships with teachers. Efficacy expectancy is about competency. Outcome expectancy, on the other hand, revolves around the impact of one's efforts (Bandura, 1977). Outcome expectancy corresponds to instructional coaches' belief that the successful performance of tasks will result in improved

instruction and student outcomes. For example, outcome expectancy describes coaches' belief that navigating scheduling conflicts to build relationships with teachers will ultimately lead to improving the quality of teachers' instruction and higher student achievement. In the context of the school district in this study, instructional coaches did not have formal instructional leadership; rather, they operated in leadership-adjacent roles. Thus, efficacy expectancy influenced whether they enacted leadership behaviors, while outcome expectancy influenced how persistently they pursued instructional improvement.

In this study, instructional coaches seemed to demonstrate consistently high outcome expectancy across all tasks. That is, instructional coaches demonstrated a belief that the instructional coaching task they attempted to engage in was meaningful and would lead to meaningful impact on instruction. Conversely, instructional coaches displayed varying degrees of efficacy expectancy, or their belief in their capability to successfully do the task they were attempting to do. This efficacy expectancy was often couched in the language of "control," with study participants referring to either what instructional coaches could "control" -such as going off-script during a coaching session if a teacher was having a stressful day and needed to vent- or what was "out of instructional coaches' control"- such as being able to influence entire grade-bands of teachers through leading professional learning community meetings.

This high outcome expectancy with variations in efficacy expectancy manifested different behaviors in instructional coaches. For tasks in which coaches had high outcome expectancy but low efficacy expectancy, such as influencing instruction at a broad level, instructional coaches demonstrated a fixed mindset. Instead of thinking of alternate solutions to challenges with these tasks, instructional coaches allowed setbacks, such as limited time to with school leaders, to derail their goals. Conversely, for tasks in which instructional coaches had

high outcome expectancy and moderate to high efficacy expectancy, such as building relationships with teachers and impacting individual instruction, coaches demonstrated persistence, resilience, and innovation in achieving their aims.

Because efficacy expectancy is a belief in capability and outcome expectancy is a belief in impact, both are necessary in order for instructional coaches to sustain instructional leadership behaviors. The variation in these constructs perhaps contributes to instructional coaches not being perceived as instructional leaders, despite them displaying aspects in all three avenues of Hallinger's instructional leadership theory (2005).

Outlier Data and Findings

Most of the data corroborated the themes outlined above. Outlier findings, however, were discovered for two themes. In one outlier finding, participants expressed a belief that the role of the instructional coach is not designed to enact instructional leadership. In another outlier finding, participants were able to consistently influence instructional practices beyond the individual teacher level. Findings from these outliers diverged greatly from most participants' experiences and are worthy of note in this study.

Outlier #1: Instructional Coaches Not Intended to Be Instructional Leaders

Although the findings of the thematic analysis demonstrate that instructional coaches had mixed success in their ability to enact instructional leadership and be perceived as instructional leaders, most participants felt that instructional coaches should act in some sort of instructional leadership capacity. All teacher participants in this study thought that instructional coaches were a part of the instructional leadership paradigm of their school, albeit not perceived as true instructional leaders. Of the ten instructional coach participants in this study, nine of them either directly stated or strongly alluded to the need and right for instructional coaches to be

considered instructional leaders. One coach participant, however, felt different. While this instructional coach did not outright reject the label of "instructional leader," she felt that instructional coaches should not be instructional leaders.

Coach H is what many would consider a veteran in the education field. She was a classroom teacher for 12 years, after which she assumed assistant principal, principal, and education director roles before eventually turning to instructional coaching. Her experiences in school leadership deeply influenced her perceptions of the roles and responsibilities of instructional coaches. The following excerpt from the transcript of her interview shares her visions of instructional leadership and instructional coaching:

> *Researcher*: Okay, so how would you define instructional leadership?
>
> *Coach H*: I don't think that instructional leadership and coaching are the same thing.
>
> *Researcher*: Okay.
>
> *Coach H*: Instructional leadership would be knowing and understanding how students…knowing, understanding, teaching moves that…can close a gap for all students so that they can learn. And helping a teacher determine how to best scaffold instruction so that they meet all of the needs of all of their learners.
>
> *Researcher:* Can you tell me a little more? Can you give an example, I guess, or some examples of instructional leadership in action?
>
> *Coach H:* I think instructional leadership is the responsibility of the school administration. And I believe that it's important for them to know the abilities of their teachers and then give them what they need most. So, if I have a brand-new teacher who is emergency certified. They don't even know teacher moves, then I

would be really, really, really direct and say, “You need to do ABC.” If I have someone who's in the process of growing, I would.make a decision, like, what are their strengths as a teacher? Where do they need to improve? And then have them be reflective. And ask leading questions to get them, kind of, to where I want them to be... so that I can help them grow in that area. And if I have a really strong teacher, there's always room for improvement, and I would want, as an instructional leader, I would want to know how to ask the best questions of them.

This view of instructional leadership is what many people believe to be part of instructional coaches’ role, yet Coach H clearly stated that she doesn’t believe instructional leadership and instructional coaching are the same thing. Because of this, Coach H was asked to share her thoughts around instructional coaches’ role in instructional leadership.

Researcher: As a follow-up question, what role, if any, do you believe that instructional coaches play in a school's instructional leadership? And I do want to say, I do, you know, I did clearly hear you say you don't think that instructional coaches and instructional leadership are the same thing.

Coach H: Yeah, that's correct.

Researcher: So that's why I'm asking, if any, what role do you think instructional coaches play in the school's instructional leadership?

Coach H: I think they play a strong supporting role where an instructional coach will work with a teacher, to help them grow individually and be more self-reflective. I think I might do better telling you what it's not and then maybe get to the answer that way.

Researcher: That's fine.

Coach H: I always used to think of coaching as "[Teacher], you did a great job. You're, you know, you're doing A, B, and C. If, you know, if you try D, E, F, you might get this kind of result, why don't you give it a try?" But now, after being a school leader, I don't think that's the role of a coach. I think that's the role of the educational leader. I think the coach is there to say, "You know, I'm really, like, I'm seeing this, I'm seeing this, I'm seeing this. What do you think about what I'm saying? Do you agree with what I'm seeing? Where do you think you need to grow? What is an area that you're passionate about that you want to grow? Where do you think your students need to be? How do you think we can get them there?" I think it's more about probing the teacher and getting them to be self-reflective more than anything. I think that's the number one goal of the instructional coach, is to have them grow, have teachers grow in, self-reflection, self-efficacy, so that they take responsibility for their own learning and growing.

Researcher: Okay. Can you clarify how that role of the instructional coach plays a role in a school's instructional leadership, if it does play a role?

Coach H: It does, it does play a role, and I see it as a supportive role... every teacher can, whatever their skill level, benefit from instructional coaching; emergency certified to novice to seasoned to whatever. I just see the instructional leadership as a step beyond where you are giving specific feedback. You're giving specific feedback to the lesson, to the teacher, about their skills and their abilities, maybe. You're expecting them to grow from that, whereas in the coaching experience I'm not the one telling you what you need to do. And if I have someone who I need to tell what to do, I think we talk about having a directive

> style. I don't necessarily see that working. And I know coaching needs to be confidential, and I'm fine with that, but I also wonder if it would benefit students if I, as a coach, see poor instruction that is not improving how I can turn that over to the instructional leadership team.

Coach H identifies a clear distinction between instructional leadership and instructional coaching. She views instructional leadership as being a more directive route towards improving instructional practice, with instructional leaders explicitly telling teachers what changes to make to their instruction. Conversely, Coach H believes that instructional coaching is less direct and more facilitative, calling upon coaches to inspire teachers to contemplate their instruction and determine which areas to develop. This perspective was vastly different from all other participants, who acknowledged that coaches cannot work in a directive capacity but believed that they should be able to.

It is possible that this divergence from the central findings of the data may be attributed to a difference in Coach H's professional experiences prior to instructional coaching. Unlike any of the other instructional coach participants in this study, Coach H's professional career included school administration, with Coach H having served as both an assistant principal and a principal at several schools. Additionally, Coach H held an educational director position for a network of public charter schools in the school district represented in this study. In her experiences in these top-level leadership roles, Coach H employed, supervised, and partnered with instructional coaches. Her experiences in leadership may have colored her perceptions about instructional coaches' instructional leadership. For instance, Coach H noted that school leaders have a duty to be more directive with teachers in their efforts to improve instruction. In her experiences in educational leadership, Coach H may have felt a stronger sense of obligation and urgency for

improving instruction, as the person who is ultimately responsible for instruction and student outcomes in a school. Coach H's firsthand experience of the weight of school leadership seemed to inform her vision of instructional coaches playing an auxiliary role to instructional leadership, imbuing a nuance to the role that those without school leadership experience may not appreciate. Other instructional coaches reference the gravity of principals' school leadership, but do not have the intimate understanding of the legal, professional, social, and moral significance of said leadership. This understanding is possibly the root cause of Coach H's distinction between instructional coaches and instructional leadership.

Coach H's divergent stance complicates common instructional leadership conceptions that equate influence with leadership. Rather than reflecting resistance to leadership practice, this outlier finding suggests a boundary condition in which instructional leadership identity is structurally decoupled from influence. Coach H's understanding of instructional leadership is bound by ideas of formalized authority and more directive interactions that she does not believe are part of the instructional coaching role. In contexts wherein instructional coaching roles lack the traditional hallmarks of leadership, such as supervisory and evaluator capacities, Hallinger's (2007) instructional leadership theory may overextend its assumptions about leadership role internalization.

Outlier #2: Ease of Making Broad-Level Impact

A second outlier in the data revolved around the success and ease of instructional coaches impacting instruction at a broad level. All the teacher participants and most of the instructional coach participants who discussed this theme remarked on the limited success coaches had influencing instructional practices at the grade, grade band, or department levels. Two coaches, however, reported a relative ease of supporting instruction beyond the individual teacher level.

Both coaches had uniquely strong relationships with their principals, and these relationships facilitated this ease of impact.

Coach C is among the most experienced instructional coaches of the participants, with eight years of instructional coaching experience. In the course of her interview, Coach C revealed that her principal was a former coach who worked alongside her. Because of this intimate coworker relationship, the principal has a firm professional trust in Coach C's capacity and regularly invites Coach C to the decision-making table. The following excerpt from Coach C's interview reveals how this relationship affects Coach C's work:

> *Coach C:* Honestly, I think the biggest factor in my success is the principal at my school. I don't know if I have any influence over that or not. I guess I do. The principal is my friend.
>
> *Researcher:* Can you share a little more about your friendship with the principal? And how that is a factor in your success as an instructional coach?
>
> *Coach C:* Sure. Most people don't know this; it's not something we advertise, but me and [the principal] used to be coaches together in the department. She was there when I started, had been there for a couple of years before me. Since we worked in the same network, we worked together a lot and became friends really quickly. We did some coaching work together, a few PDs together...I even helped her study for her principal cert and prep for her principal interviews. We know each other. And professionally, I think we both trust each other's judgment, you know. Like, when we were both coaches, I'd come to her with an idea like, "Blah blah blah is happening with this teacher, and I think I should do ABC. What do you think? Give me some feedback." And she just always thought I had really

> smart ideas. And vice versa too. So, when I was assigned to support her school when she became a principal...it was the same thing. She's still her and I'm still me. She still knows she can trust my judgment. I can look at the data, evaluate it, and make plans to really move the data. So, I have a great relationship with my principal, and I can get a lot of stuff done because of that.
>
> *Researcher*: When you say you can "get a lot of stuff done because of that," what exactly do you mean? Can you give an example?
>
> *Coach C*: Well, I know that a lot of other coaches have tricky relationships with their principals. Or even if they have a great relationship, they don't have their principal's ear like I do. Like, I am sort of in charge of the middle school ELA. We have a good school-based teacher leader for K-5 ELA, so I support them. But in middle school, I'm the top dog. I make the decisions. I analyze the data, I meet with the teachers, even the ones I don't directly coach. I make response-to-data plans for 6th-8th grade and [the principal] always okays them because she knows I know what I'm doing. Do I still have to go through her to get permission? Yes. But sometimes I just do the thing, whatever my idea is I just implement it and tell [the principal] after the fact and that's always okay with her because she knows my work is A-1. She personally knows my work is A-1.

In her role as an instructional coach, Coach C leveraged her prior professional connection with her principal to drive some high-level initiatives. She contended that she has a de facto autonomy, making decisions and enacting instructional plans with the confidence that she will always be supported by the principal, her former close coworker. For Coach C, her unique

relationship with her school leader gave her a degree of instructional leadership that most of the other coaches in this research did not experience.

Similarly, Coach G's nuanced partnership with her principal afforded her the opportunity to impact instruction at higher levels. Coach G is fairly new to the role, having coached for two years after ten years of teaching. Coach G shared that her principal is also new to her role and gladly distributes instructional leadership as she finds her footing as a school administrator. The following excerpt from Coach G's interview transcript highlights this experience:

> *Coach G:* Well, I would say that I am a real instructional leader at my school.
>
> *Interviewer:* What makes you say that? What makes you a "real instructional leader"?
>
> *Coach G:* Well, both me and my principal, we are both new. This is my second year coaching and this is her first year as a principal. We met before school started and we just kind of clicked. I don't know if it was really us clicking or her feeling overwhelmed, but she just kind of gave me full reign.
>
> *Interviewer:* Can you give a little more detail, just to make sure that I understand you clearly? I don't want to make any assumptions. What do you mean when you say she gave you "full reign"?
>
> *Coach G:* Basically, the math and the ELA departments are mine. She's at the top, you know; the buck stops with her. But when it comes to math and ELA, I'm just one little notch below her. Basically, she's trying to learn how to be a principal. She knows instruction really well, but she didn't anticipate a principal being so much more than just instruction. So, we meet regularly, and she keeps a

pulse on math and ELA, and of course I run all my ideas past her, but I essentially run the math and ELA departments.

Interviewer: Thank you. Again, just for clarity, what do you mean when you say you "run" the math and ELA departments? What does that look like or sound like?

Coach G: Team leads meet with me. I hold the weekly PLC meetings; I decide the scope and sequence of PLC meetings. I meet with our math and ELA professional learning specialists and do the walkthroughs, draft the feedback. [The principal] is also invited to come, but her presence is optional. If she is absent and I'm here, we still hold the walkthrough; if I am absent and [the principal] is still here, we reschedule the walkthrough for a day that I am here. Not saying that I am more important than [the principal], but all of math and ELA is under my charge. Through her permission.

As with Coach C, Coach G's relationship with her principal is built around a faith in her instructional capabilities. Unlike Coach C's scenario, Coach G's principal had faith in Coach C's abilities not because of concrete experiences; instead, the principal seemed to have a blind faith borne out of the principal's need to devote her attention to non-instructional tasks. Although the nuance of each relationship is different, each coach has granted authority to make decisions at broad levels. While these two coaches needed permission from their principals to implement their decisions, this permission is perceived to be performative in nature. These two outlier coaches operate with a high degree of professional autonomy and wide-ranging impact that other participants did not experience.

This difference in autonomy most likely represents a different infrastructure for distributed instructional leadership in these two instructional coaches' contexts than in the other eight instructional coaches' contexts. One structural difference appears to be the communication of leadership. Although the Coach C's and Coach G's principals did not explicitly tell others that the instructional coaches are instructional leaders, they have strongly implied these coaches' instructional leadership. For instance, having an instructional coach facilitate professional learning community meetings sends a clear, albeit nonverbal, message that the instructional coach is a leader of that community. Likewise, allowing an instructional coach to be the primary host for district educational leaders implicitly establishes instructional coaches' instructional leadership. Communication is one of Spillane's channels for distributed leadership (2005), and the outlier experiences of these instructional coaches demonstrate that both implicit and explicit communication support distributed leadership.

Regular partnership with top leaders and shared decision-making are also structures that buoy distributed leadership, both of which were present in these outlier examples. Coach C's friendship with her school leader gave her consistent access to the school leader. This access afforded Coach C with frequent opportunities to share information, align on vision, and chart instructional leadership actions together. Similarly, Coach G's secure relationship with her principal, characterized by "clicking" early in their relationship, gives Coach G the ability to "meet regularly" with her principal despite the principal's overwhelm with other professional duties. Their constant communication and trust afforded Coach G with the ability to instructionally lead two content areas and meet with district leaders in lieu of the principal. Once again, although informal, the infrastructure for distributed leadership experienced by these outlier coaches supported their enactment of instructional leadership.

Coach C's and Coach G's outlier experiences do not necessarily challenge instructional leadership theory or illustrate a boundary condition. Instead, they can likely be attributed to a contextual variation. In each of their contexts, their relative ease with impacting wide-range instruction was enabled by their relationship with and endorsement from their principals. In other words, the distributed leadership ecology of their schools structurally facilitated how their two coaches were perceived as instructional leaders. These two instructional coaches' experiences do not undermine the validity of the general findings and interpretations of other coaches' experiences; rather, Coach C and Coach G had more ideal relationships with their schools' leaders, structural access to authority, and more communications -both verbal and non-verbal- from their principals that more strongly signaled the distributed leadership given to these coaches. The perceived ease of these two coaches likely reflects contextual optimization, not theoretical contradiction.

Research Question Responses

This study sought to answer the central research question, "What are the instructional leadership experiences of instructional coaches in a large, urban city?" This central research question was broken down into sub-questions: "How do instructional coaches perceive and enact instructional leadership?" and "What factors influence how instructional coaches perceive and enact instructional leadership?" As a phenomenological study, the primary purpose of this study was to examine the experiences of participants and how they make meaning of their experiences. Through a careful thematic analysis of individual semi-structured interviews with instructional coach participants and focus group interviews with teacher participants, the central research questions and two sub-questions were answered.

Central Research Question

What are the instructional leadership experiences of instructional coaches in a large, urban city? The participants' experiences of instructional coaches' instructional leadership were centered around their understanding of instructional leadership. Participants viewed instructional leadership as being composed of two strands: content knowledge and autonomous decision-making authority. The overwhelming majority of study participants did not believe that instructional coaches fully experienced an instructional leader role; even though instructional coaches were able to be the content knowledge experts in their schools, they did not have the authority to independently execute their vision for impacting instructional practice on a large scale. Additionally, despite the strong personal relationships instructional coaches formed with teachers which facilitated improved individual practice, instructional coaches were not perceived as instructional leaders by the teachers in their schools. Coach E hyperbolically declared, "Everyone thinks I know everything, but everyone also knows that I can't do anything." Participants rated instructional coaches' success in varying degrees, with more success being experienced in aspects of the role for which coaches had high feelings of self-efficacy and less success in aspects of the role for which coaches had low feelings of self-efficacy. Teacher D reflected on his coach's success, claiming, "In some ways she's successful and in some ways she's not...I think she does what she can...but a lot of it is not in her control."

Sub-Question One

How do instructional coaches perceive and enact instructional leadership? Instructional coaches perceived instructional leadership as the authority to make large-scale and small-scale decisions to impact instruction based on ones' high content knowledge, understanding of the vertical trajectory of learning, and ability to create and use interpersonal relationships with

stakeholders to facilitate growth. Instructional coaches were able to enact many of these facets of instructional leadership, such as constantly developing their pedagogical and content knowledge and strategically cultivating relationships with teachers, school administrators, and other coaches. They were not, however, able to enact the autonomy believed to be central to instructional leadership; this lack of autonomy limited their impact on instruction to mostly the individual teachers they supported despite their insights on larger scales of instruction. Consequently, instructional coaches were not perceived as full instructional leaders. Summarizing these notions succinctly, Teacher C noted, “

> [My instructional coach] definitely should be an instructional leader in my school. She knows everything. Like, she knows the stuff and knows what we should do. But she doesn’t have the power to make anything happen. She should be the leader, but without that power, she’s not.

Sub-Question Two

What factors influence how instructional coaches perceive and enact instructional leadership? Instructional coaches’ content knowledge and ability to build relationships with teachers, school leaders, and other instructional coaches appeared to have a high impact on instructional coaches’ experience and perception of instructional leadership. Instructional coaches demonstrated feelings of high self-efficacy and success in these areas of instructional leadership. Instructional coaches’ experiences of instructional leadership were also greatly influenced by their autonomy and by their ability to impact instruction on small and large scales. Instructional coaches reported feeling low self-efficacy and medium to low levels of success in these aspects of instructional leadership. Coach I succinctly shared, “I think I’m successful...I

would be more successful if I could do more, but that's out of my control so I just stay in my lane."

Summary

Instructional coach participants in this study experienced their instructional leadership in a limited capacity. For a variety of reasons, school administrators did not communicate their professional expectations of instructional coaches to teachers or the coaches themselves. As a result, instructional coaches and teachers used their own experiences and perceptions to determine whether instructional coaches were perceived as instructional leaders. Participants believed that instructional coaches enacted some aspects of instructional leadership strongly, including building relationships with others and demonstrating high content knowledge. Participants noted, however, that instructional coaches could not exercise the autonomy and decision-making authority required to be an instructional leader, and thus instructional coaches were not perceived as instructional leaders. This mixed ability to enact instructional leadership was reflected in mixed feelings of success for the instructional coaches; instructional coaches felt and were perceived as successful in aspects over which instructional coaches had high self-efficacy and felt and were perceived as unsuccessful in aspects over which they had low self-efficacy.

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

Overview

The purpose of this phenomenological study is to gain clearer, more in-depth insights into how instructional coaches in a major northeastern urban city experience their instructional leadership as well as how others perceive them as instructional leaders. This chapter aims to refine and interpret the findings of this study. The theoretical, methodological, practical, and policy-related implications of these findings are explored. Limitations and possible delimitations of this study are discussed. Lastly, recommendations for future research are offered.

Discussion

This research afforded instructional coaches and the teachers that they support the opportunity to share the essence of instructional coaches' experiences with instructional leadership. Specifically, how these educators make meaning of instructional leadership, how instructional coaches are perceived in light of this meaning, and how these experiences and perceptions impact instructional coaches' feelings of success and self-efficacy were explored. The thematic analysis of these findings has meaningful implications for the instructional coaches, school leaders, and teachers. Additionally, there are implications for instructional coaching preparation programs. The following subsections detail these implications in-depth.

Interpretation of Findings

Using a phenomenological approach, the data underwent rigorous thematic analysis to identify core themes, which were then refined to produce in-depth interpretations. The following themes were revealed as findings in the thematic analysis of the data: Role Ambiguity

and Fractured Instructional Leadership, Relational Trust as Enabler, and Perceived Agency and Coaching Self-Efficacy.

Summary of Thematic Findings

The theme Role Ambiguity and Fractured Instructional Leadership describes how study participants define instructional leadership and how instructional coaches enact instructional leadership. Similar to Miller et al.'s (2019) findings, participants voiced minimal communication from school leaders about instructional coaches' duties. Teachers who were supported by instructional coaches came to understand the instructional coaches' roles through either the coaches' explicit messaging or through professional experiences with instructional coaches. Instructional coaches did not receive any messaging from school administrators about the expectations or responsibilities of the instructional coaches, despite it being a hallmark of effective instructional coaching to do so (Reid, 2019). Interestingly, despite not communicating the responsibilities of instructional coaches to teachers, school leaders communicated teachers' obligations towards instructional coaches. This lack of clear messaging about instructional coaches' duties was attributed to various reasons such as school administrators not understanding instructional coaches' professional duties. Participants also theorized that school administrators were deliberately withholding communication about instructional coaches' roles and responsibilities so that instructional coaches could perform duties outside of their job description, aligning with the findings of Galey-Horn and Woulfin, (2021), Kho et al. (2019), and Miller et al. (2019).

Without a clear and uniform understanding of instructional coaches' responsibilities, participants used their own experiences with instructional leadership and instructional coaching to determine how instructional coaches experience instructional leadership. Consistent with

Hallinger's (2005) instructional leadership dimension of cultivating the learning environment, instructional coach participants were able to leverage their high content and pedagogical knowledge to facilitate individual professional learning experiences for teachers via instructional coaching. In sharp contrast, participants reported that coaches had limited direct agency or influential access to shape school-level visions for instructional improvement, Hallinger's (2005) first dimension of instructional leadership. Additionally, role boundaries expressly prohibited some tenets of managing the instructional program (Hallinger, 2005) such as evaluating teachers (Galey-Horn & Woulfin, 2021) and monitoring student progress through independent access to standardized testing data (Munson & Saclarides, 2022). For these reasons, instructional coaches displayed some aspects of instructional leadership but were not perceived as instructional leaders.

The theme Relational Trust as an Enabler explores how instructional coaches intentionally cultivated relationships with various stakeholders so that they may have the impact needed to be successful, confirming Knight's (2007) and Cardenas et al.'s (2024) claims that instructional coaches' development of high relational trust deepens their impact. Both instructional coach and teacher coach participants noted that instructional coaches built strong, trusting partnerships with the teachers they coach. Instructional coaches expressed a belief in their ability to create productive relationships with teachers, demonstrating that despite obstacles such as limited face-to-face time with teachers or teachers' high feelings of stress, they could use deliberate relational moves to nurture rapport and professional confidence.

In a similar vein, instructional coaches were strategically connected with school leaders to have influence. Instructional coaches were aware that their independent ability to make decisions –for themselves, for teachers, and for the schools they work in- was limited, and that

school administrators were the power holders for these decisions. Instructional coaches developed relationships with school administrators to both understand how to best collaborate with them as well as to be sure the intentions behind their proposed plans were perceived as supportive. Such relationships with administrators were intended to broaden instructional coaches' influence and allow them to enact more aspects of instructional leadership than could be achieved without school leaders' explicit support. These findings validate Reid's (2019) claims that trust between instructional coaches and school leaders is an enabler of instructional coaches' work with teachers, positioning instructional coach-school leader relationships as a primary catalysts for panoramic impact.

Instructional coaches also built relationships with other instructional coaches to propel their work. One difference between the relationships that coaches built with teachers and administrators and the relationships that coaches built with other coaches is that whereas the former was perceived as one of instructional coaches' professional duties, the latter was perceived as an auxiliary move to grow their own skillset, corroborating the findings of Knight (2007), Denton and Hasbrook (2009), and Killion and Harris (2017) that assert that instructional coaches must continually develop their professional knowledge and abilities in order to be impactful. For these peer-to-peer relationships, instructional coaches evaluated their colleagues' success and created opportunities to network with those who they deemed successful.

Lastly, the theme Perceived Agency and Coaching Self-Efficacy details how instructional coaches experienced different efficacy expectancies in various tasks for which they held the same outcome expectancy (Bandura, 1977). Participants did not measure instructional coaches' success as one single entity; to the contrary, participants disaggregated the perceived responsibilities of coaches and evaluated instructional coaches' success in several areas that they

expected would lead to improved instruction. Instructional coaches' feelings of self-efficacy for various professional responsibilities seemed to directly impact how successful they were deemed to be in those components of their job. Aspects of coaching over which instructional coaches believed that had an internal locus of control and high self-efficacy, such as building relationships with teachers, were deemed to be success areas for coaches. Conversely, aspects of coaching over which the instructional coaches felt an external locus of control and experienced low self-efficacy, such as influencing instruction at a high-level, were deemed to be unsuccessful areas for coaches. Instructional coaches experienced and perceived mixed success in areas in which they had a moderate level of self-efficacy and small degree of internal locus of control.

Standardization Facilitates Instructional Coaches' Instructional Leadership

One standout interpretation from the findings that confirms the work of numerous other educational researchers (Kane & Rosenquist, 2019; Reid, 2019; Shaked, 2022; Voelkel et al., 2023; Warnock et al., 2022) is that there is a need for a measure of standardization in instructional coaches' roles, responsibilities, and skillset. Simply put, participants did not have a uniform understanding of what instructional coaches' professional duties are, nor did they believe the school leaders had this understanding. When asked about instructional coaches' general responsibilities, participants gave an assortment of answers. Although some patterns in responses demonstrated a few commonly understood duties of instructional coaches, such as "build relationships with teachers" and "model lessons for teachers," responses generally varied greatly. Of particular interest is the fact that all coaches participating in this study were all hired through the same department within the same district and have received the same onboarding training, yet they made different meanings about what it is to be an instructional coach. As Denton and Hasbrouck (2009) point out, instructional coaches at large do not have a standard

understanding of what their job duties entail. A singular, all-encompassing description of instructional coaching could ease some of the challenges that arise from the uncertainty about instructional coaches' job (Kane & Rosenquist, 2019; Reid, 2019).

This standardization may also facilitate instructional coaches' instructional leadership. This may occur in two ways. In one vein, with uniform expectations around instructional coaches' professional duties, school leaders will have a clear understanding of what instructional coaches can do. Participants of the study noted that school administrators oftentimes were unaware of both what instructional coaches were authorized to do and what instructional coaches had the capacity to do. If instructional leaders have a firm understanding of what instructional coaches have the capacity to do, instructional leaders may be more inclined to extend instructional leadership work to coaches. For example, instructional coach participants in our study voiced a capacity to do group coaching or develop plans to enhance the instruction of multiple teachers at once. Coach E shared, "Coaching is not just one-on-one. I can do small group coaching...or even a whole grade-band." Not only did coaches have this capacity, but they also believed it to be an effective way to get coaching traction and sustain new practices in teachers even when instructional coaching has stopped. Coach A shared,

> In order to really proliferate change with a teacher, real change, I would have to work with the whole grade-level. Because grade-partners work together more than the coach ever could, they have the potential to influence each other more than I could or anyone else.

Brandmo et al.'s (2021) research confirms that working with groups of teachers on the same goal can support individual teachers' continued improvement. If school leaders understand that a chief way to sustain improved individual teacher practice is to develop the practice of

connected groups of teachers such as grade teams or content departments (Sutton & Crobach, 2022), then school leaders may charge instructional coaches to collaborate with these groups of teachers. Such work will lead to the high-level impact that instructional coaches desire, support them in managing the instructional program and promoting a positive learning climate at their school, and consequently support them in enacting instructional leadership as outlined by Hallinger (2005).

A standardization of instructional coaches' responsibilities may also afford instructional coaches the opportunity to more effectively enact instructional leadership. Participants in this study reported that, at times, instructional coaches were asked or required to do duties that fall outside of what is typically perceived as instructional coaching. Some participants asserted that school leaders were deliberately vague about instructional coaches' expectations for the express reason of having instructional coaches engage in tasks outside of their job description. As alluded to earlier in this research, Teacher D implied that school leaders intentionally keep instructional coaches' job duties vague to that they can "fill many roles that you would not normally expect a literacy coach to fill." The finding confirms that the work of educational researchers who purport that this is a rather common experience for instructional coaches. Researchers such as Kho et al. (2019), Voelkel et al. (2023), and Woodward and Thoma (2021) have demonstrated that use of instructional coaches for duties outside of the coaching role obscures their ability to be seen as instructional leaders. It is plausible that school leaders intentionally assign non-coaching related duties to instructional coaches, as school leaders find themselves overwhelmed by the sheer amount of managerial and administrative tasks that impede their own instructional leadership (McBrayer et al., 2018). In an effort to free themselves to show up as instructional leaders, school administrators may be limiting others'

ability to enact instructional leadership. It stands to reason, then, that providing a standard definition of instructional coaching and clear uniform expectations around instructional coaches' professional duties could limit instructional coaches' engagement in auxiliary responsibilities. When instructional coaches' duties and roles are clear for all, there may be less room for instructional coaches to do anything outside of them. Consequently, instructional coaches who act more frequently as instructional coaches may be more likely to feel like and be perceived as instructional leaders.

Inclusion of Instructional Coaches in a Distributed Leadership Model

Another compelling interpretation of this study's findings is that there is room and a need for instructional coaches to be included in distributed leadership models in schools. Distributed leadership describes a collaborative approach to leadership in which leadership duties are shared among various stakeholders in an organization instead of being held by one sole leader (Spillane, 2005). Distributed leadership approaches can be particularly useful for the enacting of instructional leadership in school systems. High-level leaders in schools who are typically viewed as the instructional leaders, such as principals and assistant principals, are often restricted in their ability to act as instructional leaders for a variety of reasons, such as inadequate content knowledge (Cunningham & Lochmiller, 2020; Shaked, 2023), limited capacity due to administrative and managerial tasks (McBrayer, et al., 2018; Noor & Nawab, 2022), and conflicting duties that impede trusting relationships (Galey-Horn & Woulfin, 2021; Kraft & Gilmour, 2016). In spite of these restrictions, school systems need strong instructional leadership to effectively function.

Throughout this research, instructional coaches were described as possessing high content knowledge, one of the tenets of instructional leadership. Teacher participants

like Teacher J explained how their instructional coach knew more "than any other adult in the building" in their content area or general pedagogy. Coach participants demonstrated a firm belief that staying abreast of recent instructional and pedagogical research is a unique obligation required of instructional coaches, with Coach D asserting that it is instructional coaches' "job" to do so. Several instructional coach participants detailed their methods of learning, such as attending professional development seminars, devoting regular time in their schedule to building their skill and knowledge base, and intentional collaboration with well-informed peers.

Such perceptions of instructional coaches' knowledge base demonstrate Tang et al.'s (2022) findings that middle-level leaders like instructional coaches could serve a much-needed role in a distributed instructional leadership system in schools. There could be a two-way benefit to including instructional coaches in schools' distributed instructional leadership paradigms. Schools would benefit from the potential for greater alignment between vision and practice. If instructional coaches are at the table when a school's goals are being mapped out, they have firsthand understanding of them and can influence the fidelity and depth of implementing school initiatives in classrooms (Hashim, 2020). Instructional coaches can benefit from being included in a distributive instructional leadership framework as it would contribute to their capacity to have high-level impact. As instructional coaches are given the authority to support the horizontal and vertical execution of a school's vision, their ability to build rapport en masse and impact instruction at scale is increased. As demonstrated in this study, increasing instructional coaches' self-efficacy for large-scale impact is related to higher perceptions of instructional coaches' success.

Challenging Assumptions About Distributed Leadership

Some findings from this study challenge the underlying assumptions that undergird distributed leadership theory. Distributed leadership theory implies that leadership is stretched across multiple personnel in school through shared agency, common aims, and unified experiences (Spillane 2005, 2006). Embedded in this implication is the conceptualization of leadership as a practice and not a specific position, with leadership existing as a product of people and interactions in specific situations (Spillane, 2006). As the experiences and perceptions of study participants illustrate, this is not always so. For instance, according to leading conceptions of distributed leadership theory, expertise will often lead to leadership, as those who are the most skilled, knowledgeable, or best suited to address situations would amass followers in their work (Harris & Jones, 2024). Study participants, to the contrary, identified instructional coaches as the content knowledge and pedagogy experts in their building but did not perceive them to be leaders. This was because these instructional coaches, despite their expertise, did not have the authority that participants assumed was part and partial of leadership. Without a certain level of power, instructional coaches were not seen as legitimate instructional leaders, despite the high levels of expertise they brought to their contexts (Shaked, 2024). This finding suggests that perhaps distributed leadership's focus on leadership as a practice may underestimate how concepts of power and legitimacy impact leadership, consequently downplaying the need for formal structures to distribute leadership.

The experiences and perceptions of participants in this study also bring to light another tension in distributed leadership theory and its practice. Owing to its belief that leadership arises from interactions and situations, distributed leadership theory assumes that schools have the capacity to sustain the relationships that support said leadership (Spillane, 2005). Distributed leadership theory assumes that trust and collaboration are norms in schools. As evidenced by the

anecdotes of this study's instructional coach participants, trust and collaboration between instructional coaches and school leaders is delicate, built on the instructional coaches' behalf through a careful dance of seizing opportunities to meet with school leaders and learning instructional leaders' personalities. At a base level, there does not seem to be the protected time for principal and instructional coaches to collaborate and build trust. Instructional coaches consistently framed meetings with school leaders as conditional, "if" school leaders were able to meet. This ambiguity in and of itself cannot sustain the deep relational trust implied in distributed leadership theory. On a deeper level, instructional coaches characterize meetings between themselves and school leaders as overly cautious so as not to offend leaders with their suggestions. It can be inferred that such caution is necessary because relationships between school leaders and instructional coaches are not as trusting and intimate as they should be in a current conception of distributed leadership theory. Distributed leadership requires a sense of psychological safety, and the relational context of the school may deeply moderate how effectively leadership can be distributed.

Instructional Coaches Are Not Intended to Be Instructional Leaders

Another thought-provoking interpretation of the findings is that perhaps instructional coaches are not perceived as instructional leaders because instructional coaches are not intended to be instructional leaders. Original conceptions of the instructional leadership theory (Hallinger, 2005) analyzed instructional leadership through the lens of the principal as the instructional leader; more recent researchers such as Eadens and Ceballos (2023) have viewed instructional leadership as existing along a continuum with the potential for staff members in middle positions of the organizational hierarchy to occupy instructional leadership positions. The findings of this study, then, could be viewed through the lens of whether they formally extended Hallinger's

(2005) leadership theory to instructional coaches. While participants noted instructional leadership qualities in instructional coaches, they did not view instructional coaches as true instructional leaders. One plausible explanation for this is that although they are uniquely poised for instructional leadership and possess some invaluable characteristics, instructional coaches cannot be instructional leaders because the instructional coaching role is not designed for instructional leadership. This presents an interesting conundrum that deserves a deeper exploration of instructional coaches' roles in light of instructional leadership theory.

A core component of school-level instructional leadership is oversight for the instructional success for an entire school (Cuban, 1988; McBrayer et al., 2018). The three avenues of instructional leadership- defining the school mission, managing instructional programming, and cultivating the learning environment- require both low-level and high-level understanding of a school's functions (Hallinger, 2005). Instructional coaches in this study did not have roles with this type of panoramic responsibility. In fact, the design of most instructional coaching paradigms includes working one-on-one with teachers on singular, specific goals, not with all teams in a school or even the same grade (Knight, 2019). According to Kraft and Blazar (2018), building strong rapport and tailoring support to meet strengths and needs are typically achieved on an individual or small-team level to account for the personal differences. Barring an instructional coach supporting every teacher in a school, instructional coaches' roles combined with the limitations imposed on them by time and capacity do not allow them to have a comprehensive understanding of instruction and teachers in a school.

Some may even argue that not only are instructional coaches not intended to be instructional leaders, but also that they do not need to be positional leaders in order to have a strong impact. The purpose of instructional leadership is to improve student learning outcomes

through high quality instruction and teacher professional development (Hallinger, 2005). Whereas Hallinger's (2005) conception of instructional leadership usually implies authority and supervision (Khan et al., 2009), instructional coaches improve instructional practice through relational influence. Extending formal positions of instructional leadership to instructional coaches could change how teachers view instructional coaches; instead of being perceived as partners in practice, instructional coaches who are formally designated instructional leaders may be viewed as "agents of compliance" (Galey-Horn & Woulfin, 2021). This may shift the motivation for teachers' changes in practice from an authentic desire to grow to mere subordination to a school authority. Consequently, the sustainability of these instructional improvements may wane once these practices are no longer prioritized, monitored, and given feedback. This illustrates how official instructional leadership roles for instructional coaches may be counterproductive.

Lastly, endowing instructional coaches with formal instructional leader roles may cause internal tension within the instructional coaching role itself. Instructional leadership is typically of an evaluative nature, through its managing the instructional program dimension (Hallinger, 2005, 2021). Formal instructional leaders are often assigned tasks such as instructional walkthroughs, regular data monitoring and conferencing, initiative enforcement, and teacher remediation (Cuban, 1988). These duties may compromise the trust and confidentiality that are often viewed as part and partial of an effective instructional coaching relationship. Such role ambiguity may create a sense of unease and mistrust in teachers for instructional coaches, thereby straining the potential for positive impact.

Instructional Coaches' Self-Efficacy Shapes Impact and Success

A final worthy interpretation of the findings is that, consistent with Bandura's (1977) self-efficacy theory, the amount of self-efficacy an instructional coach has for an aspect of their role influences the success and lasting impact the coach has in that aspect. Participants in this study implied that instructional coaches were more successful in instructional coaching duties over which they believed they could influence. The most common of these reported responsibilities was building relationships with teachers, with Teacher G capturing the essence of this sentiment by sharing, "In the beginning, [my instructional coach] does everything she can to make sure that we feel comfortable and safe working with her...she is definitely successful in getting us to trust her and feel comfortable to do the work." Instructional coach participants demonstrated persistence and proactiveness in high self-efficacy areas, flexibly adapting strategies to build connections with resistant and hard to reach teachers. For instance, multiple coaches in this study shared anecdotes of having mini coaching sessions with teachers in busy copy rooms when time was limited or impromptu modeling when real-time instructional challenges sprang up during a lesson observation. Such behaviors align with Bandura's (1977) assertions about self-efficacy's impact on motivation, perseverance, and addressing challenges.

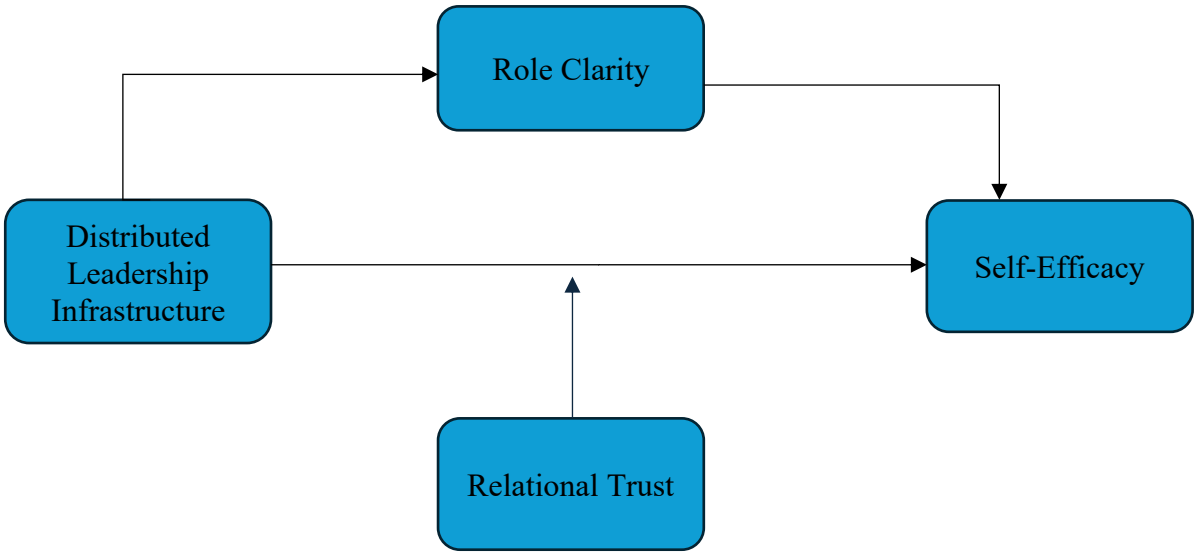
This same persistence and proactivity were not noted in job duties for which instructional coaches believed they had little influence. For example, instructional coach participants believed that they were unsuccessful at making high-level instructional change in schools, as this was seen as dependent on their relationship with school leaders. These participants did not consider more grassroots, ground-up methods of high-level instructional change, such as elevating the successful use of new instructional practices with coached teachers to gain interest and buy-in from teachers the instructional coach is not currently supporting (Ehrich & English, 2012).

While its own distinct concept, this study's findings around self-efficacy's impact on instructional coaches' persistence in instructional leadership tasks appears to be related to Skaalvik's (2020) research surrounding self-efficacy and task avoidance. Skaalvik (2020) asserts that when an educator's self-efficacy in a domain -such as instructional leadership - is low, the educator will feel unsuccessful; seeking to avoid the discomfort of low self-efficacy, the educator will avoid tasks in that domain and effectively disengage from that work (Skaalvik, 2020). Although instructional coaches in this study did not completely avoid tasks in more challenging instructional leadership areas, such as producing wide-ranging instructional improvement, they did appear to disengage from the progressive problem-solving that they exemplified in other areas of instructional leadership. As such, it seems that instructional coaches' self-efficacy for the various responsibilities embedded within their role has direct and indirect impacts on their effectiveness, persistence, and perceptions of success. (Bandura & Locke, 2003).

The interpretations of this research's findings center around four interwoven constructs informing instructional coaches' enactment of instructional leadership. The following conceptual model illustrates the relationships among these key constructs. Distributed leadership infrastructure refers the structural conditions such as formal leadership routines and access to decision-making that shape role clarity. Role clarity represents the instructional coaches', teachers', and school leaders' shared understanding of the instructional coaches' professional expectations and authority. Relational trust represents perceptions of credibility and respect among coaches, principals, and teachers. Role clarity functions as a mediator and relational trust functions as a moderator for self-efficacy for instructional leadership, defined as their belief in their capability to effectively improve instruction.

Figure 1

Conceptual Model of Relationships Between Distributed Leadership Infrastructure, Role Clarity, Relational Trust, and Instructional Coaches' Self-Efficacy



Implications for Policy and Practice

The findings presented in this study provide key insights into the experiences of instructional leadership for instructional coaches. These insights offer practical and policy implications for district leaders, school administrators, and instructional coaches. Specifically, major implications for policy include explicit guidance from district leaders about instructional coaches' professional duties and codifying distributed instructional leadership paradigms for schools to include instructional coaches. Significant implications for practice may include the development of an instructional coach mentorship program to support coaches in navigating common, consequential difficulties in their work, such as how to produce and sustain large-scale instructional improvement. These implications may support translating this research's findings into actionable, real-world applications.

Implications for Policy

Both educational researchers (Brandmo et al., 2021; Comstock & Margolis, 2021; Galey-Horn & Woulfin, 2021; Munson & Saclarides, 2022) and participants in this study assert that

instructional coaches' roles and responsibilities are unclear. This lack of definition imposes serious challenges for instructional coaches and has ramifications for the impact that instructional coaches may be able to have in schools (Comstock & Margolis, 2021; Galey-Horn & Woulfin, 2021). In this study in particular, instructional coach participants were limited in their ability to be instructional leaders because school leaders did not know the extent of instructional coaches' capacity for instructional leadership and because school leaders tasked instructional coaches with responsibilities outside of those assumed to be within the instructional coaching role.

To clear up the confusion around instructional coaches' roles and responsibilities, district leaders from the school district represented in this study should clearly define the instructional coach position. This definition should specifically outline the roles that instructional coaches have. Notably, district leaders should clearly specify instructional coaches' role as instructional leaders within schools, not leaving this important distinction to interpretation. Such a job description from district leaders should also clearly outline the responsibilities that instructional coaches should have and the responsibilities that instructional coaches explicitly should not have. For example, guidance from district leaders should detail whether school leaders are allowed to use instructional coaches as assessment coordinators, substitute teachers, interventionists, etc. and communicate this to school leaders, instructional coaches, and teachers. Straightforward messaging about instructional coaches' professional duties from district leaders to other stakeholders can facilitate instructional coaches' proper perception, optimize the use of their time in job-related tasks, and consequently deepen their potential for impact.

Implicit in the standardization of instructional coaches' roles and responsibilities is a variety of natural tensions to be addressed. One such tension is the potential conflict between

standardization and responsiveness. Instructional coaching is by its very nature a deeply relational practice that is inherently shaped by its context (Ippolito and Bean, 2019; Kho et al., 2019; Knight, 2007). Standardization of the instructional coaching role requires uniform prescriptions of behaviors, knowledge, and tasks for coaches. Thus, a tension around the role clarity that standardization offers to instructional coaches and the situational responsiveness required of instructional leadership arises. This role clarity may also conflict with the role flexibility that instructional coaches' experience as they occupy organizational hierarchies between school leaders and teachers. While standardization of instructional coaches' responsibilities can reduce ambiguity and maximize their use in instructional tasks, it can also possibly limit how instructional coaches can respond to nuanced situations. For example, clarifying that instructional coaches are not to serve as substitute teachers opens questions of how instructional coaches can support in emergent situations of teachers' absences.

Instructional coaches' role clarity can indeed coexist with their role flexibility if their standardization is not too rigid. The ultimate intent of standardizing instructional coaches' responsibilities is to support their instructional leadership, and yet leadership is often dynamic and fluid. As such, role clarification for instructional coaches should allow for adaptive leadership behaviors, perhaps making distinctions between what instructional coaches cannot do and what instructional coaches should engage in at the discretion of their school's leaders. A district mandate that standardizes instructional coaches' roles may also offer alternative ways to accomplish common tasks that are perceived as out of role for instructional coaches. Such measures will provide role clarity for instructional coaches while also ensuring that their duties are relevant and adapted to their specific context.

If district leaders demarcate instructional coaches as official instructional leaders, another implication for district policy is designing distributed instructional leadership structures that include instructional coaches. Effective distributed leadership models require that various organizational, structural, and cultural conditions are in place to make it possible for leadership to be shared across roles (Harris & Jones, 2024; Larsson & Löwstedt, 2020). These conditions are essential when formal leadership is extended to groups of people who have historically not held this leadership or have murky understandings of their leadership status (Harris, 2008). A district policy to oversee the addition of a new group of staff members -such as instructional coaches- to a school's distributed leadership model would be advantageous to all stakeholders.

School district leaders would do well to detail the necessary conditions for embedding instructional coaches in schools' instructional leadership framework and offer guidance on how these conditions are to be created. Access to decision-making authority is one of the conditions needed for all educators under a distributed instructional leadership model, for instance (Highlands & Woods, 2024). District leaders can ensure decision-making conditions support instructional coaches' inclusion by mandating that instructional coaches are part of decision-making teams for schools, such as instructional leadership teams and school steering committees. Likewise, proper communication channels and sacred time to engage in instructional leadership are two other conditions necessary for distributed instructional leadership. District leaders can ensure that both instructional coaches and school leaders have protected time and forums for collaboration, such as formal, regular school leader-instructional coach meetings with an agenda set in part by district leaders.

Implications for Practice

In addition to policy implications, the findings from this study allude to implications for practice in schools. The relationships that instructional coaches in this study formed with other stakeholders were a means for the coaches to achieve their professional aims. Whereas instructional coach participants created relationships with teachers and school administrators as an implicit necessity of their job, instructional coaches intentionally built relationships with their peers in a more auxiliary way, to learn from colleagues and enhance their own practice. While it seems clear that establishing a formal peer mentoring program would be beneficial for instructional coaches in this school district, it may also be advantageous for other districts and school systems that employ instructional coaches.

A peer mentorship program for instructional coaches has a unique ability to leverage instructional coaches' experiences to deepen inexperienced coaches' expertise. Participants in this study detailed intentionally seeking out successful coaches and thought partnering with them around challenging aspects of their role. Coach A succinctly describes this, stating "There is no way I would be as successful as I am if I didn't connect with other coaches to find out how they do things." Formalizing and standardizing these experiences align with situated learning, wherein expertise develops through social practice rather than through formal training alone (Anderson et al., 1996; Contu & Willmott, 2003). If school districts design opportunities for instructional coaches to build learning relationships with other coaches, they may consequently increase coaches' self-efficacy through vicarious pathways (Bandura, 1977) and ultimately lead to more instructional coaching success.

Additionally, a districtwide instructional coach peer mentoring program can support efforts to standardize instructional coaches' roles and responsibilities. As instructional coaches consult with other instructional coaches for ways to address challenges in enacting their

instructional leadership, an informal alignment of practices across instructional coaching contexts may result. For example, instructional coaches may norm language to use when prioritizing their time for instructional leadership tasks. These peer mentorship programs may also support inexperienced coaches in skillfully navigating relationships with school leaders to broaden their impact. In this way, an instructional coaching peer mentoring program can ensure consistency in instructional coaching practices across the district.

Theoretical and Empirical Implications

This phenomenological study was grounded in Hallinger's (2005) leadership theory to examine how instructional coaches experience their instructional leadership and are perceived as instructional leaders. Recent instructional leadership research has conceded that instructional leadership is not vested in principals alone (Neumerski, 2013; Somoza-Norton & Neumann, 2021). Participants in this study acknowledge that instructional coaches function in some instructional leadership capacities. The phenomenological framework for this study allowed for a deeper exploration of the intersections of authority and relational influence in participants lived experiences.

Bandura's self-efficacy theory was a secondary grounding theory for this study, in order to connect how the experiences and perceptions of instructional coaches' instructional leadership impacts and is impacted by their self-efficacy. Self-efficacy theory positions a person's success in a task as related to a person's perception of his or her capacity to successfully complete the task (Bandura, 1977). This phenomenological framework allowed for an in-depth examination of how self-efficacy for instructional leadership influenced instructional coaches' experiences.

Theoretical Implications

When considered from a theoretical perspective, the findings of this study invite a deeper probe into Hallinger's (2005) instructional leadership theory, specifically its emphasis on formal authority and hierarchical power. Participants' experiences suggest that instructional leadership is perceived as being explicitly tied to role-based, autonomous power to make decisions; viewed from this lens, instructional coaches were not qualified as instructional leaders by study participants. Instructional leadership research, however, does not name decision-making authority as a prerequisite for instructional leadership; it instead emphasizes leadership that supports the development of teaching and learning through three avenues: developing a shared vision for student learning and instruction, managing instructional programming, and fostering an effective instructional culture in a school (Hallinger, 2005). Considering this framing, study participants consistently noted instructional coaches' instructional leadership. These experiences suggest that instructional leadership theory can be extended to include leadership that is exercised through relational influence as opposed to purely positional authority.

Additionally, this study's findings surface rich descriptions of the tensions instructional coaches navigate as they enact endeavor to enact leadership. Without a clearly defined role that establishes formal authority, participants in this research navigated instructional coaches' professional identities and ensuing expectations. The current body of literature richly describes how instructional coaches' role ambiguity impedes their ability to carry out core responsibilities (Kho, et al., 2019; Miller et al., 2019) but does not necessarily examine how it impacts their role identities as instructional leaders. In this study, role ambiguity led to teachers, instructional coaches, and school leaders questioning –in word or in action- instructional coaches' claim to be instructional leaders, with at least one coach expressly denying instructional coaches' inherent

instructional leadership. These findings allude to a need for instructional leadership theory to investigate the impact of role ambiguity for mid-level leaders.

The findings of this study confirm Bandura's (1977) self-efficacy theory while simultaneously surfacing areas for deeper theoretical examination. Specifically, participants' experiences and perceptions confirm that efficacy expectancy and outcome expectancy are two distinct concepts that do not necessarily align with each other (Bandura, 1977; Bandura and Locke, 2003). Although participants in this study strongly insinuated a belief the coaching can lead to instructional improvements, participants had various beliefs about instructional coaches' ability to successfully perform different coaching behaviors that would bring about said instructional improvements. Several structural barriers were reported to impact coaches' efficacy expectancy, such as protected time to meet with stakeholders, time allocation for instructional coaching, and access to formal power. Moreover, relationships and trust were mechanisms that mediated self-efficacy for instructional leadership. These revelations suggest that a deeper exploration of instructional coaches' leadership experiences through a self-efficacy theory framework could be warranted, specifically situating self-efficacy as not merely an individual self-concept but instead within a context of infrastructure for leadership.

Finally, this study highlights a possible intersection on instructional leadership theory with distributed leadership theory. As implied in the research of Dami et al. (2022), McBrayer et al. (2018), Noor and Nawab (2022), and Shaked (2022), principals often do not have the capacity to focus solely on instructional leadership or be the sole instructional leader in a school. To carry out strong instructional leadership, it would behoove school principals to extend instructional leadership to other top- and mid-level instructional personnel. Doing so, however, would require a framework to effectively and efficiently delegate this leadership. This

issue of providing the needed structures that bestow instructional leadership to mid-level instructional personnel like instructional coaches was elucidated in the findings. A distributed leadership theory framework may have been another equally if not more effective framework to ground this research. This suggests that research that specifically explores distributed instructional leadership could enrich the body of knowledge for both separate theories.

Empirical Implications

As described earlier in this study, there is ample research on the topics of instructional leadership and instructional coaching as separate topics, but a dearth of research that specifically explores instructional coaches as instructional leaders. Empirically, this study advances the conversation on instructional coaches' instructional leadership, both giving contextualized accounts of how teachers and instructional coaches define instructional leadership and extending conceptions of instructional leadership to instructional coaches. In doing so, this study addressed a gap in the literature that often posits instructional leadership within a researcher-driven definition that focuses on role-related authority (Hallinger, 2005), extending ideologies like those of Eadens and Ceballos (2023) that conceive of school leadership as existing on a continuum. A phenomenological approach allowed this study to provide qualitative descriptions of instructional coaching duties as aspects of instructional leadership in practice, particularly documenting how relationships pave the way for impactful instructional coaching without the use of formal authority. These in-depth descriptions are useful in exploring how middle-level leaders can successfully navigate both their position and relationships with others to affect change.

In this same vein, the findings of this study offer some confirmation of centrality of relational trust to Spillane's distributed leadership theory (2005). Distributed leadership theory

posits, in alignment with the experiences of participants in this study, that leadership as a practice arises from the interactions of followers and leaders that emerge due to their contextually-dependent expertise (Spillane, 2005). One of the salient themes of this study is that relationships are vehicles for influence. Through various interactions with teachers and school leaders, instructional coaches' content expertise and professional development capacity are discerned, supporting the impact that instructional coaches have to improve instruction in schools. This relational influence is the mechanism through which instructional coaches enact their instructional leadership. Future research can explicitly explore how relationships between instructional coaches and other educational stakeholders serve as a mediator between instructional coaching behaviors and improved instructional outcomes.

Additionally, findings from this study reveal that instructional leadership enactment by instructional coaches is heavily impacted by leadership structures -or the lack thereof- embedded in school contexts. Participants in this study described various structural barriers that impeded their instructional leadership, such as time allocation, alignment with school administration, access to instruction, and channels for communication. These findings suggest that coaches' instructional leadership is perhaps mediated by the available infrastructure for instructional leadership. Instructional leadership infrastructure in general, and distributed instructional leadership infrastructure in particular, may have predictive power over the effectiveness and extent of instructional leadership enactment. Consequently, the empirical focus of future studies on instructional coaches' instructional leadership may do well to shift from individual coaches' experiences, competence, and self-efficacy to the organizational ecology in which leadership is enacted.

Finally, and perhaps most plainly, the findings from this study offer an experiential credence to the vast body of research detailing the value that instructional coaches add to school systems (Anderson and Wallin, 2018; Hashim, 2020; Ippolito & Bean, 2019; Kho et al., 2019; Knight, 2019). Instructional coach participants' simultaneous success with individual instructional impact and difficulty creating broad-level impact suggests that grounding their influence in a more formal authority may increase their impact. Thus, in exploring the limits of this relational influence, this research also offers a foundation for future investigations of instructional coaching as a formal leadership practice. Prospective research on how instructional coaching roles are designed, supported, and evaluated for instructional leadership may be appropriate.

Limitations and Delimitations

Limitations

The scope and overall generalizability of this research may be tempered by several inherent limitations. One limitation of this study is the location of the participant pool from which data was obtained. Participants in this study were limited to one large, urban public school district in the northeastern region of the country. Such contextual specificity of this research inherently limits the transferability of findings. The leadership hierarchies and governance models in a large, urban school district may likely differ from those in smaller or more suburban and rural district. Likewise, regional sociocultural and political norms likely influence interpretations of instructional leadership; these are context-bound and do not necessarily transfer to other settings. Furthermore, public schools all over the country employ instructional coaches, with one recent study citing that over half of all the nation’s public schools have at least one instructional coach (Ng, 2024). The lack of standardization in instructional coach

preparation, prerequisites, or responsibilities implies that instructional coaches in different contexts may have different experiences in their role (Ng, 2024). While there are commonalities among instructional coaches nationwide, many aspects of instructional coaching are colored by the nuances of their specific contexts. Phenomenological research endeavors to explore and describe the lived experiences of a phenomenon within a particular context. Consequently, expanding the geographical pool of participants for this phenomenological research may have yielded different experiences, perceptions, and overall findings.

The participant pool for this research presented another limitation to this study. Data from this study was obtained from interviews with instructional coaches and teachers who work with instructional coaches, as these two groups of educators were deemed to have the most intimate experiences with and perceptions of instructional coaching. There are, however, other educational stakeholders who work in close enough proximity to instructional coaches to offer meaningful considerations for this study. For instance, school administrators could have been included as participants in this study, as both their role as top instructional leaders and the prominent role that participants believe they played in instructional coaches' experiences would have possibly imparted keen observations for this study. Additionally, teachers who do not receive instructional coaching but work tangentially to instructional coaches -such as teachers who work in the same grade or department as coached teachers- may also have valuable insights as to how instructional coaches are perceived.

Interestingly, the participant sample was unintentionally limited by gender. While both male and female teachers were represented in the teacher participant sample, all the instructional coaches that were interviewed for this study were females. This was not deliberate; gender was not a factor in the recruitment for instructional coach participants, nor were participants screened

for their gender. Historically, studies have concluded that males and females experience leadership in general (Jong, 2023; Kim et. Al., 2020; Paustian-Underdahl et al., 2014) and instructional leadership in particular (Hallinger et al., 2016; Sanchez & Thornton, 2010; Shaked et al., 2018) differently. As such, it is possible that gender may influence an instructional coach's experience of instructional leadership or how they are perceived as instructional leaders.

The phenomenological research design of this study itself might be considered a limitation. Phenomenological studies are typically relatively small and purposive in their sampling, focusing on participants who have experienced a particular phenomenon (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Because they are so bound to the context of the experience being studied, phenomenological studies may be imbued with transferability but lack scientific generalizability to population at large. Additionally, there is an inherent degree of subjectivity embedded in phenomenological research. Subjectivity may occur within two avenues: the participants or the researcher. Phenomenological research relies on the in-depth interviews of participants; this reliance may be impacted by various participant biases. For instance, as in common in research that used self-reported data, participants in this study may have been impacted by recall bias and incorrectly remembered or reported various anecdotes, experiences, or behaviors. Similarly, social desirability bias may have impacted participant responses due to the group setting of the teacher data collection process or the desire of instructional coaches to present a positive self-image and avoid negative judgment. Data from these interviews is then interpreted by the researcher. Even though this study used a hermeneutic phenomenology framework in which the researcher attempted to bracket her experiences, a complete suspension of researcher bias is impossible.

Lastly and of considerable note, researcher positionality may be a limitation for this study. Specifically, the researcher for this phenomenological study exploring the instructional coaches' experiences and perceptions of leadership is herself an instructional coach who has had various experiences of instructional leadership in that role. This researcher espouses core beliefs that instructional coaches should formally engage in instructional leadership capacities and that top-level school leaders must play a leading role in establishing a vision, defining the culture, implementing changes in a school setting, and supporting the instructional leadership of others. With this experience and these beliefs, it is possible that the understandings the researcher came into this research with may have influenced which participant responses were probed, which themes became salient, and even interpreted ambiguity in responses that should have been clarified by participants. Additionally, this researcher is a friend to two instructional coach participants and collegially known to several other instructional coach participants. Despite all best efforts to explore implicit assumptions, the researcher may have limited the depth of data collection during interviews due to assumed mutual understanding. A study of the same topic by a researcher who does not have experience as an instructional coach, teacher, or school leader may not experience these limitations.

Delimitations

To ensure focus and feasibility, this study was designed with specific, purposeful delimitations. One such delimitation was selecting participants from a purposive sampling pool in which participants had a certain amount of professional experience. The experience requirements were intended to ensure participants' reasonable familiarity with the concepts in the study. Instructional coach participants were required to have at least two years of experience in coaching. This minimum amount of experience would allow for instructional coach participants

to have had enough personal experiences in the role as well as collaborations with other coaches to have a nuanced understanding of the instructional coaching role and its intersection with instructional leadership. Because instructional coaching is often vaguely defined, it would not have been prudent to include first-year instructional coaches who may have been grappling to make meaning of their new role.

Similarly, teacher participants were required to have at least six months of coaching collaboration outside of the mandatory first year of coaching that all teachers in this district receive. This prerequisite was a delimitation to support teacher participants in both having enough teaching experience to have an informed opinion about instructional leadership and having enough instructional coaching experience to reflect on how instructional coaching and instructional leadership converge or relate. Narrowing the participant pool in the manners described above prioritizes depth of experience over breadth of experiences, a central tenet of phenomenology that has the potential to increase the homogeneity of studied experience.

Another delimitation strategy was that the only prerequisite placed on teachers was their experience, for the reasons listed above. Once the experience prerequisites were met, all participants were eligible for participation in the study. This allowed for as diverse a sample of participants as possible, to ensure that there were a variety of backgrounds, grade-levels, subject areas, and schools represented in the data. This diversity aimed to maximize the transferability of the study.

A final delimitation strategy of this study was allowing participants to define instructional leadership and use their definition in all their pursuant reflections while having the researcher analyze the data through the lens of Hallinger's (2005) instructional leadership theory. Phenomenological research centers on understanding an experience and how participants make

meaning of that experience. In keeping with this tradition, this study quite literally asked participants to "make meaning" of a key concept in the study. This allowed the researcher to provide a deeply context-specific analysis of data that phenomenology strives for while simultaneously interpreting findings through a common and conventionally accepted lens.

Recommendations for Future Research

The findings, limitations, and delimitations of this research make a compelling case for several recommendations for future research. The first and perhaps most obvious of these recommendations is to broaden the participant pool from this study in terms of the geographic location of participants and the educational role held by participants. Geographically diversifying the participant pool from one school district in one area of country to districts across the nation will intrinsically enhance the transferability of the study. At the same time, it may reduce certain unintentional location-based biases that may show up in the data, such as overrepresentation of certain cultural and socioeconomic norms that are deeply influenced by location. Lastly, the introduction of a geographically diverse participant pool may permit educational policy and structural variability -which are both heavily influenced by the local regulations-to be reflected in the findings.

Including participants with a variety of educational positions is another recommendation for future research. School leaders such as principals and assistant principals are natural choices for new studies about instructional coaches' instructional leadership. Because these school leaders typically hold instructional leadership positions in their schools, they may offer compelling opinions about how instructional coaches function as instructional leaders. The inclusion of school leaders may also provide a complementary perspective on the relationship between instructional coaches and school leaders, which emerged as part of a salient theme

within this research. Teachers who do not work directly with instructional coaches could also make prudent choices for participants in a similar study. Because instructional coaches in this study voiced a strong desired to broaden their impact beyond the instruction of the teachers they coach, collecting data about perceptions of instructional coaches from teachers who do not work directly with instructional coaches could reveal pertinent findings on this topic.

In addition to adding different types of participants, it could also be enlightening to solicit participants' perspectives on additional concepts brought forward in this study. One such concept is how participants perceive and experience the instructional leadership of their school leaders, particularly in comparison to their instructional coaches. Participants in this study consistently named instructional coaches' lack of autonomous decision-making ability and power-based influence as the things that hindered them from being perceived instructional leaders. Presumably, principals and assistant principals have this ability and influence; yet participants in this study were not asked to reflect on their school leaders' instructional leadership. Asking participants to reflect on school leaders' instructional leadership could provide a contrast to their reflections on instructional coaches' instructional leadership while deepening the understanding of the nuances educators consider as they make contextualized meaning of instructional leadership.

Grounding future research on instructional coaches' instructional leadership in a different theoretical framework, particularly Spillane's (2005) distributed leadership theory, is a worthy recommendation. This study used instructional leadership theory as its basis, examining how participants made meaning of and enacted instructional leadership. Although participants did not actively define instructional coaches as instructional leaders, they cited numerous examples of instructional coaches engaging the tasks that fall within Hallinger's (2005) conception of

instructional leadership. Significant revelations could be uncovered in a study that assumes instructional coaches' instructional leadership and examines the specific structures and conditions in which instructional leadership is bestowed upon coaches.

Finally, future exploration of the nexus of instructional coaching and instructional leadership through the use of a different research methodology is strongly encouraged. While phenomenology provided insight into instructional coaches' lived experiences of instructional leadership, future research could employ a case study design to examine how instructional leadership is enacted within a specific, bounded school context. Such an approach might capture how context-dependent variables including school culture, administrative structures, historical context, and local policy impact instructional coaches' instructional leadership. Additionally, this change in methodology permits data sources such as observations and artifact analysis in addition to the interviews and focus groups used in phenomenological studies (Patton, 2014; Stahl & King, 2020). These additional data sources would allow for a greater triangulation of data, which may strengthen the credibility, dependability, and overall contextual richness of the research (Greenhalgh, 2025).

Conclusion

As the responsibilities of school administrators across the country continue to increase and inadvertently limit their instructional leadership, school systems are progressively turning to instructional coaches to support schools' mission. Instructional coaches are well-suited for instructional leadership in many ways, including their extensive content knowledge, skill in relationship building, and positions within schools' organizational hierarchy. Some practices and conditions in schools preclude their instructional leadership, such as poorly defined roles, misuse

of time, lack of distributive leadership infrastructure, and inadequate training for instructional leadership.

This phenomenological research sought to understand the experiences and perceptions of instructional coaches' instructional leadership in a large, urban, northeastern city. Key findings from this study highlight that although instructional coaches are able to impact instruction on an individual level, they face significant challenges impacting instruction on a broad level and do not have decision-making authority; thus, they are not generally perceived as instructional leaders by themselves or by the teachers they coach. While a possible interpretation of these findings is that instructional coaches are not intended to be instructional leaders, other interpretations situate instructional coaches' instructional leadership as being constrained by lack of professional definition, impacted by feelings of self-efficacy, and dependent upon intentional and strategic relationship building with various stakeholders. Implications of these findings include that standardization of instructional coaching responsibilities may lead to stronger perceptions and experiences of instructional leadership and the need for distributed instructional leadership infrastructure to be built for instructional coaches in this school district. In consideration of the many limitations and delimitations imbued in this study, there are numerous opportunities for future research.

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Appendix A

IRB Approval Letter

Slippery Rock University of Pennsylvania
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD
104 MALTBY AVENUE, SUITE 005
SLIPPERY ROCK, PA 16057
724-738-4846
irb@sru.edu

August 7, 2025

Dr. Mark Hogue
Curriculum, Instruction, and Educational Leadership

RE: Protocol Approved
Protocol # 2025-082-17-B
Protocol Title: Experiences and Perceptions of Instructional Coaches in a Large, Urban City: A Phenomenological Study

Dear Mark and Sadiyah:

Thank you for your new IRB submission. The Institutional Review Board (IRB) of Slippery Rock University has received and reviewed the above-referenced protocol utilizing the expedited review process. The IRB has approved the protocol under the "expedited" category.

You may begin your project as of August 7, 2025. Your approved protocol will expire on August 6, 2026. You will need to submit a Progress/Final Report at least 7 days prior to the expiration date. Please remember that all research must be conducted as described in the submitted approved materials. If any changes need to be made, a Change to Protocol Form must be submitted to the IRB Office for review and approval. A final report is required upon the closure of your research study. These forms can be on the IRB webpage, https://www.sru.edu/offices/institutional-review-board/how-to-apply-to-the-irb.

We appreciate your conscientious adherence to protecting the rights and welfare of human participants. If you have any questions or concerns, please contact the IRB Office by phone at (724)738-4846 or via e-mail at irb@sru.edu.

Sincerely,

Betsy Kemeny

Betsy Kemeny, Ph.D., Vice-Chairperson
Institutional Review Board (IRB)

Appendix B

Recruitment Emails

Instructional Coach Email: Interview

Subject Line: Experiences and Perceptions of Instructional Coaches in a Large, Urban City

Body Text:

Hello,

I am seeking participants for research study that is being conducted through Slippery Rock University about the experiences and perceptions of instructional coaches in a large, urban city. The research study is for instructional coaches in the School District of Philadelphia with at least 5 years of teaching experience and 3 years of instructional coaching experience.

The purpose of this study is to understand the experiences and perceptions of instructional leadership for instructional coaches in a large, urban city school district. If you choose to participate, you will be asked to engage in a Zoom interview and answer a set of 20 questions about your experiences and perceptions of instructional leadership as an instructional coach. This will take approximately 60-90 minutes.

If you meet these requirements and are interested in participating, please respond to this email or contact Sadiyah Lewis-El at SXL1054@sru.edu for more information or to schedule an interview time.

Thank you again for considering this research opportunity.

Sincerely,

Sadiyah Lewis-El, M.Ed.
Doctoral Candidate – Slippery Rock University

Appendix B

Recruitment Emails

Teacher Email: Focus Groups

Subject Line: Experiences and Perceptions of Instructional Coaches in a Large, Urban City

Body Text:

Hello,

I am seeking participants for research study that is being conducted through Slippery Rock University about the experiences and perceptions of instructional coaches in a large, urban city. The research study is for teachers who collaborate with instructional coaches in the School District of Philadelphia. Teachers who will be considered for this study will have at least 2 years of teaching experience and 6 months of experiences working with an instructional coach beyond your mandatory first year of coaching.

The purpose of this study is to understand the experiences and perceptions of instructional leadership for instructional coaches in a large, urban city school district. If you choose to participate, you will be asked to engage in a Zoom focus group interview with other teachers and answer a set of 10 questions about your experiences and perceptions of your instructional coach's instructional leadership. This will take approximately 60 minutes.

If you meet these requirements and are interested in participating, please respond to this email or contact Sadiyah Lewis-El at SXL1054@sru.edu for more information or to schedule an interview time.

Thank you again for considering this research opportunity.

Sincerely,

Sadiyah Lewis-El, M.Ed.
Doctoral Candidate – Slippery Rock University

Appendix C

Instructional Coach Informed Consent Form

CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH

Experiences and Perceptions of Instructional Coaches in a Large, Urban City: A Phenomenological Study

Mark Hogue, PhD.
Mark.hogue@sru.edu
Phone: 724-738-4265

Sadiyah Lewis-El, M.Ed.
sxl1054@sru.edu
Phone: 267-432-2273

Invitation to be Part of a Research Study

You are invited to participate in a research study. In order to participate, you must be an instructional coach with at least five years of experience teaching and two years of experience as an instructional coach. The study is for research purposes only and taking part in this research project is voluntary.

Important Information about the Research Study

Things you should know:

- The purpose of the study is to understand the experiences and perceptions of instructional leadership for instructional coaches in a large, urban city school district. If you choose to participate, you will be asked to engage in an online Zoom interview and answer a list of questions regarding your experiences and perceptions on instructional leadership as an instructional coach. This will take approximately 60-90 minutes.
- Risks or discomforts from this research include a potential risk of a breach of confidentiality. All participating schools and school personnel will be assigned pseudonyms for the data collection and analyzation process to protect their confidentiality.
- The study will have no direct benefit to you as a participant but will contribute to the ongoing knowledge in the field of instructional coaching and instructional leadership.
- Taking part in this research project is voluntary. You do not have to participate, and you can stop at any time.

Please take time to read this entire form and ask questions before deciding whether to take part in this research project.

_____ Initials

What is the Study About and Why are We Doing it?

The purpose of the study is to understand the experiences and perceptions of instructional leadership for instructional coaches in a large, urban city school district. A dearth of instructional leadership research that explores instructional coaches in instructional leadership roles. There is a need to focus on the experiences and perceptions of instructional leadership held by instructional coaches.

What Will Happen if You Take Part in This Study?

If you agree to take part in this study, you will be asked to answer a set of questions regarding your experiences and opinions of your instructional leadership as an instructional coach. I expect this to take about 60-90 minutes. The researcher will send a copy of the interview transcript to you for your review after the interview has been completed. This process will allow you to review and verify that all responses to the interview questions were accurate.

How Could You Benefit From This Study?

Although you will not directly benefit from being in this study, others might benefit because it allows educators to better understand how instructional leadership is enacted by instructional coaches.

What Risks Might Result From Being in This Study?

Although all identifying information will be kept private, there is a minimal risk that the participants may be identified (breach of confidentiality).

How Will We Protect Your Information?

I plan to publish the results of this study. To protect your privacy, I will not include information that could directly identify you.

I will protect the confidentiality of your research records by utilizing pseudonyms throughout the entire data collection and analyzation process. Your name and any other information that can directly identify you will be stored separately from the data collected as part of the study and password protected.

What Will Happen to the Information We Collect About You After the Study is Over?

I will not keep your research data to use for future research or other purposes. Your name and other information that can directly identify you will be kept secure and stored separately from the research data collected as part of the study and password protected.

What Other Choices do I Have if I Don't Take Part in this Study?

If you choose not to participate, there are no alternatives.

_____ Initials

Your Participation in this Research is Voluntary

The decision to participate in this study is yours and yours alone. Participating in this study is voluntary. Even if you decide to be part of the study now, you may change your mind and stop at any time. You do not have to answer any questions you do not want to answer. If you decide to withdraw before this study is completed, your data will be destroyed and not included in the final study analysis.

Contact Information for the Study Team and Questions about the Research

If you have questions about this research, you may contact **Sadiyah Lewis-El M.Ed., sxl1054@sru.edu or the dissertation chair, Dr. Mark Hogue PhD., mark.hogue@sru.edu.**

Contact Information for Questions about Your Rights as a Research Participant

If you have questions about your rights as a research participant, or wish to obtain information, ask questions, or discuss any concerns about this study with someone other than the researcher(s), please contact the following:

Institutional Review Board
Slippery Rock University
104 Maltby, Suite 302
Slippery Rock, PA 16057
Phone: (724)738-4846
Email: irb@sru.edu

_____ Initials

Your Consent

By signing this document, you are agreeing to be in this study. Make sure you understand what the study is about before you sign. I will give you a copy of this document for your records. I will keep a copy with the study records. If you have any questions about the study after you sign this document, you can contact the study team using the information provided above.

I understand what the study is about, and my questions so far have been answered. I agree to take part in this study. I understand that I can withdraw at any time. A copy of this signed Consent Form has been given to me.

_____	_____	_____
Printed Participant Name	Signature of Participant	Date

By signing below, I indicate that the participant has read and to the best of my knowledge understands the details contained in this document and has been given a copy.

_____	_____	_____
Printed Name of Investigator	Signature of Investigator	Date

Video Recording Release Form:

I request the use of Zoom video recording material of you as part of our study. I specifically ask your consent to use this material, as I deem proper, specifically, for data analysis related to the study and subsequent transcription. After analysis and the study is complete, the videos will be destroyed. Regarding the use of your likeness in video recording, please check one of the following boxes below:

____ I do…

____ I do not…

Give unconditional permission to the investigators to utilize a video recording of me.

_____	_____	_____
Print Name	Participant Signature	Date

Appendix D

Teacher Informed Consent Form

CONSENT TO PARTICPATE IN RESEARCH

Experiences and Perceptions of Instructional Coaches in a Large, Urban City: A Phenomenological Study

Mark Hogue, PhD.
Mark.hogue@sru.edu
Phone: 724-738-4265

Sadiyah Lewis-El, M.Ed.
sxl1054@sru.edu
Phone: 267-432-2273

Invitation to be Part of a Research Study

You are invited to participate in a research study. In order to participate, you must be a teacher with at least two years of experience teaching and six months of experience working with an instructional coach. The study is for research purposes only and taking part in this research project is voluntary.

Important Information about the Research Study

Things you should know:

- The purpose of the study is to understand the experiences and perceptions of instructional leadership for instructional coaches in a large, urban city school district. If you choose to participate, you will be asked to engage in online Zoom focus group interview with other teachers and answer a list of questions regarding your experiences and perceptions of instructional coaches as instructional leaders. This will take approximately 60-90 minutes.
- Risks or discomforts from this research include a potential risk of a breach of confidentiality. All participating schools and school personnel will be assigned pseudonyms for the data collection and analyzation process to protect their confidentiality.
- The study will have no direct benefit to you as a participant but will contribute to the ongoing knowledge in the field of instructional coaching and instructional leadership.
- Taking part in this research project is voluntary. You do not have to participate, and you can stop at any time.

Please take time to read this entire form and ask questions before deciding whether to take part in this research project.

_____ Initials

What Is the Study About and Why Are We Doing it?

The purpose of the study is to understand the experiences and perceptions of instructional leadership for instructional coaches in a large, urban city school district. A dearth of instructional leadership research that explores instructional coaches in instructional leadership roles. There is a need to focus on the experiences and perceptions of instructional leadership held by instructional coaches.

What Will Happen if You Take Part in This Study?

If you agree to take part in this study, you will be asked to answer a set of questions regarding your experiences and opinions of instructional coaches as instructional leaders. I expect this to take about 60-90 minutes. The researcher will send a copy of the focus group interview transcript to you for your review after the interview has been completed. This process will allow you to review and verify that all responses to the interview questions were accurate.

How Could You Benefit From This Study?

Although you will not directly benefit from being in this study, others might benefit because it allows educators to better understand how instructional leadership is enacted by instructional coaches.

What Risks Might Result From Being in This Study?

Although all identifying information will be kept private, there is a minimal risk that the participants may be identified (breach of confidentiality).

How Will We Protect Your Information?

I plan to publish the results of this study. To protect your privacy, I will not include information that could directly identify you.

I will protect the confidentiality of your research records by utilizing pseudonyms throughout the entire data collection and analyzation process. Your name and any other information that can directly identify you will be stored separately from the data collected as part of the study and password protected.

What Will Happen to the Information We Collect About You After the Study is Over?

I will not keep your research data to use for future research or other purposes. Your name and other information that can directly identify you will be kept secure and stored separately from the research data collected as part of the study and password protected.

What Other Choices do I Have if I Don't Take Part in this Study?

If you choose not to participate, there are no alternatives.

_____ Initials

Your Participation in this Research is Voluntary

The decision to participate in this study is yours and yours alone. Participating in this study is voluntary. Even if you decide to be part of the study now, you may change your mind and stop at any time. You do not have to answer any questions you do not want to answer. If you decide to withdraw before this study is completed, your data will be destroyed and not included in the final study analysis.

Contact Information for the Study Team and Questions about the Research

If you have questions about this research, you may contact **Sadiyah Lewis-El M.Ed., sxl1054@sru.edu or the dissertation chair, Dr. Mark Hogue PhD., mark.hogue@sru.edu.**

Contact Information for Questions about Your Rights as a Research Participant

If you have questions about your rights as a research participant, or wish to obtain information, ask questions, or discuss any concerns about this study with someone other than the researcher(s), please contact the following:

Institutional Review Board
Slippery Rock University
104 Maltby, Suite 302
Slippery Rock, PA 16057
Phone: (724)738-4846
Email: irb@sru.edu

_____ Initials

Your Consent

By signing this document, you are agreeing to be in this study. Make sure you understand what the study is about before you sign. I will give you a copy of this document for your records. I will keep a copy with the study records. If you have any questions about the study after you sign this document, you can contact the study team using the information provided above.

I understand what the study is about, and my questions so far have been answered. I agree to take part in this study. I understand that I can withdraw at any time. A copy of this signed Consent Form has been given to me.

_____	_____	_____
Printed Participant Name	Signature of Participant	Date

By signing below, I indicate that the participant has read and to the best of my knowledge understands the details contained in this document and have been given a copy.

_____	_____	_____
Printed Name of Investigator	Signature of Investigator	Date

Video Recording Release Form:

I request the use of Zoom video recording material of you as part of our study. I specifically ask your consent to use this material, as I deem proper, specifically, for data analysis related to the study and subsequent transcription. After analysis and the study is complete, the videos will be destroyed. Regarding the use of your likeness in video recording, please check one of the following boxes below:

_____ I do…

_____ I do not…

Give unconditional permission to the investigators to utilize a video recording of me.

_____	_____	_____
Print Name	Participant Signature	Date

Appendix E

Individual Interview Script

Semi-Structured Interview Questions

Directions: This session will be recorded. Please refrain from using your name or the names of others as part of your response to the questions.

1. Please describe your educational background and career to date.
2. How long have you been an instructional coach?
3. In what content or pedagogical areas do you provide instructional coaching?
4. What do you believe are the professional responsibilities of instructional coaches?
5. What are your specific professional duties as an instructional coach at your school/site?
6. How do you define instructional leadership?
7. In general, what role, if any, do you believe instructional coaches play in a school's instructional leadership?
8. In what ways do you act as an instructional leader in the site(s) in which you provide instructional coaching?
9. In what ways do you impact the instructional practices and programing at your school/site?
10. What factors support you acting as an instructional leader?
11. How do you influence the factors that support your instructional leadership?
12. What barriers prohibit you from acting as an instructional leader?
13. How do you influence these barriers that prohibit your instructional leadership?
14. How do you measure your success as an instructional coach?
15. How would you describe your supervisor's leadership style?
16. What professional expectations has your supervisor communicated related to your role as an instructional coach?
17. How do you feel your supervisor's leadership impacts your ability to fulfill your role as an instructional coach?
18. How are you evaluated as an instructional coach?

19. What perceptions exist among the professional staff related to instructional coaches?
20. What else would you like to add to our discussion of your experiences and perceptions of instructional leadership as an instructional coach?

Appendix F

Focus Group Interview Script

Focus-Group Interview Questions for Teachers

Directions: This session will be recorded. Please refrain from using your name or the names of others as part of your response to the questions.

1. Please describe your educational background and career through your current position.
2. How long have you worked with the instructional coach at your school?
3. How does the instructional coach at your school professionally support you?
4. What do you believe are the general professional responsibilities of the instructional coach?
5. What professional expectations has your principal/school leadership communicated related to your instructional coach's professional duties?
6. How do you define instructional leadership?
7. Do you consider your instructional coach to be an instructional leader at your school?
8. How successful do you consider your instructional coach?
9. What factors influence your instructional coach's success?
10. What perceptions exist among the professional staff related to instructional coaches?
11. What else would you like to add to our discussion of your experiences and perceptions of instructional leadership as an instructional coach?