

**Part A****Instructional Coaching's Most Impactful Practices as Told by Teachers and Instructional Coaches in Vermont Schools**

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**Abstract**

The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) indicates a significant decline in student achievement since 2019, with average scores dropping by nine points between 2020 and 2023. Given the link between instructional quality and student outcomes, this grounded theory qualitative study investigated the practices of instructional coaching in Vermont schools as a lever for teacher growth and student success. Though teacher evaluation systems often remain compliance-based and ineffective for professional development, instructional coaching offers a non-evaluative, job-embedded alternative that can mitigate teacher burnout—which accounts for 27% of attrition variance—and enhance self-efficacy. Through interviews and document analysis with 10 instructional coaches and nine teachers across five Vermont school districts, this study explored how participants describe effective coaching and its implementation. Findings reveal Vermont schools do not strictly adhere to a single coaching model (e.g., Knight, Aguilar, or Sweeney and Harris); instead, they use an eclectic, flexible approach tailored to individual teacher needs. Key themes emerged regarding the necessity of nonevaluative relationships to build trust and the importance of a "human-first" approach, grounding professional support in the fulfillment of basic psychological needs. The study concludes with the presentation of a flexible

coaching model designed to enhance teacher effectiveness and reduce learning gaps, particularly for students in rural and disadvantaged settings.

*Keywords:* instructional coaches, impactful practices, instructional practices, student achievement, teacher well-being, Vermont education

According to the Nation's Report Card (National Center for Education Statistics, 2024), a key challenge facing U.S. schools is underperforming students. Data from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) test, administered in schools around the country annually by The National Center for Education Statistics, has shown that student achievement in reading and mathematics has been steadily declining since 2019 with an average score change decline of nine points between 2020 and 2023, one of the most dramatic drops represented in the data since 1971 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2023). According to Nilsen and Gustafsson (2016), changes in teacher practice can positively address student underperformance. Nilson and Gustafsson went on to state, "teacher quality was significantly related to instructional quality and student achievement" (p. 21). Hattie (2009, 2023), through the meta-analysis of strategies that increase learning, concluded that what teachers do instructionally matters and correlates to student learning gains or losses.

Given that instruction and student achievement are fundamentally linked, improving the quality of teaching is a significant lever that can be pulled to improve student learning outcomes. Student underperformance suggests that more instructional coaching for educators could be beneficial (Rhue, 2022). According to Hattie (2009, 2023) and Knight (2018), instructional coaching has shown promise as one way to improve teaching quality and, in turn, student achievement. Given the positive impact instructional coaching can have, I believe that all schools would benefit from having some version of instructional coaching for their teachers.

However, Clenchy (2017) suggested instructional coaching is not always part of systems designed for teacher improvement. According to Hattie (2023), teacher evaluation systems, which are commonly used to rate teacher performance, are usually compliance-based instead of being dedicated to the coaching and growth of educators. In fact, insufficient time is allotted to instructional coaching (Hunter, 2020). According to Clenchy (2017), research on teacher evaluation models have shown they are ineffective at generating teacher growth. According to Hunter (2020), typically there is a local and/or state mandate enforcing teacher evaluation, and, to meet legal requirements, many schools and districts have evaluation systems that rate teachers often based on classroom observations and student test scores. These evaluation systems tend to leave teachers with nothing more than a rating about their practice. In some cases, a teacher can receive a rating below proficient with no suggestions regarding how to improve or any support given to assist them in their professional growth. Said rating can be based on a single observation of instruction over the course of a school year. The result is a system that leaves teachers unsupported, which perpetuates inequities for both teachers and students in the form of lack of support, lack of changed classroom practices, and unchanged systems (Hayes, 2023; Kimball et al., 2021). These researchers highlighted the importance of instructional coaching which is more than a single observation followed by a rating but instead focuses on teacher growth and support over time.

If evaluation alone is not enough to elicit teacher growth (Clenchy, 2017) and sufficient time has not been dedicated to teacher growth (Hunter, 2020), the outcome can be classroom instruction that does not positively impact student learning. Quality of classroom instruction and student learning outcomes are linked; therefore, teachers not performing at an effective level are unlikely to yield high levels of growth in students (Olsen, 2016). Without systems to improve

teaching, achievement gaps will grow because ineffective teaching negatively impacts student learning outcomes and students' potential to access higher education, jobs, and career opportunities (Opper, 2019). Though achievement gaps are largely affected by factors outside of the educational setting, such as student race and socioeconomic status (Gothart, 2023), effective classroom instruction can improve equitable access to learning for all students and reduce learning gaps (Shell et al., 2023). For this reason, students, especially those who have been historically disadvantaged, must have access to high-quality teaching (Gothart, 2023; Hattie, 2009; Olsen, 2019; Opper, 2019; Shiheiber-Gilmer et al., 2025).

Further, if students continue to receive instruction from teachers who are not supported in their own growth and improvement, especially those working with students who are historically disadvantaged, the learning problems will persist (Gothart, 2023; Opper, 2019). According to a June 2024 report by the National Center for Educational Statistics (2024), 32% of students in public schools are below grade level as of the end of the 2023–2024 school year. An article about the aforementioned study identified that just 59% of public schools have an instructional coach (Ng, 2024, para 5). These statistics demonstrate that just over half of schools nationally are using coaching as a strategy to improve instruction and student learning, leaving a significant portion of schools nationwide not engaging in the practice.

Teacher burnout and attrition is connected to teacher support; instructional coaching influences this through improved teacher efficacy. Madigan and Kim (2021) conducted a meta-analysis of studies aimed at better understanding the effects of teacher attrition. The findings showed that burnout explained 27% of the variance leading to teachers quitting the profession and burnout increasing over time (Madigan & Kim, 2021, abstract). Li (2023) showed that when teachers develop more self-efficacy, they are less likely to experience burnout, and that teacher

self-efficacy was statistically significant in reducing burnout with the effects being amplified if the teacher also was able to emotionally regulate and show resilience.

With a lack of instructional coaches and overall teacher support, it seems apparent that more educators may experience burnout and leave the profession, exacerbating the already growing teacher shortage problem nationwide. Patrick and Franco (2023) reported that as of the 2022 school year, one in 10 teaching positions nationally remained unfilled or were filled by teachers who were not fully certified. They estimated, based on state-reported data, that a minimum of 27,844 vacant teaching positions remained as of 2022 and that number grew to nearly 42,000, or one in eight, as of July 2024 (Tan et al., 2024, Table 1). Given the data presented by Li (2023), Madigan and Kim (2021), Patrick and Franco (2023), and Tan et al. (2024), it is clear that properly supporting teachers through instructional coaching can help alleviate common issues impacting schools nationally, like teacher burnout and lack of retention, and having schools fully staffed with educators who feel positively about their jobs, thus benefitting students and staff alike, and positively impacting student outcomes.

### **Statement of the Problem**

A primary problem is that many schools in the United States are underperforming and students, especially those who are most disadvantaged, have limited access to high-quality teachers (Hunter, 2020; Milanowski, 2017). This means that learning gaps exist between affluent students and economically disadvantaged students. Research has shown that students who need quality instruction the most, those who are most disadvantaged, receive instruction from the most inexperienced teachers (Hunter, 2020; Milanowski, 2017). Additionally, though schools are required by state and local mandates to have evaluation frameworks in place, those frameworks are commonly accountability systems that rate teaching practice but do little to support teacher

growth (Kraft & Christian, 2022; Milanowski, 2017). Studies such as those conducted by Hunter (2020) and Milanowski (2017) have demonstrated that accountability-based evaluation systems perpetuate biases within the school system, including racial and assimilation bias.

According to Hunter (2020) and Milanowski (2017), instructional coaching has emerged as a promising practice that can support teacher growth and improvement, reduce inequities, and positively improve student outcomes. The study builds on the existing research by seeking the perspectives of coaches and teachers currently being coached to understand how instructional coaching is implemented and identify strategies and practices coaches and teachers believe are most impactful. This research benefits schools looking to incorporate instructional coaching because it provides perspectives on what approaches teachers being coached and instructional coaches believe are effective while allowing other schools to use these best practices.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to understand, from individuals being coached and those coaching them, what effective instructional coaching looks like and how effective instructional coaching is done. My understanding of what effective instructional coaching is and how it is done led me to create of a model which could result in enhanced instruction, improved student performance, and enhanced teacher effectiveness.

### **Methodology**

The purpose of this grounded theory qualitative study was to answer the research questions: 1. In what ways do coaches and teachers being coached describe effective instructional coaching? 2. In what ways do coaches and teachers being coached describe how such instructional coaching practices are effectively implemented? The central phenomenon of instructional coaching is generally defined as “job-embedded professional learning that focuses

both on content and practice” (Institute of Educational Sciences, 2020, para. 1). Coaches meet with teachers about their needs and goals, observe them in action, and use a variety of strategies or tools to help the teacher reflect, adjust, and improve instruction in an ongoing cycle.

Implementation refers to the strategies and/or tools used by instructional coaches. The study used an interpretivist paradigm, defined as a paradigm where reality is constructed based on the experiences of individuals and how they interpret those experiences (Nickerson, 2024). The interpretivist paradigm is also well aligned with the research methods for this study, which included interviews and document analysis.

### **Research Design and Rationale**

I conducted a grounded theory qualitative study which is a methodology that “attempts to unravel the meanings of people’s interactions, social actions, and experiences” (Lumivero, 2023, para. 1). I used interviews with coaches and teachers who were being coached, gathered and reviewed artifacts as examples of tools or strategies, and implemented a follow-up questionnaire. Grounded theory is an approach that suggests data analysis can occur in an ongoing way while data are being collected. Thus, as I conducted interviews and reviewed artifacts, I engaged in ongoing analysis and coding to make meaning of the experiences shared with me. In this way, my study was iterative, which is another feature of grounded theory research. I also sent out a follow-up questionnaire that was optional for participants, but allowed them space to elaborate on responses, share tools, and share contact information for others who may like to participate in the study.

### **Sampling**

I used a purposeful selection model to identify participants with background experience in instructional coaching and teachers who were being coached. In addition, I used convenience

sampling, which allowed me to seek coaches and teachers being coached in schools in my state of residence, Vermont, for better ease of access. Once I had an initial pool of coaches and teachers with whom to meet, again identified through convenience sampling (starting with schools with which I had connections), I used snowball sampling, where I asked participants if they would be willing to pass along names of other coaches or teachers, they knew who may be interested in participating. I included this in my interview follow-up questionnaire, where I included a space for people to provide that contact information (see Figure 1).

### Figure 1

#### *Follow-Up Questionnaire*

**Post-Interview Follow-Up (OPTIONAL!)**

**B I U ↻ ✕**

Thank you so much for taking the time to participate in my research. Your time and thoughtful answers will aid in my research process and in the development of an instructional coaching model.

This form is intended to be used should you have additional information to add to your interview, any artifacts to share, or names of other teachers or coaches you suggest I contact. There is no obligation to complete it as part of this research process.

Email \*

Valid email

This form is collecting emails. [Change settings](#)

Do you wish to elaborate on any responses you provided regarding instructional coaching, or do you have any additional information to add?

Long answer text

Please use this space to attach any artifacts or tools related to instructional coaching that you wish to share.

[Add file](#) [View folder](#)

If you know of other Vermont teachers or instructional coaches you think may like to participate in this research, please share their names/emails here. Please indicate if they are a coach or teacher.

Long answer text

App Store

I wanted teachers and instructional coaches in this study to meet some specific criteria. I began by selecting instructional coaches with 2 or more years of experience in their role. Two or more years' experience was my preference because I wanted to ensure I spoke with coaches who had engaged in their practice for long enough to have ample time to work with multiple educators resulting in them having more insights into patterns they saw over time in terms of effectiveness. However, it was harder to find participants than I anticipated, and to ensure my sample size had enough individuals to obtain different perspectives, I ended up also including data from instructional coaches who were new to their roles. Two of the 10 coaches I interviewed were in their first year. Since I started gathering data in February 2025, the school year was over halfway complete, which ensured that those coaches in their first year of coaching had been in the role over half the year before I spoke with them.

For the purposes of this study, I only included instructional coaches who were in non-evaluative roles. In other words, coaches who were not school principals or administrators. According to Russell and Booker (2022), who conducted a meta-analysis of instructional coaching studies, having the same person as a coach and evaluator erodes trust and results “in superficial and infrequent feedback” (p. 3). Taking evaluation out of the coaching process allows the teacher to feel that the coach is there for support and growth and helps them build trust resulting in implementation of changes with higher fidelity. For this reason, the instructional coaches I included in the study were non-evaluative in their roles.

I wanted to have a sample size of 15 instructional coaches and 15 teachers being coached. Having 15 participants in each group provided a mix of coaches in terms of their experience, grade level or content in which they specialized, and potentially a variety of tools or strategies

used across different schools. Having a diverse pool of coaches, who worked with a variety of teachers, provided a range of perspectives and strengthens findings.

To contact these coaches and teachers, I engaged in a variety of outreach approaches with equally varied results. I started by conducting outreach to school leaders with whom I had a connection and schools that I knew had instructional coaches on staff. These leaders were able to connect me to instructional coaches and coached teachers. In some cases, they did initial outreach such as sending an email and including me. In other cases, they facilitated a meeting with coaches so I could connect and describe the study and its purpose. These were the most effective approaches resulting in multiple interviews with coaches and teachers.

In cases where a person I knew simply provided a contact list, which led to more anonymous outreach, I had less success in receiving responses. I also asked the Vermont Principal's Association Director if they would include an invitation to participate in their weekly outreach to all Vermont school leaders. This provided some validity to my request and resulted in several school leaders contacting me for participation. I also engaged in some "cold calling" style outreach of emailing or contacting coaches or school leaders via email directly, but those almost never resulted in follow-up.

Perhaps my most effective method of obtaining study participants was using social media to my advantage, which was surprising to me. I made a post on my personal Facebook page, asking that anyone in an educational role in Vermont spread the word that I was looking for instructional coaches and coached teachers to interview for a study. The post was shared frequently and yielded 15 responses. I suspect this was both because educators shared my post and the word was passed around broadly, and because it was summer vacation, teachers had more time and flexibility than they did during the school year. I was able to interview seven of

the people who contacted me based on the social media post. Ultimately, I interviewed 10 instructional coaches and nine teachers who had been coached for a total of 19 participants.

Following this initial outreach and consent process, I employed snowball sampling to increase my participant pool. Nikolopoulou (2023) described snowball sampling, also called chain or network sampling, as a process of identifying additional study participants through referrals of current participants. In my study, coaches and teachers I interviewed sometimes identified other coaches or teachers who would also provide valuable insights.

Though my study did not officially require IRB approval, I opted to follow the IRB consent process when connecting with my participants. Whenever I went through a superintendent or principal for access to coaches and teachers, I asked them to sign a consent form. Participants were provided either a written or verbal description of the study and procedures used to protect anonymity and returned signed consent forms before interviews.

Ho and Limpaecher (2021) explained that saturation is reached when the data either repeatedly confirms what you already know and/or when the data continues to show the same patterns repeatedly. In this study, saturation was achieved when the data yielded common patterns about coaching strategies and/or tools and additional interviews further reinforced those and/or were not revealing novel ideas to explore. At that point, I was able to arrive at a theory that answered my research questions. Through my interviews, I was able to achieve “rich rigor,” which “obliges the researcher to collect data until there is more than sufficient coverage, at which a point of saturation is reached, and in which no additional data collection is useful” (Jones et al., 2022, p. 269). Though I engaged in frequent outreach in a variety of ways, I was not able to reach 15 each of teachers and coaches in the end, but I did reach saturation with the pool I

obtained, which was 19 total participants, and an almost equal balance between teachers (nine participants) and coaches (10 participants).

### Participant School Demographics

Five school districts in Vermont participated in this study. Vermont schools are organized into larger districts and supervisory unions, which may contain several towns with a union high school that serves students from various towns. Most districts in the study were rural districts consisting of smaller schools. There was a tendency for instructional coaches in these settings to be assigned to multiple schools in the district to support teachers versus one individual to provide instructional coaching in one school building (see Table 1).

**Table 1**

#### *School District Demographics*

District	Number of district towns	Number of district schools	Number of coaches	Number of schools coaches work in	Full Or Part time coaches	Mandatory or opt-in	Coaching assigned
District A Suburban	1	5	2 (MS/HS)	2	full	Opt-In	Content
District B Rural	6	9	3	4 or more	full	Both	Content & grade level
District C Rural	3	4	5 (MS/HS) 3 (Elem)	1	Both; HS are part-time	Both	Content
District D Rural	8	7	1	7	full	Both	Content & Grade Level
District E Rural	6	5	2 in the school	1	full	Both	Content

I was aware of how data could be affected by only one district being suburban. In the rural districts the instructional coaches tended to work across schools in the district, coaching across grade levels, though usually in grade levels and content areas where they had experience and background. This sharing of coaches is largely due to Vermont's rural schools being small and, for a district to justify a full-time coaching position, the cost of the role must be shared among schools. This usually meant an instructional coach would need to travel between school sites, sometimes across broad geographic areas, to provide instructional coaching support. Comparatively, District A also did some shared coaching across their middle and high school buildings, but since the schools were in one town and on one campus, it was relatively easy for coaches to work between buildings that were adjacent to one another.

Universally, full-time instructional coaches who participated in the study worked in multiple school sites. Part-time instructional coaches, those who also continued to teach while coaching, worked in one building. Instructional coaching additionally tended to be targeted to specific grade levels or areas of content expertise. Instructional coaches tended to provide coaching in their area of expertise, for instance, a coach who had a literacy instruction background would be assigned to coach literacy and humanities educators and a coach with a math background would coach math and science educators. Coaches also tended to coach within their grade-level licensure areas, meaning those with elementary backgrounds tended to support elementary educators and those with secondary backgrounds tended to support secondary educators.

This was not a uniform rule, however. In District D, there is one full-time instructional coach for seven schools. Coach Hannah (pseudonym) reported supporting any and all content and grade level needs in District D. This makes sense as she is the only coach district-wide.

Coach Sarah, from District D, typically supported elementary and middle school educators in math instruction, but also took on coaching a high school science teacher who was a late hire to the district because Coach Sarah had the most availability in her schedule. Though content and grade-level experience were typical approaches to targeting instructional coaching across schools and districts, they were not firm or inflexible boundaries. When necessary, some instructional coaches coached outside their content or grade-level experience.

Most districts also employed a mix of voluntary, opt-in, coaching and mandatory coaching. Opt-in coaching is when a teacher may voluntarily choose to participate in instructional coaching but is not required to do so. For opt-in coaching, teachers could choose to participate in instructional coaching on their own and at a time they felt they needed it. Opt-in coaching was described in interviews as a mix of targeted coaching for a specific purpose or need, or teachers choosing to access the coach throughout the school year. In voluntary opt-in models, both opt-in/voluntary and mandatory approaches occurred. Opt-in instructional coaching was offered to a mix of new and veteran teachers and sometimes occurred through professional learning community (PLC) meetings in a larger group setting. Professional Learning Communities are an “ongoing process in which educators work collaboratively in recurring cycles of collective inquiry and action research to achieve better results for the students they serve” (DuFour et al., 2006, p. 2). PLCs are often made up of teachers who share common grade levels and/or content areas.

Mandatory coaching is when an instructional coach is assigned to a teacher and the teacher is directed to participate in instructional coaching sessions throughout the school year. In districts that employed mandatory coaching, support for new hires, teachers new to the profession, and teachers implementing a new curriculum were prioritized to receive coaching.

Most districts that participated in the study employed a mix of mandatory coaching for new educators and opt-in coaching for other staff interested in the support. All schools reported having a mix of new and veteran coaches, though instructional coaches in District B reported serving a larger population of new educators overall. Whether schools employed mandatory, opt-in, or a combination of coaching models, six of the teachers supported tended to be either new to the profession, new to their role, or implementing something new, like a new curriculum or instructional strategy.

### Individual Participant Demographics

Participants volunteered to participate in this study based on choice and interest. All coaches (see Table 2) in the study identified as white. Nine were female and one was male. Coaches in the study were most commonly full-time with a mean experience of 4.1 years as an instructional coach (see Table 2). The amount of experienced varied for the coaches. Two coaches had 1 year of experience as a coach, two coaches had 3 years of experience as a coach, five coaches had 4 years of experience, and one coach had 13 years of experience as a coach. All coaches worked with various numbers of teachers each year, with most ranging from 14 to 30 teachers. One coach worked with 6 teachers, and another (the most experienced coach) worked with 50 teachers.

**Table 2**

*Instructional Coach Demographics*

Coach name	Ethnicity	Sex	Years Of experience as a coach	Number Of teachers coached per year (approximate)
Laurie	White	F	1	25–30

Coach name	Ethnicity	Sex	Years of experience as a coach	Number of teachers coached per year (approximate)
Ella	White	F	1	25–30
Sarah	White	F	4	15
Claudia	White	F	3	Unclear: coach across several school districts
Hannah	White	F	13	50
Marie	White	F	4	15
Ron	White	M	3	14
Allison	White	F	4	Unclear
Darcy	White	F	4	About 3 grade levels at a time
Natalia	White	F	4	6

Eight of the nine teachers (see Table 3) in the study were female with one being Latina. There was one white male teacher. Teachers were a mix of new to the profession (two new) and veteran teachers (seven veteran), though most I spoke with worked with an instructional coach because they were new to a district if not new to the career. It should be noted that it is common practice in Vermont schools to provide new teachers and those new to a district with a coach. In this study four teachers had between 2 and 6 years of experience, three teachers had 8 years of experience, one teacher had 15 years of experience, and the ninth teacher had 29 years of teaching experience. Teachers who participated had a mean teaching experience of 9.5 years and worked with a coach for an average of 3.55 years (range of 2–6 years of work with a coach). I also spoke with two experienced veteran teachers who had opted into coaching voluntarily. They

were neither new to their districts nor new to teaching, but an instructional coach was available to all and they used the support provided.

**Table 3**

*Teacher Demographics*

Teacher name	Ethnicity	Sex	Years of experience as a teacher	Years working with a coach
Pal	White/Latina	F	8	5
Earleen	White	F	15	5
Mina	White	F	8	2
Stacy	White	F	8	2
Ted	White	M	29	2.5
Rose	White	F	2	1.5
Eowyn	White	F	6	6
Suzanne	White	F	5	4
Mona	White	F	4	4

**Instructional Coaching Models**

An interesting trend from all schools who participated in the study was that no Vermont school subscribed to one individual coaching model or structure. Rather, instructional coaches shared universally that they have researched models such as Aguilar (2013), Danielson's (2009) framework for teaching, Knight (2021), Marzano and Brown (2013), and Sweeney and Harris, (2020), and have extracted approaches from each of these or they developed a flexible approach to coaching that drew from a variety of instructional coaching philosophies. For instance, in

District B, coaches collaborated to develop a continuum of coaching support that drew from principles from different models (see Table 4).

**Table 4**

*Instructional Coaching Models in Vermont Schools*

Instructional coaching model	Frequency of occurrence	Districts using these models
Jim Knight	5	A, B, C, D, E
Elana Aguilar	4	A, B
Diane Sweeney	1	A, B
Robert Marzano	1	B
Danielson Framework	1	D
Other	3	B, D, Coach Claudia

The schools in this study, all reported taking components of coaching from various models and applying what was most relevant to individual teacher's needs or what would be best for a specific coaching session. This led to all districts and instructional coaches in the study having a flexible, district-created approach to coaching. Some, like District B (which has used full-time coaches for at least 3 years), had formalized their processes. They created common coaching tools, structures, and a continuum of coaching. The continuum helped coaches determine how directive versus flexible coaching could be used to help teachers. Directive coaching is where a coach tells a teacher what to do through direct advice or suggestions (Aguilar, 2013). Flexible coaching is described by Abu-Alghayth et al. (2022) as being adaptable to a teacher's unique needs day-to-day and finding diverse ways to meet their needs individually and in small groups.

Coaches additionally tracked relational timing to help determine when it might be the right time to help a teacher move from relational to instructional support. Relational timing means that a coach has enough of a relationship with and understanding of the needs of a teacher they support that they can effectively gauge at what point in a coaching relationship the teacher is ready to be pushed or encouraged to take on a new challenge. Or, conversely, when they may need things to slow down to reduce the teacher becoming overwhelmed and burned out.

Other districts new to using full-time instructional coaches, like District A, were still in the process of exploring approaches to coaching, researching models, and developing protocols and handbooks. Districts A, B, and C offered both one-on-one instructional coaching and coaching through professional learning communities' content/grade-level teams. Coaches in District A shared that supporting teachers in a group setting often led to individual outreach. Pal, a teacher, shared that she felt supporting teachers in groups was an effective approach and one that could help teachers feel less vulnerable or exposed than they otherwise might in an individual setting.

## **Results**

The following eight themes emerged as a result of my analysis of the data obtained from interviews, artifacts, and follow-up questionnaires: (a) trust and relationships, (b) relational timing, (c) dynamic, (d) growth-focus, (e) human-first, (f) incremental change approach, (g) maintained over time, and (h) selecting quality instructional coaches. Each of these themes emerged as elements of coaching that helped both teachers and coaches to be more successful.

### **Trust and Relationships**

Mentioned at least 64 times across 19 interviews, trust and relationships emerged, unsurprisingly, as the core of the coaching relationship. Teachers and coaches alike found

coaching to be most effective when teachers felt they could trust that their coach supported them, was there for growth and not judgment, and when they felt that the coach was a separate entity from administration. For example, Teacher Mona explained that she needs trust present to be vulnerable and to say to a coach, "I'm still not sure on these things, and I don't want anyone else to know. But you're my confidant like, can you help me with this, please?" Teacher Ted similarly explained how trust allowed for open conversations about practice. Ted explained:

We'd go down and close the door and closing the door was great, because there aren't many places you can do that, and have a conversation without interruptions and extra ears. So, it was a chance to talk about what had happened, to ask questions without fear.

This trust led to teachers being more willing to show vulnerability in the coaching relationship, be honest about struggles and challenges, and more willingly accept support. The coaching relationship takes some time to develop, and several coaches in the study, like Marie for example, expressed that there is sometimes a need to solely focus on relationships and not on instruction for some time to build that relationship and trust. Marie explained:

I spent the first several months just making lots of relational deposits and creating positive feedback loops with teachers. Just so they really understood that I was not somebody who was out to get them, that it would feel possibly different than interactions that they've had with administrators in the past.

Coach Sarah stated:

I think that in order for you to be impactive and effective, you have to have trust, and you have to have a solid relationship with the teachers that you're with. You have to let them know that you care about them, that you're there for them.

Coach Hannah shared:

Trust is so fragile. Teachers as a group tend to be territorial a little bit, even the new ones, and don't want anybody telling them that they're not doing well. So, you never want to.

You may be working with a teacher that's really got a lot to learn, but you don't want them to ever feel that you're disapproving.

Universally, coaches expressed that though slowly building trust may seem to slow down the growth process, the time put in to build a relationship can propel teacher growth once it is there. Mona expressed such a sentiment and that she continued to seek instructional coaching support for years beyond what was mandated by her district due to the relationship she built with the coach and her perception that the coach's support resulted in improved instruction. She explained that she has accessed instructional coaching “the entire time” she has taught in this school, which is 3 years beyond what was required by the district.

### **Relational Timing**

Relational timing is another theme closely related to trust and relationships that participants related is critical to the success of an instructional coach. I define the term relational timing as when the teacher is ready to be “pushed” forward by a coach or when they may need to pause or find a different type of support. In relational timing the coach has a strong understanding of the teacher. This understanding comes from the trust and relationship building that has happened and helps an instructional coach know when a teacher may be ready and receptive to more or deeper feedback about their practice, and when they may be feeling more vulnerable or sensitive to feedback and need a gentler approach.

Both coaches and teachers in this study cautioned against pushing a teacher to do too much or overloading them with growth areas for which they are not ready. Coach Ella described this by saying, “try to push them, you know, to their zone of proximal development, because I

think that everyone has a different tolerance for growth,” meaning that she gets to know teachers and their skills and needs before taking action that would push someone to try something new or different. In one instance, teacher Pal shared how when she was new to the teaching profession and already struggling to learn about instruction and classroom management, an instructional coach came in to tell her that her students were disengaged. Pal explained:

At one point this coach said she was taking notes. [The coach said,] I noticed this percentage of your class was engaged, and this percentage of your class was not engaged.

At that moment I felt terrible like, okay, I know these children are disruptive, and you are judging me by how I can engage these children who are giving me a hard time. And you're telling me this right now, like, why don't you tell me how I can engage them?

She explained that she needed someone to empathize with the struggles of a new teacher and ask her what sort of classroom support would feel helpful to her rather than call her out about what she already knew was not going well. In this example, a coach, without taking the time to develop trust and without relational timing, created a situation where the teacher both felt bad about herself and felt unsupported, inhibiting growth. Had this coach spent more time developing a relationship and offering support tailored to the teacher's needs there might have been a different outcome.

I placed trust, relationships, and relational timing at the heart of our district's coaching cycle to help emphasize its importance across all components of the model. Though many educators now know that building relationships is the core of what we do in schools (Aguilar, 2013; Knight, 2018), it can be easily forgotten when things begin to feel urgent and busy. Let this be a reminder that there is always time to build a relationship and the benefit of that time spent is worth it.

**Dynamic**

The need for instructional coaches to be dynamic comes from the need for flexibility and for the coach to adapt to varied needs. Coaches frequently shared in interviews that they may have prepped and prepared for a certain conversation with a teacher, but when they met, the teacher had a different challenge that was more pressing. Participants explained that instructional coaches, therefore, must be prepared to be dynamic, think on their feet, be prepared to pivot to the unexpected, and adapt their support to meet the unique goals of each teacher. Coach Ella shared “being flexible is to take a couple of different models [of coaching] and different teaching strategies, [to use] with various people in their classrooms depending on what they're seeing with their students.”

For this reason, I do not recommend following a set-in-stone script for instructional coaching. Rather, the coach must be a great listener and be skilled at posing reflective questions for the teacher to consider. Though preparing questions in advance is beneficial, the coach must also be skilled at developing questions in the moment as the teacher's needs emerge or change during the coaching conversation. Being dynamic requires the coach to have a vast array of coaching approaches in their toolkit and know, based on a teacher's goal or expressed need, which would be most effective for a given area of need.

**Growth Focused**

As previously expressed, coaching is more effective when the teacher sets and drives the goals (Goeze & Lewin, 2023; Sims et al., 2021). Coaches consistently expressed that working on the teacher's preferred goal, even when other areas for growth were present, usually led to more teacher engagement and progress. Coach Sarah stated:

The best coaching that I've done have been when the individual being coached has

identified it. It's been their choice, and I help them support that. Whether it's their professional goal or something, they're just seeing that they want improvement.

Coach Ella stated:

For a one-on-one coaching session, a teacher would come to me with a problem of practice . . . And then we would kind of think about how we could act on that information so that might be me saying, “Oh, let me do some research and get back to you and see what's out there.” So, usually it’s teacher driven.

Coach Darcy volunteered, “Really just allowing the teacher to lead the conversation and not feeling like it's top down, or, you know, I really want it to feel supportive, collaborative. And that's when I found the most success.”

In addition, being growth-focused opened doors for the coach to use relational timing to suggest additional growth areas over time, based on teacher readiness and a trusting relationship. Using the teacher’s self-identified goals lets the teacher take the lead and places the teacher and coach on more equal footing (Knight, 2018). This is also beneficial as teachers expressed a nonhierarchical relationship was the preferred structure.

### **Human-First Approach**

Another theme that emerged from interviews with teachers and instructional coaches was that of a human-first approach, meaning all of the participants are all people with human needs before we are educators (Maslow, 1943). All teachers have real, human emotions and lives outside our classrooms that may sometimes impact us. A human-first approach asks a coach to support the person before the work, and this concept was mentioned over 20 times across all interviews. Coach Claudia explained that her approach is usually to “focus a lot on how well individuals are doing, and kind of putting that oxygen mask on first, before we make suggestions

about how to change your pedagogy or your practices.” Sometimes, especially for new teachers, being overwhelmed can leave a teacher feeling like they are drowning. Coach Ron shared that he has seen new teachers in such a state of being overwhelmed that they were not even able to identify a goal. Ron said:

If I was using the walking metaphor, like they couldn't even ascertain where the sidewalk was to stay in a lane, you know they were like all over the place, and if I wasn't giving them direction it was perpetuating frustration.

In this case, coaches should feel empowered to slow down, care for the person with whom they are working, support their immediate needs, strive to eliminate the stressors helping the teacher regulate and reduce their stress, and offer more directive guidance if the teacher asks for it (Mansfield et al., 2016).

Coach Claudia talked about the need to help teachers remember their “why,” why they selected this profession and what they were passionate or excited about when they began their career. Claudia explained:

I think it's like getting people to really zoom out and think about the why. Why am I here? What do I, what is my higher purpose as an educator? And what am I doing or not doing that's keeping me from being burned out?

She would use this to remind them of their passion and reignite an interest in pursuing growth.

Coach Hannah shared about an intrinsic coaching model where she supports the person first, then the teaching, then the students. Hannah further shared that when a teacher is stressed and dysregulated, she has observed the students mirroring those emotions in classrooms. She told me that supporting the teacher to feel regulated and calm is a critical step before any growth can be made. Certainly, it is related to what we know about Maslow's hierarchy of needs, that self-

actualization cannot be accessed until safety and care needs are met (McLeod, 2025).

This does not mean a coach must become a therapist or counselor. However, the coach should be ready to encounter teacher emotions and may sometimes provide emotional support. Several coaches shared specific examples of meetings with teachers where the teacher had just come out of a challenging moment and needed to process what happened rather than engage in the pre-planned coaching discussion. Coach Sarah explained:

Maybe something happened that morning with a student, or they want to talk about that. I always allow them that space to kind of clear the air if they need it. And then I'll circle back to whatever it is that we talked about in our previous session.

A coach may also need to rely on their trusting teacher coach relationship to suggest the teacher seek some additional kinds of support.

### **Incremental Change Approach**

Instructional coaches and teachers talked about instructional coaching being more effective when goals or actions were broken into small steps and teachers had one area to focus on at a time. Coach Darcy said she tries to focus on teacher goals by “really just allowing the teacher to lead the conversation and not feeling like it's top down, or, you know, I really want it to feel supportive, collaborative.” Instructional coaches almost universally expressed that they never wanted teachers to feel that coaching was an extra, or something more. Rather it should feel like it takes something off a teacher's overfull plate, or as Coach Laurie explained, “it involves positivity and support and willingness to tackle issues which feel insurmountable to teachers in order to make teachers' lives easier.”

Because so many schools tend to frontload coaching for new teachers who are already taking on an abundance of new information, it can be most helpful to not be given too much

feedback or too many new things to try at once. Coaching may be more effective if stress is removed while building new skills or strengthening existing skills (Kraft et al., 2018). Coach Darcy described this by saying, “small bite sizes is an effective way of coaching,” and teacher Mina gave an example of how her coach approached incremental change saying, “You're doing great like you do awesome work, like I can see that you've done progress monitoring. Here's some little tiny piece of feedback. It was about prompting kids,” saying changing a small thing each time they met felt manageable. Teacher Ted similarly felt that too much to change at once is overwhelming, and said of coaches, “don't give me 35 projects in the next week. Give me two, maybe three, that I can think about.”

### **Maintained Over Time**

Instructional coaching is best when it occurs at regular intervals, and whenever possible maintained over time (Anderson & Holland, 2025; Knight & Skrtic, 2020; Teement, 2014). Many districts and schools have limited instructional coaching staff, so they tend to frontload instructional coaching for those teachers new to the profession or cycle through small groups of teachers throughout the year, which was the case for districts in my study as well. However, many teachers I interviewed were veteran staff who continued to access instructional coaching well beyond their first few years in the profession and found it just as impactful. Veteran teacher Ted shared that though he had taught for over 25 years, he felt that coaching was an essential support for all teachers and should always be available, as his coach helped him continue to refine and adjust his instruction even with many years of experience to draw from. Ideally, a school system would have enough instructional coaching staff to provide more intensive coaching to new educators, but consistent coaching throughout a school year to all teaching staff as a way to keep a growth-focused culture.

### **Selecting Quality Instructional Coaches**

A significant finding from my research was data on how important it is to place the right people in instructional coaching roles. Though this was not a research question, the topic is critical to the success of any instructional coaching program. Participants, especially teachers, frequently mentioned that an instructional coach needs to have a very specific disposition, background of experience, and personality type. This is consistent with Aguilar (2013) and Knight (2013) who similarly outlined the dispositions needed for one to be an effective instructional coach. Without thoughtful consideration of the attributes needed for effective coaching, a district or school may employ the wrong person for the job which can have negative impacts for teachers. Simply being a veteran or tenured teacher is not enough to qualify one as an instructional coach, and that was mentioned by nearly all teachers in interviews. Teacher Mina described a good instructional coach's qualities. Mina stated:

Collaborative, positive. I think, trusting like, it's one thing to get, like, constructive feedback, like unsolicited right, but you have to trust the person that's giving you that feedback, because otherwise nobody wants constructive criticism from someone they don't particularly trust or like.

Teacher Earleen similarly explained that coaches need to have a specific type of nonjudgmental and supportive personality. Earleen said:

I don't see her as judgmental like, she doesn't judge me and I think that takes a certain personality. So, I think some teachers who are instructional coaches can come across as kind of condescending or at least, I've experienced some of that. But my instructional coach currently has just the right personality, like she really cares about how we feel about what we're doing.

Though participants and others in the education profession can agree that one really must have classroom instruction experience before they can be an instructional coach, participants suggested the coach needed to be someone they can trust, someone they like, someone they can easily connect with, and someone who will not pass judgment on them (Aguilar, 2013; Knight, 2018). Teacher Earleen further explained that what makes a coach effective is someone who “walk[s] with the teacher, know[s], show[s] them that they can reflect on their own practices. They can make those mistakes, and then they can, no matter what is done in the classroom, that they can do better next time.” The coach is more than an expert in content, they are also a trusted advisor, someone who can help reflect without judgment, who can allow the teacher to grow without pressure or the looming threat of evaluation (Aguilar 2019, Knight 2013).

Both coaches and teachers reflected that coaching was more effective if their coach was experienced in their content area (Ocasio-Stoutenburg et al., 2024). One teacher, Pal, shared that though she liked her coach, their lack of background in her specific content meant that some suggested approaches did not fit well in her context, and conversely, when a professor who provided coaching for a course in Pal's content area modeled a specific practice that is effective for her content, she found that incredibly powerful. Pal explained:

My coach [at the school] didn't know how to coach me because she was not a coach for languages. Then I have the other coach, who was a language coach, or she taught languages, and she was my coach. But I think what happens is in the language world, things have evolved so much, and she [school coach] was not, she was not up to speed with the best practices, so I really never had a coach in the language field.

The professor's coaching-style approach plus content expertise led to more effective coaching and growth for the teacher. Coach Laurie shared a similar reflection from her own

perspective, explaining that she felt more confident coaching in her area of content expertise than when she supported educators in other contents. Coach Marie similarly explained, “when I'm asked to work with teachers that are outside of math for me, that's just harder. And I think that I'm growing in that space. But it's definitely not my comfort zone.” She went on to say that her comfort grew over time as she did more of it.

### **Discussion**

From my work with teachers and instructional coaches I am more convinced than ever that schools and school districts should develop and support great instructional coaching programs for their teachers. One important insight that my study gave to me is that all teachers from the newest to the oldest should have access to great instructional coaches. As I review what is going on just in terms of technology, it is obvious to me that all of our teachers need coaching to ensure that our students are knowledgeable and safe. It is critically important to help all students to become effective producers and consumers of the use of technology.

Teachers, families, and students are living in a world in which there is way too much violence, and many of our students and teachers are nervous just to go to school. Educators and our communities must ensure that our educators and our students teach and learn in environments that are safe and caring (Sousa, 2022). All students deserve a valid education (Armstrong, 2012), no matter their circumstances. The educational gaps in our students must be dealt with successfully for all students but according to the Nation's Report Card (National Center for Education Statistics (2024), in the United States, reading and mathematics scores continue to be in decline. Educators and parents know that the most important people to turn these declines around are teachers (Hattie, 2009, 2023). Unfortunately, as the system stands now, too many teachers are unsupported in their efforts to grow their skills (Hayes, 2023). The present

process perpetuates inequities for both teachers and students in the form of lack of support, lack of changed classroom practices, and unchanged systems. I have come to understand it simply makes no sense to leave the people who have the best chance to improve education, teachers, unsupported.

The good news is that the results of my study and those of other people (Hattie, 2023) have developed recommendations shown to make a positive difference in the abilities of teachers to develop and implement educational strategies that help all students learn. In my study, from my work with and data from teachers and instructional coaches, I discovered eight strategies to help instructional coaches and the teachers with whom they work to increase their knowledge and skills to help their students. These strategies include the following elements for instructional coaching programs: (a) trust and relationships, (b) relational timing, (c) dynamic interactions, (d) a growth-focus, (e) human-first, (f) incremental change approach, (g) maintained over time, and (h) selecting quality instructional coaches. In Part B of this two-part series, based on the findings of my study, I describe my ideas for an effective instructional coaching model.

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