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Co-navigating the Complexities of School Reform: The Establishment and On-going Maintenance of Relational Trust in School Reform Efforts

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this research was to examine the ways in which the principal and literacy coach collectively developed and maintained relational trust in order to establish school literacy reform efforts. Drawing from a larger set of data, we employed qualitative methods to explore interviews and surveys from the principals and literacy coaches at two different schools who were able to implement literacy reform for several consecutive years. The relational trust established between the coach and principal enabled them to co-navigate issues that might have otherwise impeded literacy reform efforts in their school. Acting together, the principal and the coach were able to communicate a common vision for literacy reform, which resulted in increased implementation of the reform framework in their schools.

ARTICLE HISTORY

KEYWORDS

Literacy professionals; school reform; interprofessional relationships; relational trust

Washington Elementary is in the third year of a literacy reform implementation. The principal, Mrs. Miller, believes strongly in the reform's framework and in her literacy coach, Ms. Wright. In fact, she has reorganized the school's schedule so that Ms. Wright can provide support in each teacher's classroom for large blocks of time. Communication between Mrs. Miller and Ms. Wright is ongoing and constructive throughout the year as they plan ways to support teachers. Mrs. Miller notes, "if [the coach] and I ever cannot communicate, [the reform] will fall flat and we'll be stuck." Reform efforts are thriving due to school-wide expectations regarding involvement in the framework. Specifically, the teachers, coach, and principal built a relationship that helped establish rapport with each other and confidence in the program. This strong sense of trust between the principal and literacy coach was critical to the successful school reform efforts at Washington Elementary.

Schools are socially complex places where individuals and groups are highly dependent on other individuals within the school system, especially so when involved in school reform efforts. Changing how teachers implement literacy instruction necessitates a research-based, sustained process that facilitates buy-in from the principal, coach, and teachers (Coburn & Woulfin, 2012; Elish-Piper & L'Allier, 2010; Lowenhaupt, McKinney, & Reeves, 2014; Scott, Cortina, & Carlisle, 2012; Woulfin, 2018). One such research-based, sustained process is the implementation of a comprehensive language and literacy framework that includes literacy coaching for teachers in the schools (Biancarosa, Bryk, & Dexter, 2010; Lee, Smith, & Croninger, 1995; Newmann & Wehlage, 1995; Woulfin & Rigby, 2017). Yet, even with

strong research-based programs, these reform movements are often derailed by a myriad of problems arising at the state, district, and school levels (Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Finkelstein, 2016; Labaree, 2008; Mangin & Dunsmore, 2015). Despite the many difficulties school reform movements may encounter, schools with strong professional relationships are more prepared to overcome challenges and successfully redesign themselves in ways which increase student achievement (Huget, Marsh, & Farrell, 2014; Lee et al., 1995; Newmann & Wehlage, 1995; O'Connor, Fulmer, Harty, & Bell, 2005; Taylor, Pearson, Peterson, & Rodriguez, 2004).

Often, school improvement movements focus on improving classroom instruction, but effective implementation of school reform efforts also rely on the establishment of trust between colleagues (Bryk & Schneider, 2002). Therefore, understanding the development of relational trust and understanding how to maintain relational trust are of central importance to efforts to improve school performance and student outcomes. Knowing which factors augment trust in schools is imperative for school leaders and policy makers. Previous research on relational trust within schools undergoing literacy reform efforts has focused on the whole-scale efforts between the administration, stakeholders, coaches, and teachers in improvements on student learning (Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Cosner, 2009; Daly, 2009; Forsyth, 2008; Forsyth, Adams, & Hoy, 2011; Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 1998). Additionally, research has looked at relational trust as an individual entity instead of looking at the collective actions the principal and coach take to establish relational trust and achieve reform efforts (Coburn & Woulfin, 2012; Mraz, Algozzine, & Watson, 2008; Shanklin, 2006; Woulfin & Rigby, 2017).

This study seeks to add to the literature on navigating reform efforts by arguing a positive interprofessional relationship between principals and coaches is an imperative in schools seeking to successfully implement school reform. In this research, we present two exemplar schools that were able to implement a school reform that includes literacy coaching, Literacy Collaborative® (LC) (see www.lcosu.org), for several years. The aim of LC is to improve children's literacy achievement through the implementation of a comprehensive literacy framework (Fountas & Pinnell, 2017) and by supporting teachers to become experts in enacting the framework in their classrooms (Atteberry & Bryk, 2011). To become an LC school, an on-site coach completes graduate coursework for a year to learn about teaching, coaching, and providing professional development (PD). The following year, the coach teaches the literacy block daily; provides long-term PD; and coaches teachers in classrooms to support them as they work to conceptualize classroom procedures, materials, and the social routines of the school.

The LC framework is more than just a set of instructional principles; the human relationships behind the pedagogy serve to increase its effectiveness and success. Therefore, our focus is on the collective nature of the relationship between the school administration and literacy coach involved in reform efforts. We argue in these schools, the relationship of the literacy coach and the principal played an essential role in the ways in which the pair was able to co-navigate many of the difficulties that thwarted reform efforts in other schools. To this end, this research aims to address two central questions: 1) How do principals and coaches collectively establish relational trust with each other to address and continue reform efforts? 2) How do the principals and coaches collectively maintain the relational trust established through reform efforts? We begin by framing our research around the theory of relational trust.

Next, we explain our methodology. Then, we review our findings, exploring the role relational trust plays as the literacy coach and school principal work to navigate reform efforts. Finally, we discuss the implications of this research.

Literature review and conceptual framework

Relational trust

Extant research characterizes relational trust as a necessity for implementing the sustainable school change driving improvements in educational processes. For instance, top performing schools are those able to continuously revise and improve upon their educational processes in order to create better student learning outcomes (Chenoweth, 2007; Mourshed, Chinezi, & Barber, 2010). Relational trust reduces the sense of risk associated with change, which makes it more likely reform efforts will be taken up throughout a school community (Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 1998). Over the course of a decade, Bryk and Schneider (2002) conducted research with more than 400 Chicago elementary schools to discover any identifiable progress or issues in school reform efforts. Their data included observations from school meetings and classroom lessons, interviews and notes from individual meetings and focus groups consisting of principals, teachers, parents, and community leaders. They found elementary schools with high relational trust were significantly more likely to demonstrate improvements in student learning. The work of numerous other researchers substantiates Bryk and Schneider's findings in various school contexts (e.g., Cosner, 2009; Daly, 2009; Forsyth, 2008; Forsyth et al., 2011; Tschannen-Moran, 2009) making it clear researchers and practitioners interested in school reform efforts need to pay careful attention to the ways in which interpersonal relationships are developed and maintained in schools.

The theory of relational trust in schools offers a framework for understanding the ways principals and literacy coaches interact to implement school reform efforts. Relational trust theory is informed by literature pertaining to social systems on organizational trust (Bryk & Schneider, 2002; VanMaele, Forsyth, & Van Houtte, 2014). Although trust has been defined in various ways across the literature, we employed VanMaele et al.'s (2014) definition of trust as "a condition in which people or groups find themselves vulnerable to others under conditions of risk and interdependence" (p. 5). Certainly, the members of many organizations rely on each other to carry out their work; however, as argued by Bryk and Schneider (2002), schools are inherently social institutions that depend on the quality of social exchanges between staff, students, and community in order to function successfully.

Productive school communities are those in which the members have a common understanding of the obligations and expectations of each role (Bryk & Schneider, 2003). Trust is relational because, in schools, the success of each individual member of the school community is dependent on the support they receive from the other members of the school community. Not only do individuals need to fulfill their role obligations to establish trust, but they also need to act in ways which reduce the sense of vulnerability in their coworkers. Importantly, Bryk and Schneider (2002) note it is too simplistic to assume trust is something that can be achieved in a workshop or a retreat. Instead, trust is something built through day-to-day interactions and repeated social exchanges.

Because extant research has focused on the separate roles of the principal and the coach in establishing relational trust, in the following section we have first described research on the role of the principal, and then described research on the role of the coach. Next, we speculate how, collectively, the principal and literacy coach can work together to establish relational trust in ways that positively impact reform efforts.

Role of the principal

Benevolence, competence, and integrity are key characteristics of leaders who establish relational trust within their organization (Tschannen-Moran & Gareis, 2015). In order to be perceived as benevolent, principals must be consistent in their words and actions, and demonstrate genuine care for teachers, students, and parents (Cranston, 2011). When principals encourage teachers to have a voice in organizational decisions, they create mutual trust between themselves and their staff (Tschannen-Moran & Gareis, 2015). Also, principals must capably manage their responsibilities as a school leader in order to establish role competence (Bryk & Schneider, 2003; Handford & Leithwood, 2013; Rigby, 2015). Handford and Leithwood (2013) describe competence as being both functional and interpersonal. This means competence is more than just managing school resources appropriately, but extends to include problem solving, conflict resolution, maintaining the school vision, and modeling professional behavior (Handford & Leithwood, 2013; Tschannen-Moran & Gareis, 2015). Handford and Leithwood's (2013) research on the leadership practices teachers perceive as signs of trustworthiness illustrated that competent principals are visible in the school and in classrooms, engaged in formal and informal classroom observations, and knowledgeable about the instructional activities occurring in classrooms. Bryk and Schneider (2002) also note the principals' integrity is strongly linked to the ways they carry out their moral obligation to advance the best interests of the students.

Tschannen-Moran and Gareis (2015) found faculty trust in the principal was strongly related to both the principal's collegial leadership behaviors (his or her ability to be friendly, open to teacher input, and approachable) and instructional leadership behaviors (their awareness and engagement with the instructional program of the school). In fact, according to Tschannen-Moran and Gareis (2015), "...without trust, principals cannot be effective leaders. Faculty trust in the principal is related directly to student achievement and it is also related to important elements of school climate which are, in turn, related to student achievement" (p. 84). Bryk and Schneider (2002) explain "principals must be prepared to engage in conflict in order to advance reform. Yet they also need social support and trust from a solid core of the faculty if reform is to have a chance of succeeding" (p. 73). These findings are particularly relevant to the principals' involvement in reform efforts because the principal plays a central role in impacting teachers' instructional practices through providing PD opportunities and teacher supervision.

Importantly, the principal also plays an important role in reform efforts through their conceptualization and support of the role of the literacy coach. Matsumura, Sartoris, DiPrima, and Garnier (2009) investigated the ways principal leadership impacted teachers' participation in a new literacy coaching program. Their research identified several ways in which principals supported literacy coaches. Principals facilitated coaches' work with teachers by endorsing the coach in ways both public (i.e., identifying the coach as an a literacy expert and a resource for teachers) and subtle (i.e., including the coach in leadership activities). Matsumura et al. (2009) also found principals who granted the

coach professional autonomy, such as positioning the coach as an expert in literacy and trusting the coach with his/her own schedule with teachers and other school matters, were subtly signaling to teachers the coach had expertise and warranted respect. Another dimension of principal leadership that supported literacy coaches was the principals' active participation in the PD the coach organized, supporting the coach in observing teachers in their classrooms, and providing time for the coach to meet with those teachers among other aspects of involvement in the coaching program.

Principals are responsible for sustaining their school's vision, interacting with the broader school community, managing the school, and evaluating faculty effectiveness (National Policy Board for Educational Administration, 2015) and are therefore "critically positioned" to impact educational objectives (Spillane, Halverson, & Diamond, 2004; Tschannen-Moran & Gareis, 2015, p. 68).

Role of the coach

Our review of the literature unearthed numerous descriptions of the role of the literacy coach, describing the coaches' competence and interpersonal skills as important to successfully completing their role (e.g., Finkelstein, 2019; Mraz et al., 2008; Shanklin, 2006), but did not yield much research specifically on relational trust and how it is established and maintained between the roles of the literacy coach and principal. However, recent research has discussed the specific relational dynamics between coaches and teachers in the field (e.g., Edwards-Grove, Grootenboer, & Ronnerman, 2016; Finkelstein, 2019). Finkelstein (2019) shared a case of herself as a literacy coach working to establish relational trust with a teacher needing instructional improvement. This focus on the interactional dynamics between herself and the teacher acknowledged the need for such trust in addressing change at the classroom level. Moreover, Edwards-Grove et al. (2016) conducted research on the role of the middle leader in establishing a culture of relational trust in action research. They defined middle leaders as "those who have an acknowledged position of leadership in their school but also have a significant teaching role" (p. 371); Edwards-Grove et al. (2016), argue the actions of middle leaders have the greatest potential to impact student learning and become the impetus for teaching change because they "... exercise their leading in and around the teaching that happens in classrooms ..." (p. 372).

Notably, in Matsumura et al.'s (2009) study the researchers found the principal's understanding of the role of the literacy coach significantly impacted the amount of time coaches spent observing teachers. How the principal dictates the responsibilities of the literacy coach is important to reform efforts. Literacy coaches are often asked to fulfill many roles, which can cause teachers to ambiguously perceive the coaches' role (Bean, Draper, Hall, Vandermolen, & Zigmond, 2010; Walpole & Blamey, 2008). Lynch and Ferguson (2010) interviewed literacy coaches and asked them to articulate what barriers exist to them being able to perform the role of literacy coach. They indicated a lack of administrative support was a large barrier because principals did not support the coaches' decisions, nor provide opportunity for coaches and teachers to meet and discuss classroom procedures. Some coaches reported they were often asked to complete other duties outside of coaching because principals did not articulate a clear role for them in the school. Furthermore, in Matsumura et al.'s (2009) study, the researchers found when principals conceptualized the coach's role as one that supported teachers through observing and coaching them, the coach was frequently in classrooms collaborating with teachers. However, if the principal

conceptualized the coach's job as being separate from their work with teachers (i.e., administering assessments, bus duty, etc.), then the coach had difficulty working with teachers in their classrooms. Otaiba, Hosp, Smartt, and Dole (2008) posited in order for coaches to be successful at their job, administration needs to clearly explain what the role of the coach entails.

While the research reviewed here points to the importance of the role of the coach in facilitating reform and to the importance of the principal's support of the literacy coaches' role, it does not reveal ways in which the principal and coach might co-construct and maintain a common understanding of the coach's role to leverage school reform efforts. Furthermore, our literature review revealed a lack of research exploring the role of the coach's relationships with their principal, and how that relationship did or did not enable the pair to cultivate trust with the school staff in order to continue reform efforts. The present research will be one step toward filling these gaps.

Methodology

This qualitative study is grounded in social constructivist epistemologies (Kamberelis & Dimitriadis, 2005) and therefore seeks to examine how relational trust is constructed "through symbolic acts of human beings in relation to the world" (p. 32). As literacy researchers with our own beliefs about the efficacy of LC, the social constructivist perspective required us to acknowledge our own biases so as not to impose our expectations on interviewees, and aligns with our research methods. The data for this research was collected as part of a larger project studying the implementation of LC over a five-year period in a large Midwestern urban school district. Following Rubin and Rubin's (2012) responsive interviewing model, the "researcher's role is to gather narratives, descriptions, and interpretations from an array of conversational partners and put them together in a reasoned way that re-creates a culture or describes a process or set of events in a way that participants would recognize as real" (p. 7). We saw Rubin and Rubin's model as appropriate for our research because the model emphasizes the flexibility of design, and allows the researcher to alter questions asked, the sites chosen, and the situations to study. Circumstances in the school district where we conducted research were such that flexibility was paramount; implementation of LC occurred in over 70 elementary schools within the district. At the outset of the research, district-level administrators selected 10 schools to participate in the study. Throughout the duration of the research, several schools discontinued their implementation of LC (making them ineligible to continue participating in the research) and new participating schools were added. By the conclusion of the research, only three of the original schools remained as participants, while six new schools had been added, making for a total of fifteen participating schools over five years. Our data analysis led us to narrow our focus to two exemplar schools where the data most clearly spoke to our research questions.

Data collection

Data collection tools

Data from the participating schools include twice-yearly one-to-one semi-structured interviews with each of the principals and coaches, and once-yearly surveys. The researchers

collaborated to develop initial interview protocols for both the coaches and principals. As ongoing data analysis revealed new areas of interest, we added new questions to the protocols and made revisions to reflect emerging findings. The final interview protocols included 18 questions for the coaches (see [Appendix A](#)) and 8 questions for the principals (see [Appendix B](#)). Although the coach and principal play different roles in the process of school reform, we asked many of the same questions to principals and coaches to determine whether each of them would interpret the shared situations differently. We asked coaches about the impact of LC training on their coaching, how school teachers were responding to PD and coaching, about their job responsibilities, about successes and barriers to reform, and about the role the principal was taking in reform efforts. Similarly, we asked principals how they were working with the coach, how the teachers were responding to the coach, and how they planned to respond to reform successes and barriers. Interviewers asked follow-up questions to better investigate confusing or intriguing developments.

The principal and coaches from each of the participating schools completed yearly surveys (see [Appendix C](#)). They were designed by the researchers to ascertain the number of teachers implementing LC at each school, the extent to which each teacher had implemented LC, the amount of training the teachers had received on LC, and about which areas of LC the teachers had received training. Survey data enabled us to ascertain the extent of implementation in each school, and the extent to which the principal and coach were “on the same page” about implementation, teacher needs, and PD. Comparing the survey data from the principals and coaches also facilitated data triangulation (Miles & Huberman, 2014).

Data collection procedures

Over the five years of research, five different researchers conducted interviews and collected the survey data. The principal investigator trained each interviewer on the interview protocols and provided additional interview training by participating in at least two interviews with each researcher and by reviewing and discussing researchers’ responses to participants in interview transcripts. Interviews were conducted at the beginning of each academic year to garner the background knowledge of each participant, their expectations of how school reform efforts would be implemented, and perceptions of the support they would require to implement and maintain reform efforts throughout the school year. The researchers conducted a second interview with the same set of questions at the end of each academic year, providing opportunities to follow up with participants on the implementation of reform efforts. When possible, the researchers gave exit interviews to the principals and coaches of schools that withdrew from the research in order to ascertain problems of implementation leading to withdrawal. Notably, many of the schools withdrew from the research due to the reassignment of a principal or coach, making it difficult to conduct exit interviews. Each of the 20–40 minute interviews were audio recorded and transcribed. The resulting data corpus included 102 interviews from principals and coaches at 15 different schools – 2844 minutes of data.

Data analysis

Using a process of inductive analysis, the researchers undertook multiple and interrelated phases of data analysis and coding. Kamberelis and Dimitriadis’s (2005) statement, “coding

and analyzing data begin almost as soon as data collection begins, and the process continues throughout the final write-up” (p. 19) aptly describes our work. As we collected data, each researcher pre-coded the data (Saldana, 2013) by identifying salient quotations about the relationship between the coach and principal in the interviews while also looking at the implementation data in the surveys. Using this initial analysis, we developed preliminary codes that informed our data condensation (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014) as we moved into a second, more focused, round of analysis.

In our second round of coding, we focused on four schools who had been implementing LC for over three years. In order to explore “negative evidence” (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014, p. 259), we also closely examined the data for one school where LC was discontinued after one year of research and where, as accounted by both the coach and the principal in their interviews, the coach and principal had a contentious relationship. Author one and author two conducted second cycle coding by independently reading and coding the interviews from the selected schools using exploratory coding (Saldana, 2013). We intentionally looked for data where the principals and coaches discussed their relationship. Likewise, we paid attention when the participants discussed the tensions that arose as they worked to implement LC, and to the ways in which they described navigating those tensions. Author one and two met to discuss their analysis and collaboratively developed and defined each coding category. Then, to ensure intercoder agreement (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2013), they each coded the same transcript individually. The researchers resolved disagreements through discussion and refinement of the coding scheme (Lombard, Snyder-Duch, & Bracken, 2002). The second cycle of coding resulted in further data condensation as the two researchers identified the two exemplar schools that are the focus of the present article. We also continued to analyze the “negative evidence” from the school where LC was discontinued after one year as this data was helpful in examining factors that contradicted our ongoing analysis. As our research questions focus on the ways the principal and coach develop and maintain relational trust rather than the ways in which they might fail to develop trust, we will not discuss the “negative example” in this paper.

Next, all four researchers used the coding scheme to independently code the interviews and surveys from the two exemplar schools and the discontinued LC school—20 total interviews. Each interview was coded by at least three researchers. Comparison discussions resulted in third-cycle codes as additional codes were added and some second-cycle codes were absorbed into new codes in the form of code editing. Third-cycle codes are displayed in [Table 1](#).

Data collection sites

Central Elementary School is an alternative elementary school in a large urban school district in the midwest. Alternative schools, in this district, provide alternative education options for students in lieu of suspensions/expulsion. At the conclusion of the research, the principal, Mrs. Penny, had been the principal for ten years and the literacy coach, Mrs. Reese, had been working as a teacher at the school for seventeen years; they had been working together for ten years and implementing LC for five of those years. Washington Elementary School resides in the same school district. When the research was conducted, the principal at Washington, Mrs. Miller, had been working there as the principal for four years, and the literacy coach, Ms. Wright, had been working there as

Table 1. Final coding data display.

Codes	Sub-codes	Number of instances of appearance in exemplar school data	Number of instances of appearance in negative example data
Productive and unproductive tension	Between principal and district expectations	2	0
	Between LC Model and what actually happens	2	3
	Between principal and coach	0	3
	Between principal and/or coach and teachers	4	16
Confidence	Confidence in the program	4	4
	Confidence in each other	21	1
	Confidence in implementation	3	0
Role of coach	Resource for staff	14	1
	Support students & teachers' stated & perceived needs	7	1
	Build rapport	8	6
	To implement LC model	4	1
Role of principal	To implement principal's vision	1	2
	Support coach	14	3
	Provide opportunities for PD	5	1
	Support LC	13	2
	Provide materials	1	0
Productive and unproductive communication	About roles	1	2
	About expectations	3	1
Working With/Against Each Other	Principal and coach making/not making decisions together	5	1
	Implementation as team effort	18	1
Agency	Coach as agentive and successful	8	3
	Teachers as agentive	7	2
Enjoyment in Program		5	1

the coach for five years. They too had been implementing LC for five years. One hundred percent of the students who attend both Central and Washington receive free and reduced lunch, and both schools have a high mobility rate, with 10% of Central's students not remaining in the school for the majority of the year, and 23% at Washington.

Participants

This article focuses on interview and survey data from two of the schools who persisted in literacy reform efforts by implementing LC for five years: one school that participated in the research for all five years, Washington Elementary School; and one school that implemented LC for all five years but only participated in one year of the research, Central Elementary School. We see these schools as exemplars where principals and literacy coaches demonstrated considerable relational trust in enacting school reform efforts and problem solving within the theoretical frame of relational trust. As Bryk (2014) notes, it is necessary for researchers interested in school reform to study successful schools so that they better understand what enables some schools to accomplish reform while other schools struggle.

Findings

This study sought to answer two research questions: How do principals and coaches collectively establish relational trust with each other to address and continue reform efforts? And, how do the principals and coaches collectively maintain the relational trust established through reform efforts? In each of the exemplar schools, 1) the principal and coach persisted with reform despite encountering difficulties, 2) the principal and coach conceptualized reform as a shared responsibility, 3) the principal and coach had a clear understanding of each other's roles within the LC framework, and were confident in each other's competence in carrying out those roles, and 4) had a common understanding of teachers as agentive and knowledgeable. We argue because of these shared understandings, they were able to establish relational trust enabling them to move the school staff forward with reform efforts. We elaborate on these findings in the remainder of this section.

Payoff for persistence

Interviews with the principals and coaches across the participating schools revealed implementation was met with a range of difficulties. This included: challenges from the school district to expand the job of the LC coach, challenges from resistant teachers who had difficulty with a colleague coming into their classroom to observe and challenges maintaining fidelity to the LC framework when faced with the realities of classroom implementation.

Despite confronting obstacles that might have impeded implementation, the principals and coaches in Central and Washington developed relational trust which enabled them to co-navigate difficulties that arose. In surveys conducted during the fourth year of research, both Central and Washington's principals and literacy coaches indicated all of their K-3 classrooms showed "many signs" of LC implementation. Despite initial problems with teacher buy-in at both schools, by the fourth year of the study, Central and Washington's principals described teachers' eagerness to work with the coach. Mrs. Miller explained, "the first year of course [the teachers] were hesitant to have anybody in their room, but right now they're begging for her [the coach]. There aren't enough of her to go around." Echoing the observations of the principal, Ms. Wright explained all of the teachers welcome her in their classroom and "they do implement the strategies we discuss."

Perhaps, most importantly, the coaches and principals at Central and Washington both described their students' growing enthusiasm for literacy which they attributed to the reform efforts in their schools. Mrs. Penny explained with the implementation of LC, "Our kids ... love books. [Before LC] you didn't hear kids talk about books or authors. They read the books that were in class, but you didn't see them devouring books the way they do now. The way they talk about their favorite author, like, ... It's pretty neat." Similarly, Mrs. Miller explained,

Once we got rid of those basals, we got rid of the teacher's manual, we got rid of the script. So teachers are ... actually looking at the skills, they're actually doing the running record and analyzing the types of errors that kids are making so that guided reading groups are planned to meet specific needs so that a child can move on to the next level ...

Echoing the sentiments of the principal, Mrs. Wright asserted, "if you walk around this building and in the classrooms you will see stuff on the walls, students engaged,

small groups, lots of writing, lots of reading, and that's what we need to do." We consider these numerous signs of implementation and engagement with reading and writing to be evidence of the longevity in which two exemplar schools continued LC reform efforts.

Conceptualizing reform as a team effort

Unsurprisingly, communication played an essential role in the ways the principals and coaches interacted to develop relational trust. In the data for both schools, the principals and coaches described their frequent and open communication, noting they could converse about any difficulties and find ways to support and resolve conflict, revealing a shared vision for the implementation of reform. As Mrs. Penny noted, "if [the coach] and I ever cannot communicate, [LC] will fall flat and we'll be stuck." Communication took place via e-mail, text messaging, phone conversations, scheduled meetings, and "on the fly" meetings in the school hallways. These meetings also had important implications because they provided a space where the principal and coach were able to learn about each other as competent actors in the school community. Additionally, it enabled them to collaboratively plan PD that would address the needs of their teachers and students.

The principals at Central and Washington worked hard to ensure the coach had materials and opportunities to lead PD sessions with the teachers to meet requirements mandated by LC. When Ms. Wright was asked to describe her principal's role in the implementation of LC, the coach responded, "She is our foundation . . . She sees the value in it . . . Because like, for example, if I need PD, we can take some of the staff meeting [to run PD]. You know, if there was a snow day, and I didn't get my PD in, then [she says] 'let's work around this and try to figure it out.'" The principal's support served to communicate to the staff that LC was a school-wide priority. Similarly, because Mrs. Reese shared her concern about Central's teachers not attending the optional PD sessions with the principal, Mrs. Penny began scheduling grade level PD days during the school day and providing substitute teachers so teachers could attend.

Access to materials was one component of both schools' reform efforts, and schools created book rooms as places to house the children's literature and teachers' texts used in the literacy program. Although all of the schools had book rooms, some of the schools were having more success getting their teachers to use the book rooms. As Mrs. Reese explained, part of the problem was getting the book room organized and ready for use; "the checkout system is cumbersome. It involves making labels for all the bins and cards for all the books . . . it's just taken a lot of man hours." At Central Elementary school Mrs. Penny spent time over the summer working with Mrs. Reese to organize the book room so it would be ready for teachers to use. Similarly, at Washington Elementary school Mrs. Miller supported the upkeep of the book room by not just providing the funding for books and materials, but also by finding staff to help the coach prepare and maintain the book room. Note that, in the examples of the book room maintenance, and the PD scheduling, the responsibility for the success of these components of reform was conceptualized by both the coach and principal as something they did together.

Understanding each other's roles

The literacy coaches in the research schools had specific roles in ensuring reform efforts were implemented, including frequently observing and coaching teachers, providing PD, and teaching a daily literacy block. However, due to demands from the school district and principal in many of the research schools, the coaches' availability was not under their control. A primary conflict confronted by many of the coaches in the third year of our research was the school district changed the title of the coach from "literacy coach" to "instructional coach;" and required coaches, who are supposed to support teachers in literacy instruction in grades K-3, to provide support to teachers in all subject areas and grades. Furthermore, many coaches in our research reported being pulled from their coaching duties to cover various school duties (e.g., bus duty, cafeteria duty) or work as substitutes when there was a substitute shortage. In most of the research schools, the coaches experienced the tensions noted by Walpole and Blamey (2008) and found the school staff did not have a clear understanding of what the coach's role was due to their many obligations. In contrast, at Central and Washington Elementary schools, the principals closely guarded the role of the coach and kept other responsibilities from encroaching on their time. For example, when the school district changed the title of the literacy coaches to "instructional coaches," the principals did not enforce this change.

At Washington Elementary Ms. Wright and Mrs. Miller worked to make the coach hypervisible and available to support teachers. Ms. Wright spent six weeks each year co-teaching the literacy block with each of the kindergarten, first, and second grade teachers in her building. She was able to do this because when Mrs. Miller created the school's daily schedule, she did so with Ms. Wright's plans for co-teaching as the foremost priority and ensured Ms. Wright could visit each teacher during their literacy block.

The principals believed the coaches' role in LC was to support the teachers and their role was in supporting the coaches' efforts to help the teachers. However, to trust the process, the teachers needed to see collective buy-in between the coach and principal. As explained by Mrs. Penny, the coach is the "good guy" and the principal is "the hammer, basically . . . that's the way the roles should be, the coach should not be that person laying down the law." At Washington, Mrs. Miller reinforced this idea noting the teachers were getting consistent feedback about LC from "two different sides," because the coach guides implementation but the principal evaluates it.

In the interviews, both the principals and coaches collectively recognized that to successfully achieve reform efforts they had to reinforce trust in each person's roles. Often, the principal reinforced the coach through the school's teacher evaluation processes. This required the principals and coaches to be constantly engaged in conversations about what should be evaluated in order to ensure they were communicating the same message. At Washington the building leadership team, composed of the coach, the principal, and teachers from across grade levels, developed guidelines for guided reading lessons. Ms. Wright used a version of the form when she was working with teachers, and in turn, Mrs. Miller used the form while observing teachers, reinforcing the feedback the teachers received from the coach. Ms. Wright remarked that teachers appreciated the consistency between her and Mrs. Miller and what they were learning from the coach was exactly what the principal was looking for in their instruction. The open and consistent communication

of the expectations the principals and coaches held for the teachers fostered an environment where LC could flourish.

When the coaches in the successful schools met with resistance from the teachers, the principal helped them navigate those tensions. At Washington, when a teacher was not buying into the LC framework, Mrs. Penny and Mrs. Reese recommended she move to another school within the district. According to Mrs. Penny,

... this teacher wanted to do more direct instruction, and LC is not that. It's way more student centered ... and she wasn't willing to do that. So, [she's] going to another building, because there was enough pressure, between the coach and I together, on both me from an evaluative standpoint and her from a coaching standpoint, where she [the teacher] decided, OK, this is not for me.

Mrs. Miller described a similar scenario in which a teacher was resisting the LC framework. As was done at Washington, Mrs. Miller and Ms. Wright worked together to convey that teachers who did not adopt the LC framework did not fit in with the school's vision and their unified message was powerful enough that resistant teachers chose to work in other schools.

Understanding of teachers as agentic and knowledgeable

Another key component of the creation of relational trust was that in order to begin, continue, and achieve reform efforts, the principal and coach collectively recognized not only the role of teachers in achieving reform efforts, but also valued the teachers' agency in making decisions. During interviews, both Central and Washington principals and coaches revealed they did not make decisions without considering the needs of the teachers. Mrs. Penny explained that literacy coaching reform efforts: "started with the teachers." Mrs. Penny narrated how one of the teachers at the school began a book group. Mrs. Penny participated in this group, as did Mrs. Reese, who was a teacher at the time. Troubled by the tedium of the district's current reading program, Mrs. Penny, Mrs. Reese, and the teachers, began working toward a solution which would better support the needs of Central's students. Mrs. Penny described how the school had "been through the district with several direct instruction programs and ... These programs ... They addressed standards, but not student needs, and I just kept thinking, 'Oh my gosh ... I can't imagine being a child who's in this environment.'" When Mrs. Penny and Mrs. Reese learned about a grant enabling them to implement LC, they consulted the other teachers in the group before applying. Mrs. Penny and Mrs. Reese attributed valuing their teachers' say in the instructional program as key to getting the "teachers on board" with reform efforts. Mrs. Penny explained, "Excitement around literacy, I'd never seen that from the staff. Like just learning and then just watching the kids." Importantly, including the teachers in a decision to switch to LC is a move aimed at improving relational trust. Mrs. Penny selected Mrs. Reese as a coach from among a team of teachers who she knew were already invested in school reform. Together, with the help and support of those teachers, the coach and principal were able to successfully push for the implementation of LC.

Also, demonstrating a recognition of the importance of teacher input and knowledge, as mentioned previously, the coach and principal at Washington worked in conjunction with their Building Leadership Team, which was composed of teachers, to create a "walkthrough

checklist” that echoed the principles of LC for Mrs. Miller to use while observing teachers. This collaboration between the coach, the principal, and the teachers also worked to foster buy-in from the teachers, who felt invested in the process.

Because of their shared belief in teacher agency and knowledge, the principals and coaches at Central and Washington Elementary Schools were highly concerned with meeting the needs and matching the interests of the teachers in their buildings. Thus, during interviews, both the coaches and the principals shared their most frequent reason for communicating with each other was to discuss the teachers’ needs, and how to meet those needs during PD sessions. Prior to planning PD sessions the principal and coach surveyed the teachers to gain insight into what the teachers felt their needs were and then planned PD around teachers’ needs. According to Mrs. Penny, she and Mrs. Reese were “always talking about things that we see in the classroom, and decisions teachers are making . . . it was such a paradigm shift to be thinking in these terms, of teachers making these educational decisions at all these points throughout the day, continuously.” Mrs. Penny remarked, “there’s a lot of assumption in the LC framework that teachers are knowledgeable, they have a certain skill set, they have a high efficacy, they’re hard workers, and they can make decisions and . . . that’s intriguing because everything we’d done before assumed that teachers could do none of those things.” This “paradigm shift” led the principal and coach at Central to be flexible in their expectations of teachers and acknowledge the teachers at Central know what works best for their students. Viewing teachers as agentic is important because teachers who have agency are more active participants in their professional growth (Calvert, 2016), which may then contribute to teacher buy-in for reform implementation.

Similarly, Mrs. Miller described how she leaned on her coach’s knowledge of the LC framework and the staff to help her plan and facilitate the school’s PD. She explained,

I rely heavily on Ms. Wright because she plans a lot of our PD and has the knowledge base to . . . facilitate the PD. I relied on her a lot to look at the data and say ‘OK, what do you think the staff would benefit from the most based on what you’ve seen, what you’re hearing from me and make sure we’re servicing the needs.’

Not only did Mrs. Miller acknowledge Ms. Wright’s credibility, but when planning PD, she and the coach treated the instructional needs of the teachers as paramount. Through this considerate planning, Mrs. Miller and Mrs. Wright worked as a unit to establish relational trust with the staff.

When the principal and coach worked together toward reform, our data analysis revealed they were able to overcome barriers to reform; had a clear understanding of each other’s roles within the framework and were confident in each other’s ability to carry out those jobs; communicated frequently about their expectations; and saw each of the actors in the school as agentic. Moreover, this “collegial relationship” (Barth, 2006) established between the coach and principal created a united front which resulted in increased implementation of LC across classrooms. According to the principals and coaches, the teachers treated these coaches as esteemed school resources. In these schools, ongoing conversations between principals and coaches regarding literacy instruction ultimately influenced LC teachers’ instruction directly, which, in turn, created a positive learning environment for students.

Discussion

It is not unusual for school reform movements to encounter tensions and resistance. Yet, some schools are able to successfully overcome these problems and flourish while others stagnate. As noted earlier, Biancarosa et al. (2010) found the implementation of LC had positive effects on students' learning, but the effects varied considerably across the schools. Understanding the reasons behind this inconsistency is important so student growth can be replicated under varied conditions. When working toward implementing effective school reform, literacy researchers need to "develop the necessary know-how for a reform idea ultimately to spread faster and more effectively" (Bryk, Gomez, Grunow, & LeMahieu, 2015, p. 8). As collegial relationships among school staff enable the effective implementation of literacy reform, we believe it is necessary for literacy researchers to examine the factors enabling some school faculty to collaboratively problem solve reform complexities.

While this research substantiates work done by other researchers such as Tschannen-Moran and Gareis (2015) and Bryk and Schneider (2002), who found relational trust can facilitate better problem solving in schools undergoing reform, it also nuances those findings by highlighting the role of relational trust in the relationship between the literacy coach and school principal. Scant research identifies the ways in which school leadership can work together to co-navigate the tensions that often confront reform efforts. Yet, the findings from this study indicate the collective work of the literacy coaches and the school principals impacted the ways teachers in both schools responded to literacy reform efforts.

Implications and conclusions

The findings from this research suggest when school districts invest in reform, that investment needs to extend beyond purchasing new curriculum and offering preplanned PD. Instead, it needs to include opportunities for relationship building among and between school staff with a particular focus on the ways in which coaches and principals can work together to facilitate reform. However, as noted by Bryk and Schneider (2002), trust is something that cannot be achieved in one day of PD. Instead, as demonstrated by the principals and coaches in this research, they must work to build trust through their day-to-day interactions and ongoing social exchanges.

Building and maintaining positive interpersonal relationships between the principal and coach requires district administrators to rethink the ways in which they hire and assign coaches to schools. Often, principals and coaches end up in collaboration simply because they have been assigned to the same school. However, as in the example of Mrs. Penny and Mrs. Reese, principals and coaches may be more likely to establish productive relationships if the principal is able to select a literacy coach by examining how the coach's educational philosophy, beliefs about teacher efficacy, and literacy theories align with those of the principal. The present research suggests that this alignment facilitates the collaboration that is necessary so that principals and coaches can participate in a shared vision for reform.

Further, while principals might lean on their coach's literacy knowledge and expertise to drive reform, principals need to be active collaborators in supporting school improvement efforts. The principals in the exemplar schools that were part of this research attended PD to learn about the LC framework so that they were knowledgeable about the instructional activities occurring in classrooms, they supported teachers' PD attendance, and they

ensured that there were opportunities for the coaches to be in teachers' classrooms on an ongoing basis. Collaboration required establishing open lines of communication and making a concerted effort to send a consistent message about reform to school faculty.

The consequence of the relationships developed by the principal and the coach, and the impact of that relationship on school reform efforts is of particular importance when considering the frequency with which school administrations shuffle faculty and principals to new positions. In fact, in the year following the conclusion of this research, the principal from Central was assigned to a different school within the district. This movement ruptured the principal's long-standing relationship with the coach, the teachers, the students, and the community. Although principals are often reassigned by school superintendents in order to boost performance at under-performing schools, the findings from this research suggest that this practice may hamper districts' attempts at improvement and reform; when principals move around, it may take them longer to establish trust with a new coach.

Finally, in an attempt at school improvement, many school districts (such as the one in which the present research was conducted) take up a reform effort one year, only to replace it with a new reform the following year. But, as exemplified by the two schools discussed in this manuscript, persistence bears fruit. When the principals and coaches in the exemplar schools were able to establish and work together toward a long-term vision for literacy reform, they saw increased student engagement in literacy activities, and increased teacher investment in the LC framework.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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Appendix A Interview questions for coaches

1. How did you decide to become a Literacy Collaborative coach?
2. How has the training you have received so far affected you as a teacher? as a coach?
3. Did you participate in LC professional development scheduled this year? Why or why not?
4. What has been the response of teachers to your efforts as a coach and a staff developer so far? (probe to ask for both coaching and leading staff development)
5. Are all the teachers you are coaching also attending Professional Development?
6. Are you released from teaching to provide sufficient in-class coaching? Why or why not?
7. During the school year, did teachers participating in initial training get coached twice a month? Why or why not?
8. What have been the successes? How do you plan to build on these successes?
9. What have been the barriers? How do you plan to overcome these barriers?
10. Do you have additional responsibilities or duties required by the school or district?
11. What parts of the framework are you focusing on now with your LC teachers?
 - How are things going in independent reading, guided reading, interactive read aloud, shared reading, independent reading, writers' workshop, community writing?
12. Describe the role of your principal in the implementation of LC.
13. Describe the role of your school literacy team in the implementation of LC.
14. How would you describe your school's supply of books and materials necessary to implement the LC language and literacy framework?
15. How often does your leadership team review student literacy data?
16. How have you implemented Leveled Literacy Intervention in your school?
 - How many teachers? How many groups? Which grade levels?
17. How many coaching sessions are scheduled weekly? Tell me about modeling lessons. Tell me about having a preconference, observation, and a post conference. How are things going with those?
18. What teachers have been attending your professional development sessions? Probe for teachers who aren't coming or are coming inconsistently.

Appendix B Interview questions for principals

1. What are the ways you are working with your coach?
2. What has been the response of teachers to the coach so far?
3. What have been the successes? How do you plan to build on these successes?
4. What have been the barriers? How do you plan to overcome these barriers?
5. What are you focusing on now with your LC teachers?
6. Describe the role of your school literacy team in the implementation of LC.
7. How have you implemented Leveled Literacy Intervention in your school?aaaaa
8. What other interventions support student learning K-3 in your school? (Volunteers? Parent?)

Appendix C Survey

Date:
Name:
School:

1. How many teachers do you have per grade level?
 - a. Grade K

- b. Grade 1
- c. Grade 2

Grade	No signs	A few signs	Some signs	Many signs	Fully implemented
K					
1					
2					
3					

- d. Grade 3
- 2. What is the status of implementation in your building? Indicate the number of teachers at each level.
- 3. How many of your third grade teachers completed the 60 hours of professional development offered last year? _____
 - a. Are the others credentialed through a reading endorsement, reading MA, or by taking the test? If so, how many and what credentials?

- 4. How many hours of LC professional development will you have given by the end of this year?

- a. What topics have you covered?
