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## The Influence Of Instructional Coaches On Special Educators' Skills And Effectiveness

Julie Olsen  
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The Influence of Instructional Coaches on Special Educators' Skills and Effectiveness

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A DISSERTATION

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of the College of Graduate and Professional Studies  
at the University of New England

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## The Influence of Instructional Coaches on Special Educators' Skills and Effectiveness

### **Abstract**

Instructional coaching has been a practice in public schools since the early 1990's and began in the area of reading coaching. While coaching has expanded nationally to include other content areas over the years, there is little information regarding the use of Instructional Coaches who are experts in the field of special education. This qualitative study, grounded in Vygotsky's (1934) sociocultural theory of human learning and Jim Knight's (2007) partnership theory, examines the ways in which Instructional Coaches influence special educators' skills/effectiveness and the experiences special educators have with coaching models in a K-8 public school district.

Thirteen special educators participated in focus groups and individual one-to-one interviews to gather data. Results indicate that Instructional Coaches increase the amount of time special educators are able to work directly with students, increase the time they are able to plan and prepare lessons, and increase collaboration amongst many stakeholders. Instructional Coaches also assist special educators with legally sensitive case management responsibilities, allowing participants to feel less distracted by case management duties. Staff did not feel Instructional Coaches modeled lessons on various teaching techniques but rather assisted them with the nuanced work of special education and collaboration/consultation with team members. All thirteen staff had negative feelings about returning to work as a special educator in a setting where an Instructional Coach is not present. Positive relationship qualities emerged as critical for an Instructional Coach to demonstrate in order that an effective working partnership evolve between the coach and the person being coached.

University of New England

Doctor of Education  
Educational Leadership

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## **CHAPTER ONE**

### **INTRODUCTION**

Instructional coaching is classroom-based professional development that focuses on building the capacity of teachers to deliver research-based instruction. Research by Knight (2009, 2012, 2014, & 2016), Lipton (2013), Sargent (2013), Sweeny (2011), and Steiner and Kowal (2007), reveals that allowing teachers to work with coaches to reflect, implement, and apply professional learning impacts teachers' retention of teaching strategies. An Instructional Coach is a paid professional teaching staff member who is hired to support teachers in a building and/or school district. The use of Instructional Coaching is a fairly new phenomenon in K-12 public education and is a powerful professional development strategy for supporting teachers' instructional efforts to embed research-based instruction into their daily practices. According to Denton and Hasbrouck (2009), "coaching is quickly becoming a popular model in schools for providing job-embedded, individualized, and sustained professional development to teachers" (Denton & Hasbrouck, 2009, p. 151).

Instructional coaching began in public schools on a limited basis in the late 1980s and early 1990s with a focus specific to reading instruction (Denton & Hasbrouck, 2009). Legislation such as the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) of 2000 and No Child Left Behind Act of 2002 included funding support for teachers growing and expanding their teaching skill set. Again, these acts stressed the needs of teacher performance related to teaching students reading, yet they paved the way for the desirability of having Instructional Coaches in public K-12 schools nationally. Expanding the roles of coaches to other content areas has also grown over the years. Knight (2009) believes this growing interest in coaching is

likely “fueled by educators’ recognition that traditional one-shot approaches to professional development--where teachers hear about practices but do not receive follow-up support--are ineffective at improving teaching practices” (p. 18).

In most districts, directors of special education are responsible for overseeing programming for students with special needs who have Individual Education Plans (IEPs) and Section 504 accommodation plans. One aspect of this role includes mandating that students with disabilities are provided a Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) as well as providing ongoing training and improved professional development to staff working with these students. Using Instructional Coaches to provide onsite, ongoing, student-specific professional development to Special Educators is a valuable resource to increase the capacity of teachers to meet individual student needs. “Coaching is becoming a central strategy in district and school efforts to build teacher capacity to interpret and respond to student learning data” (Huguet, Marsh, & Farrell, 2014, p. 1).

There are many coaching models used in schools. Included in these models are: peer coaching; cognitive coaching; literacy coaching; and instructional coaching (Houston, 2015). While each coaching model has a purpose and role in schools and will be clearly defined in this study, the focus of this study will be on instructional coaching. Instructional coaching focuses on the partnership between coach and teacher to incorporate practices that are research-based in the area of classroom instruction (Cornett & Knight, 2008).

In many cases, districts are spending substantial district resources to send staff to conferences, to have them attend webinars, or to bring outside experts to the districts to engage in one-day single-shot professional development experiences. While staff can benefit from these professional development experiences, using an on-site Instructional Coach who understands the

district vision and goals, knows the students being served, and is a member of the school community, can be a more powerful way to engage teachers in learning, reflecting, and growing in their trade. Working through the budget process to implement Instructional Coaches who focus on Special Education is a cost effective solution to regular professional development that meets the needs of students, teachers, and administrators, and is a worthy solution for many stakeholders. While the focus of this study is not budgetary, expenses should and are always a consideration in schools. As educators' methods improve, student performance is likely to improve as well. As student performance improves, the district test scores improve, which increases community support.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Special Educators face a diverse population of learners to case manage and instruct each year. Students' unique profiles and Individual Education Plans (IEPs) drive the need for specialized instructional practices, yet Special Educators do not always have the appropriate training, skills, and teaching techniques to meet each student's unique learning needs. Yearly, new students are added to the caseload and teaching responsibility of Special Educators. According to the Chapter 101, Special Education Regulations, Resource Room Special Educators can serve up to 35 students on their caseload each year. If a Special Educator works with a student who is self-contained in the Special Education setting, the teacher can case manage up to 11 in grades K-5, 13 in grades 6-8, and 15 in grades 9-12 ("State Regulations," 2013). On average, Special Educators work in groups of 3-5 students at any give time during the course of a day. In comparison, Regular Educators have class sizes of 18-22 students.

In order to require an IEP, each student has undergone specific educational testing and information is gathered regarding what skills and areas of need a child has in relation to their

learning. No two learners are the same and, therefore, special educators need to have a substantial breadth of teaching strategies, tools, and techniques on hand to meet the needs of the students they are charged with educating. Special education is highly regulated and tends to be one of the most litigious departments in public schools. This situation speaks to the need and urgency of targeting special educators' professional development that is meaningful and applicable to their daily work ("State Regulations," 2013). Literature shows that allowing teachers to work with coaches and reflect on new professional learning, implement this new learning, and apply it to their daily practices, impacts teachers' retention of teaching methods and new skills. Instructional Coaches provide on-site, ongoing professional development, support, feedback, and modeling of instructional practices for teachers (Knight, 2009).

Coaches are on-site experts in a variety of curricula areas; they are able to facilitate learning in a way that ties to a teacher's actual work. In order for instructional change to occur and student achievement to increase, many argue that Instructional Coaches are necessary. Thomas et.al (2015) insist that "without instructional coaching, all too often, no significant change occurs in teacher practices" (Thomas, Bell, Spelman, & Briody, 2015, p. 1). Coaches model lessons and model receiving and providing feedback with teachers. This modeling provides teachers in-house opportunities to learn in a setting that is meaningful to them. Casey (2011) states, "successful coaches, therefore, know the importance of modeling lessons to help teachers develop a vision of effective instruction" (p. 24). Teachers need to be able to watch new instruction in practice before they can make the practices their own.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this qualitative case study is to better understand how the partnership between Instructional Coaches and special educators influences the daily roles and

responsibilities of special educators in grades Kindergarten through eighth grade in a New England public school district. Participants of the study were currently employed in a public school, working with students who have Individual Education Plans (IEPs) and in a setting where they are exposed to ongoing coaching from an Instructional Coach. This Instructional Coach specializes in working with students with special needs and is knowledgeable in regard to the state and federal Special Education regulations.

### **Research Question(s)**

Guiding this research is the overarching question: In what ways do Instructional Coaches influence special educators' skills/effectiveness? Related research questions included:

What are special educators' experiences with coaching models used in public schools? A K-12 public school in New England, which was used for this study, uses a comprehensive Instructional Coaching model. In this model, coaches who specialize in special education procedures, instructional methods, data collections, and the regulations, partner with special education teachers.

How has special educators' collaboration with an Instructional Coach influence the way these educators prioritized their job responsibilities?

### **Conceptual Framework**

The framework that most appropriately serves as a lens to explore Instructional Coaches in the public school setting is Vygotsky's (1934) sociocultural theory of human learning. The theme of this framework is that social interaction plays a fundamental role in the development of cognition. Vygotsky believed that "frameworks of thought were social in origin and internalized through cultural practice" (Marginson & Anh Dang, 2016, p. 3). Vygotsky theorized that everything is learned in two levels, the first level through interactions with others

and second through an individual level. He asserted that people learn by connecting socially with others and then they integrate this information on an individual level. He applies this theory to voluntary attention, logical memory, and the formation of concepts. All other higher functions begin as actual relationships between individuals. For example, children's early speech is designed to make contact with others and join social conversations. Vygotsky's fundamental principle claims "that psychological functions such as perception and memory appear first as elementary functions and then develop into higher functions through assimilation into the sociocultural practices that occur when people live and work together" (Marginson & Anh Dang, 2016, p. 309). Vygotsky's theory is helpful in examining the reciprocal relationship between a special educators' growth and the organizational support needed for ongoing professional development.

Instructional Coaches require evolving professional development to learn the skills they need to be successful in their role. Additionally, the instructional skills they provide to teachers through coaching need to be learned and demonstrated by the person being coached.

Researchers, grounding their work in Vygotsky's theory, attest that the sociocultural framework "describes coaches' learning as it occurs through participation in professional development activities and how that learning sets the conditions for the learning of others" (Gallucci, Van Lare, Yoon, & Boatright, 2010, p. 925). These authors found that in order to obtain organizational support for professional development it is important to draw attention to the functional aspect of the learning process. This theory describes the relationship between individual and collective dimensions of a sociocultural process allowing individuals and collective actions to interact across an organizational setting, which in turn allows teachers to be supported in their learning (Gallucci et al., 2010). Additionally, the sociocultural theory, which

frames learning as a social process, supports the concept that it is through dialog with others who have more knowledge that teachers can obtain the assistance they need to advance student learning. Learning is an active process involving the student, the teacher, and the environment (Teemant, Wink, & Tyra, 2011). Social interaction as a key strategy in building teacher practices in educators is exemplified through Instructional Coaches engaging in dialog and modeling instructional practices with special educators.

Jim Knight (2007), a researcher whose work is grounded in Vygotsky's theory, is a key contributor in the field of instructional coaching. Knight bases his framework of partnership on the principles of Vygotsky's sociocultural theory. Knight attests that the "partnership approach" is the theoretical framework for the Instructional Coaching model and is related to "knowledge transfer, knowledge development and human interaction" (Cornett & Knight, 2008, p. 205). Partnership focuses on the relationship between the coach and the teacher, providing a framework to support teachers, coaches, and ultimately students. This framework considers and addresses: the relationship; school culture; organizational change; data collection; active listening amongst partners; modeling; various coaching models; and the daily work of coaches, which are all important components of the available coaching practices. Knight's framework of partnerships between coaches and teachers is grounded in each of his seven principles: "equity, choice, voice, dialogue, reflection, praxis, and reciprocity" (Mudzimiri et al., 2014, p. 5). Without an effective partnership, powerful coaching that impacts teachers' skills will not transpire. Researchers suggest that instructional coaching leads to significant teacher change and is a valuable professional development strategy used for increasing skill transfer (Teemant et al., 2011). The interactive, social partnership between teacher and coach elicits teacher change and retention of newly learned teaching strategies.

### **Assumptions, Limitations, Scope**

Considering the purpose of this study, it is assumed that participants will engage in honest, professional, and critically thoughtful dialog regarding their teaching practices, profiles and population of students, student data, and their experiences working with an Instructional Coach. The scope of this study is limited to a small rural public school in New England and limited to grades Kindergarten through eighth grade. The grade span focuses on elementary and middle school to provide a manageable size for in-depth research. Given this scope, limitations are the sample size of 13 participants. This small number limits the ability to generalize the findings of this study to all other public schools. While this limitation exists, the participant population of special educators is reflective of a larger demographic of educators, therefore the outcomes and findings of the study may be applicable outside of the school being researched.

As the Director of Instructional Support who is responsible for overseeing programming for students with special needs, vigilance for bias will be necessary. Working in the role of director, colleague, and researcher will require clear and comprehensive data collection techniques as well as open communication and fact checking with participants to maintain the validity of the results.

### **Rationale and Significance**

The significance of this study is unique in that the research and findings fill a gap in the current research available to educators. While the research on the impact of Instructional Coaches on teaching practices and student achievement has increased in the last 15-20 years, there is limited research on the impact Instructional Coaches have on specific teaching disciplines. The use of Instructional Coaches in the content area of reading has been studied most in depth since federal legislation and funding supported reading coaches as the first coaching

positions in schools. Further research is needed on the impact Instructional Coaches have on non-general education teachers. Specifically, research is needed on the effectiveness of utilizing Instructional Coaches to increase the teaching capacity and skills of special education teachers. Special education teachers who are participants in this study will contribute to the field's knowledge base about the ways they interact with Instructional Coaches on behalf of special education students. The findings will provide insight into an increase in their effectiveness in meeting job roles and responsibilities.

### **Definition of Terms**

For the purpose of this study, the following terms are defined.

*Special Educator:* is defined as a person who holds a current 282 (K-8 special education) teaching certification from the state Department of Education and who is currently employed in a New England public school as a special education teacher (State Department of Education, 2015).

*Instructional Coach:* is defined as a person who holds a current 079 (Consultant), 035 (Assistant Education Director) and / or 030 (Special Education Director) teaching certification from the State Department of Education, who is an expert on state and federal special education laws, and who is currently employed in a coaching role in a New England public school. A coach is someone whose main professional responsibility is to bring evidence-based practices into classrooms by working with educators.

*FAPE:* stands for Free Appropriate Public Education that is provided to each and every student enrolled in public schools across the nation.

*Coaching:* occurs when a person “enrolls, identifies, explains, models, observes, explores, supports, and reflects” with a colleague regarding their teaching practices and responsibilities (Knight, 2007, p. 197).

*Teaching Practices:* techniques and methods used for instruction of school-age children to be implemented by special educators to achieve the desired learning outcomes by students.

*Special Education Student:* a student who meets the eligible requirements outlined in the state Special Education regulations as a student with one of thirteen different disability categories and is currently accessing specially-designed instruction in a special education setting by a special educator for a portion of their school day ("State Regulations," 2013). The student would have a current Individual Education Plan (IEP).

*Public School:* a New England School Administrative Unit that is recognized by the Department of Education, receives public funds, and adheres to all state education statutes.

### **Conclusion**

Instructional coaching is a valuable tool for providing meaningful on-site professional development to staff working in public schools. Special educators work with individual, unique learners and therefore need regular professional development that is tied directly to the work they are doing with students daily. Coaching from a highly qualified, specialized personnel in the district will have a positive impact on staff's retaining new professional learning and applying this learning in their teaching. Coaching in schools is a fairly new practice; therefore there is limited research on the effectiveness. However, available research supports instructional coaching as an effective professional development technique. This study will contribute

additional knowledge which may be applicable in other special education teaching environments.

The following chapter, the literature review, will outline the existing research that explores the various roles of Instructional Coaches in public schools as well as the support they provide teachers. In Chapter Three the researcher will discuss the methodology used in the study and explain how data was collected for a qualitative review and analyzation. Chapter Four contains a review of the current roles and responsibilities of Instructional Coaches that were found to be the most effective in impacting the teaching strategies of special educators. Finally, Chapter Five will present findings in the analyzed data and make recommendations to further research on instructional coaching.

## CHAPTER 2

### LITERATURE REVIEW

Literature supports the concept that there are various coaching models commonly used in public education systems. The model of coaching presented in this study focuses on targeted professional development. Most coaching models include: consultation; collaboration; modeling; videotaping; active listening; and self-reflection. Creative ways of coaching, including using assorted technological resources, have begun to open new doors for Instructional Coaches to meet their multiple job responsibilities. Research by Houston (2015), Huguet, Marsh & Farrell (2014), Knight (2009, 2012, 2014, & 2016), d Sweeney (2011), and Wellman & Lipton (2013) supports how critical it is for Instructional Coaches to build relationships with those teachers they are mentoring in order to have a greater impact on teachers' professional development.

This integrative literature review addresses the following topics:

- What is the evolution of Instructional Coaches in K-12 public schools?
- What are common coaching models used in public schools?
- What are effective instructional coaching techniques?
- What is the impact of Instructional Coaches on school culture?
- What are the budgetary implications of Instructional Coaches?
- What is the impact of Instructional Coaches on the public education?
- What is the impact of Instructional Coaches on addressing the improvement in teacher skills/effectiveness?
- What are next research steps that are needed to examine Instructional Coaches in public schools?

### **Evolution of Coaching In Schools**

Historical research shows limited use of instructional coaching in the 1980s and early 1990s, with an increase of coaches, specific to supporting reading, happening in the late 1990s (Denton & Hasbrouck, 2009). The Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) of 2000 stressed the need for high quality reading teachers and coaches. Nationally, federal funds were provided for these Coaching positions (Denton & Hasbrouck, 2009). Historically the Reading Excellence Act (REA) provided funding for instructional reading coaches to help impoverished schools in the United States. The No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2002, which had similar goals to the Reading First Initiative, also included funds to support teachers in strengthening their existing skills and gaining new instructional skills in the areas of reading. This federal legislation prioritized the need for Instructional Coaches in the area of reading and provided districts with expectations focused on professional development and teacher performance as it relates to reading instruction. These expectations lay the foundation for Instructional Coaches in public K-12 schools. As school leaders began implementing coaching practices for reading, the demand for Instructional Coaches expanded to all curricula areas and an increase in coaching positions is growing in schools.

### **Models of Instructional Coaching**

Currently there are many variations of what schools consider to be instructional coaching methods. Various pieces of research outline the wide-range of roles that engage coaches in schools. Some common coaching models include: peer coaching; cognitive coaching; literacy coaching; and instructional coaching (Houston, 2015). While peer coaching relies heavily on the expertise of one teacher supporting another to improve practice, cognitive coaching is centered

on guiding teachers to purposefully reflect on their teaching practices. Literacy coaching focuses on improving instructional practices related to the content area of literacy. Instructional coaches are collaborative in nature; they support teachers in choosing to implement research-based interventions that help students learn (Houston, 2015). Many researchers have studied the role of an Instructional Coach and document the importance of this position in schools. Sargent (2013) shares that, “Instructional Coaching is a partnership between a coach and teachers to incorporate research-based practices in the areas of classroom management, content, instruction, and assessment for learning into their teaching.” Saphier and West (2009-2010) view a coach as a person who performs a range of duties from modeling lessons, entering data, working with struggling students, and assisting the principal. Huguet et al., (2014) state that coaches “play multiple roles: they assist in connecting teachers with student data, interpreting data, applying new information to classroom practice, facilitating constructive dialogue, and identifying instructional responses” (Huguet, Marsh, & Farrell, 2014, p. 3). The progress of Education reform describes Instructional Coaches as “teachers who view the school as a whole, see the big picture and focus on how they can help improve aspects of the school to result in increases in student achievement” (“Teacher leaders,” 2010, p. 1). Denton and Hasbrouck (2009) cite the work of Joyce and Showers (1981) and outline the importance of using coaching as a “vehicle to transfer knowledge and skills learned by teachers in professional development into classroom practice” (Denton & Hasbrouck, 2009, p. 152).

In current educational initiatives, “coaching is often seen as a key element of school reform” (Denton & Hasbrouck, 2009, p. 155). There are many types of coaching that are defined differently across educational research, yet, generally speaking, authors agree that Instructional Coaches have a responsibility to provide professional development on-site to teachers to increase

their ability to utilize research-based instruction to meet the needs of a variety of learners in their classroom. Denton and Hasbrochk (2009) outline and define the four types of coaching according to the American Institute of Research. These types are “technical, problem solving, reflective practice, and collegial/team building” (Denton & Hasbrouck, 2009, p. 158). Knight (2009) outlines the four most common types of coaching in schools today. These are: Literacy Coaching; Peer Coaching; Cognitive Coaching; and Instructional Coaching (Knight, 2009, p. 18). While there are many approaches to coaching outlined in the literature, McCrary (2011) argues that Instructional Coaching is the most “appropriate approach for promoting reform-oriented teaching, because it involves the partnering of Instructional Coaching with teachers in efforts to help them incorporate research-based instructional practices that positively impact student learning” (McCrary, 2011, p. 2). Coaches have large roles to fulfill in order to positively impact student learning. They are expected to be context experts, teacher supporters, classroom helpers, and instructional facilitators. They need to be experts on content and pedagogical knowledge and be able to model and facilitate classroom lessons (Benson & Cotabish, 2014). These roles are certainly lofty expectations; when done thoughtfully they can impact teaching approaches.

Not only is it important to have Instructional Coaches supported in a school system, it is critically important to ensure that people are supported by coaches during their teacher preparation program to receive regular feedback on teaching practices. Jackson & Mackler (2016) researched teacher preparation programs for developing effective practices and policies for the work force. An integral part of their study was the use of instructional coaches for residents, first-year, and second-year teachers. Residents and first-year teachers met with their coach at least twice a month and a comprehensive coaching cycle was followed. Second-

year teachers met with their coach less frequently but a coaching cycle was still followed. Feedback from this study indicates that coaching is a “valuable program component,” with 92% of cohort participants reporting that coaching sessions were “useful in improving their teaching practice” (Jackson & Mackler, 2016, p. 12).

Friedrich & Trainin (2016) also study the importance of coaching pre-service and in-service teachers. They examined a collaborative process that combines student teachers, cooperating teachers, and a university-based coach in integrating technology into their teaching (Friedrich & Trainin, 2016, p. 1456). These authors stress the importance of ongoing coaching to integrate new learning into the classroom. They state that one-day workshops for professional development do not, in general, help teachers integrate technology into their daily teaching and curriculum and that “less than ten percent of teachers implement strategies learned in traditional workshops into their actual teaching” (Friedrich & Trainin, 2016, p. 1458). This research found that coaches were able to provide on-site professional development, model evidence-based practices and support teachers during planning and implementation of new pedagogy. The coaching process “entails motivating, modeling, observing, and providing feedback” (Friedrich & Trainin, 2016, p. 1458). The collaboration among participants in this study showed that Instructional Coaching can provide personalized professional development that impacts implementation of evidence-based instruction in the classroom.

### **Daily Work of Coaches**

The day-to-day work of Instructional Coaches should and does vary across schools based upon the needs of each individual school district and building. Some districts have state developed plans for improvement in tests scores and use coaches to meet these plans. Other districts use coaches in a much more informal way to increase the teacher capacity among their

staff. McCombs and Marsh (2009) state that coaches perform both informal and formal work including: observations; modeling of instruction; and lesson planning. Informal work includes lending an ear to a colleague. They also note that coaches engage in coaching-related administrative work such as organizing assessments and data collection and analysis. Lastly, they report that coaches in schools participate in non-coaching related work such as lunch and bus duties (McCombs & Marsh, 2009).

The national emphasis on teacher evaluation has added to the daily role of Instructional Coaches and this role is becoming increasingly more important in public schools. Coaches are now expected to participate in walk-through observations of teachers. The purpose of walk-throughs is to get school leaders and coaches into classrooms frequently to see how teachers are developing and whether or not key instructional techniques and strategies are actually being implemented. This is an important component of teacher evaluation as “even frequent formal observations can’t provide enough information on typical instructional practices, especially about how key instructional strategies are routinely implemented” (Milanowski, 2011, p. 22). If Instructional Coaches, or other school leaders, identify any problems during walk-through observations, data can be gathered, collaborative conversations can begin between the coach and teacher, and goals can be set. Having school leaders and Instructional Coaches walking in and out of classrooms frequently sends a message that specific teaching methods and techniques are important and teachers are expected to implement these methods (Milanowski, 2011).

Artigliere & Baecher (2016) outline the coaching responsibilities a bit further, focusing specifically on the role of a peer Instructional Coach. These authors state that peer coaches should work with both novice and veteran teachers to provide them feedback on their instruction, management, and other aspects of practice that are outlined by the school administration

(Artigliere & Baecher, 2016, p. 82). The Instructional Coach must be integrated into a larger school context and be familiar with school-wide trends and resources. Additionally the Instructional Coach may act as a liaison between the needs of the teachers and the administration (Artigliere & Baecher, 2016, p. 82).

### **Responsibilities of Special Educators**

Special educators' responsibilities differ from those of a general educator in that they have case management duties, which include: IEP development; meeting minutes; student evaluations; regular data collection of student progress to inform instructional techniques; delivery of research-based instructional techniques that align with a student's disability; and regular communication and collaboration with parents, administrators, and regular education teachers. A Council for Exceptional Children (CEC) discusses the burden of substantial paperwork that a special education undertakes as part of their role. "Common issues include heavy workloads and administrative tasks, as necessary documentation of student assessment and progress monitoring can produce a substantial amount of paperwork" (CEC, 2017, p. 2). Additionally, special educators work under the threat of litigation against the school or districts if parents feel the school does not follow state and federal regulations or if parents feel their child's progress is not adequate (CEC, 2017, p.2).

Given all these responsibilities, many special educators choose to leave their role as special educator and move into a regular education classroom. DeMik (2008) states that "one of the most important challenges in the field of special education is developing a qualified workforce and creating work environments that sustain special educators' involvement and commitment" (DeMik, 2008, p. 22). Instructional Coaches can be instrumental to providing

regular, ongoing professional development and support specific the job tasks of special educators.

### **Coaching Strategies**

Although the role of Instructional Coach varies from school-to-school, research highlights common practices as critical elements for successful coaching. Research suggests that teachers need to have opportunities to discuss and reflect with other professionals, to practice new learning and receive feedback from an expert on their application of new learning, and to observe others modeling lessons (McCombs & Marsh, 2009, p. 502). Since coaches are on-site experts in a variety of curricula areas, they are able to facilitate learning in a way that ties to a teacher's actual work. In order for instructional change to occur and student achievement to increase, many argue that Instructional Coaches are necessary. Thomas et.al (2015) insist that "without instructional coaching, all too often, no significant change occurs in teacher practices" (Thomas, Bell, Spelman, & Briody, 2015, p. 1). Knight (2009) would agree with this statement. In reviewing research, Knight found from observations of teachers who were not coached that teachers were much less likely to use new teaching practices learned at professional development than teachers who were coached (Knight, 2009, p. 193).

Mudzimiri et.al (2014) propose that most classroom coaching models follow the same three-part cycle. These three steps are: "pre-lesson conference; a lesson observation; and a post-lesson conference" (Mudzimiri, Burroughs, Luebeck, Sutton, & Yopp, 2014, p. 3). While they believe this three-part process is a common structure in schools it is not the only way or the most current way for Instructional Coaches to provide coaching to teachers. Teachers need ongoing modeling, feedback, and opportunities to reflect in order to effectively implement new learning

and research-based instruction. Instructional Coaches are a resource to provide these critical elements to teachers in a school setting.

Collaborative research efforts of several prestigious educational organizations support that coaching has great potential in increasing teacher instructional methods and closing student achievement gaps. Educational researchers have outlined six pillars that are essential in order for all teachers to benefit from high-quality coaching. These pillars are: “system vision and commitment; recruitment and selectivity; development and support; role clarification, time and culture; and compensation and sustainability” (The University of Florida Lastinger Center for Learning, Learning Forward, & Public Impact, 2016, p. 4). The first pillar, system vision and commitment, encourages Instructional Coaches to commit to providing great coaching in their vision. In the second pillar, recruitment and selectivity, Instructional Coaches are chosen based on their excellent demonstrated teaching. The third pillar, shared responsibility, outlines the importance of the Instructional Coach’s partnering with the teacher and taking responsibility for the collaborative work. The fourth pillar, development and support, describes the importance of coaches and teachers receiving necessary support and professional development to be successful in their roles. The fifth pillar, role clarity, time, and culture, fosters a school culture and structure for professional growth of teachers and adequate time for instructional coaching. The last pillar, compensation and sustainability, ensures that the school system makes instructional coaching a well-paid role to attract strong teachers to instructional coaching positions (The University of Florida Lastinger Center for Learning, Learning Forward, & Public Impact, 2016). Each of these pillars provides a structure for effective implementation of high-quality coaching for teachers. Leaders of these organizations attest that coaching has great potential to positively impact

student learning; providing teachers instructional coaching is an essential role of educational leaders in today's schools.

Performance feedback is one coaching strategy that is used to improve performance in various fields. It is defined as “actions taken by (an) external agent(s) to provide information regarding some aspect(s) of one's task performance” (Cavanaugh, 2013, p. 112). In education, performance feedback is most effectively used to support teacher behaviors and teaching strategies in literacy instruction, mathematics instruction, and behavior support plan implementation. Performance feedback is a coaching strategy used to improve classroom management techniques of teachers (Cavanaugh, 2013). Performance feedback is a widely recognized tool for teacher improvement and the intent is to provide feedback to teachers to help them improve the target behavior(s), as measured by an Instructional Coach. Performance feedback has been found to be most effective when it is task-based rather than person-based. Especially when teachers are learning new practices, it is a more efficient and effective method for improving or changing performance of teachers than training or incentives alone. (Cavanaugh, 2013, p. 112). Instructional Coaches are one resource to provide this recognized tool of performance feedback to teachers to encourage use and retention of newly learned skills.

### **Active Listening**

Active listening is a key disposition for Instructional Coaches and is not an easy skill to acquire and active listening is more than just paying attention during a conversation. Reiss (2007) attests that when coaching, a coach needs to be completely focused on the coachee. In order to do this, a person in this role needs to have strong active listening skills that he or she apply during conversations with the coachee. This kind of listening demands that coaches

listen as if they are hearing every word said and analyzing each statement. Coaches will "synthesize what they hear and use their intuition and skills to move the coachees forward" (Reiss, 2007, p. 86). The coach needs to be tuned into the coachee and listen fully without filtering what is said through their own personal thoughts and beliefs. Knight (2016) suggests that to listen actively, people need to "commit to listening, make sure the partner is the speaker, pause before you speak and ask "will my comment open up or close down the conversation?" and don't interrupt" (Knight, 2016, p. 57). To truly listen actively, a coach needs to maintain appropriate body language, ask infrequent yet appropriate guiding questions, and reflect back information that they hear from the person they are coaching. While a coach provides ongoing information to their coachee, it is equally important that the coach listen actively during each coaching session.

### **Modeling**

A critical skill and important role of an Instructional Coach is the ability to model lessons and model receiving and providing feedback with teachers. This modeling provides teachers on-site opportunities to learn in a setting that is meaningful to them. Teachers crave an opportunity to watch others teach. Teachers benefit from seeing others interacting with their students. Casey (2011) states, "successful coaches, therefore, know the importance of modeling lessons to help teachers develop a vision of effective instruction" (p. 24). Teachers need to be able to watch new instruction in practice before they are able to make the practices their own. Casey (2011) shares strategies for Instructional Coaches to implement when modeling lessons. These strategies are: think aloud while teaching; have teachers who are observing be engaged in the lesson; videotape lessons; show teacher and student growth; use professionally-made videos for modeling; create type A and B lessons; and develop a common vision" (p. 26-29). Casey

explains type A lessons as a videotape of the coach delivering the lesson in the typical instructional way. Type B is videotaping a second lesson demonstrating more effective teaching techniques using the same or similar students and instructional focus. When an Instructional Coach is modeling lessons it is important that he or she provides times when the teacher can understand in-the-moment decision making, see errors occur, and see growth over time.

Modeling while coaching is a powerful and meaningful strategy to use as an Instructional Coach. This modeling, along with any coaching work, should be done through a student-centered approach. Sweeney (2011) attests that student-centered coaching has a higher impact on student learning than teacher-centered or relationship-driven coaching (Sweeney, 2011, p. 9). Student-centered coaching involves coaches and teachers setting specific targets for students that are grounded in standards and curriculum and working collaboratively to make sure these targets are met. Teacher-centered coaches focus more on how teachers feel about their teaching and acquisition of new skills (Sweeney, 2011, p. 7).

### **Technology**

Technology has become part of many individuals' everyday personal and professional lives. It is embedded in the work of teachers as well as the work of students. Technology has been a powerful addition to teaching and learning, allowing students and teachers access to information at their fingertips, increasing collaboration amongst students and teachers, and providing educators with increased and immediate communication through email. As Knight reports (2014), "in a flash, new technology can transform the way we do just about anything" (p. 2). Technology has transformed the field of Instructional Coaching by allowing coaches to support teachers through different modalities.

## **Videotaping**

One powerful technological resource for Instructional Coaches is the use of videotaping. When a teacher who is a willing participant is able to see him or herself teach, they can see all of their actions and exactly what they are doing. This can dramatically improve how teachers teach and how students learn. Knight uses videotaping as a regular part of his popular coaching regime and has conducted more than 50 interviews with teachers, Instructional Coaches, and principals who use videotaping every day to improve teaching (Knight, 2014). Knight (2014) states that “perhaps the major reasons video is so useful for learning is that it helps us see exactly what it looks like when we teach or our students learn” (p. 4). As a group of professionals, educators do not often have an opportunity to see what they look like when they do their work. Once videotaped, Instructional Coaches and teachers can review the recordings, pausing as often as needed, and discuss what they observe. Coaches can offer suggestions of other teaching strategies that are effective in helping guide students to new learning. This allows moment-by-moment coaching without disrupting the learning of students. These recordings allow coaching partnerships to have more professionally rich conversations and increase student engagement.

As Knight (2014) attests, “using video cameras in a way that recognizes teachers’ professionalism can have a dramatic effect on teaching and learning” (p. 18). Since using videotaping as an instructional coaching method can have a dramatic effect on teaching and learning, Instructional Coaches should consider this resource but need to do so thoughtfully. Knight (2014) outlines below six guidelines for successful use of videotaping by Instructional Coaches. These are: “ensure psychologically safe environments; make participation a choice; focus on intrinsic motivation; establish boundaries; walk the talk; and go slow to go fast”

(pp. 22-23). Each of these guidelines focuses on making sure the person being videotaped and coached is a ready, comfortable, willing participant in the process.

Another suggested structure to support teachers with ongoing modeling, feedback, and opportunities to reflect in order to effectively implement new learning and research-based instruction is outlined by the *Mathematical Quality of Instruction (MQI)*. MQI outlines a five-step cycle for effective coaching. These steps include: the teacher videotaping themselves; the coach identifying short clips from the video for the teacher to watch and analyze; the teacher watching the videos; the teacher and coach using the MQI rubric to discuss the clips and set goals; and the teacher implementing action steps based on the coaching conversation. (Harvard University, 2016). Instructional Coaches are a resource to provide this coaching structure and are critical professionals to teachers in a school setting.

Videotaping teachers is a technique that can assist with coaching. Another incredibly powerful strategy is the teacher's viewing a recording of an Instructional Coach modeling a lesson. If an Instructional Coach records him or herself then a whole group of teachers can review the recording, increasing the potential number of teachers who benefit from observing a lesson being taught by a coach. Being able to pause, rewind, and re-watch the video opens the door for powerful dialog between the Instructional Coach and the teacher or teachers watching the video (Casey, 2011). A coach needs to be prepared to make errors on videotape and discuss these intentional errors with other teachers in order to maximize the role of coaching. Additionally, a coach should make multiple videos of teaching the same lesson. One video should document teaching in a way that is typical or common to the school. The second video should demonstrate more effective teaching techniques. Materials and class demographics should be similar in both videos. Teachers are then able to review, analyze, and discuss both

recordings using guiding questions. Instructional Coaches can engage teachers in discussions about what is more effective in the second video versus the first (Casey, 2011).

Researching, purchasing, and utilizing professionally-made videos is another means by which technology can positively impact the field of instructional coaching. Choosing the most meaningful professionally-made video is key to the work of an Instructional Coach. The content of the video, age of students in the video, and demographics of the students should all be considered when choosing to access professional videos during coaching (Casey, 2011, p. 28). Guiding questions can be used throughout the videos to allow educators to dialog about what they have observed. It is important that an Instructional Coach understands the group of teachers he or she is coaching. Some may respond well to use of videos for coaching, while others may feel the video does not accurately mirror their classroom instruction.

### **Virtual Peer Coaching**

Another way that technology can impact the role of coaching and respond to the recent demands of increased instructional coaching in schools is with the use of virtual peer coaching as an option that allows Instructional Coaches to observe and communicate with teachers when they are not on site. The use of Bluetooth technology with Skype is one example of this. Benson and Cotabish (2014) explore the use of this non-traditional method of coaching. Using a Bluetooth and/or Skype, mentor coaches are able to observe and provide feedback to mentees. The purpose of Benson and Cotabish's(2014) study was to pilot new virtual peer coaching and determine the effects on instructional behaviors and perceptions of participating teacher candidates and results showed that when virtual peer coaching took place, mentees “demonstrated effective use of new technology, produced more thoughtful self-reflection essays, and immediately improve

their teaching performance and instructional behaviors as a result of on-demand corrective feedback” (Benson & Cotabish, 2014, p. 4).

There are certainly drawbacks and limitations to using virtual peer coaching or technology in schools. Some limitations are: some schools have technological limitations with their broadband or Internet connectivity; some coaches feel intrusive when using technology; and finally, if no on-site coaching happens then teachers lose the physical engagement with the coach (Benson & Cotabish, 2014). Technology can benefit the role of an Instructional Coach by conducting classroom observations and assessments. Districts need to support the use of technology with high-speed Internet services and the purchase of state-of-the-art equipment, while time for personal, face-to-face contact between the Instructional Coach and the teacher also needs to occur.

### **Data Collection**

To augment effective coaching strategies, a data collection system is necessary. Data collection, analysis of data, and being a data-driven teacher is not only an expectation in today’s schools, but is also a critical component of many teacher evaluation systems nationwide. Generally speaking, although teachers appreciate having substantial data regarding their students at their fingertips, many teachers struggle with how to use data to develop and implement instructional materials. In response to this dilemma many districts employ Instructional Coaches to assist teachers in using data appropriately. Regular data analysis can increase classroom and school improvements. Huguet et al., (2014) discuss the Sociocultural Learning Theory (SCLT) as an important theory to increase the use of coaches in schools, specifically related to building capacity in teachers around data collection and analysis. The SCLT model emphasizes that learning occurs through interactions with “a more knowledgeable

other” (Huguet et al., 2014, p. 6). A coach is hired to be more knowledgeable about student data collection, data analysis, and using data to inform instruction. They can therefore be the more knowledgeable staff person who works with teachers to increase their capacity. During the process of coaching both coach and teacher are engaging in dynamic learning and sharpening their skills. In order to effectively coach, Instructional Coaches need to review artifacts with teachers regarding their classroom practices. Artifacts are both physical and symbolic tools created to assist in the coaching process. These tools assist coaches in gathering data on teacher implementation of new practices and the resulting impact on student learning (Huguet et al., 2014).

Marsh, McCombs, & Mortorell (2010) study another angle of coaches' use of data and look at the impact of Instructional Coaches' supporting data-driven decision-making (DDDM) in Florida schools. DDDM in education refers to school staff, including teachers and administrators, systematically collecting data and analyzing the data to drive decisions to increase student achievement. Results indicate that coaches support data activities and influence teachers and student achievement. This research supports that more “frequent data support from a coach is associated with higher student achievement and more positive perceptions of coaches’ influence on teaching practice” (Marsh, McCombs, & Mortorell, 2010, p. 899).

Given the findings of Marsh, McCombs, & Mortorell (2010), it is important for the educational field to continue to understand how coaches can assist teachers in the data collection process. There are a core set of coaching practices that contribute to building capacity in teachers related to data-use. These include: assessing teachers' needs to create specific goals for data-use work with coaches; modeling around data use; observing teachers to monitor how they implemented or engaged in particular phases of the data-use cycle; providing feedback and

sharing expertise which includes suggested next steps for practice; dialoging and questioning about data and instruction; and brokering the divide between data and application by connecting with teachers (Huguet et al., 2014, p. 13). Not all coaches have the same skill set to use for building teacher data-use capacity.

Strong coaches are skilled at implementing their practices related to data collection in their work. A strong coach has a large repertoire of practices and artifacts to tailor assistance to individual teachers (Huguet et al., 2014, p. 21). Coaches need to assess teacher needs and then change their coaching to match these needs. Lipton & Wellman (2013) insist that coaches shift between four stances when engaging in conversation with the people they are coaching. These four stances are: “calibrating, consulting, collaborating, and coaching” (Lipton & Wellman, 2013, p. 5). Calibrating is when the coach identifies gaps between the expected standards and presents results a teacher is producing. Problems are identified and results are prescribed. In consulting, the coach provides direct ideas and technical resources to the teacher. Collaborating is the practice of teacher and coach co-generating information and ideas, analyzing problems together and co-creating a plan of action. Lastly, coaching is when the coach is facilitating the teacher ideas and prompting the teacher to problem-solve and make decisions. When shifting between these four stances, coaches are able to “build teachers’ capacity to reflect on data, generate ideas and options, and to increase personal and professional awareness and skill” (Lipton & Wellman, 2013, p. 5). In order to shift between these stances and build capacity in teachers, coaches need strong training and a solid understanding of how to effectively gather, analyze, and use data.

## **School Culture**

School culture and climate are important parts of schooling and can either assist administration and teachers with moving the work forward or hinder the work from moving forward. How teachers feel in terms of support from their administration and Instructional Coaches is critical to how they receive feedback and reflect on their teaching practices. The quality of the Instructional Coach and teacher relationship is essential to the partnership and effectiveness of coaching in a school. Teachers need to feel like equal partners with the Instructional Coach and they need to feel part of the learning experience. Teachers need to believe that coaching is collaborative in nature and not top-down. With this open, supportive culture, learning takes place and student achievement can be positively impacted (Thomas et al., 2015). Upon entering a coaching position, a coach should establish relationships with his or her colleagues and begin work routines that are organized around the new role and which support the work of those he or she is coaching (Atteberry & Bryk, 2011).

In addition to the relationship between coach and teacher, for Instructional Coaches to be successful in a school district, the focus and vision of the coach must be on instruction and student achievement. District and building administration must provide an Instructional Coach with the time, resources, and professional development they need in order to be the best they can be at their job. Time must be set aside for allowing coaches to work with teachers and be in classrooms. Instructional Coaches should not be pulled from their coaching responsibilities to complete tasks such as clerical duties if school leaders expect increased teaching and learning to transpire. Instructional Coaches need a deep knowledge of effective strategies for content and behavior management. They need to be resourceful in finding materials but also need to be financially supported by their school in order to purchase empirically-based resources.

Instructional Coaches also must be model learners and engage in ongoing professional development opportunities which are supported by the building and district administration (Sargent, 2013).

Additionally, school culture is strengthened by increasing instructional interventions of teachers. Tzivinikou (2015) conducted a study on the impact of in-service training for general and special educators. This author focused on providing pairs of teachers (one regular educator paired with a special educator) with professional development and coaching for 6 months on their educational practice specific to working with students with special needs (Tzivinikou, 2015). The objective of this training was to improve the educators' teaching skills, enrich their practices with the most effective approaches and enhance their instructional interventions for students with special needs. The findings of this study showed that this in-service training had a "positive impact on the educators' self-efficacy and their effectiveness regarding collaborative educational interventions for their students" (Tzivinikou, 2015, p. 95).

### **Administrative Support**

There is overwhelming consensus in the literature that effective school leaders need to focus on the job of improving classroom instruction in addition to all their other job responsibilities. Given the other demands of their jobs, this goal is often unrealistic. One way to address this dilemma is by hiring and supporting Instructional Coaches. Instructional Coaches can focus on improving the classroom instruction of teachers while school administrators focus on the other demands of overseeing a school, such as setting a vision, engaging the community, and creating an environment of collaboration that focuses on student needs. In order for Instructional Coaches to be successful and effective in schools the school administrators need to "play an active role in selecting trained coaches, developing a targeting coaching strategy, and

evaluating whether coaches are having the desired impact on teaching and learning” (Steiner & Kowal, 2007, p. 1).

Once a coach is selected, support from building and district administration is key to the success of an Instructional Coach. Many times the “Instructional Coach is the right-hand man to the principal when it comes to instructional leadership” (Sargent, 2013, p. 2). Instructional Coaches and principals should meet on a regular basis to ensure that they are leading the school with a shared common vision and that coaches feel supported. Additionally, coaches and principals should observe classes together to build this vision of good teaching and learning while building capacity in both the Instructional Coach and the principal regarding best teaching practices (Saphier & West, 2009-2010). According to McCombs and Marsh (2009), who studied Florida middle school reading coaches, “most coaches viewed school and district administrators as key supports for their work” (McCombs & Marsh, 2009, p. 503). Administrators should clearly define and communicate the coach's roles and responsibilities to the school building. Additionally, administrators are in charge of assigning duties and outlining teachers’ daily responsibilities. Without administrative support, coaches’ time may be assigned to duties that can take away from effective coaching.

When implemented with minimal barriers, teachers and administrators report that Instructional Coaches have a positive impact on schools. Teachers report changes in their instruction and principals report a positive effect on their own knowledge and a sense of community among teachers (McCombs & Marsh, 2009). Navigating the school community can be tricky for all staff and can certainly impact a sense of community in the school. If there are conflicts between Instructional Coaches and teachers, supportive administrators can help mediate

the interactions and politics to influence positive working relationships, which in turn will impact the effectiveness of coaching (Huguet et al., 2014).

Saphier and West (2009-2010) argue that while a positive principal and coach relationship is critical to impacting teacher instruction and student achievement, they suggest a coach should report to and be supervised by district curriculum administrators rather than by the principal. The rationale for this is that Instructional Coaches are hired to make change over several buildings in district, not just one building, and should therefore have a K-12 vision and workload (Saphier & West, 2009-2010). If supervised solely by a building principal, the Instructional Coach could lack an understanding of the K-12 district goals, vision, and resources. Supervision, work expectations, and Instructional Coach visions are all impacted by school culture and relationships. Positive relationships and administrative support are critical variables to the success of coaches.

### **Budgetary Implications of Coaching**

As districts consider establishing Instructional Coaches in their schools they need to evaluate the impact this position has on a district budget. Teacher salary and benefits, professional development opportunities, and resources are areas where coaches increase school costs. Professional development is a key component to increasing teacher skills. Embedding instructional coaching into this professional development certainly has a major impact on the cost, due to the coach's salary. Houston (2015) states that "staffing costs are the largest costs for most educational organizations and the importance of continued professional development for teachers has never been greater" (p. 95).

There are many variables that impact the total cost of an Instructional Coach. These variables include but are not limited to: Length of the school day as well as length of specific

content area instruction; class size; percentage of licensed staff in the school who teach core classes, and grade configurations (multi-age, looping, etc.) (Odden et al., 2008). Odden et al. (2008) found that spending on professional development, primarily Instructional Coaches, can range from approximately 0-11% of a school district's overall spending. Knight (2012) developed a formula to calculate the per year cost of an Instructional Coaching model and finds that any school district can replicate this equation to roughly identify the cost of an Instructional Coach. This formula provides educational leaders with an understanding of all the costs associated with coaching and which ones most significantly impact the budget. Although the cost of a coach can be viewed as presenting a barrier or block, the positive impact on teaching and learning is clearly outlined in the research. If schools choose to send staff off-site to engage in professional development that may or may not be brought back to their classroom for implementation, schools will likely see less growth in the area of teacher practices. If instead they invest in on-site coaches who can be in classrooms modeling, collaborating, providing feedback, and connecting professional development to daily lessons, building administrators are likely to see a larger increase in the skills of teachers. Administrative teams and Superintendents may need to engage in creative problem solving and reallocating staff positions in order to fund an Instructional Coach in their district through a neutrally-fiscal process.

### **Impact on the Field**

There are many benefits outlined in the research and very few barriers to school districts hiring Instructional Coaches to work with teachers and students. Based on the current research on teacher instruction, districts may benefit from hiring Instructional Coaches who can fulfill many roles. Research-supported roles for an Instructional Coach in the public school setting are: modeling classroom instruction; providing professional development to teachers using research-

based interventions; assisting teachers in gathering, analyzing, and using data; and working collaboratively with building and district administration on a shared vision for instructional practices. If districts follow a thoughtful hiring process that outlines clearly what they need in their school, provide the Instructional Coach with the resources and administrative support needed, and work with teachers to gain teacher interest in participating in a coaching model, an Instructional Coach can have a substantial impact on school improvement. The use of technology for Instructional Coaches is becoming more common and an effective modality to assist coaches with their job responsibilities.

### **Prominent Authors**

The value of Instructional Coaches is grounded in research and presented journals, books, and research studies on coaching, partnering, and methodologies used to increase teacher retention and application of professional development. Jim Knight, Jennifer Sloan McCombs, Bruce Wellman, Laura Lipton, and Diane Sweeney are all influential researchers in the field of Instructional Coaching and the impact coaches have on teacher instruction. These authors look at various coaching techniques, the importance of the partnership between the coach and teacher, and the importance of school culture and climate as it relates to effective implementation of Instructional Coaches.

### **Next Steps for Research**

While the research on the impact of Instructional Coaches on teaching practices has increased in the last 15-20 years, there is limited research on the impact Instructional Coaches have on specific teaching disciplines. The use of Instructional Coaches in the content area of reading was studied most in depth since federal legislation and funding supported reading coaches as the first coaching positions in schools. Further research is needed on the impact

Instructional Coaches have on non-general education teachers. Specifically, more research is needed on the effectiveness of utilizing Instructional Coaches to increase the teaching practices of special education teachers. This is an area with limited research; however, given current literature on the positive impact Instructional Coaches have on the teaching practices of regular education students, one could predict that a similar impact could be seen with special educators and their students.

### **Conclusion**

Instructional Coaches are highly trained, knowledgeable, skilled, on-site professionals who can effectively impact teaching and learning in K-8 public schools nationwide. Instructional Coaches are key players in school reform and are becoming increasingly more common in school districts. Instructional Coaches are staff members who use research-based interventions to provide professional development to teachers in order to increase their teaching practices. While hiring Instructional Coaches does increase spending in a district, the benefits for teacher instruction outweigh these costs. These benefits include learning and implementing professional development, having opportunities for on-site, regular feedback from a trained professional, and modeling of effective teaching practices by specialists in the school.

## **CHAPTER 3**

### **METHODOLOGY**

Analyzing the effects of Instructional Coaches on addressing the improvement in special educators' skills/effectiveness was the over-arching focus of this research. This qualitative, instrumental case study discovered the experiences that special educators have had with common coaching models in public schools. An instrumental case study is one in which "the focus of a qualitative study may be a specific issue with a case used to illustrate the issue" (Creswell, 2015, p. 469). An instrumental case study is the study of a case in order to provide information or insight into an issue and then to draw generalizations from this review and build theory.

Effective instructional coaching is based in relationships between two partners: a coach and a teacher. This partnership allows for collaboration, modeling, coaching, reflection, and feedback to occur. Vygotsky's sociocultural theory of human behavior is grounded in the concept that social interaction plays a fundamental role in the development of cognition. Using this theory as a premise, special educators learn first through their interaction with the Instructional Coach and then will integrate this learning through a personal level.

#### **Setting**

A small public school system in New England was used for this study. This district serves approximately 2,050 students in grades Kindergarten through 12<sup>th</sup> grade from two rural towns. There is one building that houses K-3 students, a middle school housing grades 4-8, and the high school housing grades 9-12. These buildings share the same campus. Predominately Caucasian middle to upper class citizens populate the district. The district has a comprehensive special education program accessed by approximately 300 students and employs 109 special education staff. Employees in this unit range from Educational Technicians to special education

Teachers to related service providers (Occupational Therapists, Physical Therapists, Social Workers, Speech Therapists) to Instructional Strategists/Coaches. Student support ranges from minimal support in content areas such as reading, writing, and math to full self-contained programming in all areas of their academic, developmental, and functional needs across their school day. Some students require one-to-one Educational Technician support throughout the day.

There are a wide range of staff and students in each school building on campus. For the purposes of this study, instructional coaches and teachers serving grades Kindergarten through eighth grade were included. The following outlines the breakdown of personnel in each building. The K-3 building has 541 students and 92 staff. Of these 541 students, 91 have IEPs. Of the 92 staff, 32 work in the special education department. The grades 4-8 building has 846 students and 140 staff. Of these 846 students, 118 have IEPs. Of the 140 staff, 42 work within the special education department. While they did not participate in the study it is important to note the high school houses the 653 9-12<sup>th</sup> graders with 95 staff. Of these 653 students, 92 have IEPs. Of the 95 staff, 33 work in the special education department.

Each building in the district has a special education team which works together to meet the individual needs of students in the building. On each team there is an Instructional Coach who works directly with staff in the department and is the point of contact with the Director of special education. Oversight of the entire K-12 department is the responsibility of the Director. Instructional Coaches housed in each building provide professional development and instructional coaching to each special educator in that building and create an infrastructure that supports teacher development and seamless instruction for students. Given that the special education staff and Instructional Coaches are on campus, work a contract school year (183 days)

with many working in the extended school year program, there was ample opportunity for them to participate in this research. Weekly special education team meetings occur in each building that I, as the director, was able to join in order to gather data regarding this research. The study was conducted through focus groups and interviews during team meetings and after-school meetings.

In order to provide a glimpse into the vision and goals of the district, the mission and vision statement are provided below.

### **Mission**

The mission of the district is to guide all students as they acquire enthusiasm for learning, assume responsibility for their education, achieve academic excellence, and discover and attain their personal best. To accomplish this mission, the district community will collaborate to:

- use effective instructional practices and provide professional development to assure that all students meet or exceed the District's Content Standards and Performance Indicators as they relate to the system of state Learning Results to reflect Common Core Standards;
- ensure a safe and respectful environment where all feel a sense of belonging; and
- promote parental participation as fundamental to each student's success.

**Board goals.** To support the mission of the district, the Board of Directors has adopted the following overarching goals.

1. Ensure that each student is effectively engaged in learning, meets or exceeds the District's learning goals, and progresses towards attaining his/her personal best.
2. Implement accountability systems for providing, assessing, and supporting student learning.
3. Foster a positive and supportive learning and working environment.

4. Provide responsible oversight of District and Community resources.

These goals are best accomplished by:

- supporting the District’s work in curriculum, assessment, instruction and professional development;
- understanding and analyzing student performance data;
- explaining the reasons and rationale for curricular changes to the community;
- developing policy for general guidance and specific compliance with local and State mandates;
- adjusting processes and procedures to ensure a quality and safe teaching and learning environment; and
- developing plans for human, financial, and facilities resources that
  - account for community capacity, District needs, and priorities,
  - maximize District efficiency and long-term sustainability, and
  - use an approach that is inclusive and transparent to District constituencies

### **Professional Development in District**

Having a clear professional development (PD) plan that aligns with the district mission/vision and which includes the use of Instructional Coaches is instrumental to this study. PD in the district is planned by various staff members depending on the topic, team, and group size. The Director of Curriculum, Assessment, and Professional Development is ultimately responsible for overseeing all PD in district. This Director works with building administration, the district administrative team, and other Directors to identify building and district goals, then develop a year-long plan of meeting these PD goals. This planning happens during summer administrative team retreats and is ongoing throughout the school year.

Overarching district goals are based on the district strategic plan and each building/department goals fall under these broader goals. Special education staff work both within their buildings and within the special education department so they access PD both as part of their building and as part of the department. Regular education PD is provided on two staff days in August before the school year starts, early release Wednesdays on each full week of school (if there is a Monday holiday students do not have an early release on Wednesday of that week), and three additional PD days throughout the school year calendar. Special Education staff attends regular PD opportunities offered through the district as appropriate. As the Special Education Director and Instructional Support Director, the researcher works with each building principal to ensure that special education staff are connected to their building and accessing PD that will help them grow as individuals and as a team.

While special educators have early release Wednesdays, attend off-campus conferences, and work in role-alike teams for meetings, one of the most powerful PD opportunities they have in district are the use of Instructional Coaches specific to special education in their building. Instructional Coaches observe teaching, troubleshoot various interventions, facilitate meetings, review all legally binding IEP paperwork, and support special educators in reflection and growth of their teaching. Educators interact, for the most part, on a daily basis with the Instructional Coach in their building. Staff benefit from a variety of coaching models and techniques across grades K-8.

### **Participants/Sample**

There are three Instructional Coaches housed in grades K-8 in district: one coach at the K-3 school; one responsible for grades 4-5; and one at the 6-8 school. Each of these three coaches are full-time employees in district. Thirteen special educators who are employed in the

district, collaborating with Instructional Coaches in their building, and who have a caseload of students with whom they work, participated in the research. These participants did not include related service providers or educational technicians who work in the department at each school. Given that each participant is a contracted employee in the district, working a minimum of 183 days, they are in their school, working with students, engaging in regular professional development, and working with the Instructional Coach in their building on applying and integrating the professional learning in their daily practice. As the Director of the department, the researcher joined already scheduled meeting times and hosted before/after-school meetings to engage participants in reflections on their experiences with Instructional Coaching.

### **Data**

Data for this case study was gathered through interviews and focus groups. The intent was to convene teams of special educators from grades K-8 in focus groups to discuss their experiences with Instructional Coaches and how it ties to their teaching responsibilities. Each focus group agreed upon meeting norms and then co-construct a common understanding of the words and phrases used in the questions/prompts being used to facilitate the discussion. Several times and locations on campus were offered to ensure maximum participation. Additionally, one-to-one interviews were conducted with each special educator. The focus was on their experiences and views concerning their work with an Instructional Coach and the impact this partnership has had on their roles and responsibilities.

The researcher, who is the Director of Instructional Support, personally gathered all data. For the most part meetings were held during the school day with offerings after school for those who prefer this time of day. Having one consistent person gather the data strengthened the use of common terminology and facilitated recognizing patterns in the data. The researcher also

gathered and analyzed all survey results. As results were gathered in each process, participants were asked to review the documentation and findings for accuracy. Each person had a chance to modify or add to their input at any time.

### **Analysis**

When considering analysis of the data, it was evident that grounded coding would be used in order to condense the extensive data into manageable categories and units. Grounded coding allowed themes and patterns that emerge from the documents and audio recordings gathered through focus groups and interviews to be noted. After working with each focus group to co-construct meaning of terms, phrases, and key concepts, the group engaged in a dialog. Voice Typing notes, hand written notes, and an audio recording were taken throughout the conversation. After all conversations were done, the researcher pored over each set of notes and audio, highlighting/coding each document. Highlighted terms included descriptive words about participants' experiences with coaching. All positive and negative adjectives were highlighted. The process of in vivo coding was used, meaning that terms and phrases used by the participants were the voice of the research and drove the outcomes. The intent was to stay as close to the original words of the participants to capture the key elements (King, 2017). Trends surfaced based upon the content of the responses, which allowed categories to be formed. After categories surfaced, transcripts and themes were brought back to the focus group participants for a member check to support validity (Creswell, 2013). Participant voice was well represented using this process.

### **Data Collection Timeline**

After obtaining committee and Institutional Review Board approval, focus group and interview meetings were scheduled. Each focus group was scheduled to last one hour and each

interview was scheduled to last 30 minutes. The meetings were set up through Google calendar with a specific outreach email. Each participant was given the consent form, outreach letter, and email correspondence with the Google calendar invitation so they had time to read about and understand all components of the study. Individual follow up conversations and/or emails also took place with a few participants who had questions regarding the study. It took the researcher 3 days to confirm all meeting dates. Focus groups and interviews were held over a week and a half period of time. It is important to note that no one-to-one interviews were held with participants until after they joined a focus group discussion. Focus groups took a full hour to complete and in one case the conversation lasted for seventy minutes. The one-to-one interviews ranged in time from ten minutes to thirty minutes.

After gathering all data, transcriptions and Google Voice Typed documents were checked for accuracy by the researcher and errors were corrected. It then took 4 days for all thirteen participants to validate their transcripts. Once the documents accurately reflected what participants intended to say, the hours upon hours of the coding process began, themes emerged, and data analysis began. The data collection process was seamless as all participants were excited to be part of the study and engaged in the follow up process. Additionally, given that participants' work in the district being studied, arranging focus group meetings and interviews was fairly uncomplicated and went expeditiously. If special educators worked outside the district, it is anticipated that this timeline would need to be extended.

### **Participant Rights**

Participation for this research was all voluntary and there was no foreseeable negative impact on the participants' current teaching job, roles and responsibilities, or their evaluation if they chose not to participate. Confidentiality was held at the forefront of the work and there was

transparency about the topic, clarity of the purpose of the study, and each participant consented to the process. Institutional Review Board protocols and rules for research with human subjects was followed with fidelity. Informed consent forms were clearly written for all participants and time was allocated to thoughtfully and thoroughly answer all participant questions. Information gathered from focus groups and interviews was not connected to any specific person. All participant information and data will be maintained in a secure, password protected network. If at any time a participant chose, they could withdraw from the study.

### **Potential Limitations of the Study**

Limitations of this research and study included its small sample size of 13 participants, all of who are from within one district. This small number limits the ability to generalize the findings of this study to all other public schools. While this limitation exists, the participant population of special educators and Instructional Coaches who specialize in special education are reflective of a larger demographic of educators. Therefore the outcomes and findings of the study may be applicable beyond the school being researched.

A second limitation was that the researcher is an administrator, overseeing the work of the special educators and Instructional Coaches. Monitoring any possible bias of the research outcomes was critical to the success of the study. Coghlan & Brannick (2014) outline areas that a researcher should be aware of prior to conducting research in their own organization. These include: being careful to not be too close to the data and “assume too much” when conducting interviews; “developing a spirit of inquiry so as to receive insights into familiar situations where things are taken for granted because they are so familiar;” work to develop “collaborative inquiry or action with relevant colleagues in familiar situations where the spirit of inquiry may be diminished;” and lastly the importance of “developing practical knowledge of how to inquire as a

native, and so to be able to link theory with practice” (Coghlan & Brannick, 2014, p. 135). It was imperative that the researcher applied these recommendations when conducting research for this study. Ethical data collection and analysis with constant data checking with participants was important throughout. Additionally, it was important that the researcher engaged in “friendly, honest, and forthright conversations” while listening carefully to each response from the focus group and interviews (Ceglowski, 2000, p. 98). Participants needed to feel comfortable that they were entering a conversation in which they could be open, honest, and comprehensive with their answers. Evidence that the researcher was effective in minimizing bias was shown in that not all information provided by the participant was positive and glowing regarding the Instructional Coaches. Participants shared what they value from the coach as well as what they desire the coach add to their responsibilities and provide to the special educators.

### **Conclusion**

This chapter offered an explanation for qualitative case study research methodology that was applied to gather and analyze data so as to better understand the role of Instructional Coaches in promoting effective teaching practices for special educators in grades Kindergarten through eighth grade in a New England public school district. This chapter outlined the rationale for the case study as well as the data collection methods that were implemented. Subsequently, considerations concerning human subjects were outlined with regard to IRB requirements. Details regarding proposed participant selection were discussed, in addition to the specific interview questions that were asked of each participant. The following chapter will describe the data analyzed and findings that arose from this case study.

## CHAPTER 4

### RESULTS

The qualitative instrumental case study focused on the experiences of special educators from a New England public school related to their work with an Instructional Coach. Data were collected through focus groups and follow-up individual interviews with special educators currently employed in grades K-8 in which a special education Instructional Coach is also employed and working with staff. Common themes that emerged from each focus group and interview will be presented as well as a description of how this data was organized, analyzed, and coded. Additionally, findings will be presented regarding how participants view Instructional Coaches, how Instructional Coaches affect the practice of special educators, and what special educators feel they do not get from their work with Instructional Coaches. Descriptions of each theme that emerged will be outlined with supporting quotations from participants. Information regarding how findings are linked to research questions, literature review, and conceptual framework will be outlined.

Thirteen participants took part in this study. These educators work in the same district as the researcher and interact with the researcher on at least a weekly basis. As Director of Instructional Support, the researcher oversees special education programming, teachers, and services in grades K-12. Participants in this study range in experience and time working in the field from a first-year public school special educator to a participant who has been teaching in special education in a public school for 32 years. Both male and female teachers participated in this study. Three participants represented the K-3 school, four participants represented grades 4-5, and six participants represented grades 6-8. The number of students on each person's caseload ranges between 11 and 25 students, depending on the individual needs and profiles of students.

During the course of each day and week, the participants work with students either one-on-one or in small groups in a special education classroom and they support students in the regular education classroom. In addition to their teaching responsibilities, special educators are required to gather specific student data on how students are progressing on their Individual Education Plan (IEP) goals, collaborate with regular educators, supervise educational technicians, complete all special education paperwork including writing IEPs and formally evaluating students, consult with specialists in the field and outside providers, and collaborate with parents.

### **Research Questions**

Guiding this research was the overarching question: In what ways do Instructional Coaches influence special educators' skills/effectiveness? Related research questions included:

- What are special educators' experiences with coaching models used in public schools?
- How has special educators' collaboration with an Instructional Coach influenced the way the educator prioritizes his or her job responsibilities?

### **Analysis**

Data collection commenced with the researcher's convening three focus group sessions, one in each school building. Thirteen participants joined these focus groups. Follow-up interviews were conducted one-to-one with eleven special educators to gather more in-depth, individual data. The researcher was looking for eight to ten participants to join follow-up interviews. Eleven of the thirteen participants expressed interest in joining this step of the process; therefore, more interviews were held than originally planned.

During the focus groups and interviews, participants each had a laptop and used Google Voice Typing to assist in the data collection process. Additionally, the researcher obtained an

iPad to record each conversation. Voice Typed notes, handwritten notes, and an audio recording were taken throughout the conversation. Essentially, each participant had Google Voice Typing open so some pieces of the conversation were picked up on the document and shared with the researcher. After each meeting, the Google voice-to-text documents were shared with the researcher and the iPad audio recordings were transcribed. The transcriptions and voice-to-text were merged to provide a detailed, complete transcription of the conversations. Participants reviewed the transcripts to check for accuracy and validate the documents.

Once all transcriptions were completed and validated, data was uploaded into a database using the Dedoose application. Grounded coding was used to condense the extensive data into manageable categories and units. Grounded coding allowed themes and patterns to emerge from the transcriptions of focus groups and interviews. The researcher combed through all the transcripts and highlighted terms, which included descriptive words about participants' experiences with coaching. All personality attributes as well as positive and negative adjectives were highlighted. The process of in vivo coding was used so that terms and phrases used by the participants were the voice of the researcher and drove the themes and findings. The intent was to stay as close to the original words of the participants to capture the key elements (King, 2017). Themes surfaced from an analysis of the findings, which allowed categories to be formed. After categories surfaced, these transcripts and themes were brought back to the focus group participants for a member check to support validity (Creswell, 2013). Participant voice was well represented using this process.

Review of transcripts revealed clear commonalities among the responses from each participant. As themes emerged, code categories were developed and excerpts from the transcripts were placed into each category and assigned a color to assist with the coding process.

The researcher engaged in three rounds of re-organizing the data and themes that emerged. Initially, the data was tallied and quantitative graphs were developed. Eleven themes and eight personality characteristics emerged. Each time a participant mentioned a theme a frequency tally mark was noted. Bar graphs and pie charts were made representing this data. After reflection and review, the researcher refined the findings to report the data in a qualitative narrative. Graphs were removed, excerpts were pulled from the transcriptions, and the story of the impact of Instructional Coaches on special educators' skills and effectiveness began to emerge. The eleven themes and eight characteristics still were maintained at this point in the process. Further refinement was needed in order for data to be presented and represented in the most powerful way. The third revision included re-organizing all the themes and characteristics into three super code headings: a composite portrait of Instructional Coaches; how Instructional Coaches affect the practices of special educators; and what special educators desire from the Instructional Coaching model. Each theme and personality attribute was organized under these super headings.

### **Themes**

The themes that emerged from the conversations during focus groups and one-to-one interviews outlined many commonalities among special educators in grades K-8, which allowed seamless coding of the data. The various grade level/school buildings provided very similar data sets and did not provide many differences or discrepancies in the data. Regardless of the grade level a special educator was teaching, they report increased teaching time, decreased case management responsibilities, increased collaboration, and negative feelings about returning to a model in which there was no Instructional Coach in their building. Additionally, many of the special educators report that the Instructional Coaches, as utilized in this public school district,

do not model specific teaching techniques or strategies with students but rather model communication techniques with educational technicians, parents, and administration. Partnership and relationship characteristics will be explored in depth, but overall responses suggest special educators feel they need to trust their coach and be assured this person is not judgmental. In addition, they use this position as a go-to person for any question, big or small.

During the coding process, themes fell into three general categories: personality characteristics/attributes related to how participants view their Instructional Coach; how Instructional Coaches affect the practice of special educators; and what special educators do not gain from their Instructional Coaches although they desire to do so. The data was strikingly similar in both meeting settings so these findings are representative of all conversations with all participants.

Special educators highlighted the need for specific relationship characteristics to be in place for a successful coach/ person coached partnership. The terms special educators used to characterize Instructional Coaches were:

- trustworthy;
- supportive;
- respectful;
- professional;
- non-judgmental;
- knowledgeable;
- honest;
- a go-to person for any question.

In addition to the findings that emerged regarding characteristics of an effective Instructional Coach, themes developed about how Instructional Coaches affect the practice of special educators. These themes were:

- Increased collaboration with various stakeholders
- Assistance with case management responsibilities and is an active listener
- Increased time teaching students
- Increased time for instructional planning and professional development
- Peer coaching
  - It is important to note that this was the one theme only discussed during one-to-one interviews. It did not surface during any focus group discussions.

There was one theme that emerged from all participants that expressed their expectations were not met through the model. Special educators stated that Instructional Coaches did not model lessons with students for them. Additionally, there was one other interesting theme that emerged: participants stated that, once this position of coach was put in place, special educators had negative feelings of returning to previous model of no Instructional Coach in place. They articulated a concern that their coaching needs would not be met if the position was removed.

### **Presentation of Results**

Once all the data was combed through, themes emerged, codes were assigned, viewpoints were assigned to each code, and participants' passages and quotes were extracted. Each quote has a corresponding participant and number after it representing a designation for the different participants who completed interviews. For example, there is an entry of “participant 1- participant 13” after each quote. The numbers 1-13 represent each person involved in the study. The reader can see that all participants are represented throughout the quotes. Participants

shared attributes they observed and value in their Instructional Coach in order to have a successful partnership. There were many positive excerpts regarding how the role of a special education Instructional Coach affects the practice of the special educators in their role. As one participant shared, “I think this role seems like an overlooked necessity in schools” (Participant 1). The two themes that commonly emerged related to how an Instructional Coach assists special educators in their role were: 1. staff felt that they had increased collaboration with various stakeholders such as: parents; educational technicians; other special educators; regular educators; and the coach by having an Instructional Coach position in place; 2. staff felt as though their case management responsibilities decreased while their direct time teaching students increased due to this role being in place. The last area that emerged was the theme of what special educators felt they did not benefit from the role of an Instructional Coach. Each theme is discussed below with supporting excerpts from participants.

### **Composite Portrait of Instructional Coaches**

The participants in this study shared many common observations of personal characteristics of the Instructional Coach in their building. Descriptions of these characteristics emerged from the participants through stories and various questions in both the interviews and focus groups. The portrait that was painted through the findings by special educators is that they view the Instructional Coaches in their buildings as having eight essential characteristics. These were: Instructional Coach being a go-to person for any question; honesty, knowledgeable; non-judgmental; professional; respectful; supportive; and trustworthy. Working with coaches who demonstrate a majority of these attributes enhances the productivity of the special educator when working with an Instructional Coach.

All participants spoke about the importance of having a strong relationship with the Instructional Coach in order for an effective and beneficial coaching relationship to be present. These relationship characteristics of an Instructional Coach as described by the special educator are essential elements to the success of instructional coaching in a public school. This theme of relationship is well researched by many. Both Vygotsky (1934) and Knight (2007) attest that relationships are a critical part of human learning, collaboration, and coaching. As discussed earlier, Vygotsky in 1934 outlined the sociocultural theory of human learning. The theme of this framework is that social interaction plays a fundamental role in the development of cognition. Vygotsky asserted that people learn by connecting socially with others and then they integrate this information on an individual level through conversations. Additionally, Jim Knight (2007), a current researcher, bases his framework of partnership on the principles of Vygotsky's sociocultural theory. Knight attests that the "partnership approach" is about "knowledge transfer, knowledge development and human interaction" (Cornett & Knight, 2008, p. 205).

Partnership focuses on the relationship between the coach and the teacher. Without an effective partnership, powerful coaching that impacts teachers' skills is unable to transpire. Both these frameworks emphasize the importance of a special educator's experience with the coach with whom they are working as someone with whom they feel comfortable and supported.

Based on these frameworks, participants were asked to describe their relationship with the Instructional Coach in their building and how they characterize that relationship. This question, posed in both focus group discussions and one-to-one interviews, along with other stories and answers throughout the conversations, led to an abundance of data regarding the characteristics or attributes that must be in place for a special educator to feel comfortable

working with an Instructional Coach. While each and every attribute does not need to be in place to have a professional relationship and partnership between the Instructional Coach and special educator, the data suggests that having many of these attributes enhances the likelihood that effective coaching will transpire. While the question was posed in a way that could have led participants to speak about personal relationships such as friendships and collegiality, the question instead sparked more dialog and stories about the necessary characteristics that coaches need and how the coach in their building demonstrates these traits, which is why the model/role is successful. Special educators spoke eloquently and passionately about what characteristics they feel an effective Instructional Coach must demonstrate for this model to be successful.

Special educators identified qualities they determine Instructional Coaches need to possess in order to make the partnership effective and successful. Special educators most strongly report that it is critical that the Instructional Coach is a go-to person for any question. Across responses and people in focus groups and interviews, participants' perceptions are that the coach needs to be someone they can go to prior to going to administrators to ask questions. Participants deemed it critical that the Instructional Coach be available and open to these questions no matter how big or small the question or how silly the question seemed. Also reported from all participants was a value for the characteristic that the Instructional Coach needs to be non-judgmental in their response to the special educator. For example, one staff said,

I feel like I can go to [coach's name] for anything. She's always willing to help. She never makes me feel like my questions are stupid or that she's annoyed with me if I'm asking too many questions. She's definitely someone I trust. We have a good relationship. (Participant 2)

Interestingly, the relationship characteristic that emerged from only two people was the importance of the Instructional Coach being honest. Being a trusting, supportive, respectful, knowledgeable professional were used more often than the term *honesty*. A participant described the relationship with her Instructional Coach in this way: “I feel like we have an open, honest relationship where I trust her confidentiality 100%” (Participant 8). Another said, “I trust her, know that what I share will be confidential, and we have a friendship” (Participant 13). A third talked about the importance of respect and stated, “I like a high level of respect between the coach and the instructor so that it’s a sharing of ideas as opposed to a “this is how you do it” approach” (Participant 4). Each of these excerpts highlights the tenor of the overall conversations about the importance of special educators feeling that coaches must be people on whom they can depend and go-to at anytime. Special educators want to be able to have a sounding board, someone to listen, someone to model collaboration and communication techniques, and someone to be an overall resource to them around programming. For example, the researcher heard one person say, “I now have a resource to bounce communication challenges and programming ideas off of as well” (Participant 13).

As Knight (2007) and Vygotsky (1934) attest in their theoretical frameworks, social connections, conversations, and partnerships are critical to effective learning and Instructional Coaching. In this study, special educators confirm the importance of high quality relationships and positive personality traits on the part of the Instructional Coach in order to create an effective partnership and working relationship between the coach and person being coached. In the absence of these characteristics, Instructional Coaching would be less effective. Participants consider their relationship valuable as their coach provides the foundation for any questions and discussions to transpire within their partnership.

## **How Instructional Coaches Affect the Practice of Special Educators**

While reviewing the transcripts, themes emerged regarding how/in what ways special educators feel Instructional Coaches affect their daily work. The findings suggest many implications concerning the daily work of special educators due to having an Instructional Coach supporting them in their role. Each theme is fleshed out below with supporting language from participants.

### **Theme One: Increased Collaboration with Various Stakeholders**

The theme that all participants shared throughout the focus group discussions and one-to-one interviews was that the presence in their building of an Instructional Coach who specialized in special education allowed them to experience an increase in collaboration with all the stakeholders with whom they interact on a regular basis. A portion of the role of a special education case manager is to collaborate. Increased time in this area is, therefore, extremely beneficial. Their job as special educators is to ensure that all team members know, understand, and are ready to implement the student's IEP. This takes collaboration among many people on the student's team, all of whom wear different hats. Examples include: collaboration with regular educators who share IEP students; collaboration with educational technician regarding programming, data collection, and scheduling; collaboration with parents; collaboration with their special education colleagues; and collaboration with the Instructional Coach. Staff shared that, before having an Instructional Coach they "felt like in this building we were more isolated from each other. This Instructional Coach has pulled us together as a group more and we feel more unified" (Participant 2). Another staff said that

[I] wanted to add how crucial it seems to have someone who spans the special education

and general education departments who really sees the way we can be working together and sees kids move from one to the other and back again. (Participant 3)

A third teacher shared that she “feels that the coach is a good person to collaborate with particularly when we have a new student and are looking at student needs” (Participant 4). A new teacher shared that “she [coach] has been great as a new teacher to ask questions to get answers to” (Participant 5). Each of these staff shared different experiences about who they were collaborating with and what their needs were regarding collaboration, but each also demonstrated that having an Instructional Coach on staff increased collaboration for the special education teacher.

### **Theme Two: Assistance with Case Management Responsibilities**

A second theme that was shared by many participants in addition to increased collaboration was staff's feeling that the Instructional Coach assisted with their case management responsibilities. This theme was expressed by each participant many times in both focus groups and one-to-one interviews throughout the data collection conversations. Specifically, special educators spoke about how the Instructional Coach: conducts all the individual achievement evaluations with students for their initial referral to special education and their triennial evaluation; sets up and facilitates all IEP meetings; completes all the meeting minutes; assists with the development of the IEP; assists with scheduling students for service times, and keeps special educators reassured they have met legal requirements. Participants report that:

Without a coach I felt like the majority of my time was spent with case management work at [previous job/role] but here with having the Instructional Coaching role it is the opposite. I'm a teacher way more than I'm a case manager. (Participant 6)

Another says,

I think the biggest difference that I've seen is the decrease in paperwork that I've had to complete. In addition, scheduling IEP meetings is a huge burden removed from me. I'm doing so much less of those pieces like testing, scheduling IEP meetings, and writing evaluation reports and that has helped me in a huge way. (Participant 3)

She also stated that "decrease in paperwork has really opened up time for better planning, more consultation with both teachers and educational technicians and it has allowed me to do more observations in classrooms" (Participant 3). An energizing quote was shared by a staff member in a focus group and others quickly agreed. She said,

Before having an Instructional Coach, I did absolutely everything from taking the minutes, arranging meetings, trying to make sure that there's a regular education teacher and all the right people around the table. If one person couldn't attend, I had to go back to the drawing board and check with different schedules and try and figure out when the team could meet and it was very time consuming. When you have 23 kids on your caseload, it was stressful. I took a lot of work home with me and while that is part of the job, it could be exhausting. The Instructional Coach position has been fantastic, -- to the point where I don't think I would ever work anywhere else without this position.

(Participant 7)

Staff shared that they are much more energized to teach and stay in the profession as a special educator since they are not as bogged down with such copious case management paperwork responsibilities and they no longer need to take abundant paperwork home each day to complete outside of work hours.

### **Theme Three: Increased Time Teaching Students**

The theme of assisting with case management responsibilities leads directly to another theme that arose and had substantial enthusiasm and excited/excitement behind the comments that participants made throughout the focus group and interview discussions. This theme, increased time to teach students, elicited long and passionate responses from staff. Staff elaborated on this topic. It should be noted that all thirteen participants stated that their time working directly teaching students had increased due to the role of an Instructional Coach. Special educators feel that because the Coach can expertly take over many of the case management responsibilities, they were freed up to do what they love to do, which is teach. One veteran teacher even stated “I am enjoying teaching more than ever after 40 years” (Participant 4)! She also shared that she “can do what I love to do....prepare, plan, and execute instruction” (Participant 4). A longer response that was passionately shared by a seasoned special educator was:

Having an instructional coach has increased the time I spend with students and it has increased the time I spend planning for working with my students. I think it has helped me in taking what I do to a higher level of detail. For example, I might have done a writing unit with a group and had it planned but now I have it planned to a different level. I have finer tuned exemplars to show them and I have assignment documents with expectations listed with what kind of details are better. They're [the students] better off with my instruction and there are better outcomes from the students - because I have been able to have time to take my planning and preparation to a higher level of detail. I have more time to talk and consult with my ed techs - I supervise their small group work -- small groups that they teach or their work in classrooms and that has been helpful rather

than me rushing off to do an observation or to do paperwork or make phone calls. I am available in my room more. (Participant 8)

This staff member clearly articulates that not only does she get more time working directly with students but she now has more time to plan for effective instruction with students. Other staff members shared similar insights about how they can be present in the moment of teaching and not be distracted by their paperwork “to-do” list. They feel more engaged in the planning and executing of instruction as a result of the burden of some paperwork being lifted. An invigorating quote that emerged from a staff member was:

[Coach’s name] position has reminded me of why I got into teaching in the first place. It wasn’t to do paperwork. It wasn’t to manage data collection systems. It wasn’t to sit in meetings. It was to be in front of kids. (Participant 7)

An appropriate summarizing statement was provided by one staff member: “What she [coach] does for behind-the-scene stuff, taking care of much of the paperwork and some parent contact, gives us more time to have the scheduled face-to face time [with students]” (Participant 9). It was very uplifting and reinvigorating to feel the passion from participants when they shared their experiences of being in front of their students, teaching more hours each day and week. In general, educators enter the field in order to help children and make a difference in the lives of children. These special educators feel they now have more opportunity to focus on the direct instruction ordered in the IEPs of students on their caseloads so they, therefore, can impact student progress and make a difference in the lives of these children.

#### **Theme Four: Increased Time for Instructional Planning**

In addition to increased instructional time, special educators across grade levels reported that they have increased instructional planning time as well when an Instructional Coach is on

staff. This theme complements the theme of the Instructional Coach's assisting with case management responsibilities. Participants reported that since they have less regulated, legally sensitive paperwork to complete, such as evaluations, meeting minutes, and scheduling of meetings, they have more time to plan lessons and instruct students. This planning includes consultation with educational technicians concerning the lessons and teaching. As one special educator reported: “helping with the paperwork for IEP meetings; completing the written notice; doing all the testing; writing the testing reports; the scheduling; and working with ed techs provides much more time to devote to instruction and instructional planning” (Participant 4). A second special educator simply shared “having an Instructional Coach taking care of all of that [case management responsibilities] allows me to develop more meaningful, effective, thoughtful lessons and carry them out” (Participant 8). In general, staff shared that because they have less paperwork to complete and they have fewer distractions and stress because of this decrease in paperwork, they have more time to plan for and implement thoughtful lessons with their students. One person said it well: the coach role has “freed me up to spend more time with students and grow and improve as a teacher and see growth in the students I work with” (Participant 6). With more time to plan, more time to teach, this person feels there is more growth to be seen in students. When staff are pulled away from their students to perform other duties, their students get less instruction which may result in less student growth.

### **Theme Five: Peer Coaching**

A fifth theme to materialize from reviewing the data is staff's feeling that peer coaching is the most beneficial model for them as special educators. This theme diverges from the other four themes as it is the one theme that only emerged during the one-to-one interviews and did not emerge from the focus group data. Given the questions outlined for the focus groups and

interviews, the question regarding coaching types was not explored in the focus group setting. Instead, this question, about which of the four most common coaching models outlined in the literature (peer coaching; cognitive coaching; literacy coaching; and instructional coaching) they found to be most beneficial to them, was only asked during the 1:1 interviews.

Each participant who spoke to the current model reported that working with an Instructional Coach feels like peer coaching. They have an Instructional Coach who they depend on, value, and trust to support their daily work, yet this person does not provide coaching on specific instructional techniques and they do not stand in front of children and model direct teaching techniques. The coach is a colleague who is working under a teacher's contract. Therefore, peer coaching appeared to rise above the Instructional Coaching model as the preferred model for participants because they feel the current Instructional Coach model, as developed and implemented in this rural New England school district, is more peer-to-peer based than an Instructional Coach model. An Instructional Coach model is when a coach provides direct teaching and modeling of specific teaching methods to the special educator. Participants in the interviews felt that when a colleague provides them feedback and coaching, they are able to grow professionally. Staff reported that peer coaching is beneficial to them and said they often use the Instructional Coach "for bouncing ideas before approaching administration" (Participant 9). One staff shared that they benefit from having the Instructional Coach around because it is an "opportunity to take advantage by soaking it in, whether it's peer-to-peer or coach-to-me or direct instruction of something new" (Participant 10). When staff were talking during the data collection process they would often use peer coaching and peer collaboration interchangeably. For example one staff shared that "for me I find that I enjoy peer collaboration, and maybe it's "peer coaching," possibly better than most other models"

(Participant 7). From these conversations and these excerpts, it appears staff would like a peer to provide them feedback and/or to have a peer to go to with questions prior to going to an administrator with their questions or when they need help.

### **What Special Educators Desire from the Instructional Coaching Model**

While the findings represent many ways Instructional Coaches assist special educators in a New England public K-8 school, there was one strikingly evident and consistent theme that emerged in which special educators felt the role of Instructional Coach was lacking. Special educators feel that they do not have the opportunity to observe the Instructional Coach teaching or modeling lessons with students. While the participants are missing having the direct modeling of teaching, participants are very appreciative of what the Instructional Coaches do for them in their role. As a second theme in this area, staff expressed clearly that they have no desire to return to working as a special educator in a setting where no Instructional Coach is present.

#### **Theme One: Lack of Modeling Lessons by Instructional Coach**

The data documents that, while staff consider that they have had significant assistance from the Instructional Coach with case management responsibilities and now have had increased teaching and planning time and collaboration with others, they do not feel they had guidance or support from the Instructional Coaches on how to directly teach a student or had any modeling from an Instructional Coach on how to implement a lesson. Rather, they as educators have had more time to delve into their own professional development and grow as educators, obtaining this feedback on instructional techniques from other sources since their case management responsibilities have decreased. For example, one teacher shared:

I think a lot of the activities that she's doing now are definitely already helping me to grow. You know, to lift the load of the paperwork piece and the back-end of what we do

for kids, has allowed me to take advantage of things like that Wilson workshop and practicum work this year. It's allowed me to even think about and attempt to work on my National Board Certification last year and this year, and has given me the chance to put my energies elsewhere, knowing that that's going to be well taken care of. (Participant 7)

Special educators believe the current model does not allow for many experiences or opportunities for the Instructional Coach to actually model lessons with students for special educators, since Instructional Coaches are busy assisting special educators with case management responsibilities. Peer coaching provides a structure of colleague-to-colleague coaching, which is exactly how the model in this New England public school is set up. The theme of Instructional Coaches not modeling lessons emerged across focus group and interview discussions. The data and stories from participants indicates that, given all the other roles and responsibilities that the special education Instructional Coach has taken on, modeling of specific lessons is not an activity they engage in during their day-to-day work. Participants report that if the coach had “more time doing instructional coaching that would be a plus because it is always good to get another educators’ take on how to teach whatever” (Participant 10). Another participant states:

I think most of our time has been spent doing things other than instructional coaching, so I can't think of a technique that she has modeled for me. She's really been helping me with a lot of other things, especially relating to IEPs. (Participant 11)

A third says, “It would be fun to have time to have some more observation time available for specific coaching on lessons or techniques that I use with students to get some feedback” (Participant 8). While direct modeling appears to be a desired additional area that staff could benefit from, participants conclude that the Instructional Coaches are very busy supporting them

and their work in other ways which allows them, as special educators, to seek out professional development directly related to teaching strategies and techniques.

### **Theme Two: Negative Feelings of Returning to Previous Model of No Instructional Coach**

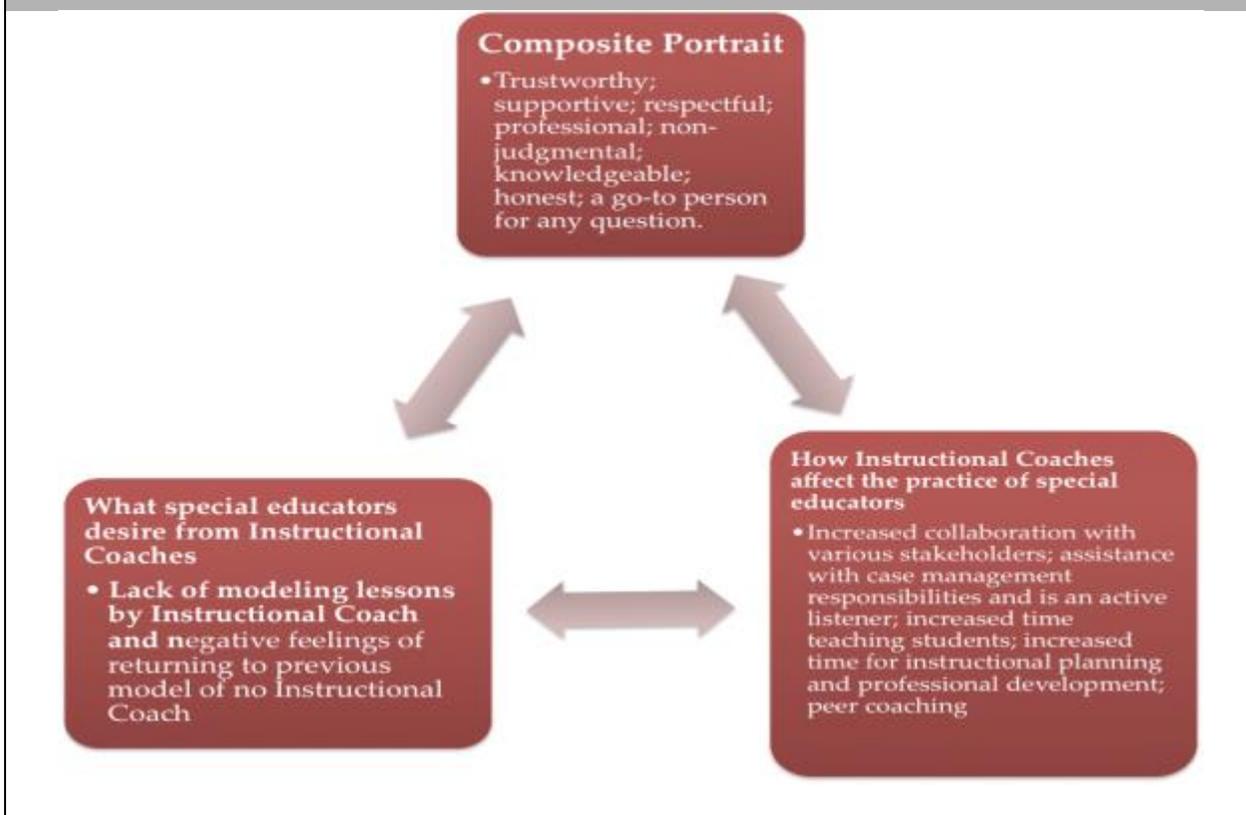
A second interesting theme that emerged was the strong desire from special educators not to return to a previous model when no Instructional Coach was in place. Now that this position has been established, staff verbalized they had no desire to go backwards and work in a setting without this model. They have very negative feelings about returning to the previous model of case management and of having no Instructional Coaches. While there was not a specific question regarding staff feelings about the role being removed, this theme came up in all focus group and one-to-one interview discussions. Special educators reported things such as:

I would cry if I had to go back to scheduling all those IEP meetings again. That makes me want to cry. The amount of time spent calling parents and then they're calling you back, endless phone tag. I couldn't do it. (Participant 3)

And, "I remember when kids lost and what my co-teachers and I had to go through [schedules] to balance working with kids, and testing kids, and handling meetings. Oh, and the constant phone calls" (Participant 8). Staff also said this is an "over-looked necessity" (Participant 8) and wonder "how we are so fortunate" (Participant 12) to work in a district where this role exists. Responses regarding these negative feelings spread across grade levels and across teachers with various years of experience.

The figure below visually represents the three super codes as discussed above.

Figure 1

*Super Codes***A Micro Look at the Data**

During the analysis, themes emerged from the data related to the pros and cons of the Instructional Coaching role as well as the characteristics special educators view as essential in an Instructional Coach for an effective partnership. There were themes and subthemes that emerged in all areas of the findings. Each of the relationship characteristics which contributed to the composite portrait of how special educators describe the Instructional Coach in their building are shown on a list. Three additional themes that were described later, in a second round of analysis, were synthesized into the eight final themes, including the relationship characteristics. The three additional subthemes included: staff feeling that they finally “get to teach;” active listening; and

increased time for professional development. This theme was combined with increased teaching time. Increased professional development was combined with increased professional planning time. And active listening was combined with increased collaboration. Another way of presenting the results is through examining a Code Cloud, which provides a visual interpretation of the preponderance of excerpts by code. The preponderance does not necessarily equal importance of each theme but provides the reader a visual of the findings. The larger the font size the more references made to that term in the data, which was then coded. For example, “increased collaboration” is the largest term in the Code Cloud below, indicating that it arose most in the data set. Conversely, “honest” is in the smallest font, indicating that it arose least in the data set. All eleven themes and eight relationship characteristics are included in the code cloud. This is shown to provide the reader with a different view of the data and to show the contrast in themes at a more micro level.

Figure 2

*Code Cloud*

## Summary

The purpose of this study was to address the overarching research question: In what ways do Instructional Coaches influence special educators' skills/effectiveness? Additionally, the study focused on related research questions of: What are special educators' experiences with coaching models used in public schools? And how has special educators' collaboration with an Instructional Coach influenced the way they prioritize their job responsibilities? Results demonstrate that Instructional Coaches most influence the skills and effectiveness of special educators by assisting with case management responsibilities, allowing special educators to increase the time they spend working directly with students, increase the time they spend planning for students, and provide them more time to engage in professional development to hone their skills as educators. Results also indicate that with the model in place at the specific district studied, Instructional Coaches did not illustrate specific teaching techniques for the participants. This study found that special educators value and have grown to depend on the role of the Instructional Coach in their buildings; they have negative feelings about ever working in a special education position without this administrative support. The collaboration between coach and the person coached in this study found that because of the trusting, supportive nature of the Instructional Coaches, participants feel they have a go-to person in their coach and that having a coach assist with all the legal paperwork responsibilities allows them more time to collaborate with others, allows them to prioritize working directly with students, and allows them more time for planning and preparing lessons with educational technicians.

## **CHAPTER 5**

### **CONCLUSIONS**

The qualitative instrumental case study examined the experiences that thirteen K-8 special educators have had with a common coaching model in a public school. Literature and research support the use of Instructional Coaches in public schools across various content areas. Different models of coaching and techniques used in public education for effective coaching were reviewed in the study.

Building-based focus groups and follow-up individual interviews were held to gather data and hear the stories and experiences of these special educators. The research was framed in Vygotsky's (1934) sociocultural theory of human learning and Knight's (2007) partnership theory. Specific questions were designed to probe the participants regarding their relationship with their Instructional Coach as well as gain a better understanding of what types of coaching are beneficial to them as special educators.

#### **Interpretation of Findings**

The interpretation of findings are presented and linked to the research questions. The overarching research question was: In what ways do Instructional Coaches influence special educators' skills/effectiveness? Findings from the data supporting each related question document the outcomes for this overarching research question. Related research questions included: What are special educators' experiences with coaching models used in public schools? Findings indicate that special educators appreciate Instructional Coaches who have the following attributes: knowledgeable; honest; trustworthy; supportive; respectful; non-judgmental; and being a go-to person. They note that Instructional Coaches make their experiences working in a New England public school more achievable and successful. Participants believe these attributes

in an Instructional Coach are not only beneficial but are required in order for a successful partnership to be formed and effective coaching to transpire. When this partnership is in place, participants share how their work as a special educator has been enhanced by having an Instructional Coach in their building. Findings also show that special educators benefit from a colleague or peer coaching them in their role. In addition, special educators report a desire to have more coaching happening in regards to specific instructional method and lessons.

The second related research question was: How has special educators' collaboration with an Instructional Coach influenced the way the educator prioritizes his or her job responsibilities? Conclusions of the finding indicate that Instructional Coaches influence the daily work of special educators most predominately in the areas of assisting with various federal and state mandated case management responsibilities which allows special educators the opportunity to collaborate more frequently with their colleagues, parents of students with whom they work, the Instructional Coach themselves, and the educational technicians who work in their program.

Additionally, this assistance with case management responsibilities of evaluating students, setting up and facilitating meetings, completing meeting minutes, and scheduling students, allows special educators to spend more time working directly with students, planning for lessons with students, and engaging in their own professional development. Results show that Instructional Coaches do not have time to model lessons for special educators due to the amount of support they are providing with communication and case management responsibilities. The data clearly shows that special educators have been able to prioritize their time working directly with students over completing paperwork and scheduling meetings due to the role of the Instructional Coach. Participants report that in the past they have been pulled away from teaching and thoughtful lesson planning by their legal paperwork requirements as part of their

case management role. Now that they have support by someone knowledgeable whom they can trust with these tasks, staff report that they are able to focus on developing meaningful lessons for students and working directly with students.

### **Tie to Conceptual Framework**

The area of data collection focused on how special educators view Instructional Coaches and what attributes/relationship characteristics they see as beneficial, and speaks to how this research ties to the conceptual framework. Data regarding how participants would characterize their relationship with their Instructional Coach was gathered. The sociocultural theory of human learning as put forth by Vygotsky (1934) is based on the principal that social interaction plays a fundamental role in the development of cognition. Vygotsky theorized that everything is learned in two levels, the first level through interactions with others and second through an individual level. He asserted that people learn by connecting socially with others and then they integrate this information on an individual level. This theory is helpful in examining the reciprocal relationship between a special educator's growth when an Instructional Coach is in place and the relevant relationship traits that allow special educators to connect with this coach.

Complimenting Vygotsky's sociocultural theory is a more current researcher, Jim Knight. Knight (2007) bases his work on the theory of partnership. Data in this study found that special educators feel they need a trusting, honest, supportive, knowledgeable, go-to person in their role in order to feel confident releasing case management responsibilities and increasing their collaboration, lesson planning, and direct teaching. The results of this study support Vygotsky and Knight's theories in that the social connection and partnership between coach and teacher is critical to the effectiveness of the Instructional Coach role in the field of special education in a New England public school district.

### **Limitations and Discrepancies in the Findings**

The data gathered in this study is limited to a small rural New England school district and limited to grades K-8. There were thirteen special educators who participated in this study, which is an appropriate sampling for a case study but also provides some limitations regarding the size of participation. Additionally, a limitation in this study was that the researcher was the director overseeing the K-8 programs in which research participants work. This potential for bias was well recognized and supports were put in place to minimize this limitation.

The excerpts provided by special educators throughout the focus groups and interviews were exceptionally consistent. Across grade levels, school buildings, and areas of specialty (functional life skills teachers, behavior teachers, resource room teachers), all staff noted a significant increase in collaboration with others due to the Instructional Coaching role. This includes special educators feeling strongly that the Instructional Coach is a valuable collaboration resource. The Coach understands special education laws, regulations, and various programming models and techniques. The Coach's possession of this knowledge allows special educators to grow professionally. Staff also consistently stated that their time working directly with students has increased due to this role while their case management responsibilities have decreased. Additionally, staff report that due to the time Instructional Coaches spend on assisting with case management responsibilities, scheduling, and meetings, Coaches do not have time nor do they spend time modeling specific teaching techniques for special educators. Staff feel that being coached by a peer/colleague is the most effective model of coaching. They express strong negative feelings about ever returning to working in a setting where there is no special education Instructional Coach present.

When discussing the various relationship characteristics and how they view an Instructional Coach, special educators consistently stated that they need a go-to person who is knowledgeable, non-judgmental, professional, respectful, supportive, and trustworthy. The one trait that was less consistently stated across participants was the need for the Instructional Coach to be honest. No one indicated that they wanted a dishonest coach but the term honesty did not arise from many participants.

While there are potential limitations in this study, the consistency in responses is striking across the thirteen participants, which, in the opinion of the researcher, strengthens the interpretation of the findings. Categories and themes seamlessly emerged from the data. If data were inconsistent across respondents, a larger sample size might have been required to gather more data to clearly identify divergent categories and themes across the data.

### **Implications**

The results from this study are meaningful and beneficial to the school district studied, the larger community, and other public school districts at the state and national level. The findings in this study support the efficacy of the Instructional Coach model. Having a special education expert as an Instructional Coach, who specifically supports K-8 special educators in public schools, benefits staff in their ability to have increased collaboration, increased time to work directly with students, and increased time to plan and prepare.

The results of this study benefit the school district and larger community. The students who are identified as having special education needs now have more time during which they are instructed by a certified special education teacher. This supports the vision of the district as well as the strategic plan. Additionally, it is evident that special educators now are able to collaborate on student needs and programming with the Instructional Coach, regular education colleagues,

special education colleagues, educational technicians, parents, and administration more often due to this model. There may also be implications for district administrators such as building principals. Having an expert in special education in their building who can support the teams to abide by all legal regulations may in fact make the challenging job of a building principal easier. The principal could potentially focus on other aspects of their job and be assured that a special education Instructional Coach is up-to-date on the regulations and keeping the building legally protected.

There are budgetary implications of this role; it does cost money to hire Instructional Coaches. These findings suggest that the investment is worth the cost as both staff and students are benefiting from having an Instructional Coach who is an expert in special education working in public K-8 schools. Special Educators face a diverse population of learners to case manage and instruct each year. Students' unique profiles and IEPs drive instructional practices yet special educators do not always have the appropriate training, skills, and teaching techniques to meet each student's unique learning needs. Having an Instructional Coach supporting their work, providing them more time to engage in professional development, and being an in-house expert in the field with whom they can consult helps address this challenge.

### **Benefits to the Larger Educational Field**

While there are limitations to the study, specifically the low number of thirteen participants and the grade levels of K-8 rather than K-12, the data could be used to help educators at both the state and district level make determinations about implementing this model in other public school settings. The special educators who participated in this study range in years of experience, gender, area of expertise, and grade level. Given how consistent the responses were from participants, it is definitively clear that having this model in place benefits

staff and allows special educators more time to teach. It is anticipated that with the right supports in place, including administrative support, these outcomes for staff could easily be replicated in another school setting. Similarly, grades 9-12 were not interviewed for this study, yet the commonalities among responses are not grade or student specific, indicating that findings would be similar at the high school level.

### **How These Findings Tie to the Literature**

As the literature of this study documents, Huguet et al., (2014) state that coaches “play multiple roles: they assist in connecting teachers with student data, interpreting data, applying new information to classroom practice, facilitating constructive dialogue, and identifying instructional responses” (Huguet, Marsh, & Farrell, 2014, p. 3). Participants in this study support the work of Huguet, Marsh & Farrell and document the importance of the instructional coach facilitating constructive dialogue and connecting with teachers around student data

Additionally, the literature outlines the various types of coaching. These types are “technical, problem solving, reflective practice, and collegial/team building” (Denton & Hasbrouck, 2009, p. 158). Research regarding the Instructional Coach model for this study supports that special education Instructional Coaches in grades K-8 in a New England public school assist case managers with technical responsibilities around case management, problem solving student cases, collaborating and reflecting with special educators and facilitating collegial team building in each of the three buildings.

Other literature documents the importance of the special educator and coach having a positive relationship in order for the coaching to be effective. Research by Houston (2015), Huguet, Marsh & Farrell (2014), Knight (2009, 2012, 2014, & 2016), Sweeney (2011), and Wellman & Lipton (2013) supports how critical it is for Instructional Coaches to build

relationships with those teachers they are mentoring in order to have a greater impact on teachers' professional development. Special educators in this study support this research and add to the literature around the importance of a positive relationship and the impact this has on a successful coaching partnership.

### **Connection to Transformative Learning and Leading**

Transformational leadership is a transforming or change-oriented leadership model which motivates followers through a shared vision, individual support and attention, clear modeling of change behaviors by the leader, and follower engagement. The goal of transformational leadership is to make effective organizational change in complex systems, allowing them to function more smoothly and efficiently. Implementing/employing/engaging skilled special education Instructional Coaches is a prime example of this leadership model. In this model, one is transforming the special education department in a school while motivating staff and increasing special educators' engagement in a shared vision that better meets the needs of the population of staff and students.

Instructional coaching has been a model in schools since the 1980's and early 1990's in some capacity or another, initially beginning in the field of reading instruction (Denton & Hasbrouck, 2009). Over the years instructional coaching has become more widespread and research/literature has developed supporting the model. Transformative leadership models have many principles which support the leadership work of implementing an instructional coach model, specific to special education, in a public school setting. These principles include: deconstruction and reconstruction of social/cultural knowledge frameworks that generate inequity; focusing on liberation, emancipation, democracy, equity, and justice; demonstrating moral courage and activism; and effecting deep and equitable change (Shields, 2010). In terms

of deconstruction and reconstruction of cultural knowledge frameworks that generate inequity, there are external barriers of the community, budget, and special education regulations that are realities of the daily work of education and specifically special education. Different buildings and different staff members need different levels of support to manage these barriers and allow for a level playing field for all to meet their job expectations. When considering focusing on liberation, emancipation, democracy, equity, and justice, the Director of Instructional Support is responsible for thinking creatively and guiding criteria around creating equity for all our students. Having the additional resource of an Instructional Coach who can tailor their coaching and support to staff needs provides more justice and equity to staff. Additionally, the director needs to have the moral courage to outline a clear vision of support that aligns with doing what is best for students. This vision of Instructional Coaching needs to then be consistently implement/implemented and evaluated over time. This takes courage from the transformative leader to embark on this change process and implement this model. Adding the Instructional Coach role has the potential to result in deep and equitable change for all staff and administration in the building(s) where this role exists (Shields, 2010). Research, literature, and this study support that a transformational leader creates a vision which includes the use of special education Instructional Coaches in a public school to support special educators in their complex roles.

### **Recommendations for Action**

Given that the results of this study are supported by previous literature of the effects of Instructional Coaching in schools, it is recommended that public school districts who are state and federally regulated to provide a meaningful education to all students, regardless of their disability, consider adding special education Instructional Coaches to their district. These coaches need to be highly trained in understanding the special education laws as well as the

principles found to be effective when coaching educators. Results indicate that this role should be used as an expert collaborator and facilitator of student-focused conversations as well as an expert in completing legally sensitive special education paperwork and case management responsibilities. Districts should allow for peer-to-peer conversations built into the school day regarding teaching and learning.

Data from this study suggests that participants were not provided regular modeling of how to teach lessons to students with special needs but that they would welcome this coaching. It is recommended that when replicating this model in another district, leaders consider how the role can be shaped in order to allow for all the essential supports that are in place in the district of study to continue moving forward and, if possible, to add modeling of lessons to the coach's job expectations to enhance the position.

Lastly, when considering recommendations based on this study, it is critical that leaders hire the right candidate for the role of special education Instructional Coach. Both the literature and the results of this study indicate a strong need for a coach who can foster a positive partnership with the special educators in their building. In order for the coaching to be successful, staff need to feel supported and confident in the coach's knowledge. They need to trust the coach and feel that they can go to that person for any question, no matter how big or small. Having a positive and collaborative relationship lays the foundation for the growth and learning of the special educator.

### **Benefits to Stakeholders**

The benefits of an instructional coaching model in the area of special education are clearly supported by this study. Certified staff have more time to work directly with some of the most complex and diverse learners in a school and they get increased opportunities to engage in

professional development to hone their skills. Additionally, due to this model they have an expert in the field who is available to them in their building to confer on student programming, working with parents, and collaborating with regular educators and educational technicians. This also allows staff more time to collaborate with these stakeholders to support student programming. Lastly, this study affirms for the district and community that the role of Instructional Coach is benefiting staff and students in the schools.

### **How will Results be Disseminated**

The results of this study will be shared with the 13 special educators who participated in the study, the three Instructional Coaches who work in the buildings where the special educators work, and the K-12 administrative team in district. Individually, the results will also be shared with the district's superintendent and curriculum director to assist in K-12 planning, programming, and budgetary discussions. Lastly, the results will be presented to the Board of Directors to share the benefits of this role with the community.

### **Recommendations for Further Study**

While this study provides clear and consistent data regarding the benefits of a special education Instructional Coach role in a New England public school focusing on grades K-8, it does not provide data focusing on grades 9-12 or data in a variety of schools. Both these areas are recommendations for further study. It would be valuable to research whether high school special educators' feedback aligns with grades K-8 or whether it is discrepant in some areas. It would also be powerful to expand the study to include a variety of K-12 public schools in various states with different demographic profiles. In addition, it is recommended that data be gathered in a setting where the Instructional Coach is able to consistently be in special education classrooms modeling direct lessons to compare the current data with this data and analyze the

benefits of each model for special educators and students. Lastly, it would be powerful to take the data from this study one step further and research whether special educators' retention in the field increases or decreases when the role of an Instructional Coach is in place. Additional data in all four of these areas would strengthen the body of research and literature in the field. This data is persuasive and meaningful to school districts across the nation.

### **Conclusion**

Instructional coaching is a valuable tool and resource for providing on-site expertise and support to special educators working in public schools in kindergarten through grade 8. Special educators have complex jobs that entail working with individual, unique learners and completing a variety of case management duties, which include completing an abundance of legal paperwork. On-site, ongoing collaboration and coaching that is tied directly to the work they are doing daily benefits staff, students, and the district as a whole. When the right relationship characteristics are in place and a solid partnership is formed between the special educator and coach, staff and students benefit. Coaching from a highly qualified, specialized personnel has a positive impact on special educators being able to increase the time they work with students, increase the time staff can collaborate with others, and expand the time staff can plan and engage in personal professional development. Data supports that staff working under a model that provides an Instructional Coach in their building do not want ever to return to working as a special educator in a setting where this model is not in place. Organizationally, schools benefit when the special educators they hire have more time to teach and each building has a coach who is responsible for supporting the staff to insure that all their programming and documentation is legally sound. Recommendations for further studies in the area of grade span, demographics, direct modeling of teaching techniques, and retention of teachers are recommended.

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## Appendix A

### Outreach for Stakeholders

*Title of Research Study: How do Instructional Coaches influence Special Educators' skills/effectiveness?*

Dear \_\_\_\_\_

As Director of Instructional Support, a committed educator, and a student in the Doctoral Program for Transformational Leadership at the University of New England, I actively support our work with students with special needs, the mission of MSAD 51, and your professional growth. Part of the vision of the district over the last few years has been to implement the role of Instructional Strategist (Instructional Coach) in the area of Special Education in each building. The role of this person has been to support you as Special Educators in refining your teaching practices and following the Chapter 101 regulations.

To further understand the effectiveness of the Instructional Strategist role in MSAD 51 I am conducting a qualitative case research study in grades K-8. You are a stakeholder in this study because you are a Special Educator in MSAD 51. The following information is provided in order to help you understand the research study (method, scope, and potential value). If you have any questions at any time, please do not hesitate to ask.

The purpose of this study is to examine the impact of Instructional Coaches on the teaching responsibilities of Special Educators.

The researcher will conduct staff focus groups in order to discover the experiences staff have had and how they feel about the role of the Instructional Strategist. In addition, each Special Educator will be asked to participate in 1:1 interviews with the researcher. Structured interview questions will be asked and there will be time for staff to share their personal input and experiences. These focus groups and interviews will help inform the researcher and the study.

The design and methodology of this case study, including all legal and ethical considerations for the rights of participants, have been developed to meet the Institutional Review Board (IRB) standards of UNE. Participation in this study is strictly voluntary. All participants may choose not to participate or may withdraw from the study at anytime. There are no known risks associated with this research. The information obtained in this study will have no bearing on supervision, evaluation, or other responsibilities of participants. This is a confidential process and any information, which could identify a participant and that is obtained during this study, will be held in the strictest confidence. The information obtained in this study may be published in educational journals or presented at educational conferences, but the data will contain no identifying information.

If you have any questions concerning this research study, you may contact Julie Olsen, Director of Instructional Support, in person at (207)-829-4835 or by email at [jolsen5@une.edu](mailto:jolsen5@une.edu). You may also contact the UNE Institutional Review Board at [irb@une.edu](mailto:irb@une.edu), 207-602-2244.

Respectfully,

Julie Olsen  
Researcher

## Appendix B

### UNIVERSITY OF NEW ENGLAND CONSENT FOR PARTICIPATION IN RESEARCH

**Project Title:** *Title of Research Study: How do Instructional Coaches influence Special Educators' skills/effectiveness?*

**Principal Investigator(s):** The principal investigator for this project is: Julie Olsen, University of New England, 207-829-4835 or jolsen@une.edu. Faculty advisor for this research is Michelle Collay at 207-602-2010 or mcollay@une.edu

#### **Introduction:**

- Please read this form, you may also request that the form is read to you. The purpose of this form is to provide you with information about this research study, and if you choose to participate, document your decision.
- You are encouraged to ask any questions that you may have about this study, now, during or after the project is complete. You can take as much time as you need to decide whether or not you want to participate. Your participation is voluntary.

#### **Why is this study being done?**

As a student in the Doctoral Program for Transformational Leadership at the University of New England, I actively support our work with students with special needs, the mission of MSAD 51, and your professional growth. Part of the vision of the district over the last few years has been to implement the role of Instructional Strategist (Instructional Coach) in the area of Special Education in each building. The role of this person has been to support you as Special Educators in refining your teaching practices and following the Chapter 101 regulations.

To further understand the effectiveness of the Instructional Coach (Strategist role) in MSAD 51 I am conducting a qualitative case research study in grades K-8. You are a stakeholder in this study because you are a Special Educator in MSAD 51.

The purpose of this study is to examine the impact of Instructional Coaches on the teaching responsibilities of Special Educators.

#### **Who will be in this study?**

- Kindergarten through 8<sup>th</sup> grade special educators who hold a Department of Education 282 certification will be invited to participate in this study. Special educators must be employed by MSAD 51 as a special educator and need to be currently working with a caseload of students. Instructional coaches will not participate in this research.
- There are 16 special educators who meet these criteria in MSAD 51.

#### **What will I be asked to do?**

- All 16 special educators will be asked to participate in one focus group meeting with their building level colleagues. This meeting will last for one-hour and specific questions will be asked while and audio recording is being taken. Notes will also be taken during this conversation.
- The first ten to twelve of the 16 special educators to respond will be asked to participate in follow up 1:1 interviews last approximately 20 minutes. Specific questions will be

asked while and audio recording is being taken. Notes will also be taken during this conversation.

- The purpose of these focus groups and 1:1 interviews is to better understand how special educators characterize their experiences working with an Instructional Coach.
- There will be no experimental or unusual procedures or interventions used.
- The intent is that all data collection will transpire in April and May 2017.
- Focus group and interview questions will be used and shared with participants prior to each meeting.
- There will be no financial compensation for participation.

#### **What are the possible risks of taking part in this study?**

- Participation in this study is strictly voluntary.
- All participants may choose not to participate or may withdraw from the study at anytime.
- There are no known risks associated with this research.
- The information obtained in this study will have no bearing on supervision, evaluation, or other responsibilities of participants.
- This is a confidential process and any information, which could identify a participant and that is obtained during this study, will be held in the strictest confidence.

#### **What are the possible benefits of taking part in this study?**

- There are no direct benefits to you for participating in this study. The outcomes of this research may be of interest to other special educators, the superintendent, and/or school board members.

#### **What will it cost me?**

- There are no anticipated costs for you to participation in the research. There is no travel included in this research as the focus groups and interviews will take place on MSAD 51 campus.

#### **How will my privacy be protected?**

- All focus groups and 1:1 interview meetings will take place in a private room on the campus of MSAD 51.
- This is a confidential process and any information, which could identify a participant and that is obtained during this study, will be held in the strictest confidence.
- The information obtained in this study may be published in educational journals or presented at educational conferences, but the data will contain no identifying information.

#### **How will my data be kept confidential?**

- The results of this study are designed to be anonymous, this means that no one, can link the data you provide to you, or identify you as a participant.
- All data will be housed on a password-protected computer or in a locked filing cabinet in the office of the principal investigator.

- Data will be coded
- Data will be encrypted using industry standards.
- No individually identifiable information will be collected.
- Only the researcher will have access to the data for the duration of the study and for three years after the study is complete. Once this time period has passed, all data will be shredded.
- Please note that regulatory agencies and the Institutional Review Board may review the research records.
- A copy of your signed consent form will be maintained by the principal investigator for at least 3 years after the project is complete before it is destroyed. The consent forms will be stored in a secure location that only members of the research team will have access to and will not be affiliated with any data obtained during the project.
- Members of the focus group will be asked not to repeat what is discussed but the researcher cannot ensure that they will respect other participants' privacy.
- Audio recordings will be taken of all focus groups and 1:1 interviews for the purpose of transcribing, coding, and analyzing the data to develop trends and categories across participants. These audio recording will be saved for three years and then deleted from all electronic devices.
- There is no intent to use the data for future research purposes upon the conclusion of this study.
- All research findings will be available to the participants upon completion of the dissertation. Staff will have access to a copy of the dissertation.

#### **What are my rights as a research participant?**

- Your participation is voluntary. Your decision to participate will have no impact on your current or future relations with the University or MSAD 51. Your decision to participate will not impact your relationship with their MSAD 51.
- You may skip or refuse to answer any question for any reason.
- If you choose not to participate there is no penalty to you and you will not lose any benefits that you are otherwise entitled to receive. You are free to withdraw from this research study at any time, for any reason. If you choose to withdraw from the research there will be no penalty to you and you will not lose any benefits that you are otherwise entitled to receive.
- You will be informed of any significant findings developed during the course of the research that may affect your willingness to participate in the research.

#### **What other options do I have?**

- You may choose not to participate.

#### **Whom may I contact with questions?**

- The researcher conducting this study is Julie Olsen. For questions or more information concerning this research you may contact her at 207-829-4835 or jolsen@msad51.org. The faculty advisor for this research is Michelle Collay and you can contact her at 207-602-2010 or mcollay@une.edu

- If you choose to participate in this research study and believe you may have suffered a research related injury, please contact Julie Olsen 207-829-4835 / [jolsen@msad51.org](mailto:jolsen@msad51.org) or Michelle Collay and you can contact her at 207-602-2010/[mcollay@une.edu](mailto:mcollay@une.edu)
- If you have any questions or concerns about your rights as a research subject, you may call Olgun Guvench, M.D. Ph.D., Chair of the UNE Institutional Review Board at (207) 221-4171 or [irb@une.edu](mailto:irb@une.edu).

**Will I receive a copy of this consent form?**

- You will be given a copy of this consent form.

---

**PARTICIPANT'S STATEMENT**

**I understand the above description of this research and the risks and benefits associated with my participation as a research subject. I agree to take part in the research and do so voluntarily.**

---

Participant's signature or

---

Date

Legally authorized representative

---

Printed name

**RESEARCHER'S STATEMENT**

**The participant named above had sufficient time to consider the information, had an opportunity to ask questions, and voluntarily agreed to be in this study.**

---

Researcher's signature

---

Date

---

Printed name

## Appendix C

### Focus Group Questions

*Title of Research Study: How do Instructional Coaches influence Special Educators' skills/effectiveness?*

- Please describe your experiences working in a setting where an Instructional Coach who is an expert in the field of Special Education is present.
- What are the benefits of the coaching model?
- Are there specific strategies that the Instructional Coach in your building implements that are more beneficial or less beneficial to you as a Special Educator? Examples of strategies are: use of technology, modeling a lesson, holding a pre-conference or post conference; facilitating meetings; engaging in learner focused conversations, etc.
- In what ways have your data collection methods and reporting changed due to input from an Instructional Coach?
- In what ways have your teaching practices changed as a result of your work with an Instructional Coach?
- Are there any stories you would like to share about your experiences with coaching? Can you describe an intervention? Can you describe a case of a student where coaching was influential on your practice?
- How would you describe your relationship with your Instructional Coach?
- Is there anything else you would like to share that has not already been asked?

## Appendix D

### 1:1 Interview Questions

Title of Research Study: How do Instructional Coaches influence Special Educators' skills/effectiveness?

- Describe a specific example of technique that a coach model for you and you were able to use with one of your students and/or their parent.
- From your experiences, what coaching models or techniques work best for you personally (peer coaching; cognitive coaching; literacy coaching; and instructional coaching)?
- Has having the Instructional Coach model in your building has increased or decreased the time you spend with students? Please share examples.
- Please share your insights working as a Special Educator in a situation both with and without an Instructional Coach.
- How would you describe your relationship with your Instructional Coach?
- What other practices or activities on the part of your Instructional Coach would help you grow as a practitioner?