Educational Instructional Lead Teachers Perceptions on Improving Teacher Quality

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Abstract

Research suggests that instructional coaching enhances a teacher's instructional quality, thereby improving students' chances for academic success. Instructional Lead Teachers (ILTs) are positioned within a Northeastern school district to improve instructional quality via a coaching paradigm; however, it is unclear how ILTs influence teachers' instructional practices. The purpose of this bounded multi-site qualitative case study was to explore the perspectives of ILTs regarding their instructional support responsibilities and practices in improving instructional quality. Grounded in Bandura's social cognitive theory, the research questions addressed ILT perspectives of their influence on teachers' instructional practices and identified supports ILTs need to increase their effectiveness. Ten ILTs, who served in middle schools, participated in semi-structured interviews and 4 were selected for observations. Data were thematically analyzed using open and axial coding. ILTs believed they served as an authority to provide instructional support, their work was essential to improve student achievement, coaching strategies changed teachers' classroom management skills, and no instructional duties interfered with their coaching responsibilities. They identified support from administration, structure for the position, and more training are needed to be effective ILTs. The results of the study were used to create a coaching structure and 3-day professional development designed to address the specific needs of ILTs. These endeavors may contribute to positive social change by helping district administrators provide ILTs with the structure and training needed to effectively influence teacher practice, thus improving the educational outcomes of students.

Keywords: Instructional lead teachers; Instructional quality; Student achievement; Coaching; Teacher training.

I.Introduction

New educational standards, such as the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) and New Generation Science Standards (NGSS), as well as Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) policy, call for schools and teachers to reform practices to meet new demands for educational quality (Woulfin & Rigby, 2017). New standards for learning, exposed the faltering academics of students across the nation. In a Northeastern state, students have struggled to master grade-level standards in literacy and mathematics. According to the 2017 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), more than 60% of eighth-grade students in the Northeastern state, scored below proficiency standards in both reading and mathematics (The Nations Report Card, 2018). These scores were relatively the same in 2015, which suggests no growth within the 2-year time span.

In the XYZ district, a pseudonym for the district in the research study, most students are performing well

below proficiency levels in reading and mathematics. In 2017, the Northeastern state assessments indicated that approximately 29% of students in Grades 6-8 met or exceeded state-level standards in reading, and less than 15% met or exceeded standards in mathematics. These scores are comparable to previous years. Addressing the poor academic performance of students, the district identified training a high performing workforce as a priority in the 5-year strategic plan. To that end, the district provides principals the option of hiring an ILT, whose primary responsibility is to improve the pedagogical practice of teachers at a specific school site. According to a principal within the district, ILTs are a common position that reports directly to principals, are a part of school staff, and, therefore, understand the specific needs of teachers within the building.

Researchers agree that changing policies in education have narrowed the focus on the role of the teacher in increasing student achievement (Darling-Hammond, 2015). Therefore, teachers must continuously retool their approaches to instruction to learn new ways to respond to new standards and demands for student achievement (Woulfin & Rigby, 2017). In a rank list, resulting from meta-analyses of over 800 factors affecting student achievement, the domains of *teacher* and *teacher practices* were cited 14 times in the top 23 highest influences on student achievement (Hattie, 2008). The positive correlation between teacher practices and student achievement has resulted in school district administrators seeking better ways to focus on improving teacher practices. As a result of these understandings, the XYZ district provided the option of hiring an ILT to improve teacher practices, ultimately to improve student achievement. Teaching is an ever-changing field, requiring continuous and relevant training to keep up with new demands. Yoon, Duncan, Lee, Scarloss, and Shapley (2007) cited the correlation between teacher learning and student learning, noting that teacher professional learning improves a teacher's capacity to teach through additional skills, knowledge, and techniques. Teacher learning is, therefore, necessary to address the changing demands of educational policies.

The key to improving student achievement scores lies within the quality of instruction provided by teachers (Darling-Hammond, 2015; Mincu, 2015). The problem at the XYZ district was that despite the adoption of the ILT position, it was unclear how this role had influenced teacher practice. This was especially true at ABC Middle School (a pseudonym) that provided two ILT positions to support teachers. Although the XYZ district was underperforming as a school district, the students at ABC Middle School were performing well below XYZ district averages for performance in both reading and mathematics for seventh and eighth-grade students. In 2017, only 15% of students met proficiency in reading and 0% in mathematics, as measured by state assessments. The gap in practice was the discrepancy between (a) what research constitutes as the role and practices enacted by instructional coaches and (b) what may not be happening.

In a state-mandated master plan, the XYZ district has identified coaching, including mentoring, as a solution and strategy for improving teacher quality and developing a highly effective workforce. The XYZ district has dedicated two teacher support programs to improve teacher quality. The district offers a mentoring program for 1st-year teachers and a Peer Assistance and Review (PAR) program that provides underperforming nontenured teachers with differentiated coaching. Both teacher support programs focus on improving the instructional practices of teachers with less than 3 years of experience; however, there were no programs for teachers with more than 3-years. ILTs were therefore charged with supporting the instructional practices of all teachers including those with 3 or more years' experience.

According to the literature, instructional coaching was used as a high leverage strategy to improve teacher capacity and thus, student achievement (Kurz, Reddy, & Glover, 2017; Mangin & Dunsmore, 2015). Instructional coaching includes key practices revolving around curricular and instructional approaches to teaching. These practices may include modeling lessons, deepening content knowledge, observing and providing feedback, and supporting specific teaching practices (Kurz et al., 2017; Mangin & Dunsmore, 2015; Woulfin & Rigby, 2017). The XYZ district job description of the ILT was consistent with the key practices of an instructional coach. Researchers agree, noting that lead teachers enact instructional coaching responsibilities

(Kurz et al., 2017; Mangin & Dunsmore, 2015), thus making the term synonymous.

The XYZ district defined the role of an ILT as those teachers who receive additional time during the day to support, lead, and assist with the enhancement of the instructional program within schools. Further, the district charged ILTs with leading in the areas of curriculum, district initiatives, assessments, and pedagogy.

II. Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative multi-site case study was to explore the perceptions of instructional coaching of middle school ILTs, identify how they influence the instructional practices of the teachers they serve, and assess what supports they need to increase their effectiveness. The implementation of coaching through the use of ILT's was unknown in the XYZ School District at the time of the study. Despite a district-wide focus on improving teacher quality, the XYZ schools continue to struggle with low and/or stagnant literacy and mathematics achievement scores. Data regarding the effectiveness of professional learning opportunities in the district have not been collected.

Specifically, the perceptions and experiences of ILTs have not been analyzed. The lack of academic progress in the district supports the need to study this problem to reverse the current academic trend and bring about sustainable improvement for the XYZ district.

III. Research Questions

The RQs that guided this qualitative case study is as follows:

RQ1: What are the ILTs' perceptions of and experiences with instructional coaching of middle school teachers?

RQ2: What instructional changes do ILTs observe in the teachers' classroom practice?

RQ3: What supports do ILTs believe they need to increase their effectiveness in providing instructional support?

IV. Theoretical Framework

The conceptual framework for this study was rooted in social cognitive. Social cognitive theory, developed by Albert Bandura in 1986, holds that humans engage in their development and learning (Bandura, 1977). The theory posited that humans learn through direct observation, modeling, setting goals, planning a course of action, and reflecting on experiences (Bandura, 1977; Bandura, 1989). Further, there are an interplay of influences that form learning – situational, interpersonal, and behavioral, thus, making learning an internal process that can be influenced externally.

According to Bandura (1999), modeling and observation are central to human learning because observing the actions of others informs the observer of what to do or avoid before trying for oneself. Modeling allows for one to gain new skills by observing behaviors and actions that can be recalled and used as an example for future use (Bandura, 1989; Bandura, 1999). Learners are more likely to retain information that was modeled and call upon that information later to serve as a guide. White (2017) likened modeling and observing to the teaching and learning process, noting that the interactive process allows learners to codify new behaviors, and when combined with feedback, strengthens retention of information. Modeling and observing are two behaviors that ILTs are responsible for enacting in accordance with their job responsibilities.

Human learning was appropriate for this study because it describes the learning needs of both teachers and ILTs. The principles and behaviors outlined by Bandura served as the main lens for interviews and observations. As indicated by research, instructional coaches enact teacher learning through modeling, observation, and feedback; these behaviors align with principles in social cognitive theory. However, the types of learning needs for ILTs who are responsible for teaching teachers were unclear. ILTs are tasked with improving the instructional practices of other teachers.Therefore, they must be able to ensure that the instructional supports and learning provided meet the needs of the teachers they serve. Social cognitive theory outlines characteristics of learning

that align with the practices of instructional coaching. Modeling, observation, goal setting, and self-direction are activities enacted by coaches leveraged for improving teacher practice. The research questions were grounded in social cognitive theory, as they highlight the ILTs perceptions of their role, how they enact their role, as well as supports needed to address their role as learners and facilitators of learning for teachers.

V. Methodology

5.1 Participant Sampling

Lodico, Spaulding, and Voegtle(2010) stated that purposive sampling is germane to qualitative studies because it allows the researchers to get in-depth information to help in answering research questions. Purposeful sampling provides the researcher with the best opportunity to learn about the phenomenon. There are many types of purposeful sampling; a homogenous sampling strategy, in order to study the perspectives and practices of ILTs in the XYZ District was used. According to Creswell (2012), a researcher uses homogenous sampling when targeted participants have defining common characteristics. According to literature, there is no target sample size in qualitative studies but that research questions dictate the sample size (Merriam &Tisdell, 2016). At the time of the study, there were 25 ILTs employed in middle schools in the XYZ School District. The study targeted all ILTs who served at the middle school level. Ten participants were identified as the sample size. The small participant sample fit within the tradition of qualitative research. Creswell (2012) noted that studying a few sites allows the researchers to go in-depth, providing rich detail of the sites and participants in the study.

5.2 Data Collection Methods

In this study, two forms of data collection were used: face-to-face semi-structured interviews and observations. Both data collection instruments, the interview guide, and the observation guide were based on facets of social cognitive theory as well as research provided in the literature review. To ensure confidentiality and protect participants from any potential harm, each participant was identified by a pseudonym in place of their name, such as ILT A.

For further protection of data, each transcribed interview and observation note was stored on Microsoft Word document, saved under the pseudonym of the participant and stored in a folder on a computer which is password protected.

5.2.1Observations

Four, half-day observations, of ILTs over the course of two weeks were conducted. Participants were selected based on those who responded and agreed to be shadowed. The observations were scheduled around the availability of the ILTs. Each participant was observed at their school site for four hours and included activities such as collaborative planning, interactions with teachers and staff members, a leadership team meeting, classroom instruction, and preparing for an upcoming presentation. The observations provided their routines and activities and whether the coaches enacted activities aligned to social cognitive theory, such as: direct observation, modeling, goal setting, reflecting, or planning for support. Observations occurred with each ILT in their natural setting to allow for further understanding of the individual role of each ILT within their school buildings as well as their responsibilities and how they enacted their roles.

5.2.2Interviews

ILTs were interviewed individually regarding their perceptions of their role, any instructional changes they observed with the teachers they support, and any support they needed to fulfill their roles. Interview questions were designed to provide answers to research questions as well as to determine how and if ILTs utilized facets of social cognitive theory as they undertook their roles. Interviews occurred over a two-week period with each interview lasting no longer than 50 minutes and took place at a location determined by the participant. Seven of the 10 interviews took place at the participant's school and occurred after the end of the school day; three interviews occurred at an off-site location. Each interview began with the reading of a transcript that restated the

purpose of the research, a review of the informed consent form, as well as stating the need to audio record the session. During each interview probing was used to have participants expand on answers that at times were vague or limited. Some examples of probes used were: "Can you think of an example?" "Can you elaborate?" "You stated…can you tell me more?" Before each session ended, participants were asked if they would like to contribute anything more to the conversation.

5.3 Data Analysis

Using a thematic data analysis approach, an open coding strategy was used for both data sets. Creswell (2012) described the coding process as organizing and segmenting chunks of data in order to determine the essential meaning in the collected data. Starting with the interview transcripts first and using the open coding strategy, words and phrases were highlighted, being mindful to include anything that might be relevant in answering the research questions. Next, a tentative label to each section was assigned based on the meaning determined. This process was repeated for each transcribed interview, as well as the observation notes. After the open coding process was completed, a long list of open codes was generated.

After each data set were analyzed, a second level of coding, axial coding, was conducted to determine the most important codes relevant to answering the research questions. The raw data and open codes, grouping information into categories based on commonalities were reviewed (Merriam &Tisdell, 2016). Next, categories and sub-categories were developed from the recurring patterns emerging from the secondary coding process. During the process of axial coding, categories reorganized the data, deleted redundant codes, combined axial codes, and aligned codes to research questions were reviewed. Key concepts and patterns in order to further develop categories were also searched. Summarizing and clarifying the data are important in the process of determining meaning from the data (Merriam, 2009).

A list of categories from the observation and interview data was kept. These categories were reviewed to determine patterns emerging as subthemes and were useful in describing the phenomena of instructional coaching and in answering each research question. The data was reviewed, continuously, searching for repeated ideas among the categories. Finally, the data were condensed further by creating groupings of connected categories until themes emerged. Data were reviewed multiple times until no new themes emerged, which is considered saturation (Merriam, 2009). Themes are patterns across data sets that are important to the descriptions of the phenomenon and are associated with the research questions.

Once themes emerged, the observation data with the interview data were triangulated. The data analysis process involved two data sets: interviews and observations. Methodological triangulation was used, as there were multiple data sets used (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). To establish quality control and credibility, the themes were crosschecked to ensure there was support from each data to corroborate findings. Codes from each data set were in the above-mentioned spreadsheet and were used in the recursive process of determining themes. To establish validity of the study and ensure accuracy of the represented thoughts and experiences of participants, member checking was conducted. Any discrepant cases are reported in the analysis.

VI. Results

ILTs in the XYZ district believe in their work as instructional coaches and feel as though their work is purposeful and necessary towards improving educational outcomes for students in the district. However, their experiences as a collective group are marked by variances with how the role is enacted in each school setting. For most of the ILTs, noninstructional responsibilities consumed much of their time and therefore impacted their availability to improve teacher practice. For several, citing examples of success with coaching were limited and some could only be provided from previous the year's experiences.

6.1 ILT Demographics

Interviews were conducted with 10 ILTs, all currently working in middle schools serving grades 6-8. Table 1 shows the demographics of the ILTs. Of the group, five ILTs support only one content area one supports two content areas, and the remaining four support more than two content areas. The group averaged 13 years as a classroom teacher. The ILT is a fairly new position in the district, beginning in 2013 (National Association of Secondary Principals, 2013). Two ILTs have been in the role since its inception, four have between four - and five - years' experience and four have less than four years' experience.

Table 1

Pseudonym	Number of Years as a Teacher	Number of Years as an ILT	Content that is Supported
A	9	1	ELA
B	18	5	Mathematics
C	12	5	ELA
D	8	5	ELA/SS
E	11	7	Allcontents
F	9	4	All contents
G	19	1	ELA
H	20	7	ELA/SS/Science
I	12	3	All contents
J	8	2	ELA

Demographics of Instructional Lead Teachers

6.2Results for Research Question 1

RQ 1 was "What are the ILTs perceptions of experience with instructional coaching of middle school teachers?" Table 2shows three themes that emerged from seeking to understand both the perspectives and experiences of ILTs regarding coaching middle school teachers.

Table 1 *Themes Identified from Data Analysis for Research Question 1*

Research Question	Data Source	Themes
What are the ILTs perceptions of and experience with instructional coaching of middle school teachers?	Interviews Observations	ILTs influence student achievement
		ILT is an instructional authority and teacher support
		Noninstructional responsibilities pose challenges to instructional coaching

6.3Results for Research Question 2

The ILT position is marked by instructional interactions with teachers. According to the job description, growing teacher capacity is central to the position. To understand the phenomenon of instructional coaching, the ways in which ILTs observed instructional changes in teachers' classroom practices were reviewed. Table 3 identifies the themes that emerged from seeking to determine the instructional changes ILTs noticed as a result of their coaching.

Table 3: *Themes Identified from Data Analysis for Research Question 2*

Research Question	Data Source	Themes
What instructional changes do ILTs observe in teacher's classroom practice?	Interviews	Classroom management is the main instructional change. Coaching practices used by ILTs

6.4 Results for Research Question 3

Research question 3 involved seeking to understand the supports ILTs needed to be more effective with coaching teachers. Data from interviews yielded that coaches need support from administration, clarity in the structure for their position, and training in coaching. Emergent themes are noted in Table 4 below.

Table 4 *Themes Identified from Data Analysis for Research Question 3*

Research Question	Data Source	Themes
What supports do ILTs believe they need to increase their effectiveness in providing instructional support?	Interviews	Administration support for the ILT position Clarity in structure and training for instructional coaching

VII. Conclusions

The problem of this bounded multi-site qualitative case study was that despite the XYZ district's adoption of the ILT position, it is unclear how this role has influenced teacher practice. The XYZ district has identified

teacher coaching as a solution for improving teacher quality with the ultimate goal to increase student achievement. However, the majority of students in grades 6-8 in the school district were performing below proficiency benchmarks in reading and mathematics, despite the presence of the ILTs. ILTs are hired as school-based coaches to improve teacher instructional practices; however, the role was enacted differently across buildings. ILTs may find other duties assigned to them that are outside the primary responsibility of improving teacher practice.

Consequently, the study aimed to explore the perspectives and experiences of ILTs regarding their role, how they enact their instructional support responsibilities, and what supports they deem necessary to be effective in their role. Bandura's social cognitive theory was used as the conceptual framework for the study, as it outlined principles associated with human learning. Humans learn through direct observation modeling, setting goals, planning a course of action, and reflecting (Bandura, 1977; Bandura, 1989). The actions outlined in the social cognitive theory align with the strategies employed by instructional coaches; therefore, if utilized, teachers may have the best opportunity to improve their instructional practice. This study is significant because research suggests that leveraging the work of ILTs may produce gains in student achievement that has otherwise eluded the XYZ district.

The XYZ school district currently offers an ILT position whose primary responsibility is to improve teacher quality to positively influence student achievement; however, student achievement has remained unchanged since the inception of the position. The purpose of this multi-site qualitative case study was to explore the perceptions and experiences of ILTs as they enact their instructional support responsibilities, determine any observed changes in the instructional practices of teachers, and identify what supports they need to be effective. Findings from the study revealed that ILTs need clarity and structure for their work and training for their coaching responsibilities.

An analysis of data revealed there is a multitude of factors that influence the role of the ILT, including competing responsibilities, lack of clarity and structure, and specific instructional coaching training.One alternative recommendation to address the problem would be for the district to develop an evaluation system that aligns directly with the role of the ILT. An evaluation system would allow for monitoring and measurement of the effectiveness of ILTs. Reddy, Glover, Kurz, and Elliott(2019) suggested that an assessment measure to determine the effectiveness coaching could provide greater clarity around performance and provide feedback to improve coaching practices. The authors further noted that an assessment measure should include self-assessment from coaches, a supervisor's rating, and feedback from teachers that the coaches serve.

An evaluation system would ultimately allow the XYZ district to measure the performance of ILTs as well as provide insight into targeted areas of support for training and refinement.

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