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## Instructional Coaches and Teachers: A Grounded Theory Study of the Professional Relationship

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INSTRUCTIONAL COACHES AND TEACHERS:  
A GROUNDED THEORY STUDY OF THE PROFESSIONAL RELATIONSHIP

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A Dissertation  
Presented to the  
Faculty of  
California State University,  
San Bernardino

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In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Doctor of Education  
in  
Educational Leadership

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by  
Julia Alberg-Burbank  
December 2021

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## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this constructivist grounded theory study was to examine the professional relationship between instructional coaches and teachers in an elementary school setting. This examination is necessary due to the expansion of personnel serving as instructional coaches in US public schools. Utilizing constructivist grounded theory, the researcher gathered electronic journals from 19 participants, 11 teachers and eight coaches. Additionally, interviews were conducted with all 19 participants. The initial codes from electronic journals were applied to interview transcripts in a line-by-line analysis and subsequently affirmed using qualitative software analysis. Analyzing codes led to memo writing and the emergence of theoretical codes that responded to the research questions. Follow up interviews were conducted with six participants as member-checks and centered on theoretical codes, leading to the construction of a grounded theory. The resulting codes demonstrated that, in response to research question one, coaches use their leadership role of professional development in order to strengthen relationships with teachers and to empower them to develop their skill sets. Additionally, in response to research question two, coaches cast themselves as a resource for teachers, thus supporting teachers' autonomy and professionalism. When resistance to coaching is encountered, research showed, in all but one case, it was resistance to district policy, not the coach tasked with the implementation. The implications of these findings are numerous and best summarized as when coaches work to develop trusting and respectful

professional relationships, teachers will utilize instructional coaching to modify teaching practices for the benefit of students. Thus, the grounded theory as constructed is as follows: when instructional coaching is approached from a universal design perspective, based in meeting the needs of teachers with whom one is working, then instructional coaches will face fewer acts of resistance and the professional relationship between two parties will allow for the co-construction of knowledge in order to positively impact student learning.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

“It takes a lot of courage to show your dreams to someone else.” Erma Bombeck

“Get in good trouble. Necessary trouble.” John Lewis

"I would like to be remembered as someone who used whatever talent she had to do her work to the very best of her ability." Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg

These three quotes have guided my work and my persistence through the process of taking on the pursuit of an advanced degree and seeing it through to completion. Not only do these quotes and the people behind them represent my efforts, but they also guide how I conduct myself. When I first entered the classroom at CSUSB for our first meeting with the cohort of which I was a part, it had been 20 years since I had been a student. I had set myself on a course to learn how to lead well, how to be the best instructional coach I could be, and to question my assumptions and the systems in place in my field. I took this on to be a better professional for the people I am lucky enough to work with. This was a dream, to do something strictly because it interested me. I would like to acknowledge those who helped me reach the conclusion of this successful effort.

The colleagues in my cohort quickly became trusted friends and a support network I never could have imagined. I am so thankful for sharing this experience with them and for the opportunity to learn from them.

My dissertation committee supported me with ample expertise and displayed care and concern for me throughout this process. Dr. Donna Schnorr guided me through this process and offered wonderful insights and feedback. I learned a great deal because of her generosity and wisdom. Dr. Sherri Franklin-

Guy provided crucial feedback when it was most needed on early chapters. Her clear and kind suggestions helped anchor a narrative voice in this work of research. And, Dr. Joseph Boffa said, “YES!” when I most needed support, sent research my way, listened critically and provided thoughtful commentary, all while making sure I was having ‘enough fun’. To each of them, I offer my respect and admiration, along with unending gratitude.

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In addition to the loving support of my kids, I am fortunate to have a true partner in my husband Tom. From when I first came home with this idea, until the writing of this final piece, he has picked up the slack around the house and enthusiastically supported the use of our time and capital in this endeavor. I am appreciative of the many conversations we had that allowed me to articulate where my research was headed and what I thought I was seeing, as well as his cogent and thoughtful readings of each chapter and the feedback he provided. Tom is a wise man and educator, who brought his own experiences to the reading of this work and helped me develop it with clarity. I gratefully acknowledge his love, dedication to our family, and his encouragement when it was most needed to safeguard this dream of mine.

## DEDICATION

In memory of my dad, Lyle, who had a 1000-watt smile and encouraged me to pursue expertise in my field.

In memory of my brother Leo, who coached people each day through his ministry and left us too soon.

To my mom, Denise, who always said I had a book to write.

To Joseph, Kate, John and Alex, you are the best work I have to put into the world. I am enormously proud of each of you.

To Tom, without you, this could not have been. Thank you for holding my hand. I love you.

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## CHAPTER ONE

### INTRODUCTION

“Coaching is the art of creating an environment, through conversation and a way of being, that facilitates the process by which a person can move toward desired goals in a fulfilling manner” (Gallwey, 2000, p. 177). In recent years, schools and districts have added the role of instructional coach to their faculties and central office personnel. Instructional coaches are teachers who do not work with students, but, rather, teachers, and they help to facilitate changes in instructional practices that benefit student learning. Instructional coaching takes up numerous lenses and frames, as a single model has not proven to be the gold standard for arriving at success with student achievement. Due to the multiple iterations of instructional coaching, it would be beneficial to examine the commonality no matter the context or setting: the relationship between an instructional coach and the teachers with whom they work. In the following chapter, I will delineate the problem, purpose, questions, significance and theoretical underpinnings contained in the study.

#### Problem Statement

Instructional coaches inhabit the space between peer to the teachers they serve and policy implementors for their employers (Swinnerton, 2007).

Coaches are tasked with bringing changes to teachers' instructional practices, in order to positively impact student learning. For the instructional coach and teacher, it is possible to find themselves negotiating policy implementation with which one disagrees, or the suggestion of a change in practice, or an insistence on collaborative practices. In instructional coaching, trust forms a necessary but fragile bond. The creation of relationship with those being coached counts heavily and can be fraught with conflict (Walker et al., 2011). This space of problematic interaction is the space occupied by the instructional coach as the role has evolved from its earliest days. Due to the growth of instructional coaching in public schools across the country, the professional relationship between coaches and teachers is worth an exploration.

### Purpose Statement

The purpose of this research was to gain understanding of and insight into the professional relationship between instructional coaches and teachers working in an elementary setting. Approaching this problem from a constructivist viewpoint allowed for the relationship to be examined through a contextual lens. Coaches and teachers co-construct the meanings of their interactions and relationships within the context of the school setting. Additionally, there are numerous roles that a coach may take on in order to establish a relationship with the teacher, just as the individual teacher may only accept certain approaches from a coach. For example, coaches may interact with teachers in a group for

explanations of data, professional development or to facilitate collaboration (Bean, et al., 2010; Chien, 2013; Domina, et al., 2015; Galluci, et al., 2010; Joyce & Showers, 1981; Woulfin, 2018). Or coaches may meet one-on-one with a teacher to facilitate the coaching cycle, a cycle of goal setting, observations and debriefing around goals chosen by the teacher (Knight, 2007; Marzano, et al., 2012). Any of these interactions are co-created by the people involved and situated in the context and culture of the school or district. The meaning created through these interactions make a working relationship, for good or ill, between the coach and teacher. The purpose of this study was to seek clarification around how coaches and teachers work together to create positive relationships that impact teacher practices.

### Research Questions

This study proposed to carefully examine how power shapes the work of instructional coaches and how teachers respond to that work; work that is heavily dependent on relationship, trust, and context. Coaches and teachers are peers, yet due to the need for districts to demonstrate accountability to state and federal agencies for improving teaching, coaches are frequently tasked with implementing policy (Swinnerton, 2007). Instructional coaches must inhabit the space between peer and policy implementation. How do coaches use their leadership role to empower teachers and support them in instructional strategy changes? How do instructional coaches use interpersonal and communication

skills to negotiate meaning with teachers in order to respect teacher autonomy?  
How do coaches and teachers navigate problematic situations in which teachers display resistance to coaching?

### Significance of the Study

Through the exploration of the research questions, clarity around best practices for schools or districts utilizing instructional coaching was obtained. The role of the instructional coach is costly to schools, as estimates range from \$3,260 to \$5, 220 as the cost per teacher, in order to have a full-time instructional coach (Knight, 2012). Therefore, it was important to examine the instructional coach and teacher relationship, what factors make it an effective one and what factors should be avoided. Furthermore, instructional coaching takes on numerous iterations and a study that examined commonalities that contribute to success was beneficial for the education community.

### Theoretical Underpinnings

The work of this project was grounded in a constructivist world view. This research was framed by symbolic interactionism and utilized constructivist grounded theory as the methodology. Symbolic interactionists think reality is created because of a person's interaction with the world. Meaning is created that is dependent on the culture and context of the time and place. Individuals make

sense of their world and their reality based on the interactions they have with objects, surroundings, and other people. “Courses of interaction arise out of shared perspectives, and when not shared, if action/interaction is to proceed, perspectives must be negotiated” (Blumer, as cited by Corbin & Strauss, 2008, p. 7). Instructional coaches and teachers, in order to work, must interact and negotiate the relationship, each from their own perspective.

Constructivist grounded theorists build from the specifics of those negotiated interactions to general statements that can be situated in the context and culture of their creation, in this case, elementary schools (Charmaz, 2014). As a constructivist, the researcher cannot separate the phenomena, data, or analysis from the sources of its creation, nor from their world view. Any theory generated, or conceptual clarity arrived at, depends on the researcher’s world view (Charmaz, 2014). Charmaz (2014) maintained that conducting and authoring research are not neutral acts and that “these constructions occur under pre-existing structural conditions, arise in emergent situations and are influenced by the researcher’s perspectives, privileges, interactions and geographical locations” (p. 240).

### Assumptions

For the purposes of this study, it is assumed that instructional coaching impacts teachers’ instructional practices and, thereby, improves student

outcomes. This study further assumed that positive interactions between coaches and teachers are possible.

### Delimitations

This study focused on the professional relationship between the instructional coach and the teacher in an elementary school setting. It looked only at coaching as it occurred in the context of the school setting, and not how it may be carried out in a new teacher program, such as induction.

### Definitions of Key Terms

**Instructional coach:** A professional and credentialed teacher, who serves as a peer to teachers and assists with professional learning.

**Professional learning:** Any learning that occurs outside of the classroom, but that supports the implementation of policies or practices.

**Symbolic Interactionism (SI):** A sociological framework, originating in the US in the pre-World War I era, that posits that an individual's interactions with others, objects and surroundings create their reality and that all meaning is constructed based on those interactions.

Constructivist Grounded Theory (CGT): A methodology that builds on the work of Glaser, Strauss and Corbin. Charmaz (2004) utilizes grounded theory principles, paired with symbolic interactionism, to explore a phenomenon or process through interview, observation, and written record.

Relational Trust: A sociological theory from the same sociological schools that created Symbolic Interactionism. Bryk and Schneider (2002) arrived at this as an explanation for the phenomena around social exchanges among community members.

## Summary

Instructional coaching is a service-oriented position occupied by middle leaders who are peers to teachers, possessing no evaluative authority over the teachers whom they serve. The purpose of this study was to closely examine the professional relationship between instructional coaches and teachers, alongside an exploration of the factors that drive the relationships forward toward being productive and those factors which may deter the success of the instructional coach's and teacher's work.

In the following chapter, an examination of the theoretical framework supporting this study is presented. Additionally, a review of the literature

relevant to instructional coaches is summarized and organized in such a manner as to support the necessity of this in-depth study of coaches and teachers.

## CHAPTER TWO

### LITERATURE REVIEW

#### Introduction

“The work is unpredictable, and while it can be planned, it is always emerging, improvised” (King & Bouchard, 2011, p. 659). In public education, the rise of high-stakes testing, and increased accountability culture have led to schools and districts seeking pathways to demonstrable improvement in student outcomes (Galey, 2016). One pathway that experienced growth is the creation of the non-administrative role of instructional coach (Teemant, Wink, & Tyra, 2011). A uniform job description is not to be had, as the job is heavily contextual and grounded in the culture of the school or district (Mangin & Dunsmore, 2015). Instructional coaches may work out of the central office, or at a school site; they may be assigned to coach based on a subject matter or may coach all subjects. By 2012, the number of school districts employing instructional coaches had risen to 20% (Domina, Lewis, Agarwal & Hanselman, 2015). The undefined nature of the role and the ubiquitous number of people serving in that role renders the subject of instructional coaches ripe for study. The purpose of this study was to understand the professional relationship between instructional coaches and teachers working in an elementary school setting.

Instructional coaching and the ambiguity involved in carrying out the role create a problematic situation for people serving in this capacity (Charmaz,

2014). Within symbolic interactionism, “meanings are tied to practice” (Charmaz, 2014, p. 271). Therefore, it is the interaction between the teacher and the coach that creates meaning. Within their practice together, problematic situations arise. “A problematic situation develops when people 1) find themselves torn between conflicting desires, demands or directions, 2) their current practices do not resolve the situation, and/or 3) the problem lies outside their existing normative framework (Shibutani, 1986, p.268, as cited in Charmaz, 2014, p. 271). The creation of a professional relationship with those being coached is complex and may be laden with potential conflict. Therefore, trust is a key factor in creating relationships that allow for policy implementation or encouraging collaborative practices (Walker et al., 2011). This space of problematic interaction is the space occupied by the instructional coach as the role has evolved from its earliest days. As has been consistent in the literature, there are no shared definitions of what instructional coaching is, *per se*. However, there is tacit agreement that “coaching is an intervention that can help people to achieve their goals or improve performance” (Gormley & van Nieuwerburgh, 2014, p. 91). A review of current literature detailed the manner in which coaches face the problem of being tasked with policy implementation while being a peer, the manner in which the work depended on context, how coaches contributed to teachers’ professional learning, how coaches expanded capacity for change among teachers by building collective efficacy, the collaborative nature and use of power coaches bring to help with this problem and the qualities that allow instructional coaches

to attempt this work. The ultimate goal of the instructional coaches' work is to impact teachers' abilities to change instructional practices. This study proposed to carefully examine how power shapes the work of instructional coaches and how teachers respond to that work; work that is heavily dependent on relationship, trust, and context.

### Theoretical Framework

In examining how coaches conduct themselves in relation to teachers, I utilized the methodology of constructivist grounded theory. Further, the problem itself can be viewed through theoretical frameworks that are complementary and well-housed within the methodology of grounded theory: symbolic interactionism and relational trust (Charmaz, 2014). Due to the contextual nature of instructional coaching and the multiple avenues to approaching coaching, it was important to examine this relationship by evaluating the themes that shape it. Coaches and teachers are peers, yet due to the need for districts to demonstrate accountability to state and federal agencies for improving teaching, coaches are frequently tasked with implementing policy (Swinnerton, 2007). Instructional coaches must inhabit the space between peer and policy implementation. How do coaches use their leadership role to empower teachers and support them in instructional strategy changes? How do instructional coaches use interpersonal and communication skills to negotiate meaning with teachers in order to respect

teacher autonomy? How do coaches and teachers navigate problematic situations in which teachers display resistance to coaching?

### Explanation of Symbolic Interactionism

Symbolic Interactionism began as a quantitative sociological theory that has evolved into a theoretical framework of a qualitative nature, in which people create and negotiate meaning based on their roles, their interaction with others and their surroundings (Stryker, 2008). Meaning is negotiated between people and objects and meaning derives from context (Kuhn, 1965). The key to this theory is its focus on relationships, which makes it ripe for application to instructional coaching where, daily, situations arise where relationships are formed, negotiated, and recreated. As detailed by Kutsyuruba and Walker (2015) schools are ecosystems with more in common with living systems than mechanical systems and relationships are the key to the sustainability of the community. Schools frequently function as microcosms of society, and so too, does symbolic interactionism play out in schools.

Symbolic interactionism grew out of the work and thinking of sociologists, largely in the Midwest region of the United States. Further, oral tradition was primarily responsible for the theory making its way from one class of sociologists to the next. John Dewey formally published around symbolic interactionism in *Experience and Nature* (1925); however, the language was forbidding, therefore the book went largely unread (Kuhn, 1965). The theory had been in existence since the late 1800s, but George H. Mead brought forward a more fully

developed theory and published his work in 1934's *Mind, Self and Society*. In this seminal work, Mead establishes the interactional processes for both psychology and sociology. Throughout this work, Mead and his students who published after him, view children and adults as "important determiners of their lives rather than our product of conditioning" (Stryker, 2000 p. 16).

Herbert Blumer, a student of Mead's, began to codify and define symbolic interactionism based on three principles. 1. 'Human beings act toward things on the basis of meanings which these things have for them.' 2. 'The meaning of a thing for a person grows out of the ways in which other persons act toward the person with regard to the thing.' 3. 'The use of meanings by the actor occurs through a process of interpretation' (1969, pp. 2-5). At the time, quantitative studies were considered the only avenue for "scientific research", and by codifying principles, sociologists were then able to create networks and clusters as they studied relationships from a quantifiable, analytical approach.

As time marched on, and more became understood and published on sociology, it became clear that symbolic interactionism best functions as a theoretical framework, rather than a theory (Stryker, 2008). The framework provided a shape and guide for the interactions of people with each other and their surroundings. In the 1960s, Kuhn tied this framework into "role theory" and examined the roles that people play in their world and how they begin to establish meaning. Thus, this framework began to take on the qualities of a phenomenological framework, examining the phenomena of individuals

interacting in groups (Kuhn, 1964). This work was amplified and enriched by the work of Piaget, Maslow and Carl Rogers.

It is from this refinement that the framework bridged to other theories, which helped develop an understanding of the sociological concepts more fully, as well as explained the interactions of humans with each other and their surroundings (Stryker, 2008). This theoretical framework continues to bridge with other sociological and psychological theories to provide a deeper understanding of the concept of self and the interaction between people.

In the era of modern technology and communication, symbolic interactionism has achieved new vitality by studying social networks and the interaction of humans within them. One may view the space which instructional coaches and teachers occupy as overdue for examining in this manner as the research refers to coaches' ability to establish social networks as important in their work (Galey, 2017).

One of the strengths of symbolic interactionism is the central ideas it develops. The recognition of the self, as an autonomous and social person, is of primary importance. According to Charon (1979), there are five ideas that are the central strengths of symbolic interactionism. Humans are social beings, and the symbolic interaction is what creates an individual. Using the interaction as a moment in time and examining how individuals comport themselves throughout, provides a framework for social behavior. Humans are thinking beings, not simply products of their conditions, just as Mead had stated a generation ago. As such,

humans focus on their thinking and work to understand causes behind events. Next, humans create their reality. Through thinking and perception, they create the context in which they live. Also, what is happening in the present informs how humans understand their situations. The past only becomes part of interactions when people begin to contemplate. Finally, people respond in relation to their environment; they are not passive within it, but actively work to shape it. These ideas lead to the dynamism that dwells within this framework and works to reliably understand how people develop relationships with each other and their surroundings.

In critiquing symbolic interactionism, one may comment that it is not a theory as it is not testable. This is why, perhaps, generations of sociologists have worked under the belief that symbolic interactionism is a theoretical framework, rather than a true theory. Responding to this critique by viewing symbolic interactionism as the frame in which to work allows one to bridge this framework to other theories and deepen the understanding of human interaction and creation of meaning. An additional critique is leveled by Davis (1982), in that he castigates sociologists for ignoring the “symbolic” in symbolic interactionism. The researcher claims that sociologists who utilize this framework are, in fact, quite literal. “Hence for these theorists, symbolic content, be it fashion, politics, religion, or even art, tends to be treated as a kind of epiphenomenon to be dropped from the analytic equation once its true, underlying, basic or latent significance has been divined or propounded” (p. 112). Therefore, if humans

create their reality based on their present perceptions of their environment, what role does symbolism play? Where is the need for creativity? These are interesting criticisms worth pondering. It is possible that the symbolic interactions negotiated between people and between their environs could be reduced, minimalized or even subject to biased interpretations based on who is examining the interactions (Benford, 1997). There is danger, Benford asserts, in the idealization of interaction, as the questions then tip towards, “Whose ideal interaction? Whose experience is of value?” Benford (1997) levels several other valuable and reasonable critiques. Among other suggestions is expanding frameworks beyond specific countries or regions, as well as expanding beyond small slices of time. Finally, Benford (1997) notes the caution necessary with “reifying” socially constructed ideas, fearing it could lead to neglecting human agency when examining a variety of interactions. It may be helpful to bear these criticisms in mind when reflecting on the interactions between instructional coaches and teachers, because one should not ignore perceived power and how middle leaders may carefully negotiate their interactions with others.

The theoretical framework of symbolic interactionism has many applications for the situational problem of instructional coaching, as the interactions and realities that are affirmed are a microcosm of our broader society. Relationships and shared meanings are created through interacting with one another and negotiating a shared understanding. In this manner, learning is arrived at together, rather than the “banking” method, which sees the coach as

expert and teacher as receptacle of knowledge. In 1996, Voight proposed that teachers use an interactional method when teaching students. This meant that meanings were not fixed, but open to interpretations through instructional practices. It is through the social interaction of coach and teacher, as well as teacher and teacher, that meaning is created and clarified. Teachers can use the physical, social and symbolic world to create meaning and come to an understanding of concepts presented to them. This keeps both teacher and coach interpretations in focus and allows the entire community to participate in clarifying meaning and adapting new knowledge. An additional benefit of the shared meaning and the creation of knowledge is the relationship that develops. A community is created, and trust is developed, in partnership with new knowledge.

Coaching from a space of symbolic interactionism additionally allows for a spirit of collaboration. Teachers build capacity for problem solving and developing new knowledge by coming together around a particular topic and bringing their collective and on-going experiences to the table. An additional set of strategies for guiding the collaboration, asks teachers to notice what their peers are doing, adapt their own thinking, or contrast it to their peers, followed by highlighting a peer's thoughts, supporting those ideas, and finally allowing space for new ideas to take hold (Monk, 2013).

Just as students and teachers access deeper learning as well as a sense of community, instructional coaches' interactions with teachers could be greatly

improved by using symbolic interactionism in their work with teachers. In the coach's role as peer to teacher yet tasked with implementing policy at a particular school site, one approach may be to enter a practice of creating shared meaning. In this way, the coach is not viewed as expert and the teacher is given the opportunity to create meaning for themselves and process it with the assistance of a coach. Additionally, this provides an opportunity for the growth of community and furtherance of an organizational vision.

Symbolic interactionism has a long and storied history, with deep roots tied to the study of sociology and the Midwest regions of the United States. Dating back to a time when scholars did not publish regularly, oral tradition is what moved symbolic interactionism through the sociological community. Remarkable scholars have had their impact on symbolic interactionism, its practices and uses. The likes of Dewey, Mead, Blumer, Piaget, Maslow, and Stryker have all had a hand in shaping this theoretical framework. The rich historical tradition involved in refining this framework is worthy of honoring and carrying forward. There are many situations where symbolic interactionism is not only a relevant framework but an enriching one: from social networks of the 21st century, to the fields of medical care, labor and management relations, classrooms and collaborative school leadership teams, there is much from symbolic interactionism to enrich our studies and our communities. The use of symbolic interactionism as a theoretical framework, tied to relational trust, as a

guide for this study allowed a pathway for understanding the contextual roots of this coach and teacher relationship.

### Explanation of Relational Trust

Complementary to the theoretical framework of symbolic interactionism is the theory of relational trust. The inclusion of relational trust is necessary due to the instructional coach's reliance on trust in order to create collegial interactions that support the work of the learning community. The learning community must have trust between members in order to do the work that changes practices. Within school communities, coaches and teachers occupy space in the middle ring of the school community (Cranston, 2011). This is the portion of the school community where interaction is not between teachers and children or adults and the larger community, but rather, between professionals. An outgrowth of social capital theory (Bryk & Schneider, 2002) this relational trust among adults is multifaceted and essential to school improvement. According to Plagens (2011), Dewey viewed social capital as a positive force that enabled meaningful connections within interactions between people. In order for teachers to accomplish goals, it is necessary to work closely, rather than in isolation previously found in schools. In a unified community, not a monolith, Plagens (2011) argues the connections of social capital strengthen the ability to converge around resources that will enhance student performance. The qualities of highly connected communities predispose them to better solve problems, they are

cooperative, invested and interested in the well-being of each other and their community (Plagens, 2011).

Relational trust comes out of the same sociological schools and geographic regions as symbolic interactionism. As societal changes have undermined communities' financial stability, there has been an increasing gap of social distance between school personnel and the people they serve (Bryk & Schneider, 2002). The relational interactions break down for school personnel due to increased systemic pressure for reform and accountability. In Chicago, according to Bryk and Schneider (2002), several diverse initiatives for school reform were created out of their diverse communities. This allowed the sociologists (2002) to study why some reform efforts created positive change and others did not. Bryk and Schneider (2002) sought to name a theory that explained the phenomena around social exchanges among community members and they arrived at relational trust. They maintained that for coherent schoolwide practices to emerge, this trust must be in place (2002). Further, there are power structures embedded in schools and the power differential between an instructional coach, for example, and a teacher may cause the teacher to feel vulnerable. If a coach, as someone leading from the middle of the organizational structure, recognized this and made efforts to relieve those feelings, a crucial bond between teacher and coach may develop. This is relational trust (Bryk & Schneider, 2002).

Just as symbolic interactionism is an organizational theory with social components, so too, is relational trust. Symbolic interactionism is the doings between two people or groups and how each group perceives these actions (Kuhn, 1964). Relational trust guides the interactions of the parties (Bryk & Schneider, 2002). When teachers see that coaches demonstrate respect, competence, a consideration for others and integrity by being reliable, then teachers can develop the relational trust necessary to interact and create meaningful instructional change. Edwards-Groves and colleagues (2016) establish relational trust as central to sustainable change in teacher practices and that trust is arrived at by entering into public dialog and having purposeful conversations (Edwards-Groves, Grootenboer, & Ronnerman, 2016). Additionally, according to Bryk and Schneider (2002), when a principal utilizes what is currently described as shared leadership, or a willingness to engage teachers to transparently arrive at decisions, this provides teachers with authentic opportunities to participate in the learning community and to realize they have a voice and some control over their teaching lives, making teachers more willing to engage with instructional coaches around change.

Critiques of relational trust, as delineated by Bryk and Schneider (2002), are presented as the barriers that interfere with trust between teachers, and teachers and administrators. For example, teachers not working in professional learning communities (DuFour & Eaker, 1998) generally work in isolation, rather than in groups where they may engage with one another in order to share

practices and problems in a trusting environment. Additionally, principals may have little control over which teachers become part of the staff, and who moves on from the group. Bryk and Schneider (2002) also suggest there are scant opportunities or pathways for teachers to work out personal differences and often the interactions between teachers can be reduced to discussions of little consequence. An additional caution in utilizing the related theories of symbolic interactionism and relational trust is to remember that meanings from interactions between people and groups are negotiated and power differentials may influence those interactions (Lee, 2014). Instructional coaches who work within the problematic situation of being a middle leader should be mindful of the role of perceived power in shaping interactions between people (Edwards-Groves, et al., 2016). Middle leaders (e.g., instructional coaches) bring together symbolic interactionism and relational trust in their work. When it comes to professional learning, instructional coaches understand the actions of social life (doings), the common terms (sayings) and couple those with relating to those whom they coach. (Edwards-Groves, et al., 2016). Middle leaders assist in the contextual developments that are unique to school communities: caring, emotional work of educators, civility and interdependence woven through the work. Coupling these frameworks to guide this study will permit a full examination of the interactions and lived experiences at work in the relationship of instructional coach and teacher.

## Evolution of Instructional Coaches as Middle Leaders

Prior to the accountability and reform movement driven by the requirements of No Child Left Behind (2001), Joyce and Showers (1980) looked at methods for sustaining professional development. Joyce and Showers built on the work of Knowles (2005), who focused on the needs of adult learners to receive training that is relevant, engaging, and involving real-world situations and problems. After a two-year meta-analysis of 200 studies analyzing effective delivery methods for teacher professional development, Joyce and Showers (1980) determined that the presence of a coach, or peer, contributed significantly to teachers making use of new learning. Additionally, Joyce's and Showers' research demonstrated that instructional coaches serve to guide the application and implementation of new learning by teachers, which in turn, increases the chance that new strategies will be used and sustained (1981). Joyce and Showers (1980) examined the efficacy of professional development and contributing factors to teachers implementing changes in practice. Additionally, Joyce's and Showers' research bore out the need for coaching as a means to assist teachers through the discomfort of adapting new practices and reliably using them. Similar to coaching in the field of sports, instructional coaches function by guiding teachers through a new process, offer technical feedback and analyze the application of the process (1981). It is the early works of Joyce and Showers that formed the background for the development of coaching and the inhabited space within schools and districts.

The context of the work coaches are called to do thrusts them into a paradox. To whose priorities should they coach (Woulfin, 2018)? In Woulfin's (2018) qualitative case study, which utilized institutional theory to analyze the relationship between district policy and instructional coaching, the researcher found that districts hold competing reforms and instructional coaches translated those competing demands for teachers; in order to get reform in an area, coaches capitalized on teachers' currently held beliefs as an anchor point. Additionally, administrators needed to be selective in communicating reform priorities and clear in establishing who was responsible for enacting those reforms. When an administrator remained mindful that the coach functioned as a peer, the coach was more likely able to build collective efficacy behind the desired reform. Finally, when coaches had a clear pathway for coaching in support of a district policy, coaches implemented the coaching relationship in a variety of settings that were contextual and built on trust. A coach might have worked individually with a willing teacher, or in grade-level groups, in order to build toward the desired district reform. Instructional coaches navigate priority and look for pathways to support their peers. Coaches allow adult learning theory, or andragogy, to inform the practice of making use of relevant problems to support teachers in the classroom through modeling, observation, and feedback (Knight, 2007). According to Coburn and Woulfin (2012), the longitudinal case study examined the role of reading coaches in negotiating Reading First policies and teacher practices and found that coaches use

educative capital to assist teachers in moving more deeply into practice in a manner that allows adults to modify their world view and adapt new learning. Further, a qualitative blocked randomized trial in public and charter schools established that the presence of a coach improved teachers' practices, and the proximity of an instructional coach gives opportunity to deliver coaching at a highly dense rate (Blazar & Kraft, 2015). Teachers do not have to wait for assistance or feedback and that increases the likelihood of utilizing a coach. However, as Galey (2016) explained in a policy paper that reflected on the changing role of coaching in the context of United States classrooms, teachers are naturally distrustful of instructional coaches because their position was borne of accountability. According to Galey (2016), demands for accountability undermine trust and professionalism, while simultaneously schools and districts embrace instructional coaching as an "important policy lever for improving teacher quality and implementing instructional reform" (Galey, 2016, p. 54). Galey (2016) posited that the instructional coach served three roles—cognitive, organizational and reform. In occupying those roles, a coach can develop instructional capacity and address issues of scale (organizational), influence classroom practices (cognitive) and broker policy implementation (reform). These roles are only possible when a coach professionalized the relationships, through contextualizing the interaction and developing relational trust. Instructional coaches use symbolic interactionism and relational trust to weave relationships

and reestablish professionalism, in a manner in which the coach and teacher are both seen as competent.

### Policy Making Creates Instructional Coaching

American education policy has shifted since the publication of *A Nation at Risk* (1983); Mehta (2013) highlights the increased role of the federal government in crafting and shaping education policy and the influence of political factors into those policies. The giving away of local control to federal influences represented a substantial paradigm shift in policy. Mehta contended that issues of schooling became framed as workplace issues and business interests set the boundaries for policy debate. “Paradigms create politics and can explain major shifts not only in what key policy makers think, but also in the social and political landscape that surrounds an issue” (p. 316). Mehta went on to write that in examining the variety of influences on policy, one can begin to understand how policy came to be shaped as such and trace the path of the shifting paradigm in our institutions.

Galey (2015) authored a policy paper that examined the current trends in education policy and the diverse route taken in making policy. The researcher found recent significant changes in power and authority as it was distributed across policy-making arenas. When the federal and state governments began imposing accountability measures tied to funding, Galey (2015) found that money and power shifted, dramatically, to the federal and state governments. Further, with the implementation of Common Core State Standards, political factors grew

in power and influence as the local power waned and unions sought to participate as reform partners. Research, according to Galey (2015), seemed to take a back seat to political influence and diminish in importance when considering policy choices: "...recent studies on research utilization raises concerns about the perfunctory and passive consumption of research in deliberative policy arenas, while also highlighting the important role of sensemaking" (p. 27). In other words, scholarly research takes a back seat to political influence in education reform, leaving professionals unsure of whom to trust, and made to work in a politicized environment. Instructional coaches, as professional sense-makers (Domina & Lewis, 2015), may be able to support teachers through this political era and restore a sense of professionalism for teachers.

In a three-essay format, Galey (2017) set out to explore elements that impacted instructional coaching and policy implementation. Galey (2017) examined "how instructional coaches manage systemic conflict stemming from competing ideologies for educational improvement" (p. 3). The researcher (2017) argued that coaching is a local political response to state and federal accountability policies. Galey (2017) went on to apply policy paradigm theory to the work of instructional coaching and analyzed how coaches mediate the space between teacher accountability and professionalism. Galey (2017) established that "educational accountability reforms in the U.S. are ideologically driven as opposed to being based on research" (p. 4). In the second essay, Galey (2017)

analyzed the work of a coaching team in a high-performing district and found that coaches experienced the systemic conflict endemic in the problematic situation: coaches work to aid teacher professionalism, but accountability measures limit teacher autonomy and professionalism.

Finally, in the third essay, Galey (2017) utilized a comparative case study to assess the role of two coaching teams for building capacity in the face of policy implementation. Galey's (2017) research finding demonstrated the importance of coaches who, utilizing data analysis and facilitating collaboration, helped implement district policy reforms. Additionally, Galey (2017) found that coaches are an emergent form of district leadership who leverage social capital in order to improve system-wide reform. Galey (2017) found that political coalitions drive even local educational reform, which leads to inequity within the system as "elite-driven policymaking" (p. 5) dominates policy proposals from research producers. Coaches occupy this space and through interaction, both symbolic and real, based on trust, drive professionalism in the implementation of policy and harness the talents of their teaching peers.

#### Implementation of Reading First

Continuing the role of instructional coach as a supporter of professional learning, and an extension of accountability policies, numerous studies have examined how instructional coaches can contribute to meaningful and sustainable professional learning. As education reform became driven by federal mandates that required accountability, numerous districts began to add

instructional coaches in the area of literacy. In schools with the federal program, Reading First, the coach was to put the focus on the improving the quality of classroom reading instruction (Bean, Draper, Hall, Vandermolen, & Zigmond, 2010). Again, as a coach's role is heavily situational, the impact of coaching varied from school to school. In a seminal examination of the role reading coaches play in the relationship between reading policy and teachers' classroom practices, Coburn's and Woulfin's (2012) qualitative longitudinal study of a Reading First school in Massachusetts supports the importance of coaching support to obtain meaningful change to teacher practices. The study found that coaches play both an educative and political role when it comes to creating change in practice. Educatively, coaches create equal relationships where teachers can ask questions, take risks, and clarify understanding around changes to practice. This makes it more likely that those changes will be deep and meaningful, as opposed to rejected outright or simply symbolic. King and Bouchard (2011) examined effective ways to build organizational capacity around common learning goals and the impact of leadership coaching. In a summary and analysis of the available literature, the authors (2011) determined that school improvement policy is frequently driven by demands for compliance and predictable policies. Having implemented a university partnership that provided both leadership and instructional coaching, the researchers (2011) found that capacity building is an unpredictable process and that buy-in to changes in practices come when coaches work from an asset-based lens, the strengths

presented and build from that point. Also, policies and coaching must be context dependent and provide relevant assistance (King & Bouchard, 2011). Finally, coaches need to focus on adult behaviors and needs, to successfully build capacity in individuals and groups.

In an effort to understand coach-based professional development, Scott, Cortina, and Carlisle (2012) studied who took up the role of *Reading First* coaching, what the content was of interactions between Reading First coaches and teachers and the nature of the relationship between the two. In a study of 105 coaches and over 1000 teachers, the researchers, through survey, questionnaire, and coaching logs, examined the interactions between coaches and teachers. Scott and colleagues (2012) found that the teachers appreciated the embedded nature of professional development. Scott, et al. (2012) also found that when principals bought into the process, coaching had a greater impact. Additionally, coaches who were reliable were appreciated by teachers. It mattered what the coaches did, rather than who they were. Furthermore, Scott and colleagues (2012) established that modeling and co-teaching, two activities frequently engaged in by coaches, was significant to the teachers. These portions of the literature reflect the symbolic interaction between coaches and concepts such as capacity building, the role of trust in being viewed by teachers as reliable, and the value of real interaction based in school contexts, between coach and teacher.

## Coaches as Middle Leaders Supporting Professional Development

Lotter, Yow and Peters (2012) created a case study around the direct participation of math coaches in professional development alongside teachers. This supports Joyce's and Showers' (1983) theory that having coaches embedded in training with teachers will better position coaches to support teachers in utilizing strategies when back at the school site. For this case study, 39 teachers and 13 coaches participated in professional development during a two-week summer training, as well as four follow-up Saturday trainings on centering math instruction around a cycle of inquiry (Lotter et al., 2012). All participants were administered a pre- and post-questionnaire, as well as keeping a reflection log that was completed each day after participating in "practice teaching" lessons at the summer institute. The findings in this study revealed that teachers relied on coaches for support in implementation of the inquiry model, as coaches had attended the training and were seen as a knowledgeable resource. (Lotter et al., 2012).

Further, Gallucci, DeVoogt Van Lare, Yoon and Boatwright (2010) authored a study to examine how instructional coaches can best impact student achievement through enhancing professional development. This qualitative study took place over four years and examined the partnerships of third-party providers and three school districts, two urban and one rural/suburban. From the examination of the processes of coaches learning how to do their job, the authors (2010) narrowed their study to a focused case study of one coach and the

organizational supports that coalesced behind his work. The data for this case study consists of thirteen interviews and observations of the coach at work over 41 times, as well as the coach's field notes. One of the findings was that coaches who operate in reform contexts are learning new content and pedagogy at the same time as those they are coaching (Galluci et al., 2010). In order to support teachers, they must be able to pick up content and methods and internalize them quickly and efficiently.

Additionally, Galluci and fellow researchers (2010) found that coaches must be able to make sense of their ideas about teaching, before they can explore ideas with other teachers. Being a reflective practitioner facilitates this. Finally, the researchers (2010) found that coaches should be supported by professional learning for instructional leaders. While this additional support of coaches is costly, without professional learning, coaching may remain vague and rudderless. This study (2010) is helpful because it begins to define the previously ambiguous role of instructional coaches. Woulfin (2018) takes up the institutional lens in a study of policy implementation. Through an examination of a single school district, involving ten coaches from a variety of campuses, Woulfin (2018) creates a rich case study derived from interview, extensive observation, and document data. One aspect of coaching that was studied, intently, was how coaches chose which district priorities to implement. In this study Woulfin (2018) found that coaches centered their work on non-administrative roles, in keeping with their role as peer, and prioritized policy messages as filtered by their site

administrator. Further, coaches frequently made use of data to draw teachers into their coaching work and to guide their coaching cycles with teachers (Woulfin, 2018).

In an educational brief, Domina, Lewis, Agarwal and Hanselman (2015) looked at educational statistics to assess the increase in the number of U.S. districts hiring educational specialists. The researchers (2015) describe educational specialists as district-level employees who develop curricula, provide professional development and instructional coaching to teachers. Domina and colleagues (2015), after analyzing educational statistics, interviewed specialist personnel. The authors (2015) found that specialists are charged with sense-making of the common core standards and translating standards into practice. The demographics of specialists is overwhelmingly white, and the researchers found that specialists will play an outsized role in the development and implementation of policy and that specialists' work must necessarily be scrutinized to make sure there is no disenfranchisement of high-need students, and that educational equity is a priority (Domina, et al., 2015). When serving as middle-level leaders, without supervisory capability, instructional coaches interacted with peers through participating alongside teachers in professional learning and in internalizing new ideas prior to providing support in that area. Additionally, coaches created relational trust through filtering that which is shared with teachers and allowing teachers to scrutinize their own thinking and strategies.

## Coaching Models and Lenses

Instructional coaching is an effective professional learning approach for eliciting changes to teacher practices and skill transfer (Teemant, Wink & Tyra, 2011). Given that coaching is highly contextual and cultural, responding to the needs and priorities of the school site, as well as what might be the contradictory, needs of the district, coaches may center their practices in differing ways. This ties into symbolic interactionism as the meaning of coaching comes directly from the interaction between coaches and those they coach. Using relational trust to create the space for vulnerability in the work, coaches may work individually or with faculty as a group. Hattie's (2012) meta-analysis of impactful practices for student learning provided a pathway for coaches to center their assistance on changing instructional practices. Practices that yield an effect size of 0.40 represent those practices which promote a year's growth in student learning. Several of the most impactful practices relate to teachers' efficacy (1.44), the credibility of the teacher (0.90) and formative evaluation of the teacher (0.90). Each of these provide the coach with an anchor point for working with teachers, given there is not one approach that will work all the time and teacher's needs are heavily contextual (Hattie, 2012).

## Individual Coaching

As coaches grapple with multiple and conflicting demands on their work and navigate the space between policy implementation and peer relationship, a

path forward may be to harness and build collaborative culture within which to work. An instructional coach may create interaction through supporting a teacher in developing their practices in any area in which the teacher chooses, for example, management of the classroom, instructional strategies, or personal communication. Coaches may consult with a teacher, co-teach or model for the teacher, release the teacher to observe in another room or observe the teacher, looking for something specifically delineated by the teacher. Prior to any of this, and immediately after, there are conferences in which goals are set and then debriefed. This is commonly called a coaching cycle (Marzano et al., 2012).

One of the difficulties in attaching quantitative data to a coach's work with teachers is due to the heavily contextual nature of the work they do together. Reddy, Glover, Kurz and Elliott (2019) studied the reliability of an assessment tool for providing feedback to instructional coaches regarding their practices. The authors used a rating scales instrument and interaction scales and provided it to 225 teachers grades K-12, as well as 25 coaches, with the intent of determining the reliability of the assessment to provide needed feedback for coaches, who are often evaluated according to teaching standards and not on the job they are assigned to do. The finding (Reddy, et al., 2019) was that the internal structure of the instrument was statistically reliable. Additionally, there were satisfactory correlations between the items, totals, and exploratory factors. Further, both scales were free from bias and, as long as anonymity was available to the participants, both were usable. This research (2019) matters as more schools

add the services of instructional coaching and attempt to discern the impact of the coach's practices.

In this analysis of the coaching method "Classroom Strategies Coaching", Reddy and colleagues (2017) examined one coaching model which aims to empirically validate practices supported by instructional practice and behavior management guides. This quantitative random control analysis of coach and teacher interactions had two conditions. The first group received immediate feedback from a coach and the second group waited five weeks before the coaching model was implemented. With both groups, coaching was conducted on a cycle of pre-conference, observation, and post-conference, with both coach and teacher filling out observation checklists of classroom practices and behavioral management practices. Researchers (2017) found that the group that received coaching immediately significantly improved their teaching in the use of the targeted strategies. In addition, once coaching commenced for the delay group, they too, were able to improve their use of the strategies. Further, the use of quantitative scales on teacher practices may give coaches a pathway for coaching to the implementation of desired instructional strategies.

Across the literature it was apparent that the way coaches approach their work is as varied as the people who become coaches and the contexts within which they work. However, while there will not be one pathway that is the correct one in this problematic situation, there are qualities of coaching that aid in assisting teachers to deliver improved instruction collaboratively and sustainably.

A coach's own learning is done in the context of work and deeply tied to the time they are available to assist teachers and are not otherwise being used elsewhere (Gallucci, DeVogt Van Lare, Yoon & Boatwright, 2010). Campbell and Malkus (2011) studied the impact of instructional coaches for mathematics on elementary test scores. This control-treatment design with triples of like schools who were randomly assigned to three years of coaching, three years of control or two years control and one-year coaching. Students who were enrolled in schools with math coach had significantly higher scores on the high stakes' math test, however, those scores did not come in the first year of coaching. While the study (2011) did not address how coaching was implemented or how coaching varied among the schools, it does demonstrate that coaching takes time due to its need to build relationships and its contextual nature.

Jim Knight is one of the early and commercially successful voices in the study and implementation of instructional coaching. A study from Knight and van Nieuwerburgh (2012) examines the work of instructional coaches and the practices used in the field. The purpose of this study was to examine the process used by instructional coaches in the United Kingdom to establish relationships with teachers they coach. It was the authors' contention that trust is the cornerstone to building an authentic relationship between the coach and teacher. In order to create trust, the coach must have a breadth of interpersonal skills available to them. Often, instructional coaching involves developing a one-on-one relationship with a teacher, setting goals with the teacher, gathering data to help

support, then explain, model, and provide feedback. On occasion, this process may be perceived as slipping into evaluation of the teacher. In order to preserve the coaching relationship, Knight and van Nieuwerburgh (2012) maintain that coaches need to establish firm boundaries around Knight's "Seven Principles" of coaching: through entering into a coaching relationship as equals, giving the teacher choice and voice in choosing goals and directions, speaking in dialogue with the teacher about issues of praxis and embracing the reciprocity of the model will all preserve the relationship between coach and teacher. The principle finding of this paper is that instructional coaching "respects the professionalism of teachers but is also designed to ensure that they are able to learn best practices" (p.103) of the craft of teaching. Further study is warranted in understanding how coaches maintain these boundaries over time, in the face of pressures to act as an evaluator, implement policy, and turn away from craft.

In building a collaborative culture, instructional coaches break down the isolation that teachers face (Campbell & Malkus, 2011) by utilizing a variety of lenses when working with a teacher. Coaching, in education and other fields, has several researched pathways, or lenses, for shaping the performance of the coaches. For example, Knight (2017) discussed the facilitative, dialogical, and directive lenses which coaches will choose to rely on depending on the context of the coaching session and the teacher's needs. By extending educative capital and harnessing political capital, applying pressure and persuasion, coaches utilize the collective efficacy teachers hold and build capacity among teachers to

bring coherence to the curriculum, thereby extending the reach of professional learning and shifting the culture of collaboration (Coburn & Woulfin, 2012; Woulfin & Rigby, 2017). Additionally, coaches use political capital and the power derived from it to pressure teachers to make changes necessary to implement the policy, as well as using their power to persuade teachers to change. Further, coaches use their power to buffer teachers from unnecessary input or change, and guide teachers in producing symbolic change when their current practices are close to the demands of the implementation. This portion of the literature captured, once again, the variety of interactions between coaches and teachers, and demonstrated that coaches engage with and interpret teachers' needs in a variety of ways. The persistent difficulty in quantifying a coach's work demonstrates the power in allowing coaches to create trusting relationships with teachers, dependent on the context of the school site and use the coach's leadership to lead a cohesive vision of policy implementation.

### Collaborative Coaching

Instructional coaches meet with individual teachers, and with groups of teachers. Coaches can create and interpret relationships by assisting faculty groups, grade-level teams or departments. A coach may bring and interpret data, may elicit the sharing of effective practices, or may communicate the policy of the district (Marzano, et al., 2012). Marsh and colleagues (2010) set out to examine the extent to which coaches focused on data when coaching reading. Using a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods, Marsh, et. al. (2010)

surveyed and studied data usage from instructional coaches in 113 Florida schools. Some 62% of those coaches reported using data heavily in driving their interactions with teachers. Those teachers who had data support from a coach were more likely to attribute a change in teaching practices to the coaching relationship. Additionally, researchers (2010) suggest that administration needs to protect coaches' time from other constraints, thus leaving coaches available to create relationships with teachers and bridge the divide around data-driven decision making.

Milad (2017) found that coaches who used a stance that incorporated empathy and tolerance, were able to change colleagues' behaviors that resulted in teachers who are better able to self-monitor their practices. When teachers are aware of both the what and why of their teaching, they can make shifts in their teaching and integrate these shifts in knowledgeable ways. In Chien's (2013) qualitative case study examination of coaching teachers of second language learners, Chien found teachers readily accepted coaching from an instructional coach who delivered the workshop because they were viewed as knowledgeable in the area, and that following that professional development with one-on-one coaching caused implementation of workshop teachings to increase. Further, the work of Gormley and van Nieuwerburgh (2014) places coaching within the culture of the institution and minimizes the focus on the individual. This is important because the individual is less likely to feel singled out and more likely to accept coaching as part of the daily business of the organization. It is

important that leadership embrace the integration of coaching for it to be seen as of value and to be utilized. Indeed, the literature suggests that coaching can change people and organizations. When coaching is appreciated within an organization, it is because the coach has embraced a collaborative approach in their work and displays characteristics conducive to effectiveness: trust, timeliness, genuine care for people and a positive outlook. These characteristics are created and supported by an atmosphere that is safe for learning. People remain unthreatened by engaging in learning, discovery and celebrating growth. Above all, coaching should be organization wide and embraced across all levels.

The commentary on a variety of instructional coaching models looks at commonality among successful models. Connor (2017) begins the commentary with the assumption that is incumbent with coaching: teachers are partly responsible for their students' outcomes and improving instruction will improve student performances. Additionally, Connor (2017) finds the common elements present in effective coaching models to be partnering with teachers, rather than directing them, letting data inform the decision making and that coaching is time and person intensive. The coach as a driver of collaboration demonstrated how coaches symbolically interact as a cultural agent with the school community to build acceptance of coaching as a method for working together and reinforced the need for coach, teacher, and supervisor to develop trust in their collaborative relationships.

#### Instructional Coach as Content Specific

Once again, the role of instructional coach takes on numerous incarnations, and there has yet to be shown one correct way to design the role. From its earlier days, instructional coaching was focused on reading in elementary schools, and has now expanded to secondary schools and specific content areas to keep up with accountability pressures around influencing teacher practices in order to positively impact student performance (Brown, et. al., 2017). Brown, Harrell, and Browning (2017) created a qualitative study utilizing a constant comparative method in order to understand what factors contribute to differing implementations in coaching, specific to mathematics. While the coaching is subject specific, the research showed that teachers were most willing to engage with coaches when teachers were treated as content experts and coaches were seen as instructional experts, there to provide support and strategies for improving the delivery of the content. This study illuminated many of the same issues that those assigned to coach non-content specific areas face. Secondary teachers distrusted the coaches because of the role accountability played in the creation coaching, as well as fearing that coaching is another instructional fad. Additionally, content specific coaches face demands on their time that keep them from coaching and are, frequently, asked to interpret dueling messages from site administrators and district administrators. Gross (2010) supports the finding that at the secondary level, coaching is met with distrust and viewed, at least initially, as a fad. Additionally, in a similar vein to general instructional coaching, Gross (2010) authored a qualitative constructivist

case study investigating the perspectives of teachers who opted into content area coaching at the secondary level and found that content area coaching relies on teacher efficacy, the context in which the relationships develop, a spirit of collaboration between coach and teacher and mutual voice between the two parties. According to the research, whether instructional coaching is content based or generalized, the concerns of coaches and teachers will be similar.

#### Instructional Coach as Central Office Agent/Implementer of Policy

The purpose of Neumerski's paper (2013) was to examine what scholars know and do not know about instructional leadership. This study (2013) makes an effort to integrate traditional scholarship regarding administrative leadership with newer scholarship on instructional coaching leadership. It posits, "How does leadership improve instruction?", given that instructional coaches are instructional leaders without the benefits of administrative authority. The author (2013) asserted that for instructional coaches to be influential, schools should rethink the interactions between leadership and "followers" as collegial and reciprocal, thereby removing the need for coaches to have administrative authority in order to do their work. Additionally, this promoted coaches building relational trust in order to establish healthy relationships. Again, these interactions were shown to be heavily contextual and inseparable from that context.

Franken, Penny and Bransen (2015) examined middle leadership in higher education, but acknowledge their work applies to middle leaders at any

level of education. This 2015 study gets at the heart of the negotiated space for instructional coaches by pointing out that in accepting the role of coach, the former teacher is set apart from their colleagues while expected to work alongside them with many of the same responsibilities. The authors (2015) go on to highlight two of the most salient issues facing coaches as they move away from organizational thinking and towards relational thinking. Middle leaders, or coaches, are expected to “be able to persuade, influence or direct the beliefs and behaviors of their colleagues, but invariably have little to offer by way of tangible benefits” (Franken, et al., 2015, p. 130). In other words, coaches are peers and cannot offer any incentives for those who engage with them. The second salient point illuminated by Bransen, et al (2015) is that middle leaders have as the essence of their leadership “the building of collegiality, cooperation and teamwork...” (Franken, et al., 2015, p. 130). Thus, the researchers (2015) firmly situate coaching as relying on relational trust in order to navigate the lack of credentialed authority missing from the role. It may well be that teachers will interact with an instructional coach precisely because their work is confidential and they have, generally speaking, no evaluative oversight over those for whom they coach.

### Teacher Resistance to Coaching

When a coach is not a university researcher, they are fellow teachers and, therefore, peers. An essential practice in which coaches engage is relationship building with those for whom one provides coaching (Kang, 2016 & Swinnerton,

2007). Due to the optional nature of utilizing a coach's support, teachers will not engage if they are unable to be vulnerable when working with a coach. Coaches are educational middle leaders who must earn the buy-in of colleagues by providing confidential, non-evaluative expertise. High quality and coherent programs are difficult to develop, scale and sustain (Kraft, et al., 2018). Jacobs, Boardman, Potvin, and Wang (2018) examined teachers' resistance to coaching. This qualitative descriptive study of 71 middle school teachers and 14 instructional coaches attempted to understand why some teachers were more receptive to coaching than others, and to understand the reasons for resisting coaching support in a content-area, reading-based professional development program. While many teachers were, in fact, receptive to coaching and changed teaching strategies, there were roughly 20% of teachers who did not make time for coaching, did not value the instructional model being coached and did not implement the coach's feedback. Resistant teachers were, generally, teachers with more than a decade of experience, and science or social studies teachers who did not feel they needed to teach reading strategies. Often, teachers will engage in principled resistance based on their experiences or a deep regard for their subject expertise. Because of this, it would be beneficial to separate those who may be rejecting the policy, rather than the coaching. This is in keeping with the problematic situation in symbolic interactionism, as teachers' meanings are tied to their practices, and they may legitimately hold that their current practice is the correct one for them.

Teacher participation in the coaching relationship is shaped by the social norms of the campus or district community, as every individual draws meaning from the interactions with others in the school or district. Atteberry and Bryk (2011) studied the Literacy Collaborative program (LC) and the role coaches played in supporting K-2 reading teachers. In this program, coaches are trained for a year prior to offering professional development and individual coaching. The researchers use of activity-theory brings attention to each person involved in coaching and how context influences key aspects of the interaction. Atteberry and Bryk (2011) studied seventeen (17) schools in eight (8) U.S. states over four years and examined the roles of formal leadership, the social structure of the school, the role of relational trust and the organizational norms. Surveys were administered and Rasch rating scales applied in order to determine the characteristics of coach and teacher and their interaction with the social construction of the school. As in other studies, the support of coaching by the school leadership impacted how coaching was perceived; additionally, schools with a strong professional community of teachers made use of coaching when it was available. "In the case of the professional community, however, instruction is understood as a complex practice that is contingent on local and moment to moment conditions" (Atteberry & Bryk, 2011, p. 361). Also, professionals who relied on each other for feedback and support, experienced that as relational trust that supports the work of the school. Additionally, schools in this study that were too loosely coupled did not utilize coaching as frequently because of a

tendency to promote egalitarianism and disdained a peer being viewed as expert. Schools without clear norms for the various roles of school personnel, perhaps, approached professional learning and development of new strategies as voluntary. Finally, teacher turnover impacts coaching, in that teachers may not have made themselves available to coaching, believed they had no support system and left the school or the profession.

Furthering the notion of the social norms of a school contributing to coaching resistance, in a 2010 qualitative randomized trial study, Matsumura, Garnier and Resnick researched the manner in which a school's social resources impacted the initial implementation of intensive and ongoing professional development for 11 coaches, called Content Focused Coaching (CFC). Coaches were to then support 63 fourth- and fifth-grade teachers in reading instruction strategies. The teachers were spread over 15 urban area schools. Thirty-three teachers in another 14 schools continued with literacy coaching from nine Reading First coaches, not related to CFC. Through Likert-scale surveys and semi-constructed interviews, the researchers (2010) found that teachers who participated in coaching from those coaches trained in CFC received significantly more coaching than those in the control group. Further, the study revealed that initial implementations depended on the support of the principal, and that one-on-one coaching was influenced by the professional needs and experiences of teachers. Also of interest, schools with strong collaborative cultures were more resistant to instructional reform, as they may experience attempts at reform to be

an attack on their autonomy and professionalism. However, schools with little collaboration often turned to individual coaching to ease feelings of isolation.

Additionally, teachers who did not believe the instructional coach created a safe space for reflection, exploration, trial and error, are reluctant to attend to coaching. Both Ross and Bruce (2007) and Russell (2017) studied teacher self-assessment in changing practices and the role of the coach within those interactions. Ross and Bruce (2007) explored the role of teacher self-assessment in aiding professional growth in a case study examination of ten middle school math teachers over three months. One teacher, whose growth was deemed representative, was observed and interviewed on five occasions. After collecting notes, interviews and the reflections, these documents were coded, after which themes became apparent. Those themes led to the researchers to conclude that the web-based self-assessment tool allowed the teacher to input their reflections, the teacher believed their professional goals were attainable and that peer feedback provided a common language and shared experiences that supported the change honestly and easily in practices for the teacher. Russell (2017) examined the coaching of teachers to develop capacity and influence instructional practices to the benefit of English language learners. This qualitative case study focused on the role of the English language facilitator and how the facilitator created opportunities for professional learnings in an inclusive high school. Specifically, the researcher (2017) studied how the EL facilitator served as a resource to support the development of strategies for meeting the needs of

EL students and how the structure of the school influenced the work of the EL facilitator. Through interviews, observations, and document collection, it was revealed that teachers appreciated the embedded and ongoing work with a knowledgeable EL facilitator. Further, the facilitator, in the role of coach, was a resource, an advocate and bridging agent for teachers.

One standard of coaching work that instructional coaches adopted from other areas of business/industry coaching is adapted from ethical standards of the International Coaching Federation. In this reflection Cox, (2015) the researcher, examined the goals of the International Coaching Federation of unlocking a client's potential through collaboration. Cox applied the theoretical framework of constructivist ideas that support adult learning: andragogy and transformative learning. In utilizing these strategies, coaches presented information to teachers that was relevant, coaches found an opening to help make sense of something for teachers and kept interactions centered on the needs of teachers. Through all of this, coaches supported teachers through the uncomfortable reality of change. Instructional coaching was developed as a means to obtain accountability in changing teacher practices. As is demonstrated, coaches have no overt authority to implement policy on behalf of the school or district. Being viewed as accountability and policy implementation officer meant that coaches necessarily began their work with a dearth of trust between coach and teacher. Through negotiation of the school culture,

development of trust and a partnership with the teacher, it may be possible for coaches to better navigate the simultaneous role of peer and policy implementor.

### Gaps in the Literature

Much of this initial research led to some gaps in the understanding of how coaches and teachers negotiate a relationship with one another, so that in collaborating there is a change to instructional practices. Specifically, there was a need to study coaches in their role as educational leaders and how they inhabit the space where the curriculum, policy implementation and instructional practices overlap, all while being a peer and not an evaluator. This is the intersection from where coaches operate and reach out to teachers to support them in order to create change in instructional practices. An additional gap in the research was the lack of teacher feedback on coaching. Rarely were teachers asked about the value of coaching, and teachers are half of the relationship. Building on the rich and varied qualitative studies that exist to help illuminate the role of instructional coach in modern schools brought a fresh look at how coaches and teachers navigate this complex space. Further, including teacher voice, which is often neglected in the literature, brought a much-needed depth of understanding surrounding the agency and power teachers possess in their collaborative work.

## Summary

The purpose of this study was to examine the role of instructional coaches in relationship to classroom teachers in an elementary school setting. Employing constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2004) as the methodology, supported by symbolic interactionism, this study explored the context and process of relationship building between coaches and teachers. How did coaches use their leadership role to empower teachers and support them in instructional strategy changes? How did instructional coaches use interpersonal and communication skills to negotiate meaning with teachers in order to respect teacher autonomy? How did coaches and teachers navigate problematic situations in which teachers display resistance to coaching? Through examining the data via a critical and grounded stance, it became possible to have a broader idea of the qualities instructional coaches use to find contextual solutions to this problematic situation and how those solutions impact teacher and coach relationships.

Through the use of electronic journals and semi-structured interviews with coaches and teachers, I explored the experiences of these professionals working within the constructs of this problem of practice to improve instructional strategies. Through question, discussion, and observation of artifacts, I gained a better understanding of the experiences of the instructional coach and the ways in which teachers chose to partner with them and when they do not.

Using grounded theory (Timonen, Foley, & Conlon, 2018), I explored how coaches and teachers create emancipatory relationships and contribute to

solutions for the situational problem of teacher autonomy in an accountability culture. How did coaches and teachers inhabit this shared space together? Viewing this problem of practice through the lens of grounded theory allowed for the delineation of critical issues and avenues from which to create change that benefits teachers. While grounded theory aspires to theory-building, it is perfectly acceptable to hope that utilizing this approach will add to a depth of understanding and conceptual clarity around the role and impact of instructional coaching (Timonen, et al., 2018).

## CHAPTER THREE

### RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

As reform and accountability measures have grown in American public schools, an outgrowth of satisfying those reform measures that relate to changing teacher instructional practices has been to shift some teaching personnel to the role of instructional coach. In fact, the number of personnel serving in the role of coach has doubled between 2000 and 2015 (Galey, 2016). While there is a growing number of people serving in these mid-level leadership positions, the role is not uniformly defined and is changeable, as it is heavily contextual to the school or district in which the coach serves (Mangin and Dunsmore, 2015). Therefore, because of the undefined nature of the role and the amount of people working as coaches, how coaches interact with teachers is a problem worthy of study. The purpose of this study was to understand the working relationship between instructional coaches and teachers in an elementary school setting. There is a gap in the literature around the topic of instructional coaching; while there are a few studies that examine teacher perceptions of coaching, those studies do not limit the coach's status as peer to the teacher (Jacobs et al., 2017). Further, few of those studies utilize grounded theory methods in which to explore the relationship between coach and teacher.

## Research Questions

As an instructional coach, I serve as a peer to and support for fellow teachers. However, I am often tasked with implementing policies of the district, although I have no authority to do so. I proposed to examine how coaches and teachers navigate the space of relationship within the coaching framework. Utilizing grounded theory methodologies of intensive interviewing, document collection, coding and comparative analysis, I examined the role of instructional coaches in professional relationship to classroom teachers in an elementary school setting. Additionally, I paid specific attention to researching the theory that explained the process of relationship building between coaches and teachers in an elementary school setting. These subsequent questions supported the overarching research question, while raising issues deemed relevant in the literature and supported and framed the structure of the data collection: How do coaches use their leadership role to empower teachers and support them in instructional strategy changes? How do instructional coaches use interpersonal and communication skills to negotiate meaning with teachers in order to respect teacher autonomy? How do coaches and teachers navigate problematic situations in which teachers display resistance to coaching? Corbin and Strauss (2008) stress “the purpose of the questions is to lead the researcher into the data where issues and problems, important to the persons, organizations, groups and communities under investigation can be explored” (p. 25). Allowing the literature

review to surface potential themes and, in turn, shaping questions in order to promote an examination of those themes, grounded in the context and culture on the school, will promote clarity for instructional coaches and teachers. Through examining the data via a critical and grounded stance, it became possible to have a broader idea of the qualities instructional coaches use to find contextual solutions to this problematic situation and how those solutions impact teacher and coach relationships.

### Research Design

Guided by symbolic interactionism, relational trust, and utilizing constructed grounded theory as methodology, the purpose of this qualitative study of instructional coaches was to fully immerse and examine a community of instructional coaches and the teachers with whom they work. Additionally, I worked to ascertain and understand how instructional coaches occupied that fine space between peer and policy implementor. In approaching an examination of the professional relationship between instructional coaches and teachers, a qualitative study that allowed for the voice of the people in those roles to tell their story, grounded in the context of their settings, seemed the appropriate choice for this study. Using a qualitative methodology when exploring a problem of practice within educational settings is an accepted practice (Creswell and Gutterman, 2019). From under the umbrella of qualitative methods, I narrowed my

methodology based on my ontological perspective, as well as choosing the methods best aimed to illuminate the context and investigation into the research questions. I view this work as evolving and fluid and realize that new circumstances or contexts could change its shape in the future (Corbin and Strauss, 2008). Therefore, well-housed within qualitative studies and able to examine the research problem from the theoretical framework of symbolic interactionism, as well as relational trust, is the method of constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2014).

Grounded Theory (GT), as originally championed by American sociologists Glaser and Strauss (1967), sought to deemphasize the researchers' use of verification of assumptions and to emphasize the creation of a theory and attendant hypotheses that are grounded in the context of the research (Kenny & Fourie, 2014). As Glaser and Strauss continued their work, much the same as the sociological framework of symbolic interactionism, others began to use the methodologies of grounded theory, thus expanding into fields beyond sociology and into nursing, religion, and education (Kenny & Fourie, 2014). Eventually, Glaser and Strauss split over ideological issues pertaining to grounded theory. The fracture between the two led each to refine theoretical viewpoints they wished to emphasize, with Glaser sticking to the original tenets and expanding on them, while Strauss paired with Corbin to develop a framework for conducting grounded theory research that was firmly ensconced in pragmatic philosophy and symbolic interactionism (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Glaser believed Strauss' and

Corbin's emphasis on the framework and their willingness to contemplate the researcher's need for a literature review, rather than approaching the problem *tabula rasa*, to be antithetical to grounded theory. Glaser continued to argue in favor of the original, or classical, grounded theory (Kenny & Fourie, 2014). It was proffered by Strauss and Corbin (2008) and, later, Charmaz (2014) that no one should come to a study *tabula rasa*, or with a clean slate, from lack of experience or a reading of the literature. Contrary to the *tabula rasa* idea, Thornberg (2012) contends that research and studies are enriched by the experiences which ground the researcher in the community of study, and that the data that arises will be guided by the "sensitizing principles" of the researcher's awareness of the literature and community.

The break between the two researchers allowed for new developments in the methodology of conducting grounded theory research. The third wave of grounded theory, as developed by Charmaz (2014), is constructivist grounded theory and is the methodology for this study. Charmaz studied under Glaser and was known to Corbin and Strauss. The work of Charmaz is grounded in a constructivist point of view and turns some assumptions of grounded theory on their heads. While utilizing symbolic interactionism as a centering theoretical framework, Charmaz (2014) establishes a much-needed middle position, epistemologically, between the extremes of objectivism and subjectivism. The use of constructivism allows for the researcher to acknowledge the belief "that the essence of creating knowledge is not by finding an objective truth waiting to

be discovered” (Gehrels, 2013, p. 21). Charmaz, using constructivist grounded theory, allows for the interaction between data and researchers and acknowledges that the researcher has a role in constructing outcomes of the study that are grounded in the context of the research (Gehrels, 2013).

There are valid criticisms to consider when using constructivist grounded theory as a methodology; these criticisms are carefully considered by the researcher, and they use them to shape the research process. Criticisms come from Glaser, himself, as he objects to the role of the researcher as co-creator of meaning in building theory (Kenny and Fourie, 2015). The ontological view of the researcher, that reality is interpretive, and as such that experiences are co-created by participants and the researcher is not outside that process, but, rather, a contributor. Others have criticized Charmaz’s insistence that constructivist grounded theory occupies an epistemological middle ground. In fact, scholars insist that Charmaz’s use of relativist ontology and post-modern relativist epistemology place constructivist grounded theory squarely in a post-modernist philosophy (Kenny and Fourie, 2015). Additionally, Charmaz’s development of the use of the literature review as comprehensive and informative is criticized by Glaser, who advocates for research to begin *tabula rasa*, while engaged in research and creation of theory (Kenny and Fourie, 2015). These criticisms represent scholarly and philosophical differences in approaching research using various iterations of grounded theory. Therefore, in the use of constructivist grounded theory one understands that “constructivists

have used grounded theory to make explicit the assumptions and unspoken knowledge of participants, elicit their meaning-making rather than make claims about an objective reality and develop contextualized theory for practical application” (Oliver, 2012, p. 377). After much reading and careful examination, supported by a comprehensive review of the literature, I remain convinced that constructivist grounded theory, embedded in the symbolic interactionist and relational trust frameworks, provides the best pathway for deeply exploring the role of the instructional coach with respect to coaching teachers in an elementary school setting. Creating meaning with and allowing the voices of the community involved to shape the process will provide conceptual clarity for others serving in these roles.

The use of constructivist grounded theory acknowledges that knowing and learning are embedded in a social life, constructed and shaped through rigorous methodologies, as well as a researcher who is grounded in the context and culture of the study. This study was conducted following the roadmap outlined by Charmaz (2014), which involved a literature review to assess the current status of research into coaching, a set of broad and open-ended research questions to shape the gathering of data for inductive examination, rigorous comparative analysis leading to theoretical analysis which informs policy and practice in service to this problem of practice. It is acceptable, even desirable, to add to understanding and create clarity around the professional relationship between instructional coaches and teachers (Timonen, et al., 2018).

This study sought to understand the professional relationship between an instructional coach and teachers working together in an elementary school setting. Constructivist grounded theory lent itself to the study of this problem because this methodology accounts for coaches and teachers negotiating and managing the social situation of school and the processes within those social interactions. Further, constructivist grounded theory permits an examination of the process of the coaching cycle and any changes to teachers' practices that may occur. Finally, constructivist grounded theory and the perspective of symbolic interactionism allows that teachers and coaches face a reality that is local in context and co-constructed through their interaction with one another (Gehrels, 2013). Using a constructivist grounded theoretical framework and partnering it with the frameworks of symbolic interactionism and relational trust, provided a direction for constructing initial interviews and kept the primary research question from being overly broad. As interviews progressed, the data illuminated other questions that were worthy of attention, particularly those issues around the power and systemic structure of the school district and its employees. Thus, the grounded theory that allowed for induction, deduction and abduction of data to obtain clarity on these questions (Mitchell, 2014. Timonen, Foley, & Conlon, 2018) and explore these structures.

## Research Setting

This study took place in one school district in southern California. This district featured 27,000 students with 71% of the student body receiving free and reduced lunch. Further, 74.6% of the student body identifies as Hispanic/Latino. This district had 19 elementary schools, inclusive of transitional kindergarten to 5<sup>th</sup> grade. Each elementary school has an instructional coach as part of its faculty. The instructional coaches are all peers to the teachers, in the same bargaining unit, and hold no supervisory authority.

## Research Sample

This study, in an effort to reach theoretical saturation (Kolb, 2012), used an initial research summary (Glesne, 2016) and informed consent e-mailed to recruit instructional coaches and a research summary, informed consent and interest survey e-mailed to recruit classroom teachers for participation in the study. The initial summary and inquiry for instructional coaches was shared with those coaches who have at least two full years' experience in their role as an instructional coach. In order to examine the instructional coach and teacher relationship, coaches new to the role would still be in the process of establishing

those relationships with teachers and are, therefore, omitted. The goal was to recruit six instructional coaches to participate in the study. With permission of the district, all elementary teachers will be surveyed to ascertain their willingness to participate in the study. Again, those teachers with fewer than two years' experience or who were enrolled in induction, will be excluded. This choice is made to keep the distinction in the study between induction coaches and instructional coaches. Further, teachers assigned to the same site as the researcher will be excluded from participation. In order to reach theoretical saturation, 12 elementary teachers were sought for participation, and 11 were enlisted. All participants received and were asked to provide informed consent, via Qualtrics, and prior to any interest being noted. The manner of keeping all data confidential and secure was shared with each participant. Being mindful of the ethics of research and the principle of respect, all participants were reminded of their right to consent to each part of the process and to withdraw their participation at any time (Glesne, 2016). While the researcher is employed at the district, no research will be conducted at their assigned site. Further, the researcher has no supervisory authority of any kind and, in keeping with constructivist grounded theory, made no assessment about the quality of coaching or teaching, and endeavored to uncover conceptual clarity around the professional relationship between instructional coach and teacher and insight into how the instructional coach navigated the roles of policy implementor and peer.

## Research Data

Once the 19 participants were secured and informed consent given, the researcher asked that for twenty instructional days in February and March 2021, the coaches complete a Google form electronic journal for each workday that, briefly, explains what activities they engage in, with whom (teacher, administrator, another coach, or district personnel), and to describe their perceived impact of their work for that day. Teachers were asked to complete a similar Google Form for any workday in February and March 2021 in which they interacted with the instructional coach. The form asked the teacher to fill in the nature of the interaction, as well as to describe the impact of the interaction. These data were collected by the researcher on March 2, 2021, and saved to a university drive that is password protected. This data will be destroyed within 30 days after the acceptance of this dissertation.

Due to COVID-19 and limitations on gathering, the researcher conducted interviews via the teleconference tool. Interviews were also audio recorded on a Sony digital recording device. The researcher worked with instructional coaches and teachers to establish mutual times for teleconference interviews and provided the links through university provided email. An interview protocol was created for the researcher to take notes as they engaged with the interviewee (Creswell & Gutterman, 2019). For instructional coaches, the research questions prompted the following interview questions: Talk about your experiences in

coaching and your philosophy of coaching. Share how you came to be a coach. What specific training did you receive when you became a coach? Reflect on collaboration. What is it like for you to lead a professional learning community? What makes an effective coaching session? Talk about encounters with resistance to coaching. The topics explored in interviews with instructional coaches allowed me to see how the coaching lens impacts thoughts about culture, collaboration, and collegiality.

When the participant was a teacher: Talk about your teaching experiences and philosophy. What is your school culture? Reflect on your professional learning community. What does collaboration mean for you? What is your experience with coaching? What makes an effective coaching session? Talk about a time you resisted coaching. These questions explored both the lived experience of coaching and explored the relational connection between philosophies and school cultures. The researcher sought to uncover how these concepts impact a teacher's viewpoint of instructional coaching.

### Data Collection

“Let your research problem shape the methods you choose” (Charmaz, 2014, p. 27). In aiming to get at methods that promoted the emerging ideas as detailed in the literature review, the data was collected through interview and documents. To start, gathering data from instructional coaches began with a research summary e-mailed along with a link to a Qualtrics survey tool, where

informed consent was obtained. The research summary introduced the problem of practice, purpose of the study and invited participation in the research. The summary made clear the extent of the commitment and gauged the time involved. The participants were informed that involvement consisted of a journal for twenty workdays, an initial interview, and a possible follow-up interview.

In order to recruit elementary classroom teachers, an email inquiry was sent to gauge interest. The email contained a research summary and a link to a Qualtrics survey that requested informed consent and information regarding demographic characteristics such as years of experience in the classroom and years in the district. After obtaining informed consent and assent, the researcher conducted the interviews in March 2021, all via Zoom due to COVID-19 restrictions. The interviews lasted, approximately, forty minutes and were audio recorded on a Sony digital recorder for later transcription for coding, and notes were taken by the researcher on the interview protocol, during the interviews. The submitted journal entries were collected for initial coding. All instructional coach participants were provided a \$25.00 gift card and teacher participants were provided a \$20.00 gift card to thank them for their time and assistance.

In keeping with the principle of beneficence (Glesne, 2016), participants were entitled to privacy; their participation in the study was not known to others, nor were they made aware of others who may or may not have participated. All participants and any identifiable characteristics, such as district or school site, were anonymized in notes, memos and transcripts used in working copies and

drafts of analysis. Master lists with participants' true identities were kept locked in a file cabinet in the researcher's office and then shredded within 30 days of the acceptance of this work. The data from journal entries and Likert scales are also anonymized to conceal the participants' identities, stored on a password protected drive and stored in locked drawer, as well, until 30 days after the acceptance of this dissertation, after which they will be destroyed. All audio recordings of interviews, once transcribed, will be deleted.

### Data Analysis

Beyond basic demographic information, the methodology of this qualitative study was framed by constructivist grounded theory (CGT) as first developed by Charmaz (2014). Using a constructivist grounded theoretical framework, and partnering it with symbolic interactionism and relational trust, provided a direction for constructing initial interviews and keeping the primary research question from being overly broad. As interviews progressed, the data illuminated other questions that were worthy of attention, particularly those issues around the power and systemic structure of the school district and its employees. Thus, the grounded theory that allows for induction, deduction and abduction of data to find clarity on those questions (Mitchell, 2014. Timonen, Foley, & Conlon, 2018) and explored those structures.

Using constructivist grounded theory, the data from interviews and artifacts were analyzed using constant comparative method in which the

researcher moved back and forth between relevant incidents that respond to the research questions and develops categories that emerge from participants' responses. Once the raw data is selected, the researcher began to code through several iterations; initial coding promoted asking of the data what is and what is not understood about the relationship between coach and teacher. Axial coding allowed for the creation of categories and subcategories as answers to each of the research questions. Finally, selective coding promoted the identification and choosing of core categories, using the research questions as a guide for choosing those categories (Kolb, 2012). Theoretical saturation was reached when no new findings were generated, and new cases ceased to provide additional information or categories (Kolb, 2012). After initial coding and concurrent to axial and selective coding, the use of theoretical sampling allowed the researcher to check and refine their analysis. Theoretical sampling has a unique place in constructivist grounded theory and the researcher used this technique to work abductively with the data generated by the participants. "Inference entails considering all plausible theoretical explanations for the surprising data, forming hypotheses for each possible explanation, and checking these hypotheses empirically by examining the data to arrive at the most plausible explanation" (Charmaz, 2014, p. 200). These processes led the researcher to build theory that answers the proposed questions of this study.

## Validity and Trustworthiness

In participating in research that is qualitative in nature, there are methods for demonstrating the validity and trustworthiness of the findings. The validity of these findings will be bolstered by the researcher's use of triangulation (Creswell & Gutterman, 2019): the researcher collected data in multiple ways via interviews and documents from instructional coaches and teachers. The use of triangulation and the incorporation of multiple viewpoints bolstered the theory drawn from the data. An additional method for improving the validity and trustworthiness of the findings of the research is member-checking (Creswell & Gutterman, 2019): the researcher asked participants for feedback on the inferences made from the data. The researcher also asked participants to verify the accuracy of the representation of the data. This contributed to the co-creation of clarity and theory around the instructional coach and teacher relationship.

## Positionality of the Researcher

In approaching my research, it was essential for me to be reflective about the beliefs and biases that may have influenced directions in the research I pursued, or the lenses through which I analyzed evidence and data (Glesne, 2016; Peskin, 1988).

The lenses through which I viewed my work are, like other humans, varied and based on numerous life experiences. I work, every day, to follow the words

and guidance of John Lewis (2012): to leave my corner of the world better than I found it and to stand up and cause “good trouble”. As a researcher, making “good trouble” meant deeply researching and examining those circumstances that allowed instructional coaches to provide support for teachers. Having been a teacher for 29 years means that I have, truly, spent most of my life in a variety of school settings, first as a student, then a teacher, and now as an instructional coach. In my current role, I am charged with providing support, strategic assistance, model lessons and on-site professional development to teachers. In looking critically at the world, and schools, I approach problems with an optimistic hope for just outcomes that improve the situations of teachers. In centering those professionals who have been overlooked, such as teachers who may want to collaborate and break down the wall of “private practice” but may not know how, one can create new and equitable solutions. These solutions foster a broadening of the voices at the table. Teachers need space and support in changing instructional methods or practices. In order for teachers to be present for their colleagues and students, a confidential and supportive relationship with a coach can assist teachers in reaching their professional goals.

My relationship to teachers and coaches is rich and nuanced, and I want that reflected in the research. I prize the autonomy of teachers’ work and advocate for their professionalism. Teachers, in general, are altruistic and mission driven. They are also, generally, risk-averse which can make a change in practices fraught for them. It is imperative that teachers be seen by their

employers and community as professionals, capable of doing the job for which they were hired and working with the best interests of their students at the center of what they do. I am a peer to teachers and coaches, as well as a strong champion of the work they do. Unless a teacher and I have a trusted relationship and the teacher actively seeks feedback, it is best I do not provide it. Instead, it is a sign to me to circle back, bring the focus back to the relationship between the teacher and I, so that I will have an opportunity to support that teacher in being more able to provide teaching for their students that helps both teacher and students arrive at their goals.

In keeping with constructivist grounded theory, the data collection methods of the qualitative study utilized survey, electronic journal, and intensive interviews of coaches and teachers. As this data was collected, coded and analyzed, simultaneous themes arose that required clarification. This, in turn, necessitated additional follow-up interviews to serve as member-checks. The setting for the study was teachers and coaches at elementary schools in the district in which I am employed. I positioned myself as an outside observer, as I did not conduct research at the specific site where I am employed.

In the research setting, I am a part of the community of teachers and coaches, but I stayed firmly in the role of researcher and observer. Through remaining in that role and documenting, interviewing, and describing, I used common language to avoid undue influence over research. The data was coded in two ways: open and selective (Charmaz, 2014), in keeping with the

constructivist grounded theory framework. As themes emerged from the coding, I was open to the connections and patterns that revealed themselves. It is the deep engagement with the data and the exploration of the relationships between instructional coaches and teachers that allowed a more complete picture of how instructional coaches navigate their professional space and use their leadership to partner with teachers in developing the craft of teaching. In order to demonstrate trustworthiness in my study, I engaged in member checking, the reading back and verification of interviews by those who provided them. Additionally, triangulation of data came through multiple open-ended interviews as well as document collection.

I further illuminated this community by engaging in thick descriptions of the relationships between instructional coaches and teachers. This study's delimitations are to focus on elementary campuses with access to an instructional coach, as opposed to secondary campuses. The study's limitations are the gender, class, and racial and ethnic composition of the personnel who occupy the positions I wish to study.

Through immersing myself in a community of coaches and teachers, I hoped to honor their professionalism and freedom to create collaborative relationships with one another, free of worry of evaluation or policy, thereby freeing teachers to practice their craft in a way that enables their students to have voice and share in the power of the school community.

## Summary

In examining the interaction between instructional coaches and teachers, in an elementary setting, and, specifically, exploring how instructional coaches navigate their unique roles of policy implementer and peer, a theoretical framework of symbolic interaction and utilizing a methodology of constructivist grounded theory provided a rich exploration into the professional work of instructional coaches and the teachers they support. With a world view that one's reality is co-created through interaction with one's surroundings and others, working with participants to co-construct meaning grounded in the lived experiences of the culture and context of their work provided bountiful descriptions of instructional coaches' labors. Through interview, and document collection, triangulating the data collection provided ample opportunities for coding, analysis, and the creation of categories. Using codes and concepts generated via member-checked data, the researcher used theoretical sampling and abductive logic to develop theory or conceptual clarity around the manner in which coaches approach their work as both policy implementor and peer.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### RESULTS

This chapter contains the results of the constructivist grounded theory study designed to answer the following research questions:

Research Question 1: How do instructional coaches use their leadership role to empower teachers and support them in instructional strategy change?

Research Question 2: How do coaches use interpersonal and communication skills to negotiate meaning with teachers in order to respect teacher autonomy?

Research Question 3: How do coaches and teachers navigate problematic situations in which teachers display resistance to coaching?

#### Trustworthiness

“The purpose of a grounded theory methodology is not to make truth statements about reality, but, rather, to elicit fresh understandings about patterned relationships among social actors and how these relationships and interactions actively construct reality” (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, as quoted by Bowen, 2009, p. 307). While grounded theory and other qualitative methods are valuable ways to examine and explore research questions, these studies must still provide evidence that they are trustworthy and not simply a reflection of the researcher’s held beliefs. As shown in this proceeding chapter, the results were rendered trustworthy through a variety of accepted means, including an audit trail

(Bowen, 2009). To support the credibility of the findings, *triangulation* was used through electronic journal gathering and analysis, as well as data collected in interviews of both teachers and instructional coaches, in addition to a document review of the job description of instructional coach as written by this district and the three-times yearly federal time accounting report that must be submitted by instructional coaches. These documents validated the multiple demands placed on instructional coaches' time as discussed in the findings and further recommendations. This study also can be deemed *transferrable*, as another researcher may take these findings and apply them to their work. Further, the results have demonstrated *dependability*, as over time the findings have not changed, and the themes communicated by teachers and instructional coaches were consistent. Additionally, there is an internal *confirmability* in the consistency of the findings and the resulting interpretations and recommendations. This is verifiable through an audit trail, as described by Bowen (2009), "Thus, the audit trail offers visible evidence- from process to product- that the researcher did not simply find what it is he or she set out to find" (p. 307). The audit trail for this research endeavor began with the extensive literature review in the field and state of instructional coaching, followed by a meticulous research design and Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval, initial codes such as: respect, ownership, peer, resources, supportive, guide and district agent, emerged from submitted electronic journals from teachers and instructional coaches. Further internal audit is supported by initial codes as applied to line-by-line manual

coding of initial interviews and coding, for confirmation, through the use of the qualitative analysis software, QDA Miner Lite. This process allowed the researcher to verify the codes that attained depth, as well as to examine the themes around which they coalesced. Additionally, the researcher wrote seven memos and used those memos in the follow-up member-check interviews to ascertain participants' accordance or disagreement around the application of themes such as coaching's impact on student outcomes, the intentional use of collaborative time, any correlation between a coach viewing a teacher as engaged in coaching and subsequently viewing them as empowered by coaching, the impact of administrative support for coaching, the impact of demands on instructional coaches' time and the reliance on systems thinking vs. design thinking. These member-check interviews clarified and distinguished the impact of these themes and led directly to the development of a clear and simplified grounded theory that is firmly a part of the literature, the applied theoretical framework, the context of the field and responds to the three research questions presented in this study.

## Results of the Study

In this chapter is an analysis tied to the research questions and consistent with the methods of constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2014). Additionally, the sample demographics are included. The process used to analyze electronic journals and interview transcripts from 19 participants to

reveal codes and themes are detailed in this chapter, as well. The analysis of this data occurred on several levels: (a) initial coding, (b) memo writing and (c) theoretical coding. At every level, constant comparison of data was utilized until themes emerged. Further included in this chapter are vignettes from participants that validate the emergent themes and resulting grounded theory.

### Sample Demographics

Teachers and instructional coaches from one district in Riverside County, California were asked to participate in the study. This district features 27,000 students with 71% of the student body receiving free and reduced lunch. Further, 74.6% of the student body identifies as Hispanic/Latino. The teaching corps is stable with a 99% teacher retention rate. Nineteen participants completed electronic journals and were interviewed for this study. All 19 teach or coach in an elementary setting and have done so for a minimum of three years. Of the participants, 11 are classroom teachers and eight are instructional coaches. Participants from all but the researcher's school site were eligible, and no attempt was made to match teachers and their coaches. In all, 13 out of 19 elementary schools in this district were represented.

Among participants, one teacher had three years' experience, five had between four and 10 years and the remaining five had more than ten years' experience in a classroom. Only one teacher responded affirmatively that they had participated in a formal coaching cycle; five responded that "maybe" they

had and the remaining five responded “no” they had not. For participants who serve as instructional coaches, one has served in the role for three (3) years and seven coaches have had the role for four (4) to ten (10) years.

### Descriptive Data

Each participant’s electronic journal entries and interviews were coded manually, line by line. The researcher coded each journal entry and interview transcript individually and through constant comparison analysis, initially coded data gave way to broader theoretical codes aligned to the research questions guiding this study. Once all electronic journals entries and all 19 initial interviews were collected and initially coded, the researcher produced a series of memos reflecting on emerging thematic codes in the data. Following the production of these memos, six follow-up interviews were conducted and served as member-checks for validation of the research and the resulting theory.

Upon completion of initial coding, memo writing and member checking, all interview transcripts were uploaded to QDA Miner Lite software for further analysis and comparison to manual coding.

In the theoretical coding phase, the initial codes were sorted and grouped into broader theoretical categories as dictated by the emergent data. In examining connections between and across initial codes, vignettes from the transcripts that directly supported a code were used to further elucidate the validity of the concept and to tell the story of the professional relationship

between the teacher and instructional coach more fully. For the purposes of this study, initial codes with 10 or more vignettes were designated by the researcher as having *depth*, and worthy of inclusion in this study. Vignettes that share participants' responses have been lightly edited for clarity and use gender neutral language in order to keep the anonymity of participants and any colleagues to whom they may refer.

The electronic journals, which were completed over 20 instructional days by teachers only when they had contact with their instructional coach, and by instructional coaches, each instructional day. These entries provided preliminary data that guided the development of initial codes. The journals asked teachers to briefly describe the encounter with the coach and whether they believed the interaction to be one that preserved the teacher's autonomy and the degree to which it empowered them to do their jobs. Subsequently, teachers were asked to provide evidence for their rating. Meanwhile, instructional coaches were asked to briefly document their day and assess whether they believed their coaching for the day to have been empowering for their peers and to provide the reasoning behind their choices. For both sets of participants, the questions were structured so as to not be evaluative of their peers' job performance. Within the electronic journals, one finds ample data that supports emergent initial codes, which led to theoretical coding and supported the construction of viable grounded theory.

During this time period, most coaches also serve as testing coordinators, and are responsible for creating schedules, training teachers, facilitating student

practice and, often, administering the assessment itself. The electronic journal data demonstrated that teacher participants most frequently came into contact with a coach over testing procedures, testing administration, and testing routines. In light of COVID-19, the English Language Proficiency Assessment for California (ELPAC) had to be administered to students remotely which took a great deal of time to implement. Despite the preponderance of coaching time devoted to test administration, teacher participants overwhelmingly reported the interactions as supporting their empowerment and autonomy. Although testing procedures are strictly governed and inflexible, teacher participants believed the coach was picking up a task to reduce their stress and empowered them by supporting them in teaching students how to remotely access a test. This type of coaching was followed by teacher participants reporting that they encountered the coach as a means of support in coaching cycles, collaboration, and program implementation. Again, interactions were rated as empowering to the teacher and supporting their autonomy. Coaches were described as caring and invested, meeting needs of the school community and engaging in supportive partnerships.

The coach made me feel less stressed, because of the way they interacted with me regarding the new way of posting the lesson plans to a new program....After time spent with the coach I felt positive about the change and was able to go back to work and be productive....The coach always does that; they explain it in a way that a teacher can get it and make you feel like you made the change

in our systems without too much time away from teaching, (Teacher, electronic journal).

Instructional coaches were often viewed by the teachers as willing to step in and reduce teacher stress by lightening the teachers' burden as often as possible.

I needed to plan interventions and enhancements for student growth. The coach helped by pulling data for me. [They] actually pulled data for the grade level. It's a visual I could easily use to compare for measuring growth (Teacher, electronic journal).

Supporting collaboration and data driven decision making are chief among an instructional coach's roles. Through providing accurate and timely data, instructional coaches support teacher's ability to make decisions and adjust instructional strategies for students as needed.

[The coach] let us voice our frustrations with distance learning. [The coach] also listened to our concerns about iReady. [The coach] answered a lot of our questions. They are the middleman between the district and our school. [They don't] have any authority to change things and neither do the teachers. We just have to implement what [the coach] brings to us. They do give us the freedom to brainstorm how it will work within our grade level (Teacher, electronic journal).

The vignette included above demonstrates that validating teachers' experiences is a key leadership skill employed by instructional coaches when they are faced with bringing central office demands to their peers. Instructional coaches do not have credentialed authority over teachers and must rely on leadership and interpersonal skills in order to fulfill their role.

For instructional coach participants, the electronic journal data demonstrated that coaches spent their days, overwhelmingly, in support of teachers. Further, coaches reported these interactions to be empowering for teachers. Themes that emerged from this data showed that coaches believed they are holding space for teachers during a crisis (distance teaching and the COVID-19 pandemic), supporting individual teachers in developing capacity, providing applicable data to teachers, collaborating with teachers to develop strategies, and clarifying meanings and engaging teachers in reflective practices.

Teachers gained a better understanding of NGSS by looking at the differences between topic and disciplinary core views. We worked to understand the key concepts covered and student evidence of learning expectations. We mapped the flow of relevance to plan the order in which the lines of inquiry would flow through the unit. Teachers were able to say what they expect student understanding to be at the end of the unit and use the lines of inquiry to confirm that

what they will be teaching will give some students the knowledge needed to understand and demonstrate their learning of the central idea (Instructional coach, electronic journal).

Instructional coaches reported that supporting strategy development through collaborating with teachers, empowered the teachers to accept curriculum changes. Further, through supporting teachers' autonomy, instructional coaches helped foster teacher input on how those changes were developed.

Both teachers with whom I interacted one-on-one today, and the grade level I met with, told me directly that they appreciated my time, my encouragement and willingness to 'do' these things with them and not just tell them what to do (Instructional coach, electronic journal).

Instructional coaches, according to data, are valued when they act as partners and provide encouragement to teachers, in addition to supporting teachers by sharing the workload as much as practicable.

'Pre-meet' to set up a plan. We met after school and talked about what they felt was working and not working. Through conversation, it was agreed that there was a lot of direct instruction and not a lot of conversation and student help.... So, before we started to go into

small groups, we brainstormed how we can make this more engaging and involve the whole class with less direct instruction (Instructional coach, electronic journal).

In partnering with teachers, instructional coaches can be a second set of eyes to help gauge student engagement and support the improvement of instructional strategies that fully engage student learning. When coaches approach this, not as an expert, but as a peer responding to a teacher determined goal, the coaching cycle can yield improved student outcomes (Knight & van Newburgh,2012).

After the initial codes, as deduced from the electronic journals, the manual coding and subsequent coding using software, of initial and follow-up interviews, the codes were consolidated and organized to provide data relevant to the researcher's questions. As an example, initial codes from the electronic journal such as 'respect,' 'ownership' and 'peer' are incidents occurring with depth in the initial and follow-up interviews as one shifts to theoretical coding. In this shift from initial coding to theoretical coding, the researcher consolidated data which possessed depth into groupings that reflect phenomena aligned with the research questions.

Everything stems from the relationship you build (Instructional coach, follow-up interview).

In response to research question one, examining how coaches use their leadership role to empower teachers, the data that emerged demonstrated coaches coalesce their leadership skills around their role as professional developer. Multiple codes further this role of the coach and rose to the researcher's definition of *depth*. In order of depth, the emergent codes were as follows: 'peer-to-peer relationship', 'act as collaborator', 'role definition', 'validation of teachers', 'respect', 'responding to teachers' needs', and 'data: compilation and analysis'. Vignettes and analysis of each code follows.

The focus on coaching is to support a person's professional development, not to fix them (Instructional coach, follow-up interview).

#### Peer-to-Peer Relationship:

Instructional coaches are peers to teachers and have no administrative authority. Through providing professional development as a peer, coaches use their leadership to empower teachers. Coaches and teachers frequently referred to understanding and remembering that 'colleague' is the basis of the relationship. This understanding was a significant contributor in deepening the professional relationship.

I feel like I've never presented myself as an administrator. I was always very clear to people.... I'm here to support you; to help you. I felt like it was my job to advocate for teachers, and make sure they

had support (Teacher, initial interview, commenting on their time as instructional coach).

In keeping the focus on the peer relationship, instructional coaches rely on leadership skills to partner with teachers and help them develop professionally.

I wanted to be Batman- available whenever the signal came up (Instructional coach, follow-up interview).

Instructional coaches are mission driven individuals who use proximity and reliability to strengthen the professional relationship between teacher and coach so that teachers will utilize their coaching services.

[They] made it very clear to us that [they were] not part of our evaluation; what we talked about, what our weaknesses were...[they] made sure to say this is a private safe space. I will never go to the principal. This stays here with me and I'm here to help you with whatever you feel is your weakness. And I will help you improve in that area; whatever you need to do so (Teacher, initial interview).

In this vignette, one sees the power of a coach leveraging a peer relationship in order to promote trust and safety, so that the teacher may

confidently choose a path for strategy improvement without fear of reprisal from administration.

I would rather be a facilitator than a coach...because I don't feel like the coaching model works with a campus-based coach. You are their (teachers) peer and they feel as though you are close to administration. Only new teachers actually ask for coaching (Instructional coach, initial interview).

The above evidence demonstrates the fine line walked by instructional coaches in their work. It is crucial to develop confidential professional relationships so that teachers can reliably depend on the coach's professional development.

Act as Collaborator:

Teachers and coach participants spoke to the impact of the coaches' efforts to support collaboration, or to create a collaborative relationship, as it supported the further professional development of teachers. A collaborative approach deepens the professional relationship through reinforcing that coach and teacher are peers, and the coach uses their leadership skills to promote and support collaborative work between and among teachers.

Teachers who are, you know, they feel like they are in the fringe, and they need somebody to talk to...they need somebody to listen and

hear their frustrations; they don't need a fix (Instructional coach, initial interview).

As research (Matsumura, et. al., 2010) has shown, teachers will turn to instructional coaches for collaboration support, and participants in this study reported that instructional coaches are able to use their leadership to unite the divide between teachers and facilitate collaborative efforts.

It's fair to say, a coach can come in and kind of be that companion in some places where teams are less collaborative, and the coach can bridge that gap (Teacher, initial interview).

In schools where the culture is less collaborative, or the professional learning community process is not as developed, coaches can use their leadership skills in professional development to improve collaboration and to model how to operate in a professional learning community, in order to support the collective development of the teaching staff.

Role Definition:

While coaches use leadership skills and not credentialed authority to support professional development of teachers, coaches have many competing demands on their time and teachers are frequently confused about the definitions of a coach's role.

A lot of coaches are put in as assistant principals, without the status or authority (Teacher, initial interview).

I'm amazed at what they do (Teacher, initial interview).

This role confusion is common among teachers, and it is due, in part, to this district's demands on coaches' time. Frequently, because of their funding source, instructional coaches are also tasked with coordinating various programs on campus, for example testing, English Language learning, Title I, intervention and after school care programs. Additionally, this confusion is reinforced because coaches are considered part of the leadership team on campus and must work that much harder to cultivate clarity and understanding of the confidential nature of coaching.

And I was confused and then I got so far, and I thought I feel like I'm too far to ask: What do you do? Because I've been here for three years working with you, and I literally don't really know what your job is! (Teacher, initial interview).

I think coaches are pushed and pulled in ways that are not their responsibilities, so they couldn't actually do what was intended or what they thought they would be able to do (Teacher, initial interview).

I also know, in the coach's defense, the district asks more and more of them. Their time is occupied with a lot more than working on instruction with teachers (Teacher, initial interview).

...a very nice person, but I think [they] are more of just this liaison and they kind of are there to help our principal...I don't feel like [they're] being utilized as instructional coach, and in fact, I hardly ever have contact with them (Teacher, initial interview).

These vignettes clearly demonstrate the confusion around just what an instructional coach is meant to be doing in their role and the competing demands on their time they face each day. Coaches use longer workdays and trusting relationships in order to cultivate clarity of the role for the teachers whom they serve. For example, due to teachers needing to be actively teaching during the day, instructional coaches make themselves available before and after school, as well as making themselves available via text and email on evenings and weekends. It is because of competing demands on their time, that instructional coaches make themselves accessible to teachers beyond the contract day.

#### Validation of Teachers:

Research participants indicated that within professional development support from coaches, came validation of teachers' thoughts, feelings, and

stressors. Having the support of a coach creates trust in the relationship and furthers collaboration.

The last two [coaches], they've really come with the understanding that we've worked so hard and they want to be part of that and they want to see where we are, how we can all work together to make it even better and to keep growing and keep achieving....So, they kind of step in and kind of observe everything that is going on and notice what is happening and offer, 'Have you thought of this?' (Teacher, initial interview).

My goal is to relieve some of whatever it is that they're experiencing in that moment. You know? I just want to be there to provide relief or whatever they need (Instructional coach, initial interview).

So, I just think being open and transparent has helped them to trust me (Instructional coach, follow-up interview).

For me, it's about listening to the needs of the other person (Teacher, initial interview).

When instructional coaches use their leadership skills to validate the lived experiences of the teachers, the coaches deepen the trusting relationship

that leaves a teacher feeling empowered in their work and capable of managing stress and change, knowing they have a reliable partner in their coach.

Respect:

Instructional coaches use their leadership skills in ways that promote validation and collaboration, as well as garner the trust and respect of teachers with whom they partner.

I just think the relationship piece is key because then it allows you to leverage and provides a mutual respect between, you know, both parties, so that when differences of opinion do arise, they're easier to navigate, I think (Instructional coach, follow-up interview).

Where those coaches have seen me more like an equal, you know they're not coming in to say, 'Well, this is what we're going to do.' They're saying, 'I respect what you have done. Look at what you've done with these kids, these scores, what you're helping them with.' It's been more like a level playing field, which is really nice for us to be able to hear as a teacher....to see a coach that comes in and doesn't want to change things but wants to learn and see how they can help (Teacher, initial interview).

“I need to feel that there’s a level of trust, you know? That person is open to helping and that they’re ready to listen to me and kind of identify this need- this is what I’m looking for,” teacher, follow-up interview.

In these vignettes, it is clear that trusting relationships support the navigation of conflict as well as teacher buy-in for participating in coaching. Respecting a professional, and having that reciprocated, allows for professional development that benefits students, and supports teacher empowerment.

#### Responding to Teachers’ Needs:

Participants emphasized the importance of coaches responding to a teacher’s needs. Coaches recognize that through a professional, trusting relationship, coaches are better able to respond to a teacher’s needs and further support their professional development.

An effective coaching session would be if I come to my coach with something I’m struggling with and the coach listens, gives suggestions, but maybe lets me talk it out and helps me see where I’m trying to go with that struggle...help me find the solution (Teacher, initial interview).

The coach is a great teacher, and in that aspect, I think an instructional coach has to be an awesome teacher because now

they're not teaching children, they're teaching grown adults who are stubborn in their ways, and the coach has a way of making you feel like a mistake is not that big of a deal (Teacher, initial interview).

I feel like teaching is this gift we give to each other. [The coach] gave me [their] knowledge and [their] gift, and I get to turn around and pass it on to my kids in class and other teachers who may need help (Teacher, initial interview).

[The coach] gives some knowledge, but not too much knowledge. The coach builds on what you already know and validates what you are already doing. You have to build a relationship over time, so the coach can point out things that you may not have thought of, but could implement, with support (Teacher, initial interview).

I've had three different coaches. One was a great resource, super organized. I do feel like they were an advocate for us when we did have an issue; they were a voice for us (Teacher, initial interview).

These scenes show that a coach shows up for teachers in a myriad of ways, and that teachers will participate in a coaching relationship when they believe they are validated and respected by the coach and that coach

has an interest in engaging in productive struggle with them, without lapsing into telling teachers what to do.

Data: Compilation and Analysis:

Instructional coaches base their professional development work with teachers on data relevant to the school site. This data compilation and analysis provided by coaches, supports clear and direct proof of areas of student need. Having the peer support of a coach in analyzing, interpreting, and making data driven decisions leads to teacher buy-in and growth, as this occurs away from the evaluative lens of an administrator.

The teacher is probably already on board but just needs someone to realign their thought process toward that vision. So, the first way to do that is through looking at student data together. Then observational data: I think sometimes a coach can just notice- like notice and naming. I think that has a huge impact (Instructional coach, follow-up interview).

Ideal coaches, like someone who can provide support without making people feel embarrassed, or feel like they're less than- because they want help, you know? I mean, that's our goal as teachers, to get better (Teacher, initial interview).

Teachers rely on instructional coaches for data analysis and compilation in order to support sound decisions for student instruction. Examining data

collaboratively and making decisions based on student data is a key driver of the work teachers and coaches do together.

Participants in this study shared the multi-faceted ways that instructional coaches empower teachers through leading professional development. Instructional coaches place an emphasis on the peer relationship that exists between them and teachers, function as collaborators who seek teacher voice, are able to support teachers even in the face of competing demands for their time, validate teacher's viewpoints, create an atmosphere of respect, respond to teachers' needs and provide accurate and appropriate data. In all these ways, the participants confirmed that instructional coaches use their leadership skills to support the professional development and empowerment of classroom teachers.

In response to research question two, creating theoretical codes through analyzing interviews line-by-line, more data coalesced to elucidate the manner in which instructional coaches use communication and interpersonal skills to deepen the professional relationship between teachers and coach, as well to support negotiated meanings that preserve teachers' professional autonomy. Again, instructional coaches are peers to teachers, yet tasked with supporting teachers in changing teaching strategies in ways that will garner improved student performance and equitable access to learning, for all students. Teachers, traditionally,

functioned on their own and value their autonomy. Participants in this study communicated the ways in which coaches can effectively create a professional relationship of shared meaning and understanding, which leads to an environment of collaboration and change. Emergent codes attaining depth in answer to question two are: 'resource for teachers', 'partnering', 'guide and advocate', 'honesty, transparency, caring and concern', and 'invested in the school community'. What follows is an analysis of the application of these codes and supporting evidence.

#### Resource for Teachers:

Participants indicated that the qualities demonstrated by coaches that are significant contributors to meaningful professional relationships between teacher and coach are qualities that support the coach's role as a reliable resource for teachers. When teachers can depend on a fellow professional, they will utilize the offered resources.

The idea that we have somebody for us (Teacher, initial interview).

Both give and take. Being able to share with others, your ideas, but taking what others have to say. And it's really based on trust, meaning a trusting relationship where you can know the other person will follow through, or they keep what needs to be kept confidential, confidential (Teacher, initial interview).

So, because I was asking questions, [the coach] came and spent a lot of time with me, and I think that was amazing. I think my entire ability to do my job, a lot of it, really came from my relationship with [the coach] (Teacher, initial interview).

I put myself in their shoes. What would I have valued as a teacher? I call them, I email them, I text them. Whatever they need (Instructional coach, follow up interview).

In this manner, when coaches are viewed as a reliable resource to teachers, meaning and community are created in the relationship and the interaction between the two parties is united in bettering student outcomes.

#### Partnering:

Another interpersonal skill participants described as necessary is the coach's ability to act as partner and walk with teachers as they problem solve, reflect, or engage in improvement.

Having a good dialogue where most of the talking and discovery comes from the teacher, not [the coach] saying, 'I'm the expert and I'll tell you how to fix that (Instructional coach, initial interview).

I understand the pressure teachers are under. I want to come in and take away some pressure. I try to put myself in their shoes. I try to be an advocate (Instructional coach, initial interview).

And [the coach] started to make me feel special, that's for sure, and valued for what I can bring to the table. I think that is what I mean about not wanting to be 'talked at'. I want to be in collaboration with (Teacher, initial interview).

We sat down. [The coach] asked open-ended questions. [The coach] helped me write a schedule. [They] came into my classroom and befriended me. 'Let me make your life easier.' [They] always email me. [They are] always one step ahead of me, which makes my life easier (Teacher, initial interview).

...from the teacher, a willingness to learn and a vulnerability; and from the coach, that warm regard and that trust- being able to build that trust so the person can vulnerable (Instructional coach, initial interview).

The willingness of the coach to stand beside their peer as they grapple with problematic situations, and to do so without claiming expertise or taking over, according to participants, strengthens the instructional coach

and teacher relationship and enhances the impact of the work done together.

Guide and Advocate:

Research participants report that coaches extend their usefulness as a resource and support teacher autonomy when they act as both guide and advocate for teachers.

[The coach] is quick to respond and then [they] always provide resources, but [they're] very conscientious of how [they're] coming across; so not pushy (Teacher, initial interview).

Once the coach helps you understand what you're heading into, and then guides you through it, it's because they know the children and how things work (Teacher, initial interview).

So, then I have some idea [of what is happening] going into the coaching conversation. The area where I think, you know, the teacher would benefit from coaching, and I can present some options that take into account their feelings (Instructional coach, initial interview).

They [teachers] all have different needs: one wants to question, one wants to reflect, others want to pick your brain or need a sounding

board. You have to be there for all of it (Instructional coach, initial interview).

The feeling of support teachers get from the coaching process and how you're able to implement changes with them.... We're learning together (Instructional coach, initial interview).

There are strong PLC teams and I support the process by being available to the team and providing them the templates for the meetings (Instructional coach, follow -up interview).

Through guiding teachers through change and transformation and acting as an advocate to administration, coaches use their interpersonal skills to negotiate meaning with teachers and enrich the professional relationship.

Honesty, Transparency, Caring and Concern:

Coaches and teachers forge meaningful professional relationships when they are honest in their communication, transparent with their time, and demonstrate care and concern for the others' well-being.

We scheduled the next meeting, so we both knew the next step. So, we know where we are going (Instructional coach, initial interview).

I think, ultimately, it is up to the coach to develop that personal relationship with teachers.... If you have that relationship, they know exactly what they are getting (Instructional coach, follow-up interview).

I have all the teachers' numbers in my phone, and we text each other a lot. They are not a bother, and I will always respond (Instructional coach, initial interview).

I had [a coach] and [they] were awesome. I mean I owe [them] my life. I wanted to quit in November, I mean I got stabbed in my first months on the job. And [the coach] told me, 'No, you can do this!'...and [they] kept ahold of my hand and kept coming into my classroom every day (Teacher, initial interview).

The above vignettes reveal just some of the ways coaches make themselves available to teachers, as well as show care and concern for their teacher's lives and professional well-being. Participants in this study frequently spoke of the security that came from knowing the instructional coach was available and invested in them.

Invested in the School Community:

Participants also shared the importance of instructional coaches investing in the larger school community, being known to the students and staff, and

participating in the life of the school. In order to strengthen the professional relationship, coaches cannot limit those ties to only teachers. Just as teachers become part of the fabric of the school community, so too, do instructional coaches. This enables coaches to bring a fresh perspective on students and families in their work with teachers. Additionally, understanding the needs of the community, based on data and involvement provides additional pathways for supporting student achievement.

Coach a teacher based on their need and their students' needs. I think a coach has to be aware of students (Teacher, follow-up interview).

All the teachers and staff are involved in the school community. It is a big part of our students' success (Teacher, initial interview).

Research participants shared numerous examples that demonstrated the ways in which a coach uses interpersonal and communication skills in order to deepen the professional relationship with the teacher, while acting to preserve the teacher's autonomy. Through their function as a resource for teachers, instructional coaches' partner with teachers, guide them and advocate for them, use honesty and

transparency in communication, demonstrate care and concern for teachers and invest in the larger school community.

As part of the professional relationship, there are instances in which resistance to coaching is encountered. Research question three focused on encounters with resistance. Research participants shared their encounters with resistance, including times when they, themselves, may have rebuffed coaching and the reasons for doing so. Generally speaking, teachers resist not the coach themselves, but rather district demands, things that take time away from what they believe to be the practical application of teaching in their classroom, or when the school culture does not support coaching. Only one instance of resistance was due to a lack of respect for the coach.

I think we were supposed to start these cycles that the district was implementing, but it was during testing season...so it was not like we were opposed to it but needed to get the kids ready and I can't do that co-teach/co-plan lessons right now (Teacher, initial interview).

The idea of making change, it is very difficult...because people develop an attachment to how they have always done something (Teacher, initial interview).

I'm thinking of one teacher who didn't seem to understand what we were doing. [They] wanted to make more about the students' problems and their parents, rather than their teaching. It was a lot of effort to turn toward the teaching (Instructional coach, initial interview).

Like, they're caught and sometimes the coach is just the mouthpiece for bad news (Teacher, initial interview).

I did not respect the person or what they were telling me. They were asking me to do something I didn't believe in. They were adding more to my plate without the support (Teacher, initial interview).

Through an understanding of what contributes to resistance in coaching, and data that demonstrates how instructional coaches can create professional relationships that empower teachers, it may be possible to minimize resistance to coaching through listening to the teacher cohort when they explain the nature of their resistance. Time, for teachers, can be scant and they place a premium on productive time with their students. Further, when districts give directives for implementation that may not fit into the culture of the school, teachers are bound to resist. Finally, if an instructional coach is not respected by their peers, they will surely encounter resistance from the very people they are meant to coach.

Research participants pointed out that outright resistance to coaching was, fortunately for both parties, rare. Often, initial reactions may be one of resistance, but through coaching, opinions moved and shifted.

### Summary

Nineteen research participants, each with a minimum of three years in their roles, completed electronic journals over twenty instructional days and engaged in interviews conducted over Zoom. In order to support member-checking and validation, six participants agreed to follow-up interviews. These interactions provided rich data that was manually coded, as well as additionally uploaded to qualitative data analysis software for further deduction of themes. The research participants provided honest and insightful examination of instructional coaching and the professional relationship between coaches and teachers. Through the participants sharing their stories and experiences, in journal and interview, the researcher created theoretical codes that aligned to the research questions. These theoretical codes contributed to a deeper understanding of the leadership a coach brings to their role, how coaches use professional development to empower teachers, illuminating the interpersonal and communication skills employed by coaches in order to support teachers' autonomy, as well as factors that cause resistance to instructional coaching. In answering research question one, how do

instructional coaches use their leadership role to empower teachers and support them, participants indicated that instructional coaches best do this within the framework of their role within professional development. This may be in the form of peer support, collaboration or using data to inform practices. In examining the second question, how do coaches use interpersonal and communication skills in order to respect teacher autonomy, the data indicate that when the instructional coach positions themselves as a resource in support of teachers and developing their practices, they are able to support instructional change in ways that protect teacher professionalism. Further, in cases of resistance, the third research question, participants indicated that resistance was generally to district policy and not affiliated with the coach, thereby providing coaches an avenue to seeking needed buy-in by demonstrating the relevance of a given policy to the school culture and community. Coming into a rich and contextual understanding of the ways in which instructional coaches and teachers create meaning through their interactions, leads the researcher to construct a grounded theory based in the rich, symbolic interaction of the teacher and instructional coach.

In chapter five, the constructed grounded theory will be explored, along with recommendations for educational leaders, the next steps for education reform in the area of instructional coaching, as well as recommendations for future research and the limitations of this study.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

#### Overview

Everything from the coaching becomes about responding to the needs of teachers, as opposed to the district saying, 'Coaching is THIS.' As long as my efforts are in alignment and parallel to the direction of the school. Coaching has to be differentiated because the dangers of systems thinking is that you're not uncovering some true need that may be there because the 'opportunity cost' may be focused on something else that isn't a big deal on that campus (Instructional coach, follow up interview).

The purpose of this constructivist grounded theory study was to explore the professional relationship that exists between an elementary classroom teacher and instructional coaches, in order to develop an understanding of the ways instructional coaches use leadership and communication skills, not credentialed authority, to support teachers in changing instructional practices that benefit student outcomes. This chapter outlines the key findings related to the research questions and connects those findings to a proposed theory which supports the professional relationship between coaches and teachers and is rooted in the current literature on instructional coaching as well as the theoretical

framework for this study: symbolic interactionism. Chapter five also, briefly, presents recommendations, the limitations of this study and conclusions.

This section contains discussion and future research possibilities to answer the following research questions:

Research Question 1: How do instructional coaches use their leadership role to empower teachers and support them in instructional strategy change?

Research Question 2: How do coaches use interpersonal and communication skills to negotiate meaning with teachers in order to respect teacher autonomy?

Research Question 3: How do coaches and teachers navigate problematic situations in which teacher display resistance to coaching?

While grounded theory research does not always yield a functioning theory, in this study, the researcher has constructed a grounded theory based on the data from participants and the literature in the field, that support instructional coaches and teachers in their work together. The constructed grounded theory is thus: *when instructional coaching is approached from a universal design perspective, based in meeting the needs of the teachers with whom one is working, then instructional coaches will face fewer acts of resistance and the professional relationship between the two parties will allow for the co-construction of knowledge in order to positively impact student learning.* This theory of practice is based in grounded theory (Charmaz, 2014) because the

perspective it demands can only be utilized when deeply grounded in the needs of the school culture and community.

In keeping with the findings of this study's research, approaching the coaching relationship with a design thinking lens, rather than a systems thinking lens, or "top-down" approach, will serve the three main findings of this study: supporting the professional development of the teachers present within the learning community, allowing coaches to be an authentic resource to teachers and minimizing or working through acts of resistance, by leveraging the professional relationship.

Universal Design for Instruction (UDI) came to education from the field of architecture. As Holbrook, Moore, and Zoss (2010) highlight in their research, Universal Design was an architectural principle that pushed for maximum accessibility and maintained aesthetic standards, thereby destigmatizing individuals with disabilities. Adapting this approach to student education meant linking instruction to students' ability to process information and permit flexibility in presentation, variety in how learning is acquired and options for students to demonstrate mastery (Rose & Meyer, 2002). Holbrook, and fellow researchers (2010) go farther in their research to argue that using UDI when working with adults demonstrates an ethic of care for the other party, a key finding in this study in which teachers indicated care and concern as an interpersonal quality necessary in coaching. "When we looked at our own practices and the larger cultural forces that informed them, we had to acknowledge the urgency behind

the expressed need for care. Standards, accreditation mandates; regimentation and regulation are part of the teacher education models” (Rose & Meyer, 2002, p. 684). While this study applied to teacher education programs, it opened the possibility that professional development of teachers is similar, and the principles of UDI are relevant for instructional coaches. When instructional coaches approach professional development from a design perspective it means they could consider the precise needs and goals of the teachers with whom they work. Using leadership skills to empower teachers, involves truly coming to know a fellow professional and working together, using data, to design a coaching relationship. This further allows for reinforcement of the peer relationship, provides opportunity for collaboration with one another and others with similar goals, while bringing clarity to the coach’s role, and validating the teacher’s lived experience over a district directed mandate. All of which clearly demonstrates respect for the teacher’s professionalism and supports the needs of the students with whom the teacher is working.

Further, as researchers Scott, McGuire and Shaw (2003) elucidate, design thinking provides “a more cohesive instructional environment” (p.374). Utilizing the nine principles of UDI, as outlined by Scott, et al. (2003) one can apply these principles when acting as a resource for teachers and supporting professional autonomy. Application of these principles to coaching would mean that coaching is made more equitable and designed around the needs of a particular teacher or group of teachers. Also, in this approach, coaching is flexible in how it is used. As

Bungay Stanier (2016) highlights, “coaching should be a *daily, informal act*, not an occasional formal ‘It’s Coaching Time!’ event” (p. 7). Pointing toward a need for events beyond the formal coaching cycle to count as coaching. Every text, email, and conversation is the coach acting as a resource and should “count” as an act of coaching. Another principle is that design be simple and intuitive; a further argument for coaching to include all the small resourceful assists provided by a coach. Principle four argues for perceptible information, meaning that the coach effectively communicates needed information. While acting as a peer and resource, coaches may still communicate district initiatives to teachers. If coaching is designed to respond to the needs of teachers and students, then the coach carrying a simple message may be viewed as a reliable resource rather than a district agent. Additionally, there must be a tolerance for error. The idea of risk-taking and being vulnerable in trying to improve is essential. Because a coach cannot evaluate a teacher, both parties should feel able to take chances and reflect on the outcome together. Another principle is that design should involve low physical effort to maximize brain power for learning. In coaching, this would indicate the need for coaches to provide necessary resources to teachers: data, articles, videos, or links. This supports the teachers and keeps them from needing to physically exert themselves in tracking down resources while allowing them the brain power to peruse and internalize the resources. The seventh principle concerns size and space for approach and use. As a coaching issue, does the coach have access to teachers and do teachers have access to

coaches? Are there spaces for meeting that allow for preserving confidentiality? Further, principle eight calls for the creation of a community of learners. As a resource for teachers, committed to their empowerment and autonomy, a coach can help support the principle of all learning together and additionally apply the ninth principle to coaching which insists on building a welcoming, inclusive environment with high expectations.

Another way in which using UDI principles in coaching corresponds to this study's findings is in circumstances of resistance to coaching. Participants spoke of wanting to resist coaching when the coach was perceived as implementing something from a program or directive from the district when teachers had pressing and relevant needs from the students with whom they are working. When coaching is approached as anchored in the culture and community of the school rather than as a systemic agent of the district, bound by formal coaching cycles, then coaches can engage in meaning-making of district directives and find ways in which district demands are germane to campus life, thereby reducing teacher stress and resistance. In this manner, through broadening what activities are considered instructional coaching and prioritizing the needs of the of the school community, trust between coach and teacher will deepen and acts of resistance will be able to be processed by leaning on the established connections between coach and teacher.

This constructed grounded theory also ties back to the relevant literature as presented in chapter two. For example, the viewpoint that coaches are middle

leaders supporting professional development as a partner to teachers (Lotter, et al, 2012; Gallucci, et al, 2010; Woulfin, 2018); when acting as a partner and using a design lens based on creating meaning through interaction, instructional coaches are better able to support the empowerment of the individual teacher and the broader community. Further, through the adaptation of various coaching models (Knight & van Newburgh,2012; Reddy, et al, 2017; Marzano, et al, 2012) to meet the individual needs of those being coached, one can maintain the highly contextual and cultural nature of coaching rather than assume that one coaching model applies for each professional regardless of need or experience.

Approaching professionals by matching resources to needs will respect the professional autonomy of the peer while procuring buy-in to the process of coaching (Campbell & Malkus, 2011). Through design thinking, a coach will be better able to engage in collaborative coaching and more effectively use their political capital, when needed, to make changes in order to implement policy in the absence of any real authority to do so (Coburn & Woulfin, 2017; Woulfin & Rigby, 2017; Marsh, et al, 2010). Bringing design thinking to instructional coaching further supports Milad's (2017) finding that coaches who display empathy and tolerance support the cultivation of teachers who change behavior and are more reflective of strategy use. Finally, implementing design principles to guide the interaction and professional relationship between coach and teacher may reduce resistance as detailed in research (Kraft, et al, 2018; Jacobs, et al,

2018; Atteberry & Bryk, 2011) through more exactly personalizing the interactions which are shaped by the social norms of campus.

In all six follow-up member check interviews, research participants were supportive of this constructed theory and helped clarify and validate these notions. One coach likened the design approach to good teaching, noting that the most effective teachers are those who respond to the needs of their students rather than attempting a “one-size-fits-all” approach.

We as coaches need to design with the end in mind, the way we would do lesson planning, for the teachers we partner with (Instructional coach, follow-up interview).

Another instructional coach expressed that utilizing design thinking with teachers would broaden the depth of coaching and moves coaching away from a system approach which would necessitate coaches be able to dedicate more time to the act of coaching, rather than needing to engage in pseudo-administrative tasks that leave coaches inaccessible to teachers.

But the reality is that we get pulled in so many different directions that it does take us away from our initial goal and purpose.... the system we have right now does not allow us to do our jobs...If we had this kind of approach [design thinking], I would feel like I was doing my job (Instructional coach, follow-up interview).

Additionally, another participant coach highlighted that a design thinking approach to coaching would take into account the needs and experiences of both teachers and students, which varies from site to site within a district. This participant drew a parallel between instructional coaching and sports coaching, in which successful coaches cultivate a culture unique to the team and build toward the vision from the ground up. All of this is designed based on the strengths and needs of the team. So, too, this participant offered, can instructional coaching be thusly rendered. The teacher participants of follow-up interviews each spoke to the power of the design thinking approach as it levels the playing field by directly supporting the needs of the teachers and students. One offered that this approach could create more equitable student outcomes by supporting a teacher who may need to modify instructional strategies and raise expectations for students. Finally, the remaining teacher participants offered that a design thinking approach would empower them and preserve professional autonomy through creating coaching around a teacher's own identified needs and goals, and that it would further support developing the art and craft of teaching. Through personalizing coaching, these teacher participants identified the power of coaching as made relevant to the culture, time, and place of the school community.

Approaching instructional coaching through implementing Universal Design for Instruction principles and design thinking, is supported by the

findings of this study as well as the existing literature. This grounded theory is also aligned with the theoretical framework for this study, Symbolic Interactionism and supported by the complementary framework of Relational Trust. Miller (2011) relays that for Mead “gestures, utterances, and actions have no inherent meaning. Rather meaning is related to purposive outcome- consequences. For Mead, the meaning of an utterance is the response that follows it and any further interaction- consequences” (p.343). This is applicable to the interaction between coach and teacher utilizing universal design because it is the results of the interaction that are relevant. If coaches engage with teachers in ways that are designed to support professional development, the consequences will be professionals who are empowered and autonomous. Miller (2011) reassures us that structure arises from co-participation, which coaching is designed to be, due to the collegial nature of the relationship. The researcher (2011) goes on to remind that interaction is created through “copresence, reciprocally acknowledged attention, mutual responsiveness, establishing congruent identities, developing a shared focus and a social objective” (p.344). In these ways the symbolic becomes manifest and meaning is created and received between coach and teacher. Schools are institutions with histories and structures. Teachers and coaches navigate the area between institutional demands and classroom realities (Everitt, 2012). It is through this navigation that teachers and instructional coaches

work to improve practices for the benefit of students. A teacher, whether newer or with years of experience, makes sense of things, according to Symbolic Interactionism, retroactively, while still acting in the moment to meet current demands. Everitt's (2012) research shows that teachers find ways to negotiate institutional demands and classroom needs. In so doing, teachers develop "arsenals of practice" that they come to believe support student achievement and engagement. It is through the construction of these arsenals that teachers contribute to the character of the educational institution. Further, in order to achieve a design approach, teacher and instructional coach must be able to enter a trusting relationship, based on social exchanges, that will allow them to interact in meaningful ways so that sustainable change may be created. The invocation of relational trust allows for instructional coaches to relate to those they coach and support them in the unique work of education: caring, civility and interdependence. A design approach to coaching would allow for more reliance on professional autonomy and less need to navigate institutional rules, thereby reducing resistance to coaching. Using the social nature of the instructional coach-teacher relationship, grounded in the reality of classroom demands, allows for the construction of a meaningful, trust-based relationship.

## Recommendations for Educational Leaders

The age of school accountability culture has given rise to instructional coaching as a tool for professional development. Much research validates the proliferation of instructional coaching as an appropriate method for reliable teacher support to improve teaching strategies over time. However, despite a preponderance of “how-to” commercial products on instructional coaching which claims that coaching may be systematized in one way or another, impactful instructional coaching should be designed to be so, through the tandem work and collaboration of an instructional coach and a teacher. Educational leaders would be wise to clarify the role of the instructional coach and their place in campus culture. Teachers, and sometimes coaches themselves, are unsure about the purpose of instructional coaching and unaware of the confidential nature of this teacher support. When instructional coaches are viewed, at their work site, as some sort of administrator or as allied with administration to the exclusion of the teaching corps, an instructional coach may be unable to effectively create the necessary relationships with teachers. Additionally, training for instructional coaches in a variety of approaches and a working familiarity with the principles of Universal Design for Instruction would support the development of needed coaching skills. Perhaps an approach such as that found in the work of Tschannen-Moran & Tschannen-Moran (2020), which advocates what the authors call an individualized and evocative approach to coaching:

Evocative coaches respect the individuality of teachers and

collaborate with them by exploring their stories, understanding their feelings, appreciating their strengths, and enhancing their designs. These moves make up the dynamic process of evocative coaching conversations, enabling teachers to reconnect with their passion and move to increasing levels of personal and professional mastery (p.3).

Educational leaders need also consider protecting an instructional coach's time from being diluted by other tasks not related to interacting with teachers. In addition to protecting the work of the coach, leaders should broaden the definition of coaching to incorporate all the 'in the moment' informal interactions between coaches and teachers, rather than narrowly defining coaching as limited to formal coaching cycles. As Bungay Stanier (2016) points out, coaching is about both performance and development, equally essential.

Coaching for performance is about addressing and fixing a specific problem or challenge. It is putting out the fire or banking the fire. It's everyday stuff and it's important and necessary. Coaching for development is about turning the focus from the issue to the person dealing with the issue, the person who is managing the fire. This conversation is more rare and significantly more powerful (p.40).

Throughout their days, instructional coaches are called upon to coach

both performance (acting as a resource for teachers) and development (indeed, engaging in professional development), both of which take time: time to develop authentic relationships, time to collaborate, time to implement and time to reflect. Preserving an instructional coach's precious resource of time allows them to engage in acts of coaching and should be a priority for educational leaders.

Finally, educational leaders who are tasked with policy implementation should invest in utilizing adult learning theory (Knowles,2005) and work to make clear the practical applications of policy for the school site. In both design thinking and andragogy, learners engage when tasks are relevant to the work and when given a viable reason to do so. Instructional coaches and other leaders, through prioritizing the professional relationship, should invest time in developing an understanding around the benefits for students and teachers that may result through implementation. Further, leaders may make the case for how a policy aligns with the context and culture of the school site. In doing so, teachers may see the value in the change and see the instructional coach as a trusted guide in the process.

### Next Steps for Educational Reform

Instructional coaching as a role in schools or districts is a relatively recent phenomena borne of school accountability policies that call for improved

professional development in order to advance student outcomes. With educational reform, there is a need to place highly trained coaches at school sites over central offices, thereby increasing the coach's ability to create the professional relationships with teachers that are necessary to inaugurate and maintain a coaching relationship. Further, trained, site-based coaches function in tandem with the site's leadership team, making coaching part of the site's mission, vision and culture and supporting the creation of a community of learners. Educational leadership, such as site administrators, need to enter trainings with coaches, so that administrators may understand and communicate the nature and purpose of instructional coaching to the broader school community as well as relaying to the community how coaching ties into the vision for the school. Finally, while part of accountability culture in American education, the work of coaching takes time that cannot always be explicitly accounted for or made visible. Instructional coaches should be supported in the time needed to read broadly on a teaching strategy, given time in the workday to analyze needed data or plan a coaching conversation. Now that there is coaching in the schools, one next step is to resist the urge to demand that coaches account for every moment of their day with "visible" tasks. Much like teachers resist coaching when it threatens their autonomy, so too do coaches become demoralized when what is named coaching by a central office becomes quantifiable tasks that are far removed from instructional coaching, such as serving as a testing coordinator for a site. If coaches are asked to take on these tasks, then it must be incorporated

into their job descriptions, so that all parties have transparency and clarity around the use of an instructional coach's most valuable resource, time.

### Recommendations for Future Research

A meaningful way to further investigate this topic may be through creating a hypothesis from the grounded theory and testing it via a mixed methods study. Perhaps, restating the grounded theory as, "When instructional coaches apply the principles of design thinking to their work with teachers, teachers will be less likely to resist coaching and consider it an empowering practice in their professional lives". A survey could be used as an instrument to gauge pre and post study views on impact of coaching. Semi-structured interviews and focus groups could be convened throughout the study to ascertain if the connection is being made around coaches designing their coaching to meet the needs of the teachers and to demonstrate the connections between policy and its applications to the classroom. From this type of further study, one may explore whether these practices are beneficial to the professional relationship, as expressed by study participants.

While this study examined the professional relationship between instructional coaches and teachers, there are more areas of needed research. In the reality of school, the administrator, the instructional coach, and the teacher form a triangle of interaction. One recommendation is to plumb the professional relationship between the principal and coach. What about the relationship

permits the coach to do the work they do, to operate in confidentiality, and how does the principal influence the school culture to embrace coaching? This “leg” of the triangle may have an ability to impact the acceptance and utilization of coaching. More research into this relationship and how it functions is needed.

### Limitations of Study

This constructivist grounded theory study possesses some limitations. While theoretical saturation was reached, the sample in this study consisted of a relatively small number of teachers and coaches, representing only one district and only in the elementary level. Further, no administrators were invited to participate to give their perspective on this relationship. Additionally, because instructional coaches and teachers are peers to one another, no questions were posed in which one party was asked to evaluate another’s performance, participants in the study were not made known to anyone by the researcher, and while a teacher from one site may have participated, no effort was made to then secure the participation of their corresponding instructional coach.

### Conclusion

Instructional coaching, partnering with teachers to provide them with data and strategies for responding to student needs, has proven to be a reliable method of professional development. The professional relationship between coach and teacher is non-evaluative, therefore coaches must skillfully develop

said relationship. Using a collaborative approach, operating as a resource and supportive partner, and designing one's coaching rooted in the school culture and vision are what is called for by some who participate in these professional relationships and is supported in the literature.

Through an extensive review of the literature around instructional coaching and the careful development of a grounded theory research design, instructional coaches and teachers were able to speak to how coaches effectively use their leadership position and develop their interpersonal and communications skills. Additionally, teachers and coaches were able to illuminate what leads to resistance to coaching. All these insights and conversations allowed for the emergent data to consolidate around a grounded theory: Instructional coaching can be approached using design thinking in direct response to the contextual needs of teachers and students. When the professional relationship is rooted in shared meaning-making, trust, empowerment and the preservation of professional autonomy, teachers are more likely to engage in the reflection necessary to alter strategic practices and achieve equitable outcomes for their students.

APPENDIX A  
ELECTRONIC JOURNAL FORMS

## Classroom Teacher Electronic Journal:

Please Complete this over the course of 20 instructional days, February 1, - March 1, 2021. You are asked to complete only when you interact with an Instructional Coach.

1. E-mail

2. Date

3. If you interacted with an Instructional Coach, please describe the nature of the interaction (e.g., coaching cycle, conference, observation, professional development, PLC).

4. Empowerment: Enabling the teacher to be more confident, more autonomous and stronger in skill set. Think back to your interaction with the coach. What was accomplished during the interaction? Explain.

5. Autonomy: independence or freedom. Think back to your interaction with the coach. Do you have choice or control in implementing any suggestions made by the coach? Explain.

## Instructional Coach Electronic Journal:

For 20 instructional days, February 1- March 2, 2021, you are asked to reflect on your coaching and the interaction with others. Please do not include any identifiable information in your reflection.

1. E-Mail

2. Date

3. Briefly, explain what coaching activities you engaged in and with whom (teacher, administrator, another coach or district personnel). Please do not name people, simply state the role of the person.

4. Empowerment: Enabling the teacher to be more confident, more autonomous and stronger in their skill set. Today, I think my coaching was:

- Disempowering for the teacher
- Somewhat disempowering for the teacher
- Not empowering for the teacher
- Somewhat empowering for the teacher
- Empowering for the teacher

5. Why did you give the above rating?

APPENDIX B  
INITIAL INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

## Interview Protocol: Teacher

1. Interviewee:
2. Talk about your teaching experiences and philosophy.
3. What is your school culture?
4. What does collaboration mean for you?
5. What is your experience with coaching?
6. What makes an effective coaching session?
7. Talk about a time you resisted coaching.

## Interview Protocol: Instructional Coaches

1. Interviewee
2. Talk about your experiences in coaching and your philosophy of coaching.
3. Share how you came to be a coach.
4. What specific training did you receive when you became a coach?
5. How do you think of collaboration?
6. What makes an effective coaching session?
7. Talk about encounters with resistance to coaching.

APPENDIX C

FOLLOW UP/ MEMBER CHECK INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Participant: \_\_\_\_\_

Follow Up/Member Check Interview Protocol: Coaches and Teachers

Thoughts on coaching as a driver for equitable outcomes for students:

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Design thinking and systems thinking:

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Social energy on campus that does not translate to same energy for collaborating on curriculum. What can coaches do to take the social constructs that exist and translate that to PLC?

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Is there a connection between being receptive to coaching and being viewed as an autonomous professional?

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If an administrator does not set a tone that includes coaching as part of campus life, how does that impact the relationship between the coach and teachers? What happens to the overall climate of the school?

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When a coach has a day or days where there are few opportunities for coaching, per se, does this mean that the teachers are unsupported? How do teachers know that coaches are available?

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APPENDIX D  
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD APPROVAL



January 14, 2021

**CSUSB INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD**

Expedited Review

IRB-FY2021-145

Status: Approved

Prof. Donna Schnorr and Ms. Julia Alberg-Burbank  
COE - Educ. Leadership & Tech ELT and COE - Doctoral Studies  
California State University, San Bernardino  
5500 University Parkway  
San Bernardino, California 92407

Dear Prof. Schnorr and Ms. Alberg-Burbank:

Your application to use human subjects, titled "Instructional Coaches and Teachers: A Grounded Theory Study of their Professional Relationship" has been reviewed and reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of CSU, San Bernardino. The CSUSB IRB has not evaluated your proposal for scientific merit, except to weigh the risk and benefits of the study except to ensure the protection of human participants. Important Note: This approval notice does not replace any departmental or additional campus approvals which may be required including access to CSUSB campus facilities and affiliate campuses due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Visit the Office of Academic Research website for more information at <https://www.csusb.edu/academic-research>.

The study is approved as of January 14, 2021. The study will require an annual administrative check-in (annual report) on the current status of the study on January 14, 2022. Please use the renewal form to complete the annual report.

If your study is closed to enrollment, the data has been de-identified, and you're only analyzing the data - you may close the study by submitting the Closure Application Form through the Cayuse IRB system. Please note the Cayuse IRB system will notify you when your protocol is due for renewal. Ensure you file your protocol renewal and continuing review form through the Cayuse IRB system to keep your protocol current and active unless you have completed your study. Please note a lapse in your approval may result in your not being able to use the data collected during the lapse in your approval.

You are required to notify the IRB of the following as mandated by the Office of Human Research Protections (OHRP) federal regulations 45 CFR 46 and CSUSB IRB policy. The forms (modification, renewal, unanticipated/adverse event, study closure) are located in the Cayuse IRB System with instructions provided on the IRB Applications, Forms, and Submission Webpage. Failure to notify the IRB of the following requirements may

result in disciplinary action.

- Ensure your CITI Human Subjects Training is kept up-to-date and current throughout the study.
- Submit a protocol modification (change) if any changes (no matter how minor) are proposed in your study for review and approval by the IRB before being implementing in your study.
- Notify the IRB within 5 days of any unanticipated or adverse events experienced by subjects during your research.
- Submit a study closure through the Cayuse IRB submission system once your study has ended.

The CSUSB IRB has not evaluated your proposal for scientific merit, except to weigh the risks and benefits to the human participants in your IRB application. If you have any questions about the IRB's decision please contact Michael Gillespie, the IRB Compliance Officer. Mr. Michael Gillespie can be reached by phone at (909) 537-7588, by fax at (909) 537-7028, or by email at [mgillesp@csusb.edu](mailto:mgillesp@csusb.edu). Please include your application approval number IRB-FY2021-145 in all correspondence. Any complaints you receive regarding your research from participants or others should be directed to Mr. Gillespie.

Best of luck with your research.

Sincerely,

*Nicole Dabbs*

Nicole Dabbs, Ph.D., IRB Chair  
CSUSB Institutional Review Board

ND/MG

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