

Our Continuing Instructional Coaching Journey: An Action Research Project

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Abstract: Instructional coaches collaborate with teachers to help them choose and implement research-based interventions that help students learn. This action research project, conducted through a professional development school (PDS) partnership with a local university, used a survey to examine the impact of two instructional coaches on the elementary educators they served. In addition to identifying actions such as in-person promotions and one-on-one conversations that had the most impact, results of the study revealed a need to clarify the instructional coaches' roles and services offered as well as to make changes to the coaching cycle.

KEYWORDS: *instructional coaches, school-university partnerships, professional development, action research*

NAPDS NINE ESSENTIALS ADDRESSED:

3. Ongoing and reciprocal professional development for all participants guided by need.
4. A shared commitment to innovative and reflective practice by all participants.

Throughout our first year as instructional coaches, we (Cynthia and Leslie, the first and second authors of this article) stopped many times to reflect on our actions. With instructional coaches being a new position in our district, educators needed to know who we were and what services we provided in order to access those services. Our job as instructional coaches was to meet the needs of educators in our district, provide them with research-based instructional practices and resources, and help close the district's achievement gap. We used many avenues to share our job description but knew there was room for growth. As we reflected, we realized that to make improvements we needed feedback from educators in our district to determine what was working for them. So, we worked with a professor from the local university, Suzanne (third author), to clarify an action research question, tools, and methods. Monthly, we met with Suzanne to share progress and receive guidance as we carried out our research. It was our goal, through this action research project, to improve our capacity as instructional coaches based on feedback from the educators we serve.

Background and Rationale

Located in the college town of Manhattan, Kansas, Manhattan-Ogden Public Schools has approximately 6,500 students with about 40% classified as economically disadvantaged. The district includes two early learning centers, nine elementary schools, two middle schools, and one high school. The schools vary in size, with the smallest housing approximately 170 students and

the largest approximately 580. The schools also vary in socioeconomic status. Approximately 5% of our students are homeless. Some of our schools have low free and reduced lunch rates while others have up to 75% of their students receiving free and reduced lunch. Our smallest school has the highest percentage of students receiving free and reduced lunch.

At the time of our action research project, our school district had recently adopted a new literacy curriculum called *Wonders* (by McGraw-Hill) and was also implementing Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS) to support all children in attaining grade-level reading proficiency. To assist educators in their implementation of both programs, a model of instructional coaching was adopted by the school district. As instructional coaches, we served the district's nine elementary schools, containing students from kindergarten through grade six. Our positions were funded through a Konza Literacy Network of Kansas (K-LINK) grant awarded to our district. The literacy grant was focused on the educational success of three target populations: students with English as a second language, students with exceptionalities, and students at risk of educational failure due to low socioeconomic status.

As two of the district's newly hired instructional coaches, we were constantly developing our knowledge and leadership skills to effectively provide relevant professional development to teachers. Through professional reading, attending conferences, and viewing webinars, we were able to grow our knowledge on topics such as dyslexia, best practices in reading instruction, and trauma-informed teaching. We regularly presented on a variety of educational topics during district professional development days, building-led professional development, and staff meetings; we worked with teachers to improve instructional practices through professional development and feedback following non-evaluative observations of lessons; and we met with teachers one-on-one in grade-level teams to set and achieve self-selected goals. The idea was that as teachers became more effective instructors, students would receive a higher quality of education, increasing their chances of academic success.

Soon, we grew interested in understanding what actions taken by the instructional coaches had the greatest impact. Since this was a new position to our district, we wanted to understand what effect our actions were having on teachers and students so that we could continue what we were doing or adjust our approach accordingly. We also wanted to ensure that we were as effective as possible so that our positions would continue to be funded after the grant ended in three years and we could continue doing work that we view as important and vital to the success and improvement of the schools in our district.

Manhattan-Ogden Public Schools has had a partnership with Kansas State University for over 35 years. This partnership is beneficial to both institutions through sharing of personnel and professional development to support the development of proficient educators. As part of the K-LINK grant, our district chose to encourage educators to take part in action research projects facilitated by KSU professor Suzanne Porath. We decided to work together on an action research project to identify which practices implemented during our first year of instructional coaching were effective and which were not.

The action research group met monthly to work through the action research cycle: 1) identify a question, 2) develop a plan, 3) gather and analyze the data, 4) reflect and take action, and 5) share results (Dana & Yendol-Hoppey, 2014). Although we had both completed action research projects previously, we greatly appreciated Suzanne's feedback and assistance in narrowing our research question, developing our survey, disaggregating our data, and at the

conclusion of the study, determining next steps for year two. Throughout this process we sought to determine the strengths of what we were doing, and weaknesses and problems in our implementation of instructional coaching.

Comparison of the Research Literature and the District's Instructional Coaching Practices

Definition of Instructional Coaching

Knight (2018) defined instructional coaches as professionals who collaborate with teachers to help them choose and implement researched-based interventions to help students learn more effectively. Instructional coaches are knowledgeable about a large number of instructional practices. Instructional coaches were typically teachers who held a master's degree in a specialized field under the umbrella of education. Coaches typically have five or more years of successful classroom experience prior to becoming instructional coaches (Symonds, 2003). In our district, instructional coaches are often selected from within the district because they have already formed relationships with many members of the staff and have shown leadership capability. To stay on the cutting edge of research and best practices in the classroom, instructional coaches in our district receive training and attended conferences regularly.

How Instructional Coaches are Being Used

There are several reasons school districts might employ instructional coaches. For example, in Mangin's (2009) study, students' test scores were an important contributing factor to the district's implementation of instructional coaches. Student scores on the SAT-9, Gates MacGinitie, district assessments, and student grades showed a significant achievement gap between native English speakers and English language learners. The districts studied stated that they believed teachers were more willing to consider new initiatives such as instructional coaches because of the low achievement of student subgroups (Mangin, 2009).

Instructional coaches were brought to our school district for similar reasons. One of the goals written into the K-LINK grant under which we were hired stated that a certain percentage of our student population should score at or above grade level on state and district assessments since student scores are an area of concern to district leaders and educators.

In Symonds' study (2003), three districts in California used coaches as a source of professional development at the building or district level and through coaching in classrooms. Several districts mentioned that hiring an outside curriculum consultant was an ineffective form of professional development because the consultants were unable to support the vast number of educators who needed assistance. Mentors were also found to be minimally effective in creating change in classrooms because, due to their schedules and responsibilities in their own classrooms, they were unable to spend enough time helping struggling and new teachers.

DeMonte's (2013) research also supported the idea that using instructional coaches as a professional development support increases the likelihood that teachers use the tools presented. Because instructional coaches were able to work with teachers on a regular basis rather than in a one-time professional development setting, teachers were more likely to sustain use of best practices in the classroom, which impacted student achievement. Similarly, instructional literacy

coaches in Symonds' (2003) study were used to support teacher instruction, especially new or struggling teachers, and promote research-based instructional strategies and routines.

Our district recommended that we operate in similar ways. During year one implementation, our primary focus was on supporting new or struggling teachers with instructional practices, both during coaching cycles and during professional development. These professional development sessions provided teachers with research-based instructional strategies and routines, mostly focused around literacy. This model of implementation was supported by Symond's study.

Forms of Instructional Coaching

Several approaches to coaching might be used depending on the needs of the teacher. Knight (2018) identified three main approaches to coaching: dialogical, facilitative, and directive. Dialogical coaching, which balances advocacy with inquiry, is considered best practice. Within the dialogical approach, the impact cycle consists of three main parts: 1) educators identify a self-selected goal, 2) the instructional coach and the teacher work together to identify a strategy to accomplish the goal, and 3) the instructional coach and the teacher check in frequently to monitor progress on the goal (Knight, 2018). The impact cycle was the model for instructional coaching that our district selected.

Outcomes of Instructional Coaching

Instructional coaches impact teaching and learning in a variety of ways. According to Symonds (2003), instructional coaches help grow collaborative teacher culture, help teachers become more open to change, increase focus on equity, improve communication between teachers and district leaders, and increase leadership capacity. Symonds' study also showed that literacy coaches were an effective source of professional development for teachers through one-on-one coaching and during professional development sessions as they shared scientifically-based practices and resources. These practices were more likely to be implemented correctly when teachers worked closely with a literacy coach. Practices that are implemented correctly are more likely to have a positive impact on student test scores.

Methods

The purpose of the study was to determine educator perceptions of instructional coaching in our district to improve our capacity as instructional coaches.

Data Collection

During the 2018-2019 school year, near the end of our first year as instructional coaches, we sent out a survey to all nine elementary schools in the district. The survey was anonymous to maintain the relationships we had built with educators during year one of implementation. The survey had 13 questions. The four categories of questions were services we offer, who we are and when we were in each building, experience with instructional coaches, and recommendations on how we could improve in year two. All four categories contained one or more forced answer

questions, including multiple choice and Likert-style questions. Educators were asked to answer some open-ended questions about their experiences with instructional coaches and make recommendations on how we could improve in the future.

The survey was sent via district email. Respondents were given notice of informed assent at the beginning of the survey, stating that the risks of the survey were low, participation was voluntary, and all answers were confidential. Of the 324 educators in the nine elementary schools, 123 responded, for a return rate of 40%. The respondents were a blend of classroom teachers, specialist teachers, Title 1 reading teachers, English as a second language teachers, special education teachers, administrators, and paraeducators, with the majority of respondents being classroom teachers.

Data Analysis

To analyze the forced answer questions, we disaggregated the data based on category, answer type (positive or negative), and identified misconceptions. To analyze the open-ended questions, we read through the teachers' responses and categorized them by positive and negative association with instructional coaching. We highlighted keywords to code the responses and determine patterns and commonalities. Once we started highlighting, outliers and patterns became clearer.

Results and Discussion

Overall, both the forced answer and the open-ended responses showed that our impact on educators in our district during year one implementation was positive, but we still have some work to do in year two.

Forced Answer Responses

Who can instructional coaches work with? Throughout the year, we had explained to educators the populations instructional coaches serve in the district. We wanted to know whether this message had been clearly communicated. Which of the following people can instructional coaches work with? was a forced entry question where respondents were asked to select all answers that apply. As instructional coaches, we can work with classroom teachers, special education teachers, paraeducators, and specialist teachers; but not with parents. One hundred percent of our respondents correctly identified that we work with classroom teachers while only 56% stated they thought we could work with paraeducators. Surprisingly, 26% of respondents incorrectly identified parents as a population instructional coaches serve. We also noted that 87% of respondents thought we were able to work with specialist teachers, including PE, music, art, and STEM.

When are instructional coaches available? We also wanted to determine our impact on educators' knowledge of our presence in their buildings. We asked, do you know who your instructional coach is and when she is in your building? We were pleased to discover that 91% of educators surveyed knew who we were, while 9% claimed they did not. Of those 91%, only 20% responded that they did not know what day we were scheduled in their buildings. One hundred percent of participants responded that they could contact the instructional coach assigned to their

building via email. Fewer responded that they could contact us through text or phone call, both of which are contact options for instructional coaches in our district. While we are glad all respondents knew how to contact us, the survey responses conveyed that there is still some work to be done surrounding relationship building with educators in our district.

Would you consider using an instructional coach? It was important for us to note what approximate percentage of educators in our district had accessed services from an instructional coach through coaching cycles and professional development. The data revealed that 51% of respondents used an instructional coach in year one implementation and 49% had not. We were glad to see that over half of respondents had accessed an instructional coach. Moreover, responses to the question, would you consider using an instructional coach in the future? were favorable, with 83% of respondents stating yes, they would.

Why haven't you used an instructional coach? We then asked respondents who had not yet accessed an instructional coach, why they had not. Fourteen percent of respondents who had not accessed an instructional coach stated they didn't feel they needed one. An additional 9% of respondents stated they didn't have enough time to meet with an instructional coach, and another 9% stated they did not understand the services offered by instructional coaches. The remaining 18% of respondents selected 'other' and typed their responses, which varied from forgetting we were a resource to feeling overwhelmed at the potential workload of working with an instructional coach.

Open-ended Responses

Confirmation of effective instructional coaching services. The first open-ended question of our survey asked those surveyed in what capacity, if any, had they worked with an instructional coach. Most respondents stated that they had collaborated with, been observed by, or worked on best practices with an instructional coach. Specific teaching areas were mentioned quite frequently, especially small group reading instruction and classroom management. One educator stated, "My instructional coach has taken videos of my teaching. She has given feedback and suggested instructional strategies that would improve my teaching. She has also come in to observe and give advice." Another respondent said:

She has helped me grow as a teacher in so many ways. She has given me lots of ideas for my literacy time. I look forward to having her observe me in the future so we can brainstorm even more ideas.

Others stated that we had provided materials and resources. A few misconceptions were listed, including a response that one of us took an MTSS group for math each day. Overall, experiences were positive and fit into the scope of what we provide.

In-person promotional presentations. In year one implementation of instructional coaching, we vigilantly sent out information to educators and administrators about what instructional coaches offer. At the beginning of the school year, we emailed a PowToon video and our instructional coaching menu to all employees in the district. Throughout the year, we frequently posted opportunities and information about instructional coaching on our K-LINK social media sites and presented at various professional development and faculty meetings.

To determine the impact of these actions, we asked respondents what promotions they remembered seeing. Twenty percent of respondents said they had seen our PowToon video, 47%

had seen the coaching menu, 60% had heard about coaching through a district presentation, 70% learned about coaching during a faculty meeting presentation, and 55% said they followed or had viewed K-LINK social media. Based on this data, we were able to determine that in-person presentations had the biggest impact on educators in our district.

Overall positive experiences. We wanted to know more about how those who had worked with instructional coaches felt about their interactions with us. We used a scaled survey question, if you have used an instructional coach, how has your experience been? Of those who have worked with an instructional coach, 66% responded that their experience was excellent, 28% said they had a good experience, 5% said they had an okay experience, and 2% (one respondent) said she did not have a good experience working with an instructional coach.

When asked to elaborate, those with positive experiences shared that we were reliable and helpful, that we supported them, and that we were knowledgeable. For example, one educator stated, “I have loved working with my instructional coach. She has given me strategies that work, and I have seen improvement in myself as an educator because of my interactions with her.” The one negative response described that one of us was rude and unwilling to help. Overall, it seems we had positive interactions with educators throughout the district with one outlier. This was an area where we were intentionally striving for improvement, but we were generally happy with the results after year one.

Misconceptions about instructional coaching. The types of interactions educators have had with instructional coaches helped us evaluate the effectiveness of our instructional coaching program. Of those who had interacted with an instructional coach, 45% had collaborated with a coach, 27% had resources provided to them by a coach, 66% had a conversation with an instructional coach, 31% had a consultation with a coach either in person or via email, and 31% had not interacted with an instructional coach. We were not satisfied that 31% of educators in our district had not interacted with us in some way during year one. If we do not reach as many educators as possible, we cannot effectively help create change for students. The more educators we touch, the more students we touch.

Almost all educators surveyed understood three services instructional coaches in the district provide: instructional strategies, collaboration, and providing resources. About 50% knew that we could video record lessons and set professional goals. This was about the same percentage as those who have used an instructional coach during the year. Likely the respondents who correctly identified setting professional goals and video recording lessons were also those who had worked with us during the year. However, a few misconceptions arose. Four respondents said they thought we supervised students when the teacher was absent, and twelve respondents said they believed we evaluated teacher performance. Neither of these statements is accurate. While most educators understood some of the services we offer, it was clear that there was still work to be done in this area.

Ideas for improvement in year two. To determine how we could improve in year two, we also asked respondents to suggest services we could offer that we weren’t already offering. Answers varied greatly. It was evident that some respondents did not understand our positions, suggesting we offer services outside our responsibilities as instructional coaches. For example, one educator suggested that we take an MTSS group for reading and create a home-to-school engagement piece. One respondent suggested that our salaries could be spent to hire more classroom teachers to solve the issue of overcrowding. Several suggestions included services we

were already offering. Additionally, more than one educator suggested we make more of an effort to introduce ourselves to people in the district. We appreciated the candor the educators showed and began making plans right away to implement as many of their suggestions as possible during year two of implementation.

Plans for Year Two

As we move into year two, we are already making plans for improvement based on the survey results. The survey data suggest that our in-person presentations and one-on-one conversations had the biggest impact on educators. This model of providing teacher professional development is supported by research from DeMonte (2013) and Symonds (2003). Since our goal is increasing student achievement gains, we will continue our current practices of presenting professional development and following up with teachers during coaching cycles. We also have come up with a plan to make our identities and presence known throughout the district by sending out an *All About Me* letter to our respective schools that includes a photo of each of us. Our hope is that this letter will provide some personal information about each of us and help educators recognize who we are when we are in their buildings.

Increasing our initial case load will be another change in year two. To start this school year, we will be checking in with the teachers we worked with during year one as well as with new-to-the-district and first year teachers to determine what these educators would like to work on during the new school year. This will significantly increase our caseload at the beginning of the year. Our hope is to stay as busy as we can so that we can help implement change and professional growth for both veteran and new teachers. We know that the more we can help educators grow professionally, the greater the likelihood they will have a positive impact on their students.

Limitations

The results of our action research project are specific to our school district. The ideas and insights reported may or may not be applicable to other settings.

Conclusion

This action research project has allowed us to better understand the experiences the elementary educators in our district have had with us as instructional coaches. We found that our in-person efforts made the most impact on teachers. We were also pleasantly surprised to find that most educators knew who we were and that, in general, those we had worked with had favorable remarks. Even the negative responses allowed us to identify ways in which we could change and grow in year two. Our goal throughout this continuing instructional coaching journey is to ensure we are making a positive impact on teachers as they continue to grow professionally. If we can help our teachers grow, they can help our students grow!

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