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Teachers' Perceptions About Instructional Coaches

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ABSTRACT

Many states and school districts are using federal funds to hire instructional coaches to provide quality professional development for teachers. These instructional coaches provide on-site, on-going support for teachers. This study inquired into about teachers' perceptions of instructional coaches, both positive and negative. A survey was given to 52 teachers from four elementary schools that have had a coach for the past few years. The results indicated that 97% of the teachers who have been coached perceived the experience as beneficial and would choose to be coached again in the future. When asked about the benefits of being coached, the most prevalent answers were the opportunities to learn new strategies; the coach's modeling of lessons in the classroom; the immediate feedback given by the coach to the teacher; and the availability of resources from the coach.

INTRODUCTION

For decades, professional learning for practicing classroom teachers has virtually consisted of brief presentations, accompanied by handouts (Truscott & Truscott, 2004). However, teachers resent going to in-services sessions where someone tells them what to do but isn't around later to help them follow up (Knight, 2004a). The International Reading Association (IRA) says that these one-time, workshop-oriented professional development efforts do not result in changes in classroom practices or in improved student learning (2004).

Due to increased attention to reading achievement and the achievement gap in the United States, the Reading Excellence Act of 1998 and the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 have allotted large amounts of federal money

for professional development targeting improved reading instruction (IRA, 2004; Knight, 2004b). Many states are using these funds to hire instructional coaches in order to provide quality professional development for teachers that may be more effective embedded in the classroom, rather than relying on traditional, stand-up-and-deliver models (Truscott & Truscott, 2004). However, many teachers are reluctant to invite instructional coaches into their classrooms or to join in professional learning opportunities in which coaches facilitate or lead. This study investigates the reasons for teachers' decisions not to make use of this available resource.

DEFINITION OF INSTRUCTIONAL COACHES

Knight (2004b) gives the definition of the instructional coach as an on-site staff developer who teaches educators how to use proven teaching methods by utilizing a variety of professional development procedures, thus fostering widespread, high-quality implementation of interventions. Coaching is a form of inquiry-based learning (Feger, 2004), that provides teachers on-the-spot, everyday, professional learning (Knight, 2004a). "Coaches...offer principals and teachers the kind of professional development that research says is most effective: ongoing, in school, high quality, focused on instruction" (Guiney, n.d., p. 740).

Instructional coaches do the following: conduct one-to-one or small-group meetings with teachers to address concerns, guide teachers through instructional manuals and other materials, plan with teachers to identify interventions with students, prepare materials for teachers before instruction, model instructional practices in teachers' classrooms, observe teachers using the interventions, and provide feedback to those teachers (Knight, 2004a; Truscott & Truscott, 2004). Much of the work of coaches is done collaboratively with teachers through the demonstration lessons and observations, as well as pre-conference meetings, lab-site activities, debriefings, and classroom follow-up (Hall, 2004). Coaches also provide workshops for part or all of the faculty on topics chosen by teachers and facilitate inquiry groups or book studies in which participants read, research, discuss, and design instruction in the topic areas (Truscott & Truscott). They do not evaluate other teachers, provide information to be used in teacher evaluations, serve as substitute teachers, or fill in for the principal (Cameron, 2005).

EXPECTATIONS FOR INSTRUCTIONAL COACHES

Effective instructional coaches must be excellent classroom teachers and presenters; they must have in-depth knowledge of learning processes and assessment techniques and experience working with teachers. These skills enable them to master the complexities of observing and modeling in classrooms and providing feedback to teachers (IRA, 2004). Coaches must be curriculum experts and be willing to learn more about content areas and coaching, as well as have the ability to model a wide range of good teaching practices in the classroom (Cameron, 2005). Knight (2004), in his article in the *Journal of Staff Development* states that, "A coach's main task is to help teachers see how research-validated practices offer useful solutions to the problems teachers face . . . but, an instructional coach has to be more than an expert in instructional practices. She or he is part coach and part anthropologist, advising teachers on how to contend with the challenges and opportunities they face while recognizing each schools' unique culture" (p. 33).

An effective coach has excellent interpersonal skills that enable sensitivity to teachers' dilemmas, fears, and celebrations and create a learning community in the whole school (Feger, 2004). Because trust is the backbone of a teacher-coach relationship, coaches must be nurturing, supportive and active listeners. They must be nonjudgmental and respect teachers' needs (Robb, 2000). Knowledge of the practice of coaching, the strategies and structures to use (e.g. role of questioning, using materials with teachers, pros and cons of demonstration lessons), and the multiple roles of coaching in the classroom are necessary skills that coaches bring to the table through excellent training in coaching that should be continuous (Feger, 2004).

BENEFITS OF EMPLOYING INSTRUCTIONAL COACHES

Instructional coaches see themselves as equal partners with teachers in the work of teaching students. They respect teachers' professionalism and focus their efforts on conversations that lead to creative, practical application of research-based practices within the classroom (Knight, 2004b). Coaches work from the assumption that knowledge is learned quickest when it is learned on the job. Coaches are right with the teachers and their students. They see what's happening in the classroom and they provide realistic sugges-

tions or solutions for what's happening. The coach gives the teacher something to use, right now, right here, with these kids, in this content area. It is that practicality that has won widespread teacher support for hiring and using instructional coaches (Knight, 2004a). There is growing support that coaching teachers in their practice is the most powerful means to increase their knowledge and improve their practice (Lyons & Pinnell, 2001).

OBSTACLES INSTRUCTIONAL COACHES FACE

Instructional coaches face obstacles with teachers, administrators and district level employees. Initially, teachers are somewhat anxious because they are not sure what the coach's role is going to be in their classrooms. Teachers often think of coaches as evaluators who will be analyzing their lessons (Guiney, n.d.). Though some teachers believe it is beneficial to watch a coach model instruction associated with learning strategies or classroom management procedures, many do not believe it would be beneficial to watch an instructional coach teach specific content (Knight, 2004b) because they do not think the coach is qualified. Teachers also claim lack of time, changing state and federal mandates, and changes in the state curriculum (Cameron, 2005) as reasons for not utilizing instructional coaches. They may feel that coaching is just another fad that will come and go and do not want to invest their time and energy in another fad.

Coaching doesn't work unless teachers start practicing right away. Brandt (1987), in a conversation with Bruce Joyce, found that "to learn a new skill, you've got to practice it a lot in the first couple of weeks immediately following training. . . . Teachers must practice whatever they're trying to learn a bunch of times. If you don't practice it, after a month, the skills erode" (p. 12). One of the obstacles that coaches face is teachers' failure to practice the teaching strategies that have been modeled. The best way to involve teachers with coaching is to respect their ability to make decisions, including the decision to be coached in the first place. The least successful way to involve teachers is to tell them they have to do it (Knight, 2004a).

In order for instructional coaches to thrive as staff developers, they need support from the administration and the district. Coaches need opportunities for ongoing training, both in the school and at the district, state, or national level. An external facilitator who reviews the coaches can bring them to a new

level of learning. Having a coach for the coaches makes the difference in developing coaches who build capacity among teachers instead of continuing as they are (Galm & Perry, 2004). A coach who continues learning will push teachers to continue learning as well. Some coaches have been hired with little or no training and/or are given little opportunity to receive training after being hired. This lack of training is an obstacle for teachers who would normally be willing to work with coaches but prefer not to work with someone who may be unable to help them.

The purpose of this study was to gather information about teachers' perceptions about instructional coaches. After giving a short definition of what coaches are and what they do, I surveyed elementary school teachers to find out how they feel about coaches, if they've ever been coached before, and why they wouldn't want to be coached or if they've had the chance to be coached, why they refused to do so. I expected that the obstacles for teachers' utilizing instructional coaches as part of professional learning would be the following: distrust in the coaches and in professional learning activities in general, lack of time, perception of coaching as being a fad, coaches' lack of content knowledge and/or lack of training, and uncertainty of what coaches really do. Some teachers may be very apprehensive about being judged and others may think that they know enough about teaching to get by and do not need to be coached. Finally, some teachers may be near enough to retirement that they just do not want to change the way they have always taught and some are just not interested. I also expected that primary teachers (K-2) would perceive coaching in a more positive light than do upper elementary teachers (3-5).

METHOD

PARTICIPANTS

Teachers from four elementary schools in Houston County were chosen to be participants in this research. Houston County is located in Middle Georgia next to Warner Robins Air Force Base and consists of 21 elementary schools, two of which are strictly primary and three are strictly upper elementary, seven middle schools, and four high schools. The system serves 23,000 students, 40% of whom are eligible for free or reduced lunches, and employs 1,544 teachers. The four schools chosen for this research are Title I schools.

Title I schools are those that receive federal funding to help ensure that all children have the opportunity to obtain a high quality education. These schools have a high percentage of students who qualify for free or reduced lunches. Three of the schools are located within two miles of each other in the northern end of the county and the fourth is a primary school located in the southern part. All four schools have had an instructional coach during the past few years.

With the exception of teachers who are new this year, all of the Kindergarten through fifth grade, special education, and Early Intervention Prevention teachers at each of the schools participated, totaling 105 teachers. Of those given the survey, 52 returned them for a response rate of 50%. The teachers responding to the survey varied in teaching experience, from one to 36 years. The mean was 12.6 years. Of the 47 teachers who were coached, seven taught kindergarten, 17 taught first grade, one taught second grade, one taught third grade, two taught fourth grade, three taught fifth grade, eight taught special education (multiple grades) and eight were Early Intervention Program (EIP) teachers (teaching multiple grades).

INSTRUMENTATION

The instrument used was an experimenter-made survey. It consisted of 11 questions about teachers' perception of instructional coaches and the coaching experience. Three questions were yes/no, four were checklist type, one used a Likert scale, one was open-ended, and two were demographic. The four checklist type questions also included an open-ended (other) choice. Consent forms were distributed with the survey.

PROCEDURES

Before beginning my research, I first received permission to conduct the survey from the assistant superintendent and the principals of the four schools involved. I enlisted help from either the assistant principals or instructional coaches from each of the schools to conduct the survey for me. The surveys were put in teachers' mailboxes with an explanation of what the surveys were to be used for. In order to ensure anonymity, the consent letters and surveys were collected in separate envelopes before being returned to me.

DESIGN & DATA ANALYSIS

This was a mixed method research design (descriptive quantitative-qualitative). The results were compiled into percentages and number of respondents. The qualitative data was analyzed for the most frequent findings (see Tables).

RESULTS

Of the 52 teachers who answered the survey, 47 (90%) took advantage of coaching opportunities while five did not. Of the 47 teachers who were coached, 27 (57%) strongly agreed that the experience was an effective one and 19 more (40%) agreed that it was effective; one strongly disagreed. When asked about the benefits of being coached, the most prevalent answers were the opportunities to learn new strategies; the coach's modeling of lessons in the classroom; the immediate feedback given by the coach to the teacher; and the availability of resources from the coach (see Table 1 and Figure 1).

When asked for suggestions to make their coaching experience better, eight teachers preferred having more time to spend with the coach and eight preferred being able to be coached more often. Seven teachers made positive comments, stating that they could think of nothing that would have improved their experience (see Table 2 and Figure 2).

Teachers who chose not to take advantage of coaching opportunities reported that they felt they didn't have time to be coached (four teachers), they were apprehensive about being judged (two teachers), and the coach's schedule conflicted with theirs (three teachers). One teacher who was coached stated that she was given no choice as to whether or not she wanted to be coached. Two teachers (one who was coached and one who was not), reported concerns that some coaches are not given enough training before beginning their duties as coaches (see Table 3 and Figure 3).

Ten teachers reported being coached on a daily basis, 12 were coached once a week, two were coached twice a month, two were coached once a month, 15 were coached several times per year, three were coached 'as needed', and two were coached infrequently. When asked how they were coached, 32 teachers reported being coached one-on-one, 34 were coached in small groups, 21 were coached in large groups, two were given resources, and one

was coached daily in a content area for one month. When asked if they would choose to be coached this year if given the opportunity, 45 marked "yes", three checked "maybe", two checked "it depends", and two left the question blank. No one checked "no". Of the five teachers who were not coached last year, three of them responded that they would choose to be coached this year if given the opportunity, one responded with a "maybe", and one left the question blank.

More kindergarten and first grade teachers were coached than second through fifth grade teachers. This may be due both to the fact that one of the schools surveyed was a primary school and that some of the upper elementary teachers from the other three schools may have chosen not to participate in the survey.

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to gather information about teachers' perceptions of instructional coaches. Because teachers were not required to do the survey, there's a strong possibility that teachers who were not coached or those who had bad experiences with coaching did not bother to participate in the survey. Due to this possibility, the results of the research (97% positive) are probably inflated in regards to the positive aspects of coaching. Nevertheless, these results are encouraging for other school systems who are considering this approach to teacher development.

Fortunately, the information obtained from the open-ended questions, especially the question asking for ways to improve the coaching experience, was beneficial to this research. The information given about the benefits of coaching confirmed the previous findings of researchers such as Knight (2004b), in which "teachers strongly agreed that watching an instructional coach made it easier for them to implement an instructional practice, increased their fidelity to the instructional model, increased their confidence, and enabled them to learn other teaching techniques. . . . [Thus] watching a coach in the classroom was an important part of professional learning" (p. 4).

The two things that teachers felt would improve their coaching experiences would be to have more time with the coach and to be coached more often. Neither of these can happen when a coach has too many teachers to

work with. The most common obstacle to a teacher's decision to work with coach was the lack of time. This obstacle can be overcome when a coach has the time to work with teachers at the teacher's convenience, which is another reason for coaches to have a limited workload. Administrators forcing teachers to be coached and schools and districts hiring coaches who lack training are two obstacles that need to be addressed at the district level. Both of these obstacles can undermine a coach's success with a teacher before coaching even begins. According to Knight (2004b), "Coaching can quickly make a difference in a school when district leaders, principals, and highly qualified coaches all work together in partnership to improve the quality of instruction experienced by students. However, when administrative support is lacking or when instructional coaches lack knowledge or important communication skills, a coaching program may never get off the ground" (p. 3).

This information should be helpful both to school districts that are considering hiring instructional coaches and to those that are adding more coaches to their systems. District personnel, local school administrators, and instructional coaches need to know of the positive perceptions that teachers have about coaching, the positive experiences that teachers believe were beneficial, the ways teachers believe coaching could be improved, and the negative aspects of coaching that keep teachers from participating in the coaching experience.

TABLE 1

Survey Results of Positive Coaching Experiences

Positive Experience	% of Respondents
Learned new strategies	82.7
Availability of resources from coach	69.2
Immediate feedback	69.2
Coach's modeling of lessons in classroom	69.2
Availability of help when needed	63.5
Feeling of collegiality	63.5
Continuous learning opportunities	61.5
One-on-one help	61.5
Other	7.7

TABLE 2

Survey Results of Ways to Improve Coaching Experience

Ways to Improve Coaching	% of Respondents
More frequent coaching experiences	15.4
More time spent with coach	15.4
Immediate debriefing opportunity	2.0
Coach's ideas perceived as voluntary, instead of a mandate	2.0
More personal contact	2.0
Start slowly with beginning teachers	2.0
No improvement needed; had positive experience	13.5

TABLE 3*Survey Results of Obstacles of Instructional Coaching*

Obstacles	% of Respondents
Not enough time	7.6
Coach didn't have enough training	3.8
Apprehensive about being judged	3.8
It's just a fad	0.0
Don't trust coaches	0.0
Wary of professional learning activities in general	0.0
Coach isn't knowledgeable enough	0.0
I'm just not interested	0.0
I'm retiring soon	0.0
I don't need coaching	0.0
Not sure what coaches really do	0.0
Other	9.6

FIGURE 1

Positive coaching experiences

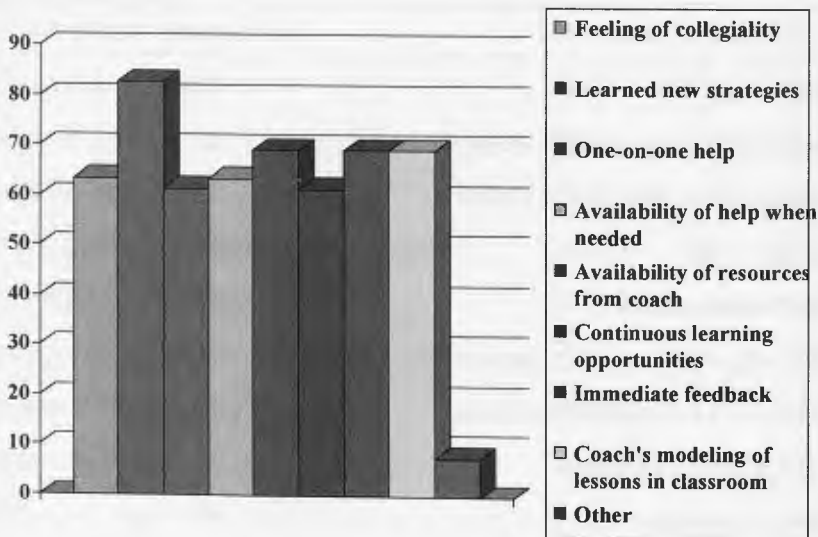


FIGURE 2

Suggestions to improve coaching

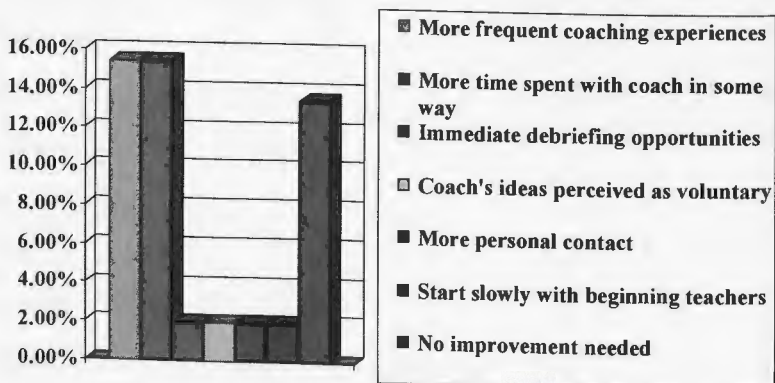
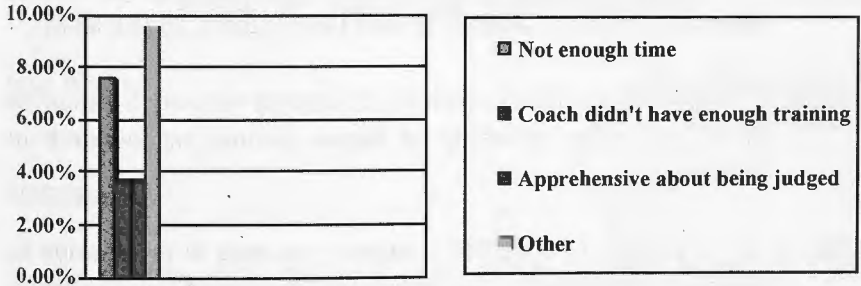


FIGURE 3

Obstacles to coaching



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