Part B

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

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Abstract

Since 2019, student achievement has seen a significant decline, with National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) scores dropping markedly between 2020 and 2023. Addressing the critical link between instructional quality and student outcomes, this grounded theory qualitative study investigates the most impactful instructional coaching practices within Vermont schools. While traditional, compliance-based evaluation systems often prove ineffective for professional growth, instructional coaching offers a nonevaluative, job-embedded alternative that can mitigate teacher burnout—a factor accounting for 27% of attrition variance—and significantly enhance teacher self-efficacy. The research identifies several foundational principles for successful coaching. High-impact coaching is characterized by an equal partnership where teachers and coaches collaborate as peers rather than the coach dictating specific actions. Central to this dynamic is the requirement that coaches remain distinct from administrative or supervisory roles; avoiding evaluative capacities is essential for maintaining the necessary trust for professional development. The study further indicates that classroom observations should be prioritized only after a secure relationship is established, allowing educators to feel safe in their vulnerability. The study advocates for the use of self-assessment tools to guide teacher reflection, especially

for those new to the profession. Coaches facilitate this growth through reflective questioning, a deliberate and purposeful strategy designed to prompt a teacher's own thinking and self-discovery. By adopting these relationship-centered and non-directive practices, instructional coaching serves as a powerful lever for both teacher growth and closing the achievement gap.

Keywords: instructional coaches, impactful practices, instructional practices, student achievement

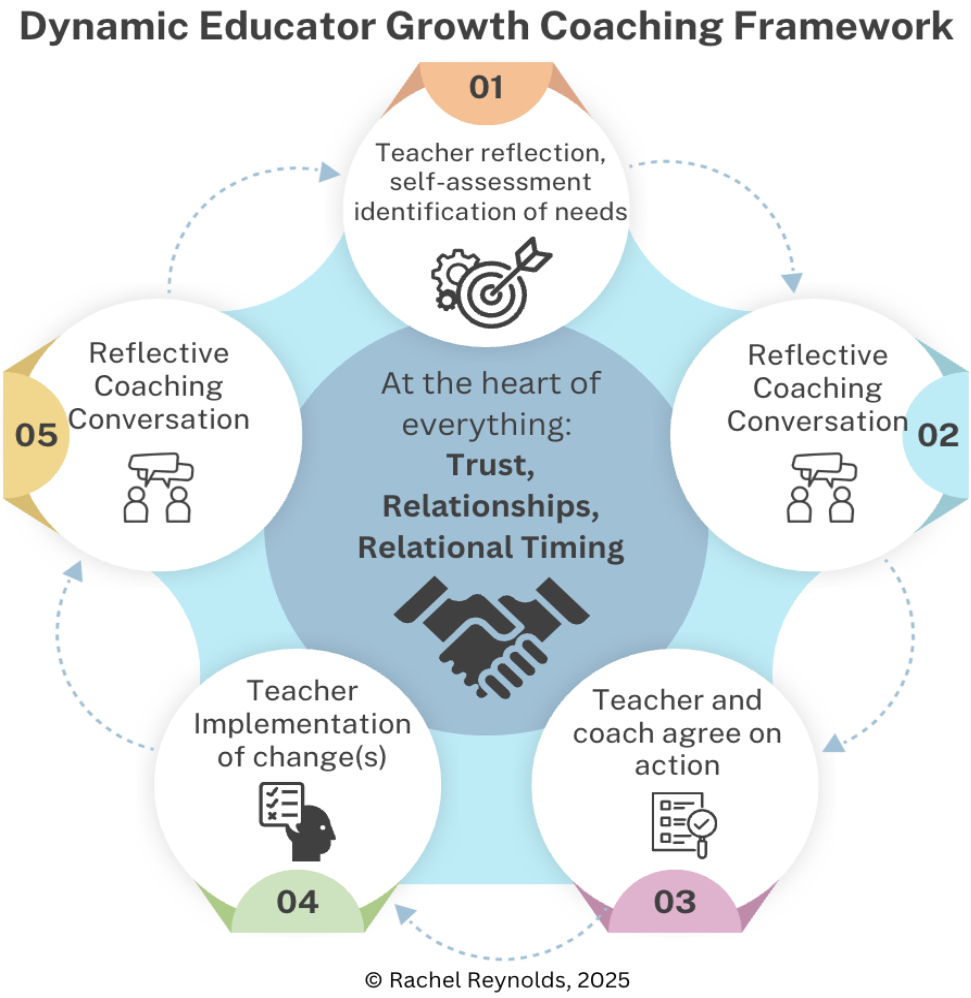
I investigated how to help teachers and instructional coaches work together in ways that will create professional and trusting relationships so that their work would be beneficial to both parties. The results from my study are aligned with other studies demonstrating effective instructional coaching makes a positive difference for teachers and their students (Hattie, 2009, 2023; Knight, 2018; Rhue, 2022; Teemant, 2014). The National Center for Educational Statistics (2024) reported since 2019, achievement scores have continued to decline. Studies have consistently demonstrated that the most important person to help improve educational results is the classroom teacher (Hattie, 2009, 2023). All students deserve to work with teachers who have received the best professional development, and research has demonstrated that instructional coaching done well helps to lead to the high quality teaching all students deserve (Gothart, 2023; Hattie, 2009; Olsen, 2016; Opper, 2019; Shiheiber-Gilmer, et al., 2025).

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 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/themes of my study, I describe my ideas for an effective instructional coaching model (see Figure 1)—the dynamic educator growth coaching framework (Rachel Reynolds, 2025).

Figure 1

Dynamic Educator Growth Coaching Framework



Dynamic Educator Growth Coaching Framework

A primary goal of my study was to take the data provided by teachers and instructional coaches and develop a new model of instructional coaching. The data provided by teachers and instructional coaches about what does and does not work when teachers interact with an

instructional coach led to the development of this model, based on common themes/elements and instructional coaching approaches that emerged from the research data. I have named the model the "dynamic educator growth coaching framework" *(DEGCF)*. Like other coaching models, there is a predictable cycle for coaching. The DEGCF contains four components, unique to this model, identified by teachers as critical to their success with their instructional coaches: (a) teacher reflection, self-assessment, and identification of needs, (b) reflective coaching conversation, (c) teacher and coach agree on action, (d) teacher implementation of changes.

Component 1: Teacher Reflection, Self-Assessment, Identification of Needs

The first component of the DEGCF is for teachers to reflect and self-assess their skills, strengths, and growth areas while emphasizing the need to have autonomy over the direction of coaching, which means the teacher needs to be able to take the lead based on their needs and goals (Goeze & Lewin, 2023; Sims et al., 2021). Teachers and coaches both shared that conversations that were goal-driven and focused on a teacher's identified goals resulted in greater improvement and progress. Self-assessment can be a useful tool for teachers, especially new ones, to guide their reflection (Aguilar, 2013; Hattie, 2023). What is most critical, though, is that the self-assessment happens privately and the teacher selects what to share and with whom. Teacher Ted explained how important that privacy and reflection was to him. Ted said, "closing the door was great, because there aren't many places you can do that, and have a conversation without interruptions and extra ears. It was a chance to talk about what had happened, to ask questions without fear." This helps establish and support trust in the teacher-coach relationship. Veteran teachers in the study noted that they often had an idea of their instructional growth needs and felt comfortable reflecting based on past experiences to set goals. It should also be noted that new teachers, especially those in their first year, sometimes do not know where to even begin

therefore a coach may need to be prepared to offer a menu of skills from which a teacher can select. Coach Sarah explained that she and the other coaches in her district developed a continuum of coaching support that showed what type of coaching may be offered and provided types of skills certain approaches may work on. Sarah said:

> So, we came up with this model that goes along with that as well. It's more of, here is a little bit more of the coach leading versus the coachee is doing all the work on the right-hand side . . . Sometimes, if they're not sure where to start that I'll give them suggestions: Do you want to look at classroom management? Do you want to look at relationships? Do you want to look at engagement?

Component 2: Reflective Coaching Conversation

The reflective coaching conversation is an essential element of the DEGCF, especially as reflection and feedback emerged as one of the most helpful tools coaches used. Once a teacher has a goal or growth area in mind, the coach must help the teacher identify how they will enact change by posing some questions to guide their reflection further. The questions asked should not be to push a teacher to a specific action or type of instructional approach, but rather to help the teacher create their own path to goal achievement, with the coach acting as a guide and resource. Coach Ella described how she uses reflective questioning to determine the type of support a teacher needs but still allows the teacher to control the direction of the conversation. Ella explained, "I think, by asking a probing question, it can kind of tap into a teacher's desire to improve for their students, and I think, depending on their capacity as a teacher, you may take on more or less of helping them make those improvements." Coach Claudia also explained that reflective questioning drives her coaching sessions. Claudia said, "I don't do any suggesting, consulting, or mentoring. I simply ask you powerful questions and play back what I'm hearing to

help you arrive at new awareness." Teacher Mona also expressed how reflective questioning helped guide and support her. Mona said:

> I think the thing that my coach did was not tell me what I should be doing, but instead, ask, like, where do you feel like you need support in this moment? And how can we get you feeling ready to go into your classroom?

In these examples, reflective questioning was used to help a teacher identify their own needs and next steps, keeping the teacher as the leaders of the process.

This reflective coaching conversation happens again as step five of the model, after a teacher has implemented a change. At that point in the process, the teacher and coach review how implementation of the change went, what did and did not work, and what should happen next. Data from interviews of both teachers and instructional coaches revealed that reflective conversations and feedback were one of the most significant factors that impacted teacher growth in the coaching process, which is why the reflective coaching conversation happens with frequency and regularity in this framework.

Component 3: Teacher and Coach Agree on Action

In most coaching frameworks, this is the place where observation of instruction occurs. And though that may be the action here, this is where the DEGCF veers from other models. Observation is an effective tool for feedback and teacher growth, but teachers in this study noted that it can feel threatening if done at the wrong time or if a coach comes into a classroom uninvited and provides feedback that is not asked for. As a result, the coaching relationship can be damaged, and trust can be nearly impossible to restore.

For this reason, component three in the DEGCF is where, after goal setting and a reflective conversation has happened, the teacher and coach decide what the right next step is to

support the teacher based on the goal the teacher has set. Observation is an effective approach when the teacher is seeking feedback and growth in an instructional strategy or classroom management approach. But if a teacher has a goal related to planning for instruction using student data, or identifying an instructional approach to improve engagement, the action may be that the coach becomes a resource finder, trouble-shooter, coplanner, or data partner. In short, the instructional coaching tool or approach must fit the teacher's goal by providing the type of support the teacher needs. The data suggests coaching is more effective when it feels like a partnership, where teacher and coach are equal in the partnership versus the coach dictating a course of action (Aguilar, 2013; Goeze & Lewin, 2023).

Component 4: Teacher Implementation of Changes

Component four of the cycle is where a teacher takes the action plan created with their coach and implements it. This could be trying a new instructional strategy or delivering a targeted lesson based on data analysis conducted with a coach. The teacher is applying something new based on their coaching conversation, which is followed up with an additional reflective conversation examining how the change went and what the logical next steps will be. After the second reflection, the cycle can begin again with the teacher's new knowledge and reflection as the baseline for continued growth or a new goal or growth area.

In interviews, many of the teachers, like Ted, Earleen, and Rose, shared that it was helpful for the instructional coach to take notes or document next steps and provide them a copy, and that it helped them stick to and implement changes after meetings ended. Coaches could benefit from creating a simple form for teachers to use that includes a space for the data that drove the change, what action will happen next (For example: will the teacher try something new? Will a tool be developed? Will the coach observe a new strategy?), when it will happen,

and a space or way for teachers to reflect on how the implementation went and self-assess their process.

Component 5: Reflective Coaching Conversation

The reflective coaching conversation is revisited as component five of the DEGCF. This time, it follows the teacher implementing a change based on the goal they set and the previous coaching conversation in component three. The teacher and coach reflect on what occurred, how it went, review any data (if relevant), and then the cycle can begin again, either by focusing on the next steps for the current goal or plan, or by reflecting on where to go next in the teacher's journey.

Discussion

Teacher Autonomy and Ability to Direct Own Growth

A teacher's autonomy and ability to direct their own growth emerged as a characteristic of effective instructional coaching and became the starting point of this model. The model also embeds two coaching conversations, emphasizing the need for a continual feedback loop and ongoing coaching over time. Step three is also unique to the model. In traditional models, a typical cycle would place a classroom observation in position three. However, teachers consistently expressed that though observation could be a valuable tool for some growth areas or goals, they needed the support offered to them to match the growth goal they identified, and observation is not always the best match for a teacher's needs.

For instance, one teacher shared their work to redesign instruction based on student data following an assessment. They explained:

> I've learned from [coach], like a little more about like doing tiered assessments. Like tier one, tier two, tier three like how to roll that out. That's been helpful . . . just like figuring

> out the best way to roll things out with kids and explain it, and how to support them like it's just nice to have somebody to bounce ideas off of.

Teacher Eowyn also gave an example of a time when observation would not have been the right fit. She wanted help adjusting and crafting lesson and unit plans, and her coach opted for a coaching approach that aligned to her specific need. Eowyn stated:

> verbalizing a lesson because I'm always doing them in my own head, and I'm always kind of writing them out on my own, having a chance to also verbalize what I'm thinking, not even writing. It just makes a huge difference, and you can kind of pick up on things that you necessarily wouldn't. And hearing another voice and their opinions on those lessons I feel like just makes them stronger, or unit plans, or whatever plans are happening.

In these instances, the action of coplanning was more aligned to the teachers' needs than observation would have been, again demonstrating why coaching needs to be teacher-directed and flexible enough to include a variety of support strategies. Coaches need to listen to what the teacher's goal or need is and tailor the support they offer to best match that need.

Who Should Be a Coach?

So, who should be a coach? The ideal personality and disposition are that of an experienced classroom educator, one with a nonjudgmental approach, who asks thoughtful questions, who can maintain trust and confidentiality, and can provide support and allow for reflection without telling someone else what to do, which echoes Aguilar's (2013) assertation that coaches need emotional intelligence and strong interpersonal skills, and Knight's (2013) point that coaches must be approachable, worthy, and good at active listening and dialogue. The coach should also be ready to be a listening ear and a supportive arm when the teacher needs it and be able to stay focused on the teacher's goals. When possible, teachers in the study felt

instructional coaches should share common grade and content expertise with the teachers they support (Ocasio-Stoutenburg et al., 2024), as this is more comforting to both the teacher and coach alike. It is also crucial that an instructional coach should not be in a supervisory role of the teacher. Instructional coaches should not be administrative or evaluative in any capacity (Aguilar, 2013; Kdruvenga, 2017).

Effective Coaching Approaches

Both teachers and coaches commonly named some instructional coaching practices that they felt were more effective for improving instruction, student outcomes, and teacher efficacy. In the DEGCF, these practices are emphasized but not prescribed. That is, their effectiveness is based on the instructional coach's relationship with the teacher, knowledge of the teacher's growth goals, and the instructional coach's ability to select the best approach to help the teacher grow. There is no one right path for coaches to follow when supporting a teacher because every coaching relationship and situation is unique.

My research revealed 10 practices referenced most frequently in interviews. Teachers described which coaching approaches had, in their opinions, a significant impact on teacher instruction, student outcomes, and/or teacher efficacy (see Table 1). Though some, like relationships and trust, are essential components of the DEGCF or skills a coach possesses, others are specific coaching strategies that were used in coaching sessions and are decided upon by the teacher and coach in step 3 of the cycle (see Figure 1).

Table 1

Top 10 Impactful Practices

Top 10 impactful practices	Frequency
Relationships and Trust	64
Observing Teaching	48
Reflective Questioning	44
Teacher Goal-Driven	39
Listening	34
Gathering Data	32
Feedback	32
Modeling	31
Co-Planning	23
Flexible Coaching	22

Relationships and Trust

Relationships and Trust were most frequently mentioned in the study by teachers and coaches. Building trusting relationships is the precursor to any successful coaching relationship. Many teachers and instructional coaches linked trust with confidentiality as well, saying that knowing their coach was not reporting back to leadership about them was also part of that trust. Coach Laurie explained:

> I've made a very conscious choice to spend a whole lot of time building relationships with people in the building because I'm not somebody who is hired internally and already knew folks, which is how a lot of coaches get their positions. And so, I spent, you know, the first several months, just like 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.

This approach helped Laurie build relationships and trust by showing her support of teachers and her separation from an administrative role that would maintain teacher confidentiality.

Coach Hannah said:

> I think it's a very trusting relationship. I think all the teachers I work with really do believe that I don't go to principals and say, "Oh, boy, you got your hands full with Sheila," you know, or you know, just it's very confidential.

Teachers described the importance of trust and relationships as essential. Teacher Ted explained:

> Knowing that I'm getting feedback that's completely separate from the evaluation process and that those notes are secured, that nobody is gonna go peek in that hard drive, nobody's gonna corner that coach and say is there something we need to be worried about here? That's huge.

In this instance, he is explaining the importance of the coach maintaining trust by keeping coaching meetings confidential and being able to trust that the growth occurring there will not be used in a punitive way against a teacher later.

Teacher Rose similarly shared that having a strong relationship with the coach led her to feel safe talking about challenging or frustrating situations and knowing those would remain confidential. Rose stated:

> I know for me this past year, especially there was some like things the administrator said that I didn't love, so she was just like a listening ear, someone I could vent to and like give me advice that I know was in my best interest and from a very professional non-biased point of view, which was very useful.

In all cases in interviews, both from instructional coaches and teachers, the bottom line was that teachers would not feel comfortable participating in coaching unless there was first a trusting relationship, and coaches similarly reported that they all spent intentional time building a relationship and trust before moving into a teacher growth process.

Observing Teaching

Observation of a teacher's instruction was mentioned 48 times in interviews by teachers and coaches. Teachers described observation of instruction having the most impact on their instructional skills and student outcomes, as the observations led to pedagogical or classroom management adjustments that improved the classroom culture. Though coaches generally felt it is a very effective tool, teachers would add a caveat about how to use it effectively. Almost unanimously, teachers expressed that observation is effective when coach and teacher have developed a trusting relationship.

Also, teachers shared that observation is more effective when the teacher invites the coach into their classroom versus the coach inviting themselves. Several teachers, like Pal, shared past coaching experiences where, when starting out with a new instructional coach, the coach had reached out to schedule an observation of instruction before meeting with or introducing themselves to the teacher first. In some cases, like with Pal's experience, that observation was immediately followed up with feedback about areas to improve instructionally. Pal shared how disheartening this was, because it felt to her, as a new teacher, that she was judged by someone who did not know her or checked in with her about her needs prior to observing. This resulted in a coaching relationship where Pal lacked trust with the coach, and future growth was limited. Pal suggested:

> After maybe some time, that's when the coach can actually observe you after you have accumulated enough experience that you feel confident, I think that coach could observe you. But 1st you need to be able to trust yourself and trust your coach, because if you don't trust yourself as a teacher yet, you're obviously going to feel like you are observed and criticized.

The DEGCF cycle outlines the coaching cycle as always starting with the teacher's personal reflection and a face-to-face meeting before anything else occurs. Observation could be the appropriate tool, but that should be a result of an invitation for a coach to enter the classroom. Observation should also wait until a relationship is clearly established so teachers feel safe being vulnerable in front of another educator (Aguilar, 2013; Goese & Lewin, 2023). Coach Darcy said, "I am not stepping into someone's classroom unless someone is asking." Teacher Mina felt similarly, saying, "Definitely follow up [coaching conversations] with like observations. Being able to see that classroom teacher, or that service provider professional in action . . . but also like setting a goal, I think that proper coaching requires goals first." In this statement Mina is explaining that a conversation and teacher's goals need to come before someone is observed. Coach Hannah said she offers it after developing a coaching relationship. Hannah shared:

> It starts with a conversation. It starts with a lot of listening, and then we come up with a schedule and a plan. Often, I'll say, would it be helpful for me to come in for a half a day, and just take down what I see?

Finally, Teacher Pal explained:

> I think that observing too early is one that should be avoided . . . I think it is important at first to avoid the I'll go and observe you, and then I'm going to tell you what I think of your lesson, so I think that is important to avoid.

On a related note, observation is also not the only approach a coach can use to help a teacher improve. If the teacher's goal is related to analysis of student data for instructional planning, then co-planning and effective use of data tools is the more appropriate coaching approach.

Listening and Reflective Questioning

Listening and reflective questioning go hand in hand and can impact teacher instruction, student outcomes, and teacher efficacy (Balcı & Özkan, 2023; Smith, 2023; Thomas et al., 2015). Though they were coded separately, I found in my review of interview data that they were impossible to separate, as one must actually listen to the responses to reflective questions in order for the practice to be effective. For this reason, they are described together in this section. In the context of instructional coaching, listening means attending carefully to the teacher to understand their perspective, strengths, and needs, and growth areas, which means listening both analytically and empathetically. Reflective questioning is a deliberate and purposeful strategy that a coach uses to prompt a teacher's own thinking and self-discovery (Aguilar, 2013). Unlike a typical question-and-answer session, the goal is not for the coach to get information, but for the teacher to gain a deeper understanding of their own practice.

Instructional coaches must be great listeners, able to understand what a teacher is expressing, and then be able to ask reflective questions that help the teacher consider how to approach the situation. This also includes listening to the coaching approach a teacher might like. Coach Ron expressed that there are situations where a teacher, especially one new to the profession, is so overwhelmed and lost that they are not in a place to be able to thoughtfully reflect. What they may express is simply wanting a coach to be more direct with them, helping them find their footing and get to a space where they feel they can manage.

Coach Darcy described her experience supporting teachers new to the profession. Darcy said:

> And those first five years really are so important to keeping people and building confidence. And I think that's the one thing that coaching really does is recognize and validate the struggle. Like, teaching is hard. There are all of these things that we're trying to juggle. And here are some things you're doing really well, and you name the thing you want to work on, and then I'm going to help you get there.

Darcy's example shows how she validates and supports struggles while helping new teachers find their footing and identify growth areas.

Ron further explained that rigidly sticking to a reflective and teacher-driven model in such a situation can leave the teacher more frustrated than if the coach had listened to the need in the first place. Ron explained:

> And I really, really struggled with that for one or two years, because the teachers that I particularly was working with as new teachers new to the profession didn't know, I mean, 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 . . . But the model had taught me to like, you know, not give direction. And so, I would like ask questions and ask questions and ask questions. But the teachers were like, not . . . they weren't frustrated with me specifically, but I could sense the frustration because nothing's changing for them. And so that was almost a disservice to me as a coach to have that be the model that was presented as like do this model, this is the Holy Grail of coaching, because it wasn't what my folks needed.

Ron's explanation here exemplified how a reflective model created teacher frustration when a teacher was struggling and unsure where they should even begin, and Ron argued that coaching is more effective when the coach can pause and adapt to the needs of the teacher in front of them versus rigidly sticking to a specific model or coaching approach.

Teacher Pal also reinforced this approach, sharing that as a first-year teacher she would have liked someone to come in with some structure and supportive guidance. Pal explained, "I remember being a 1st year teacher and thinking, how do I decide this? I don't even know what's right, what's wrong, and what is going to come at me because you make a thousand decisions per minute."

Though there is no specific script for coaches to follow in the DEGCF, there are some reflective questions (see Table 2) that a coach can use. These should be adapted based on the individual's situation or needs. I have generated seven areas of questions as examples for coaches to use at the appropriate times The examples include the following kinds of questions (a) for a new coaching relationship, (b) goal related, (c) personal learning needs or instructional improvement, (d) collaboration and support, (e) assessment and evaluation of learning, (f) resource allocation and utilization, and (g.) data and use of data,

Table 2

Reflective Questioning Prompts

For a new coaching relationship
1. What do you hope to grow or develop about your teaching practice this year? Why? 2. How do you see me supporting that? 3. How do you like to receive feedback? 4. What happens when you get stressed or overwhelmed? 5. How can I best support you in those moments?

Goal-related questions
1. What data source did you use to help shape this goal and why? 2. What support can I offer you to help you achieve this goal? 3. How will the goal impact student performance/your classroom culture/your assessment approach/etc.? 4. How will progress towards the goal be tracked/measured? What specific action steps will you take to move towards goal attainment?
Personal learning needs and instructional improvement
1. What specific skills or knowledge do you need to acquire to effectively achieve your learning goals? 2. What adjustments to your teaching practices can you make based on your reflection of content, pedagogy, and skills? 3. How could instruction change when you adjust your identified instructional practice? What will be different in your classroom as a result of your change?
Collaboration and support
1. How can you leverage the expertise of colleagues to support your professional growth? 2. What kind of collaborative relationships can you foster to enhance student learning? (With colleagues? With students?) 3. How can you effectively provide and receive support from colleagues to address challenges and celebrate successes? 4. What can I offer you as a coach that can help you on your growth path
Assessment and evaluation of learning
1. What strategies can you use to effectively monitor student progress and inform instruction? 2. How can you communicate student progress and achievement clearly and meaningfully? 3. What challenges might you encounter in assessing student learning, and how can you overcome them? 4. How do you use formative assessment data to inform your instructional planning?
Resource allocation and utilization
1. What resources (time, materials, technology) are essential to achieving your learning goals and supporting student success? 2. What additional resources or support would be beneficial for you in addressing identified challenges?

Questions regarding data/use of data
1. How well aligned is this data to the goal or growth area? What might make it better aligned or more beneficial? 2. What patterns emerge in this data? 3. Is this format for data presentation/analysis/instruction providing you with the information you are looking for? If not, what do you need to change or adjust? 4. How are you involving students in understanding and using their own learning data? 5. How will you use this data to inform your next steps?

Reflective questioning is part of the dynamic nature of coaching. The list in Table 1 is not all-inclusive and coaches should be free to adapt questions based on the teacher and situation in front of them, feeling empowered to take a more directive approach if needed, until the teacher finds their footing.

Teacher Goal-Driven

Instructional coaching sessions, according to study participants, are most successful when they are driven by a teacher's own goals and identified growth areas versus when a teacher perceives a coach is telling them what they need to do to improve (Goeze & Lewin, 2023; Sims et al., 2021). Coach Laurie explained that she usually opens coaching sessions by asking the teacher what their area of focus is. Laurie said:

> We have talked about what it is that she wants to get out of it, and then I do a lot of questioning about kind of where she wants to go. With that information and what she currently has and then we do some brainstorming together around what that could look like, and I might make some suggestions.

Coach Darcy similarly noted that coaching works best when it is "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." Darcy also added, "It's just

not successful if it's not teacher led, and if it's not what they are looking for, so I will give teachers almost a menu of options, for how I can support them after that initial observation happens."

Teachers similarly shared their experiences with having conferences that are focused around the goals they identify. Teacher Earleen explained about her coach:

> Always, I don't say holding my hand, because that's not it, but she's walking with me and kind of, guiding me, based on what I feel like. I'm the one in charge, but she's kind of helping me gather the resources. Helping me fine tune.

In her response, Earleen explained that her goals drive her coaching sessions, and she feels the coach is the guide and support person who helps her find her way to the goal. Teacher Pal suggested that coaches should "offer to coach on what interests the teacher until trust is established," then they could offer observations about potential growth areas.

Coaches did provide a caveat to completely teacher-driven goal setting and that is in the event a teacher is struggling so much that they cannot identify an area of focus or growth, then it would make sense for a coach to take a more directive approach and provide some suggestions in a more guided way. Coach Marie described a situation like this, adding that the intention is not to guide the teacher forever, but rather to get the teacher to a place where they can own the growth and reflection process.

Coach Ron similarly explained that if a teacher who is too lost and overwhelmed is asked to drive the goal and direction, it can lead to more frustration. Ron explained, "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 a case like this, coaches in my study agreed that providing more structure or direction for the teacher would be appropriate.

Gathering Data

An instructional coach must be skilled at gathering data to help inform a teacher's progress toward their goals and help teachers improve their own data analysis skills (Knight, 2007). Data could include information on the effectiveness of instructional strategies. Teachers mentioned the need for instructional coaches to be effective with data, highlighting it as an essential component of the DEGCF. Teacher Rose explained that she finds data helpful. Rose expanded:

> having just them be present and like willing to do and collect data that you want, I think that's really effective because they'll be able to, like, know what you're going with and like have data to back that up and also like on the flip side of that, if like we're our own worst critics so having them like go and be like, oh no, you're actually doing this really well, it's kind of good too.

Teacher Earleen similarly said, "she's walking with me and kind of, guiding me, based on what I feel like. I'm the one in charge, but she's kind of helping me gather the data. Helping me fine tune."

Overall, teachers and coaches shared that data about their teaching performance needed to be objective. Many spoke in measurable terms, reporting strictly on what the frequency numbers are or providing observation evidence of what was seen and heard without any judgment. Coach Darcy said:

> One thing I'm really careful about is when I'm doing the note taking about the classroom observations, I'm as objective and factual as possible so I don't make inferences about

> what I see or conclusions about what I see. I ask the teachers to do that which is really important to the trust part in the relationship building in that cycle.

Coach Sarah echoed this stating, "when I do data collection, I try super hard to be completely neutral with how I take it. And it's very much just this is the data, and there's no judgment. I let them form their own conclusions." Both teachers and coaches felt data was better received when it was factual and objective. Regardless of the method of data collection, instructional coaches must be skilled at collecting data in a way that is not judgmental or subjective.

First, teachers expressed the importance of their instructional coach knowing what kind of data would be most beneficial to their growth. Teacher Earleen, who set a goal to work on engagement in her library classes, needed the coach to first gather data on what student engagement looked like through observation so she knew the challenge areas. She then needed her coach to support her implementation of different instructional approaches and to observe and gather data again on engagement to note if growth was occurring and if students were showing improvement. For this, the coach needed to be very clear on the teacher's growth area, know exactly what she was tracking in the classroom, and track what student participation and engagement looked like before and after the instructional adjustments. Earleen explained:

> I'm like, can you sit here? She writes down literally everything I say and do and just has me read it back, and it was like, you know, [Earleen], you know what, and will ask me then clarifying questions like, what felt really good for you? What felt challenging? How would you like to make those challenging pieces not so challenging in the future? What do you think your ideas could be around that?

Teacher Pal shared that she likes to know the research behind an instructional approach and its potential outcomes before she implements it and likes a coach to provide that data in their presentation of new ideas. Pal explained:

> I think they need to come with evidence. So come to me with some evidence that works come to me with the studies. Come to me with the literature, and don't come to me with your opinions, because well, you know, some opinions would work. But if you come to me with something that has proven to work and has been researched and has proven to be best practices in the content area, I am more likely to believe you, and to apply what you're saying.

Another way instructional coaches must be skilled with data is in the use of student data (Kdruvenga, 2017; Melvin & Vargas, 2021). Coaches must be experts in examining, disaggregating, and sorting student learning data in order to find patterns and trends and to help teachers determine their next instructional moves in order to move learning forward for all students. Additionally, though they need to be experts, they need to use their knowledge as the base for asking reflective questions to support their teachers in learning and identifying those same patterns and not simply doing it all for a teacher. Coach Claudia said she incorporates data because we need to know what its showing to know if coaching is working. Claudia said, "what's the student data showing like, are they leading where we want them to? Are they understanding and using evidence?"

Teacher Stacy described an effective coaching session focused on coplanning and data analysis. Stacy and her coach reviewed student learning data Stacy had gathered from a lesson and used it to determine what students needed reteaching of skills and which had mastered the concept. Finally, they came up with in-time instruction to address the needs of these different

groups. Stacy explained, "I think like on top of that, like I've learned from [coach], like a little more about like doing tiered assessments. Like tier one, tier 2, tier 3 like how to roll that out. That's been helpful." Again, the coach's role here was not to simply tell a teacher what their data means and what to do about it, but to use one of the core DEGCF principles of listening and reflective questioning to help the teacher unearth meaning in the data and then decide appropriate next steps.

Certainly, the dynamic nature of coaching and varied teacher needs are necessary considerations as well (Sweeney & Harris, 2020). A brand-new teacher who may be overwhelmed by both the data and all that teaching requires of them may ask the coach to be more directive with them as they learn and develop their skills. A more veteran teacher with varied instructional experience may be able to craft new instructional approaches based on data without significant guidance. A coach must be ready to adapt their approach to the teacher's needs.

Figure 2 is a data analysis tool for instructional coaches to use in the event a teacher is asking for support with student data. The data tool helps a coach and teacher sort data and plan for next steps instructionally. My research showed that gathering and providing useful data to teachers impacted improved student outcomes, improved instruction, and teacher efficacy. Figure 2 helps the teacher consider how to appropriately help students at their different levels or tiers. By working with an instructional coach, this task can be more manageable than working on one's own.

Figure 2

Data Analysis Tool

<table>
<tr><td colspan="3">Teacher Goal:</td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="3">Data Source:</td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="3">General Data analysis (What does the data show about student understanding?)</td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="3">Sort the students based on the data for in time instruction:</td></tr>
<tr><td>Students who require reteaching/content in a new way</td><td>Students who are close to mastery</td><td>Students who mastered the skill/concept</td></tr>
<tr><td></td><td></td><td></td></tr>
<tr><td>Instructional Approach</td><td>Instructional Approach</td><td>Instructional Approach</td></tr>
<tr><td></td><td></td><td></td></tr>
<tr><td>Outcome/Reflection:</td><td></td><td></td></tr>
</table>

Feedback

Feedback is embedded throughout the dynamic educator growth coaching framework. During my study, teachers discussed how important feedback was to them, but most important to instructional coaches is the delivery of that feedback. Teacher Rose, who was new to teaching, shared how feedback from her coach helped her. Rose shared, "I got to have her observe me and, like, give me feedback that could be applied like all throughout the board, but she was seeing it with different classes." Rose felt the feedback from her coach led to improvements in multiple classes she taught. Teacher Mona said she liked coaching feedback and that her coach "offers feedback in a very neutral manner. I think she's good at having hard conversations." The most effective instructional coaches are providing neutral feedback in bite-sized, incremental ways, pairing with some observed strengths or areas in which they have seen improvement and providing the just-right next step to continue growth (Aguilar, 2013).

Teachers emphasized in interviews that receiving only praise is not effective because it is too non-specific and does not identify any areas to take the next action steps (Benson-Goldberg & Erickson, 2021). Teacher Ted described this as "too much sunshine," and that someone praising positives and building up a teacher, especially after a hard day, was nice. However, there is not anything to base changes or growth on, and that feels frustrating to teachers. In Ted's words some praise can feel encouraging but, "I also need that honesty of here's the thing I can work on." Teacher Mina recalled a coaching experience where praise without structured feedback left her feeling a little lost and frustrated as well following an observation. Mina said, "It was just "you're done. You're good." I got threes [proficient] on everything out of four . . . there wasn't a lot of room for collaboration, feedback, talking it through improvement."

What matters most to teachers is that feedback is both honest about where they stand in relation to their goals and growth areas, and that the feedback feels manageable (Benson-Goldberg & Erickson, 2021). Teachers and coaches described this as being supportive but not adding extra work.

Feedback was an area teachers identified as most impactful for their own efficacy and improved instruction in the classroom. This was because the feedback helped them see strengths they possessed and the incremental changes over time showed them they were capable, which resulted in better instruction for students.

Modeling

Modeling is an instructional coaching approach preferred by both teachers and coaches alike, and, according to teachers and coaches in this study, it is most effective in one of two ways: when a coach models instruction for a teacher in their classroom, then follows up later to see how it is going over time; and when a teacher observes another teacher's instruction as an example of effective practice via a video or visiting another classroom (Aguilar, 2013; Knight, 2018; Kraft et al., 2018).

Coaches and teachers in my study reflected on modeling that seeing certain strategies in action are far more effective than reading about them or discussing them in theory. Teacher Pal shared that someone modeling a specific immersive approach to teaching world language was the only way she truly grasped it. Reading about and discussing the immersive language approach only resulted in confusion about how it looked in practice. Pal shared her observations of how transformative this modeling practice was for her and its impact on student learning. Pal said:

> You base all of it in content that is produced for native speakers. So that was revolutionary for me. That is what I learned. This is, and I have been applying it this year, and my most advanced student can speak with me for 75 minutes [in Spanish] . . . So, I have seen this student go from knowing nothing three years ago to talking with me for 75 minutes.

This process was eye-opening for the coach as well as the student.

Showing is better than telling, so if the coach is an expert in an instructional skill the teacher wishes to learn, showing this to the teacher is often welcome. Teacher Rose also shared how modeling was helpful, explaining how it helped her see an instructional approach in action. She explained, "last year I struggled to do like rotations and like group rotations, so her showing me how to do that was really beneficial." Coach Laurie also described modeling as a powerful experience for transforming instruction, because it can help teachers see the potential in their students and bring about higher quality instruction. Laurie described a situation where modeling led to a teacher's practice improving instantly. Laurie said:

> And then, you know, like I had a teacher turn to me and say you were right. I thought they [students] couldn't do it, and they can and so that that is like that is so powerful to have a teacher see that their own students and their own kids, whose maybe their expectations weren't high enough. And that's a moment that will last for that teacher. And that's like a moment that, like, you know, that teacher is now like, can we meet regularly, right? Because it's just. It's so important that they can kind of see that that they can do more.

Coach Allison also noted that modeling is her favorite approach. Allison said:

> I feel like you can sit and talk and co-plan and things like that, but just jumping in and doing it often is the best way to do it with kids in front of you, so they can kind of see what the strategy is, how it works, how kids respond.

The model does not necessarily have to be the coach.

If the coach knows of another teacher who is a great example of practice, observing that instruction as the model is just as effective as the coach being the model. Coaches and teachers discussed this type of modeling as powerful as well, and it was a tool many instructional coaches in the study used as a version of modeling. Coach Hannah explained:

> One of the things I really try to do often is arrange for teachers to visit other teachers, other schools in our district, maybe similar grade or same grade just to have that experience of seeing how someone else does it? I think I read a quote years ago about we all of us humans learn more from our peers than we learn from any adult in our lives. So, giving teachers a chance to see what other teachers are doing and break down those walls. I think that's something that's very, very powerful, more than anything I could say.

Teacher Pal further explained about observing other teachers and modeling that it can take away an emotional or vulnerability barrier for teachers. Pal said:

> I think it is actually more effective when you're not feeling observed yourself, because then you don't have your emotional barrier up there. So, you're watching someone else, you're not feeling criticized, you are getting instruction on how to teach, and it's not, not making you vulnerable.

This is a powerful point, because it shows how modeling and observing other teachers carrying out instruction can result in teachers learning and positively transforming their own instruction

while not feeling nervous or vulnerable about receiving feedback or criticism about their own teaching.

In this research process, one caveat about modeling emerged that is worthy of mention. Coach Marie noted that "as much as they say it [modeling] was helpful to see, I don't always see the return," meaning that in some cases, teachers do not implement the instructional practices that are modeled through a coach or observation of another teacher, which means instructional practice remains unchanged. Therefore, modeling is not an effective tool if the coach notices the teacher is not making any instructional changes. If that is the case, the coach should either revisit their steps in the DEGCF Cycle (see Figure 1) to ensure there is an action plan and follow-up conversation surrounding the modeling, or explore other coaching approaches with the teacher to see if another coaching method is needed.

Overall, modeling was a practice teachers and coaches felt most impacted their instructional abilities and student learning outcomes, with it being most frequently named as effective in interviews. Teachers felt that seeing effective instruction in practice helped them better incorporate effective approaches in their own classrooms, and the outcome was students demonstrating deeper understanding, or the classroom environment becoming more structured and conducive to learning.

Coplanning

Coplanning emerged as a highly effective practice for teachers. Coplanning is a coaching session where the teacher and coach plan for instructional next steps together. Teachers in my study also discussed some approaches related to coplanning that they described as "troubleshooting" and "brainstorming sessions." In this approach, the coach is sitting alongside

the teacher helping to identify the next logical steps for the teacher to take based on a goal or need.

Coplanning was most impactful at improving teacher instructional practice and teacher efficacy (Knight, 2018). Teachers shared that it helped them design more effective instruction, and that it helped them feel more confident in their abilities. Coach Ella described a coaching session where co-planning led to the teacher designing and implementing more effective strategies. Ella explained:

> Having the ability to sit down with a teacher, think about what they want their lesson to look like giving them the opportunity to have input on that and thinking about what would work for their strengths, and then going in and maybe doing a piece of the lesson, or a part of the lesson that they were less comfortable with and then giving them the opportunity to replicate that.

Ella also told me this approach resulted in the teacher having control over the instruction, but also through the coach, implementing something that was more effective than previous instruction, resulting in improved engagement and learning for students.

Teacher Eowyn also described coplanning with a coach to be powerful for her. Eowyn said:

> I find that coplanning with somebody else, especially someone who might have different strengths than your own will only kind of make your lesson better and more suitable to a diverse group of students. Just like for me, verbalizing a lesson because I'm always doing them in my own head, and I'm always kind of writing them out on my own, having a chance to also verbalize what I'm thinking, not even writing. It just makes a huge difference, and you can kind of pick up on things that you necessarily wouldn't. And

hearing another voice in their opinions on those lessons I feel like just makes them stronger.

In examples from interviews, coplanning was effective because a coach reinforced an idea a teacher developed or wanted to try which built confidence and efficacy. It was alternatively effective because the coach helped the teacher design and understand why a particular approach might be more effective, and then the act of doing it helped the teacher see what they and their students were capable of. Teacher Earleen explained coplanning as an experience where "I'm the one in charge, but she's kind of helping me gather the resources. Helping me fine tune." This shows the coach provided support and resources, but the teacher felt it was resulting in instructional improvements.

Also worthy of mention was a key point four coaches made that their role should be to make teachers' lives easier, and they often described coplanning as an avenue to do that. Coach Laurie described it as "taking a bit of the lift for teachers. I just think that goes such a long way, and like actually creating some things for teachers, so they don't have to create everything all themselves all the time." What Laurie is describing is how coaches, as part of the co-planning process, sometimes offer to create tools, lesson materials, or do research for the teacher to provide support. This helps the teacher focus on delivery of quality instruction while freeing up the teacher's time, since the coach is more likely to already have a pool of instructional resources available than the teacher.

Summary

I developed the dynamic educator growth coaching framework (DEGCF) seeking to answer the question: In what ways do coaches and teachers being coached describe effective instructional coaching and how is it effectively implemented? In this study, effective

instructional coaching approaches were described by teachers and coaches as most effective for improving teacher instructional practice, teacher efficacy, and student outcomes. The key themes of effective practices that emerged from the interviews were relationships and trust, observing teaching, reflective questioning, being teacher goal-driven, listening, gathering data, feedback, modeling, co-planning, and flexible coaching. These practices, once identified, were used as the foundation for creating the DEGCF (see Figure 1), which contains at its core an emphasis on trust and relationships and then follows a cycle through teacher reflection, self-assessment, and identification of needs, to a reflective coaching conversation, then to the teacher and coach agreeing upon an action to take, teacher implementation of the identified change(s), a follow-up reflective coaching conversation, and then the cycle begins again. What makes the DEGCF model different is the flexibility for the teacher to drive the growth and the coach to remain flexible and adaptive to the teacher's needs.

The model, based on the research I conducted, also reveals a need to develop strong relationships prior to engaging in classroom observation, and to approach coaching with a humanistic lens, seeking to support the person before the work. Because of this, the research also revealed the need for a specific type of personality and skillset for instructional coaches, which requires:

1. An experienced educator who ideally supports teachers within the coach's scope of experience (Ocasio-Stoutenburg et al., 2024).
2. Someone who is non-judgmental and can ask questions and listen thoughtfully (Balcı and Özkan, 2023; Smith, 2023; Thomas et al., 2015).
3. Someone who maintains trust and confidentiality (Aguilar, 2013; Knight, 2013).

4. Someone who can be supportive to meet the needs of the person in front of them while also developing skills incrementally over time (Aguilar, 2013).

Certainly, instructional coaching is a role that can create significant teacher growth and even aid schools in retaining teachers. The DEGCF is a pathway to offer teacher support and encourage the development, confidence, and retention of teachers.

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