Collaborative Leadership Structures: Conduits To Instructional Coaching Success

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Abstract

Educational research literature documents the positive effect instructional coaching has on teacher efficacy. This study investigated how instructional leaders coupled instructional coaches' daily work with the reforms outlined in district strategic plans. The problem is that leaders in K-12 education misalign the coupling of instructional reform goals to the daily work of instructional coaches. The study aims to uncover methods educational leaders use to couple daily instructional coaching work with instructional reforms. A qualitative multiple case study research design was employed to gather data to collect data concerning phenomena in organizational culture. The significance of the study is that the research highlights strategies that enhance coaching work to improve instruction and bolster student achievement. A sample of seven instructional coaches and district leaders was gathered during semi-structured interview protocols. A sample of instructional coaches and district leaders were interviewed separately to obtain points of view from different stakeholders. Details from varied perspectives revealed details about how the daily work of instructional coaches can adhere to systematizing instructional reforms. Strategic plans and other documents connected the research literature and interview data to bolster study reliability. The study findings indicate that specific organizational structures that bolster collaborative leadership help instructional coaches spread instructional reforms to classrooms. Collaborative leadership was an essential theme that helped couple the daily work of instructional coaches with instructional. The research question is: What perceptions do district leaders and instructional coaches have about instructional coaching program structures? A critical sub-theme surfaced was the School Leadership Instructional Team (SILT). According to study participants, the strength or lack of collaboration between the principal, instructional coaches, and other instructional leaders impacted the spread of instructional reforms in classrooms. In this study, instructional coaches acknowledged that collaboration between the instructional coach and other school leaders determines their daily focus on school reforms. District leaders in this study pinpointed collaboration as a conduit to coupling the work of coaching to institutionalizing instructional reforms.

Keywords: instructional coach, district leaders, collaboration, professional learning communities, school improvement leadership team, instructional reforms, job-embedded professional learning

1. Introduction

1.1 Introduce the Problem

Educational leaders in K-12 education are constantly grappling with initiating reforms to improve the quality of classroom instruction (Reddy et al., 2019; Reid, 2019; Woulfin et al., 2023). Instructional coaching programs provide viable opportunities to develop the pedagogy of teachers (Saunders et al., 2024; Woulfin, 2020). Typically, instructional coaches provide job-embedded professional learning tied to school district initiatives (Voelkel et al.,2023). Instructional coaches also expand the reach of school leaders by sharing expert content and pedagogical knowledge with members of the school administrative team (Knight, 2021; Knight, 2023). School principals in this study note the value of coaches as experts who assist school leaders in managing organizational change. Unfortunately, the weight of daily work in public schools can shift the focus of instructional coaching work away from spreading instructional reforms (Aguilar, 2019; Knight, 2022; Harrison & Killion, 2016). The findings in this study show that instructional coaching work can be coupled with district reforms with specific collaborative leadership structures (Fullan et al., 2023). Establishing a School Instructional Leadership Team (SILT) reinforces planning with collaborative inquiry and professional learning aligned with district initiatives (Hitt et al., 2020). Layers of professional learning community structures that focus on the same instructional reforms build coherence and support coaching work (Carrington et al., 2020; Fullan et al., 2023).

1.2 Coupling Instructional Coaching Work with Instructional Reforms

Leaders in K-12 education rely on instructional coaching programs to build teacher capacity (Reid, 2019). Unfortunately, K-12 education organizations require instructional leaders to navigate competing initiatives and duties (Reddy et al., 2019; Reid, 2019; Woulfin et al., 2023). The problem is that district and school leaders misalign the coupling of instructional reform goals, causing instructional coaches to shift focus from promoting pedagogical reforms to administrative duties and direct instruction (Reid, 2019). School district leaders squander fiscal resources and time when instructional coaching programs do not promote instructional reforms (Reid, 2019; Monroe et al., 2020). The realization of increasing teacher efficacy and student outcomes is assisted by investigating the mechanisms that tether instructional reforms to instructional coaching endeavors (Hashim, 2020; Reid, 2019; Woulfin, 2020). One problem is that school district leaders do not couple the daily work of instructional coaches with reform initiatives (Reid, 2019; Woulfin et al., 2023). Monroe and Marvin (2020) noted that administrators do not support the efforts of instructional coaches with fidelity. School leaders directly impact the enactment of coaching (Booker & Russell, 2022; Reid, 2019). Furthermore, school district reforms that do not align with principal expectations lead to instructional coaches coupling instructional reforms to the daily work of instructional coaches (Galey-Horn, 2021; Woulfin, 2018; Woulfin, 2023). Woulfin (2018) advised, "Researchers should investigate how coaches serving in different types of systems and schools couple instructional reforms with their work activities" (p. 13).

1.3 Describe Relevant Scholarship

For several decades, education leaders adopted practices based on the educational leadership theory (Fullan, 2008; Heck et al., 2014). The school principal is central to many educational leadership phenomena in educational research (Fullan, 2008; Heck et al., 2014). In the last 20 years, shared responsibility for student outcomes has resonated in the research literature (Fullan, 2008; Heck et al., 2014; Woulfin, 2018). State districts, school district leadership, school leaders, teacher leaders, student groups, and parent groups work in concert to raise student achievement (Fullan & Quin, 2016). Instructional coaching is a derivative of formal teacher leadership (Aguilar, 2019; Knight, 2022; Harrison & Killion, 2016). Teacher leadership is a phenomenon that began as teachers who still held classroom instructional duties served as grade-level or department chairs in shared leadership roles, expanding the reach of principals (Aguilar, 2019; Knight, 2021; Harrison & Killion, 2016). Traditionally, teacher leaders presided over school leadership teams, governance councils, and other committees (Harrison & Killion, 2016). The presence of teacher leaders on leadership committees provided a voice that could provide a lens into instruction and student learning (Harrison & Killion, 2016).

Researchers noted success in schools where teachers shared responsibilities with leaders (Simpson et al., 2004). School reformers leveraged data from research to change educational policy to recognize teacher leadership, train teacher leaders, and formalize teacher leadership roles (Fullan, 2003; Hallinger, 2010; Lyle, 2023). Multiple research studies explore instructional coaching frameworks; however, there is little research on how instructional coaches navigate pitfalls in organizational systems and couple work to instructional reforms (Marks, 2017; Woulfin & Rigby, 2017; Woulfin, 2018).

During the last 30 years, researchers have uncovered information concerning the coherence of systems in education (Fullan & Quinn, 2016). The coherence of school districts and schools is paramount to instructional coaches (Aguilar, 2013; Ginsberg, 2012; Killion & Harrison, 2017; Knight, 2021). Instructional coaches struggle to be effective when district/school focus is clear and attainable (Anderson, 2018; Kane & Rosenquist, 2019; Killion, 2017; Reddy et al., 2019). Instructional coaches in case study research share the difficulty of focusing on reform when conflicting or conflated initiatives arise (Fullan, 2003; Fullan et al., 2016; Woufin, 2018).

Conversely, instructional coaches are successful when the principal has a mission that aligns with instructional goals to impact student achievement (Fullan & Quinn, 2016). To that end, school districts that have one or two instructional initiatives and provide resources and training under that initiative have positive results (Irby, 2020; Meyers, 2020). Instructional coaches are essential professional developers who root lessons in hands-on practices (Killion & Harrison, 2017). Instructional coaches rely on principals and district leaders to set up structures that allow instructional staff collaboration (Fullan, 2023; Killion et al., 2022; Knight et al., 2023). Three broad areas for optimal coaching integration are evident in the research literature. Professional learning communities, classroom observation, feedback sessions, and collaborative inquiry with data are structural themes that repeat in literature to be fundamental to coaching practice (Aguilar, 2013; Fisher et al., 2020; Killion et al., 2022; Knight et al., 2023).

It is not feasible to expect one leader to achieve school transformation alone (Lui et al., 2021). Bros et al. (2022) conclude that distributed leadership consists of collective activities through symbiotic professional enterprises instead of isolated individual actions. Harris (2013) states, "Distributed leadership, or the expansion of leadership roles, in schools, beyond those in formal leadership or administrative posts, is without question one of the most prominent ideas to emerge in the educational leadership field in recent years" (p.47). Lyle et al. (2023) characterizes distributed leadership as collaborative leadership practice regardless of hierarchical roles. Distributed leadership theorists elucidate strategies to ensure that

instructional coaches expand the reach of the principal and increase the use of instructional reforms in classrooms (Duke, 2015; Fullan, 2007; Wiggins & McTighe, 2007). Recurring themes for bolstering school instructional reforms include protecting time, developing a culture of trust, and building professional capacity (Duke, 2015; Fullan, 2007; Harris, 2017; Wiggins & McTighe, 2007). Similar themes resonate in instructional leadership theory literature. Instructional leadership is of paramount importance when attempting to save failing schools. Perennially, there is a greater focus on low-performing schools where a population of students is trapped and doomed to low expectations and low performance (Myers, 2021). Duke (2015) recommends that leaders of low-performing schools strategically plan for improvement by setting goals, standards, and instructional strategies. Some school districts equip leaders with instructional coaches to implement turnaround strategies (Duke, 2015; Hitt & Meyers, 2017; Meyers, 2021). School turnaround strategies that instructional coaches lead include alignment of student performance standards, instructional improvement, and professional development. Caveats of instructional leadership also include standardizing adequate teaching supervision, monitoring student progress, and promoting high expectations for student achievement (Hallinger, 2020). The caveats of instructional leadership are foundational to the role of instructional coaches.

Transformational leadership builds on the ideals of instructional leadership and the Effective Schools Movement (Hallinger, 2020). Alam (2023) lauds transformational leadership as a management style that universally supports all fields and events. Transformational leaders are proactively looking for problems to solve and develop the vision of the school and the vision that the school community can collectively realize (Alam, 2023; Subhaktiyasa, 2023). Transformational leadership seeks to raise participants' level of commitment (Eaton, 2024). Transformational leaders push the aspirational goals of stakeholders and set aside self-interest for the greater good (Kainde, 2024). Although transformational leadership resonates in the habits of schools and districts, the ideal does not consistently result in school reform (Hitt & Myers, 2017). Multiple research study findings show that a charismatic, transformational leader may not manifest more extraordinary team performance (Dionne &Yammarino, 2003). Idealized influence involves visioning behaviors and the ability to translate ideas for the future across the organization. Inspirational motivation impacts behaviors involving rapport building and empathetic language. Dionne et al. (2003) found examples of transformational leadership that caused teams to exceed expectations. Technological innovations became a lever for restructuring, organizational change, and meeting 21st-century requirements in educational leadership (Hallinger, 2022; Leithwood et al., 2020). Some management studies strongly criticize transformational leadership theory for differing definitions of dimensions.

The integrated leadership style mirrors practices that sustain teacher leadership in the research literature. Contrary to Bambrick's (2018) theory of quick wins leading to sustainable change for school turnaround, Knight (2022) extols consistency as a necessary factor toward sustainable change. Knight (2022) states that learning skills that foster and implement change are complex. Hall and Hord (2011) suggest stages for implementing lasting changes in educational institutions. Similarly, Hord and Roussin (2013) asserted that six stages move from adopting new reforms to full implementation. The six stages are like constructs that link the practices of integrated leaders with instructional coaches, teacher leaders, and administrators to define and reach a shared vision clearly (Killion et al., 2022; Knight, 2022). Leaders with an integrated leadership style create an environment conducive to change (Knight, 2019). Integrated leadership theory requires leaders to create contexts to promote the vision of change to constituents that help lead the change (Hord & Roussin, 2013; Hord & Hall, 2011). Clear concepts can resonate with clients by defining specific instructional reforms connected to daily work (Knight, 2022). The clear categories create a path for instructional coaching work (Knight, 2022). Similarly, creating and communicating a shared vision is prevalent in educational leadership research literature (Kwan, 2020; Li, 2022; Liethwood, 2020).

Restructuring professional learning in school organizations requires leadership that galvanizes a team of leaders to research, design, and implement innovations that lead to improvement (Wiens et al., 2024). Teacher leaders in formal roles aid school leaders in shifting from professional learning as one-time events to ongoing learning by doing (Wiens, 2024). Teacher leaders hold valuable information about students and how they learn (Killion et al., 2020). Instructional leaders cultivate pathways for teachers to work as leaders (Killion et al., 2020). Involving teachers in decision-making relieves the principal's workload and enhances the teacher's work climate (Berg, 2019). Additional leadership distribution has positively impacted student learning outcomes (Leithwood et al., 2020; Hallenger, 2020). Collaborative planning, co-teaching, and shared decision-making define the nature of school teaching and learning (Darling-Hammond 1995).

Initially, instructional leadership was a hierarchical concept. The hierarchical decision-making directly conflicts with democratic organizational structures from the late 1980s teacher empowerment era. Instructional coaching is a product of the teacher leadership movement that allows teachers to move outside classroom roles, focusing on improving teacher instruction (Barth et al., 2023). Even though instructional leadership embodies the characteristics of building teaching capacity, principals across the globe lack the skill to coach teachers (Cuban, 1984). Instructional coaches can provide instructional support and job-embedded professional learning. Ideals of shared management emerged, which led to a

reconstitution of teaching and learning that resonates in the Effective School Movement (Lezzotte, 1991). The promise of instructional coaching has not resulted in a body of research constituting a theoretical framework (Gallucci et al., 2004). Instructional coaches provide the opportunity to share instructional reforms in school settings. Job-embedded professional learning by instructional coaches improved teacher effectiveness (Killion, 2020). The marriage of effective principal and teacher leadership manifests increased instructional efficacy (Reddy, 2019). When educational leaders link the work of coaches to instructional reforms, teachers are more likely to adopt recommended practices (Woulfin, 2018).

1.4 State Hypotheses and Their Correspondence to Research Design

This case study explored how coaches serve in different systems and schools and how instructional reforms are coupled with daily work. Although considerable research exists on instructional coaching, a scant amount of research exists on how instructional coaches intentionally couple work with school district strategic plan instructional reforms. After comprehensively analyzing each case, a cross-analysis across multiple cases was employed (Merriam, 2019). This qualitative, inductive, multiple case study produced data to analyze themes and categories and conceptualize all case features (Yin, 2018). All data collected addressed the research question; below:

What perceptions do district leaders and instructional coaches have about instructional coaching program structures?

2. Method

I chose qualitative multiple case study methods to assist with analysis and drawing meaning from the perceptions of instructional coaches and district leaders (Yin, 2018). This study aims to determine strategies that educational leaders use to couple the work of instructional coaches with instructional reforms (Woulfin, 2018). Teacher effectiveness is an issue of paramount importance in K-12 education. Instructional coaching is a viable resource for increasing teacher efficacy (Aguilar, 2019; Harrison & Killion, 2016; Knight, 2021).

2.1 Materials and Instrumentation

The material and instruments in this study are (a) semi-structured interview protocols (Appendix A), (b) artifacts provided by study participants, (Appendix B), (c) recruitment materials, (Appendix C), and (d) district documents from public websites, (Appendix D). Stake (2013) advised, "As a form of validation, triangulation follows a classical strategy- seeing whether new views are consistent with what is already known about a Case or the Quintain" (p.77). Recruitment materials provided a pathway to engage with prospective study participants. The recruitment materials for this study included recruitment letters, emails, and flyers.

Two interview scripts enhanced the collection of responses from district leaders and instructional coaches. The interview questions aligned with the research study questions to uncover organizational phenomena from educator perspectives. The interview scripts also provide questions that elicit detailed, thick descriptions to connect themes that bind cases together (Merriam, 2019). Viewpoints shared from the feedback from an expert field-testing audit enhanced the review and revision of each interview protocol (Merriam, 2019).

2.2 Participant Characteristics

The multiple cases (instructional coaches, district leaders) within the more significant case (A school district in Metropolitan Atlanta, Georgia) assisted with uncovering similarities and variations in leadership practices used to couple coaching efforts toward implementing instructional reforms (Yin, 2018). Stake (2013) identified the phenomenon, groups, or conditions within a multiple case study as quintain. A quintain is an umbrella for all the cases investigated in the study (Stake, 2013). The quintain in this study is instructional coaches within K-12 public schools in one school district within Metropolitan Atlanta, Georgia. This multiple case study is instrumental because the aim is to bind specific reform practices to a particular group of practitioners (Stake, 2013).

The number of study participants in the final sample depended on the outcome of the purposeful sample and data saturation. After selection, employment verification of roles and certification types ensures that participants meet study inclusion criteria. Yin (2018) cited multiple case studies as an effective method for studying innovative practices in educational organizations. This multiple case study will be completed in phases, including selecting the sample, analyzing the data, analyzing each case, and conducting cross-case analysis. The following inclusion criteria were a requirement for this study:

• Certified educators employed as instructional coaches in Title I public schools in Metropolitan Atlanta.

• Title I public school district leaders in the Metropolitan Atlanta area manage instructional coaching programs.

The analysis focuses on approaches to school district leaders that couple the work of instructional coaches with instructional reforms. This multiple case study also highlighted coaches' strategies to navigate professional obstacles. Seven instructional coaches and seven district leaders participated in this study. The research literature highlights instances where coaches divert from school reform work to replicate administrative tasks (Brown et al., 2017; Knight, 2011;

Westmoreland et al., 2019; Woulfin, 2018). This case study investigated perspectives on the effect of daily coaching work to uncover strategies to reduce the misuse of coaching roles (Killion, 2020; Reid, 2019). Purposive sampling targeted instructional coaches in K-12 education working on a specific school reform tied to strategic plans. Approximately six to ten participants must participate for data saturation (Stake, 2013). Seven district leaders and ten instructional coaches satisfied saturation target requirements for purposive sampling procedures.

2.3 Sampling Procedures

Applications (Appendix E) to conduct research were submitted to potential study sites in keeping with each entity's process outlined on school district websites. Leveraging purposive sampling techniques to select instructional coaches and district leaders as study participants attracted the required participants (Woulfin, 2018). It was necessary to obtain permission from each school district's central office leadership to conduct research. I also obtained permission from each principal to conduct research in each school. Purposive sampling was conducted in Title I schools in Metropolitan Atlanta. Title I Schools must share strategic plans as a stipulation to receiving funding from the U. S. Department of Education. The strategic plan reform goals link to the research questions in this study.

It is crucial to link instructional coaching work to specific public schools for data analysis. The intentional design of data collection procedures heightens the analysis of how accountability pressures affect district reforms to instructional coaches' daily work (Woulfin, 2018). The purposive sample secured participants from high-performing, moderately performing, and low-performing schools (Woulfin, 2018). I ranked the participants' schools using Georgia School Report Cards on the public-facing Governor's Office of Student Achievement (GOSA, 2018) website and the College and Career Performance Index (GADOE, 2020).

Additionally, recruitment materials frequently targeted Title I school personnel via social media groups for that instructional coach. I sent direct email recruitment letters to instructional coaches through email lists provided on school district websites. Each recruitment digital flyer and email (Appendix A) provided a hyperlink to an initial survey to determine if potential participants met the study inclusion criteria. Upon reviewing the initial recruitment survey, qualifying study participants receive an additional email inviting them to participate.

2.3.1 Sample Size

Based on confirmations by Stake (2013), fewer than four participants will not provide enough data between programs, and over 15 participants provide a daunting amount of information for readers and researchers to understand. For that reason, this multiple case study featured perspectives from 14 participants. Participants in this study consisted of seven instructional coaches and seven district leaders. Five of the district leaders interviewed were four elementary school principals and one high school principal. A curriculum director and a cluster superintendent also represented district leaders in this study. Four school-level instructional coaches specializing in math and early literacy pedagogy participated in the instructional coach interview protocol. Two district-level literacy coaches and a data coach also served as study participants.

2.3.2 Data Collection

I used an interview script vetted through expert field tests via the Zoom online meeting platform. District leader interviews focused on the details of the coaching program. Including historical, structural, and instructional contexts added depth to the interviews. At the beginning of the interview, I asked participants if they were familiar with district reforms. Next, I asked the participants to prioritize the school reforms, which are more important in their daily work. After the ranking conversation, I asked the coaches about the specifics of their work and the ways district leadership supports coaching.

The third component of the data collection protocol was collecting information from documents about district policies. Woulfin (2018) recommends retrieving presentations from instructional coach professional development sessions, instructional initiatives, district websites, and programs. The documents provide different data points to determine the coherence between coaching programs and strategic plan reforms from theoretical frameworks (Berg, 2020; Dawer et al., 2024; Fullan et al., 2023; Hitt et al., 2020; Woulfin, 2018).

2.3.3 Research Design

Cross-case analysis from multiple case studies provided an opportunity to make meaning of educators' perceptions about coupling dominant district reforms on daily coaching work (Woulfin, 2018). Title I schools in a school district in the Metropolitan Atlanta encapsulated the overall case. The Oakwood school district has a variety of schools with diverse populations sprinkled across the Metropolitan Atlanta area. The district case envelops school organizations where participants are provided with the same governance and share varied perspectives.

In addition, examining each dominant district reform in the relationship to the Three Institutional Pillars as a coupling mechanism yielded additional layers of analysis for ascertaining themes (Gayle, 2020; Spillane et al., 2022). The study

uncovered cultural-cognitive, normative, and regulative mechanisms inhibiting or amplifying coupling district policy with daily coaching work (Woulfin, 2018).

Determining practices from multiple cases can allow inferences across district leadership in urban areas (Woulfin, 2018). Multiple case studies provide constructs to make meaning across multiple perspectives and cases with various actors and phenomena to reach a similar outcome (Merriam, 2019). Recommendations from previous research underscore the need to employ multiple case studies to analyze data across schools in an urban area (Woulfin & Gabriel, 2020). A single case study method cannot support analysis of characteristics of instructional infrastructures, reforms, and stakeholder perceptions across multiple Title I public schools in a school district within the Metropolitan Atlanta area (Merriam, 2019).

3. Results

3.1 Recruitment

After receiving permission to conduct research from the Oakwood School District, permission had to be acquired through a letter of support from each school principal. When five principals agreed to allow data collection at their schools, a recruitment email was distributed to potential study participants. Participation in the study was voluntary, and participants did not receive compensation. The recruitment tactics focused on Instructional coaches who work at Title I schools. Recruitment emails were sent to participants based on public-facing achievement reports from the Georgia Department of Education and Governor's Office of Student Achievement websites. The study targeted various schools based on the College and Career Readiness Performance Index and GOSA scores. Concurrently, distributing recruitment flyers via social media also assisted with recruitment awareness. Purposive sampling assisted with obtaining study participants from specific vocations in public education (Merriam, 2019). School districts in the Metropolitan area have policies for conducting research. A review of district policy was conducted before contacting district leaders who employ the coaches. The school district required Institutional Review Board approval before allowing individuals to research a school district, requiring time parameters to complete and submit a final report to district leaders. A purposive sample provides an opportunity to select participants that are a good fit for the data analysis goals of the study (Stake, 2013).

3.2 Data Analysis

Diverse participants ensured a variety of perspectives for non-linear responses for transcription and triangulation (Merriam, 2019). According to Yin (2018), collecting data from different subjects reduces assumptions and enhances reflexivity. Throughout data analysis, inductive and deductive reasoning uncovered links between data and findings in the research literature (Ayers et al., 2003). Notes and transcribed interviews were analyzed to ascertain perspectives about implementing instructional reforms and detailed actions in school environments (Woulfin, 2018). Fàbregues et al. (2019) noted the importance of developing themes to unite a phenomenon across cases. The themes are incomplete and inconclusive without cross-case analysis to connect the data. (Ayers et al., 2003).

Data analysis notes from interviews and transcripts from the digital meeting platform aided in data analysis. The Zoom online platform contains a transcription feature to convert audio to text. The Zoom transcription feature transcribed the text in preparation for uploading it into a qualitative software platform in some interview sessions. Notes from interviews with instructional coaches were used to detect details concerning practices, beliefs, goals, and organizational factors relating to their daily work (Woulfin, 2018).

Researching instructional reforms that are a part of daily coaching work provides an opportunity to study coupling policy to practice in school organizations (Woulfin, 2018). For example, are district strategic plan goals, principal requests, or leveraging the instructional infrastructure at the root of spreading instructional reforms to teachers (Woulfin, 2018)? The researcher is the central apparatus for qualitative data analysis to monitor any bias (Merriam, 2019). A coding process was employed for interpretative analysis to construct meaning from the interview, notes, NVivo report, and artifacts. Specifically, unique identifiers were attached to each study participant. District leaders participating in the study were identified as DL1, DL2, and DL3.

Similarly, instructional coach study participants were identified as IC1, IC2, and IC3. Data collected were labeled with the corresponding participants in computer file folders. A master list that attaches coded participants to the district, school, and data is housed on a Microsoft Excel Spreadsheet. Pseudonyms were used in place of the actual names of the school and district to protect the anonymity of participants and organizations. Pseudonyms were used to shield study participants' identities and their employer identity. For example, IC1 was employed at Utopia Elementary School, IC2 was employed at Ideal Middle School, and IC3 worked at Outstanding High School. Each pseudonym was assigned as study participants were chosen to align with the place of employment. Triangulating data from instructional coach interviews, district leader interviews, and document reviews increased the study's credibility (Merriam, 2019; Yin, 2018).

3.3 Results

Coding the perceptions of study subjects and artifacts from individual coaches, principals, and other district leaders

determined themes related to Research Question 1: What perceptions do district leaders and instructional coaches have about instructional coaching program structures?

Collaborative leadership was a consistent theme connected through several codes throughout interviews and district documents mined for the study. Each participant referred to opportunities instructional leaders must have to collaborate. All participants shared perceptions about collective decision-making and strategically connecting the work of instructional coaches to district plans. Teams of instructional leaders also make decisions about instructional reforms, focusing on using a myriad of data to determine actions.

Collaborative leadership was a recurring theme evident across the data collected concerning how districts structure coaching programs. The respondents and documents showed that the ideal structure is for the school leader to collaborate with a team of additional leaders to ensure the coaching program's success. Key pieces included in the collaborative leadership theme are Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) that persist in Communities of Practice (COP), School Improvement Leadership Teams (SILT), teacher grade level teams, and teacher content teams.

Educators interviewed referenced the concept of strategic planning as a mechanism to enhance collaborative work. Collaboration was noted throughout each interview for coupling work district reforms regardless of participant role, level, or content area. Moreover, the intersection of professional learning, data-driven decision-making, strategic planning, and the coaching cycle structures resonate with the collaborative leadership theme. The concept of School Improvement Teams (SILT) was repeated in interviews with study participants in the Oakwood School District regardless of job titles. The SILT is a sub-theme derivative of the collaborative leadership team. Each school leader implied that they relied on SILT to tie the practices of each administrative team member back to institutionalizing instructional reforms. The SILTs generally consisted of the principal, assistant principal, instructional coaches, and other program specialists assigned to a school building. The SILT broadens the reach of the principal through collaboration. The SILT writes strategic plans collaboratively with specific criteria to support efforts to couple daily work with instructional reforms.

The district leadership directed school teams to make a goal in the three focus areas: literacy, math, and social-emotional needs. The intended outcome is for the plan to act as a driver to unite the efforts of faculty and community to provide coherence between the school's mission and goals. The semester plan template provided a table for SILTs to record focus areas, SMART semester goals, and two high-level actions or practices associated with the goal. District leaders in the curriculum department use the school plans to target support to schools. The cluster superintendent monitors the plan and meets with school leadership teams to coach them on the competence of actions and SMART goals within each focus area.

Further, district documents showed that the semester plan SMART goals require leaders to select a measurement for each priority. The concept of using data in multiple forms to drive collaborative work was evident in all fourteen research interviews. The district-level instructional coach participants referenced the site visit reports completed after each school visit. District leadership requires district-level instructional coaches to align the purpose of the visit with one of the Oakwood District strategic initiatives.

The Oakwood District instructional infrastructure includes a balanced assessment system to leverage data-driven decision-making. An artifact review revealed that diagnostic assessments occur at the beginning, middle, and end of the school year to drive individual student achievement and collaborative inquiry among educators. Collective leadership required SILTs to analyze data and understand assessment data to develop coherent plans tied to instruction. The assessment data and high-level actions couple the coach's work to shepherding instructional reforms to teachers.

The Oakwood District ordinarily employed a multiple-tier support model to meet the diverse needs of all students. One principal led the school improvement team and created a semester goal to increase the percentage of K-2 students scoring at the tier I level on the district diagnostic assessment.

The cluster superintendent and principals interviewed reflected on the need for the district strategic plan. District leaders stated that setting metrics requires guesswork when the district has not set targets. Mr. Maple confirmed that he compared his plan with other principals to determine if his school was on the right track without the coherence of a district strategic plan.

The curriculum director used the school semester plan documents for collaborative inquiry with her PLC of curriculum specialists, content directors, and instructional coaches. The district curriculum teams used data protocols and reviewed semester plans to access needs and tailor support to each school. The document review revealed that the *Road to Achievement* plan did not contain metrics for guidance in semester planning.

According to district documents, the program initiatives were developed to qualify for ESSER I - Coronavirus, Aid, Relief & Economic Security (CARES), ESSER II - CRRSA Act (Coronavirus Response & Relief Supplemental Appropriations), ESSER III - ARP (American Rescue Plan) funding. Submitting applications for COVID-19 relief funding and the nature of

the environment during the height of the pandemic delayed the usual strategic planning process that the Oakwood District usually embarks on The Road to Achievement Plan included the Vision and Every Student Literate initiative. The Oakwood District utilized the Federal Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) funds to implement the Road to Achievement initiative. The ESSER funds increased budgets for additional initiatives, including K-2 literary coaches in each elementary school, textbook adoption, leadership development, and program options to differentiate instruction.

Mr. Rock acknowledged, "Our schools do not always think about the impact of the master schedule. A pocket of one or two people may implement it properly, but everybody does not know how to do it collectively." Mr. Rock suggested that the capacity needed to be instilled in leaders to embed professional learning in the master schedule. He explained that teachers, coaches, and all SILT members need capacity building by scheduling job-embedded professional knowledge throughout the leadership pipeline. Principal Pine stated, "The UVA PLE cohort taught us to strive for ninety minutes of professional learning and planning every week.

> Yes, the clusters adapt the coaching framework as it is mandatory in clusters I support
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> in Title I-funded elementary schools. None of the schools that I support have instructional
>
> coaching built in during the school day. The coaching cycle portion of professional learning
>
> takes place after the school day. Ten study participants referenced inconsistencies
>
> concerning coupling instructional work to PLCs. Based on some perspectives, PLC meetings
>
> did not occur regularly. Other participants pinpointed issues with the meeting content.
>
> "PLCs are not done with fidelity at every school. Cluster superintendents hold school
>
> leaders and inspect what they expect during site visits.

4. Discussion

The interview data analysis and district artifacts align with findings in educational leadership literature. Collaborative leadership was an essential theme that helped couple the daily work of instructional coaches with instructional reforms (Burns et al., 2023; Legget et al., 2023; Torres et al., 2023). A critical sub-theme that surfaced was the School Leadership Instructional Team (SILT). According to study participants, the strength or lack of collaboration between the principal, instructional coaches, and other instructional leaders impacted the spread of instructional reforms in classrooms. In this study, instructional coaches acknowledged that collaboration between the instructional coach and other school leaders determines their daily focus on school reforms.

District leaders in this study pinpointed collaboration as a conduit to coupling the work of coaching to institutionalizing instructional reforms. Ideally, district leaders manipulate school master schedules to provide time embedded in the workday to increase strategic collaboration (Killion, 2023). Study participants showed how semester plans improved the coherence around the relationship between student data, semester plans, and daily work. All strategic plans in the Oakwood District had specific, measurable, Achievable, realistic, and time-bound (SMART) goals that drove the actions of instructional coaches as they wrote action plans that linked to overarching goals. Semester plans occur in a short cycle, allowing SILTs to revise plans in increments based on student and staff needs (Meyers et al., 2021). The cluster superintendent interviewed encouraged school teams to identify actions that would drive quick outcomes (Meyers et al., 2021). The goals were tied to metrics that instructional coaches monitored and shifted as teachers moved through phases of implementing an instructional reform (Meyers et al., 2021).

Collaborative leadership requires organizational coherence (Carrington et al., 2022; Meyers et al., 2023). A shared mission and vision were essential components to create systems and structures to give direction to the pursuits of all stakeholders (Carrington et al., 2022; Meyer et al., 2023). Annual strategic planning is a constant practice that emanates from the aspirational goals stated in the school mission and vision statements (Carrington et al., 2022). To heighten the fidelity of planning, some institute the development of 90-day plans or semester plans to ensure that current student and stakeholder data drive decision-making (Carrington et al., 2022; Salloum, 2022).

District leaders in the Oakwood District learned semester planning methods from the University of Virginia Partnership for Leaders in Education. This study confirmed that influential leaders establish leadership leaders of assistant principals, instructional coaches, exceptional education specialists, and behavior specialists to collectively determine the school's direction. The SILT, Professional Learning Communities (PLCs), and Communities of Practice (COPs) leverage collaborative inquiry to develop organizational coherence. Coherence in the organization assists principals and instructional coaches in focusing work on institutionalizing instructional reforms (Carrington et al., 2022; Meyer et al., 2020; Salloum, 2022).

Master scheduling was another vital element for collaborative leadership, as shown by data triangulation. The regulative

coupling through district mandates supported the occurrence of PLCs and semester planning. Research literature describes manipulating the school master schedule to create opportunities for job-embedded professional learning and collaborative inquiry (Admiraal, 2021; Myers, 2020). SILTs are not a pervasive practice for leader coherence throughout the Oakwood district. The coherence of the SILT united the work of the study participants. Principals in the study that focused on the work of the SILT coupled the work of coaches to the semester plan through cultural, regulative, and normative couplings.

In exemplary situations, the principal entrusted the instructional coach to write portions of the semester plan aligned with their content area. Savvy principals also shared insights about leveraging the instructional coach as an expert who counseled them on best practices as a content expert. Congruent to the study problem, administrative tasks and substitute duties shifted the work of instructional coaches from promoting instruction reforms during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond (Woulfin, 2018). However, portions of the instructional infrastructure resonated throughout the data I collected.

District leaders and instructional coaches remarked on the lack of master schedules, time embedded for PLC, and professional learning, but not the coaching cycle. The research literature provides examples of school district leaders' modification of school master schedules to provide 45-minute blocks to provide professional learning (Antinluoma et al., 2021; Powell et al., 2019). The Oakwood District leveraged digital professional learning communities to increase instructional efficacy during the COVID-19 pandemic. Qualitative data showed that district personnel moved to face-to-face meetings when face-to-face instruction resumed.

The findings in this study allowed me to formulate conclusions about obstacles that keep instructional coaches from spreading instructional reforms. Several study participants shared insights that connect to the threat of scope creep (Killion, 2023; Roy et al., 2020; VanGronigen et al., 2023; Dawer et al., 2024). I concluded that the messiness of organizational culture and the additional breadth of responsibilities incurred by the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in scope creep (Killion, 2023; Roy et al., 2020; VanGronigen et al., 2023). Open communication between stakeholders realized that through collaborative leadership, semester planning, and concentric professional learning were promising structures illuminated in this study. Instructional coaches consistently expressed a need to have job-embedded time for individualized coaching cycles for teachers.

Data collected shows instructional coaches were left to their own devices when incorporating coaching cycles and professional development tailored to the entire staff. The instructional coaching cycle benefits teaching efficacy (Knight et al., 2023; Woulfin et al., 2023). I recommend principals confer with coaches and collaboratively implement consistent teacher coaching cycles. Aligning instructional coaching cycles with semester plan goals will reduce scope creep (VanGronigen et al., 2023). Focusing on coaching cycles and leveraging special coaching planning publications will help them to systematize instructional reforms (Killion, 2023; Knight et al., 2023).

The study findings align with research literature concerning cultural cognitive, normative, and regulative coupling influence daily instructional coaching work (Fullan, 2023; Hallinger et al., 2022; Woulfin, 2018). The connectedness of collaborative leadership, district planning, instructional infrastructure, and professional learning structures profoundly affected organizational coupling (Fullan, 2023; Lui et al., 2021; Killion et al., 2022). District leaders must understand how to leverage district systems to ensure that coaches couple daily work with spreading instructional reforms (Hitt et al., 2019; Woulfin & Gabriel, 2020; Woulfin, 2018). When instructional coaches focus on reforming instruction, teacher efficacy increases (Boufford, 2023; Killion et al., 2022; Knight et al., 2023). The findings in this study contribute to research linking instructional coaching with the collaborative nature of instructional leadership (Boufford, 2023; Killion et al., 2022; Knight et al., 2023). The insights in this study also equate scope creep as an organizational concept that has meaningful implications for instructional coaching work (Ajmal et al., 2023).

The overarching implication of this study is that the school principal can streamline district strategic plans and build coherent structures for instructional coaching (Dawer et al., 2024; Killion et al., 2022; Knight et al., 2023). Instructional leaders are essential for an effective coaching program (Reid, 2019; Woulfin et al., 2019). The implications of this study support the evidence from current research and replication (Dawer et al., 2024; Killion et al., 2022; Knight et al., 2023). Replicating this study in different schools and school districts will provide opportunities for more discourse concerning instructional coaching work.

Competing interests

Not applicable.

Informed consent

Obtained.

Ethics approval

The Publication Ethics Committee of the Redfame Publishing.

The journal's policies adhere to the Core Practices established by the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE).

Provenance and peer review

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Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

Data sharing statement

No additional data are available.

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