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Original Paper

An Examination of the Instructional Liaison between the Principal and Instructional Coach through the Distributed Leadership Perspective

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Abstract

This multiple case study investigation explored the instructional relationship between the principal and instructional coach through the conceptual framework of distributed leadership. By studying this through the distributive leadership perspective, educators will better understand the relational and implementation aspects considered to fully leverage the role of the instructional coach and continue towards the improvement of classroom instruction. The findings of this study illustrated the possibility of insight into the leadership capacity of the secondary instructional coach and the principal that added to both practice and scholarship.

Keywords

Instructional coaching, distributed leadership, classroom instruction

1. Introduction

While the importance of instructional quality is critical, it continues to be a challenge for some school administrators (Liu et al., 2021; Lu & Lin, 2016). School leaders can help build effective schools by creating a supportive organization for learning by articulating a vision and building the professional capacity of staff (Hitt & Tucker, 2016). Blazar and Kraft (2017) suggested that teaching skills have a differential impact on student outcomes. Traditionally, one of the roles of school leadership, specifically instructional leadership, has fallen upon the shoulders of the school principal (Neumerski, 2012). Consequently, the researchers believe that investigating the implementation of the instructional coach and how that connects to the role of the building principal is a challenge that exists within the

broader encounter of improving instruction. While the research identified that principals considered instructional coaches beneficial, instructional coaches are often misused, overextended, or put in impossible situations in schools (Fullan & Knight, 2011). Matsumura and Wang (2014) proposed that in a "majority of schools…coaches are expected to by principals to perform a range of other tasks that include administration duties, assessment coordination, and tutoring students" (p. 5). This may be partly due to school leaders, such as the building principal, who view instructional coaches as administrators instead of instructional and professional support to teachers (Kissel et al., 2011). As Northouse (2016) indicated, the literature regarding the Principal and instructional coach seems to isolate their area of responsibility. This study was a way to begin to bridge that gap as guided by the questions: *What are the perceptions of the high school principal on the function and use of the instructional coach? How does distributed leadership between the Principal and instructional coach influence classroom instruction?*

1.1 Conceptual Framework

Research has shown that leadership can have a powerful influence on the effectiveness of schools and the improvement of student achievement (Heck & Hallinger, 2014). This influence from the Principal is critical in enabling teachers to work towards improving student achievement (Jalet, 2021). Furthermore, the effectiveness of schools depends on the cooperation between principals and teachers, in part; because leadership occurs across the different levels of the organization (Lu & Lin, 2016). Over the last two decades, there has been significant research concerning distributive leadership (Spillane & Coldren, 2011); however, defining what distributed leadership is and what it does varies. Martinez (2021) viewed distributed leadership as shared leadership. Similarly, Goos and Martin (2019) argued that the Principal's distributed leadership created shared leadership in decision-making. While others have moved towards how distributed leadership has impacted the organization's performance (Harris, 2014). However defined, distributed leadership research has suggested that this type of leadership involves the concept of social process and the interactions between multiple actors (Uhl-Bien, 2006).

The distributive leadership theory (Spillane & Diamond, 2016) is the "social nature of human practice" that can allow a link between the instructional system and the leadership of a school to move towards improvement in instructional practice (p. 148). This is because the distributed leadership model happens through people's interactions in their situations and allows leaders to engage in the brokering, facilitating, and supporting of the leadership of others (Harris, 2014). According to Harris (2014), empirical research on distributed leadership has revealed two messages. First, specific patterns of distributed leadership "are more likely to contribute to positive organizational change than others" (Harris, 2014, p. 8). Second, the formal leader must play a pivotal role in creating the right conditions and situations for leadership distribution (Harris, 2014; Jalet, 2021).

The researchers propose using the distributed leadership model described by Spillane and Diamond (2016) as the conceptual framework for this study. There are two aspects of this distributed leadership perspective: (a) the leader-plus aspect and (b) the leadership practice aspect (Spillane & Diamond, 2007).

The leader-plus aspect suggests multiple formal and informal actors assume the leadership of a school (Spillane & Diamond, 2016). In this study, the Principal and the instructional coach would encompass the leader-plus aspect. The second aspect of leadership practice exists within the interactions of the leader, follower, and situation (Spillane et al., 2011). It is Spillane and Diamond (2016) that suggested that the "distributive perspective is a conceptual framework for thinking about and studying school leadership and management" (p. 7).

By using the distributed leadership perspective as the conceptual framework, the researchers believe that distributed leadership moves from the leader to the actual activity of leadership, which is where leadership practice gets accomplished (Spillane & Diamond, 2016). Distribution involves the equitable allocation of resources and rewards (Hytten & Bettez, 2011). While all men should have an equal claim to an equal share of all advantages in our society, certain groups in our community have received an unequal distribution of resources (Ben-Porath, 2012; Odegard & Vereen, 2010; Smith, 2012). The principle of distribution encourages the investigation of equitable allocation of resources and rewards to ensure that all individuals get an equal claim.

2. Method

The qualitative design of this study lends itself to using a constructivist paradigm. Creswell (2014) noted through this paradigm, researchers seek an understanding of the world in which they work while examining the participants' views of the situation studied. Furthermore, the conceptual framework of distributed leadership, grounded in the interactions of individuals, connects with the constructive perspective of meaning, historical and cultural settings, and the process of exchange (Creswell, 2014). Additionally, the qualitative design aligned with the purpose because the researchers were "interested in understanding how people interpret their experiences, how they construct their worlds, and what meaning they attribute to their experiences" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 6).

Specifically, the researchers conducted a multiple case study approach to explore the use of instructional coaches in suburban high schools. Yin (2014) defined a case study as an "empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context may not be evident" (p. 16). In other words, the researcher was interested in studying the instructional relationship between the Principal and the instructional coach, as seen through the distributed leadership lens, within three specific schools in one suburban school district. Therefore, an in-depth case study analysis where one thing can be studied appropriately using various data collection methods was used (Creswell, 2014; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

2.1 Setting

The researchers conducted this investigation in one suburban school district with three high schools. The school district includes 22 schools that serve 14,386 students (DESE, 2019) and employs over 1,000 staff members approximately 20 miles from a central urban area in the Midwest. The teaching staff has an average of 14.1 years of experience, with 83.8 % of its teachers earning a master's degree or higher

(DESE, 2019). The district has received the accreditation with distinction, the highest accreditation rating that a school district in this state can receive (DESE, 2019), and most recently received a 100% on the annual performance report—recognized as a top-performing district in many areas, including academics, athletics, and the arts. The three high schools serve grades 9-12, with varying grade spans. One high school serves students in grades nine through 12, one high school serves students in grades 10 through 12, and one high school serves the ninth grade. This district has implemented the use of instructional coaches for over seventeen years.

High school A has an enrollment of 2,027 in grades nine through 12. The student population includes 11.60% Black, 6.80% Hispanic, and 73.60% White. The teachers in high school A have an average teaching experience of 16.0 years, and 91.7% of its teachers have an advanced degree. The free and reduced lunch population is 20.9%.

High school B has an enrollment of 1,860 in grades 10 through 12. The student population comprises 11.90% Black, 7.80% Hispanic, and 71.10% White. The teachers in high school B have an average teaching experience of 15.1 years, while 87.6% of its staff has an advanced degree. The free and reduced lunch population is 29.3%.

High school C has an enrollment of 600 in grade nine. The student population includes 12.20% Black, 7.60% Hispanic, and 71.5% White. The teachers in high school C have an average teaching experience of 7.8 years, with 81.7% of its teachers holding an advanced degree. The free and reduced lunch population is 27.9%. Provided in Table 1 are the descriptions of the schools.

Table 1. Demographics of the Settings

	School Enrollment	Black	Hispanic	White	F/R Lunch	Avg. Years Teaching Experience	Teachers with Advanced Degrees
School A	2,027	11.60%	6.80%	73.60%	20.9%	16.0	91.7%
School B	1,860	11.90%	7.80%	71.10%	29.3%	15.1	87.6%
School C	600	12.2%	7.6%	71.50%	27.9%	7.88	81.7%

Note. School A includes grade nine through 12; School B is grade 10 through 12; School C is grade nine only.

2.2 Participants

The researchers employed a purposeful two-tiered sample (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). One tier was the selected high schools, and the other tier was the participants involved in the study. “Purposeful sampling is used so that individuals are selected because they have experienced the central phenomenon” (Creswell, 2014, p. 221). Based on the 17 years of designing and sustaining the instructional coach program was why the district was selected. Chosen based on their experience in either implementing the

coaching program, maintaining the program, or participating within the program were the 19 participants.

Each high school has a lead building principal that was part of this study (N=3). At the secondary level, there are four instructional coaches: math, science, English, and technology (N=4). Each of the instructional coaches works with each of the three high schools. Additionally, each high school has department chair teachers. For this study, four of the department chair teachers of each building took part in a focus group.

However, one department chair teacher at high school C declined to be part of this study (N=11). The Assistant Superintendent of Curriculum and Instruction was also part of this study since the instructional coaching program is under her guidance and leadership (N=1). Thus, the total number of participants in this study was 19 (N=19). See Table 2 for the career experiences of the Principals and Instructional Coaches.

Table 2. Description of Principal and Instructional Coaches' Career Experiences

	Position Years in Education	*Years in Current Role*
Principal A	25	7
Principal B	27	2
Principal C	26	2
Instructional Coach A	20	7
Instructional Coach B	40	14
Instructional Coach C	18	4
Instructional Coach D	17	6

Note. N = 7 three principals; four instructional coaches

2.3 Data Collection

Creswell (2014) proposed using several qualitative collection procedures. The researchers used interviews, focus groups, document analysis, and observations as the data collection protocols in this study.

2.3.1 Interview Protocol

Arranged with the Assistant Superintendent of Curriculum and Instruction, and each of the building level principals was interviewed. Through interviews, a person can gain understanding through the experiences of individuals. The interview sessions were semi-structured, lending itself to flexibility while allowing issues to be explored (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). These interviews assisted the researchers in gathering more information about the specific nature of how this problem of practice functions in their current setting and gave the researcher a chance to "control a line of questioning" (Creswell, 2014, p. 191).

The researchers conducted interviews lasting about 60 minutes in length. The interview questions followed along with what Patton (2015) suggested as the appropriate type of questions: (a) background/demographic, (b) experience/behavior, (c) opinions and values, (d) feelings, (e) knowledge, and (f) sensory questions. Furthermore, while the researchers could not predict responses, the use of probing questions was expected to follow up and elaborate (Creswell, 2014; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The researchers established content validity by using an interview structure that allowed participants "to make sense to themselves and the interviewer" while ensuring the participants' ideas were being represented (Creswell, 2014, p. 27). Moreover, the researchers used a panel of content experts to pilot the interview instrument and provide information on the measure's structure and comprehensiveness (Rubio et al., 2003). A content validity index was calculated for each criterion, and appropriate revisions were made as needed (Rubio et al., 2003). Each interview was audio-recorded, conducted in person, and transcribed for accuracy. The researchers also took notes if the recording device failed.

2.3.2 Focus Group

Used with the instructional coaches and department chair teachers were focus groups. These groups shared similar characteristics, providing perceptions and opinions in a nonthreatening environment (Krueger & Casey, 2015). The use of the focus group is also connected with the constructivist paradigm presented in this study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). This data collection protocol allows the researcher to understand how participants think about the phenomena under review and enables the researcher to "compare and contrast data from across groups" (Krueger & Casey, 2015, p. 7). These meetings were audio-recorded and transcribed for accuracy.

2.3.3 Document Analysis

Document analysis allows the researcher to obtain participants' language, points to data that participants have given attention to, and could be an effective use of time (Creswell, 2014). The researchers believed that exploration could be a perspective on distributed leadership through document analysis. Furthermore, these documents would also provide insight into the influence of classroom instruction. The researchers studied various documents to gain further insights on the proposed research questions and verify emerging categories/themes and evidence in support of the findings (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Examples of possible documents analyzed were job descriptions, meeting memos, directives, and professional development agendas.

2.3.4 Observations

The researchers observed meetings between the building-level principals and the instructional coaches. In addition, observed were planned meeting times between the instructional coaches and teachers.

2.3.5 Data Analysis

Data gathered from the interviews, focus groups, documents, and observations triangulated and crosschecked data sources (Creswell, 2014; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Patton, 2015). This triangulation helped construct a justification for emerging themes within the data and ensured the study's internal validity (Creswell, 2014; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The researchers also transcribed the audio

recordings of interviews and focused groups to ensure accuracy. These findings were member-checked with participants to ensure the accuracy of participant feelings, accounts, and perceptions. (Creswell, 2014; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

The goal of data analysis was to find answers to the proposed research questions (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Thus, the researchers utilized a within-case and cross-case analysis that used emerging codes to treat the data (Creswell, 2014; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). As the researchers determined reoccurring patterns that existed across the data, generated were themes or categories. Finally, the researchers looked for interconnections of the established themes to build a "qualitative narrative" that was used to "convey the findings of the analysis" (Creswell, 2014, p. 200).

2.3.6 Limitations and Assumptions

There were certain limitations in this proposed study. The setting for the inquiry occurred in one district, thereby not allowing for significant variations. Furthermore, the investigation lacked generalizability due to the settings' limitations (Creswell, 2014; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). There was also the possibility of a restriction in the data collected, especially about research question two on how the distributed leadership between the Principal and instructional coach influences classroom instruction. The study's design did not incorporate any presently or comparatively academic measures since instructional coaches have been established in the district.

Conversely, to manage these limitations and researcher bias to ensure this study was trustworthy, the researchers employed appropriate design controls (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The researchers controlled for bias by practicing reflexivity. This critical self-reflection concerning assumptions, bias, and relationship to the participants and study was conducted at every step of the proposed research (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). In addition, other controls checked bias and strengthened the validity and reliability of this study. The researchers utilized open-ended questions in interviews and focus groups that allowed the participants to go in any direction they wanted while giving the researchers an understanding of the participants' subjective experiences (Seidman, 2013). Triangulation occurred by drawing on multiple data sources from interviews, focus groups, observations, and document analysis (Creswell, 2014; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The use of member checking allowed the researchers to get feedback from participants on interpreting findings (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Similarly, Merriam and Tisdell (2016) discussed the idea of "adequate engagement in data collection" as a way to promote validity and reliability (p. 259). Thus, the researchers spent adequate time collecting data through multiple sources until there was a saturation of data or repeated themes across the study (Creswell, 2014; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Furthermore, the researchers provided an audit trail that described data collection, how major categories or themes emerged, and how decisions were made throughout the study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Thus, using these design controls helped control bias and provided the type of rigor and structure needed for a qualitative research study.

3. Findings

Research question 1: What are the perceptions of the high school principal on the function and use of the instructional coach?

The perceptions of function and use of instructional coaches had some commonalities among the three building principals, but each Principal also had points of a unique perspective for their building. Principal A stated that instructional coaches are there "to provide support, direction, inspiration, coaching, and development of our classroom teachers in their content areas." They are "key instructional curricular leaders" who are "like a connective tissue…doing a really nice job of connecting teachers to improve instructional practice and provide quality PD." Principal B expanded this idea by expressing instructional coaches as a "non-threatening resource for our teachers" that help provide "guidance on types of assessments and how to prepare for assessments." Both Principal C and A expressed that instructional coaches are "liaisons," or "go-between teachers, administrators, and the curriculum and instruction department…a buffer between all levels." Furthermore, as Principal C suggested, "I think they serve as a mentor to all teachers…making decisions to improve instruction." Principal C also mentioned that it is through "data" and "observations" that instructional coaches help improve instruction and that having instructional coaches "come in and teach mini-lessons and watch younger teachers learn is awesome."

Principals B and C also highlighted that instructional coaches are "utilized for PD, and they guide PD for their curricular areas" However, as Principal B noted, they are "not there to evaluate the effectiveness of that teacher…they are there to help them and coach them to become better." The Assistant Superintendent of Curriculum and Instruction affirmed this by stating, "They have to be in classrooms…to help teachers." Additionally, according to the assistant superintendent, instructional coaches need to help teachers "fully understand the Missouri Learning Standards and how they are being implemented throughout the curriculum."

When asked if the function and use of instructional coaches should change, the principals believe a change in at least process and use is not the right way to think about moving forward. Principal B expressed, concerning the process, "I think it can always improve…I don't think it needs to change. I think what is important is the instructional coach being a resource. Therefore the relationship of the instructional coach has to be strong with every teacher in the department."

Moreover, Principal B stated, "There are times that the instructional coach does not have the proper relationship with the people in the department, then they become ineffective." Principal C also voiced, "I don't know that it should change…I feel like they should be in the building more teaching classes." Through this conversation, Principal C suggested a creation of a "lab school" where instructional coaches would "teach four hours a day" and teachers could rotate through, "observe, and watch them teach." Both Principal A and Principal C advocate that not having social studies instructional coach is something the district needs. Principal A stated, "I think we would benefit having coordination with those staff members at both high schools and our middle schools specifically with reading strategies…with writing composition…"

Principal C affirmed this, noting, "We don't have a social studies instructional coach, which I would like to see us have." This may be especially critical for Principal C since the social studies department at his school has three new teachers and one veteran teacher.

The role of the instructional coach "will always be evolving," according to the Assistant Superintendent of Curriculum and Instruction. One of the assistant superintendent's unique perspectives was that "as things are added onto the plate, as assessments become more rigorous…I think instructional coaches have to grow. If they are not growing, we can't expect teachers to grow." Thus, there appears to be a sense of trying to provide "targeted PD" to help in this growth.

Principal A and Principal C both agreed that the perception of the use of the instructional coach in the building is that "they are effective." Principal C expanded on this by stating, "They are very knowledgeable, honest, and hardworking…they are very collaborative, and so I think the perception is they are doing a good job." However, Principal C also stated, "I just don't know that the perception is that they are in the building enough, but I think they are spread thin." Principal B noted, "If they have a strong relationship with staff in each department they are working with, they are extremely effective. If they do not, then they are not effective." This brings up a unique issue at the secondary level: the delineation of content by departments. Thus, it does appear that the perception changes by the department. Principal A suggested that perception "varies by department and by personality." For example, one particular instructional coach is "able to coach and support and provide feedback to individual classroom teachers and drive and facilitate the big picture," according to Principal A. Also noted by Principal A that not all instructional coaches are "full time." Some still teach a few hours a day, which results in not being able to "provide the same amount of support as full-time instructional coaches do."

Again, the unique voice of the assistant superintendent can add perspective to the overall view of the perception of the instructional coach. She stated, "I think they (principals and teachers) think they come over and tattle." According to the assistant superintendent, "they are advocating, and I think that is important." When asked about the teacher perception of instructional coaches, she expressed that "95 percent of teachers love the instructional coach for everything they do. Others will come along eventually…some will never." With that said, it becomes clear that understanding what challenges and obstacles exist for the implementation of the instructional coach is essential to explore.

According to Principal A, one challenge is that "some teachers feel threatened or feel like they are a piece of the evaluation process." Furthermore, as both Principal A and Principal C seem to suggest, instructional coaches are "often pulled in many directions and have a lot of ground to cover…the workload. I think that's a challenge."

Principal C also noted that the biggest challenge is "time." There is not enough time because instructional coaches are "pulled in different directions" and may not always be "in control of their schedules." One of the challenges that Principal B expressed is "consistency." Principal B points back to relationships as being part of consistency across the departments.

Some departments utilize and lean very heavily on their instructional coaches for curriculum and assessment. Some departments are very reluctant to use instructional coaches for curriculum and evaluation…and it boils down again to relationships and trust between the instructional coach and staff members themselves. From the central office level, it appears that it has been a challenge to help "everyone feel equally important," according to the assistant superintendent. Furthermore, it seems that finding the right people and "keeping them" is just as important over the program's history. The Assistant Superintendent of Curriculum and Instruction stated: "We have to have people that could have dual uses, and we have to have people that knew how to teach before they were coaches. It was vital for me to pick solid teachers who were respected by peers and their principals."

Challenges and obstacles exist; there is also the opportunity to develop ways to overcome those situations. Principal A described, "Consistent communication and meeting face-to-face has helped overcome some of these misunderstandings." Furthermore, Principal A has tried to "step in and communicate with staff to define the role of the instructional coach and bring value to the instructional coach's work…by giving them face time." Principal C also alluded to the importance of communication by simply stating "open and honest communication is key" and that he must "communicate with other building principals and be flexible." The Principal must be willing to recognize the "gaps" that exist with utilizing instructional coaches. For example, Principal C expressed "building a bridge when there is a disconnection, so the instructional coach does not become ineffective." This goes back to "understanding the strengths and weakness of those instructional coaches and doing everything I can to help."

Research Question 2: How does distributed leadership between the Principal and instructional coach influence classroom instruction?

Many factors are involved with distributed leadership in a school district this size. Thus, understanding the influence on instruction requires careful tracking of information, ideas, and perspective through the various levels of the school organization. The Assistant Superintendent of Curriculum and Instruction suggested that the Principal and instructional coach will inevitably at times "see things differently." However, she stated, "I think when people sit down and are very honest with each other, it should be a learning experience for both parties."

How Leadership is Distributed

Principal A stated, "I can't profess to be an expert in composition, literacy, math, and science teaching methods." Thus, the instructional coach is a "key voice," according to Principal A. Furthermore, as Principal B declared, "I put a lot of trust in instructional coaches. I allow them to make their own decisions." Concerning curriculum, assessment, and professional development, Principal B maintained that instructional coaches "are experts in these areas" and "I have to give them the power to be a leader with the staff." Principal C also discussed trust by stating the "key is trust," and "you trust their leadership style and their decision making…I think that is beneficial." In Principal C's school building, the instructional coach is "the content knowledge expert," while the Principal works as "the presentation type expert…working together" with the instructional coach. Moreover, it is the view of Principal A that

the "distribution of leadership of PD in their (instructional coach) content areas" as "content experts" is one avenue in which instructional coaches are to "develop staff professionally in instructional strategy." According to instructional coaches, leadership distribution occurs through "open lines of communication." Instructional Coach A stated, "there are things that we can come in and help take the lead on in the building." However, "it is their building, and they have the final say," as suggested by Instructional Coach B. It also appears that the instructional coaches see themselves as instructional leaders having a significant role in content and curriculum, where principals allow them to make decisions. Instructional Coach C affirmed, "Our leadership role is primarily in curriculum, content, test prep, and things related to our specific content area."

Additionally, according to Instructional Coach C, this role can expand when "teachers feel they need someone to talk to or help out." Instructional Coach A explained that principals see "us as instructional leaders and that everything we do is to try to unify the school district." However, as mentioned by Instructional Coach A, not all "districts follow this model."

At the classroom level, there is a defined sense of the distribution of leadership. Department Chair Teacher A1 discussed the "principal being more building focused and the instructional coach more content focused." Department Chair Teacher A3 described it as the "principal handling the nuts and bolts of school stuff." One recent example was the transition of one school building to a nine through 12 building, where the Principal and instructional coach worked together. However, the "instructional coach identified needs to make things happen." Department Chair Teacher B3 described the distribution of leadership by affirming, "I think the leadership has been distributed in terms of curriculum, standards, and content versus maybe some of the other things like behavior management or whatever else in the classroom, and I think that is a good thing."

The kinds of interactions between the Principal and instructional coach that allow for distributed leadership find their origins in "regular meetings, emails, phone conversations, and constant conversations," according to Principal A. Instructional Coach C. Principal B described this by stating, "we meet often" and "discuss how we can support each other." Principal C also commented that he wants to "observe what instructional coaches are doing to understand better what they are trying to accomplish." Instructional Coach A noted that he spends time "explaining data in different ways, and aligned to state and national averages." Furthermore, as Instructional Coach B declared, "Principals ask me to make observations." This seems to point to a "working relationship" that Principal A and the assistant superintendent have described. According to Principal B, building this "working relationship" is "putting instructional coaches in front of students and our staff as somebody we trust and want in front of our staff."

Distributed Leadership Impact on Teachers and Instruction

Principal B suggested it "comes back to relationships and effectiveness of the instructional coach." The Assistant Superintendent of Curriculum and Instruction also discussed the importance of relationships. When principals "become adversarial with the instructional coach, or become adversarial to the principal,

it is a wash." Principal B took this further by declaring a "direct correlation between the relationship and effectiveness." Furthermore, according to Principal B, teachers that are "open to guidance and coaching score measurably better than those that are not."

Nevertheless, the question remains, if the relationship is good, how does this distribution of leadership impact teachers? Principal A believes it has a "much bigger impact" when teachers are "coached, led, and developed by a content specialist, not by an administrator." This was accomplished in part by what Principal C noted as teachers seeing instructional coaches "as a teacher, coach, and mentor as opposed to a supervisor" and "it comes across as less threatening from an instructional coach than the administrator." Instructional Coach B explained that the impact might attribute to the ability to have "different perspectives on important issues like teacher instruction." She further explained, "I can tell you multiple teachers' names that have grown tremendously by certain things we have done, shown them, and given them opportunities to do…we pretty much run the professional development (PD) budget for our specific content area. So, not only are we in the classroom, but then we give PD advice to those teachers and take them to particular conferences giving them opportunities to enhance and enrich their growth.

Principal A noted that instructional coaches can "advocate." Thus, according to Instructional Coach C, "principals put a lot of trust in instructional coaches." The trust can produce a fluid situation where "teachers feel like they don't have to always go to a principal," as noted by Instructional Coach D. In some departments, there seem to be some drastic changes. Instructional Coach C declared she is "beginning to see a huge shift in instructional practice and design."

Department Chair Teacher A3 explained that the Principal's "biggest strength" is distributed leadership. "He allows for you to grow and feel supported…I know I always have a voice," according to Department Chair Teacher A3. One of the areas where distributed leadership seems to have had an impact in the classroom is the function of the class schedule. Both Department Chair Teachers A1 and A3 discussed the importance of "making the schedule" and discussing certain "combinations of teachers and classes that won't work." According to both teachers, the "principal trust their judgment" and "will listen to why we want to do this." Furthermore, as Department Chair Teacher A1 described, the instructional coach has given teachers a chance to "take the lead" by allowing teachers to be the contact "in certain areas they have specialties in."

One of the most prominent ways distributed leadership may impact teachers is professional development. All of the department chair teachers in school A voiced the idea that teachers take ownership of different parts of PD. According to Department Chair Teacher A2, concerning PD, "what better way…we are the people in the classroom year in and year out." Department Chair Teacher A3 stated, "Instructional coaches lay down the direction of the vision of PD then during the school year its classroom teachers that execute the vision. It is an excellent model. I love it." There also seems to be evidence of this in school C. Department Chair C1 explained, "My job (during a PD day) was to go through these EOC strands and present to the other teachers." What has also become clear concerning PD is when there is no instructional coach assigned to the department? Both Department Chair Teachers A4 and B4 described

difficulties planning and executing professional development for their departments. Department Chair A4 noted that in telling this dilemma, "That is what happens when you don't have an instructional coach."

Department Chair Teacher B3 stated, "The instructional coach and I meet a lot to talk through what is expected from a curriculum standpoint. We are on the same page with common assessment and met standards." Thus, the "open lines of communication" described earlier need to channel to the classroom teacher. Department Chair Teacher C2 discussed the principal asking him to "be on different committees" and about leadership being distributed; he expressed, "we have to get from point A to point B, so it is about who can do this part of it and who could help us with this."

Barriers to Distributed Leadership

Principal A, Principal C, and Instructional Coach C both agreed that "limits on time" were a difficult barrier to overcome. Principal A described it as "many buildings to cover…they have big jobs." Instructional Coach C expanded on this by explaining, "A huge challenge for me was just finding the amount of time to make it to eight different buildings with multiple teachers." Principal C believed that the "time restraints are tough," and instructional coaches "get pulled in different directions and get different directives."

However, other barriers may need to be considered when discussing the distribution of leadership. For example, Principal B suggested that instructional coaches "start evaluating staff instead of helping staff," which can be an issue. Furthermore, "if there is a disagreement on what should be done, and the instructional coach is not open to working with the principal or department…this becomes a gigantic obstacle." Principal C also described this as a "difference in philosophy." According to Principal B, in a school district with three high schools where instructional coaches work with each high school, "comparing one high school to another and using that as a motivating factor" can also be a problem. Additionally, as Principal A stated, "Some (instructional coaches) are more capable than others of leading in terms of decision making and leading other people…you have to be influential and have people trust you."

Conversely, Instructional Coach B explained that principals being "territorial" presents barriers. In a school district that has three high schools being "territorial" is something not unexpected; however, as Instructional Coach A described, "it is all about trying to unify the district." Instructional Coach C maintains, real or not that one challenge is feeling "like every principal feels like I should be in their building more." She further explains, "Finding enough time to feel like the admin feel like you are fully devoted to their teachers is tough."

Principal B explained that overcoming some of these barriers means "trying to be as honest as you can…let everyone know where the barriers are and then help break those barriers down." Principal A suggested ways to " break those barriers down through "communication, being on the same team, and gathering consistently," Principal C also explained the importance of communication, noting, "Take time and collaborative effort and communication and being student-focused" to find a "happy medium and an

agreement of what's best for kids" when differences in philosophy occur. Moreover, Principal B declared that you must "try to communicate through that and then build trust." Part of this communication piece was improved by the school district moving to Microsoft Teams. According to Instructional Coach D, "Microsoft Teams has changed how we communicate," and thus, curriculum as an example has become "living breathing documents that are changing because of teams." Finally, one final note that Instructional Coach B discussed pointed back to the summer classes described earlier in this study. Instructional Coach B believes that because of this "weeklong collaboration" in the summer there has been "a lot more work over the last few years between schools."

Distributed Leadership and Improved Instruction

The consensus from the assistant superintendent to the department chair teacher is that the distribution of leadership has positively influenced the effectiveness of instruction. However, it also appears that the influence may be more substantial or more apparent depending on the content and department. In speaking on the impact of distributed leadership and instruction, the assistant superintendent assertively declared, "oh yes…I believe that without the instructional coaches, this district would not be at the level we are achieving." Principal C believed, "I think what we are doing is effective. Can we be better? Absolutely. We can always be better. But for the most part, I think what we are doing is good." When asked how do you know? He pointed to the continued "rank towards the top in-state assessments." Principal A expanded on this as well, "The effectiveness of teaching certainly has improved in this school. The assessment results, individual classroom teachers' grade distribution, number of disciplinary referrals coming from individual teachers…when you have teachers getting more and more effective as a classroom instructor with the support and help of the instructional coach, the classroom management issues and the focus of the classroom is much better."

Principal B explained it as "giving the instructional coach that leadership role and therefore teachers seeing them as leaders and therefore taking their coaching and carrying it out in the classroom has a daily effect." Instructional Coach B emphasized, "I think there is a trust between the principals and instructional coach."

Furthermore, "principals are supportive when we ask for days to grade practice performance events and collaborate", Instructional Coach B noted. This also highlights the structures in place that allow for the distribution of leadership to occur. Instructional Coach A explained, "Other school districts are not having the success we are because they don't have the structure we have in place or trust between them." In addition, principals showing confidence in the instructional coach appears to filter into the classroom. Instructional Coach C noted, "I feel like their (principals) confidence wins over the teachers for the most part, and so just getting the buy-in from the teachers to listen to our advice, participate in our PD, and focus on the changes that need to be made comes from trust we have from administrators."

Instructional Coach C also suggested that initially, the "amount of resistance to making any changes to the curriculum was so incredibly high." With that being said, there seems to be a mixed assessment of the

impact on instruction at the department chair teacher level. Furthermore, this is related to the content area and building specific.

Department Chair Teacher A3, about seeing any impact within the department, stated "no." However, Department Chair Teacher B3 declared the instructional coach lead on the curriculum "makes things more relevant and modernizes the curriculum."

Department Chair Teacher B1 also noted that the instructional coach has kept "all on track with pacing and getting through the content we need." There also appears to be a structural component. In commenting on this, Department Chair Teacher A1 stated, "We get support from both the principal and instructional coach." According to Department Chair Teacher C1, the instructional coach has "made me more aware of the end result in describing instruction and building assessment. Now, I see more of the big picture." Department Chair Teacher C2 explained the Principal "allows the instructional coach and me to do what is best for kids" and suggested the mentality from the Principal is "you guys are the experts in your field, you know your staff, and your group, and what works best for you." Finally, in what was an example of the building principal helping lead a department that does not have an instructional coach, Department Chair Teacher B4 described an initiative they worked on in literacy education that "opened the eyes of some people in the department about our role in literacy education and with helping with ACT type questions." Furthermore, she explained that it "actually changed the way we taught…it impacted daily classroom instruction."

4. Discussion

The researchers tried to "make meaning" of this data by "consolidating, reducing, and interpreting" what people have said and what the researchers have read (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 202). Through the triangulation of data, the following three themes emerged: Trusting relationships through open communication, "Utility player" who is a teacher resource, leader, and liaison, and the Principal trusts the instructional coach's decision making influences instruction.

4.1 Trusting Relationships through Open Communication

Fullan and Knight (2011) described the instructional coach as the most critical change agent outside the Principal. Research has also indicated that the instructional coach, when used correctly, can enhance the level of quality reform within the school (Matsumura et al., 2012). However, research has suggested that the instructional coach's role is also ambiguous. The Principal's lack of understanding of using instructional coaches results in the coach not being positioned to improve instruction (Desimone & Pak, 2017). Therefore, understanding the instructional relationship between the Principal and instructional coach is critical to understanding how to implement the instructional coach in the high school setting. Data showed the importance of an instructional relationship built upon trust, which requires channels of open communication that flow back and forth between the Principal and instructional coach—allowing instruction to be student-focused and data-driven.

This trusting relationship may be the foundation for which Woulfin and Rigby (2017) described as a collective understanding of how to build "teacher capacity and catalyze improvement (p. 326). It is important to identify barriers to the instructional relationship between the Principal and instructional coach to build teacher capacity. Understanding the coach's role was one barrier identified, which supported the research by Matsummura et al. (2012), noting how important the role of the Principal is in positioning the instructional coach within the culture of the school building. Luebeck and Burroughs (2017) explained that "administrator perceptions about coaching are pivotal to a coach's success as an instructional leader" (p. 160), again supported by the findings from this investigation.

However, as with any relationship, both the Principal and instructional coach have roles. Anderson et al. (2014) suggested that instructional coaches must be trust-builders. Without the ability to build trust, there will be a lack of cooperation and collaboration in the instructional coaching program. Furthermore, instructional coaches need to create the understanding of coaching and align with principals on effective instruction and evidence of student learning (Luebeck & Burroughs, 2017; West, 2017). Findings from this inquiry supported the need for this support to flow between the Principal and the instructional coach. Furthermore, suppose the view of an instructional coach is as an instructional leader, which the data in this study suggests. The administrator's perception of the coach is "pivotal to a coach's success" (Luebeck & Burroughs, 2017, p. 160). Anderson et al. (2014) also suggested that if the instructional coach role is coordinated well within the organization, the coaches are more willing to take risks, enhancing the organization's health. This requires an open flow of communication and ideas between the Principal and instructional coach. Thus, the data in this study suggests the instructional relationship between the Principal and instructional coach is a trusting relationship built through open communication.

4.2 "Utility Player" Who is a Teacher Resource, Leader, and Liaison

The data reveals the perception of the function and use of the instructional coach. However, it has similarities at different levels within the organization and changes at different levels of the organization. For example, the assistant superintendent suggested being in the classroom as the primary function. The principals expanded on this by discussing extensive areas of curriculum and assessment, professional development, mentoring, and being a resource for teachers. Instructional coaches also discussed these significant areas but defined their role as more of a "utility player" where the job may change daily. On the other hand, the department chair teachers stated the role of curriculum and content as a vital function and role of the instructional coach.

The researchers believe the data suggested how the school district utilizes the instructional coach described by the idea of a "utility player." However, through these various leadership roles the instructional coach takes in curriculum, content, assessment, instruction, and professional development, the instructional coach, has become a resource, leader, and liaison within the school district. The data supports this as an emerging theme, especially between the Principal and instructional coach.

Cornett and Knight (2009) may provide the most understandable connection between the instructional coach and student achievement by suggesting that the utilization of the coach can lead to a higher level of professional development, which improves practice, and in return, increases student achievement. Research is consistent in showing that the roles of instructional coaches vary (Deussen et al., 2017; Woulfin & Rigby, 2017). However, according to Neumerski (2012), several studies show that instructional coaches do not spend much time observing and modeling teaching. That finding aligned with the perception from the principals, instructional coaches, and department chair teachers needed in classrooms were more instructional coaches.

Mangin and Dunsmore (2015) described not fully leveraged was the role of the instructional coach because these roles are not standardized. The researchers consider there needs to be a careful delineation between the ideas of not fully leveraged, variation of roles, or inconsistent or confused roles, as Horne (2012) and Morgan (2010) suggested. Within this study, while it appears that the role of the instructional coach while institutionalized, the role seems to be what one instructional coach described as a "utility player." Fullan and Knight (2011) suggested that the lack of definitive roles could lead to poor collaboration and a misunderstanding of how to implement instructional coaches. While this makes sense, the data indicated the level of partnership, even though there are many roles for the instructional coach to execute, is consistent and productive. Thus, the principals appear to understand how to employ instructional coaches in their school buildings.

Although this study did not investigate how instructional coaches spend their time, the data seemed to indicate that both the Principal and instructional coach believed that time was a barrier to the function and role of the instructional coach within the school district. The researchers suggest this aligns with the various parts of the instructional coach's curriculum, assessment, instructional, and professional development responsibilities. Atterberry, Bryk, Walker, and Biancarosa (2008) indicated a wide variation of how coaches spend their time, even within an instructional coaching program that is well defined.

One unique function described by the Principal, instructional coach, and department chair teachers was the concept of the instructional coach being a liaison between the Central Office, building principals, and teachers. As far as the researchers can tell, there appears not to be much in previous research that describes instructional coaches as liaisons. This may indicate the lack of research at the secondary school level. However, it may also show how this school organization works and the implementation of the instructional coach program. The data indicates throughout the different levels of the organization that the perception of the function and use of the instructional coach is one of a "utility player" who is a teacher resource, leader, and liaison.

4.3 Principal Trust in Instructional Coach Decision-Making Influences Instruction

The data indicated that distributed leadership between the Principal and instructional coach influences instruction when the principal trusts the instructional coach's decision-making in the variety of roles the instructional coach plays within the organization. The practical aspect of this study included the

interactions between the Principal, instructional coach, and department chair teachers as they described their experiences within the elements of their situations (Spillane & Diamond, 2011). As described in this investigation, distributed leadership occurs through distributed cognition due to collaboration between stakeholders to develop a shared understanding (Spillane & Diamond, 2016).

Part of the emerging theme in this study was the Principals' trust in the decision-making ability of the instructional coach. As was stated earlier, the development of trust is something that both the Principal and instructional coach must build together. However, for distributed leadership to occur within the context of this study, the Principal must create the conditions needed, whether that be space, time, or opportunity to meet, plan, and reflect (Harris, 2014). The data in this study suggested this was a significant part of the relationship between the Principal and instructional coach. Moreover, it is the Principal's responsibility to create leadership opportunities, provide support to those leaders, and empower other leaders to lead as the capacity of distributed leadership builds (Bierly & Smith, 2018). The data indicates from the assistant superintendent level to the department chair teacher level that the roots of distributed leadership exist and are strong, although more robust in some school buildings than others.

The researchers ascertained what Spillane (2006) described as collective distribution is how leadership is distributed between the Principal and instructional coach in this organization. This is where two or more people work separately but interdependently on the same types of leadership routines (Spillane, 2006). The data suggests instructional coaches have the freedom to move freely within the organization while carrying out their role without the constant oversight of the Principal. However, it also shows interdependence regarding the leadership routine through consistent communication and meeting regularly.

The second part of this emerging theme is that influencing instruction within the organization occurred with the trust in decision-making. The data across the different levels of the organization indicate a positive impact on instruction through the use of the instructional coach. Although each level of the organization described the effect somewhat differently, the measurable data of teacher growth is apparent. The researchers suggest this is because of the distribution of leadership between the Principal and instructional coach. Leithwood et al. (2016) explained that when teachers are provided leadership, there is a positive influence on the effectiveness of teachers and student engagement. Student engagement is an instructional approach that both the Principal and instructional coach agree is essential. This study revealed that distributed leadership from the Principal, the instructional coach, and the department chair teacher occurred. This transpired by the Principal building trust in the decision-making of the instructional coach, which influenced instruction.

5. Conclusions

Understanding leadership is a critical aspect in the complexities of today's schools, where according to scholars, leadership has moved past the traditional sense of leadership into arenas where both formal and informal individuals perform school leadership (Gronn, 2009). The data from the qualitative analysis revealed three major themes: trusting relationships through open communication, "utility player" who is

a teacher resource, leader, and liaison, and principal trust in instructional coach decision making influences instruction. From these themes emerged several conclusions.

The importance of relationships built on trust is a linchpin for an effective instructional coaching program. Through this trusting relationship, the channels allow information to flow back and forth between the building principal and the instructional coach. This also allowed the instructional coach to operate within multiple school buildings in many different areas, including curriculum, content, instructional strategy, assessment, and professional development. While research indicated the instructional coach's role is often ambiguous, the lack of communication can result in the coach not being positioned to improve instruction (Desimone & Pak, 2017; Woulfin & Rigby, 2017).

The instructional coaches in this investigation were engaged in many functions partly due to the organizational structures in place. For example, the direct report for the instructional coach is the Assistant Superintendent of Curriculum and Instruction. Some instructional coaches have grade levels six through 12 and cover eight school buildings. Furthermore, the nature of the departmentalized aspects of secondary school education lends itself to various curriculum, state testing, and professional development responsibilities. This suggests the instructional coach is best described as a "utility player." Seen both by the Principal and instructional coach as a teacher resource, leader, and liaison that helps connect central office, building administration, and teachers, especially in curriculum, assessment, and instruction. Also revealed, the principals and instructional coaches did not necessarily believe that the function should change. However, the importance of being in the classroom more emerged with both the principals and instructional coaches, a finding supported by prior research (Atteberry et al., 2008).

West (2017) stated that when principals "treat coaches as equal partners in upgrading teaching and learning, coaching can become a valued part of the school culture" (p. 316). Another conclusion from the data reflects an organization where the instructional coach is a valued part of the culture, partly because of the distributed leadership between the Principal and instructional coach. Furthermore, this has filtered to the classroom teacher in each building. The organization's capacity for distributed leadership occurred because Principals and instructional coaches have given support, created opportunities, and identified potential leaders. Thus, what emerged in this study is when the Principal trusts in the decision-making of the instructional coach, it will influence the instruction in the classroom, as affirmed by what Harris (2014) suggested: distributed leadership needs opportunities of space, time, and chances to meet, plan, and reflect. Within this organization, the distribution of leadership seems to occur within the structural arrangement of the school district as either or both collaborative distribution and collective distribution (Spillane, 2006).

6. Recommendations

This study focused on how the implementation of instructional coaches in the suburban high school setting occurs. The research has revealed that the instructional relationship between the Principal and instructional coach is built on trust through open lines of communication. This relationship is the

foundational part of the function and role of the instructional coach in this school district, being a "utility player" who is a teacher resource, leader, and liaison while serving in a variety of capacities within the areas of curriculum, content, assessment, instruction, and professional development. These roles are accomplished through the distributed leadership between the Principal and instructional coach, resulting in the decision-making on instructional processes.

These findings have implications for districts, principals, and instructional coaches. One of the most critical aspects of building an effective instructional coaching program is ensuring an appropriate match between the instructional coach and the Principal's vision. Both principals and instructional coaches need training not only on shared instructional processes but also on being influential leaders in the partnership between the coaches and the Principal. Activities focused on trust-building and relationship creation should also be on the training schedule. Additionally, principals and instructional coaches need training on understanding distributed leadership and how to practice accordingly. This training should occur at the district level, providing standardization of such practice. In addition, more research is recommended on how a Principal should initiate distributive leadership as a source of building leadership capacity.

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