

ABSTRACT

SMITH, SYREETA D. The Perceived Impact of Instructional Coaching on Teachers and Student Achievement in Literacy (Under the direction of Dr. Lance Fusarelli).

This qualitative phenomenological study aimed to make meaning of and capture the essence of the experience of literacy coaching on teachers in a single school district. This study sought to understand how literacy coaches support teachers' instructional practices and address the needs of traditionally marginalized student populations like Hispanics and Blacks. Teachers of grades K-2 English-Language Arts from schools across the district, where at least 20% or more of the student population identified as Black or Hispanic and 35% of the students are eligible for free or reduced meals, were invited to participate.

Qualitative data was collected through a profile questionnaire and virtual interviews to understand the live experiences of teachers receiving coaching in literacy, their perception on the coach's knowledge level, its impact on instructional practices, student achievement, and addressing the needs of traditionally marginalized population student population, particularly Black and Hispanic students.

The results of this study indicated that coaching is seen as a support reserved for new or struggling teachers with little acknowledgement of its potential to elevate the teaching practices of teachers of various levels or to raise student achievement. The study revealed that the current district and school culture provides minimal parameters on effective strategies and structures to maximize the role of the coach. Furthermore, the results indicated a lack of attention to the significant performance gaps among student subgroups.

Drawing on the findings of this research confirm teachers share a common belief that teachers have autonomy to direct the partnership with the coach. An area that requires urgent

attention is the role of coaching in eliminating proficiency disparities between Whites and Black and Whites and Hispanic students.

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The Perceived Impact of Instructional Coaching on Teachers and Student Achievement in
Literacy

by
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DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my son, Maurice Tune Jr, who is my greatest gift. He inspires me to be the best version of myself. Through this process I was able to model resilience, determination, and dedication for him. Three crucial skills necessary to reach one's dreams.

I also dedicate this dissertation to all women who are balancing a demanding profession, the joys of motherhood, and the complexities of womanhood. Keep striving!

BIOGRAPHY

My years serving in public education expands over twenty-five years. In 1997, I began my teaching career after graduating summa cum laude with a Bachelor of Arts in Elementary Education K-2 from North Carolina Central University in Durham, North Carolina. As a North Carolina Teaching Fellow recipient, I attended four years at a university at no cost to my family.

I returned to my hometown of Goldsboro, North Carolina after graduating from college and secured employment with the Wayne County Public System. My career began as a third-grade teacher at North Drive Elementary School. My six years of serving the students and families of North Drive Elementary School was one of the most fulfilling experiences of my career.

In 2003, after being awarded the North Carolina Principal Fellows' Scholarship I started my journey toward earning a Master of Arts in School Administration at North Carolina State University. I graduated in 2005, achieving a 4.0 grade point average. I secured employment with the Wake County Public School System as Assistant Principal of Wilburn Year-Round Elementary School. In 2007, I transitioned within the school system to open the newly built North Forest Pines Year-Round Elementary School as Assistant Principal. Opening a brand new school and building a school culture and instructional program from the ground is a highlight of my career. In 2011, Wake County Public Schools named me as their Assistant Principal of the Year 2011-2012. I found this award to be significant as my impact transferred beyond the walls of my school to other Assistant Principals within the district. Following this prestigious recognition, I was named Principal of North Forest Pines in 2012. My new position elevated my role as instructional leader and strengthen my skill set with cultural leadership.

My journey into district leadership commenced in 2015 as Director of Year-Round Support and Early Elementary Education. In this role I supported teaching and learning for over 114 schools. I led program initiatives like Achieve 3000 and Dreambox and assisted with vetting and procuring a new English-Language Arts Curriculum. After 5 years as Director, I advanced to the role as Senior Director of Elementary Programs in 2020. In 2024, as part of the reorganization of the department, my title changed to Senior Director of Elementary Regional Achievement and School Support. In this position, I continue to support curriculum, instruction and professional development in elementary schools with an intense focus on offering more hands-on assistance at the school level.

Each stop along my path has stretched me as leader equipping me with new insight, perspectives and skills. I enthusiastically continue this incredible journey.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

According to the 2022 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) report, only 32% of North Carolina fourth graders are proficient in reading (nces.ed.gov). When disaggregated, the data show race, ethnicity, and income disparities. For example, 40% of White children in North Carolina are reading proficiently compared with only 20% of Black and 23% of Hispanic children (nces.ed.gov). In North Carolina, only 21% of children eligible for free and reduced lunch (which encompasses 59% of students) are reading proficiently (nces.ed.gov). Nationally, students in higher-income families are making gains at a rate nearly twice that of students in low-income families (nces.ed.gov). In addition, white male students nationwide are three times more likely to read proficiently in grade 4 than their African-American peers and more than twice as likely than their Hispanic peers (nces.ed.gov).

In response to the dismal performance in reading, the North Carolina General Assembly in 2012 enacted the Excellent Public Schools Act (SL2012-142). Within the Act is the Read to Achieve program, which became law in July 2012 and applied to all schools at the beginning of the 2013-14 school year (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2012, n.d). Article 8 Chapter 115C of the General Statutes includes Part 1A: the North Carolina Read to Achieve Law). The goal of this program “is to ensure that every student reads at or above grade level by the end of third grade and continue to progress in reading proficiency so that he or she can read, comprehend, integrate, and apply complex texts needed for secondary education and career success” (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2012, para 1).

As part of my current job responsibilities, I ensure compliance and full implementation of all components of the Excellent Public School Act (Read to Achieve Program). The report, *Is Read to Achieve Making the Grade? An Assessment of North Carolina’s Elementary Reading*

Proficiency Initiative, evaluates the effectiveness of the Read to Achieve (RtA) legislation by examining the causal effect of the subsequent years' performance of students identified for possible retention. It also examined the causal effect of students' performance who received the RtA interventions and supports. No causal effects were identified. The report acknowledges the depth of the policy with its various evolving parts (Weiss et al., 2018). It attempts "to unpack the results of assessments of the impact of the policy on the first two cohorts of 3rd-grade students exposed to it" (Weiss et al., 2018, p. 9). The report provides an overview of the Read to Achieve policy, including its goals, how it assesses reading proficiency, its interventions and supports, and pathways for retention and promotion. The findings concluded that the RtA policy had a minor impact on student achievement on the policy's goal to produce proficient readers and end social promotion. RtA interventions and support failed to support substantial improvement in test proficiency. The overall trend in 3rd and 4th-grade EOG proficiency has been relatively flat yearly since the policy was implemented (Weiss et al., 2018). Limitations of the study include viewing the data from the state level and failing to investigate LEAs individually to look for casual relationships within the data. The report also acknowledged the discrepancy between state policy and implementation at the LEA level. Despite the findings, the North Carolina General Assembly reauthorized the Excellent Public Schools Act in 2021, adding an integral requirement:

All teachers and administrators engaging with children in grades Pre-K to Fifth grade must receive training to "ensure developmentally appropriate instruction grounded in the Science of Reading and outcomes promoting reading achievement in students." (SL2021-8 115C-83.4B)

Additionally, in 2022, the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction (DPI) unveiled a statewide literacy coaching model. This model included hiring 115 new regional literacy coaches to support the implementation of the science of reading for each local education agency (LEA). The annually recurring fourteen million dollar expenditure is to couple with the required Science of Reading training for teachers through Language Essentials for Teachers of Reading and Spelling (LETRS). LETRS is a comprehensive professional learning solution designed to provide early childhood and elementary education and administrators with the research of the science of reading and the skills to deliver effective literacy instructional practices, resulting in long-term systemic changes in literacy instruction (Lexia Learning, n.d.) The model aims to build school capacity to help teachers transfer knowledge of evidence-based literacy strategies into everyday practices (Fofaria, 2022). With both components in place, DPI expects to boost the reading performance of over 777,000 elementary students in North Carolina (Fofaria, 2022). As shown in Table 1, standardized reading proficiency of elementary students in North Carolina have followed national trends with minimal increases of 1 to 3 % a year. (NCPI/DSAR/OAT/LM, 2023). Fourth-grade reading proficiency is the exception; the percentage increases are 4-5% each year, beginning in 2020-21. The Black and Hispanic subgroups' performance mirrored the state.

Table 1

North Carolina End-of-grade reading grades 3-5 Level 3 and above (Grade Level Proficiency)

| Student Subgroup | Reading Grade 3 | | | Reading Grade 4 | | | Reading Grade 5 | | |
|------------------|-----------------|-------|-------|-----------------|-------|-------|-----------------|-------|-------|
| | 20-21 | 21-22 | 22-23 | 20-21 | 21-22 | 22-23 | 20-21 | 21-22 | 22-23 |
| All Students | 45.1 | 46.4 | 47.8 | 45.1 | 51.3 | 55.1 | 42.4 | 45.7 | 48.0 |
| Black | 27.8 | 31.0 | 33.1 | 27.6 | 34.8 | 40.3 | 24.6 | 28.4 | 31.4 |
| Hispanic | 30.1 | 32.8 | 33.8 | 30.7 | 38.1 | 42.5 | 28.6 | 31.8 | 34.1 |
| White | 59.4 | 59.6 | 60.5 | 59.3 | 64.7 | 67.4 | 56.4 | 59.9 | 61.7 |

The pressure to improve public schools is not unique to North Carolina. From *A Nation at Risk* to No Child Left Behind to the Every Student Succeeds Act, education reform initiatives have failed to improve student achievement significantly (Gay, 2019). States and school districts have scrambled to find solutions for sustainable improvements in student achievement, particularly for traditionally lower-performing student populations. Over the last decade, instructional coaching has emerged as a popular professional development strategy for ensuring the transfer of evidence-based practices into classrooms (Gulamhussein, 2013). Coaching has been linked to improving teacher capacity, raising student achievement, implementing curricular initiatives, differentiating instruction, and addressing equity issues (Desimone & Pak, 2017; Every Student Succeeds Act, 2015; Kota et al., 2019). While researchers have primarily focused on the quantitative outcomes of instructional coaching, a need exists to learn about the shared coaching experiences from the teachers perceiving and receiving the phenomenon.

Statement of the Problem

Despite federal and state attempts, student achievement in the United States remains stagnant and needs to grow. Studies have indicated that instructional coaching has yielded some success in teaching improvements. However, more research is needed to connect instructional coaching with improved teacher and student achievement over the long term (Goodwin, 2013; Knight, 2006).

Wake County Public Schools has followed the national trend of employing coaches to support instruction and teachers by transferring mastered skills into classroom practice. Wake County Public Schools is the largest school district in North Carolina and the 14th largest in the United States. During the 2023-2024 school year, it boasted an average daily membership of 159,995 students across 198 schools. The district's schools include 119 elementary, 38 middle, 31 high schools, seven alternative schools, and three schools with multiple grade configurations such as K-8 or 6-12. Its operating budget exceeds two billion dollars, and the per pupil expenditure is approximately \$13,000. The district employs over 20,000 employees, with a little more than half (10,899) serving as teachers. 40% of the teachers have advanced degrees and 1405 are nationally board certified. In 2021, North Carolina led the nation of the state with the most nationally board-certified teachers, with Wake County Public Schools having the highest number for a single district across the country. Despite this accolade, in 2023, Wake County Public Schools ranked 9th in overall student performance out of the 115 local education agencies in NC. The subgroups of the economically disadvantaged, Black, and Hispanic students ranked 78th, 29th, and 83rd, respectively. During the same year, the district's student growth ranked 21st out of the 115 local educational agencies in NC, with the economically disadvantaged, Black, and Hispanic subgroups ranking 33rd, 27th, and 56th, respectively.

The school district began experimenting with literacy coaches in 2014. Schools were selected for participation during the early implementation phase based on specific criteria. The district gave preference to schools that were disproportionately referring Black boys for special education services. Over time, the allotment of coaches based on data morphed into a uniform allotment for all schools regardless of performance or disproportionality. Currently, the district funds half-time literacy coaches for every elementary school. This initiative's price tag exceeds 1.2 million dollars annually. Use of a combination of local and federal funds comprise the allotment for this initiative. Table 2 depicts slight standardized reading proficiency increases with grades 4 and 5 while grade 3 proficiency remaining relatively flat. The standardized reading proficiency of Wake County Public Schools' elementary students failed to accelerate drastically standardized despite the million-dollar investment in literacy coaches.

Table 2

Wake County Public Schools End-of-grade reading grades 3-5 Level 3 and above (Grade Level Proficiency)

| | Reading Grade 3 | | | Reading Grade 4 | | | Reading Grade 5 | | |
|--------------|-----------------|-------|-------|-----------------|-------|-------|-----------------|-------|-------|
| | 20-21 | 21-22 | 22-23 | 20-21 | 21-22 | 22-23 | 20-21 | 21-22 | 22-23 |
| All Students | 59.5 | 58.6 | 58.4 | 56.9 | 60.1 | 65.3 | 54.1 | 55.5 | 58.8 |
| Black | 35.1 | 35.8 | 35.8 | 34.2 | 39.1 | 44.3 | 30.2 | 34.3 | 35.0 |
| Hispanic | 33.4 | 36.5 | 36.2 | 31.4 | 39.8 | 42.8 | 28.1 | 32.4 | 34.1 |
| White | 76.1 | 73.9 | 73.2 | 72.1 | 78.0 | 80.2 | 69.5 | 73.4 | 74.8 |

Purpose Statement

This phenomenological study will describe the coaching experience for teachers receiving instructional coaching at an elementary school in the Wake County Public School System. At this stage in the research, instructional coaching will be generally defined as a collaborative partnership between coach and teacher aimed at supporting classroom implementation of instructional practices and curriculum initiatives while fostering teacher reflection (Stoetzel & Taylor-Marshall, 2022).

Research Questions

Creswell (2007) suggests that researchers condense their entire study to one broad, overarching, central research question. He further recommends several associated, specific sub-questions. This study seeks to answer one central research question and two sub-questions.

1. How do teachers describe the lived experience of instructional coaching in literacy?

The associated sub-questions are listed below:

- 1a. How do teachers describe the perceived impact of coaching on their instructional practices in literacy?

- 1c. How do teachers describe the perceived impact of literacy coaching on addressing the needs of the African-American and Hispanic student populations?

Definition of Key Terms

The following terms are found throughout the study and are defined to offer clarity.

Language Essentials for Teachers of Reading and Spelling (LETRS)

The state requires all North Carolina teachers and administrators who engage with pre-kindergarten through fifth-grade students to engage in professional development. As legislation requires, LETRS instruction is developmentally appropriate, grounded in the Science of Reading,

and outcomes for promoting reading achievement in students (SL2021-8 115C-83.4B). Lexia Learning owns LETRS. Lexia touts LETRS as a comprehensive professional learning opportunity designed to provide administrators of early childhood and elementary educators with deep knowledge to be literacy and language experts in the science of reading. This professional learning was developed by Dr. Louisa Moats and other leaders in the field of literacy and centers around phonological awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, comprehension, and written language (lexialearning.com).

Excellent Public Schools Act, 2022

The first iteration of the Excellent Public Schools Act became law in 2013. The General Assembly reauthorized the law in 2022. The Act includes seven components (SL 2021-8):

1. Comprehensive Plan for Reading Achievement
2. Developmental Screening and Kindergarten Entry Assessment
3. Facilitating Early Grade Reading Proficiency
4. Elimination of Social Promotion
5. Successful Reading Development for Retained Students
6. Notification Requirements to Parents and Guardians
7. Accountability Measures

Both the required LETRS professional development and the Read to Achieve Law fall within the Excellent Public Schools Act.

Instructional Coaching

“Instructional coaches are onsite professional developers who teach educators how to use evidence-based teaching practices and to support them in learning and applying these practices in a variety of educational settings” (Knight, 2007, p. 43).

Literacy Coach

In Wake County Public Schools, a literacy coach is an instructional coach in a part-time or full-time teacher role responsible for leading the improvement of literacy in a school setting. Literacy coaching is an intentional, non-evaluative partnership around a collaborative common goal to build all kindergarten through second-grade students into proficient, skilled readers. Literacy coaches design and deliver effective differentiated professional learning opportunities for teachers focused on Science of Reading-aligned literacy practices to develop knowledge, skills, and behaviors.

Read to Achieve

The North Carolina General Assembly responded to North Carolina's bleak standardized reading proficiency by enacting the Read to Achieve law. According to Article 8 Chapter §115C of the General Statutes Part 1A, the North Carolina Read to Achieve Program's goal "is to ensure that every student read at or above grade level by the end of third grade and continue to progress in reading proficiency so that he or she can read, comprehend, integrate, and apply complex texts needed for secondary education and career success" (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction 2012 n.d, para 1).

Traditionally Marginalized Populations

Traditionally marginalized populations are those likely to be adversely affected by inequitable educational practices. These groups may be disenfranchised or distrust the government or societal systems. Blacks, Hispanics, women, and Indigenous people are examples of traditionally marginalized groups.

Significance of the Study

This study is significant as it strives to examine coaching from the shared common experience among teachers. Many studies on coaching have prioritized researching student

learning as the critical outcome of coaching. From this perspective, the underlying belief holds that educational inequities can be addressed by tailoring instruction to individual student needs through coaching (Stoetzel & Taylor-Marshall, 2022).

For coaching to impact student achievement, it is essential to derive meaning and describe the shared experience from the teachers who receive coaching. While improved student learning is the ultimate goal, understanding the three buckets—the perceived experiences of teachers receiving coaching, the perceived impact on instructional practices, and the perceived impact on traditionally marginalized populations—can lead to long-term improvement in student performance. Identifying how literacy coaches positively impact teaching practices can help the district evaluate the effectiveness of instructional coaching and possibly prioritize funding to expand the role from half-time to full-time. The results may also influence how principals utilize coaches to transform the instructional culture at the school level.

Limitations and Delimitations

This study will involve a small number of participants from a single school district in North Carolina. Moreover, only willing teachers will participate in the interview and study. Teachers' participation is voluntary, and their responses may not reflect the totality of elementary school teachers' experiences with instructional coaches. The researcher has limited access to the teachers at the school and could not employ purposeful sampling. The competence, disposition, and quality of the teacher's assigned literacy coach may impact the teacher's lived experience. Selection of teachers to serve in the literacy coach role is at the hiring discretion of the school principal.

Delimitations include requiring participants to work in schools from a single district and meet established criteria. The criteria include being an elementary school within the Wake

County Public School System, having at least a half-time K-2 literacy coach, and serving a student population of 30% or more who identify as non-white. Finally, a virtual platform will be used to conduct the one-on-one and focus group interviews. A virtual platform may limit the researcher's ability to read and monitor the participants' body language and make real-time adjustments in response.

Overview of the Study

This study is organized into five chapters, references, and appendices. Chapter 1 highlights the purpose, need, and significance of the study. Increasing student achievement in reading remains a challenge despite the efforts and funds from federal, state, and local education agencies (Gay, 2019). As a result, instructional coaching has emerged as a popular improvement strategy (Gulamhussein, 2013). Chapter 1 outlines the research questions, the definition of terms, and the limitations and delimitations of the study. Chapter 2 reviews the research and literature on instructional coaching and its impact on teacher practices and student achievement. Interviewing teachers who have experienced coaching will allow a personal connection to the data and tell an in-depth story of the perceived impact of instructional coaching. The interview questions intend to “understand the phenomena in their own terms to provide a description of human experience as it is experienced by the person allowing the essence to emerge” (Cameron et al., 2001, p. 34). The questions are directed at the participants’ experiences and feelings. Chapter 3 approaches the study from a phenomenological perspective. This chapter includes the selected research methodology and design, the selection of the school and participants, and the interview protocol used to collect data. The data findings and analyses are reported in Chapter 4. The interviews’ transcripts are read, annotated, and coded for patterns (Creswell, 2013). Additionally, themes are established based on literature reviews, and inductive coding occurs if

other themes arise. Finally, chapter 5 summarizes the findings, situates the findings within extant research, and offers recommendations for policy, practice, and future research.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

Student achievement in America continues to raise alarms. Several factors affect the achievement rate of students. These factors may include parental support, socioeconomic status, race, school quality, and district leadership. However, research consistently indicates that teacher quality is an essential factor contributing to student's success in school (Babu & Mendro, 2003; Sanders & Rivers, 1996), with some empirical evidence suggesting that teachers are the most critical schooling factor affecting student achievement (Sass et al., 2010). With stagnate student achievement proficiency across the nation, school districts are actively seeking strategies to improve student achievement and enhance the capacity and competencies of teachers. As a result, school districts across the United States and Canada have made coaching a prevalent professional development structure for teachers (Russell et al., 2020; Woulfin & Rigby, 2017). In addition to improving teacher capacity, coaching has been linked to raising student achievement, improving implementation of curricular initiatives, promoting differentiating instruction, and addressing equity issues (Desimone & Pak, 2017; Every Student Succeeds Act, 2015; Kota et al., 2019). Therefore, the importance of understanding coaches' impact on teachers, teaching, and student learning is paramount (Munson & Saclarides, 2022).

Literacy Coach

Coaches are usually experienced, successful classroom teachers (Chval et al., 2010), assigned to a single school or at the school district level to support instructional and programmatic improvements (Campbell & Malkus, 2011). Principals often seek out the best content or literacy teachers to serve as coaches (Shanklin, 2007) because they must do something to improve instruction to yield more remarkable student achievement outcomes.

Frequently, principals pay little attention to the soft skills necessary to lead adults or develop learning opportunities effective for adult learners (Deussen et al., 2007). Principals need to but often fail to carefully think through the skills or schedule necessary for the coach to be effective. Since coaches excelled as classroom teachers, they built their expertise in content instead of preparing for the shift in need from children to adult learners (Al Otaiba et al., 2008; Gallucci et al., 2010). McKenna and Walpole (2013) contend that a critical responsibility of literacy coaches is to master the nuances of successfully and effectively designing and facilitating professional learning opportunities for adult learners. In addition to the barriers to understanding adult learners, the responsibility of coaches leads them to fall into two groups.

Neufield and Roper (2003) grouped coaches into two main groups: change coaches and content coaches. Typically, change coaches align closely with the principal's broader school-wide changes. Content coaches specialize in a specific content area and directly assist teachers in the classroom. Whether the coach is a change or content coach, they lean on one of four coaching models. In schools, four types of coaching models are shared across the nation. The types are peer, cognitive, literacy, and instructional coaching (Cornett & Knight, 2009). Each type has a shared desired outcome of improving instruction, thus impacting student achievement. Peer coaching is the oldest form of coaching and relies heavily on modeling, practice, and feedback. Cognitive coaching “is to produce self-directed persons with the cognitive capacity for high performance, both independently and as members of a community” (Costa & Garmston, 2002, p. 16). Literacy coaching focuses on supporting teachers in their daily work of delivering literacy instruction to students and producing a literate community. The singular focus of this type of coaching is improving literacy. Finally, instructional coaching is grounded in a partnership approach between the coach and coachee. Modeling is a crucial component of

instructional coaching. The personal goals of the teacher are valued and elevated. While the goal may be the same in all four types, the methodology and approach differ. All types require the coach to work directly with classroom teachers.

This literature review will address factors that coaches use to gain access to teachers and classrooms, build teacher efficacy, raise student achievement, and promote equity and equitable practices. Finally, gaps in the body of research that link instructional coaching with improved outcomes for teachers and students will be explored.

Review of Literature

Accessing Teachers and Classrooms

According to existing research, gaining access to classrooms is challenging for novice and experienced coaches (Chval et al., 2010). However, how coaches navigate this challenge to gain meaningful access must be better understood. Although a modest body of literature emerged to address the phenomenon of access, the findings are limited in their generality as they come from small-scale case studies (Hartman, 2013) or studies that focus on a single academic discipline area (Chval et al., 2010).

Prior research from Hartman (2013) highlights relational strategies as a way for coaches to gain classroom entry. Given the dynamic nature of coach-teacher relationships, researchers and practitioners have emphasized diverse ways coaches can achieve this goal. First, coaches must work to establish credibility and gain recognition from teachers and the school community (Munson & Saclarides, 2022). To do so, coaches maximize opportunities to provide teachers with “practical information about the teacher leadership role, including the kinds of tasks performed and the positive ways in which teacher leadership can impact instruction” (Mangin, 2005, p. 467). Other literature suggests that coaches enact relational strategies by ensuring

teachers do not view them as evaluators or as too tightly linked with administrators who evaluate teachers. Tightly coupling coaches with administrators would strain access (Mangin, 2005).

L'Allier et al. (2010) recommend that coaches leverage relational strategies by respecting teachers as professionals and showing integrity in their words and actions.

One commonality that exists across studies and reports is the distinction between how coaches may position themselves in relationships with classroom teachers. Responsive (Dozier, 2006) and directive (Deussenetal., 2007) coaching are two popular stances. In responsive coaching, the needs of the students and teachers guide the coaching process. In this type of coaching relationship, there is a focus on teacher self-reflection. Directive relationships highlight the coaches as the experts. Coaches are assertive about the instructional practices that teachers must implement. Some researchers suggest that directive coaching works well with less experienced or novice teachers or after initial trusting relationships have been established through responsive coaching (Deussen et al., 2007; Killion, 2008). Others have warned that directive coaching could be detrimental to coach-teacher relationships, with responsive coaching being the best method to encourage long-lasting changes in classroom practices (Borman & Feger, 2006; Dozier, 2006). Thus far, however, research has generated little empirical evidence to address and investigate these claims.

Evidence suggests a blended approach of responsive and directive coaching moves to maintain coach-teacher relationships. A balancing method allows coaches to build relationships and maintain rapport with teachers without sacrificing the need to improve instructional practices or offer concrete instructional advice. In a case study, Dozier (2006) outlines the benefits of a combined coaching approach:

1. Respects teacher and district, school or administrator's goals.

2. Reduces the tension coaches feel from external accountability measures; and
3. Navigates and effectively balances teacher interests and goals.

In addition to maneuvering how they position themselves, coaches' designation as an insider or outsider to the school community offers another potential barrier. Beyond the type of coaching relationship, other research has suggested that the coach's status as an insider or outsider to the school community affects the coach's access (Hartman, 2013; Mangin, 2005). The featured coach in Hartman's (2013) case study taught at her current school for eight years before becoming a coach in the school. She lived within the district's boundaries; thus, she was considered an insider. Her status as an insider positively contributed to her access to the teachers' classrooms. In Mangin's (2005) study, four of the twelve teacher-leaders were considered outsiders as they had been hired from outside the district and had not previously taught within the district. Findings supported that both statuses presented challenges. For instance, insider coaches found it more difficult for their former teacher colleagues to view them as instructional experts. Conversely, one of the outsider coaches struggled to gain access because of the lack of familiarity with the teachers. Nor did the teachers understand their history or purpose. Although a coach's familiarity with teachers they work with affects access, there is inconsistency in the value of either insider or outsider identities.

Several studies have explored the success of "pitching in" as an effective classroom access-granting strategy (Campbell & Griffin, 2017; Mangin, 2005). Pitching in is defined as tasks the coaches perform that are not directly focused on affecting teaching and learning but labor tasks that reduce work on teachers, such as making copies, finding books for units, administering tests, or helping during a classroom celebration (Killion, 2008). Although pitching in may help coaches gain access to the door of the classroom, Campbell and Griffin (2017, p.

173) caution, “Coaches may feel comfortable and useful being responsive to the needs of individual teachers, but they must move beyond serving as a source for . . . instructional materials or providing another pair of hands in the classroom.”

Visibility is another access-granting strategy coaches may leverage. Being visible and available to teachers in spaces extending beyond teachers’ classrooms throughout the school building enhances coaches’ access (Campbell & Griffin, 2017; L’Allier et al., 2010; Mangin, 2005). Visibility includes but is not limited to being present in hallways, the teachers’ lounge (L’Allier et al., 2010), school gatherings, activities, trips, and bus duty (Campbell & Griffin, 2017). As Mangin (2005, p. 468) puts it, “Being seen was one way for the teacher leaders to demonstrate to teachers that they take an interest in the school for the school’s operation, which ultimately builds trust and grants access.”

Finally, the school principal's actions contribute to access to classrooms by coach. Several studies identify how the principal's actions can enhance the coach's access (Campbell & Griffin, 2017; Mangin, 2005; Matsumura et al., 2009). For example, for the coaches in Matsumura et al.'s (2009) study, access improved significantly when the principal publicly identified the coach as a literacy expert, granted the coach professional autonomy, and engaged actively in literacy reform efforts. Similarly, the teacher leaders in Mangin's (2005) study felt decreased teacher resistance when the principal communicated the role of the coaches to the teachers. Messages from the school's principal and administrative team that emphasize the coach's instructional expertise and explicitly highlight their lack of evaluative power positively impact the coach's access to classrooms. Coaches need more control over how the principal positions and communicates their role to the school staff and community.

Building Teacher Efficacy

Despite the enormous efforts by districts to teach teachers new instructional skills (Guskey, 2000; Knight, 2007), an improvement in achievement levels for all students still needs to be made. Teachers' inability to transfer learning to action in the classroom is a critical barrier to this effort. Research conducted by Pfeffer and Sutton (2000) coined this issue as the Knowing-Doing Gap. They define it as the challenge of turning knowledge about performance into actions consistent with that knowledge. They found that even though staff in supervisory roles were shown better ways of organizing and managing, these superior practices were only sometimes adopted. "Time after time, people understand the issues and what needs to happen to affect performance but do not do the things they know they should do" (Pfeffer & Sutton, 2000, p. 11).

In a study of reform programs in 15 high schools, Shiffman et al. (2008) revealed that teachers and administrators either altered the reform initiative or simply ignored it without added support, like coaching, to implement the required changes. Teachers reported three characteristics that assisted them in understanding, accepting, and making the necessary changes:

1. Frequent direct contact with the professional development provider (the coach) and more opportunities to work with the reform program.
2. Regular contact with knowledgeable providers (the coach) who could directly encourage and support implementation.
3. Continued supplemental support that fills critical needs once implementation is underway.

These findings support using instructional coaches to foster classroom implementation and reflect a deeper understanding of instructional practice or reform. Instructional coaching is recognized as an influential factor impacting teacher efficacy and change. Research shows that

the support of an instructional coach to a teacher’s instructional change opportunities significantly increases teaching effectiveness, thus positively impacting student learning. “Instructional coaching provides a vehicle to achieve goals, improve strategies, and make a difference for students and colleagues” (Barkley, 2005, p. 4). Educational researchers agree that for meaningful change to occur, modeling, practice, feedback, and follow-up support are necessary. These qualities are inherently found in instructional coaching (Barry, 2012). Teacher learning will most likely occur when teachers have sustained opportunities to study, experiment with, and receive helpful feedback on specific initiatives.

Some research found that implementing new practices without support and effective professional development may actually decrease implementation efforts. This process has been termed an ironic process. An ironic process is defined as a process that achieves the exact opposite outcome instead of what the original practice was designed to generate (Knight, 2009). In one study, the self-efficacy beliefs toward implementing a literacy practice were assessed. The researcher assigned teachers to one of four treatment groups.

Table 3

Treatment Groups

| Groups | Type of Treatment |
|--------|---|
| One | One-time lecture workshop explaining the new reading strategy |
| Two | One-time lecture workshop <i>and</i> observation of presenter modeling the new reading strategy with students |
| Three | One-time lecture workshop <i>and</i> observation of presenter modeling the new reading strategy with students <i>and</i> teachers practiced the new strategy in groups with each other |
| Four | One-time lecture workshop <i>and</i> observation of presenter modeling the new reading strategy with students <i>and</i> teachers practiced the new strategy in groups with each other, and coaches provided follow-up support with implementation from the coach |

Results proved that professional learning and follow-up coaching support yielded the most substantial effect on implementing the new strategy and the strongest belief around self-efficacy for reading instruction. These findings may not surprise; however, researchers also uncovered that teacher who participated in treatment two showed decreased self-efficacy for reading instruction (Tschannen-Moran & McMaster, 2010). This result is an example of an ironic process. In discussing this surprising finding, the study's authors concluded, “Without coaching to assist teachers in the implementation of the new skill, a significant proportion of teachers were left feeling more inadequate than they had before” (Tschannen-Moran & McMaster, 2010, p. 241). Several coaching models support teachers with the implementation of new strategies and skills.

The Coaching to Conform model focuses on introducing a new curriculum, practice, or tool intended to impact student learning positively. As experts, coaches are responsible for ensuring the implementation fidelity for teachers to conduct the process or method with full compliance (ILA, 2018). In this model, coaching work focuses on changing techniques without inviting the forms of inquiry more characteristic of promoting transformational change. One example illustrates how Coaching to Conform, a directive structure, places the coach in a supervisory/evaluative role (Stoetzel & Taylor-Marshall, 2022). In this study, change is positioned regarding teachers increased self-efficacy due to learning from coaches. Teachers may experience meaningful and lasting change and thus increased self-efficacy as an outcome of coaching. While coaching may foster a collective capacity and efficacy to work toward more critical aims, the agency of individual teachers may be limited within the coaching process.

Improved Student Achievement

Researchers have consistently affirmed the impact of teacher expertise on student achievement; more specifically, it makes a significant contribution to improve student achievement (Piper & L'Allier, 2010). One research found that low-achieving students with an exemplary teacher scored as well as average-achieving students with less skilled teachers (Pressley et al., 2001). Studies that duplicated the study also found that reading achievement can be improved by quality instruction in the classroom (Allington, 2005). Improved reading instruction will lead to fewer students requiring intervention and special education services. Swartz (2005) found that literacy coaching contributed to student achievement gains in grades kindergarten through fourth grade more than prescribed reading programs or traditional professional development methods.

Although the research on the effects and impact of instructional coaching on student achievement is inconsistent, a study by Elish-Piper & L'Allier (2010) suggests that student achievement in reading increased significantly compared to other classrooms when the literacy coach performed specific tasks. These tasks were defined as the literacy coaches administering and discussing student assessments with teachers, observing teachers' instruction, offering supportive feedback, conferencing with teachers about their instruction and students, and modeling instruction in classrooms. Evidence linking the amount of time literacy coaches spend collaborating directly with teachers with positive correlations to students' gains in reading (Elish-Piper & L'Allier, 2010). These findings are supported by Bean et al. (2010), who confirmed that schools where coaches spent significantly more time working with teachers saw a higher percentage of first and second graders scoring proficient than schools where coaches spent less time directly with teachers.

Schindler (2009) conducted a three-year study in a full-day Head Start program in Central Florida. The Head Start program enrolled 360 students in nine classrooms across five schools. The five schools that housed the Head Start classrooms served 2,911 children; 18% of the population were classified as Caucasian non-Hispanic children, with the remaining 82% of the population consisting of historically marginalized populations of students. Black, non-Hispanic children comprised 49% of the population, followed by Hispanic children at 27%. Of the 2911 children served by the elementary schools, 90% qualified for free or reduced lunch, 16.8% were considered English Language Learners, and 15.8% were students with disabilities. A coach was assigned to each preschool classroom. Coaches were selected based on their ability, expertise in the pre-school curriculum, and classroom experience. During year one, classroom teachers attended 40 hours of professional learning on emergent literacy skills. Following each session, coaches were responsible for leading the transfer of theory to practice. To accomplish their responsibility, coaches visited classrooms to emphasize the new learning and model practices. Year two saw an increase in partnerships between coaches and teachers. Coaches spent six to ten hours per week in the classroom coaching on literacy and other general matters such as lesson planning and scheduling. Finally, in year three, coaches spent more time in the classrooms than in year one but less than in year two. During year three, the emphasis was on curriculum. In year one, a significant correlation existed between the time coaches spent in the classroom and students' alphabet recognition proficiency. No significant correlation was found in years two and three. In years two and three, coaches used a coaching model that was less specific in focus but increased the time they spent on-site directly with teachers. The implications suggest that coaching practices must balance time spent with teachers and the various activities to generate effective results.

Research with anecdotal accounts describes the positive effects of literacy coaching on student achievement (Ferguson, 2014) or implies a relationship but fails to directly link literacy coaching and student achievement (Ferguson, 2014). Ferguson followed three literacy coaches in three exemplary coaching schools in the Ontario School District. The district was in its third year of implementation. The principal, literacy coach, and teachers were interviewed in each school through a structured interview process. In addition to the interviews, the researcher shadowed the coaches for 110 hours over eight weeks. The study found that all three stakeholders surmised that student learning improved through literacy coaching; however, student learning was determined in several ways. The results of the study noted four themes:

- a perception of growth in student achievement,
- a perception of improved teaching,
- an increase in professional dialogue in a safe environment, and
- a commitment to the literacy coach.

Below, the themes are described in detail.

Perceptions of Growth in Student Achievement

The study participants quoted results from standardized testing to validate their perception of improved student achievement. Students were administered the Developmental Reading Assessment (DRA; Beaver, 2001) or GB+1 (Groupe Beauchemin, 2002). GB+ is a French reading assessment similar to DRA and is used by French Immersion teachers to track student reading, while regular English classrooms use DRA. Schools tracked results on an assessment wall.

Perceptions of Improved Teaching

Both teachers and principals perceived that teacher practices in literacy improved with literacy coaching. Literacy coaches noted the implementation of literacy initiatives as a measure of success. Principals observed the implementation of literacy initiatives during class walkthroughs.

Increase in Professional Dialogue in a Safe Environment

Teachers credited literacy coaching with increased dialogue and discussion during professional learning communities. An experienced teacher revealed that it took three years for open dialogue to exist. Literacy coaches noted novice teachers helping veteran teachers.

A Commitment to the Literacy Coach

Teachers in all three schools confirmed supporting the work of the literacy coach. They expressed that literacy coaching had been a positive experience. A sense of commitment from the principal and teachers was noted in the interview responses.

Although some research attempts to explore the direct connection between literacy coaching and student achievement, the results of these studies lack consistency. Elish-Piper and L'Allier (2010) and Carlisle and Berebitsky (2011) found a positive connection between literacy coaching and student achievement; however, the research of Feighan and Heeren (2009) and Marsh, McCombs, and Martorell (2012) found no effect on student achievement from literacy coaching. Elish-Piper and L'Allier (2010) limited their investigation of literacy coaching to the early primary grades, kindergarten, and first grade in one school district in the United States. The researchers found that in-class coaching activities, such as observation, are more likely to increase student achievement than other coaching activities. Although limited to the effects of only five literacy coaches, the impact of literacy coaching on student achievement is promising.

Carlisle and Berebitsky (2011) explored the impact of a more substantial number of literacy coaches, 21. Their study was limited to only first-grade students and teachers in Reading First schools across Michigan. These researchers concluded that teachers who received literacy coaching were more likely to implement a literacy initiative than their peers who had not received coaching. After comparing the student outcomes from coached teachers and teachers who had not been coached, they revealed that the students of coached teachers showed greater improvement in word decoding than those students in classes whose teachers did not work with a coach. They caution against interpreting the results due to the relatively small sample size. Additionally, the sample size, control and experimental, was not randomly assigned because literacy coaches were mandated in Reading First schools.

Promoting Equity and Equitable Practices

The teacher education literature calls for the development of culturally responsive (Hammond, 2014) teachers who possess an equity-oriented responsiveness (Jacobs et al., 2020; Gorski et al., 2012). In order to address the disparities, bias, and marginalization related to culture, race, language, gender, sexual orientation, and socioeconomic status facing PK-12 within our nation's schools, teachers must understand equity. Gorski (2017) describes equity as "a fair or equitable distribution of access and opportunity," thus involving a commitment to justice (p. 19).

In her work on coaching conversations for equity that change practices, Aguilar (2020) introduces a transformation coaching model with three identified components:

- The Coach: With attention to their own behaviors, beliefs, and ways of being.
- The Client: With a holistic approach focused on the client's behaviors, beliefs, and ways of being.

- The Systems: With a commitment to understanding and transforming the larger system and the individuals within the system.

Aguilar (2020) further explains that transformational coaching is more comprehensive than other coaching models due to its emphasis on beliefs and ways of being. Transformational coaches are clear on their beliefs about themselves, racism, justice, and freedom. Furthermore, a transformational coach has "deep knowledge of instructional and leadership practices and of educational equity" (Aguilar, 2020, p. 35).

Few studies explore the role of coaching in creating inclusive environments and breaking patterns of exclusion, underperformance, and underrepresentation (Roche & Passmore, 2021). Boyatzis and Moore (2021) argue that coaching for traditionally marginalized populations can help build workplace proficiency, expertise, and poise. They assert that for a coach to understand the coachee utterly, he must understand the coachee's context. Additionally, coaching literature has largely ignored the power dynamics of racialization and its influence on the organizational structure. As such, the literature indirectly reinforces the existing structure of systematic racism rather than attempting to highlight or confront it (Bocala & Holman, 2021). In instances where race was acknowledged, the coach's role was often presented as a support for the adaptation of the client, a person of color, to the dominant culture (Roche & Passmore, 2021).

Matsumura et al. (2010) conducted a study in schools with high teacher mobility and high concentrations of low-income students of color and English language learners to examine the effects of content-focused coaching (CFC). West and Staub (2003) describe CFC as long-range professional learning where coaches work with individuals or groups of teachers to create, use, and reflect on rigorous standards-based lessons. The coaches focus on content. The goal of the lessons is to advance student learning. The study took place over three years. CFC coaches had

an average of 12 years of teaching experience and an average of two years of coaching experience. Results of standardized reading proficiency from the Texas Assessment and Knowledge of Skills (TAKS) and the Degrees of Reading Power Assessments (DRPA) and observation of reading instruction were used to evaluate the effectiveness of coaching. On the TAKS, English Language Learners in schools with CFC coaches scored on par with their non-ELL peers in treatment schools and almost 60 points higher than ELLs in control schools. However, the study found that CFC had no effect on the student achievement proficiency on the DRPA. Significant improvements were noted in self-reported data on the quality of text discussions. Teachers reported that students were engaged in more frequent text discussions with each other and expressed a stronger ability to make connections with events and concepts within and between texts. Observers rated CFC schools higher in instructional quality on both the spring and fall observations than non-CFC schools.

Research has shown that teacher resistance can occur when cross-cultural coaching occurs. Ingraham (2003) defines cross-cultural coaching as coaching that takes place across cultures. Ingraham defined culture as:

An organized set of thoughts, beliefs, and norms for interaction and communication may influence cognition, behaviors, and culture. Culture may be influenced by a combination of race, ethnicity, language, SES, age, educational attainment, sexual orientation, spirituality, professional role, level of acculturation, and/or operational paradigm. (p. 325)

Ingraham (2000) suggested a multicultural school consultation (MSC) framework. MSC is a homogeneous framework that intersects the values and cultures of the coach and consultee. Cooper, Wilson-Stark, Peterson, O’Roark, and Pennington (2008) found race and culture as

essential considerations during coaching. Further, they recommend that issues of race, gender, ethnicity, and culture be confronted immediately; however, they caution that cross-cultural coaching can lead teachers to feel vulnerable, resulting in a need for additional time to build trust and rapport. To encourage intersectionality between the coaching role and cultural diversity, Roche and Passmore (2021) suggest that coaching institutions should take an extensive approach with a focus on defining coaching and its purposes. It recommends that institutions become open to various viewpoints and engage in recruitment efforts that attract diverse coaches into the coaching pool. They define plurality as one of the greatest benefits of diversity. In addition, they share that data identifies the lack of “critical consciousness” among the dominant white leaders as a main barrier to the recruitment of diverse coaches (Roche & Passmore, 2021, p.14)

Little research exists that isolates the effects of coaching on underserved student populations like economically disadvantaged, English language learners, Black, and Hispanic students. Additionally, little research analyzes or describes the coach's impact in promoting equity or equitable practices in classrooms, schools, or districts.

Gaps in the Research

Many studies in the literature review use small sample sizes. Due to the small sample sizes, the results must be cautiously generalized. In addition, the researchers in the literature review collected the data in a condensed amount of time without consideration of the variance that may occur from year to year. For example, the research did not examine if the impact of coaching remained the next year when a new set of teachers started. Longitudinal data is necessary to evaluate the effectiveness or impact of coaching over the long term.

The literature review identified a gap in the research as the inconsistent manner in which student achievement was measured. The subjective nature of defining success makes it difficult

to accurately measure and compare student outcomes. Standardized testing remains a favored method for evaluating a coaching program's success. However, the type of standardized testing used varies from state to state. Another popular evaluation method is using universal screening data. Like standardized tests, many types of universal screeners are available, and the types used vary by school and district. The varying student assessment tools used by schools and districts make it difficult to measure student growth among schools, districts, and states.

Finally, few studies isolated the impact of coaching on underserved students or investigated coaches' role in creating equitable practices or outcomes. The diversity of coaches and the role of the coaches in promoting equity or inclusive environments are limited.

Summary

The research literature review explores the numerous ways schools and districts use instructional coaches and the variety of ways that schools experience their impact. With research indicating the influence of teacher quality on student achievement, schools have embraced coaching as an avenue to build teacher capacity and ensure the transfer of evidence-based practices from theory to daily practice. Consequently, instructional coaching is regarded as a highly effective part of professional development programs to build teacher efficacy.

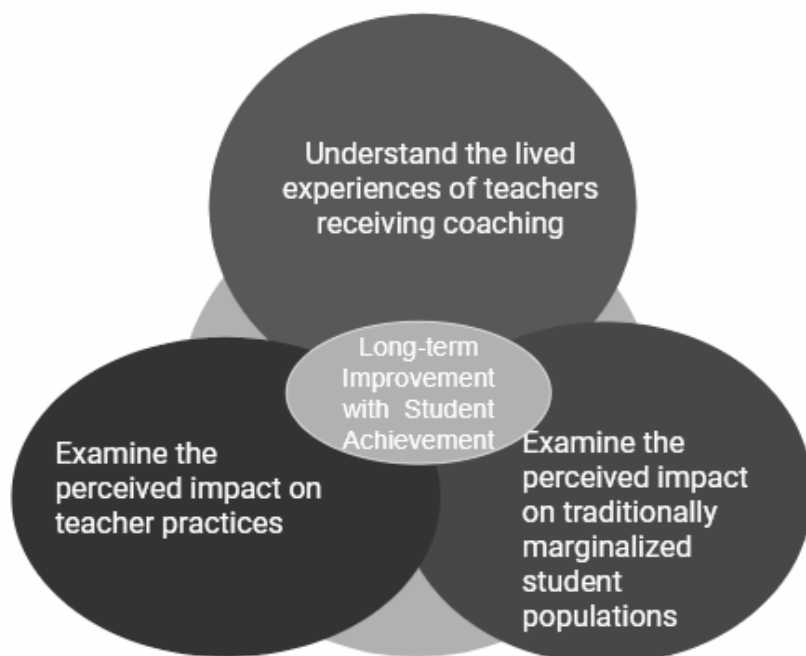
While many research studies confirm that instructional coaching positively impacts teacher efficacy, the research on its impact on student achievement or the promotion of equity is limited and often inconclusive. Some studies indicate a positive effect on student achievement, while others found no effect on student achievement. Research on the coach's effectiveness in addressing classroom disparities and biases among teachers is limited. Instead, the research suggests that coaches may reinforce systematic structures of racism.

The next chapter will explain the study's methodology, a detailed description of participants, the qualitative participant profile questionnaire, the data collection instrument, procedures for individual interviews and focus groups, and a forecast of how the data will be analyzed.

This study will describe the lived experiences of teachers receiving the phenomenon of literacy coaching. A phenomenological study does not attempt to get into the minds of others but rather to understand how the phenomenon manifests in our world (Vagle, 2018). This study will examine the perceived impact of coaching on teacher practices and traditionally marginalized student groups while describing the lived experience of teachers. The overarching goal is to identify the impact of coaching on improved achievement outcomes for students, particularly traditionally marginalized student groups (see Figure 1).

Figure 1

Purpose of the Study



CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

Public schools in the United States continue to experience great scrutiny of student performance. Attempts at the federal level have failed to show significant increases in student achievement (Gay, 2019). As a result, the pressure to improve public schools may be greater today than at any time in American history. Layered on top of dismal student performance proficiency, schools face enormous challenges in recruiting and retaining teachers (Garcia & Weiss, 2020). Over the last decade, schools have invested in instructional coaching to ensure the transfer of evidence-based practices into classrooms (Gulamhussein, 2013) and improve retention efforts. Instructional coaching is a collaborative partnership between coach and teacher to support classroom implementation of instructional practices and curriculum initiatives while fostering teacher reflection (Stoetzel & Taylor-Marshall, 2022).

The primary purpose of this study is to describe the coaching experience of elementary teachers in the Wake County Public School System who receive literacy coaching. The district defines literacy coaching as an “intentional, non-evaluative partnership around a collaborative common goal to build all kindergarten through second-grade students into proficient, skilled readers. The literacy coach uses questioning and active listening to build capacity and efficacy of teachers through ongoing effective core instruction literacy professional learning and to promote personal growth through conversations” (WCPSS Literacy Coaches Plan 2023, p. 1). The researcher attempted to capture and describe the lived experiences of the coaching experience of elementary teachers. Further, the study aimed to examine the impact of the coaching phenomenon on instructional practices and the achievement of traditionally marginalized student populations, specifically Hispanic and Black students.

As defined by Creswell (1998), “phenomenology is a research strategy of inquiry in which the researcher identifies the essence of human experiences about a phenomenon as described by participants” (p. 13). Vagle (2018) asserts that phenomenological research centers on meaning and understanding. Qualitative research gives voice to the study participants while connecting the causal relationship between variables and processes (Bass, 2022). According to Patten (2002), interviews, observations, and documents comprise the three types of qualitative research. Interviews consist of open-ended questions requiring in-depth responses about a person’s feelings, opinions, experiences, and perspectives (Patton, 2002). Observations from the field provide detailed descriptions of processes, interpersonal interactions, behaviors, and conversations (Patton, 2002). The context in which these observations take place is relevant and necessary. Finally, documents record and maintain the experience. Documents include but are not limited to personal diaries, letters, artistic work, photos, and correspondence. Creswell (2013) concludes that qualitative research starts with an assumption that uses an inquiry-based approach that collects data in a natural setting while honoring the people and environment. For these reasons, a qualitative approach is best suited for this study.

This chapter includes the selected research methodology and design, the selection of the school and participants, and the interview protocol used to collect data. It also identifies data collection and limitations and concludes with a summary of the research methodology.

Research Design and Rationale

Within the qualitative research approach, phenomenology is the approach the researcher will use to organize the study. Qualitative research explores the human experience by looking at the perspective of using different methods of collecting data. Phenomenology seeks to make meaning of and capture the essence of the experience. This study seeks to understand how

literacy coaches support teachers' instructional practices and address the needs of traditionally marginalized student populations. Thus, the researcher examined the interaction of the literacy coaches and teachers, which supports the phenomenological approach.

This study sought to answer one central research question and two sub-questions.

1. How do teachers describe the instructional coaching experience?
 - a. How do teachers perceive the knowledge level of the literacy coach?
 - b. How do teachers describe the perceived impact of coaching on their instructional practices in literacy?
 - c. How do teachers describe the impact of coaching in addressing the needs of traditionally marginalized student populations, specifically Hispanic and Black students?

Interviewing teachers who have experienced coaching will allow a personal connection to the data and tell an in-depth story of coaching. The interview questions intend to “understand the phenomena in their own terms to describe the human experience as it is experienced by the person allowing the essence to emerge” (Cameron et al., 2001, p. 34). The questions are directed at the participants’ experiences and feelings.

Role of Researcher

As the Senior Director of Elementary Programs for Wake County Public School System, one of my key responsibilities is supporting literacy in all 120 elementary schools. Through an allotment process, the district provides each school with a part-time literacy coach to help K-2 teachers. This position supports classroom teachers’ core literacy instruction (Tier I). The purpose of the role is to partner with the administrative team to provide guidance and support in building a collaborative school culture around the core literacy curriculum and the

implementation of its components to ensure a high-quality instructional experience for all students. This position concentrates on ensuring that the core curriculum is implemented with fidelity in the core area of ELA and ensures an alignment to the MTSS framework by working collaboratively with staff that support Tier II and Tier III instruction. Additionally, the literacy coach position provides job-embedded professional learning for K-2 teachers to improve the quality of classroom instruction and instructional practices for all students, resulting in increased student achievement and reduced disproportionality of special education referrals of African American males. The goal of lowering the disproportionality of African-American males in special education services is the cornerstone of this position. Central services staff organize mandatory coaching meetings and literacy professional learning. The mandatory coaches' meetings are centered on three main topics, data, coaching skills and I.C.E (Instruction, Curriculum and Environment). During each meeting coaches practice a coaching conversation using the tenants of Cognitive Coaching. The WCPSS Coaching Framework (2023) describes Cognitive Coaching as a form of coaching designed to “produce self-directed persons with the cognitive capacity for excellence, both independently and as members of community.” It touts Cognitive Coaching as one of the longest-standing coaching model with an approach that enhances the cognitive processes to impact “educator learning and growth” to produce long-term sustainable growth for educators and improved achievement outcomes for students (WCPSS Coaching Plan, 2023). The literacy content district experts share state and local data related to the literacy progress of students within the district and staff. One data report is the mCLASS school progress report. This report compares a schools' progress from the beginning to the end of the year with schools nationwide with similar BOY starting points. The district's literacy experts divided coaches into affinity groups based on the data in this report to work on specific

instructional strategies for specific grade levels. Our work with literacy coaches is evaluated based on the reduction in the number of African American males referred for special education services and the level of risk indicated through the DIBELS assessment administered three times a year.

In addition to the local investment in literacy coaches, the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction has hired an Early Literacy Specialist to work in each local education agency. The expenditure for this initiative exceeds 14 million dollars. The district's Early Literacy Specialist served three low-performing schools within WCPSS and reported directly to me.

As the leader of coaches funded at local and state levels, I am interested in studying the lived experiences of teachers receiving coaching, the perceived impact of coaching on their instructional practices in literacy, and the perceived impact of coaching on addressing the needs of traditionally marginalized student populations. Understanding the shared common experience among teachers is essential for improved student outcomes.

Study Design

Site Selection

Wake County Public Schools is the largest school district in North Carolina. The district comprises almost 159,000 students and employs approximately 11,000 teachers. It is home to 199 schools, of which 120 are elementary schools (Wake County Public Schools, 2022). While 35.2% of the students qualified for free or reduced meals, in 2022, Wake County Schools System ranks ninth in student performance compared to the 115 local education units in North Carolina. Despite ranking in the top ten, the Hispanic, Black, and Economically Disadvantaged subgroups' performance ranks eighty-third, twenty-ninth, and seventy-eighth, respectively (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2023).

The elementary teachers in the Wake County Public School System who work at schools where at least 20% or more of the student population identify as Black or Hispanic and 35% of the students are eligible for free or reduced meals were invited to participate in the study through semi-structured open-ended focus group or individual interviews. Black and Hispanic students comprise 22% and 19.4%, respectively in the Wake County Public School System during the 2022-23 school year. The district allotted each elementary school a half-time literacy coach to improve student literacy outcomes and reduce the number of African-American males referred to special education services. The coaches' impact on reducing disproportionality is measured and reported yearly through the Coordinated Early Intervention Services data collection process.

Participants' Selection and Sample

Teachers of kindergarten, first or second-grade students who work in an underperforming elementary school within the Wake County Public School System where at least 20% or more of the student population identify as Black or Hispanic and 35% of the students are eligible for free or reduced meals were invited to participate in the study. Teacher participants must be involved with the literacy coach. The interaction with the literacy coach was manifested through engagement with the Professional Learning Communities (PLC) or individual support. The support must have occurred within the last three years. The study was limited to kindergarten, first, and second-grade teachers because district-provided literacy coaches are restricted to supporting teachers in the early grade levels.

Focus group interviews garnered various perspectives, permitted a broader exploration of ideas, and increased confidence in the patterns that may emerge (Bass, 2022). The researcher sent an introductory email to the principals of the 16 schools meeting the criteria (See Appendix B). The principal forwarded the invitation to participate in the study with kindergarten, first, and

second-grade teachers who received coaching during the current or last two previous school years. Selected participants chose between the options to participate in a focus group, individual interview, or both. The researcher recruited 8-10 teacher participants from about five schools. Participants engaged in one of two types of interviews, focus group or individual. The researcher conducted four individual interviews and one focus group interview. The six teachers in the focus group were employed at the same school and taught at the same grade level, kindergarten. Although six teachers agreed to participate in the focus group, two answered only introductory questions. Both of the teachers have worked at the current school for less than a year.

Data Collection

A phenomenological approach to data collection honors that people develop meaning from their experience, and meaning varies among participants (Creswell, 2008). The interactions between the coach and teacher shape the perceived meaning that the teacher derives from the experience. This study captured, interpreted, and made sense of teachers' perceived impact on their coaching experiences. Typically, data for phenomenological studies are captured through questionnaires, interviews, and document analysis.

Questionnaire

Before conducting interviews, the researcher sent a qualitative questionnaire via survey to capture participants' interest in the study and collected their profile information. The survey was sent only to schools meeting the above-mentioned criteria.

The Teacher Profile Questionnaire will consist of the following questions (See Appendix A):

1. How many years of educational experience (including this year) do you have?
2. How many years have you experienced coaching with a literacy coach (including this year)?

3. What grade level do you currently teach?
4. In which type of interview would you prefer to participate? (Check all that apply.)
 - a. Focus Group
 - b. Individual Interview

Semi-structured Interviews

In this study, focus groups and individual interviews served as the primary method for capturing data. The focus group interview consisted of six kindergarten teachers. Focus group interviews lend to gathering various perspectives that enhance data quality (Patton, 2002). The focus group was semi-structured and comprised of teachers employed at a single school and teaching a single grade level. The use of the semi-structured format in both types of interviews, focus group and individual, allowed the researcher to ask clarifying and probing questions based on the participants' responses.

Based on five categories, educational background, coaching structure, perceptions, impact, and reflections, the interview protocol assisted in identifying and understanding the perceived impact of coaching practices on academic achievement and the teachers' instructional practices. The interviewer posed an identical set of open-ended questions to the focus group participants. Focus group participants determined the questions to answer and expanded their responses as appropriate (See Appendix C). The interviews occurred virtually, and the responses were transcribed to ensure confidentiality, appropriate reporting, and data analysis. During the interview, the researcher wrote copious notes. The interview recordings permitted the researcher to revisit the experience to confirm the accuracy of the transcriptions and reporting.

The researcher conducted the semi-structured interviews based on the research questions and followed an interview guide.

Table 4*Research Questions & Data Sources*

| Research Question | Data Sources |
|--|--|
| 1 How do teachers describe the perceived lived experience of instructional coaching in literacy | Open-ended focus group interview Open-ended individual interview |
| a How do teachers perceive the knowledge level of the literacy coach? | Open-ended focus group interview Open-ended individual interview |
| b How do teachers describe the perceived impact of coaching on their instructional practices in literacy? | Open-ended focus group interview Open-ended individual interview |
| c How do teachers describe the perceived impact of coaching on addressing the needs of traditionally marginalized student populations? | Open-ended focus group interview Open-ended individual interview Document Analysis |

Document Analysis

According to Patton (2002), researchers should not trust a singular source of information but rather assemble multiple data sources. Multiple data sources provide an extensive perspective of the research topic and ensure greater data validity (Patton, 2002). The researcher in this study reviewed the End of Grade Reading results for students in grades 3-5, paying close attention to the Black and Hispanic subgroup. The performance of the Black and Hispanic subgroups was compared against their White peers. The same method was followed using performance results from the mCLASS DIBELS in grades K-2. Research question two centered on the impact of coaching on traditionally marginalized student groups; therefore, student outcome data documents will provide a complete perception and connections with the perceived impact as identified by the participants.

Data Analysis

“Qualitative analysis transforms data into findings” and engages sense-making in the data (Patton, 2002, p. 432). The researcher will read and annotate transcriptions. To ensure accuracy and quality in the transcriptions, the researcher will share the interview transcripts with participants for additional clarity.

Coding

Coding helps to define, make meaning, and show relationships between data (Gibbs, 2007). Following the participants’ review of the transcriptions, the researcher first used the transcripts to categorize themes from the teachers’ responses (Creswell, 2013). The researcher initially coded the qualitative data by identifying and tagging descriptors (Charmaz, 2006). The initial coding will be deductive, using the five themes that emerge from the literature review. In alignment with the literature review, the initial themes were viewing coaches as experts, gaining access to classrooms, building teacher efficacy, raising student achievement, and promoting equity. Thematic coding allows the researcher to establish themes based on the literature review (Creswell, 2013).

The research questions served as a frame for the data analysis. Data will be organized and coded into logical categories that summarize and bring meaning to the collection of notes. Using descriptive coding from the transcription to summarize short phrases allowed the researcher to categorize the data based on themes identified in the literature review. These themes were color-coded. The researcher identified additional themes or patterns through re-watching the recorded interviews and re-reading the transcripts. During the re-reading of the transcripts, new themes emerged. Inductive coding allowed the researcher to see a link between

new and emergent patterns and other observed patterns (Patton, 2002). Inductive coding led to the extraction of additional themes. These themes included the following:

- the resourcefulness of the coach
- engagement in personal professional development
- establishing feedback loops
- role of Professional Learning Community

Coding allows the researcher to describe in detail the participants' lived experiences.

Reliability and Validity

In qualitative research, reliability is defined as the stability of responses to multiple coders of data sets (“How is Reliability,” 2020). According to Creswell and Poth (2013), they consider validity in qualitative research as trying to assess the accuracy of the results, as best described by the researcher. They believe that validation emphasizes a process, detailed description, and a close relationship between the researcher and the participants (Creswell & Poth, 2013). Examples of the process include member checking, triangulation of data sources, and peer review. Member checking involves taking the themes and descriptions back to the participants to check for accuracy. When themes from the study support several data sources, this adds validity to the study. Finally, peer debriefing adds validity by asking a peer to review and pose questions about the study. In this study, the researcher used data triangulation and peer debriefing as methods to establish validity and reliability. The researcher sent the transcriptions of the recorded interviews to participants to ensure that their thoughts were accurately captured. The transcription will only include responses from the individual completing the member-checking process. The researcher shared the research proposal with a cohort of other doctoral candidates who offered feedback and asked questions. Finally, the data triangulation includes

student performance data from the North Carolina End of Grade Tests in Reading and mCLASS DIBELS assessments. The researchers viewed the data holistically and disaggregated by subgroups, specifically Black and Hispanic students.

Ethical Considerations

During the study's design and implementation, the researcher considered potential ethical dilemmas and the protection of the participants. The design used pseudonyms to ensure the confidentiality of the participants' identities, which enabled participants to maintain their voices and independence (Creswell, 2014). Participants understood the purpose of the study and how the results would be used. The researcher explained that participation is voluntary the right to discontinue participation may be enacted at any point of the study without any penalty or backlash.

Before conducting any research, the researcher enacted and completed the Internal Review Board (IRD) process. The IRB process guarantees that participants' potential risks have been considered and assessed (Creswell, 2014). Through the IRB process, informed consent is verified, confidentiality is guaranteed, and participant risk is identified.

The researcher kept all notes, documents, and recordings from the study in a locked, secure location. Before publishing the study, participants reviewed transcripts for accuracy and may clarify their responses.

Limitations

This study involved a small number of participants from a single school district in North Carolina. Moreover, only willing teachers participated in the interview and study. Participation of teachers was voluntary, and their responses may not reflect the totality of elementary school teachers' experiences with instructional coaches. Using a virtual platform limited the researcher's

ability to read and monitor body language. Two of the teachers in the focus group did not respond to any questions. Their lack of participation reduced the sample size for this study. Since the camera during the virtual focus group interview was inoperable, it limited the researcher's ability to pursue and encourage the two teachers who did not respond. The researcher limited access to the teachers at the school and used purposeful sampling. The competence, disposition, and quality of the teacher's assigned literacy coach may impact the teacher's lived experience.

Delimitations include the requirement for participants to work in schools that meet a set criterion. The criteria include being an elementary school within the Wake County Public School System, having at least a half-time K-2 literacy coach, and serving a student population of 30% or more who identify as non-white. Finally, a virtual platform was used to conduct both the one-on-one and group interviews. A virtual platform limited the researcher's ability to read and monitor body language. Due to the limitations and delimitations of this study, the outcomes may vary if replicated.

Summary

Chapter 3 outlined the approach the researcher followed during the study. To answer the research questions, the researcher used a qualitative approach to capture the perceptions and lived experiences of the participants. Data collection included questionnaires, document analysis, and focus group and individual interviews. Data analysis consisted of transcribing the interview and reviewing documents and questionnaires. Member checking and triangulation of documents were used to ensure reliability and validity.

In Chapter 4, the researcher will report and describe the study's findings. Themes from the data analysis will be presented and identified as congruent with the literature review or emerging from the data. Additionally, recommendations for research and practice will be shared.

CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

Demographic Descriptions

This is a qualitative phenomenological study that sought to make meaning of and capture the essence of the experience of literacy coaching on teachers. This study sought to understand how literacy coaches support teachers' instructional practices and address the needs of traditionally marginalized student populations like Hispanics and Blacks. Teachers of grades K-2 English-Language Arts from schools across the district, where at least 20% or more of the student population identified as Black and Hispanic and 35% of the students are eligible for free or reduced meals, were invited to participate. The researcher collected data from ten teachers representing five schools (see Table #1). All the teachers participating in this study are employed at Title 1 schools. Title I is a federally funded program that comprises one component of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) of 2015. Schools designated as Title I receive additional federal funding to support the high numbers of students from low-income families (Wake County Public School System, n.d.). The schools of the participating teachers' number of students eligible for free or reduced lunch fluctuated from 44% to 76%. Student populations at these schools ranged from just under 300 to over 600. The performance composite, which includes reading, science, and math proficiency from state-mandated standardized tests for grades 3-5, ranged between 38.2% and 59.2%. In four out of five schools, standardized test proficiency was significantly lower than the reading proficiency levels measured on the K-2 benchmark, which is administered one-on-one between teacher and student. The teacher is responsible for marking the student errors within the digital platform that produces the score. Human error may account for the discrepancies between reading proficiency at K-2 as opposed to reading proficiency in grades 3-5 which is generated from responses to a multiple-choice test.

In the most extreme case, the difference between reading proficiency in grades 3-5 and K-2 was 29.3%. All the participating schools employed part-time literacy coaches.

Table 5

School Demographics & Performance 2023-24

| | Number of Students | Percent eligible for Free/Reduced Lunch | Student Performance Composite | Percent Reading Proficient (3-5) | Percent reaching reading benchmark (K-2) | Black | Hispanic |
|------------------|--------------------|---|-------------------------------|----------------------------------|--|-------|----------|
| School 1 | 628 | 52.1 | 59.8 | 53.5 | 60.0 | 18.8 | 31.7 |
| School 2 | 427 | 71.9 | 53.5 | 42.6 | 70.0 | 23.5 | 43.7 |
| School 3 | 533 | 76.8 | 38.2 | 37.2 | 66.5 | 54.0 | 28.6 |
| School 4 | 272 | 44.7 | 56.1 | 56.8 | 59.7 | 35.4 | 13.3 |
| School 5 | 547 | 69.2 | 44.7 | 40.0 | 73.7 | 45.2 | 37.7 |
| District Average | N/A | 34.9 | 65.5 | 61.3 | 71.7 | 21.4 | 19.8 |

Of the ten teacher participants, one currently teaches first-grade students, one currently teaches second-grade students, and eight currently teach kindergarten students. There was a high predominance of White females (n=7 or 70%) with less participation by Black females (n=2 or 20%) and White males (n=1 or 10%). The distribution of education experiences among the teachers ranged from less than one year to 33 years of experience, while employment at the current school ranged from less than a year to 15 years. Four teachers opted for one-on-one interviews, each representing a different school within the district. The researcher conducted one focus group interview with six participants from the same school who taught at the same grade level, kindergarten. The coach was new to the role, having previously served as a teacher at the

school in the preceding year. Of the six faculty members present, only one had been employed at the school for more than one year. Notably, the two teachers with two years of teaching experience, who had joined the staff less than a year ago, contributed the least during discussions. The minimal participation of Ms. Wagon and Mr. Jolly is particularly intriguing, especially considering that the majority of their colleagues on the team were also relatively new to the school.

Two of the six participants in the focus group interview responded to only introductory questions about their educational experience and journey. They were able to articulate the highlights and challenges of their current position. However, the two teachers failed to respond to any questions about literacy coaching even though they consented to the focus group interview. The camera during the interview was inoperable which prevented the researcher from responding to their visual cues to best engage them. Employed at the school for less than a year, these two teachers may have lacked the confidence to share their perceptions in a group setting with their colleagues.

During the interview, the researcher asked participants to identify both the most fulfilling aspects of their current role and the challenges they encounter. Teachers reported finding satisfaction in establishing a strong educational foundation for students and fostering a love of learning early in their academic careers. Several educators echoed this sentiment, emphasizing the rewarding nature of building this foundation and witnessing students' academic and social development over time.

Table 6*Demographic Characteristics of Interview Sample*

| Participant | Gender | Years of Experience | Current Grade Level | Years in Current Role | Years at Current School | Type of Interview |
|-------------|--------|---------------------|---------------------|-----------------------|-------------------------|-------------------|
| Ms. Kat | Female | 33 | First | 5 | 5 | Individual |
| Ms. Tiger | Female | 20 | Kindergarten | 2 | 2 | Individual |
| Ms. Pet | Female | 29 | Second | 4 | 8 | Individual |
| Mrs. Hat | Female | 30 | Kindergarten | 15 | 18 | Individual |
| Ms. Cougar | Female | 22 | Kindergarten | 7 | 5 | Focus Group |
| Ms. Wolf | Female | 6 | Kindergarten | 4 months | >1 year | Focus Group |
| Ms. Beaver | Female | 4 | Kindergarten | 4 | 1 | Focus Group |
| Ms. Wagon* | Female | 22 | Kindergarten | 2 | >1 year | Focus Group |
| Mrs. Peace | Female | 8 | Kindergarten | 3 | >1 year | Focus Group |
| Mr. Jolly* | Male | 1 | Kindergarten | 2 | >1 year | Focus Group |

**Denotes the participants who did not answer any questions related to coaching during the focus group interview.*

However, teachers also highlighted several challenges. One significant difficulty is managing a diverse group of learners with varying academic abilities and English proficiency levels, which can complicate efforts to meet the standard course of study using available resources while addressing all students' individual needs. Additionally, teachers discussed the

burden of extra duties and responsibilities, noting that these demands often detract from their ability to adequately plan lessons, particularly in the manner they would ideally prefer.

Further challenges identified included student behavior, with two teachers pointing to it as a concern, while another mentioned difficulty in interpersonal relationships with other adults in the building. Additionally, a lack of parental engagement was noted as an ongoing obstacle in effectively fulfilling their roles.

The researcher's own interest in strengthening the impact of literacy coaching on students and teachers fueled this study. As the leader of coaches who are funded at local and state levels, the researcher possessed a keen interest in studying the lived experiences of teachers receiving coaching, the perceived impact of coaching on their instructional practices in literacy, and the perceived impact of coaching on addressing the needs of traditionally marginalized student populations, specifically Black and Hispanic students. Understanding the shared common experience of literacy coaching among teachers is essential for improved student outcomes. As such, this study sought to answer one central research question and three sub-questions.

1. How do teachers describe the instructional coaching experience?
 - a. How do teachers perceive the knowledge level of the literacy coach?
 - b. How do teachers describe the perceived impact of coaching on their instructional practices in literacy?
 - c. How do teachers describe the impact of coaching in addressing the needs of traditionally marginalized student populations, specifically Hispanic and Black students?

Research Question 1: How do teachers describe the instructional coaching experience?

Three sub-questions support the primary research question. To describe the instructional coaching experience in literacy, the researcher aimed to understand the structure of the coaching process, including the feedback loop from coach to teacher and teacher to coach. Three key themes emerged from the data analysis: (a) “pitching-in” as an effective classroom access-granting strategy (Campbell & Griffin, 2017; Mangin, 2005), (b) the structure of coaching varied based on the school, and (c) feedback loops were inconsistent.

“Pitching-in” as an Effective Classroom Access-Granting Strategy

The study's teachers consistently praised the coaches for pitching in to lighten their workload, which is consistent with the research. Ms. Cougar suggested her coach was the model for literacy coaching and expressed sadness as her coach is transferring to another school. Our coach “is a true example of what a good, dedicated literacy coach would look like, and her involvement has been, you know, it has made the year.” She continued that her support has made our workload “a lot more focused and manageable.” During the focus group interview, another teacher chimed in to highlight the coach's assistance. Mrs. Peace recounted her observations of the coach's support. She stated,

“I previously came from a school where the literacy coach did not lead the PLCs. From what I can tell, it's super helpful to have them be able to kind of create agendas, guide us in what areas need to be discussed and delve into it as a team, and it takes a lot off of the grade level plate and especially the grade chair's plate that they are able to create agendas, and lead those meetings.”

Teachers found value in delegating duties to the coach, which freed their time to work on other pertinent tasks and responsibilities. Responsive coaching tends to concede to the needs of the teachers and allow teachers to guide the coaching process.

Structure Design

Despite the participants working within the same school district and coaches hired from identical job descriptions, the structure of the coaching process varied from school to school. In many cases, teachers struggled to identify and clearly articulate the coaching process for individual support at their respective schools. More often, teachers described a regulated support system for the Professional Learning Teams (PLT). Ms. Tiger explained, “Our literacy coach is required to be in our PLT meeting every Wednesday from 8:00 am to 10:00 am.” The visibility at the weekly meetings makes the coach appear “very reachable.” Visibility is an effective access-granting strategy coaches can exercise. Ms. Pet described a system in which the teachers were responsible for requesting support. “From what I’ve seen, I ask for assistance from the coach if I need her to come in (my classroom) to do something,” she explained.

In Ms. Kat’s school, the coaching structure and support were relegated to beginning teachers. Ms. Kat admitted the coaching role did not directly impact her as a first-grade teacher. The coach supports the “brand new teacher in second grade,” Ms. Kat clarified. Mrs. Hat assumed the structure in her school may be more evident to new teachers. “For me. I’ve been teaching so long, but if I was a new teacher it (coaching) might help me to stay on track.” She suggested that maybe the coach “goes into the new teacher’s room” to ensure they are staying on pace with the curriculum and “meeting the objectives.” The coach has only been in my room once, Mrs. Hat explained, but noted the coach’s extensive involvement with a kindergarten teacher in school. “The coach was in her room quite a bit. I think she was just there, maybe

guiding and offering suggestions.” Ms. Tiger’s viewpoint mirrored those of her peers in the study. She noted that the coach had not specifically been assigned to support her but was tapped to support another teacher. She shared that the coach spent two months in another teacher’s classroom supporting the literacy program. She described the two months of direct support as “modeling the first two weeks and then co-teaching, observation, and feedback.” She further elaborated that in December, when a new teacher joined the team, the coach worked “one-on-one to get the lady up to par.”

Directive coaching, where the coach is elevated as an expert, tends to work well with less experienced or novice teachers. Coaching is not designed only for novice teachers but can benefit teachers of all experience. All the participants in this study subscribe to the idea that direct coaching is reserved for beginning teachers, teachers new to the school or district, or struggling teachers. Viewing coaching as a tool to optimize professional growth for all teachers is not prevalent among the participants. According to Jim Knight, instructional coaching is an efficient process that makes it easier for teachers to meet the varying needs of their students (Knight, 2007).

Feedback Loop

Similar to the existing variations among schools with the structure, differentials surfaced when examining feedback loops between coaches and teachers. Feedback loops did not appear systematic or a prioritized job-embedded responsibility.

Mrs. Hat recounted a time the coach asked the grade level team to list all of their literacy centers on a dry-erase board. The coach led the group in a discussion about the centers. “We talked about (the centers) and compared them.” We and she offered suggestions, but she (the coach) said they were all good centers. Mrs. Hat reiterated that regular feedback from the coach

is not prevalent. She attributes the lack of attention and feedback from the coach as an endorsement of her teaching practices and expertise.

“I suppose because she’s comfortable with what we’re doing. I think it would be more if she saw a need somewhere, she might, and we do have a lot of new teachers at our school, so she may feel that might be why she’s in second grade a lot, and there’s such a gap between second and third-grade learning. She might feel like she’d be better off to boost them a little bit.”

In Ms. Pet’s school, the coach gives individual feedback during the planning meetings. “We only have two teachers in the grade level,” so feedback is individual “unless she comes to both classes to do something.”

At Ms. Tiger’s school, the coach leaves post-it notes and sends emails to deliver feedback. When asked to expand on the specifics of the feedback, Ms. Tiger elucidated that the feedback could be based on conversations during PLC meetings. “For instance, if I wanted to do something to help my low low (students), then the coach would find resources to benefit them.” The coach will deliver the resources, and if Ms. Tiger has a question, the coach will answer it; however, if the resources are “self-explanatory, we just keep it moving.”

Finally, the teachers in the focus group, who are all employed at the same school, offered two methods at their school for feedback: written and through reflective questioning. The coach periodically observes the implementation of Letterland, sound walls, and general literacy practices in the teachers’ classroom. Ms. Cougar said the coach “sends us a note usually with positive feedback” after such observations. Ms. Beaver added to follow up on the coaching cycle, the coach and I would schedule a time to meet. During the follow-up meeting, she would

“ask a lot of reflection questions,” which prompted me to dig deeper and engage in “introspection” into my instructional practices.

The lack of explicit and constructive feedback from the coach to all teachers to build self-improvement or collective efficacy was affirmed. Teachers consistently surmised that feedback from the coach is limited to teachers who require support or where a clear need has been established and documented. Teachers feel empowered to direct the coaches' role in their experience. In their opinion, coaching is reserved for less experienced or struggling teachers. Educational experts identify feedback as a critical component for meaningful change to occur (Barkley, 2005).

Research Sub-Question 1a: How do teachers perceive the knowledge level of the literacy coach?

As part of describing their experience with instructional coaching in literacy, the teachers weighed in on their perceptions of the coach's knowledge level. Three themes emerged from their responses. Teachers tied the depth of knowledge level with the coach's experience and education, resourcefulness, and professional development and research.

Experience and Education

In 4 out of 5 interviews, the teachers described the coach as knowledgeable. Mrs. Hat noted, “Well, I would assume she'd be very knowledgeable in literacy. She'd probably have like a master's degree in literacy.” Other participants acknowledged the influence of the coach's practical knowledge and experience. Ms. Pet suggested, “A lot of it comes from experience. She's been teaching a while.” Another teacher, Ms. Beaver, commented, “She uses her life experiences in the classroom to help us understand something better.” Ms. Tiger acknowledged that her coach is in the first year of coaching but leans toward her previous experience as a

classroom teacher and grade-level chair to support her and the team. "I think because it's her first year, I think she is growing into that position." Despite it being the coach's first year, Ms. Tiger shared, "She's doing a good job for it to be a first year." In addition, Ms. Tiger described the coach as motivated to use her "experience in education to help us (the grade level team)."

Teachers surmised that coaches use their education and previous teaching experiences to support teachers and seek answers when they experience roadblocks. Research confirms that principals usually select experienced and successful classroom teachers (Chval et al., 2010) to serve in a coaching role. Principals tend to petition the best content or literacy teachers to transfer to the coach role (Shanklin, 2007).

Resourcefulness

The coach's ability to find answers and resources for teachers surfaced as a positive trait attributing to the teachers' confidence in the coach's knowledge level. "One of the qualities of a leader is that when they don't know something, they can admit saying I don't know that thing, but they are motivated to find the answer," explained Mrs. Peace. Mrs. Hat recalled a time at her school when the grade level's Professional Learning Community (PLC) expressed interest in a particular book. The literacy coach led a book study for the PLC. She asserted that the coach "probably had to go ahead of time, and you know, prepare and read ahead of us." One participant shared an incident where the literacy coach studied outside of her assigned content of literacy to be helpful in a science unit of study. Ms. Pet stated, "We're growing butterflies now," and the coach is "very knowledgeable" and is "helping me put this stuff (butterfly habitat) together." Finally, teachers report the importance of coaches' capacity to use skills from professional development and research to guide them. Establishing credibility and recognition from teachers enables coaches to gain access to the classroom (Munson & Saclarides, 2022). Resourcefulness

in responding to teachers' needs or requests maximizes the coach's access to the classroom and opportunities to impact instruction (Mangin, 2005).

Professional Development and Research

The teachers in the focus group felt that before their new literacy coach started, they did not receive information in a timely manner. Ms. Cougar replied,

We really didn't have much at all. We even felt like we were not getting the information from the county in a timely manner, or we were not getting it. We were kind of told after the fact that we probably should have gotten new Letterland material, but our coach didn't advocate for us to get new stuff. So that kind of passed us by. So, this is the best coaching cycle I have seen at our school in the last 20 years. But I don't know if it's the person or the position. But we've seen how this position can really be utilized and help a team and be supported.

Her comments suggest the person in the role is the most significant influencer of success, although the job description of the role remains consistent across schools. Ms. Beaver continued the conversation by adding that our new coach "is very knowledgeable," and she is willing to find the answers for us in the curriculum. The new coach at Mrs. Cougar and Ms. Beaver's school was previously employed as a classroom teacher in the school. Her designation as an insider positively contributes to her access to teachers, which aligns with research. Ms. Pet acknowledged her coach's fortitude. She applauded, "I know she has to do a lot of meetings and professional development, and she has to give the professional development sometimes. I can tell that she really does her research."

In summary, while most participants found the coach's knowledge level acceptable, one participant, Ms. Kat, could not quantify the coach's knowledge level. Ms. Kat felt the coach's

primary responsibility in her school was communicating the principal's expectations. She commented, "I think I feel like her job has been more to let us know what the principal expects." As such, Ms. Kat could not discern the coach's knowledge level. Ms. Kat's perception of the tight coupling between the coach and principal hinders the coach-teacher relationship. This hindrance facilitates an evaluative environment between the coach and the teacher. After allowing teachers to express their perceived knowledge level of the coach, the researcher moved into the research question and sub questions.

Research Sub-Question 1b: How do teachers describe the perceived impact of coaching on their instructional practices in literacy?

The first sub-question addressed the teachers' perceived impact literacy coaching made on their instructional practices within the classroom. The data was collected based on the teachers' responses to the open-ended interview question. The data analysis revealed the identification of three themes in the perceived impact. The themes were facilitating the Professional Learning Community, coaching on instructional practices, and providing individual, direct coaching support.

Professional Learning Communities

A common experience for all of the participants seemed to be the coach's interaction with the Professional Learning Community (PLC) during the weekly required meeting time. The school district's board policy mandates for schools to determine a schedule for regular PLCs. A professional learning community meeting should last for an hour but can be extended by the consensus of the team. A waiver of policy is required to meet for less than 60 minutes per week. (WCPSS School Board Policy, n.d). The district defines Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) as "collaborative teams that engage in ongoing processes of collective inquiry geared

towards exploring and examining practices to improve student learning outcomes for all students” (WCPSS, n.d). The policy gives schools the flexibility to organize PLCs vertically, by subject/grade level, in cross-disciplinary teams, or by a single subject. In another research study, teachers credited literacy coaching with increasing dialogue and discussion during professional learning communities (Ferguson, 2024).

In this study, all participants confirmed the PLCs as grade-level teams in their buildings; 100% of the teachers confirmed that the literacy coach attended, led, and supported them and their grade level during PLC time. Many indicated the literacy coach designed and facilitated the PLC agenda. Mrs. Hat stated, “I believe she writes the agenda for the PLCs.” Ms. Tiger added, “Basically, our literacy coach is required to be in our PLT meetings every Wednesday from 8 to 10 am, and then after that, if we have anything that we need to be caught up on individually, she'll come by the classroom.” The focus group participants concurred, “We meet with her during our PLCs weekly, but she also checks in on us at least a couple of days a week, asking if we need anything.” Mrs. Peace from the focus groups asserted, “It's super helpful to have them be able to kind of create agendas, guide us in what areas need to be discussed and delved into as a team.” She continued that the coach’s role in managing the PLC meetings reduces the workload of the grade-level teams, especially the grade-level chair. The grade level chair is no longer responsible for creating the meetings’ agendas or facilitating the meetings.

At Mrs. Hat’s school, she recognized the coach for designing the PLC agendas and co-facilitating with the grade-level teachers. The coach “reviews all of our testing coming up” and analyzes the Number Knowledge Test proficiency with us. Using data is a major responsibility of the PLC. The Number Knowledge Test is a mathematics universal screener administered by the teacher in a one-on-one setting with students three times per year at the beginning, middle,

and end of the year. The purpose is to determine which students are performing at grade level and which students are struggling in the area of mathematics. Teachers use the results of the data to plan and deliver targeted instruction based on the student's specific areas of need (WCPSS website, <https://www.wcpss.net/Page/52309>). In addition to the mathematics universal screener, the literacy coach leads the PLC in the analysis of the literacy universal screener, Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS) 8th edition. In addition to leading the PLC, Mrs. Hat felt the coach was available to support her. To receive support from the coach, Mrs. Hat would need to solicit assistance, then the coach would support her. Discussing student assessments is a specific coaching task associated with increasing reading achievement for students (Elish-Piper & L'Allier, 2010). Additionally, Elish-Piper & L'Allier (2010) suggest student achievement in reading increased significantly when coaches observe teachers' instruction, model instruction, offer feedback and conference with teachers about instruction. These tasks from the literacy coach appear accessible to most participants, but only when initiated by the teacher.

The participants clearly articulated the expectation for coaches to attend and engage with teachers during PLC meetings, which appeared to be established by the school's principal. While structures for grade-level team support were in place, access to individual teacher support was less structured or prescribed. Participants did not vocalize a transparent direct assignment process outside of self-initiation. Assignment to individual coaching cycles seemed arbitrary; however, participants speculated that the assignment was based on the teacher's years of experience.

Coaching on Instructional Practices

The next line of questioning during the interviews attempted to gauge teachers' perception of coaching's impact on their instructional practices. The researcher invited teachers to describe the coach's impact on their instructional practices in literacy and to cite a specific example. Four out of 10 teachers (40%) confirmed an impact and supported it with a specific example. The four teachers detailed the coach's role in increasing their understanding of the district-provided curriculum resources used to teach literacy. Ms. Tiger explained her need for assistance in implementing language dives with fidelity. Language dive is a strategy in the language comprehension curriculum. According to EL Education, a language dive empowers students to "analyze, understand, and use the language of academic sentences, which often seems opaque to students" (EL Education, n.d). The coach "really unpacked it by showing us how to deconstruct and reconstruct the sentence." In addition to unpacking the strategy with the teacher and the PLC, the coach "modeled it" during a planning meeting. Ms. Pet noted support with the EL Education reading curriculum. Ms. Pet recalled the coach breaking down the protocols, "cause some of those I was like, okay, so these are protocols." Beyond assisting Ms. Pet with digesting the protocols of the EL Education curriculum, the coach added an additional layer of reinforcement by "breaking down how to read or understand the EL manual." Ms. Pet describes the EL modules and manuals as "thick." Ms. Pet continued outlining specific instructional strategies supported by the coach. The coach provided modeling for the Letterland phonics curriculum. Letterland is a research-based, systematically designed curriculum connected to the state standards. It uses a story-based approach to teaching phonics. Engagement through story logic and multi-sensory approaches promotes long-term learning of concepts. Although Ms. Pet taught phonics prior to arriving at the school, she was unfamiliar with Letterland. The coach

came into her classroom and modeled a lesson with the students. The modeling served as a demonstration for Ms. Pet.

The teachers continued to describe support from coaches with curriculum implementation as a strategy for improving classroom instructional practices. During the 2023-24 school year, the district introduced a new writing curriculum to align with the Science of Reading research. District leaders facilitated a train-the-trainer model for literacy coaches on the new curriculum. Ms. Cougar noted the coach “has done a deep dive into the literacy and writing curriculum to help us maneuver, especially the writing curriculum this year.” She praised the coach for the extra work she took on to help the teachers understand the objectives and pacing of the new curriculum. Research endorses using coaches to guide the implementation of literacy initiatives and confirms that teachers who receive literary coaching are more likely to implement a literacy initiative than their peers who have not received coaching (Carlisle & Berebitsky, 2011). Teachers can be left feeling less adequate without coaching to assist in the implementation of new skills (Tschannen-Moran & McMaster, 2010).

To anchor the learning from Letterland, schools create sound walls using Letterland sound cards supplied by the district. Sound wall cards allow students to see, and group sounds and spelling patterns with the help of the Letterland characters. Ms. Cougar credits the coach for the success of sound walls in her classroom. “She's really helped with the implementation of the sound walls and the resources.” Beyond initial implementation, Ms. Cougar reinforces the coach’s role with the sustainability of the strategy. She helps me know “how to keep it going in the classroom.” Another teacher Mrs. Peace referenced the coach’s role in guaranteeing she had the Letterland curriculum materials so that she could “teach the curriculum to fidelity.”

One teacher depicted a strategy unrelated to curricular resources. Ms. Wolf, the only teacher to describe participating in a coaching cycle with the coach, veered towards a curriculum-agnostic strategy. She stated, “Through our coaching cycle, she helped me look at different ways to analyze data.” The data analysis strengthened Ms. Wolf’s capacity to reflect on the data points, thus resulting in “changes to my small groups.”

Ms. Cougar regarded the coach’s experience as a second-grade teacher previously within the building benefitted the teachers. The coach’s experience, she noted, allowed her to see the progression through the grades, supporting the kindergarten team with understanding “where the students needed to get to and also where they are going.” Ms. Cougar further explained the benefit of her coach being “fresh from the classroom.” It permitted the coach to fully empathize with the teachers’ struggles in implementing the new curriculum. This knowledge afforded her the skill set to effectively support the teachers with manipulating the curriculum for their population of students because the coach had taught the curriculum to a similar population of students.

Like some of the other teachers in the study, Mrs. Hat credited the coach with supporting instructional strategies aligned with early reading skills. She posited that the coach supports the growth of students in kindergarten and first grade so that when the students arrive in second grade, they have mastered the foundational skills. She recalled the coach promoting a vertical alignment strategy related to syllables and spelling. The coach “noticed that if the kids could break the words into syllables, they could spell better.” The coach asked Mrs. Hat’s kindergarten team to start emphasizing syllables in their classrooms so students could have the “skill down packed by the time they reached second grade.”

One out of the ten teachers did not cite a positive impact on instructional practices but rather a conflictory relationship with the coach. Ms. Kat described a relationship where her expertise as a teacher was not valued or honored. “I've taught first grade for over 22 years, and I still get talked to like, I'm not an expert.” Her perception is the coach provides “directives, instructions and expectations” which she finds difficult to navigate because principals expect different things than what Ms. Kat believes to be best practice. She concluded by offering “I've definitely learned that I feel like I should teach principals.” Research suggests coaches need more control over how the principal positions and communicates their role to the school staff and community. Principal's actions can boost the coach's access (Campbell & Griffin, 2017; Mangin, 2005; Matsumura et al., 2009) by publicly identifying the coach as a literacy expert, granting the coach professional autonomy, and engaging actively in literacy reform efforts.

Despite the inability to describe an impact on instructional practices in the classroom, Ms. Kat acknowledged, “I appreciate that I see her more than I've seen other literacy coaches in the past because I've known literacy coaches who like stay in their office, and they never come out, and they never help anybody, and they never do anything.”

In summary, instructional coaches are essential to fostering classroom implementation and reflecting a deeper understanding of instructional practice, which is consistent with research. Teachers in this study relied on the coach to deepen their understanding and build efficacy in utilizing curricular and instructional resources. However, the teachers did not explicitly connect the role and purpose of the coaches to enhanced student achievement.

Direct Individual Coaching

Teachers struggled to clearly describe the structure for coaching at their schools. Outside of leading PLC meetings, the majority of teachers perceived coaching as a support structure

reserved for new, struggling, or alternative licensed teachers. Ms. Kat confirmed, “Coaching hasn't directly impacted down here in first grade. We've a brand-new teacher in second grade. The coach really supported her a lot.”

While most of the teachers in the study felt they could reach out to the literacy coach if they needed direct support, few accessed direct support. One of the teachers, Ms. Wolf, who shared her experience with receiving direct individual coaching, perceived the invitation to be an optional partnership. The partnership lasted over a 9-week period. She recalls, “I just started in January at Adams with a new class that was created, and our literacy coach approached me after getting to know me and spending some time in the classroom and asked if I wanted to do a coaching cycle with her.” Ms. Wolf reiterated the coach presented the invitation “as very optional” and as something Ms. Wolf could “kind of direct and control. It wasn't going to be something that, you know, put a lot of pressure on. It could be kind of how I wanted it to be.” She agreed to a coaching cycle that started in the third quarter and extended into the beginning of the fourth quarter. She continued, “We met pretty frequently following her coaching plan.” The coach wanted the plan to be directed by me based on what I needed, she further explained.

Individual direct coaching was not prevalent in teachers' descriptions of the coaching experience. Only one teacher, Ms. Wolf, described a formal coaching process over an extended period of time. The formal process included a coaching cycle. At the district level, coaches self-report the number of coaching cycles they complete with the teachers. The coaching cycle completion data is shared with school principals.

Research Sub-Question 1c: How do teachers describe the perceived impact of coaching in addressing the needs of traditionally marginalized student populations, specifically Hispanic and Black students?

The second research sub-question explored the connection of the coach with reducing disproportionality among traditionally marginalized students such as Hispanics and Blacks. The goal of reducing the disproportionality of Black males referred to special education services is the cornerstone of this position. Teachers struggled to offer explicit examples that delineate the impact of coaching in addressing the needs of traditionally marginalized student populations. Three of the ten teachers, Mrs. Peace, Ms. Cougar, and Ms. Pet cited specific examples. Mrs. Peace shared how the coach guides them in understanding what the standards might look like for their population of students. “We have a lot of students who are learning English,” and comparing their work against the state standards may look different. Although Mrs. Peace acknowledged the school’s large population of Multilingual Learners (ML) and the need for recognizing a comparison of their work against the state standards, she failed to specifically identify the coach’s role in assisting the teachers with strategies to elevate the learning of MLs so they can meet or exceed the state standards.

A teacher, Ms. Cougar at the same school, offered, “The majority of our students are those students (Black and Hispanic).” The coach helped address Black and Hispanic students’ needs by modeling for teachers how to effectively use mirrors in teaching students “proper mouth formation and tongue placement when producing sounds.” Ms. Cougar seemed to downplay the need to focus exclusively on traditionally marginalized student groups despite the school’s test proficiency exposing a gap between whites and blacks (89% proficient to 41%

proficient) and whites and Hispanics (89% proficient to 47% proficient), respectively. She further explained the school is “just the big old melting pot.” Ms. Cougar expounded,

“what she is teaching as a whole has been to help address those students, like using the mirrors to form sounds with their mouths. Just our whole curriculum focus has been how to take our curriculum and level it for those kids and keep stretching it for the high. So, it's kind of funny in our school, we don't think about how we address that set of students because that is our set of students.”

With the district’s emphasis through goal 2 of its strategic plan on eliminating proficiency disparities by race, ethnicity, gender, and socio-economic status and aim 4’s focus on eliminating over-representation in Special education and under-representation in advanced coursework by race, ethnicity, and gender, the teacher’s comments appear misplaced and misguided. The goals and aims of the strategic plan have failed to reach the frontline with teachers who make the greatest impact on student achievement.

Ms. Pet articulated the coach’s support for traditionally marginalized populations through advocacy. The coach at her school served in a dual role as an intervention teacher. Despite a black student’s intervention data showing incremental improvements, IQ testing revealed an extremely low IQ score. The student “may be low and intensive but she is very knowledgeable of stuff.” The coach was upset that the student would transition to special education because she felt the child's behavior impeded her performance and special education was not the right placement. The coach wanted to keep the child in intervention and resume serving her with intensive reading interventions. While Ms. Pet clearly celebrated the coach for her proclivity towards advocacy, prevention or intervention seemed to be an elusive idea. Finally, Ms. Pet noted the coach’s distribution of books to classrooms each month as an effort to “celebrate diversity.” The

provision of diverse books builds an inclusive culture by providing students access to books that serve as mirrors, windows, and sliding doors. Rudine Sims Bishop coined the framework of mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors. According to his definition, books serving as mirrors allow readers to see their own lives reflected in the pages of the books, while windows give readers access to view the lives or stories that may differ from their own. Sliding glass doors offer readers the experience of being engrossed in the world of the story and empathize with the characters (Phillips, 2022)

Other teachers shared implicit connections that led to addressing the needs of traditionally marginalized student populations like Black and Hispanic students. One teacher, Mrs. Hat, commented on the partnership between the English as Second Language (ESL) teacher and the coach while recognizing the coach for getting people in place to speak to the PLC. Furthermore, she described a PLC when the coach invited the ESL teacher to the meeting. The ESL teacher emphasized “some strategies like sentence starters and things that would help those kids.” The teacher’s comments suggested the responsibility for the Multilingual learners as well as the expertise for addressing that subgroup of students laid with the ESL teacher.

Ms. Tiger admitted that during data days at PLC, the coach and teachers discuss traditionally marginalized student groups by looking at individual student data. “It will only be during data days that we focus on the individual student. And then from there, we kind of like modify what’s needed to get the students to the next step.” Ms. Tiger didn’t mention any conversation around performance gaps between White and Black students or White and Hispanic students and how to address those gaps.

While coaches touched on strategies for raising student achievement that could potentially eliminate the achievement gap, concrete conversations about addressing the gap did

not surface during the interviews. The lack of attention to the achievement gap is problematic given that the performance gap between White and Black students in the schools participating in this study averaged 39.8%. The gap between White and Hispanic students at the participating schools averaged 30%. Targeted strategies for addressing the needs of traditionally marginalized student groups, such as Black and Hispanic students, were limited in scope.

Summary

Chapter 4 presented an in-depth description of the findings from the semi-structured individual and focus group interviews I conducted for the purpose of this study. Ten teachers consented to participate in the study, with eight actively participating during the interview process. Teachers of grades K-2 English-Language Arts from schools across the district where at least 20% or more of the student population identify as Black and/or Hispanic and 35% of the students are eligible for free or reduced meals were invited to participate. To answer the research question and sub-questions, the researcher used direct quotes and summarized detailed descriptions. From the participants. Overall, the researcher identified themes from the participants' responses that were similar. Based on the perceptions, Chapter 5 presents an analysis of the research questions and a discussion of how the study's findings are situated in the literature. Chapter 5 will also address the implications for practice, limitations/delimitations of the study, and recommendations for future research.

CHAPTER 5: DISUSSION

This study explored the lived experiences of eight kindergarten-second grade elementary teachers who underwent the potentially transformative process of literacy coaching. These teachers were invited from selected schools within a single school district, each with a student population of at least 20% identified as Black and Hispanic and 35% eligible for free or reduced meals. The primary aim of this study was to unravel the intricate ways in which literacy coaches bolster teachers' instructional practices and cater to the needs of traditionally marginalized student populations. As the data was exclusively collected from schools in a specific school district, the discussion, conclusions, recommendations, and implications for research and practice are tailored for this district. However, most of these recommendations can be extrapolated to other school districts, underscoring the universal relevance of our findings. Next, I will highlight the implications for school-based and district staff. To conclude, I will propose topics for future research on this relevant strategy.

Summary and Discussion of the Findings

Research question 1: How do teachers describe the instructional coaching experience?

Teachers in this study described a coaching experience in which they directed the experience based on their needs. They acknowledged that the coaching experience for novice teachers in their buildings was more directive and appeared different from their lived experiences. Teachers recognized that the school administrator played a significant role in shaping the coach's roles and responsibilities. They accepted and most welcomed the expectation and requirement of coaches to attend and engage in Professional Learning Community (PLC) meetings, a mandate often set by the school administrator. The acknowledgement of the principal's role in my findings is consent with existing research. Mangin's (2005) research found

decreased teacher resistance when the principal communicated the role of the coaches to the teachers. In this study, two prevalent findings emerged. Responsive coaching tended to be the preferred stance for coaching coupled with consistent engagement in professional learning communities.

Responsive Coaching

One first theme from the study is that responsive coaching, a coaching approach where the teacher takes a more assertive role in guiding the coaching process, is prominent among the participants. The literacy coach is available to the teachers, but the responsibility for initiating the partnership with the coach resides with the teachers. Responsive (Dozier, 2006) and directive (Deussenetal, 2007) coaching are two popular stances coaches exert to gain classroom entry. In responsive coaching, the needs of the teachers are elevated and guide the coaching process. Teachers in the study consistently stated that if they needed something, the coach was available and would often check in on them to see if they needed anything. Teachers felt affirmed in their teaching practices because the coach left them alone. Common thinking among teachers is that the coach left them alone because there was no identified need within the teacher's instructional practices. In the one instance where the teacher participated in a coaching cycle with the coach, she clearly articulated her influence in the process. The teacher felt empowered to direct and control the pace and topics of the coaching cycle. She understood participation in the coaching cycle to be optional. Teachers described the relationship as a partnership and did not feel threatened or evaluated by the coach. As defined by the teachers, the coach's primary function was to support them. Teachers in this study described directive coaching between the coach and the newer teachers on the teams or teachers new to the teaching profession. In directive relationships, coaches are elevated as the experts and are assertive about implementing required

instructional practices. Some researchers suggest that directive coaching works well with less experienced or novice teachers, a viewpoint widely held by the teachers in this study.

Research proves that professional learning and follow-up coaching support yield the most substantial effect on implementing a new strategy and strengthening beliefs around self-efficacy for reading instruction (Tschannen-Moran & McMaster, 2010). However, in this study the feedback loops between instructional coaches and teachers needed to be more consistent and systematically prioritized. Teachers received varying levels of feedback based on their school's practices and individual needs. For example, Mrs. Hat mentioned that feedback was rare, attributing the coach's lack of attention to confidence in her teaching practices. In contrast, Ms. Pet received individual feedback during planning meetings. At the same time, Ms. Tiger's coach provided feedback through post-it notes and emails, mainly offering resources rather than detailed guidance or constructive feedback.

Teachers in a focus group from the same school described feedback through written notes and reflective questioning. However, the overall lack of explicit and constructive feedback from coaches limited opportunities for self-improvement and collective efficacy among teachers. The study affirmed that feedback was primarily given to those perceived as needing support, missing a broader application that could drive meaningful instructional change.

Coaching cycles provide a structure to encourage frequent and streamlined feedback. The core of the coaching cycle is the focus on one specific area of instruction for a sustained period of four to six weeks (Knight, 2007). The findings did not yield coaching cycles as dominant structure among the teachers in this study. Only one of the 10 ten teachers interviewed indicated participation in a coaching cycle.

The next theme that emerged in the study was coaches' weekly engagement with Professional Learning Communities. This theme will be explored in the next section.

Professional Learning Communities

In each school, weekly grade-level professional learning community (PLC) meetings are commonplace and a cornerstone of the school's educational structure. They provide a platform for teachers to share their experiences, build collective efficacy, and analyze data to improve student outcomes and well-being. PLC meetings served as a consistent home base for the coach-teacher partnership. Teachers regarded the coach creating and facilitating the PLC agendas as a luxury, easing the burden on teachers. The meetings offered a segway for coaches to illuminate their instructional prowess, teaching experiences, and curricular expertise. Teachers leaned on the coach's curricular knowledge to model instructional protocols found within the curriculum and unpack the unit's standards. Unpacking the unit's standards fosters a common interpretation of the standards, thus guaranteeing students met the rigor of the standards. The role of Professional Learning Communities in fostering a supportive environment for teachers to share and learn from each other is crucial in improving student outcomes.

The visibility of coaches within PLC meetings served as an effective strategy for coaches to leverage access to teachers' classrooms, being seen is a relational strategy that builds trust between the coach and teacher and grants access (Mangin, 2005). For sustained improvement in student achievement and teacher efficacy, coaches must move beyond responsiveness to the teachers' needs or being viewed as an extra pair of hands in the classroom (Campbell & Griffin, 2017). A reliance on both quantitative student performance and qualitative teaching effectiveness data must drive the priority and work of the coach. Walkthrough tools and focused classroom observations effectively assess the impact of instructional practices. In this study, teachers

successfully recounted the perceived impact literacy coaching had on their instructional practices, but there was never a connection made to student performance. In the sub question, teachers were asked to describe the perceived impact of coaching on their instructional practices.

Research question 1b: How do teachers describe the perceived impact of coaching on their instructional practices in literacy?

Before examining the perceived impact of coaching on instructional practices, it is imperative to consider the teachers' perception of the coaches' knowledge level. In four out of five interview sessions, teachers described their literacy coaches as knowledgeable, often attributing this to their education and practical teaching experience. Teachers appreciated the coaches' ability to apply their past classroom experiences to support them, even when the coach was new to the role. The coach's resourcefulness in finding answers and providing relevant resources also boosted teachers' confidence in their expertise. The study found that while most teachers were satisfied with their coach's knowledge and resourcefulness, the coach's impact was heavily influenced by their ability to connect with and support teachers based on their experience and responsiveness to teachers' needs.

Impact on Instructional Practices

Research has consistently confirmed that teacher expertise and quality significantly contribute to student outcomes (Piper & L'Allier, 2010). Specifically, Allington (2005) found that quality instruction positively impacts reading achievement, leading to fewer students qualifying for intervention or special education services. The interviews focused on teachers' perceptions of the impact of instructional coaching on their literacy teaching practices. Four of eight teachers confirmed a positive impact, citing specific examples where the coach improved their understanding and implementation of the district-provided curriculum. The coach played a

crucial role in helping teachers grasp complex strategies, such as language dives and protocols in the EL Education curriculum and provided modeling for the Letterland phonics curriculum. Teachers highlighted the coach's support in implementing and sustaining instructional strategies, including creating and maintaining sound walls. One specific teacher, Ms. Wolf, described how coaching cycles improved her data analysis skills, leading to changes in her small-group instruction. Teachers valued the coaches' classroom experience for its relevance in supporting teachers, especially in adapting the curriculum to their specific student needs. Shiffman et al. (2008) revealed that teachers and administrators either altered the reform initiative or simply ignored it without added support, like coaching, to implement the required changes. These findings highlight the importance of instructional coaches in enhancing classroom implementation and deepening teachers' understanding of instructional practices and reforms. Instructional coaching is vital to improving teacher efficacy and facilitating meaningful change.

Overall, the findings indicate that instructional coaches are vital in enhancing teachers' instructional practices, particularly in implementing curriculum resources effectively. This perceived impact is consistent with research. Carlisle and Berebitsky (2011) concluded that teachers who received literacy coaching were more likely to implement a literacy initiative than their peers who had not received coaching. Even though teachers described a favorable impact, using data to confirm or connect the impact was lacking or not prioritized. Teachers failed to make explicit connection between the coach's role and elevated student outcomes.

Research Question 1c: How do teachers describe the perceived impact of coaching in addressing the needs of traditionally marginalized student populations, specifically Hispanic and Black students?

The second research sub-question examined how coaching contributed to reducing disproportionality among traditionally marginalized students, specifically Black and Hispanic populations. The teacher education literature emphasizes cultivating culturally responsive teachers (Hammond, 2014) who are attuned to equity (Gorski et al., 2012; Jacobs et al., 2020). To address disparities, biases, and marginalization related to culture, race, language, gender, sexual orientation, and socioeconomic status in PK-12 schools, teachers must have a deep understanding of equity. Gorski (2017) defines equity as “a fair or equitable distribution of access and opportunity,” which requires a strong commitment to justice (p. 19). Despite the well-documented performance disparities for Black and Hispanic students in this district, teachers found it challenging to provide clear examples of how coaching addressed the needs of these groups. Only three out of ten teachers shared specific instances, such as the coach helping them understand standards for Multilingual Learners (MLs) and modeling sound formation techniques. However, these examples lacked direct connections to addressing performance gaps between White students and Black or Hispanic students. While one teacher, Ms. Pet, highlighted the coach’s advocacy for a Black student at risk of being placed in special education, other teachers failed to indicate clear, broader strategies to mitigate gaps for the most academically fragile students. In one instance, the coach distributed diverse books to promote inclusivity. Other teachers mentioned indirect support, like partnerships between the coach and the ESL teacher, but did not acknowledge or focus explicitly on eliminating achievement gaps and predictability. Traditionally, ESL teachers have taken the lead in supporting Multi-Language

Learners, and this historical precedent can perpetuate the belief that the responsibility lies primarily with them. General education teachers and coaches may feel inadequately prepared to address the unique needs of Multi-Language Learners.

Although research identifies the importance of culture and race in coaching, Cooper, Wilson-Stark, Peterson, O’Roark, and Pennington (2008) found race and culture to be essential considerations during coaching. To encourage intersectionality between the coaching role and cultural diversity, Roche and Passmore (2021) suggest that coaching institutions should take an extensive approach, focusing on defining coaching and its purposes. Overall, while teachers noted some strategies for raising student achievement, there was a lack of targeted, concrete conversations or strategies specifically aimed at addressing the needs and eliminating the achievement gaps between white students and their Black and Hispanic counterparts. Teachers in this study failed to highlight any conversations with the coach around race or the significant achievement gaps between Whites and their Black and Hispanic peers. Teacher failed to identify differentiate supports for Black and/or Hispanic students.

Recommendations for Future Research

This study added to the body of research and literature on instructional coaching; this research also suggests directions for further research in this area. While many studies capture the roles, responsibilities, and impact of coaching, few explicitly research the role coaching has in reducing the disproportionality of traditionally marginalized student groups. The achievement gap is historically widespread and well-documented throughout the United States. Coaching emerged as a popular strategy to combat systemic inequities resulting in lower performance and opportunities for traditionally marginalized student groups. Nevertheless, more research is needed to validate the effectiveness of the coaching strategy for identified groups of students.

Another recommendation for research is to clearly understand administrators' knowledge regarding implementing and sustaining a successful coaching program around literacy. Principals and district leaders must know how to build successful coaching programs based on evidence-based practices in their schools and systems. Well-equipped and knowledgeable principals and district leaders yield quality professional learning for coaches. Principals and district leaders must balance the needs of teachers with district initiatives (Ippolito, 2010). Literacy coaches should balance responding to teachers' needs (responsive) and enacting local and state initiatives (directive) (Ippolito, 2010). Principals can assist with creating and sustaining balance through weekly meetings with the literacy coach focused on examining the progress of the school's improvement efforts and discussing plans for meeting teachers' individual needs.

Recommendations for Practice

The participants in this study are employed in a single district, collaborating with literacy coaches held to identical job descriptions. The district's strategic plan explicitly calls for eliminating proficiency disparities by race, ethnicity, gender, and socio-economic status. Furthermore, the district's goals aim to annually graduate 90% of its students while eliminating graduation rate disparities by race, ethnicity, gender, and socio-economic status; achieve a 90% student proficiency rate on standardized testing while eliminating proficiency disparities by race, ethnicity, gender, and socio-economic status; reach 90% of its schools exceeding the state-wide average for growth; and have 100% of student subgroups exceeding the state-wide average growth. Despite this explicit call for equitable outcomes for all students, the teachers in the study failed to clearly describe the impact of the coach in addressing the needs of traditionally marginalized student populations, specifically Hispanic and Black students. Based on the study and to create greater alignment with the goals of the strategic plan, the district should

1. Create and communicate expectations for the literacy coach's role in supporting the obtainment of the strategic plan goals and
2. Develop and facilitate professional learning for coaches on implementing strategies to meet the diverse needs of all students and accelerate learning for our most academically fragile student populations.

Recommendation #1: Create and communicate clear, measurable expectations

The district should create clear and measurable expectations that communicate and quantify the impact of coaching in assisting schools in achieving the goals outlined in the strategic plan. Although the coaching initiatives are funded at the district level, schools exercise discretion with the coach's everyday responsibilities. Literacy coaching roles vary broadly within the district because schools have different needs and resources (Kowal & Steiner, 2007). The expectations should elevate the collective responsibility of all teachers (novice and veteran) to improve student achievement and reduce disparities among subgroups. The coach should be highlighted as a change agent to spark reflection, consciousness, and equity.

The district's next step is to foster principals' understanding of the coach's roles and responsibilities. Principals must have access to tools to help them clearly communicate the coach's role and responsibilities to all staff, emphasizing the importance of collaboration. Afterward, principals must encourage teachers to view the literacy coach as a partner rather than an evaluator (Mangin, 2005). The partnership advances a culture of trust and openness, where teachers feel comfortable seeking and receiving support. Principals can prioritize coaching by allocating time in the school schedule for teachers to meet with the coach, observe model lessons, and participate in professional development sessions (Matsumura et al., 2009). Principals play an active role in supporting a clear job description for coaches. The findings

suggest the coach's role is limited to meetings with teacher for Professional Learning Community meetings and while delivering professional development sessions. Modeling was not mentioned as a coaching strategy.

Ultimately, the district should equip principals with the skills to use data to monitor coaches' impact on student literacy outcomes and provide coaches with insights to help refine their strategies. Relationships are critical in coaching but should not be the end goal. Since the district significantly invested in funding the coaching positions, it must demonstrate “that these efforts are valuable to the school organization, individual educators, and ultimately, students” (Guskey, 2000, p. 8). Coaches should be made aware of the success criteria for their positions and know of their impact for their own sense of self-efficacy (Sweeney & Harris, 2020). Principals must allow coaches to have a voice in creating and monitoring the goals. Principals should frequently monitor the coaches' progress toward the stated goals.

Recommendation 2: Robust professional development for literacy coaches

Professional learning for literacy coaches should focus on instructional practices, data analysis, and culturally relevant instruction and resources to eliminate performance gaps. An effective coaching program has structural conditions that support coaches, maintain a keen focus on adult learning, and normalize strong instructional leadership (King et al., 2006). District staff should identify instructional strategies with proven outcomes, deliver professional learning around said strategies to literacy coaches, and highlight student proficiency and growth data as one of the success criteria for the role. Coaches should be trained to have a propensity to analyze student performance data, aggregate data by subgroups, and inform the next steps for instruction based on the data. The analysis should stem from examining both assessment data and student work samples. A coach should encourage teachers to discern individual student needs through

data and create differentiated instruction for individuals or groups of students (Allen, 2006; Hasbrouck, 2005).

As part of the professional learning for coaches, the district must teach coaches to give constructive feedback and assist with designing feedback loops between the coach and teachers. The district's current coaching framework leans on cognitive coaching as a vehicle for conversing between the coach and the teacher. An effective coach should be able to pinpoint focal areas and give direct and specific feedback to teachers. The district could create scenarios and allow coaches to practice developing coaching cycles to address the scenario. Coaching cycles allow for a sustained period to focus on a specific area of instruction to facilitate the transfer to practice (Knight, 2007b). This will help reduce the challenge of turning knowledge about performance into actions consistent with that knowledge. Pfeffer and Sutton (2000) coined this issue as the Knowing-Doing Gap. Teachers receive frequent, timely, and sustained feedback in a coaching cycle.

Conclusion

The 2022 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) report revealed that just 32% of North Carolina's fourth-graders are proficient in reading. When broken down, the data highlight significant disparities based on race, ethnicity, and income levels. Intervention at the federal, state, and local levels failed to remedy the stagnate achievement proficiency. Research suggests that instructional coaching has had some success in enhancing teaching practices. However, additional studies are needed to establish a more vital link between instructional coaching and long-term improvements in teacher performance and student achievement (Goodwin, 2013; Knight, 2006). This study reported that most teachers favorably perceive the

coaching role as impactful in reducing teacher workload, improving instructional practices, and raising student achievement.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: Participant Invitation and Teacher Profile Questionnaire

Dear Participant,

You are invited to participate in a research study to examine the lived experience of elementary school teachers who receive coaching from a literacy coach. Syreeta Smith is conducting this study under the supervision of Dr. Lance Fusarelli, a professor at North Carolina State University. I am interested in describing the lived experience of teachers involved with a literacy coach, examining the perceived impact of coaching on teachers' instructional practices in literacy, and addressing the needs of traditionally marginalized student populations.

You were selected as a possible participant because you are an elementary school teacher with at least a half-time literacy coach on-site at your school. As the primary researcher, I have chosen to survey elementary schools in the district with 30% or more of their student population as non-white.

If you decide to participate, you are asked to complete a demographic/general information questionnaire. It should take about 10-15 minutes to complete the questionnaire. In the questionnaire, you can indicate whether you prefer to participate in a focus group or an individual interview.

I have received permission from the school district to send the questionnaire to select elementary schools and conduct focus group and individual interviews; however, your participation is strictly voluntary. I assure you that all of the data collected from you for my study will remain anonymous.

Information obtained through your participation may be used to fulfill the educational requirements for the Doctoral Degree in Educational Leadership. You may withdraw from

participation in this study at any time without penalty; however, after you have provided anonymous information, you will be unable to remove your data after participation since there will be no way to identify individual information.

If you have questions about this study, please contact Syreeta Smith XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX at XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX. Thank you for helping me with my research.

(Questionnaire link)

Teacher Profile Questionnaire

- 1. How many years of educational experience (including this year) do you have?*
- 2. How many years have you experienced coaching with a literacy coach (including this year)?*
- 3. What grade level do you currently teach?*
- 4. Thank you for completing this brief questionnaire. If you would be interested in participating in a focus group or individual interview, please indicate your response below (check all that apply)*
 - a. Focus Group*
 - b. Individual Interview*

Appendix B: Focus Group Script and Open-Ended Interview Questions

SCRIPT: FOCUS GROUP

Opening (10 Minutes)

“Hello. My name is _____. Today, I would like to talk with you about Literacy Coaching. I am interested in learning about the perceived impact of literacy coaching on the instructional practices in your classroom. Are there any questions?”

Respond to participant questions.

“Let’s begin with some norms. In order for me to keep track of what people are saying, it is important that we speak one person at a time. If something someone says resonates with you and you want to respond, please use the raise hand feature, and I will call on you next. Everything we say during this conversation will be kept completely confidential. I will summarize your responses. My role as facilitator is to ensure that there is equity of voice and that all voices are honored. To get us started, let’s go around and have everyone share their first name and number of years working with a literacy coach.”

Start with the person at the top of the screen. Select participants sequentially.

“Let’s begin.”

Focus Group Interview Protocol

Interview Protocol (Questions)

- Background
 - Tell me about your journey in education.
 - What is your current role?
 - How long have you been in your current role? How long have you been in your current school?

- In general, what do you enjoy most about your current role? What do you find most challenging?
- Coaching
 - Describe the structure of the coaching process at your school.
 - How are teachers assigned to a coaching cycle?
 - How often does coaching occur?
 - If you know the difference in the frequency of coaching cycles among teachers, what are those differences?
 - Why do the differences occur?
 - How does your coach provide feedback to you? Describe the feedback structure.
- Perceptions
 - How do you perceive the knowledge level of your coach?
 - Describe your perception of coaching before being coached.
 - How do you perceive coaching now that you have been coached?
- Impact
 - How has coaching impacted your instructional practices? Please cite a specific example.
 - Describe the impact of coaching on addressing the needs of traditionally marginalized students. Please cite a specific example that illustrates impact on Black and/or Hispanic students.
- Reflection
 - Is there anything else about the coaching experience that you would like to add?

Appendix C: Open-Ended Structured Individual Interview Protocol

Individual Interview Protocol

Invitational Disclaimers

Participation in this study is voluntary. Participants are not associated with the researcher or related research outcomes. I will not use interview transcripts, recordings, and related research content beyond this study. Participant names will be changed, and related information in the research study will not be identifiable by name.

Thank you for agreeing to speak with me. The interview should take approximately 1 hour. The primary goal of this interview is to learn about your lived experience of being coached in literacy. This interview is entirely voluntary, and you may refrain from answering any questions that make you uncomfortable. Your answers will be kept from the other teacher participants and your literacy coach. Your name will be changed to protect your privacy. There are no correct answers. Feel free to answer candidly and honestly based on your lived experience. Do you have any questions? Do I have your permission to record?

Interview Protocol (Questions)

- Background
 - Tell me about your journey in education.
 - What is your current role?
 - How long have you been in your current role? How long have you been in your current school?
 - In general, what do you enjoy most about your current role? What do you find most challenging?
- Coaching
 - Describe the structure of the coaching process at your school.
 - How are teachers assigned to a coaching cycle?
 - How often does coaching occur?
 - If you know the difference in the frequency of coaching cycles among teachers, what are those differences?

- Why do the differences occur?
 - How does your coach provide feedback to you? Describe the feedback structure.
- Perceptions
 - How do you perceive the knowledge level of your coach?
 - Describe your perception of coaching before being coached.
 - How do you perceive coaching now that you have been coached?
- Impact
 - How has coaching impacted your instructional practices? Please cite a specific example.
 - Describe the impact of coaching on addressing the needs of traditionally marginalized students, particularly Black and/or Hispanic students. Please cite a specific example that illustrates impact.
- Reflection
 - How do you measure success in your current role? Would you consider yourself successful in your role? Why or why not?
 - Is there anything else about the coaching experience that you would like to add?