INSTRUCTIONAL COACHING: A REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

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Abstract

Instructional coaching has emerged as a critical lever for improving teacher practice and student learning outcomes. As educational contexts evolve, teachers require sustained, job-embedded professional development that goes beyond traditional workshops. Research indicates that instructional coaching provides individualized support, fosters reflective practice, and bridges the gap between theory and classroom implementation. This literature review synthesizes current research on instructional coaching, guiding principles, coaching strategies, benefits, and frameworks. Key findings highlight coaching's impact on teacher retention, instructional quality, and student achievement, as well as its role in navigating curriculum reforms and promoting systemic change. The review also explores essential components of effective coaching programs, including trust-building, data-driven decision-making, and collaborative goal setting. By analyzing diverse models such as the Impact Cycle, Student-Centered Coaching, and data-driven approaches, this review underscores the importance of instructional coaching as a dynamic, relational process that empowers educators and transforms school culture.

Introduction

The complexity of teaching in today's classrooms demands continuous professional learning that is both practical and responsive to educators' needs. Traditional professional development models—often characterized by one-time workshops—have proven insufficient for fostering lasting instructional improvement. In contrast, instructional coaching offers a sustained, personalized approach that situates learning within the teacher's daily practice. Defined as a collaborative process in which coaches support teachers through observation, feedback, and reflection, instructional coaching has gained prominence as a strategy for enhancing instructional quality and student outcomes.

It is commonly agreed that as teachers enter the classroom, they need continuous learning, skills, practice, and support (Aguilar, 2024). As the world around teachers grows and changes, so do their students, research, and teaching methods. Coaching is a powerful type of professional development (Aguilar, 2024). The purpose of this literature review is to examine current research, processes, and impacts of instructional coaching in the classroom. This literature review explores the multifaceted role of instructional coaching in education.

History and Background

Instructional coaching is not a new concept. Bruce Joyce and Beverly Showers developed a peer coaching model in the 1980s centered around collaboration, observation, and feedback (Joyce & Showers, 1981). Early work in the area of content coaching was done at the University of Pittsburgh's Institute for Learning (West, 2017). In recent years, coaching has gained in popularity, most notably as a result of policy changes, including the No Child Left Behind Act and the Reading First initiative, that mandate the use of coaches (Nugent et al., 2016).

Instructional coaching is seen as a pathway to improving practices and support for teachers that can also impact students' academic and behavioral success (Reddy et al., 2021). West (2017) envisions an ideal school environment where teachers, principals, coaches, and students are all active learners and where teachers, coaches, and principals collaborate to study the art and science of teaching. The school in West's vision is described as a learning organization. Instructional coaching should use evidence-based strategies to help teachers. To be effective, these evidence-based strategies should be job-embedded (Reddy et al., 2021). Sustaining effective instructional coaching involves complex interactions between coaches and those with

whom they work. Effective instructional coaching requires at least the following three levels of learning:

- coaches learning how to effectively manage responsibilities, work with teachers, and navigate the school environment;
- teachers practicing new teaching methods, mastering new material, and learning to use data to inform practice; and
- students learning in new and different ways as a result of teachers' and coaches' efforts.

Knight (2021) suggests seven partnership principles as a guide for instructional coaches. The seven principles are equality, choice, voice, dialogue, reflection, praxis, and reciprocity (Knight, 2021). These principles suggest that both the instructional coach and teacher are on equal footing; neither is more valuable than the other (Knight, 2021). It is important that instructional coaches also allow teachers to have choice. When teachers have the power of choice, they feel a personal responsibility and accountability to achieve their goals (Knight, 2021). The principles of voice and dialogue are represented in the instructional coaching cycle when both the teacher's voice and the instructional coach's voice are heard, both parties work together creatively, and the two have meaningful conversations (Knight, 2021). Another principle, reciprocity, encourages teachers and coaches to go beyond conversations in order to learn together through their shared experiences (Knight, 2021). These experiences should align with educational praxes and be grounded in real-world connections within the teacher's classroom (Knight, 2021). At the end of each experience, it is important for the instructional coach and the teacher to reflect on what happened during the experience and how that can continue to impact the future learning experience in their classroom (Knight, 2021).

Instructional Coaching Defined

Coaching, at its core, is seen as a method of professional development for teachers (Reddy et al., 2021). One definition describes coaching as "in-service PD programs where coaches or peers observe teachers' instruction and provide feedback to help them improve" (Kraft et al., 2018). Aguilar (2019) stresses the importance of articulating a clear definition and vision for coaching before implementation. Without a shared definition, teachers and administrators often misunderstand the purpose of coaching, leading to confusion and weak engagement. Aguilar defines coaching as "a form of professional development with a person who willingly engages in reflection and learning," emphasizing that coaching is not remedial or punitive but rather a voluntary, ongoing, and a job-embedded form of professional growth. Establishing this definition and vision ensures that coaching is seen as a valued opportunity for professional learning rather than a corrective measure (Aguilar et al., 2019).

Whole-day workshops, the most common form of professional development, have been found to be an ineffective method of transferring skills to teachers (Reddy et al., 2021). Though some scholars refer to coaching as an alternative to "traditional models of professional development" (Kraft et al., 2018) or as the "train and hope model" (Shernoff et al., 2015), coaching has shown more evidence of promise not as an alternative to but as a supplement to other types of professional development (Nugent et al., 2016). Coaching has been referred to as "embedded professional development" (Gallucci et al., 2010) and "sustained" professional development (Nugent et al., 2016) occurring in "real-time" (Shernoff et al., 2015).

Instructional coaching is different from traditional professional development because of its embedded practice. Unlike one-off workshops, coaching provides support that can be implemented throughout the school year and individualized for teacher needs. This cycle of observation, feedback, and goal setting allows schools to strengthen teacher efficacy as a daily practice rather than an individual event (Motto, 2021; Pomerance & Walsh, 2020). Hill and Papay (2022) argue that effective professional learning, including coaching, shares two core principles: it is situated in practice and involves social accountability. Coaches revisit classrooms to check progress, and teachers often engage in peer collaboration, creating a relational accountability structure that promotes sustained change (Hill & Papay, 2022).

Instructional coaching is facilitated by instructional coaches, who have been referred to as "on site resources for teachers" and people who can provide "targeted professional development opportunities to meet teachers' specific learning needs" (Mangin & Dunsmore, 2015, p. 180). A coach is generally an expert

in a specific teaching method or a specialist in a particular area of the curriculum, such as literacy. Subject matter specialists are sometimes referred to as curricular coaches, defined as "an instructional coordinator or supervisor, such as a curriculum specialist in the areas of reading, mathematics, or science" (De Jong & Campoli, 2018). Various models exist for how coaches are employed. Coaches might be brought into a school on a temporary contract basis, employed full-time by a single school, employed full-time by a district with an agreement to travel between two or more schools, employed part-time with responsibilities outside of coaching, such as teaching a limited number of classes or administrative duties, or employed by a partner university or institute and assigned to assist the school on a regular basis.

Some researchers have referred to coaching as key to improving teachers' classroom instruction and translating knowledge into practice. A primary goal for coaches is to help teachers grow and become more effective in their work. Coaching might be used in cases where schools are implementing new curricular materials or instructional resources (Kraft et al., 2018) or as a means for individual or systemic reform (Mangin & Dunsmore, 2015). Coaching has also been shown to be effective in supporting teachers in implementing new or updated standards (Andersson et al., 2021). Coaches in a study by Mangin and Dunsmore (2015) demonstrated a belief that whole-system change would result from individual interactions with teachers in specific ways that supported their classroom practices.

Facilitating the teacher's transfer of learning is central to effective instructional coaching. For professional development to achieve its desired long-term effects, teachers who participate in that professional development must apply knowledge gained in the context of the classroom and continue to use new knowledge as a basis for refining their practice. To maximize the potential for transfer, coaching must be ongoing and iterative, allowing teachers repeated opportunities for observation, reflection, and practice with feedback from the coach in each cycle (Reddy et al., 2021). Transfer is a task for both teachers and coaches (Joyce & Showers, 1981). "Transfer of teaching skill involves much new learning—when to use new skills, how to modulate them to the students, etc.—learning which has to take place in the process of transfer" (Joyce & Showers, 1981, p. 170). Because of the job-embedded nature of coaching, transfer is more likely to occur with coaching rather than with workshops or other traditional forms of teacher professional development (Shernoff et al., 2015). Moreover, the job-embedded nature of coaching allows for more direct impact and deeper benefits than single-session professional development.

Benefits of a Coaching Program

Widespread research has been conducted in the field of instructional coaching, particularly in relation to its effects on classrooms, teachers, and students. One notable limitation of this research is that findings are not necessarily generalizable because many studies are qualitative in nature and involve small samples, often from a single school or district. The following is a sampling of some of the notable research findings related to instructional coaching.

New teacher retention

A primary benefit of instructional coaching is improved teacher retention, with research finding that "curricular coaches may indirectly save urban school districts thousands of dollars by reducing early-career teacher attrition" (De Jong & Campoli, 2018, p. 197). The results of De Jong and Campoli's meta-analysis showed that the presence of an instructional coach had a statistically significant negative relationship ($p < .028$) with teachers leaving the profession. They found particularly strong evidence of the benefit of curricular coaches related to the retention of first-year elementary teachers.

Improved teacher practice and student performance

Instructional coaching has also been linked to more effective teacher practice and increases in test scores. A meta-analysis showed an effect size of .49 standard deviations (SD) across 43 studies for instructional practice and an effect of .18 SD across 31 studies for student performance on standardized tests (Kraft et al., 2018). The effect sizes were even larger when coaching was paired with group training sessions, leading to effect sizes of .8 SD for instruction and .3 SD for achievement (Kraft et al., 2018).

Recent evidence underscores that coaching is most effective when it is sustained, individualized, and focused on teachers' day-to-day practice. Hill and Papay (2022) note that successful coaching programs often include cycles of observation, feedback, and planning, which provide accountability and support for implementing new instructional strategies. These programs typically emphasize concrete classroom practices rather than abstract principles, ensuring that teachers can translate learning into action (Hill & Papay, 2022).

Altering teachers' perceptions of learning

A mixed-methods longitudinal study sought to investigate the relationship between the presence of mathematics coaches and teachers' and students' learning (Ellington et al., 2017). Teacher surveys indicated that there was no effect on teacher beliefs from simply assigning a math specialist at the school. However, teachers who were highly engaged with a specialist showed a change in how they perceived student learning. The authors suggest that teachers developed a "sense-making view of mathematics" from working with the math specialist (Ellington et al., 2017). In some schools, teachers were able to collaborate with the math specialist to develop student lessons that approached the content from this perspective.

Coaches can also help improve uptake of new approaches by relating them to teachers' current practice. In Coburn and Woulfin's (2012) study of Reading First implementation, one of the coaches' most powerful methods of persuasion was to convince teachers that Reading First practices were similar to what teachers were already doing or that these practices aligned with teachers' existing beliefs and values. Doing so resulted in teachers being more receptive to trying new approaches and activities. The authors described the coaches' actions as "constructing congruence" (Coburn & Woulfin, 2012, p. 21).

Navigating Curriculum Initiatives and Promoting Deeper Implementation

Instructional coaches also encouraged teachers to push past their initial, more superficial responses in which they typically transformed curriculum through their preexisting worldviews and practice, either rejection or assimilation, toward deeper understanding. Through this deeper understanding, teachers were able to reconstruct their practice in light of the new curriculum (Coburn & Wolfing, 2012, p. 17). With coaches involved, teachers showed "Deeper forms of enactment" (Coburn & Wolfing, 2012, p. 17).

In a study of how teachers responded to messages related to a Reading First initiative, researchers found that coaches influenced teachers' responses by "pressuring, persuading, and at times buffering them from Reading First" (Coburn & Woulfin, 2012, p. 13). According to the study, "When coaches were involved in presenting or reinforcing Reading First messages, teachers were much more likely to accommodate and much less likely to assimilate, have parallel structures, respond symbolically, or reject messages" (Coburn & Woulfin, 2012, p. 17). With coaches involved, teachers showed "deeper forms of enactment" (Coburn & Woulfin, 2012, p. 17). Coburn and Woulfin (2012) also found that "Teachers responded with accommodation to 52% of messages that involved the coach (28 messages), compared with only 15% (21 messages) when coaches were not involved" (p.18).

Specifically, coaches were described as giving teachers practical steps to take in order to incorporate changes into their classrooms. In the context of using assessment data to inform practice, coaches helped teachers identify specific ways to use the data when designing their instruction and organizing instruction to address students' individual needs. This intervention from the coaches made the difference in assimilation, as "teachers who assimilate [curriculum] often embrace new approaches wholeheartedly but lack the support to transform their instruction in deeper ways, resulting in assimilation rather than accommodation" (Coburn & Woulfin, 2012, p. 19).

Coaching Frameworks

Instructional coaching has emerged as a critical lever for improving teaching practices and student outcomes. Therefore, numerous frameworks have been developed to guide this work. These frameworks provide structured processes that define the roles of coaches and teachers, establish clear goals, and ensure that coaching is both collaborative and evidence-based. From models that emphasize teacher-driven goal setting to those that prioritize student learning or systemic transformation, each framework offers unique principles

and practices to support instructional growth. Understanding these approaches is essential for educators and leaders seeking to implement coaching effectively and align it with their organizational priorities.

The Impact Cycle

The Impact Cycle is a framework for instructional coaching that has three stages: Identify, Learn, and Improve. Instructional coaches who have completed the framework with teachers report powerful results (Knight, 2021). Before beginning the cycle, the instructional coach should sit down with the teacher and explain what the Impact Cycle is and the process the teacher will be working through (Knight, 2021). Instructional coaches can provide scaffolding for teachers by recording the Impact Cycle as a checklist (Knight, 2021). A checklist can give a teacher a reference point and an idea of where they are heading. The checklist should have information that provides the teacher with a deeper understanding of the process.

The first stage of the Impact Cycle is Identify. During this stage, the teacher focuses on their own skills and processes. Teachers need a clear understanding of their own abilities to make decisions about what goals they should work toward (Knight, 2021). Having teachers watch and analyze a video of themselves teaching is a great way to help them identify goals (Knight, 2021). It is recommended that the teacher and coach watch the video separately to remove uncomfortable feelings the teacher might have if watching the video with the coach (Knight, 2021). As teachers and coaches sit down to discuss the video, they should focus on creating a goal. The goal needs to be the teacher's choice and should follow the PEERS structure—powerful, easy, emotionally compelling, reachable, and student-focused (Knight, 2021). If the teacher is unable to record a video or make a decision based on the conversation, they can collect data in other ways. Teachers and coaches can collect data from classroom observations, student work, student interviews, or a combination of methods (Knight, 2021).

The second stage is called Learn. In this stage, the instructional coach discusses a strategy or strategies with the teacher (Knight, 2021). The instructional coach needs to take the time to explain the strategy while balancing the conversation to include the teacher (Knight, 2021). They should ask the teacher questions, actively listen, and consider the teacher's thoughts and ideas. Many coaches also model strategies for their teachers (Knight, 2021). Coaches can model in another classroom, but it is recommended that coaches not model in the teacher's classroom (Knight, 2021). Some instructional coaches keep a collection of pre-recorded videos that they can share with their teachers for the various strategies they work with (Knight, 2021).

Once the teacher understands the strategy, they start implementing it into their classroom. As the teacher improves, the instructional coach can work with them to modify or adapt the strategy until the teacher has met their goal, which is the third and last stage of the Impact Cycle: Improve (Knight, 2021). Both the instructional coach and teacher work together to gather data to show the teacher's growth toward their goal (Knight, 2021). They use this data to guide the changes or adjustments that the teacher needs to make. The cycle ends once the teacher has achieved their goal and restarts with a new goal.

Student-Centered Coaching

Student-Centered Coaching is an instructional coaching framework that keeps the work centered on student learning rather than teacher behavior. The framework is built around a set of predictable practices that structure how coaches and teachers collaborate. Its core components include a partnership agreement, learning targets and success criteria, cycles of co-planning and co-teaching, and the ongoing use of student evidence to guide instructional decisions (Sweeney & Harris, 2017).

A foundational element of the framework is the partnership agreement, which clarifies the purpose of coaching, expectations for collaboration, and the commitment to use student evidence as the basis for instructional improvement (Sweeney & Harris, 2017). This agreement sets the conditions for a consistent and transparent coaching process.

Central to Student-Centered Coaching is the use of learning targets and success criteria. Coaches work with teachers to identify what students should learn and how progress will be measured. These targets anchor all coaching conversations and help keep the focus on specific, measurable outcomes for students (Sweeney & Harris, 2017).

The instructional work takes place through cycles of co-planning, co-teaching, and reflection. In co-planning, teachers and coaches design lessons that align strategies, assessments, and learning targets. Co-teaching serves as a collaborative approach to implementing planned instruction and allows both partners to stay focused on student learning rather than evaluation. Reflection involves analyzing student evidence such as work samples, formative assessment data, or observation notes to determine next steps.

Another important feature of the Student-Centered Coaching framework is the use of student evidence teams or structured conversations that consistently return to the question, "Are students learning?" This evidence-driven focus helps teachers make informed instructional adjustments and supports continuous improvement.

Overall, Student-Centered Coaching provides a structured, student-outcome-focused approach to instructional coaching grounded in shared planning, collaborative instruction, and data-informed reflection.

Data-Driven Coaching

Data-driven coaching frameworks provide structured processes that help coaches and teachers move beyond intuition and base instructional decisions on evidence. Two widely recognized approaches are collaborative inquiry and professional learning communities (PLCs).

Collaborative inquiry is a cyclical process where educators work in teams to identify student learning problems, verify causes, generate solutions, and monitor results. This framework emphasizes building a foundation of shared goals and norms, analyzing multiple sources of data, and focusing on instructional practices within the school's control. Coaches can facilitate this process by guiding teachers through each step, ensuring that solutions are evidence-based and aligned with classroom realities (Henderson & Corry, 2021).

PLCs embed data-driven decision-making into routine collaboration. Teachers and coaches meet regularly to review assessment results, examine student work, and adjust instruction. PLCs prioritize continuous improvement and shared responsibility for student learning. When implemented effectively, they provide a structure for ongoing professional development and foster a culture of collective problem solving (Abrams et al., 2021; DuFour et al., 2021).

Both frameworks share common principles: collaboration, iterative improvement, and the use of multiple data sources to inform practice. Instructional coaches play a key role in operationalizing these frameworks by modeling data analysis, supporting goal setting, and helping teachers connect findings to actionable strategies. These approaches ensure that coaching is not an isolated activity but part of a systematic process for improving teaching and learning.

Data-Driven Instructional Coaching Model (DDICM)

The Data-Driven Instructional Coaching Model (DDICM) is another approach to data-driven coaching designed to improve teacher effectiveness and student outcomes through a structured, evidence-based approach (Glover et al., 2023). This model incorporates three key components: an emphasis on creating supportive learning environments and guiding teachers to implement interventions with fidelity using evidence-based classroom practices; the use of a formalized, data-driven framework to inform instructional decisions; and active engagement of school personnel in modeling, practice, and feedback cycles (Glover et al., 2023).

In the DDICM, a standardized protocol is used to guide teachers during coaching sessions. The protocol outlines procedures for clarifying objectives, reviewing concepts and skills, modeling with case examples, facilitating the application of research-based practices and interventions, conducting classroom observations, and providing regular feedback on practice and intervention implementation (Glover et al., 2023).

Central to the DDICM is a five-phase behavioral consultation process that guides coaching interactions. In the first phase, coaches collaborate with teachers to analyze student data and identify priorities for coaching (Glover et al., 2023). The second phase involves examining underlying mechanisms contributing to identified needs, such as behavioral or skill deficits (Glover et al., 2023). In the third phase, coaches and teachers establish measurable, data-based goals specifying practices aimed at improving student outcomes (Glover et al., 2023). In the fourth phase, intervention plans are developed and implemented to address these goals (Glover et al., 2023). Finally, the fifth phase focuses on monitoring and evaluating both the fidelity of teacher implementation and student progress toward goal attainment, using the data to inform future coaching needs

(Glover et al., 2023). This cyclical, data-driven process ensures that instructional coaching remains dynamic, targeted, and responsive to evolving student and teacher needs.

Classroom Strategies Coaching Model (CSC)

The Classroom Strategies Coaching Model, or CSC, also focuses on data to drive coaching (Reddy et al., 2021). The goal of CSC is to use evidence-based instruction and data on behavior management practices to help teachers increase their effective use of these methods (Reddy et al., 2021). These strategies are to be used with the whole class to increase student engagement and improve student behavior (Reddy et al., 2021).

CSC is not just one strategy but multiple strategies and practices for the teacher to focus on in their classroom at once (Reddy et al., 2021). All of the strategies used in the classroom with this model are evidence-based and focused on improving classroom climate and learning environments (Reddy et al., 2021). CSC is driven by data and uses assessments, such as Classroom Strategy Assessment System (CSAS), to guide coaches in making decisions about what practices and actions teachers should implement (Reddy et al., 2021). Feedback from these assessments is provided to teachers throughout the coaching process. This feedback can then be used to set goals, determine strategies, and create a plan for the teacher (Reddy et al., 2021). Teachers can use the assessments as progress monitoring tools for their own improvement (Reddy et al., 2021). Like in many other models, reflection is another component of CSC. Coaches and teachers can reflect on job-embedded implementations and the use of strategies and practices in the classroom to drive future actions (Reddy et al., 2021).

Transformational Coaching

Aguilar (2024) discusses the Transformational Coaching model founded on the belief that coaching serves as a powerful tool for systemic changes in education. Central to this framework is the idea that instructional coaching partnerships with teachers represent the greatest point of leverage for improving the system, as teachers directly shape student learning and classroom culture (Aguilar, 2024). Transformation, however, requires more than surface-level adjustments; it involves addressing behaviors, underlying beliefs, and ways of being to create lasting change (Aguilar, 2024). This process unfolds through intentional, reflective conversations that foster insight and growth (Aguilar, 2024).

Moreover, the framework emphasizes that meaningful transformation depends on meeting fundamental human needs for connection and belonging, ensuring that coaching relationships are grounded in empathy and trust (Aguilar, 2024). This includes the following two principles: everyone deserves to thrive and a common understanding that instructional coaches and teachers share the same purpose: meeting the needs of students(Aguilar, 2024). The main purpose of Transformational Coaching is to improve teaching and help all stakeholders at the school thrive (Aguilar, 2024). This is meant to be done collaboratively with the coach serving as a supportive guide (Aguilar, 2024). Because the Transformational Coaching model is based on relationships between teachers and coaches, success with this coaching model requires instructional coaches to be aware of and able to regulate their own emotions in order to positively impact the teacher or improve the situation (Aguilar, 2024).

Coaching frameworks serve as roadmaps for fostering professional growth and enhancing classroom instruction. While these frameworks differ in focus—ranging from teacher-centered cycles like the Impact Cycle, student-focused models such as Student-Centered Coaching, and data-driven approaches like DDICM and CSC—they share common commitments to collaboration, reflection, and continuous improvement. By leveraging these frameworks, instructional coaches can create purposeful, evidence-based partnerships that not only strengthen teaching practices but also advance student learning. Ultimately, selecting and applying the right framework ensures that coaching remains a dynamic, responsive process that meets the evolving needs of educators and learners alike.

Roles and Practices of Coaches

Instructional coaches fulfill a multifaceted role that extends beyond classroom observation. Their daily work often includes collaborating with teachers through co-teaching and modeling instructional strategies (Hopkins

et al., 2017; Huguet et al., 2014). Coaches engage in informal conversations to build trust and provide ongoing support, while also leading formal curriculum planning sessions to align instructional practices with school goals (Hopkins et al., 2017). They assess teacher needs, promote new curricula, and interpret assessment data to guide instructional adjustments (Coburn & Woulfin, 2012; Huguet et al., 2014). In addition to supporting teachers directly, coaches participate in professional development to strengthen their own expertise and they meet regularly with administrators to plan systemic improvements (Gallucci et al., 2010). These activities position coaches as instructional leaders who influence both individual teacher growth and broader school reform efforts.

There is a critical need for on-site teacher support in professional development interventions. Across twelve programs reviewed in a study by Bognar et al. (2024), the presence of mentors or coaches who provided feedback, modeled strategies, and facilitated reflection was consistently associated with positive changes in teaching and student learning. This study reinforces the view that instructional coaches serve as essential resources, bridging professional development activities with classroom realities by offering timely, embedded guidance (Bognar et al., 2024).

Aguilar (2019) underscores that effective coaches must be hired with the right criteria in mind. Beyond content expertise, coaches need strong social-emotional intelligence to manage their own emotions, recognize and respond to the emotions of others, and build trusting relationships despite differences. Aguilar (2019) argues that while technical skills such as data analysis can be taught, dispositions like humility, reflection, and emotional regulation are foundational and should be evident at the time of hiring. This perspective expands the literature's discussion of the coach's role by highlighting the personal qualities that enable coaches to foster meaningful growth in teachers (Aguilar, 2019).

An inclination toward building relationships and trust is also an important quality in an instructional coach, as one challenge a coach may face is gaining access to classrooms for observation. Studies show that eliminating fear of authority and establishing trust are essential prerequisites for coaches to be invited into instructional spaces. Instructional coaches can integrate themselves into teachers' routines by attending meetings, sharing ideas through emails, and scheduling observations during regular school hours. This integration builds respect and transparency, increasing the likelihood that teachers will be more accepting of the coaching process (Kochmanski & Cobb, 2023; Munson & Saclarides, 2022).

Agents of Change

School leaders have found that simply mandating a new curriculum is not enough to induce change. Instructional coaches are often brought into schools to help enact new programs, bridging the gap between abstract policy and classroom implementation (Coburn & Woulfin, 2012; Hopkins et al., 2017). To get all stakeholders working together, coaches may engage in brokering activities (Huguet et al., 2014), such as connecting teachers and administrators (Ellington et al., 2017) or fostering collaboration among previously disconnected teachers (Hopkins et al., 2017).

Instructional coaches also play a critical role in supporting new teachers as they transition into the profession. Instructional coaches provide guidance, feedback, and support as novices develop their practices (Luft et al., 2007), while also helping new teachers promote student learning and create powerful learning environments (Luft et al., 2014). Throughout the reviewed literature, a common theme emerges: coaching success is closely tied to strong working relationships with teachers. These relationships are most effective when coaches and teachers connect on an emotional level; when this connection is absent, the relationship suffers (Shernoff et al., 2015).

Through collaboration, teachers refine their instructional approaches, strengthen communication with students, deepen their understanding of how students learn, and expand content knowledge (De Jong & Campoli, 2018; Luft et al., 2007). Coaches help teachers make sense of new initiatives and experiences, enabling them to integrate these elements into practice more effectively (Coburn & Woulfin, 2012). Strategies include reflective dialogue, data interpretation, and modeling instructional techniques in authentic contexts (Hopkins et al., 2017; Huguet et al., 2014). Coaches also provide timely feedback, validation, and positive reinforcement, building teacher confidence and capacity (Huguet et al., 2014; Luft et al., 2007). Ultimately,

these actions foster professional growth and position coaches as catalysts for meaningful instructional change (De Jong & Campoli, 2018).

Key to establishing a positive teacher-coach dynamic is reinforcing the idea that receiving help does not signal poor performance. As one teacher explained, "It got so hard to get everything done that we realized that we all have shortcomings; we all need help from someone else. And it doesn't mean that you're a bad teacher" (Hopkins et al., 2017, p. 225). In studies of early career teachers, coaches were described as facilitators of dialogue rather than experts and were encouraged to remain optimistic about instructional change and to use motivational interviewing techniques such as reflective listening, empathy, and promotion of autonomy (Knight, 2021; Shernoff et al., 2015).

Instructional Coaches are Leaders

When reflecting on successful instructional coaches with strong positive impacts compared to other instructional coaches, leadership is the skill that stands out (Knight, 2021). An instructional coach serves as not just a leader for teachers, but also a leader among other coaches (Knight, 2021). Through their work, instructional coaches should help teachers discover the areas they want to improve in, not just the ways the district believes they should improve (Knight, 2021). Approaching the role of instructional coach should not be based on control, but should be seen as an act of service, as illustrated by the partnership principles of voice and choice (Knight, 2021).

To be an effective leader, coaches should start with leading themselves. Instructional coaches should practice time management, build good habits, and practice self-care (Knight, 2021). When working with teachers, instructional coaches should model their own leadership skills and work with leadership strategies. Using the partnership principles, instructional coaches can develop new leadership strategies (Knight, 2021). Instructional coaches can start by balancing ambition and humility and helping teachers do the same (Knight, 2021). Instructional coaches need to be ambitious and have a strong desire to see themselves and their teachers succeed, while at the same time approaching their work with humility by remembering that they are working to impact students over themselves (Knight, 2021).

Another strategy instructional coaches should work toward is what is referred to as being a multiplier (Knight, 2021). Being a multiplier refers to recognizing the strengths of others, multiplying those strengths by supporting them, and working toward what others need (Knight, 2021). To be a multiplier, an instructional coach should challenge teachers, helping them to discover their talents and strengths (Knight, 2021). They should grow teachers rather than tear them down. Once teachers recognize their strengths, instructional coaches can help guide them to set goals for themselves to facilitate growth in other areas (Knight, 2021). Setting goals with teachers requires good decision-making skills. Strong decision-making requires thinking through a challenge or need, and working with the teacher to provide options, determine which options are best, and eliminate options that don't align to provide teachers with an impactful goal they can achieve (Knight, 2021). By using these skills for themselves and others, instructional coaches can avoid issues like burnout (Knight, 2021).

Relationships and Trust

As leaders in their schools, instructional coaches should work to build relationships. It is important for instructional coaches to build trust and create authentic connections with their teachers in order to effectively support them (Knight, 2021). Engaging in and modeling effective communication is believed to be one of the most constructive ways to improve relationships. Productive conversations rely on self-reflection and are rooted in six core beliefs including the following:

- "I see others as equal partners in conversations.
- I want to hear what others have to say.
- I believe people should have a lot of autonomy.
- I don't judge my conversation partners.
- Conversation should be back and forth.

- Conversation should be life-giving (Knight et al., 2015, pp. 9–10)."

These core beliefs are essential to instructional coaches' ability to practice and lead conversations with teachers (Knight et al., 2015).

One aspect that contributes to better conversation is both parties involved viewing each other as equals (Knight, 2021). An instructional coach should not position themselves as superior to the teachers they are helping, as this will hinder growth and communication. Working toward equal opportunities in a conversation promotes a shared experience for all parties involved. When coaches practice seeing the teachers they work with as equals, they promote credibility and trust (Knight, 2021; Knight et al., 2015).

It is not enough to simply show up to a conversation. An instructional coach must be fully present and focused on what their teacher is discussing and presenting. One way coaches can show a true interest in their teachers' thoughts is by asking them direct questions about their opinions on various topics and situations. Additionally, to strengthen connections, coaches can limit distractions during the conversation by turning their phones over, turning any noises on their devices off, and not glancing at their watch too often (Knight et al., 2015).

Part of building a true partnership between instructional coaches and teachers is allowing for each person to have autonomy. People are more motivated to listen and embrace change when they feel they have choices (Knight, 2021). An instructional coach should speak in a way that is provisional, allowing their teacher the freedom to disagree with them or share their own differing insights. Additionally, conversations that avoid judgement promote trust, confidence, and respect. One way for an instructional coach to practice non-judgmental conversation is by resisting the desire to provide unsolicited feedback or advice (Knight et al., 2015). At times, this type of feedback can feel forced and one-sided, which can result in a teacher feeling judged and can decrease trust between the teacher and coach.

Better conversations happen when all parties are fully involved and become more immersed as the conversation progresses. Coaches should display a genuine curiosity and interest in their teachers, engaging them as equal partners. Sharing meaning back and forth should be a priority between coaches and teachers. Conversations should also be "life-giving," as part of instructional coaching is motivating teachers. A way to build motivation and "give life" is to create an environment that is energized, positive, engaging, and empathetic. Teachers need to feel motivated and encouraged when they leave a conversation with their coaches (Knight et al., 2015).

Practicing effective conversations is just one way to build a relationship, but it is also important to make personal connections. It is valuable for coaches to make an effort to be present and persistent in the personal relationships they have with their teachers. One way for an instructional coach to foster a deeper connection is to share the positive experiences they have with their teacher. Coaches can provide direct, specific compliments about an experience they had with a teacher, recounting their work, efforts, or actions. Coaches should "be a witness to the good" when it concerns their teachers (Knight et al., 2015, p. 108). This shared positivity can promote a deeper, more trusting relationship (Knight et al., 2015).

Aguilar (2024) asserts that instructional coaches need to have the non-negotiable skill of trust. Trust can be cultivated through the belief that everyone deserves to thrive, including the coach, but the teacher has autonomy and the ability to improve (Aguilar, 2024). When teachers feel that their instructional coach sees their potential, they are more open to listening and more willing to take risks (Aguilar, 2024). Coaches should be compassionate, unafraid, respectful, and have faith in the coaching process (Aguilar, 2024). By displaying care, consistency, congruence, and competence, coaches can build trusting relationships with their teachers (Aguilar, 2024).

Aguilar (2019) reinforces the centrality of trust in coaching relationships, noting that psychological safety is essential for teachers to reflect honestly on areas of uncertainty. She identifies six dispositions that support trust-building: compassion, curiosity, trust in the process, humility and mutuality, appreciation, and a learner orientation. Importantly, Aguilar (2019) cautions that coaching must remain separate from evaluation to preserve confidentiality and ensure that teachers feel safe to engage. These insights complement Knight's (2021) emphasis on equality and dialogue by providing specific dispositions that strengthen relational trust

(Aguilar, 2019). A foundation of strong relationships and mutual trust is essential for effective instructional coaching and is the base upon which all parts of the coaching process rest.

Reflection Strategies

An essential part of the coaching process is creating opportunities for self-reflection. Debriefing is a reflective practice that significantly impacts both teacher and coach growth. Coaches should facilitate a debrief session that includes collaboratively analyzing whether or not goals were met, exploring student outcomes, and engaging in authentic communication. This process fosters vulnerability, autonomy, and trust, while also creating a culture of reflection. The debrief serves as a transformative stage of the coaching cycle, leading to sustained change in instructional practice (Damore & Rieckhoff, 2021; Elfarargy et al., 2022; Moore & Williamson, 2023).

There are simple, effective ways for coaches to self-evaluate their technique and practice. To determine if they are treating their teachers as equal partners, making space for teachers' opinions and thoughts to be shared, and removing judgment from conversations, coaches can start by asking themselves the following reflective questions:

- "Are you often convinced that you have the best solution for problems? If so, has this made it difficult to work alongside others?
- Are there habits you have that distract you from paying attention to others?
- Are there habits that you can adopt that could remind you to give others more attention?
- Have you ever received unwanted advice? How did it affect you?
- Think about times when you learned from a student. How did it make you feel? How do you think they felt?" (Knight et al., 2015, pp. 86–87)

Additionally, to assess if there is room for autonomy within communication, ensure that conversations are facilitated as back and forth, and have conversations that are "life-giving," coaches can work through the following self-reflection prompts:

- "Is it possible to name a fear which holds you back from being able to allow others choice and the freedom to be or feel different than you?"
- Which statement most reflects your current thoughts about the belief that others should have autonomy?
  - I disagree
  - I am skeptical
  - I am not sure
  - It is helpful
  - It is essential
- As a professional, you often need to have a clear purpose or agenda for certain conversations. However, rigid adherence to the agenda is detrimental when it comes at the expense of the loss of others' voices. What are some creative ways you can allow for true dialogue while keeping the conversation on track?
- Think of a conversation you have had where you were completely engaged. How did it make you feel? Did time seem to fly? What life-giving elements created the engaging atmosphere?
- On a scale of 1–10, how important is it for you to improve at facilitating conversations that are life-giving?" (Knight et al., 2015, p. 52)

These self-reflection questions and prompts can be used for internal dialogue, journaling, or facilitating conversations shared between a coach and teacher. Another effective self-reflection strategy is taking a video of a conversation between a coach and teacher and analyzing it to improve facilitation skills (Knight et al., 2015). A video is an impactful artifact that can be used as a starting point to track growth.

Inquiry and Problem Solving Between the Teacher and Coach

Nugent et al. (2016) describe a coaching model that involves cycles of joint planning, action and practice, observation, reflection, and feedback, specifically following a protocol of:

- positive coach feedback;
- review of desired student outcomes and teaching strategies that promote student inquiry skills;

- detailed discussion of the lesson, including sharing time-stamped video clips to demonstrate what worked well and why and what student outcomes need to be addressed or improved; and
- exchange of ideas about strategies to address areas for improvement.

Coaches in the Nugent et al. (2016) study used both scaffolding and questioning techniques to lead teachers to improved understanding and proficiency in their guided scientific inquiry instruction. Coaching generally consisted of one to two sessions per week over six to eight weeks. The coach and teacher agreed to end coaching when the teacher believed he or she was able to effectively implement the guided inquiry approach without further assistance, and the coach had documented that the teacher possessed the needed skills.

Administration Role in Instructional Coaching

Without administrative support, instructional coaching programs can struggle to be successful. Administrators serve as leaders for instructional coaches and create the structures and school-wide culture to promote teacher and student learning (Knight, 2021).

Administrators influence the success of data-driven coaching by shaping the school's data culture. When leaders model constructive use of data, protect time for analysis, and communicate clear expectations, teachers are more likely to engage in the process. Conversely, when data is perceived as punitive or tied solely to accountability, participation in coaching declines. Administrators should frame data as a tool for improvement and ensure that coaches have the time and resources needed to support teachers effectively (Lasater et al., 2020; Schildkamp & Datnow, 2022).

Administrators can further support coaching by creating opportunities for teachers and coaches to discuss student learning in depth. Conversations about "foundational core ideas and crosscutting concepts, difficulties in learning the content, and the prior knowledge students should have" have proven effective (Luft et al., 2014, p. 69). Coaches themselves emphasize the importance of balancing validation with active problem solving (Shernoff et al., 2015). In all cases, support must be purposeful and timely, as mismatched support wastes time and can hinder teacher development (Luft et al., 2007).

Setting Up a Coaching Program

The literature provides numerous options and recommendations related to establishing and growing a coaching program, which are considered in the sections that follow.

Selecting Coaches

Among the initial steps in building a coaching program is identifying how coaches will be employed and who the coaches will be. As schools engage in this process, they should carefully consider the methods of selecting and hiring coaches. The stakes are high, as coaches who are perceived as being ineffective in their roles have been cited as having a detrimental effect on the curriculum (Huguet et al., 2014). If a school or district is choosing coaches from within their existing pool of teachers, researchers caution that basing decisions on the criterion that a candidate was an effective classroom teacher might be problematic, especially when the process does not consider pedagogical content knowledge or skills in working with adult learners (West, 2017).

Two characteristics of strong coaches cited in the literature are content knowledge and interpersonal skills (Huguet et al., 2014). Both should be top considerations in the selection process. However, even if a school chooses coaches with these characteristics in mind, new coaches will not necessarily be established experts as they enter the role. Coaches need continued professional development to equip them to effectively support teachers. One promising professional development strategy is to provide coaches opportunities to collaborate with fellow coaches and supervisors, building a professional learning community in which coaches can learn from one another (Shernoff et al., 2015).

Implementing a Coaching Program

When implementing a coaching program, the literature agrees that coaching works best when the school climate is supportive of coaching, and coaches, teachers, and school leaders are working together collaboratively (Huguet et al., 2014; Knight, 2021). The literature has illustrated that the way in which a coach's role is framed might have a significant influence on how coaching is enacted (Mangin & Dunsmore, 2015).

Empowering coaches to be proactive and providing flexibility for coaches to engage in all parts of the job are key aspects of effective instructional coaching. Coaches in a study by Mangin and Dunsmore (2015) showed reluctance to initiate conversations with teachers and instead waited for teachers to come to them. They didn't intervene even when they had evidence that a teacher's practice was not adequate or effective. The authors suggested that the lack of proactivity on the coaches' part was due at least in part to the school's strict delineation between coaches as "supporters" and principals as "evaluators." This lack of flexibility and ability for coaches to be proactive led to less positive improvement than anticipated (Mangin and Dunsmore, 2015).

In a study by Huguet et al. (2014), strong coaches were observed regularly spending time in a broad range of coaching activities, whereas developing coaches were observed spending a disproportionate amount of their time in the "broker" role. In instructional coaching, a "broker" role refers to a practice in which instructional coaches connect people, resources, and ideas across boundaries within a school to develop a shared understanding of data use and instructional improvement (Huguet et al., 2014). The authors explain that, "spending their time as 'broker' may have limited their employment of other coaching practices and may have created perceptions among teachers of the evaluative role of the coach, which may have caused reluctance among teachers to work with [them]" (Huguet et al., 2014, p. 14). This suggests that limiting coaches' ability to engage in a variety of coaching activities and ill-defined roles within a school can lead to poorer outcomes from a coaching program than a program that grants coaches a measure of empowerment and defines roles and responsibilities clearly.

Studies such as these bring up the question of authority and how it relates to the dynamics of coaching. Within a school, administrators are in a position of authority as it pertains to the functions of the school and personnel matters. Coaches, however, typically are not in a position of authority, though teachers sometimes view coaches as authority figures or "pseudo administrators" (Coburn & Woulfin, 2012). When teachers see coaches as working for the administration or having the power to make judgments regarding their performance that could affect their employment, teachers are less willing to work with coaches. In reality, however, coaches rarely have that type of power and are typically non-supervisors (Gallucci et al., 2010) and must rely on "expertise and relationships to exert influence" (Gallucci et al., 2010, p. 922).

An effective paradigm is one in which administrators frame coaches as teachers' trusted peers, encouraging them to work together in a type of mentor/mentee relationship. Huguet et al. (2014) relate this view of the relationship between teachers and coaches to Vygotsky's conception of learning from a "more knowledgeable other." One way to gain early buy-in from teachers and help develop this type of paradigm is to involve teachers in the design of the coaching process and give them a voice in how they will work with coaches (Knight, 2021; West, 2017).

Some researchers see coaches in a unique position to serve as conduits in the "flattening" of relationships between teachers and administrators, which refers to the shift from a hierarchy of authority to a joint partnership between the roles. Coaches "can facilitate the transition from a hierarchical model of interaction to a partnership model that engenders inquiry, reflection, and informed action by teachers and administrators" (West, 2017, p. 314).

West (2017) also suggests creating a protocol for handling disagreements between coaches and teachers in instances where the principal and coach do not feel a teacher is making progress. However, she also suggests that the relationship between coach and teacher should be transparent enough that the two can speak candidly about progress, what is working, and what isn't working. Taking concerns to the principal should not be the first step for either the coach or the teacher.

The Role of Administrators and Principals in Implementing a Coaching Program

It is important for school leaders to take a systematic and long-term approach toward implementing coaching initiatives and connect those initiatives with formal professional development for teachers (Hopkins et al., 2017). Administrators are important in "shaping the work of a coach through their mediation of political dynamics in a school" (Huguet et al., 2014, p. 2). Having a leader who sets clear expectations opens the door for more focused collaboration between teachers and coaches (Hopkins et al., 2017; Knight, 2021).

A principal's words and actions are also important in setting the tone for the entire school's acceptance

of a coach's work. Principals can publicly endorse the coaching program, acknowledge the coach's expertise, take the time to be involved in coaching-related activities, and demonstrate how coaches can be used as a valuable resource for teachers. In addition, because administrators' roles naturally require them to frequently take on the role of coaches themselves, administrators can benefit from the same training as instructional coaches (Knight, 2021) and can further endorse the program by participating in the training. They can also encourage individual teachers to meet with a coach and then follow up with them to see how the coaching session went (Matsumura et al., 2009).

Principals can help coaching programs be more effective by supporting instructional coaches. Principals should provide instructional coaches with the time they need to work with teachers. By meeting in-person with coaches to define their roles and understand how they spend their time, a principal can help support them as a coach (Knight, 2021). Empowerment and support from administrators allows coaches to be more effective as they focus on implementing a variety of coaching strategies and practices.

Coaching Strategies and Practices

One of the most important aspects of a coach's work comes in the form of one-on-one coaching sessions with teachers. The literature suggests a number of models and strategies to make these coaching sessions as productive as possible.

Goal Setting

Goal setting is a foundational element of instructional coaching, providing direction, motivation, accountability, and opportunities for reflection. When goals are specific, measurable, and collaboratively developed, teachers are more engaged in implementing new strategies (Höpfner & Keith, 2021; Kochmanski & Cobb, 2023; Munson & Saclarides, 2022). Within data-informed coaching, this process is strengthened through the use of SMART goals aligned with identified areas of need. Regular progress monitoring, based on agreed-upon data sources, ensures that instructional adjustments remain responsive to evidence and focused on improving student outcomes (Baharav & Newman, 2019; Henderson & Corry, 2021).

Listening

Some coaches can have a tendency to dominate coaching conversations by talking too much (Aguilar, 2024). This makes listening an important skill for coaches to develop. Aguilar (2024) defines listening as actively receiving and understanding another person's thoughts, emotions, and experiences. Coaches will struggle to understand their teachers' thinking and feelings if they don't take the time to listen (Aguilar, 2024). Coaches need to not only listen to the words their teachers are saying, but also pay attention to the metacommunication, or nonverbal cues. Metacommunication is nonverbal communication that accompanies verbal communication. 65% of people's thoughts and feelings during a conversation are expressed through metacommunication (Aguilar, 2024). Coaches need to hone their listening skills. First, they need to focus on what is in their own mind to help them clear the clutter and focus on the conversation in front of them (Aguilar, 2024). Once they have cleared their own thoughts, they can actively listen and focus on nonverbal queues (Aguilar, 2024). Pausing during the conversation, taking notes, and making eye contact are also important habits to help the coach retain what is being said and for the teacher to feel heard (Aguilar, 2024). To show that coaches have been active listeners who are listening to words and metacommunication, they should paraphrase what they heard from the teacher and repeat it back to them (Aguilar, 2024). Coaching sentence stems can be a good resource to help beginning coaches with coaching conversations (Aguilar, 2024). After a conversation, coaches should take time to reflect on both the discussion and their own listening skills (Aguilar, 2024). Reflection on their own listening helps coaches continue to improve their skills and become better active listeners.

Questioning

Though coaching conversations start with active listening, coaches still need to include strong questions to help guide the conversation. Questions should be purposeful and open-ended (Aguilar, 2024). Coaches need to be cautious not to interrupt teachers in order to best answer their questions (Aguilar, 2024). There are

times when a coach might need to suggest a teacher pause a conversation thread in order to redirect the conversation back to the purpose or topic (Aguilar, 2024). Questions that ask a teacher "why" they did or did not do something should typically be avoided, as they tend to lead the teacher to feel that they have to justify their actions or that they have messed up in some way (Aguilar, 2024). When coaches do use "why" questions, they should be intentional and come from a place of love and caring so that they are not perceived as overly confrontational (Aguilar, 2024).

Coaching Styles

Aguilar (2024) states that coaching tends to fall into one of two main styles: facilitative coaching and directive coaching, each of which serves distinct purposes depending on the situation and desired outcomes. Directive coaching is more informative, as in directive coaching the coach provides information and feedback to the teachers (Aguilar, 2024). In directive coaching, coaches tell teachers how to solve their problems, and coaches act more as an authority figure (Aguilar, 2024). Both facilitative and directive coaching can be used depending on the situation and the outcome the coach is trying to achieve (Aguilar, 2024). Directive coaching should be used when teachers have a skill or knowledge gap that can be efficiently addressed by more directive methods (Aguilar, 2024). Facilitative coaching is used more often as it helps create a safe space for teachers to solve their problems with knowledge and skills they already possess (Aguilar, 2024).

Each coaching style has three different approaches. Directive coaching has the following approaches: prescriptive, informative, and confrontational. A prescriptive approach is rarely used as it tends to deal with legal and safety issues (Aguilar, 2024). The most commonly used directive coaching approach is the informative approach (Aguilar, 2024). An informative approach is used when discussing resources, strategies, and tools that may be new to a teacher or to allow the teacher to start processing next steps (Aguilar, 2024). Finally, the confrontational approach is used to challenge a teacher's existing beliefs and encourage them to shift their way of thinking (Aguilar, 2024). This stance often involves interrupting a teacher's thoughts when they are talking (Aguilar, 2024). It is best used when a teacher should consider the consequences of their actions or adjust their viewpoint (Aguilar, 2024).

Facilitative coaching supports teachers by helping them find answers to their questions (Aguilar, 2024). It puts the coach in a position of a guide to help teachers move toward the "three Bs" of transformational coaching: behavior, beliefs, and being (Aguilar, 2024). Facilitative conversations also lead teachers toward reflection (Aguilar, 2024). Facilitative coaching can be supportive, cathartic, or catalytic. When coaching is supportive, the coach provides encouragement and confirmation to offer motivation and build self-efficacy (Aguilar, 2024). Asking a teacher questions moves a coach toward a more cathartic approach (Aguilar, 2024). This approach is still supportive but moves the conversation toward helping teachers process thoughts and emotions (Aguilar, 2024). A catalytic approach is used at the end of a coaching experience (Aguilar, 2024). This approach provides teachers time to reflect on challenges, successes, and future actions (Aguilar, 2024).

Both facilitative and directive coaching can be applied depending on the context and goals. While facilitative coaching is generally more frequently used for fostering reflection and autonomy, directive coaching is essential when addressing gaps in knowledge and skills.

Instructional Playbook for Districts

While providing teachers with research-based, high-impact strategies is an important role for an instructional coach, coaches must also ensure the proper organization, coherent structure, and clear communication of those strategies. This can be done with an instructional playbook. The use of this playbook is based on its design and the components chosen inside that help ensure consistent implementation and effectiveness for teachers and coaches. It is important that a district's instructional playbook has teaching strategies that create the highest impact for student learning (Knight, 2021). District leaders, administrators, and instructional coaches should work together to create instructional playbooks with common strategies and checklists. Instructional playbooks are meant to help coaches have multiple research-based instructional strategies within reach at any time (Knight, 2021). The strategies should be comprehensible by teachers and focus on helping them achieve their goals (Knight, 2021). These strategies should also be frequently used with teachers within

the school district (Knight, 2021). These playbooks are indispensable to instructional coaches as they recall multiple strategies to use when coaching teachers (Knight, 2021).

The instructional playbook should be created by a team of administrators, teachers, instructional coaches, students, and other stakeholders to create a consistent set of research-based strategies for use throughout the district (Knight, 2021). Instructional playbooks have three sections: a table of contents, one-pagers, and checklists (Knight, 2021). The table of contents lists the strategies recorded in the playbook. It is recommended that an instructional playbook contain no more than 15–20 researched, high-impact strategies (Knight, 2021). A one-pager is a single page that describes a strategy and its proper implementation. The page should answer two major questions about the strategy: "What is this strategy?" and "What does this strategy do?" (Knight, 2021). The majority of an instructional playbook is made up of checklists (Knight, 2021). These checklists contain the action steps a teacher must take in the classroom in order to use the strategy (Knight, 2021). Checklists help coaches understand each strategy and give the teachers an easy process for implementing each strategy into the classroom, with the focus of improving student learning (Knight, 2021). Some strategies in the instructional playbook may not require a checklist, and an instructional coach may sometimes share a strategy with a teacher that is not listed in the playbook (Knight, 2021). Once created, the instructional playbook should be revised two to four times per year to keep it up to date with research and district strategies (Knight, 2021). It is important that a district's instructional playbook has teaching strategies that create the highest impact for student learning (Knight, 2021).

When districts create instructional playbooks, they increase the depth of understanding of the strategies that teachers are implementing (Knight, 2021). They also create a shared knowledge of strategies and their definitions (Knight, 2021). Instructional coaches in districts with instructional playbooks have more clarity in their role as a coach, have less cognitive overload, and are able to provide a path for teachers to achieve their goals (Knight, 2021).

Coaching with Technology

To be effective, coaching sessions do not necessarily need to take place in person. Video conferences between a teacher and a coach can be effective in providing professional training (Knight, 2021; Nugent et al., 2016). In one case study of using digital tools for coaching, including FaceTime, email, and video and audio recordings of classroom interactions, the authors indicated that "digital technologies create additional options for teachers by expanding resources and training mediums to help address obstacles posed by the limits of time or by geographical constraints" (Leighton et al., 2018, p. 40). For example, video conferences between a teacher and a coach might be employed as a primary means of interaction in situations where a rural school is working with coaches from a distant city. In other cases, tools such as email and video conferences can help teachers and coaches stay in touch and refine strategies in the periods between coaching sessions.

Teachers can also record themselves in the classroom and later watch recorded videos to reflect on their teaching (Knight, 2021). Though it is suggested that teachers are more comfortable when allowed to watch the video without the instructional coach, it is still important for the coach and teacher to discuss what they saw in the video after viewing it individually (Knight, 2021).

Data-Driven Decision Making

Data collection is an important step in the role of an instructional coach, as it helps them see what is going on in a teacher's classroom and how to help the teacher create and work toward goals (Knight, 2021; Reddy et al., 2021). Data can inform teachers' efforts in areas such as setting goals, tracking students' progress, and adjusting content and sequencing. It is also important that data collection shows the impact of coaching on student achievement (Aguilar, 2024). Through this data, teachers and coaches can measure progress and have a clear idea as to the success of the coaching (Knight, 2021).

Teachers often need assistance with making the connection between an identified problem and an appropriate response (Huguet et al., 2014). Strong coaches have been identified as not only helping teachers access data, but also helping them investigate what it means and how to respond to it. One-on-one coaching sessions allow teachers opportunities to develop a response immediately with the support of the coach. In

contrast, weaker coaches simply help teachers access the data without providing additional guidance (Huguet et al., 2014). Knight (2021) suggests that teachers and coaches follow six data rules: the data should be chosen by the teacher, collected by the teacher, objective, valid, reliable, and gathered frequently (Knight, 2021).

A "data-driven" teacher is one who is called upon to use student data to guide instruction (Huguet et al., 2014). Data, however, rarely serves as a motivator for teachers—rather, teachers are more easily motivated by seeing their students succeed and by the prospect of becoming better at their job. When coaches begin their discussion of data with those motivations in mind, they are more likely to capture the teacher's attention and cooperation (Toll, 2017).

Effective data-driven decision-making begins with clarifying the purpose of improving student learning. Coaches can help teachers interpret data accurately and avoid assumptions. Productive data conversations should focus on observable facts and instructional actions rather than attributing causes beyond the classroom. Establishing norms for how data is discussed, such as stating what the data shows before proposing solutions, helps maintain a constructive tone and keeps the emphasis on teaching practice (Mandinach & Schildkamp, 2021).

There are several ways a coach and teacher can collect data. Coaches and teachers can collect data through student interviews, student work, observation, or a combination of different methods (Knight, 2021). One of the more popular methods is observation. Observation provides the coach a way to support the teacher in the classroom with academic, social, and emotion growth (Aguilar, 2024). When observing a teacher, coaches need to collect as much data as possible to discuss with the teacher to determine goals and a path to implementation (Aguilar, 2024). Coaches must communicate the purpose of the observation and the length of the observation to teachers (Aguilar, 2024). Both the coach and teacher should have clear expectations as to what will be focused on during the observation (Aguilar, 2024). If the observation cannot be conducted in person, the teacher can record the session or arrange for the coach to attend remotely. If remote observation is the chosen method, the coach should ensure that the teacher feels comfortable with the arrangement (Knight, 2021).

Building teachers' capacity to effectively use data requires more than access to reports. Many educators enter the profession with limited experience with data literacy, and one-time training sessions are rarely sufficient. Instructional coaches can bridge this gap by providing ongoing, scaffolded support to help teachers learn how to analyze data, identify patterns, and connect findings to instructional strategies. Regular practice with real classroom data builds confidence and promotes sustained use of data-informed teaching (Abrams et al., 2021; Beck & Nunnaley, 2021; Washburn et al., 2022).

Types of Data

There are many types of data that teachers and coaches can collect when they are working toward their goals. Some types of data include engagement, academic, and teaching data (Knight, 2021). Engagement data is divided into three categories: behavioral, cognitive, and emotional (Knight, 2021). Behavior data can consist of the amount of time students spend on task, disruptions in the classroom, student responses, and incivilities (Knight, 2021). Cognitive engagement can be measured by directly asking students to describe how engaged they are (Knight, 2021). This can be done through interviews, exit tickets, correct academic responses, or random samplings (Knight, 2021). Districts can survey students by asking them to describe their levels of engagement. Emotional engagement can be collected in a similar way to cognitive engagement. Data on emotional engagement can be collected by speaking to students directly to gather responses (Knight, 2021).

Academic or achievement data focuses on students' learning. Prior to collecting data, teachers and coaches should identify what students are expected to learn by working with the teacher's or subject's standards (Knight, 2021). Purposeful planning with objectives, assessments, and questions determined in advance can help with data collection (Knight, 2021).

Teaching data refers to how the teacher is teaching in the classroom. Teachers can focus on the ratio of interaction with students, which students the teacher is focusing on, and which students the teacher is not focusing on (Knight, 2021). Data can also be collected on how much the teacher is talking versus how

much the students are engaging in on-task conversation (Knight, 2021). The types of questions asked by the teacher or the number of opportunities for students to respond can also be useful data to help guide a teacher to set goals to improve (Knight, 2021). Lastly, teachers can record how much time students spend on-task (instructional time) versus time spent off-task (non-instructional time) (Knight, 2021).

Data used in coaching should include both formal and informal sources. Formal data might consist of standardized test scores, attendance records, and benchmark assessments, while informal data can include classroom observations, student work samples, and teacher-created assessments. Combining multiple sources provides a more complete picture of student learning and helps coaches and teachers make informed decisions. Relying on a single data point or single data source can lead to incomplete or misleading conclusions (Albiladi et al., 2020; Blumenthal et al., 2021).

Evaluation of Coaching

Aguilar (2019) highlights evaluation as one of the weakest elements in many coaching programs, yet she argues it is essential for demonstrating impact. She recommends using rubrics to assess coaching programs, coaching practices, and coaching conversations, as well as to track outcomes such as teacher growth, retention, and student performance. Evaluation not only provides data to refine coaching but also allows leaders to tell the story of coaching's influence on school culture. The addition of an evaluation process to the instructional coaching model strengthens accountability by offering concrete strategies for evaluating coaching effectiveness (Aguilar, 2019). Evaluation can allow for coaches and the instructional coaching program to grow and evolve.

Pairing Coaching with Other Professional Development

Research has suggested that coaching might be most effective when it is paired with other forms of training that are designed to introduce teachers to new concepts, knowledge, or skills. Results of one quantitative study showed that a summer institute was effective in helping teachers to gain knowledge, while follow-up coaching sessions were effective in helping teachers to translate that knowledge into practice. Both the institute and the coaching appeared to contribute to teachers' gains in self-efficacy (Nugent et al., 2016). A meta-analysis of coaching by Kraft et al. (2016) reinforced the idea that building knowledge prior to coaching is an effective strategy. When designing a coaching program, it is important to ask what knowledge and experience teachers need before they begin working with a coach, and then determine the best method for delivering that prerequisite training. Hill and Papay (2022) find that professional learning opportunities, including coaching, are more effective when they provide practice-supportive materials such as curricula or formative assessment items. These concrete resources reduce the cognitive load on teachers and increase uptake of new practices compared to programs focused solely on general principles (Hill & Papay, 2022).

Conclusion

Instructional coaching represents a powerful approach to professional development that aligns with the realities of classroom practice. Unlike traditional models, coaching offers sustained, individualized support that enables teachers to translate new knowledge into actionable strategies. The literature consistently demonstrates that effective coaching programs foster teacher growth, improve student learning, and contribute to a collaborative school culture. Success, however, depends on clear role definitions, trust-based relationships, and alignment with school-wide goals. Frameworks such as the Impact Cycle, Student-Centered Coaching, and data-driven models provide structured pathways for achieving these outcomes while emphasizing reflection, evidence-based practice, and continuous improvement.

Instructional coaching has been shown to be an effective way to help teachers grow their practice, which in turn can lead to better student performance in the classroom. An effective coaching program is part of a school-wide learning culture that encompasses all levels, from students to administrators. All members of a school district should understand what coaching is and why it is necessary in all of its many stages (Knight, 2021). By providing teachers, administrators, and coaches with clarity on the "what" and the "why" of an instructional coaching program, schools promote buy-in, which is essential for success. Coaching is an art form that uses a variety of skills and tools to help teachers with diverse needs (Aguilar, 2024). Coaches require

structures, defined roles, and the ability to be creative and innovative to be successful (Aguilar, 2024). The coaching role is multi-faceted and benefits from collaboration among teachers, coaches, and administrators to focus efforts and target areas of greatest need.

As schools strive to meet the demands of diverse learners and evolving standards, instructional coaching stands out as a critical lever for systemic transformation. By investing in well-designed coaching programs and cultivating partnerships among all stakeholders, educational leaders can create environments where teachers thrive and students succeed. Ultimately, instructional coaching is not merely a support mechanism—it is a strategic one.

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