

LEADERS OF LITERACY: EMPOWERING TEACHER LEADERS THROUGH INSTRUCTIONAL COACHING

by

MOLLIE S. SCHUBACH

(Under the Direction of Sally J. Zepeda)

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to examine how instructional coaching fostered the development of teacher leaders, and how this development impacted literacy instruction and overall school improvement goals centered around literacy. The researcher sought the perspectives of administrators, instructional leaders, and teacher leaders to investigate the impact of instructional coaching on teacher empowerment. With pervasive and disparate gaps in reading achievement, particularly at the middle level, it was urgently necessary to identify which components of instructional coaching were effective in supporting teachers to carry out literacy instruction and intervention aligned with the Science of Reading (SoR). During this action research study, the context in which this study was situated was amid literacy reform to address underachievement in reading and writing.

The Action Research Design Team (ARDT) developed targeted interventions that were facilitated through instructional coaching and aimed at developing teacher leaders of literacy. The following themes emerged from the study: 1) Job-embedded, personalized, and frequent instructional coaching is an effective form of professional development; 2) Effective instructional coaching empowers teachers to develop their

capacity; 3) Collaboration is necessary across all layers of school leadership to achieve literacy goals. This study and its findings underscores the impactful role that instructional coaching plays in supporting teachers and their capacity to develop as leaders of literacy.

Keywords: Instructional coaching, Literacy, Middle school, Professional learning,
Science of Reading (SoR), School improvement, Teacher leadership

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MOLLIE S. SCHUBACH

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MOLLIE S. SCHUBACH

Major Professor: Sally J. Zepeda

Committee: Jami Royal Berry
Jamon Flowers

Electronic Version Approved:

Ron Walcott
Vice Provost for Graduate Education and Dean of the Graduate School
The University of Georgia
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DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to all the teacher leaders seeking to make a difference in our world. Our students are better because of your continued impact. Thank you for what you do.

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I am profoundly lucky to be surrounded and supported by a community of individuals who have lifted me up and encouraged me in my personal and professional pursuits. First, I would like to acknowledge the steadfast support and guidance I have received from Dr. Sally J. Zepeda. Dr. Z., I will forever be appreciative for the ways you encouraged, challenged, and supported me. Thanks to your wisdom and insight, not only was I able to persevere through the highs and lows of writing and researching, but I was also able to immerse myself into the doctoral journey and become a better and more knowledgeable educator and human being. There are not enough “thank yous” for everything you did for me.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Reading achievement matters. Widespread research has detailed the grave implications of students not reading on grade level (Gibbons, 2023; Olson, 2023; Sparks et al., 2013), but national assessment data has reflected that nearly two-thirds of elementary-aged students do not read at adequate levels (National Assessment of Educational Progress, 2022). As decades of test scores reflect slow and non-linear growth, educators, policy makers, and politicians seek solutions to target and to develop readers. These solutions place the onus of responsibility for successful implementation on the shoulders of building-level teachers and instructional leaders.

Research has suggested the profound impact of positioning teachers as leaders in a building to support and to extend development among the staff (Harris & Jones, 2019; Harris & Muijs, 2004; Wilmore, 2007). Harris et al. (2019) argued, “where teachers are genuinely at the forefront of educational reform and co-constructing change, the net result can be both positive and empowering” (p. 123). Thus, as leaders seek systematically to address literacy gaps within their context, it must be a priority for building leaders and teacher leaders to work in tandem.

In the post-pandemic era, researchers, policymakers, and school leaders are moving at a frenetic pace to address achievement gaps that were exacerbated by long stints of virtual learning. In their investigation of student achievement post COVID-19, the Northwest Evaluation Association (NWEA) found that middle school students are

showing languid growth, particularly in English Language Arts (ELA). Based on this alarming student data, Lewis (2025) urged district leaders and policymakers to consider “sustainable strategies that advance academic growth for all students,” notably including the suggestion to “make middle school literacy a priority” (para. 5).

It has been long understood that early reading achievement is a key indicator of long-term student success (Mol & Bus, 2011; Snow & Matthews, 2016; Sparks et al., 2013). Specifically, if students are not reading proficiently by third grade, research suggested several challenges for students. The Annie E. Casey Foundation, an organization whose mission is to improve the lives of students and their families, warned:

Reading proficiently by the end of third grade is a crucial marker in a child’s educational development. Failure to read proficiently is linked to higher rates of school dropout, which suppresses individual earning potential as well as the nation’s competitiveness and general productivity. (p. 1)

While the academic challenges associated with low reading proficiency are pervasive, the barriers extend far beyond state test scores.

Gibbons (2023) argued that literacy is a social justice issue given the association between low reading proficiency and “school dropout, attempted suicide, incarceration, anxiety, depression, and low self-concept. Adults who lack basic literacy skills were more likely to be unemployed, underemployed, and incarcerated” (p. 5). Ultimately, low reading achievement impacts students holistically, and the consequences are long-term and severe. Thus, swift action must be taken to address learning gaps in reading.

Given the impact of reading ability on long-term student success, educational leaders are constantly seeking the most effective curriculum, resources, and instructional

strategies to support student learning. This constant pursuit is now magnified given the current state of national reading achievement trends. Results from a 2022 administration of the National Assessment of Educational Performance (NAEP) showed a five-point decline on the reading assessment as compared to 2020, the largest drop since 1990. There is a certain level of panic surrounding the conversation of reading achievement, and many conversations point to the same phenomena as a beacon of hope for rectification—the Science of Reading (SoR).

Although the term “science of reading” has existed since the 18th century, it has become a heightened area of focus in the education field as leaders look to mitigate the reading achievement crisis. The International Literacy Association (ILA, 2023) defined the SoR as “a convergence of accumulated and evolving findings from research regarding reading processes and reading instruction (pedagogy) and how the two are implemented across contexts that interactively bridge cultural, social, biological, psychological, linguistic, and historical bases of learning” (para. 1). More specifically, the processes and instruction associated with the SoR include teaching phonological awareness, phonics, prosody, vocabulary, and reading comprehension (O’Connor, 2021; Snowling et al., 2022).

Significant attention has been paid to the SoR due to its positioning against “balanced literacy” approaches. Balanced literacy instruction omits pieces of phonics instruction in favor of using other tools and contexts to decode words and stories. Educational researcher and reporter Emily Hanford made waves with her production of *Sold a Story* (American Public Media Reports, 2023), a podcast that outlined America’s history of its departure from phonics instruction, the subsequent impact it had on student

reading achievement, and the underlying issues perpetuated with publishing companies. Hanford's (2023) message to educators was clear: the time is now to provide the comprehensive reading instruction that students so desperately need.

As growing research shows the efficacy of SoR-based instruction (Gibbons, 2023; National Council on Teacher Quality, 2023; Olson, 2023), numerous state leaders have passed legislation that has significant impact on literacy instruction in public schools. The legislation brings the SoR into classrooms by training teachers, adopting materials, and deploying interventions that are aligned with the components of science-based reading instruction. In 2023, the state in which this study is situated passed House Bill 538, a comprehensive piece of legislation that contains specific components aligned with the SoR which are intended to address literacy in kindergarten through fifth grade. The key components of HB538 include instructional materials, screeners, interventions, professional learning, and teacher preparation. School leaders have the complex task of determining how to equip teachers and develop teacher leaders to successfully implement all components of this literacy legislation.

Although the renewed urgency around literacy reform mainly involved interventions at the elementary level, there was notable impact at the middle level that required the focus and action of building and instructional leaders. Thus, this study examined how one middle school positioned an instructional coach to foster the development of teacher leaders during a large-scale effort to improve literacy instruction, intervention, and achievement. Specifically, the action research design team (ARDT) sought to examine how the development of teacher leaders impacted the success of the SoR initiative and overall school improvement goals centered around literacy.

Statement of the Problem

Reading achievement data for the state in which this study was conducted reflected national trends. On a statewide assessment administered in 2022, just over half of sixth-grade students demonstrated an at grade level or above reading level (Georgia Department of Education, 2022). This low reading achievement prompted policymakers and educational leaders to spearhead literacy initiatives and to apply for grants intended to target struggling readers across the state. Given that students who read proficiently by the end of third grade were more likely to remain on track in terms of academic achievement (Fiester, 2010), these programs placed an emphasis on reading instruction and interventions in grades K-3. However, gaps in reading achievement were still pervasive as students moved into middle school, prompting leaders to evaluate the approaches and methodologies of these efforts.

As research widens, more attention is being paid to the science of reading (SoR), or the understanding of how students learn how to read and the “five dimensions of reading,” including phonological awareness, phonics, prosody, vocabulary, and comprehension (National Council on Teacher Quality, 2023; O’Connor, 2021). This study examined how one middle school used the SoR to address gaps in literacy skills and the work of the instructional coach to promote teacher leadership.

The interventions examined in this study were components of the overarching plan developed by the school district in which this study took place. Specific actions and recommendations were developed for grades K-8. At the elementary level, there were four main components of the intervention: replacement of curricular resources, explicit vocabulary instruction, phonics interventions, and teacher development. Existing

curriculum resources were replaced with a new curriculum that was fully aligned with the SoR, and phonics interventions were provided to students who showed gaps in reading skills.

At the middle school level, the interventions included four components: phonics intervention, explicit vocabulary instruction, oral reading fluency, and active student engagement. Given the multi-faceted nature of the literacy interventions, ample support for teachers was needed to maximize the efficacy of their implementation. Thus, the researcher examined how instructional coaching supported the goals of the literacy plan through teacher development and professional learning.

Overview of the Research Site Context

Live Oak Middle School (LOMS, a pseudonym) is a mid-size semi-urban public middle school in Northeast Georgia. LOMS is a Title I school that is 48% Black; 34% White; 11% Hispanic; 4% multi-racial; and 3% Asian/Pacific Islander. Eighty-three percent of the students qualify for free and reduced lunch. In 2019, LOMS earned a College and Career Ready Performance Index (CCRPI) score of 63%. Within the state in which this study was situated, K-12 Public Schools earn a yearly CCRPI score based on certain criteria, including content mastery, growth, closing achievement gaps, college and career readiness, and graduation rates. The score is intended to communicate to schools and communities levels of student preparedness for subsequent grade levels, as well as a communicating a certain level of quality of schools and school districts.

Given that the average CCRPI score for all middle schools in the state was 77% in 2019, this suggested that LOMS had room for improvement in preparing students for the next steps in their learning. There are internal and external factors that add a layer of

impact on achievement and literacy at LOMS. Internally, attrition and years of teaching experience have had a substantial impact on student achievement. During the 2022-2023 school year, 25 teachers at LOMS were either new to teaching or new to the school, which is nearly 30% of the certified teaching staff. In particular, the English Language Arts (ELA) Department has experienced high turnover rates. During the 2022-2023 school year, seven of the nine ELA teachers were either in their first three years of teaching or were new to LOMS.

High attrition, coupled with the notable challenges presented by high poverty rates, created significant challenges for increasing student outcomes. LOMS is situated within a county with a poverty rate of 29.3%, which was nearly double the statewide poverty rate (United States Census Bureau, 2021). Issues that are a byproduct of high levels of poverty—including housing and food instability, absenteeism, and transiency—threaten student achievement and success.

Despite the high levels of poverty that are pervasive in the context of this study, it is also important to note that LOMS is in close proximity to a large public university. The closeness of this institution allowed for unique partnership opportunities with Live Oak School District (LOSD, a pseudonym), including mentoring and tutoring programs, on-site university classes, student teaching, and more. These opportunities provided rich and invaluable opportunities for the LOSD students and teachers as well as the students and staff who are connected to the university.

In the context of LOMS, there were layers of leadership that had substantial impact on the implementation of the action research study. The administration team at LOMS consisted of one principal and two assistant principals. It is well-researched and

understood that effective principals are strong instructional leaders and decision makers (Backor & Gordon, 2015). In the context of this study, administrative leadership was crucial for guiding the vision of the reading and literacy intervention as espoused by the district office, disseminating roles and responsibilities, hiring and assigning personnel, and providing both formal and informal feedback to teachers.

It is important to note that there was a change in leadership at LOMS during the facilitation of this action research study. The principal who had been in their position at the start of the study resigned to pursue principalship in a different school district. An interim principal was appointed to LOMS for the 2024-2025 school year. It is important to note this change in leadership because transitions, under any circumstances, have a significant impact on stakeholders within a context.

Additional leadership layers consisted of instructional coaches and teacher leaders. An instructional coach was positioned to support the implementation of the literacy intervention through conducting coaching cycles, professional learning, classroom observations, and frequent feedback. Through the intentional and systematic work of the instructional coach, it was the hope that teachers would become leaders. Teacher leaders championed the intervention by supporting colleagues through peer observation, condensed coaching opportunities, and by providing “on-the-job” exemplars of the intervention in action. Ultimately, all layers of leadership were essential for the successful implementation of the intervention, and the researcher sought to examine how these various leadership roles interacted to yield increased reading achievement at LOMS.

This study examined the role of instructional coaching at one middle school and its impact on the development of teacher leaders during a large-scale reading and literacy intervention. The researcher collected data to examine how the development of teacher leaders through coaching impacted the success and efficacy of the SoR based literacy intervention.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to examine how instructional coaching fostered the development of teacher leaders, and how this development impacted literacy instruction and overall school improvement goals centered around literacy. The researcher sought the perspective of instructional leaders, including administrators and coaches, as well as teachers, to learn more about building capacity through the development of teacher leaders. These perspectives were important to the study as they provided direct insight from the individuals who were primarily tasked with the implementation of the interventions surrounding the SoR approaches to literacy instruction.

Research Questions

This action research study was guided by the following questions:

1. How does instructional coaching impact the development of teacher leaders in literacy instruction and intervention?
2. How do teachers describe the impact of instructional coaching on their capacity to lead literacy initiatives and to implement interventions in their classrooms?
3. How does the action research design team (ARDT) describe the impact of instructional leadership, particularly through coaching, on the implementation of reading interventions and instructional initiatives?

The following section included definitions of terms that were contextually important and relevant to the context of this study. Each term was specific to the action research that was conducted at Live Oak Middle School (LOMS).

Definition of Terms

The following terms are defined related to the context of this study:

- **Adult Learning:** The conditions under which adults learn, and the specific strategies and principles that are employed to increase learning. The science of adult learning, also referred to as “andragogy,” is distinct from pedagogy, or the ways children learn (Baumgartner & Merriam, 2020).
- **Instructional Coach:** A building leader at LOMS who partners with teachers to “(1) establish a clear picture of reality; (2) set emotionally compelling, student-focused goals; and (3) learn, adapt, and integrate teaching practices that help teachers and students hit goals” (Knight, 2022, p. x).
- **Job-Embedded Professional Learning:** Professional learning that is relevant and tailored to adult learners, includes feedback, supports inquiry and reflection, facilitates the transfer of new skills into practice, combats isolation, promotes collaboration, and is delivered on the job (Zepeda, 2019).
- **Professional Learning Community Structures:** The systems and processes under which members of a professional learning community (PLC) operate.

Collaboration is guided by the PLC+ five guiding questions: where are we going? Where are we now? How do we move learning forward? What did we learn today? Who benefitted and who did not? (Fisher et al., 2019).

- Science of Reading: The biological processes of learning how to read and the pedagogical approaches aligned with this understanding, including the “five dimensions of reading instruction” (O’Connor, 2021): phonological awareness, phonics, prosody, vocabulary, and comprehension.
- Teacher Leaders: Classroom teachers at LOMS who “influence policy and practice in significant ways” (Harris et al., 2019, p. 124), specifically related to the implementation of the reading intervention, SoR.

These key definitions are important for understanding the context of the study. The following section includes the theoretical framework and logic model that were used to guide the researcher.

Theoretical Framework

This action research study focused on how the development of teachers as leaders increased the efficacy of literacy interventions. The success of the interventions hinged on timely and individualized instructional coaching and professional learning. Thus, the theoretical framework that undergirds this study was based on andragogy (adult learning) and the development of teachers as leaders.

Knowles et al. (1990, 2015) examined the conditions under which adults learn, and the factors that motivate their learning. Adult learning is often referred to as “andragogy,” which is defined as “the art and science of helping adults learn” (Knowles, 1990, p. 54). To implement effective learning structures during the course of the action research study, it was crucial to connect adult learning principles with the need for professional learning at LOMS. As an instructional coach set out to address literacy needs, it was necessary to create the conditions for effective professional learning. This

mindset is described as understanding, “the principles of adult learning must be at the forefront of all professional learning opportunities aimed at supporting teachers in their development” (Zepeda, 2019, p. 36). It was important to undergird this study in the principles of adult learning due to the significant role that quality job-embedded professional learning played in the research.

Given the urgency and importance of addressing literacy gaps at LOMS, it was crucial to position teachers as leaders during the literacy intervention. Harris et al. (2019) cited the significant positive impact that teacher leaders have on a staff as they seek development and growth. The impact often takes shape in the form of innovation, changes in professional practice and culture, and increased collaboration. The intervention at the center of this study required teachers to engage in pedagogical practices that were, for many, brand new or rarely practiced.

Because of the new content and instructional practices, the leadership could not live with just one individual. Teachers desire to be led by instructional leaders and fellow teacher leaders. The success of the intervention relied on developing teacher agency and empowerment because teachers need to be “co-constructors” of change to yield the type of positive innovations in reading practices that can lead to achievement that was sought in this study (Harris et al., 2019).

Teachers were poised to become leaders in this study through professional learning and instructional coaching. The instructional coach sought to provide job-embedded professional learning opportunities, or learning opportunities that were relevant and tailored to adult learners that included feedback; supported inquiry and reflection; facilitated the transfer of new skills into practice; combated isolation;

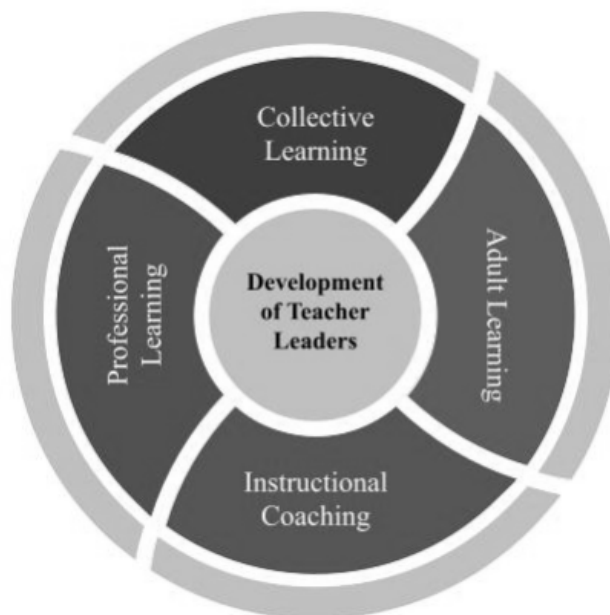
promoted collaboration; and all delivered on the job (Zepeda, 2019). Job-embedded professional learning played a key role in helping teachers build the necessary tools to implement literacy interventions.

Professional learning was coupled with intentionally planned instructional coaching and coaching cycles. Although the trajectory of coaching varied based on individual needs, the process typically followed the steps of the “impact cycle” (Knight, 2021). The cycle included identifying a clear picture of reality, goal setting, creating action and strategies around the goal, observation, and feedback. Coaching cycles were vital to the success of building individual learning, which could create greater collective learning. Collective learning, or collective efficacy, is “based on the belief that through collective actions educators can influence students’ results and enhance their achievements” (Harris et al., 2019, p. 123).

The theoretical framework that guided this study is depicted in Figure 1.1 The figure illustrates how adult learning opportunities, job-embedded professional learning, and instructional coaching created the conditions to develop teachers as leaders within the context of this study at LOMS.

Figure 1.1

Theoretical Framework Based on Andragogy and Teacher Development



Effective implementation of interventions hinged on centering adult-learning needs that informed professional learning, creating a collective understanding and urgency toward literacy gaps among students at LOMS while using instructional coaching structures to develop teachers as leaders in their classrooms. These enduring understandings were crucial to the ARDT as they developed, implemented, and analyzed interventions.

Logic Model

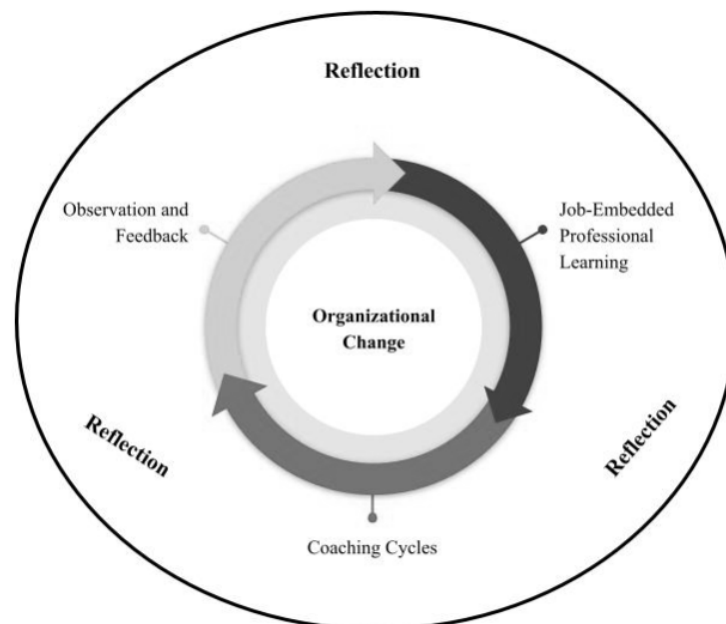
When adult learning needs are met, the conditions are more conducive to organizational learning and change. Organizational learning refers to change that occurs in an organization due to individual and collective learning. Fauske and Raybould (2005) asserted, “organizational learning theory parallels models of individual learning grounded

in cognitive and social psychology and defines learning as organizational change” (p. 23). Importantly, the research conducted by Fauske and Raybould (2005) highlighted significant implications for practice. For organizational learning to occur, the following conditions must be met: prioritization of change, consistent communication regarding the change, shared understanding about variability and unpredictability, modification of routines, and modification of frameworks. To enact change as it related to student reading achievement, the researcher identified the need to incorporate the principles of collective learning as the foundation of this action research study.

The logic model depicted in Figure 1.2 illustrates how organizational change was created through job-embedded professional learning, coaching cycles, classroom observations, and feedback.

Figure 1.2

Logic Model for Study



The logic model illustrates that change cannot occur without the continuous cycle of support and coaching for teachers, especially when developing teacher leaders. By fostering the growth of teachers as leaders at LOMS through instructional coaching—including job-embedded professional learning practices: coaching cycles, classroom observations, and feedback—the intended impact is the development of teachers as leaders of literacy. Teacher leadership is more crucial than ever as LOMS seeks to address low reading proficiency through science-based literacy interventions related to the SoR.

Overview of the Methodology

Effective school improvement must be conducted through intentional, systematic, and methodical actions. Acting purely on emotion or feeling is not measurable or reproducible, which leads to inconsistent results. A key principle to school improvement as asserted by Bryk et al. (2017) was that “we cannot improve at scale what we cannot measure” (p. 14). In other words, to have large scale impact in educational settings, actions and decisions must be driven by data that are guided by a particular problem or issue.

As a model, action research is a viable approach to improve schools because “[it] is not only beneficial but necessary and urgent to renew our schools as well as to empower both teachers and supervisors” (Glanz, 2014, p. 2). Action research was the appropriate methodology for the purpose of this study because of the urgent and timely needs connected to gaps in literacy skills. By eliciting the knowledge and insights of teachers in the middle school setting, this study was “problem-specific and user-centered” (Bryk et al., 2017, pp. 21-34).

This study focused on developing teacher leaders during a school-wide literacy initiative that was aimed at closing gaps in reading and writing skills. The problem was explored in context and from varying perspectives. The stakeholders involved in this study had a deliberate and genuine interest to identify root causes and solutions related to gaps in literacy skills found in the data at LOMS.

In this context, action research allowed for the use and analysis of both quantitative and qualitative data. Both types of data provided invaluable insight for the problem of student underachievement in literacy, and how teachers were empowered to build their capacity through professional learning community structures.

Coghlan (2016) asserted that the issues most pressing and urgent in an organization must be explored by those from within it. Individuals who are most invested and most impacted by the problem of practice possess “contextually embedded knowledge which emerges from experience” (Coghlan, 2016, p. 4). This knowledge and understanding is invaluable to consider as the problem is being addressed through action research.

Data Collection

Glanz (2014) asserted, “quantitative research attempts to establish facts, whereas qualitative research tries to develop an understanding of a problem” (p. 80). In the context of this study, quantitative data was used as a secondary source to understand and to help position the focus and the work of the action research design team (ARDT) and the action research implementation team (ARIT). Quantitative data used to frame the development of the interventions included formal assessments, such as results from the iReady Reading Diagnostic assessment and the Georgia Milestone Assessment System

(GMAS). Informal assessments included classroom-based assessments such as end-of-unit assessments and quizzes. The data from these sources were concrete.

Qualitative data allowed the research team to explore perceptions, feedback, survey responses, and other forms of more “flexible” data to seek improvement as it related to closing gaps in literacy skills. Qualitative data included the following:

1. Interviews conducted with teacher leaders who implemented components of the literacy intervention in their classrooms;
2. Questionnaire data collected from teacher leaders highlighting their perceptions regarding the supports received to implement the literacy intervention;
3. Observation data collected from classroom walkthroughs;
4. Artifacts of the implementation, including student work samples, supporting templates and organizers, instructional coaching logs, and other tools used in the implementation;
5. Field Notes and the Researcher’s Journal that provide anecdotal information tracking the progress and trajectory of the action research implementation.

The data collected were crucial for identifying patterns and trends as they related to the overall objectives of the action research study.

Interventions

The Action Research Design Team (ARDT) collaboratively developed interventions that were aimed at gradually developing the capacity of teacher leaders through instructional coaching. Three unique interventions were deployed during three action research cycles. The facilitation of these interventions allowed the ARDT to evaluate their effectiveness and inform future actions. The first intervention was the

facilitation of coaching cycles between a coach and coachee. In the context of this study, a coaching cycle is defined by the systematic steps through which a teacher progresses under the guidance of an instructional coach. Broadly, this framework includes three main components: identify, learn, and improve (Knight, 2018). Within this framework, coaches and teachers work in a partnership to set goals, model behaviors and practices, and monitor progress toward goals.

The second intervention was the facilitation of instructional coach-led professional learning communities (PLCs). In the context of this study, PLCs are defined as collaborative meeting structures that aim to increase collective efficacy and student achievement through activities such as data analysis, microteaching, and reflection (Fisher et al., 2019). The content of the PLCs conducted during this study were aligned with teacher goals, in addition to trends that the primary researcher and ARDT members identified as high leverage instructional areas.

Finally, the last intervention examined the impact of teacher-led PLCs and their impact on increasing instructional capacity, peer buy-in, and feelings of empowerment and confidence. Ultimately, the three interventions deployed during this study followed a gradual release model from instructional coach to teacher leader. It was the goal of the instructional coach to equip teachers with the tools, strategies, and mindsets to serve as a teacher leader and create a ripple effect of enhanced capacity throughout the organization.

Significance of the Study

Leaders of literacy are needed to address the significant gaps in reading achievement that are pervasive at LOMS. The languid growth in student achievement

suggests that something drastically different must be done to intervene in an effective way. While schools and school districts are often quick to purchase expensive resources and programs, less frequently is there an emphasis on the development of teacher leaders. Teacher leaders are essential in creating organizational change. Katzenmeyer and Moller (2009) asserted, “professional learning offered to teachers does not result in changed teacher behavior in the classroom unless follow up coaching and support is offered” (p. 4). Teachers who are positioned as leaders are able to provide this ongoing support to their colleagues in conjunction with the development and support offered by instructional coaching.

The role of the instructional coach is to improve student outcomes through teacher development. Tekir (2022) described instructional coaching as a content-based “job-embedded professional development model...[that] aims to enable teachers to achieve the goals in the instructional reform movements of their schools or districts” (p. 160). In the context of this study, instructional coaching was used as an important method of building teacher capacity to address literacy gaps and to meet broader goals connected to literacy achievement. This study provided important insight into effective instructional coaching methods used to move teacher and student learning forward.

This action research study examined how the development of teacher leaders, through instructional coaching, professional learning, and collective learning created organizational change. Change in this context translated into teachers becoming well-equipped with the tools of the interventions to successfully deploy systematic literacy interventions in classrooms at one mid-size, semi-urban middle school. This study provided insight into the development of teacher leaders through instructional coaching.

Organization of the Dissertation

Chapter 1 provides an overview of this action research study. This chapter introduces the purpose of the study, including the context in which it is situated. Chapter 1 details research questions, definitions of terms, the working theoretical framework, and the logic model. This information connects themes and overarching ideas about the connection between building teacher leaders through instructional coaching and the subsequent impact on student reading achievement. Additionally, Chapter 1 provides an overview of the methodology, interventions, and the significance of the study.

Chapter 2 presents the literature related to the study including teacher leadership, instructional coaching, literacy skills at the middle-level, and job-embedded professional learning. Chapter 3 details the methods and approaches taken by the action research design team and the action research implementation team. Chapter 4 analyzes the data collected during the study. Chapter 5 includes an analysis of findings and the themes that emerged from the action research case. Chapter 6 presents conclusions, implications, and connections to leadership practices and literacy.

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF THE RELATED LITERATURE

Large-scale organizational change cannot happen without systematic development of teachers. As schools and school districts seek to improve student achievement, it must be understood that, “investing in teachers and their learning, rather than creating more tests, is a better investment for improving student outcomes” (Katzenmeyer & Moller, 2009, p. 2). In the context of this study, investment in teachers refers to development through instructional coaching and professional learning. These types of support were crucial for addressing gaps in student reading achievement, and for providing the supports so that teachers would become leaders of literacy in their classrooms.

The purpose of this study was to examine how instructional coaching fostered the development of teacher leaders, and how this development impacted literacy instruction and overall school improvement goals centered around literacy. The researcher sought the perspective of instructional leaders, including administrators and coaches, as well as teachers, to learn more about building capacity through the development of teacher leaders. These perspectives were important to the study as they provided direct insight from the individuals who were primarily tasked with the implementation of the interventions surrounding the SoR approaches to literacy instruction.

This action research study was guided by the following questions:

1. How does instructional coaching impact the development of teacher leaders in literacy instruction and intervention?

2. How do teachers describe the impact of instructional coaching on their capacity to lead literacy initiatives and to implement interventions in their classrooms?
3. How does the action research design team (ARDT) describe the impact of instructional leadership, particularly through coaching, on the implementation of reading interventions and instructional initiatives?

These questions were used by the researcher and the ARDT to explore how instructional coaching developed teacher leaders during the implementation of a large-scale literacy intervention at the middle-level. Various types of data were collected as the research questions were examined, including interviews, surveys, focus group notes, artifacts, and field notes.

A literature review was conducted to synthesize and analyze the themes that became apparent in the literature related to teacher leadership, instructional coaching, and job-embedded professional learning. The literature on the development of teacher leaders through instructional coaching was categorized into three sections. The first section defined and analyzed teacher leadership, particularly how the development of teacher leadership yields organizational change. The second section explored the role of instructional coaching as an integral component of building leadership and teacher development. The final section analyzed how job-embedded professional learning could support increased teacher efficacy, with a specific focus on literacy instruction and the implications for middle-level educators. The empirical findings table can be found in Appendix A.

Teacher Leadership

When it comes to organizational change, the leadership of teachers is paramount. Teacher leaders are educators who “lead within and beyond the classroom; identify with and contribute to a community of teacher learners and leaders; influence others toward improved educational practice; and accept responsibility for achieving the outcomes of their leadership” (Katzenmeyer & Moller, 2009, p. 6). Furthermore, Katzenmeyer and Moller referred to the unearthing of teacher leadership as “awakening the sleeping giant” because of the magnitude of impact this type of leadership can have in a building. This section explored the potential of teacher leadership, the role of the teacher leader, how teacher leaders could be catalysts for organizational change, and how a culture of learning and support can be developed through teacher leadership.

Understanding Teacher Leadership and its Potential

The definition of teacher leadership and its impact has evolved with myriad studies about its impact. Silva et al. (2000) described teacher leadership as coming in three waves. The first wave was managerial and lacked instructional substance, and the managerial nature of teacher leadership was likened to assuming administrative tasks or responsibilities. The second wave of teacher leadership capitalized on instructional practices of individual teacher leaders to support the development of others and, in turn, focus on student achievement. The third wave was emerging as teachers gained a better understanding of their practices and the role that individuals played in school improvement efforts. It is important to understand these “waves” of teacher leadership to have context for its evolution and the immensely important role this informal style of leading plays in a school building.

Teacher leadership is differentiated from formal leadership structures in important and impactful ways. Teacher leadership is informal and “on-site.” The informal nature of teacher leadership is largely important. In fact, Fairman and Mackenzie (2015) determined that for some teacher leaders, there was an active resistance toward formal leadership titles. In their study, Fairman and Mackenzie (2015) found that removing the leadership title allowed for more genuine relationships to develop and to flourish between teacher colleagues. Relationship building proved to be essential for creating the conditions for teacher leaders to influence and impact others. Individuals such as team leaders, mentors, content leads, and reading specialists might assume the role of a teacher leader in a school.

There are opportunities for teacher leaders to make an impact through activities such as facilitating professional learning communities (PLCs), leading discussions during team meetings, and engaging in peer observations. The literature surrounding teacher leadership argues that it plays just as significant of a role in building teacher capacity and increasing student achievement, but teacher leadership is often understated in its importance (Campbell et al., 2018; Harris et al., 2017; Heck & Hallinger, 2009; Wieczorek & Lear, 2018).

If teacher leadership is akin to a sleeping giant, how do we awaken it for the sake of school improvement efforts? Katzenmeyer and Moller (2009) argued that this is done by helping teachers recognize that they are leaders, conducting professional learning that is targeted and supportive, and creating school cultures that value leadership and learning. Ironically, these conditions must start with the principal as the formal leader. Thus begins the process of dissecting the layers of leadership within an organization.

The first layer of leadership begins with the principal. To help teachers understand that they are leaders, the building leader must first understand “there cannot be significant progress within an educational system in which hierarchical control separates managers (school principals) from workers (teachers)” (Katzenmeyer & Moller, 2009, p. 2). Galdames-Calderon (2023) echoed the importance of the role that the principal makes in the creation and development of teacher leaders, particularly through the strategic use of distributed leadership.

Distributed leadership is “based on the idea that all members of an educational community contribute to the success of the school, instead of depending on the central leader” (Galdames-Calderon, 2023, p. 4). By distributing leadership opportunities to teachers in a building, transformational opportunities exist with respect to school improvement and initiative efforts. These opportunities exist because distributive leadership disseminates school management responsibilities, boosts teacher autonomy, promotes collaborative work, and shifts school culture toward institutional decision making (Galdames-Calderon, 2023).

The literature surrounding distributed leadership and its impact on school improvement efforts is extensive. Across the literature, it is evident that the use of distributive leadership has direct effects on student outcomes and supports the development of teachers as leaders (Heck & Hallinger, 2009; Spillane, 2006; Wieczorek & Lear, 2018). Spillane (2006) offered important insight into the facilitation of distributive leadership and what it looked like in practice. Spillane argued that distributive leadership was more than a series of roles, structures, or titles that are

assigned by the principal. Furthermore, Spillane debunked the idea that leadership was “heroic” or lived with one individual.

Spillane (2006) explained that an organization with distributive leadership is made up of formal and informal leaders, including principals, assistant principals, specialists, and teachers. However, the “leader-plus” definition of distributive leadership does not stop with merely assigning roles or carrying out specific actions. Spillane argued that distributive leadership included three main elements of leadership practice, including situations, leaders, and followers. Importantly, the interactions between leaders and followers was what constituted leadership practice, serving as the catalyst for change and leadership in a school.

Heck and Hallinger (2009) conducted a study to analyze the effects of distributed leadership on school improvement efforts. Their analysis of empirical data collected during the four-year study showed “significant direct effects of distributed leadership on change in the schools’ academic capacity” (p. 659). Furthermore, the study found that academic capacity increased in settings where stakeholders perceived strong distributive leadership systems. The findings from Heck and Hallinger’s (2009) study supported the notion that it was not only important to operate from a distributive leadership perspective, but also that distributed leadership must be built into the fabric of the school culture so all leaders and followers understood and valued its presence in the school.

Perhaps the most compelling case for strong distributive leadership structures is based on the findings of Leithwood et al. (2004). Their extensive study on the impact of leadership on student achievement and school improvement efforts found that “leadership not only matters: it is second only to teaching among school-related factors in its impact

on student learning” (p. 3). Notably, Leithwood et al. determined that quality leadership involved investing and developing teachers and leaders within a building.

Formal and Informal Leadership Roles for Instructional Coaches

The next layer of leadership lives with instructional coaches—individuals who are responsible for planning, creating, implementing, and evaluating professional learning. To develop teacher leaders, instructional coaches are responsible for quality professional learning that is individualized, targeted, and includes a plan of support for teachers. The onus of responsibility for creating school cultures that value leadership and learning lives with all layers of leadership. Initially, principals must include this type of culture in their vision for the work as an organization.

Once a shared vision is established, formal and informal school leaders are responsible for bringing the vision to fruition. Instructional coaches are responsible for perpetuating this vision through meaningful facilitation of professional learning that is aligned with school goals and desired outcomes. Effective facilitation of professional learning creates the conditions for teacher leaders to model learning habits and continual professional growth.

Knight (1998, 2007) described instructional coaching as a partnership. In Knight’s 1997 study, research revealed that teachers were more engaged, learned more, and were more likely to implement practices demonstrated in professional learning when the facilitators used what is described as the partnership approach. These findings led to the creation of partnership principles which are “intended to provide a conceptual language for instructional coaches to describe how they go about working with teachers” (Knight, 2007, p. 40).

The principles of instructional coaching as defined by Knight (2007) are: (1) equality: instructional coaches and teachers are equal partners; (2) choice: teachers should have choice regarding what and how they learn; (3) voice: professional learning should empower and respect the voices of teachers; (4) dialogue: professional learning should enable authentic dialogue; (5) reflection: reflection is an integral part of professional learning; (6) praxis: teachers should apply their learning to their real-life practice as they are learning; and (7) reciprocity: instructional coaches should expect to get as much as they give.

It is important to spell out the partnership principles as they have significant implications on the role of an instructional coach. The goal is to be able to operate under these principles and to create change in practice among teachers. The literature reveals that change in practice is possible when there is authentic collaboration between instructional coaches and teachers, and that the professional learning is relevant, tailored to adult learning, and job-embedded (Knight, 1998; Knight, 2007; Zepeda, 2019).

In addition to partnership principles and quality professional learning as hallmarks to effective instructional coaching, results from a review of empirical literature on effective coaching actions determined that specific actions have a positive impact on teacher practice. Based on their research, Elek and Page (2019) believed that observation, feedback, and goal-setting were common elements of successful coaching partnerships.

School improvement becomes possible when informal and formal leaders understand and value their role in reaching desired outcomes (Harris et al., 2017; Katzenmeyer & Moller, 2009). The present study centered its focus on school improvement in the realm of literacy. The literature surrounding teacher leadership is

clear—to yield the desired results in increased literacy skills, teachers must be positioned as leaders and supported by layers of leadership to build towards the goal of improvement.

Teacher Leaders as Catalysts for Change

Teacher leaders play key roles in school improvement efforts. Wronowski et al. (2023) asserted that these roles were specific and could be grouped in four categories: contributors, complementors, connectors, and champions. Teacher leaders contribute teacher voice and perspective to decision making. Teacher leaders compliment school and district level leaders and walk in tandem with the vision of school improvement efforts and goals. Teacher leaders connect teachers with other departments, perspectives, and ideas within the school to help colleagues broaden their understanding of instructional practices throughout the school.

Finally, teacher leaders are champions for all stakeholders in a school community, and they seek to improve outcomes for all individuals in their community. It is important to detail these key roles to understand how teacher leaders yield change in their schools. When teacher leaders fulfil these roles, culture and community is developed, collective efficacy increases, and more opportunities for teacher and student success are made available (Leithwood et. al, 2004; Wenner & Campbell, 2017; York-Barr & Duke, 2004).

An important theme that was apparent across the literature was the focus on collaboration (Fairman & Mackenzie, 2015; Galdames-Calderon, 2023; Visone, 2022; Wilmore, 2007; Wronowski et al., 2023). Collaboration between teacher leaders and formal leaders, and collaboration between teacher leaders and colleagues, made change

possible. Dismantling silos and isolated decision-making structures proved to yield more positive results and efforts toward school improvement.

Fairman and Mackenzie (2015) pinpointed specific ways that teacher leaders influence change in an organization: teacher leaders model professional attitudes and dispositions, share their ideas and work, coach colleagues, collaborate with others, and advocate for change. This type of influence underscores efforts taken by formal school leaders and allows a positive ripple effect in all corners of the building. Teacher leader influence and impact connects to the power of distributed leadership. If a principal can identify diverse leaders in various roles in their building, they can create the conditions for teacher leader influence throughout the building.

Creating Culture through Teacher Leadership

Formal and informal leaders play an instrumental role in empowering teacher leadership through culture building (Visone, 2022). The literature outlines how the principles of empowerment, collegiality, and risk taking are integral to a culture of empowerment and autonomy (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2013; Visone, 2022). A supportive culture is one where colleagues support one another in their pursuit of professional learning and development. A school culture that values professional learning is one where there is a shared vision connected to school improvement goals, and a collective understanding of the roles that all stakeholders play in achieving desired outcomes (Admiraal et al., 2021; Bezzina, 2006; Harris & Mujs, 2004; Sergiovanni, 2000). In a study about the influence of informal and formal leadership, Fairman and Mackenzie (2015) cited the importance of collegial relationships. The findings of the Fairman and

Mackenzie (2015) study revealed, “a collegial climate was an important condition supporting teacher leadership and school-wide improvement” (p. 72).

Provided that professional learning is an important vehicle for developing teacher leaders (Galdames-Calderon, 2023), the school culture must be one that values the purpose and presence of professional learning. If the school culture is jaded toward professional learning, or if negative views about professional learning are perpetuated, far fewer school leaders will emerge. Culture is present in all aspects of an organization. Evidence of culture can be seen in formal and informal ways, from the discourse in hallways to dispositions and perspectives that can be seen and heard in staff meetings.

Although the principal is not the sole arbiter of developing and sustaining culture in a school, he or she can foster the development of a healthy culture through the prioritization and implementation of teacher-centered learning activities. Zepeda (2019) asserted, “healthy school cultures and climates thrive in environments built through collaboration, trust, and care for the members of the school” (p. 96). This type of environment might include collaboration, shared decision making, peer coaching programs, mentoring opportunities, and creating protected time for teachers (Zepeda, 2019).

With respect to school culture, the message in the literature is clear: learning, change, and transformation is made possible when the culture is positive, learning-centered, and supportive (Deal & Peterson, 2016; Saphier & King, 1985; Zepeda, 2019; Zepeda et al., 2023). Deal and Peterson (2016) explained that toxic cultures can develop due to several reasons, including action (or inaction) of formal and informal leaders, the resignation of key stakeholders, or outside pressure for reform or accountability. While

there are actions that leaders can take to counteract toxic negativity, it is equally as important to address the proactive steps leaders can take to create a positive school culture.

Specifically, teacher leaders play a key role in the development of a school culture that is supportive and values learning and learning opportunities. Learning communities are essential structures for developing school culture (Zepeda, 2019). Learning communities are at the heart of school culture, and “strong school cultures embrace teacher leaders as part of the tapestry of a learning community” (Zepeda, 2019, p. 101).

Teacher leaders are not developed by the mere presence of professional learning. For these learning opportunities to also be effective, they must be quality and job-embedded. This type of development is learning that is relevant and tailored to adult learners, includes feedback, supports inquiry and reflection, facilitates the transfer of new skills into practice, combats isolation, promotes collaboration, and is delivered on the job (Zepeda, 2019).

It is important to unpack the impact of teacher empowerment as it relates to culture building. By empowering teachers and teacher leaders, a school can increase its decisional capital, or teacher autonomy (Visone, 2022). However, teacher empowerment alone cannot yield school improvements. In a study conducted by Marks and Louis (1997), results indicated that substantial change in teacher practice required shared attitudes and mindsets. This finding underscores the importance of developing a culture that centers shared beliefs around the school vision and the purpose of professional learning.

The next section of this chapter explores instructional coaching and the role it plays in professional learning, teacher development, and work toward school improvement efforts.

Instructional Coaching

In today's K-12 schools, instructional coaching is used as a common form of sustained professional development for teachers. Although the role of a coach may vary in different contexts, the literature similarly defines instructional coaching as job-embedded, sustained, collaborative, and as a partnership between teachers and coaches (Desimone et al., 2017; Knight, 2007; Zepeda, 2019). Because studies have shown correlations between quality professional learning and teacher practice, it was essential to explore the area of instructional coaching as it impacts the professional support and development a teacher receives (Desimone & Pak, 2017; Glover et al., 2023; Louis & Marks, 1998).

This section of the literature review explored the role of the instructional coach through its history and context, instructional coaching as quality professional development, and the role of the instructional coach in professional learning communities (PLCs).

The Role of the Instructional Coach

The research surrounding instructional coaching dates to the seminal studies conducted by Joyce and Showers (1980, 1996). Their 1980 study was conducted over the course of two years, and it examined how teachers developed and acquired new skills. The study proposed instructional coaching, or peer coaching, as an on-site dimension of professional development. In their research, Joyce and Showers (1986) found:

Coaching can be provided by peers (other teachers), supervisors, professors, curriculum consultants, or others thoroughly familiar with the approaches.

Coaching for application involves helping teachers analyze the content to be taught and the approach to be taken, and making very specific plans to help the students adapt to the new teaching approach. (p. 384)

Furthermore, their findings pointed to the positive impact of modeling and feedback, findings that are echoed in current research and studies (Glover et al., 2022; Knight, 2021; Kohler et al., 1999; Zepeda, 2019).

Instructional coaching picked up traction with the passage of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001, and the subsequent Every Student Succeeds (ESSA) Act of 2015. The impact of both pieces of legislation was undeniable. Schools and school leaders were faced with heightened levels of accountability and measures of student success. Both pieces of legislation “have attempted to influence teacher quality, teacher effectiveness, teacher evaluation systems, and professional learning” (Zepeda, 2019, p. 7).

In fact, NCLB spells out explicit guidance for schools to follow when planning and implementing professional learning. Professional learning must be ongoing, intensive, content-focused, aligned to state and district goals, and include opportunities for self-assessment and reflection (NCLB, SEC. 34, A). ESSA reauthorized the former NCLB, and the language of the legislation echoed that of the literature, arguing that professional learning should be on-going, standards-based, content-focused, and job-embedded (Desimone et al., 2017; Kraft et al., 2018; Zepeda, 2019).

As the research about instructional coaching has increased since the 1990s, the role has evolved to center what studies have found to be its most effective components. A 1999 study conducted by Kohler et al. found that peer coaching resulted in changes in teacher practice. Specifically, their study found that observations and feedback around the use of identified classroom strategies supported long-term change in teacher behavior. Subsequent research found that instructional coaching was effective when it was collaborative, grounded in trust, goal-centered, and individualized (Aguilar, 2013; Knight, 2007; Knight, 2019).

While common coaching behaviors and actions presented themselves in the research, Glover et al. (2022) sought deeper information connected to coaching actions. In their research, Glover et al. (2022) evaluated the impact of three specific coaching actions and their impact on teacher learning: modeling, practice, and feedback, and the findings hold important implications for practice. Although the study did not conclude that modeling was a significant predictor of student achievement, there was a positive correlation among feedback and practice opportunities on teacher practice and student achievement. Glover et al. (2022) asserted that protected time for teachers to practice skills during coaching sessions, practicing newly learned skills, and receiving ongoing feedback were important components of teacher development.

Other researchers have taken the type of implications asserted by Glover et al. (2022) and turned them into a systematic approach for coaches to follow for effective coaching. Using his partnership principles (2007), Knight (2019) proposed a simple model for coaching based on his research around effective coaching: identify, learn,

improve. This model is cyclical in nature in that it is iterative in the learning, reflection, and feedback between coach and teacher.

Instructional Coaching as Quality Professional Development

Instructional coaching is a powerful vehicle for professional development. Schools and school districts invest significant resources to fund coaching programs and initiatives. A 2020 study conducted by Barrett et al. sought to determine the monetary resources that were funneled into professional development through two main activities: workshops and coaching. Barrett et al. (2020) found, “the cost per educator per contact hour ranged from \$138.29 to \$158.45 for workshops and was \$169.43 for coaching, in 2017-2018 US dollars” (p. 604). Given the price tag of professional learning, it is important to explore the factors that make instructional coaching a quality and effective form of professional development.

In response to limited empirical evidence connecting instructional coaching and improved teacher practice, Desimone (2017) evaluated instructional coaching through five “empirically predictive elements” of effective professional development: content focus, active learning, sustained duration, coherence, and collective participation (p. 3). Given that instructional coaching is defined and shaped by these predictive factors, it was possible for this study to evaluate coaching through each lens. In other words, since instructional coaching is inherently content-focused, sustained, collaborative, and focused on learning, instructional coaching includes activities that have known positive impact on teacher practice (Burchinal et al., 2012; Buysse et al., 2010; Clements et al., 2011; Garet et al., 2001; Lee & Smith, 1996).

The literature suggested that instructional coaching was a modern form of professional development that addressed the pitfalls of the whole-group, one-size-fits-all approach to professional development (Neufeld & Roper, 2003; Yoon, 2007; Zepeda, 2019). Instructional coaching, especially coaching that is context and content specific, is differentiated and targeted based on individual teacher need. In their 2003 report that characterized the coaching model as professional learning, Neufeld and Roper (2003) asserted, “Improving teachers’ learning—and, in turn, their own practice and their students’ learning—requires professional development that is closely and explicitly tied to teachers’ ongoing work. Coaching addresses that requirement” (p. 3).

It is this content-specific approach that can have profound impact on a larger scale. Zepeda (2019) argued, “As a support to professional development with targeted teachers (e.g., math or literacy), coaches can support the instructional program and support a broader base of teachers across grade levels while focusing on school wide improvement efforts” (p. 116).

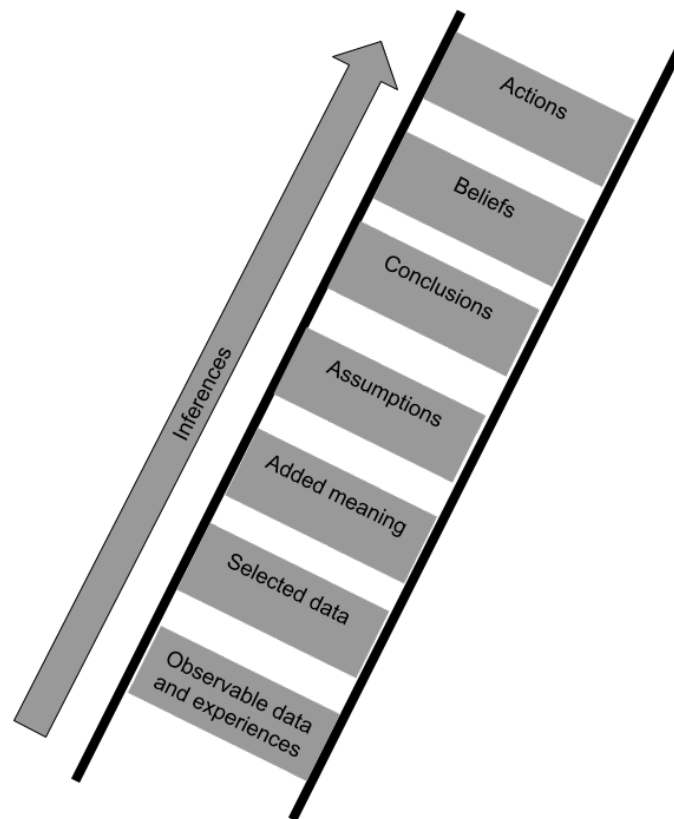
As research about instructional coaching and its efficacy continues to become available, common frameworks present themselves as the most effective for improving teacher practice and behavior. First, common coaching approaches have been established that are dependent on the goal of the coaching relationship; peer coaching, cognitive coaching, technical coaching, problem-solving coaching, and reform coaching are all common approaches for instructional coaches to use in schools with coachees (Kurz et al., 2017). Each of these approaches are intended to yield specific results based on the nature of the coaching relationship.

Given these common approaches to coaching, researchers have developed frameworks that instructional coaches are able to implement in their settings. Knight (2018) introduced the Impact Cycle, a framework that involves three components: identify, learn, and improve. Within this framework, coaches and teachers work in a partnership to set goals, model behaviors and practices, and monitor progress toward goals. Aguilar (2013) argued that transformational coaching was rooted in the desire to transform the “three B’s” – being, beliefs, and behavior. The essential framework that emerges from this belief system is the “ladder of inference,” a tool that coaches can use to deconstruct biases and assumptions that result in action and behavior.

Aguilar suggests that coaches use this framework first with themselves as an introspective exercise to examine their own thinking before attempting this process with coachees. The ladder of inference is an effective tool for unpacking beliefs and preconceived notions that inevitably impact one’s being, beliefs, and behaviors. Illuminating these biases and beliefs allows a coaching partnership to begin the transformational work of shifting mindsets that may be impeding teacher and student growth. Figure 2.1 illustrates the ladder of inference tool and the questions used to separate facts and conclusions.

Figure 2.1

Ladder of Inference



Note. Adapted from Aguilar (2013, p. 36).

The ladder of inference suggests that individuals attach meaning to their pool of observable data based on assumptions and biases from lived experiences. These assumptions result in conclusions that develop into beliefs and actions, which can ultimately impact the coaching relationship and the development of teachers. For example, a coach may use this tool with a teacher who has shared or exhibited a belief that is harmful to themselves, colleagues, or students. The use of the tool separates facts from implicit biases or assumptions that teachers have woven into a story or situation. Thus, the use of the ladder of inference as a coaching framework creates the conditions for transformational coaching that addresses the holistic development of teachers.

The Promise of Professional Learning Communities

There needs to be a systematic approach as instructional coaches seek to create change and develop teachers. Additionally, an approach is needed that leverages the individual learning occurring between teachers and coaches and to the school as a whole. Professional learning communities are a research-based answer to this important need.

Although the concept and definition of PLCs has evolved since their inception, the literature commonly defines professional learning communities as individuals working together to combine their knowledge and expertise to critically solve problems related to student learning needs (DuFour, 2004; Fisher et al., 2019; Roy & Hord, 2006; Stoll, 2006). In their systematic approach to PLC facilitation, Fisher et al. (2019) suggested that PLCs are effective when they operate under the following conditions: work from a set of shared norms, identify roles and responsibilities, and co-create agenda items.

There are also broader characteristics and theories that contribute to effective PLCs: shared values and visions, collective responsibility, reflection, and collaboration (Fisher et al., 2019; Louis & Marks, 1998; Roy & Hord, 2006). Yet, another defining characteristic of PLCs, and one that may have some of the most influence on its efficacy, is the centering and use of data to enhance student learning (DuFour, 2004). Certain PLC guiding questions, such as “where are we now?” and “who benefitted and who did not benefit?” (Fisher et al., 2019), call on the use of data analysis protocols to systematically review student performance and make informed instructional decisions based on trends.

Professional learning communities are about more than adult learning needs. Stoll et al. (2006) asserted, “to be successful in a changing and increasingly complex world, it is suggested that whole school communities need to work and learn together to take charge of change, finding the best ways enhance young people’s learning” (p. 222). Burns et al. (2018) conducted a study that specifically sought to evaluate how PLCs impact student achievement. The motivation behind this study claimed that there was little empirical data connecting PLCs directly to student performance.

The findings of the Burns et al. (2018) large-scale study found a positive correlation between student achievement and PLCs; however, it appeared that the achievement was likely an indicator of two broader constructs—collaboration and data-driven decision making. These findings may suggest that building leaders should prioritize collaboration and data systems as they pursue school improvement efforts.

An earlier study conducted by Louis and Marks (1998) found more convincing results regarding the correlation between PLCs and student achievement. Through quantitative and qualitative methods, Louis and Marks (1998) conducted a study to evaluate the impact of teacher behaviors and interactions outside of the classroom, and how this impacted school reform and restructuring.

The Louis and Marks study was “grounded in the assumption that how teachers interact when they are not in their classrooms may be critical to the future of school restructuring and to the effects of restructuring on students” (p. 758). In the context of this study, professional learning communities were evaluated and defined based on five elements as elaborated by Louis and Marks: shared values, focus on student learning, collaboration, deprivatized practice, and reflective dialogue.

Through their extensive three-year study, Louis and Marks (1998) found that school size, structural conditions (i.e., scheduled common planning time), and human and social resources were significantly impactful factors on effective PLCs. Furthermore, the findings of Louis and Marks (1998) suggested that, as schools seek reform, PLCs operating under favorable conditions, allowed for greater focus on student data and achievement. Thus, it can be concluded that schools using PLCs could see greater student success and gains toward goals.

Members of a PLC work toward common goals and have shared beliefs and a vision. This important mindset is a phenomenon defined by Bandura (1997) as *collective efficacy*, or “a group’s shared belief in its conjoint capability to organize and execute the courses of action required to produce given levels of attainment” (p. 477). The literature surrounding collective efficacy, specifically in schools, is extensive (Adams & Forsyth, 2006; Eells, 2011; Goddard, 2002; Goddard et al., 2004; Hattie, 2016).

Notably, in his visible learning research, Hattie (2016) cited collective teacher efficacy as having an effect size of 1.57, showing significant positive impact on student learning and achievement, a larger effect size of factors such as prior achievement, home environment, and motivation. These findings were consistent with research conducted by Bandura (1993) and Goddard (2002), which suggested that collective efficacy had more of an influence on student achievement than socioeconomic status, prior achievement, gender, and race/ethnicity.

Collective efficacy has an impact on teacher behavior by creating shared belief systems, influencing cultural beliefs, and implementing uniform high-yield strategies (Donohoo et al., 2018). Donohoo et al. (2018) asserted that these shared beliefs allows a

team of individuals to overcome challenges and be more effective. With respect to the school setting, these shared beliefs translate into increased student achievement (Bandura, 1993).

A meta-analysis conducted by Eells (2011) sought to determine the correlation between collective efficacy and student achievement. The results were significant. Eells concluded, “collective teacher efficacy and student achievement are strongly related. The strength of this relationship exists across subject areas, when using varied instruments, and in multiple locations” (p. 110). For school leaders, the implications of Eells’s (2011) findings are significant. Leaders have the ability to promote and increase collective efficacy by creating a culture of collaboration, learning, and support (Visone, 2022; Zepeda, 2019).

The Instructional Coach as Activator

What do PLCs have to do with instructional coaches? The PLC framework developed by Fisher et al. (2019) centers student achievement through adult collaboration and teamwork. One of the key tenets of the framework is the role of the activator, “which relates to how PLC teams must have individuals on the team take on the responsibility for ensuring the learning of the adults consistently moves forward” (Nagel, 2021, para. 3). In other words, the activator is deeply invested in the development and growth of adult learners within a PLC, particularly through the lens of building capacity to increase student achievement. Provided that instructional coaches develop adults through building relationships and partnerships, modeling, and observing (Knight, 2007), it is natural and appropriate for a coach to take on the role of activator in PLCs.

Effective activation in PLCs requires an understanding of adult learning and adult learning principles. Adult learning is often referred to as “andragogy,” which is defined as “the art and science of helping adults learn” (Knowles, 1990, p. 54). A successful activator is one who understands the differences between how children and adults learn, and applies that understanding to their leadership within the PLC. Zepeda (2019) spells out key distinctions between children and adult learners, as outlined in Table 2.1.

Table 2.1

Pedagogy versus Andragogy

Pedagogy [the ways children learn]	Andragogy [the ways adults learn]
Learners are dependent on the teacher to direct and control the learning.	Learners are independent, direct, and control the learning themselves, with the guidance from the teacher.
Views learners as: • Inexperienced • Learning when told • Focused on subjects • Motivated by external variables	Views learners as: • Experienced • Learning when necessary • Focused on life • Motivated by internal variables
Learners are dependent on the teacher for taking full responsibility for making decisions regarding learning (what should be learned, when, how, and why).	Learners are self-directed and make decisions about what should be learned.
Learners are passive.	
Learners have little experience to use as a resource for learning. They defer to the experience of the teacher and other educational resources (books, etc.).	Learners perform a variety of roles and have a vast reservoir of experience from which to draw for educational resources.
Learners become ready to learn when they are told to do so.	Learners become ready to learn when they experience a need to know something to perform more effectively in some aspect of their lives.
Learners are subject-centered.	Learners are life-centered.
Motivation to learn comes from external pressures.	Motivation to learn comes from internal motivators (self-esteem, recognition, quality of life, confidence, etc.).

Note. Adapted from Zepeda (2019, p. 38).

The key differences between pedagogy and andragogy are important for instructional coaches to understand, especially given their background and experience. Many coaches are experienced teachers who leave their classroom positions to pursue leadership opportunities. Thus, their background and training is often not grounded in adult education or theory. As leaders seek to understand adult learners, it is important to consider the complexities of adult learning.

Merriam and Bierema (2013) argued that it was not enough to simply define adult learners, but that the motivations and reasons for adult learning must also be understood. Educators of adult learners must understand their sense of self-concept, life experience, readiness to learn, internal motivations, and their desire to learn (Merriam & Bierema, 2013). Brookfield (2013) offered that adult learning should be mindful of power dynamics, promote critical thinking, be social in nature, and encourage self-directed learning.

It is essential for instructional coaches acting as activators to understand the key takeaways from the research about adult learners. Operating from these understandings make space for the transformational learning and leading that is made possible by effective PLC facilitation (Fisher et al., 2019; Louis & Marks, 1998; Roy & Hord, 2006).

Job-Embedded Professional Learning

Job-embedded professional learning refers to learning that occurs within a teacher's workday that signals collaboration, joint problem solving, and an authentic desire to improve teaching practice based on lessons learned on the job (Zepeda, 2015). Furthermore, job-embedded professional learning is grounded in the day-to-day teaching

practice and it is designed to enhance teachers' content-specific practices and overall teaching philosophies and beliefs (Croft et al., 2010).

A review of the related literature was conducted to explore how job-embedded professional learning increases teacher capacity and contributes to increased student achievement. The next section defines and evaluates the effectiveness of job-embedded professional learning. This section also explores literacy specific learning needs in the middle level, and how these learning needs can be addressed through job-embedded professional learning.

Job-Embedded Professional Learning Defined

The literature has widely debunked the concept of the “sit-and-get” style of professional learning due to its lack of individualization and broad, sweeping nature (Darling-Hammond, 2009; Yoon, 2007). From their extensive research, Darling-Hammond et al. (2017) determined that effective professional learning:

- Is content focused
- Incorporates active learning
- Supports collaboration
- Uses models of effective practice
- Provides coaching and expert support
- Offers feedback and reflection
- Is of sustained duration

Given the complex, multifaceted nature of today's school environments, these conditions of effective professional learning must be met with learning that is embedded within the layers of the school. However, for learning to be both effective and embedded,

it cannot merely exist as an “add-on” during the school day. Rather, job-embedded professional learning is not only embedded within the school day, but it is woven within the fabric of the school culture and built on shared understandings and beliefs about adult learning (Zepeda, 2015; Zepeda, 2019; Zepeda et al., 2023). Table 2.2 illustrates key components and markers of job-embedded professional learning, as asserted by Zepeda (2015).

Table 2.2

Job-Embedded Professional Learning

Job-Embedded Professional Learning Defined	Markers of Job-Embedded Professional Learning
Holds relevance for the adult learner	Occurs within the context of the work day
Includes feedback as part of the process	Honors the principles of adult learning
Supports inquiry and reflection	Coherent
Facilitates the transfer of new skills into practice	Promotes collaboration and fosters collegial relationships
Promotes collaboration	Supports the transfer of practice with the adoption and application of new skills

Note. Adapted from Zepeda (2015).

Croft et al. (2010) emphasized key distinctions between learning that is embedded and learning that is detached; detached learning is done in isolation and removed from practice. Embedded learning is typically collaborative (potentially with a mentor or instructional coach) and aligned with relevant goals. The tenets of job-embedded professional learning support the principles of adult learning; when the principles are upheld, adult learning is effective (Knowles, 1990; Zepeda, 2015; Zepeda, 2019).

The literature suggested that effective professional learning results in a change in teacher practice, rather than mere exposure to a concept or idea (Gulamhussein, 2013). In other words, effective professional learning is transformational. From an instructional

coaching standpoint, Aguilar (2013) asserted that transformation should occur within a teacher's behaviors, beliefs, and ways of being.

Literacy Professional Learning in the Middle Grades

Middle school English Language Arts (ELA) teachers face myriad challenges related to reading proficiency. Middle-level teachers are expected to teach grade level specific standards and skills, which includes concepts such as sentence structure, active and passive voice, theme development, and other complex skills that require prerequisite comprehension and other related literacy skills. These state mandated skills do not include basic literacy skills, such as building phonological awareness, decoding skills, and basic grammar, and mechanics. These are skills and concepts that are more specific to the elementary level.

However, when students arrive to middle school and are reading two or three (or sometimes more) grade levels below, middle school teachers often lack the training or experience with meeting these literacy needs. Given these complex needs, the literature was reviewed to explore the role of professional development and coaching to support literacy reform.

A study conducted by Carlisle and Berebitsky (2010) analyzed the impact of a literacy coach as a model of professional development. Their study followed two groups of teachers, one with no coach and one with a coach. The results of their study were significant. First, the teachers with a coach as a professional learning model showed increased use of instructional strategies as part of the reform. Second, and perhaps most important, the study found that the classrooms with a teacher who was supported by coach showed greater gains in word decoding from fall to spring. These findings are

consistent with the assertion that coaching is an effective form of professional development (Desimone, 2017).

A comprehensive study conducted by Garet et al. (2008) was less promising. This study sought to determine the impact of professional development on early reading instruction and achievement. The main findings of Garet et al. indicated that student test scores were not significantly higher after a year of implementation, and the added effect of coaching as an intervention was not statistically significant. Furthermore, the subsequent year following the implementation did not suggest significant teacher or student outcomes.

The literature is consistent about professional learning needs to be specific to early reading and literacy skills. The National Reading Panel (NICHD, 2000) reported that it was essential to build teacher knowledge of the five components of reading instruction, including phonological awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and reading comprehension. These findings are consistent with recent research based on the Science of Reading (SoR) (O'Connor, 2021; Olson, 2023). In the context of a middle level setting, it is likely that many educators are not versed in these essential reading areas or the related science. With effective coaching strategies and PLC facilitation, teachers at the middle level could become equipped with the tools, knowledge, and information that is essential to address literacy needs.

It was important to review the literature through the lens of the context in which this study was situated. Developing a strong understanding of the school context allows leaders to operate from a lens that is grounded in the critical issues pertinent to their specific school setting, thereby increasing their efficacy. Harris (2020) asserted that

school leaders must be “contextually sensitive” to be effective in their settings, and goes on to argue, “Leaders need to have familiarity with the socio-economic, demographic, cultural and historical composition of the community which governs their school” (Harris, 2020, p. 144).

In the context of this study, reading achievement has been languid. While some achievement markers indicate growth, this is not reflected in subgroup data. Additionally, there are severe discrepancies in reading and writing achievement between White students, students of color, and students served through the special education program. In a high-needs school, leadership through the lens of social justice, context, and achievement are needed for reform and success (Gibbons, 2023; Harris, 2020; Murakami et al., 2019).

Chapter Summary

As school leaders seek to increase student achievement, attention must be paid to how teachers are being developed. According to Hattie’s (2016) Visible Learning research, collective teacher efficacy is one of the greatest influences on student achievement and success. Collective efficacy, or the shared belief system among a group of individuals who seek to achieve common goals (Badura, 1997), is particularly powerful in a high-needs setting due to the adversity or barriers that may be pervasive based on the context. Instructional leadership through the form of coaching and development, are powerful forms of building and maintaining collective efficacy.

There are layers of leadership in a school setting. Leadership starts with the principal and trickles down to assistant principals, counselors, instructional coaches, team leaders, and mentor teachers. Through distributive leadership, teacher leaders can be

developed. This development results in higher pedagogical knowledge, content knowledge, and institutional knowledge. Furthermore, developing teachers as leaders positively impacts school improvement efforts and student achievement (Heck & Hallinger, 2009).

Instructional coaching is a powerful vehicle for teacher development through professional learning and professional learning community (PLC) facilitation. Through systematic coaching activities and actions, such as modeling, practicing, and providing feedback, teachers receive individualized support and guidance. Coaching impacts individual growth, but it can also lead to departmental and school wide growth (Zepeda, 2019). Furthermore, when coaches serve as activators in PLCs, they facilitate learning through norming, collaborating, and promoting critical thinking.

As schools seek to address achievement gaps through reform or initiatives, it is important to consider the research aligned with the specific content or skill area. In the context of this study, it was important to review the literature related to literacy instruction, particularly at the middle level. The literature shows that positioning instructional coaches to facilitate the learning of teachers during an initiative may have a positive impact on student and school outcomes (Carlisle & Berebitsky, 2010). The context-specific needs for professional learning pose important considerations for leaders as they seek to support teachers through the initiative.

The next chapter describes the action research methodology for this study. The chapter will detail the methods and approaches the researcher used in the context of this action research study. Additionally, the chapter will include data collection methods, an analysis of the data, and interventions used in this study.

CHAPTER 3

ACTION RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Developing teachers as leaders contributes to increased collective efficacy and progress toward school goals and initiatives (Donohoo et al., 2018; Leithwood et. al, 2004; Wenner & Campbell, 2017; York-Barr & Duke, 2004). Teacher leaders are developed through distributive leadership (Heck & Hallinger, 2009; Spillane, 2006; Wieczorek & Lear, 2018), empowerment through collective efficacy (Adams & Forsyth, 2006; Eells, 2011; Goddard, 2002; Goddard et al., 2004; Hattie, 2016), and job-embedded professional learning (Knowles, 1990; Zepeda, 2015; Zepeda, 2019).

The purpose of this study was to examine how instructional coaching fostered the development of teacher leaders, and how this development impacted literacy instruction and overall school improvement goals centered around literacy. The researcher sought the perspective of instructional leaders, including administrators and coaches, as well as teachers, to learn more about building teacher capacity through instructional coaching. These perspectives were important to the study as they provided direct insight from the individuals who were primarily tasked with the implementation of the interventions surrounding the SoR approaches to literacy instruction. This action research study was guided by the following questions:

1. How does instructional coaching impact the development of teacher leaders in literacy instruction and intervention?

2. How do teachers describe the impact of instructional coaching on their capacity to lead literacy initiatives and to implement interventions in their classrooms?
3. How does the action research design team (ARDT) describe the impact of instructional leadership, particularly through coaching, on the implementation of reading interventions and instructional initiatives?

Chapter 3 serves as an exploration of the action research methodology that guided this study. This analysis includes the logic model, planned interventions, data collection methods, and notes and artifacts that were collected by the researcher.

Rationale for Qualitative Research Design

Qualitative data allowed the research design team to collect essential data in the form of questionnaires, observations, interviews, artifacts collected by the researcher. Merriam and Tisdell (2015) argued, “qualitative researchers are interested in understanding how people interpret their experiences, how they construct their worlds, and what meaning they attribute to their experiences” (p. 6). In the context of this study, the action research design team sought to understand how instructional coaching impacted teacher perception of their capacity to successfully implement a literacy intervention program at Live Oak Middle School (LOMS, a pseudonym).

Simply put, qualitative research uses words as data, whereas quantitative research uses numbers (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Merriam (2002) asserted that intersections between social and political issues, and issues that are relevant and pertinent to the researcher, are central to qualitative studies. Qualitative research is effective when samples (interviews, surveys, etc.) are collected directly from the source, or from the individuals who are most impacted by the problem or issue. The purpose of this study

was to determine how instructional coaching developed teacher leaders and how this leadership impact overall school improvement efforts. A qualitative research method was used to collect and analyze the perceptions of teachers and other key stakeholders in the action research study.

Overview of Action Research Methods

Glanz (2014) defined action research as “disciplined inquiry that utilizes a systematic approach by applying the scientific method to study educational problems” (p. 7). Furthermore, Glanz asserts that *action research* is a form of applied research, or research “conducted chiefly in order to improve practice by solving a specific problem” (p. 7). In the context of educational leadership, school and district leaders engage in action research to address specific problems of practice within their unique context.

Action research is used by educational leaders as a methodology because of its potential for transformational change. According to Coghlan (2019), individuals who conduct action research within their own organization can have a multi-faceted impact. As a result of the research and the data collection process, action researchers develop personally, improve outcomes for their organization, and generate “understanding and theory” (p. 28) specific to their problem of practice.

Action research is a viable approach to improve schools because “[it] is not only beneficial but necessary and urgent to renew our schools as well as to empower both teachers and supervisors” (Glanz, 2014, p. 2). In the context of this study, action research was conducted to evaluate instructional coaching and its impact on developing teachers as leaders of literacy in their own classrooms. The researcher in this study elicited information from participants, many of whom were in classrooms experiencing the

impact of instructional coaching. This study sought to be “problem-specific and user-centered” (Bryk et al., 2017, pp. 21-34) by eliciting the knowledge and insights of teachers and leaders in the middle school setting.

Action research is undergirded by the social constructivism paradigm which posits that learning is dependent on social interactions, historical understanding, and reflection (Adams, 2006). In other words, this learning theory asserts that individuals learn through gaining a more comprehensive understanding of the realities of those around them. Furthermore, the social constructivism paradigm does not rely on absolute correctness to determine whether learning has occurred. In contrast, Adams (2006) asserted, “As the knowledge constructed is an indication of how the world might be, a variety of theoretical possibilities are acceptable, not because of their rightness but because of their ability to predict” (p. 246). The participants of the present study co-constructed their understanding about the impact of instructional coaching on the development of teachers as leaders of literacy within their classrooms.

This action research study used a qualitative research design, or research that “relies on detailed verbal description of the phenomena observed” (Glanz, 2014, p. 9). Glanz (2014) asserted that qualitative approaches can have a significant impact on a study, and he argued that qualitative approaches were valuable because, “they provide rich detail and insight often missing from quantitative studies” (p. 80).

In the context of this study, several types of qualitative data were collected for analysis. The action research design team (ARDT) reviewed data from interviews, observations (coaching and classroom), questionnaires, and artifacts collected during the study. The collection and analysis of this qualitative data helped the researcher make

connections between the impact of instructional coaching and the development of teacher leaders at Live Oak Middle School (LOMS, a pseudonym).

Action Research Design

The Action Research Design Team (ARDT) engaged in participatory and collaborative research activities throughout this study. The ARDT used the action research model to enact change in Live Oak Middle School (LOMS, a pseudonym) as it related to increased teacher capacity and leadership through instructional coaching. The ARDT sought to examine how specific coaching habits and actions could increase teacher capacity to address gaps in literacy among middle school students. The ARDT engaged in spiraling and iterative cycles to gain understandings about LOMS and the conditions needed to enact change.

Members of the Action Research Implementation Team (ARIT) served as participants in this study so the primary researcher and the ARDT could examine how interventions impacted teacher capacity. This section details the theoretical and practical components that guided the ARDT and the ARIT in this action research study.

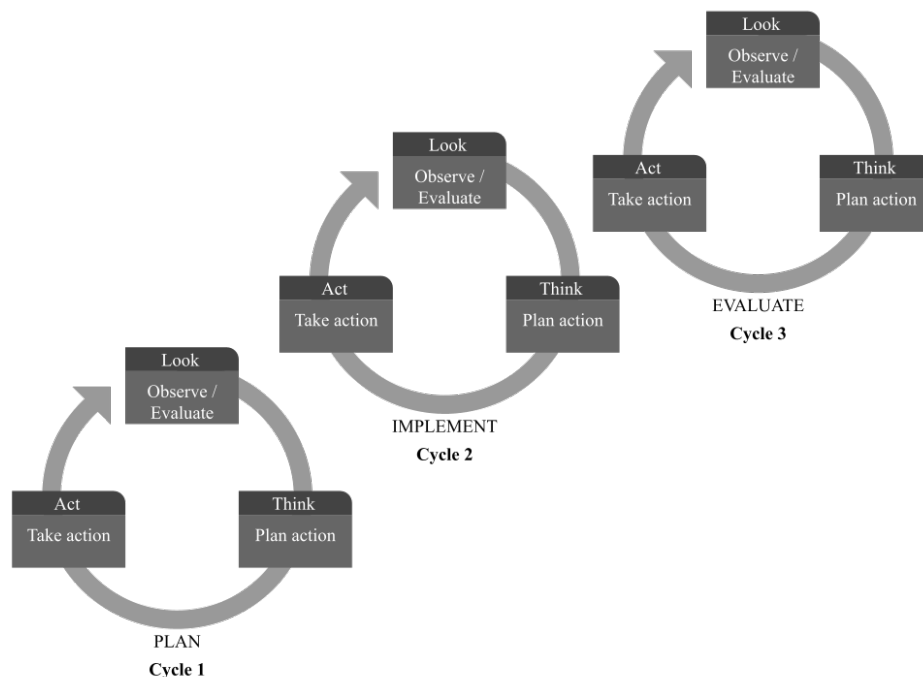
The Spiraling and Iterative Nature of Action Research

Action research is participatory and collaborative by nature (Glanz, 2014; Kemmis et al., 2014; Mertler, 2020). At its core, action research promotes systematic collaboration among participants to transform and catalyze change within an organization. Systematically analyzing practices and conditions within an organization “makes them accessible for reflection, discussion and reconstruction as products of past circumstances that are capable of being modified in and for present and future circumstances” (Kemmis et al., 2014, p. 21).

Furthermore, action research is iterative and cyclical in nature (Coghlan, 2019; Merriam et al., 2016). Action researchers engage in multiple cycles of observing, interpreting, planning, and acting (Coghlan, 2019; Mills, 2017). The systematic, cyclical, and iterative nature allows action researchers to analyze their own organizations more intentionally and with purpose. Stringer and Aragon (2020) describe the iterative action research process as the look-act-think routine, which takes places at the planning, implementing, and evaluating stages. Ultimately, the iterative nature of action research is intended to yield deeper understandings about an organization and the various conditions or factors that contribute to transformation or change. Figure 3.1 depicts the iterative and cyclical nature of action research as envisioned by Coghlan (2019) and Stringer and Aragon (2020).

Figure 3.1

The Spiraling and Iterative Nature of Action Research



Note. Adapted from Coghlan (2019) and Stringer and Aragon (2020).

The cycles depicted in Figure 3.1 illustrate how the action research design team (ARDT) reviewed data collected during each cycle of the study. The ARDT “looked” to observe current conditions and contextually important information. The next step in the cycle involved exploration and analysis of the current conditions. This analysis allowed the ARDT to plan and take action. The last phase of the cycle was an observation and evaluation of the interventions put in place by the researcher. Overarchingly, the three cycles included in the present study were characterized by their phase in the research process: plan, implement, and evaluate.

Logic Model

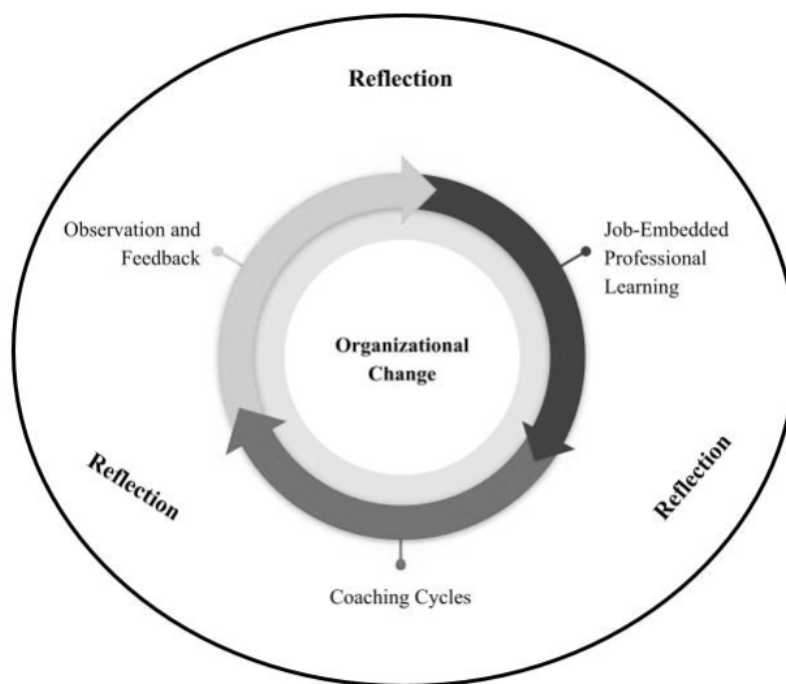
When adult learning needs are met, the conditions are more conducive to organizational learning and change. Organizational learning refers to change that occurs in an organization due to individual and collective learning. Fauske and Raybould (2005) asserted, “organizational learning theory parallels models of individual learning grounded in cognitive and social psychology and defines learning as organizational change” (p. 23). Importantly, the research conducted by Fauske and Raybould (2005) highlighted significant implications for practice.

For organizational learning to occur, the following conditions must be met: prioritization of change, consistent communication regarding the change, shared understanding about variability and unpredictability, modification of routines, and modification of frameworks. To enact change as it related to the development of teacher leaders, the researcher identified the need to incorporate the principles of collective learning as the foundation of this action research study.

The logic model depicted in Figure 3.2 illustrates how organizational change was created through job-embedded professional learning, coaching cycles, classroom observations, and feedback.

Figure 3.2

Logic Model for Study



The logic model illustrated that change cannot occur without the continuous cycle of support and coaching for teachers, especially when developing teacher leaders. By fostering the growth of teachers as leaders at LOMS through instructional coaching—including job-embedded professional learning practices: coaching cycles, classroom observations, and feedback—the intended impact was the development of teachers as leaders of literacy. Teacher leadership was more crucial than ever as LOMS sought to

address low reading proficiency through science-based literacy interventions related to the Science of Reading (SoR).

Theory of Change

The purpose of this study was to examine how instructional coaching and job-embedded professional learning supported the development of teacher leaders and increased teacher capacity. Furthermore, the success of the interventions hinged on individualized coaching and timely professional learning. Since the learning in this study was specific to adults and increasing adult capacity, the theory that guided this study was based on andragogy (adult learning) and the development of teachers as leaders. Importantly, to be effective, adult learning must be collaborative, timely, and specific to individual needs (Harris et al., 2019; Knowles, 1990; Knowles, 2015; Zepeda, 2019).

Effective implementation of interventions hinged on centering adult-learning needs that informed professional learning, creating a collective understanding and urgency toward literacy gaps among students at LOMS while using instructional coaching structures to develop teachers as leaders in their classrooms. These enduring understandings were crucial to the ARDT as they developed, implemented, and analyzed interventions.

The Case

In the context of this study, the need to address reading achievement gaps among middle level students was urgent. Historical trends in data showed languid growth in reading scores on high-stakes assessments, and the disparity among subgroups was even more alarming. Given this urgent need, teachers needed to be empowered as leaders of literacy in their classrooms. This study examined how teachers were empowered through

high-leverage instructional coaching actions, such as professional learning community (PLC) facilitation and activation, observation and feedback cycles, and job-embedded professional learning. Provided these contextual factors, the Action Research Design Team (ARDT) worked within a shared understanding that instructional coaches engaged in “empirically predictive elements” (Desimone, 2017), or elements that positively impacted teacher actions and outcomes.

The Action Research Design Team

The Action Research Design Team (ARDT) worked under the understanding that action research was collaborative and participatory (Glanz, 2014; Kemmis et al., 2014; Mertler, 2020). The ARDT was intentionally formed by the primary researcher so that collaborative discussions and reflections would be meaningful and aligned with the purpose of the study and the desired outcomes for increased teacher capacity and student achievement.

The primary researcher served as an Instructional Coach at Live Oak Middle School (LOMS, a pseudonym). The researcher primarily supported English Language Arts (ELA) teachers and social studies teachers in grades 6-8. In their role as Instructional Coach, the researcher wore many hats. Related to the context of this study, the primary researcher was responsible for developing and implementing professional learning sessions, including those that were content-specific, as well as those that were broader in nature but aligned with the goals and desired outcomes of the school improvement plan (SIP).

In addition to the primary researcher, who served as Instructional Coach for English Language Arts (ELA) and social studies, there was another Instructional Coach

who was primarily responsible for math and science. She served on the ARDT because she and the primary researcher co-developed the systems and processes for coaching cycles, professional learning, and teacher development.

Additionally, the principal of LOMS served on the ARDT because he served as the school's primary instructional leader. The principal distributed responsibilities to the instructional coaches involved in this study based on goals set forth by the school district. The principal had a vested interest in the success of implementation of instructional coaching since the focus areas were directly aligned with district initiatives.

The media specialist at LOMS rounded out the ARDT. She brought over 20 years of literacy-specific experience to the team and, in particular, had many years of experience supporting low-achieving middle grades readers. Table 3.1 outlines the individuals on the ARDT and the role they played in this action research study. The names of team members are pseudonyms.

Table 3.1

Action Research Design Team

Team Member	Primary Role at Live Oak Middle School	Action Research Role
Primary Researcher	Instructional Coach, LOMS	Leads and guides the ARDT in all research activities. Brings eight years of experience in classroom teaching and instructional coaching.
Mr. David Martin	Principal, LOMS	Serves as primary instructional leader for LOMS. Brings over 20 years of experience in education, including

		classroom and administrative experience.
Mrs. Shannon Howard	Media Specialist, LOMS	Provides experience from over 20 years in the classroom and as a media specialist. Brings specific interest and skills in middle grades literacy and reading instruction.
Mrs. Karmen Bower	Instructional Coach, LOMS	Provides over 15 years of experience in classroom teaching and instructional coaching. Brings insight regarding professional learning and coaching cycles for teachers at LOMS.

Members of the Action Research Design Team were selected based on their experience and leadership at LOMS. Everyone brought specific insights and knowledge that were beneficial to the primary researcher and the ARDT as a whole. Specifically, the primary researcher was seeking individuals who had experience with coaching and developing teachers, addressing gaps in reading achievement, and large-scale organizational change. The ARDT worked together to identify effective instructional coaching habits and actions that were conducive to increasing teacher capacity and the development of teacher leaders within their classrooms.

Action Research Implementation Team

The primary researcher recruited members for the Action Research Implementation Team (ARIT) based on their roles and experiences at LOMS. The primary researcher sought English Language Arts (ELA) teachers in 6th, 7th, and 8th grade who were actively engaged with the established collaborative planning processes, and

those who exhibited leadership characteristics or dispositions. Furthermore, it was important to select research participants who were invested in their professional growth, and those who were receptive to coaching and feedback. Additionally, the primary researcher sought participants who could engage and motivate their peers through their own leadership and vulnerability. Table 3.2 details the members of the ARIT and the experience they brought to LOMS during the action research study.

Table 3.2

Action Research Implementation Team

Team Member	Grade Level / Position	Teaching Experience
Mr. Carter Williams	Sixth Grade Gifted Collaborator	Mid-career gifted teacher who primarily serves English Language Arts classes. Brings 11 years of classroom experience.
Ms. Kaitlyn Lowe	Seventh Grade English Language Arts Teacher	Has 5 years of experience as a 7 th and 8 th grade English Language Arts teacher. Serves as a content and grade level team leader. Teaches on-level and gifted classes to approximately 90 students.
Mr. Shane Seward	8 th Grade English Language Arts Teacher	Brings 15 years of classroom teaching experience. Serves as mentor teacher to new and pre-service teachers. Teaches advanced ELA to approximately 45 students. 6 th Grade English Language Arts Teacher.
Mrs. Andrea Washington	Sixth Grade English Language Arts Teacher	Brings 8 years of classroom teaching experience. In their first year of teaching

	at LOMS and first year of teaching middle school (prior experience at the high school level). Teaches ELA to approximately 90 students.
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Research Plan and Timeline

For action research to catalyze change within an organization, interventions and planned activities must be systematic, collaborative, and reflective (Glanz, 2014; Kemmis et al., 2014; Mertler, 2020). Three cycles were planned for this study based on the theory that guided the spiraling and iterative nature of action research. Table 3.3 outlines the timeline used to guide the primary researcher in this action research study.

Table 3.3

Action Research Timeline

Date	Action Research Activity	
	Action Research Design Team (ARDT)	Action Research Implementation Team (ARIT)
September 2024	- Recruit and identify ARDT members - Gain consent	- Gain consent, conduct initial meeting to discuss the study, define roles, and establish the scope and sequence of the study - Initial interviews
October 2024	- ARDT meeting - Conduct initial meeting to discuss the study, define roles, and establish the scope and sequence of the study - Identify the problem of the study and collectively decide appropriate interventions - Facilitation of coaching cycles	- Implement components of intervention in classrooms - Goal setting with coach - Facilitation of identified strategy/skill in classroom - Completion of questionnaire

	• Artifact collection	
November 2024	• ARDT meeting • Artifact collection	• Engagement in coach-led PLCs • Completion of questionnaire
December 2024	• Artifact collection	• Facilitation of teacher-led PLCs • Completion of questionnaire
December 2024	• Debrief and synthesize • Final interviews	• Debrief and synthesize • Final interviews

Context of the Study

To increase efficacy as a school leader, it is essential to obtain comprehensive knowledge of the setting and context in which one works. This knowledge includes an understanding of the demographics, characteristics, trends, and internal or external factors that impact the school setting. Developing a robust understanding of the context allows a leader to make decisions that are aligned with specific school goals and needs.

Additionally, developing a strong understanding of the school context allows leaders to operate from a lens that is grounded in the critical issues pertinent to their specific school setting, thereby increasing their efficacy. Harris (2020) asserted that school leaders must be “contextually sensitive” to be effective in their settings, and argued, “Leaders need to have familiarity with the socio-economic, demographic, cultural and historical composition of the community which governs their school” (p. 144).

Live Oak School District (LOSD) is located roughly 60 miles from a large southeastern city. In 2024, 12,826 students were enrolled in grades K-12, which reflects a decline from a peak enrollment of 13,600 in 2018. Students in LOSD are 45% Black; 27% Hispanic; 21% white; 5% multi-racial; and 1% Asian. LOSD offers a wide range of

special programming and enrollment options, such as an early learning center, career academy, and dual enrollment opportunities with nearby colleges and universities.

Student Body Characteristics

The student body demographics at LOMS mostly reflects that of LOSD. Students at LOMS are 45% Black; 36% white; 12% Hispanic; and 6% multi-racial. Subgroup enrollment data reflected the wide spectrum of students enrolled at LOMS. Eighty-three percent of the students qualify for free and reduced lunch; 17% of the students were served through the Special Education program; and 6% of the students were classified as Limited English Proficient. Furthermore, 31% of students were identified as Gifted learners.

The student body at LOMS was diverse in race/ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and academic achievement. While this diverse composition provided many opportunities for rich discussion, learning, and collaboration, it also posed unique challenges for teachers to meet the needs of all learners with varying profiles and internal and external factors impacting academic achievement.

Academic Achievement

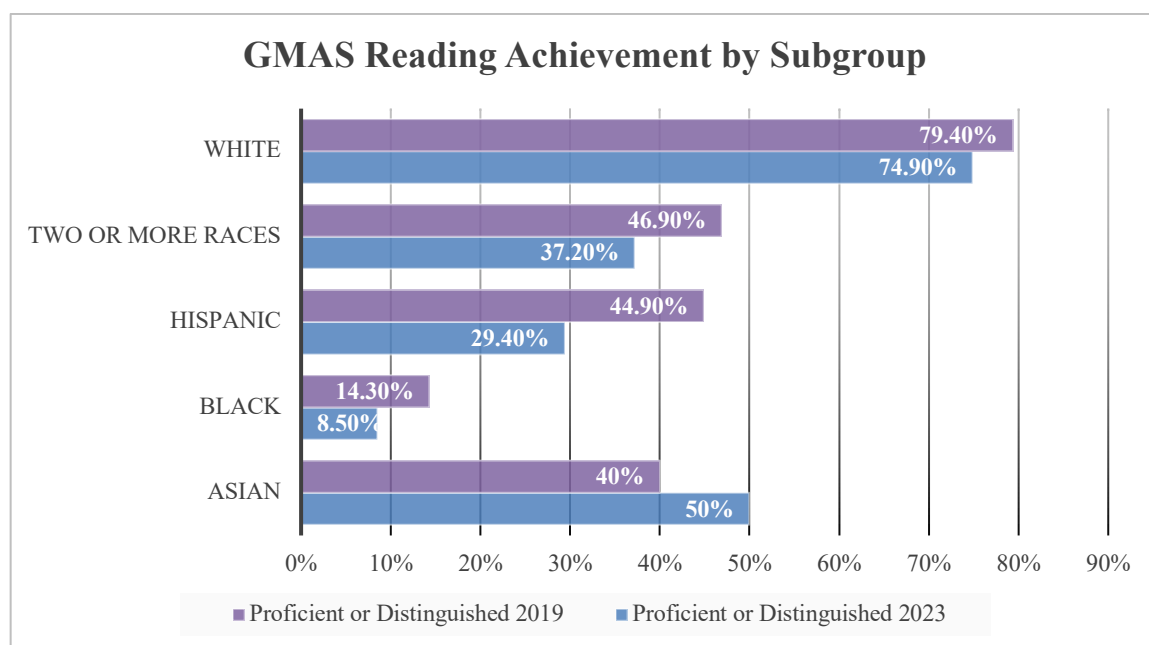
In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, student achievement data reflected the challenges posed by disrupted learning, especially as it pertained to students of color and students with disabilities. Gunning (2022) found these groups of students have been the “most adversely affected” by the pandemic (p. 2). The Spring 2024 Georgia Milestones Assessment System (GMAS) showed that 42% of the students at LOMS scored in the proficient or distinguished range of the reading assessment. When the scores were broken down by subgroup, the data were even more alarming. The 2024 data illustrated that only

12% of sixth grade Black students scored within the proficient or distinguished range on the Reading GMAS; whereas, 14% of Hispanic students scored proficient or distinguished, and 83% of white students scored proficient or distinguished. The discrepancy in these numbers is jarring and suggests that literacy instruction is failing to meet the needs of all students at LOMS.

Despite the certain impact that the COVID-19 pandemic had on student achievement, the disparity in subgroup performance has been pervasive at LOMS, including years leading up to virtual and modified in instruction imposed by the pandemic. Figure 3.3 illustrates trends in disparate GMAS performance among subgroups in 2019 and 2023. The data suggested that student achievement in math and ELA varied widely by race/ethnicity, and that this disparity has been and continues to present prevalent issues at LOMS.

Figure 3.3

Subgroup Disparity in GMAS Reading Achievement at LOMS 2019-2023



Note. Source: K-12 Report Card (2023). Governor’s Office of Student Achievement.

Alternatively, additional data points from the 2022-2023 school year suggested that growth has occurred in math and ELA. When students took the Fall 2022 iReady Reading Diagnostic Assessment:

- 46% of the students scored two or more grade levels below;
- 14% of the students scored 1 grade level below; and,
- 40% of the students scored on or above grade level.

In contrast, during the Spring 2023 administration of the iReady Reading Diagnostic Assessment:

- 43% of the students scored two or more grade levels below;
- 12% of the students scored 1 grade level below; and,
- 46% of the students scored on or above grade level.

While this data illustrated whole group growth, similar discrepancies were visible among subgroup performance. As LOMS set goals and priority areas for subsequent school years, it was urgently necessary for building leaders to implement specific actions, strategies, and interventions to target these disparate data points to be able to move the needle forward for all students.

Teacher and Staff Characteristics

The staff at LOMS was mostly female and mostly white. In 2022-2023, 52 teachers were female and 26 were male. The ethnicity breakdown illustrated similar disproportionality in that 57 teachers were white; 18 teachers were Black; 1 teacher was Hispanic; and 2 teachers were Asian. The demographic data of teachers was not reflective of the student body, which is predominately Black and male.

Additionally, there were three administrators at LOMS: one principal and two assistant principals. Two administrators were white and one was Black. Two administrators were within their first 3 years at LOMS, and the other had been at the school for over 10 years. The instructional leadership team (ILT) consisted of the three administrators, two instructional coaches, and a Special Education team leader. The instructional coaches had assigned core content areas with which they worked, including math, English Language Arts (ELA), science, and social studies.

Impact of Poverty Rates and Attrition

Teacher attrition and teaching years of experience at LOMS were important pieces of contextual information. Following national trends of teacher turnover and retention challenges, LOMS was faced with significant obstacles related to retaining and developing certified staff. During the 2021-2022 school year, 29 teachers were within their first 3 years of teaching, which was approximately 36% of the certified staff at LOMS. During the 2022-2023 school year, a total of 25 teachers at LOMS were either new to teaching or new to the school, which was nearly 30% of the certified teaching staff. In particular, the English Language Arts (ELA) Department had experienced high turnover rates.

During the 2022-2023 school year, seven of the nine ELA teachers were either in their first three years of teaching or were new to LOMS. Although LOMS had been impacted by historically high rates of teacher attrition, efforts to improve the climate and culture has resulted in decreased turnover. LOMS hired only six new certified teachers for the 2023-2024 school year, a vast improvement from the years prior. Leaders at

LOMS projected similarly low rates of teacher turnover for subsequent school years at the time of the study.

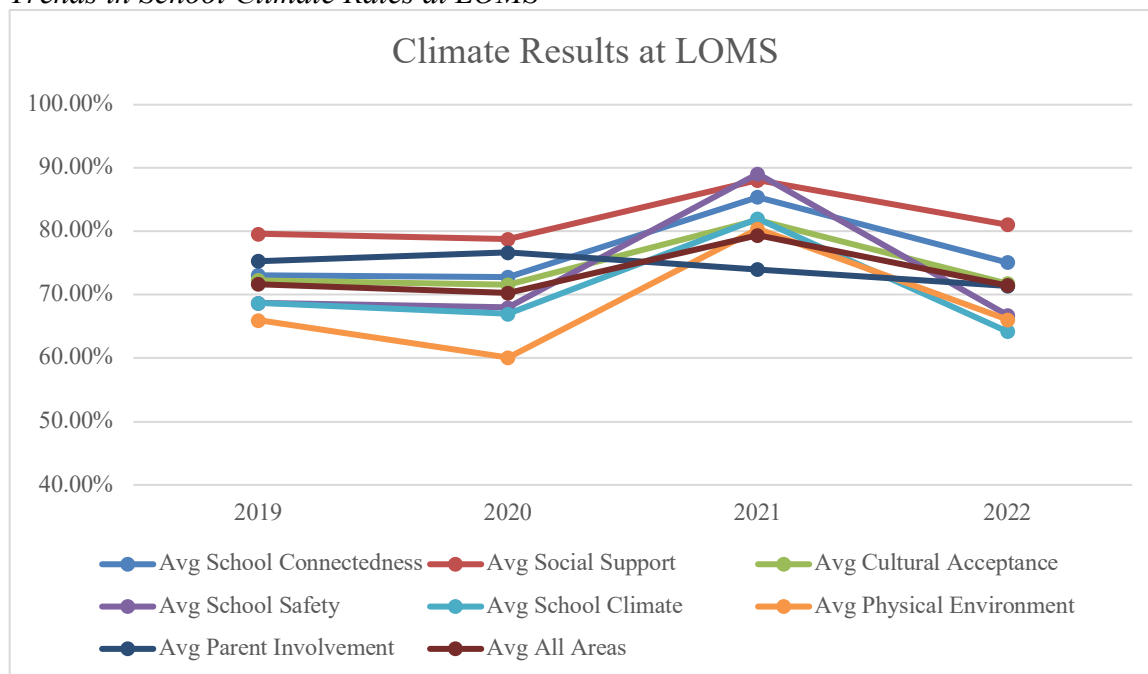
High poverty rates were an especially impactful external factor on student achievement. LOMS was situated within a county with a poverty rate of 29.3%, which was nearly double the statewide poverty rate (United States Census Bureau, 2021). The issues that are a byproduct of high levels of poverty, including housing and food instability, absenteeism, and transiency, historically have threatened student achievement and success. With over 80% of students qualifying for free and reduced lunch, these challenges posed by high poverty rates were pervasive among many students at LOMS.

Efforts to Improve Culture and Climate

Building the culture and climate at LOMS has been a primary focus for building leaders, especially within the last several years. Each school year, students, parents, and personnel complete climate surveys regarding their experience at LOMS. In 2019, the average school climate rating was 68.7%. The school climate rating reached a peak of 82% in 2021. This rating dropped considerably to 64.2% in 2022. Figure 3.4 illustrates trends in average school climate ratings, including factors such as connectedness, social support, cultural acceptance, safety, climate, physical environment, and parent participation.

Figure 3.4

Trends in School Climate Rates at LOMS



Note. Source: Georgia Student Health Survey (2022). Georgia Department of Education.

It is important to note that LOMS experienced significant turbulence during the 2021-2022 school year when there was a sudden change in building leadership. This unrest put a significant strain on the school climate, especially as the school continued to navigate the challenges presented by the on-going COVID-19 pandemic.

Several avenues have been explored to prioritize building culture and climate. At the time of the study, LOMS was in the process of becoming a certified Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) School. Building leaders created a PBIS committee to lead and implement the strategies outlined by PBIS, including behavior matrices, positive reward and incentive programs, and the use of common language and expectations regarding student and adult behavior.

Additionally, LOMS adopted Restorative Justice practices as a means of rooting the culture in equity and justice. In schools, Restorative Justice seeks justice after conflict has occurred by, (1) determining the issue, (2) identifying the harm inflicted upon parties involved, and (3) repairing harm through agreements and resolution (Zehr, 2015). LOMS hired several personnel whose roles were specifically intended to support students and staff as they repaired harm after conflict occurred. While behavior interventionists were the leaders of Restorative Justice work at LOMS, a primary goal of deploying this work was to create a culture where all students and staff operated through a lens of Restorative Justice in all their interactions at school.

In addition to PBIS and Restorative Justice structures, LOMS recently implemented Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS) structures as part of the development of a positive culture and climate. MTSS structures were intended to support the whole child, capturing academic, behavioral, and social-emotional needs. In other words, MTSS structures provided holistic support to students. During the 2022-2023 school year, building leaders at LOMS laid the foundation for meaningful MTSS work and initiatives, including the use of progress monitoring tools such as Branching Minds.

Branching Minds collected student data regarding progress toward academic, behavioral, and social-emotional goals, and it supported teachers in identifying supports or interventions that might be helpful in the development of students. To further solidify and concretize MTSS structures at LOMS, resources were specifically allocated to hire an in-house MTSS Coordinator for the 2023-2024 school year. Ideally, designating an individual responsible for leading MTSS initiatives would support streamlining its processes and its successful implementation.

Data Sources

This study sought to examine how instructional coaching and job-embedded professional learning supported the development of teacher leaders and increased teacher capacity. The researcher collected data from primary and secondary sources to analyze which factors contributed to increased teacher capacity to act as leaders of literacy within their classrooms.

Participants

The primary researcher assembled a team of ELA teachers to create the Action Research Implementation Team (ARIT). The ARIT members were English Language Arts (ELA) teacher representatives from grades 6-8. All teachers at LOMS were involved with literacy instruction in some capacity; however, ELA teachers were specifically chosen to participate in this study because of their specific training and experience with reading and writing instruction.

The Action Research Design Team (ARDT) included a diverse group of instructional and building leaders at LOMS, including two instructional coaches, the media specialist, and the principal. These individuals served in formal and informal leadership roles at LOMS, and they were integral pieces of the instructional leadership puzzle. Despite their varying roles and levels of experience at LOMS, each of these individuals played key roles in closing gaps in reading achievement.

Selection Criteria

The selection of participants was intentional, and the researcher operated with the understanding that “our choice of research participants should be determined by the focus of our research, thereby enabling us to meet our research aim and answer our research

question” (Saunders, 2017, p. 2). The purpose of this study was to examine how instructional coaching and job-embedded professional learning supported the development of teacher leaders and increased teacher capacity. Thus, the participants selected in this study were not only English Language Arts (ELA) teachers, but they were also teachers who exhibited characteristics, dispositions, or aspirations for leadership. These participants served as the Action Research Implementation Team (ARIT) and provided invaluable insight to the researcher and the research questions within this study.

Members of the Action Research Design Team (ARDT) were selected based on their professional experience and insight regarding LOMS and its institutional history. The members of the ARDT have experience and knowledge with implementing and evaluating change, particularly within the LOMS community. Their insights were essential for guiding and informing the cycles that took place during this study.

The next section explained the data collection methods that were used during this action research study.

Data Collection Methods

Qualitative data were collected and analyzed in this action research study. A qualitative approach was intentionally selected based on the comprehensive insights it provided the action researcher. Glanz (2009) asserted, “A fundamental belief that qualitative researchers espouse is that events cannot be understood unless one understands how they are perceived and interpreted by the people who participate in them” (p. 80). In the context of this study, the participants were teachers and leaders at LOMS whose development was impacted by an instructional coach, particularly those who played key roles in the implementation of a literacy initiative and interventions.

Qualitative data allowed the research team to explore perceptions, feedback, survey responses, and other forms data to seek improvement as it related to closing gaps in literacy skills. Qualitative data sources included the following:

1. Interviews conducted with teacher leaders who implemented components of the literacy intervention in their classrooms;
2. Questionnaire data collected from teacher leaders highlighting their perceptions regarding the supports received to implement the literacy intervention;
3. Observation data collected from classroom walkthroughs;
4. Artifacts of the implementation, including student work samples, supporting templates and organizers, instructional coaching logs, and other tools used in the implementation;

Field Notes and the Researcher's Journal that provide anecdotal information tracking the progress and trajectory of the action research implementation. During each action research cycle, the Action Research Design Team (ARDT) analyzed findings from each form of qualitative data to build a complete picture of stakeholder perceptions and experiences with instructional coaching at LOMS.

Interviews

The action researcher placed significant value on the insights that interviews provided to the study. Rather than seeking simple answers to the research questions, this study sought “an interest in understanding the lived experience of other people and the meaning they make of that experience” (Seidman, 2006, p. 9). Thus, the action researcher crafted questions that would elicit detailed accounts of the participants of the study. Additionally, the interviews were semi-structured and open-ended to allow participants to

share candid responses and reflections (Glanz, 2009). The full interview protocol can be found in Appendix B.

The semi-structured nature of the interview questions allowed the researcher to ask follow-up questions and to probe further into the insights of the participants. Table 3.4 detailed sample interview questions that were crafted to align with the research questions connected to the study.

Table 3.4

Interview Question Samples

Research Question	Interview Questions
Q1: How does instructional coaching impact the development of teacher leaders in literacy instruction and intervention?	What is the role of an instructional coach the implementation of the reading and instruction initiative? What is challenging about implementing literacy intervention and instruction in the classroom?
Q2: How do teachers describe the impact of instructional coaching on their capacity to lead literacy initiatives and to implement interventions in their classrooms?	How does instructional coaching impact your teaching practices? How do you describe your level of confidence in facilitating literacy initiatives in your classroom? Would you describe yourself as a leader of literacy? Why or why not?
Q3: How does the action research design team (ARDT) describe the impact of instructional leadership, particularly through coaching, on the implementation of reading interventions and instructional initiatives?	What are the effective components of instructional coaching in leading schoolwide change through intervention and instruction? What is ineffective? What makes coaching conversations effective? Ineffective?

Interviews were conducted individually to allow participants to speak freely and openly about their experiences.

Questionnaires

Questionnaires were distributed to assess the experiences and opinions of participants in the study. The researcher sought to learn how participants perceived the impact and efficacy of certain instructional coaching moves, including observation, feedback, debriefing, modeling, and reflecting. Participants completed questionnaires that included both open and closed-ended questions to elicit narrative responses, as well as responses that fell along a Likert scale, including pre-determined responses such as strongly agree, agree, neutral, disagree, strongly disagree. This variety of data allowed the ARDT to analyze qualitative data with quantitative data to support or underscore findings. Items for the questionnaire can be found in Appendix C.

Questionnaires were administered to research participants during each cycle of action research. The researcher used the data to make adjustments to the interventions. For example, if the data suggested that the professional learning was failing to meet the needs of teachers, the researcher would take these findings to the ARDT and determine what adjustments needed to be made to the facilitation of teacher learning. The following questions were included in questionnaires:

1. On a scale of 1-5, how would you rate the overall effectiveness of the intervention?
2. Optional: explain your rating for question 1.
3. What were the specific components of the intervention that made it either effective or ineffective?
4. On a scale of 1-5, how would you rate your overall confidence in facilitating the literacy-specific skill/strategy at the center of this intervention?

5. Optional: explain your rating for question 4.
6. What could the instructional coach do to better support you in the internalization of this intervention?

The questionnaire data was invaluable to the primary researcher and the ARDT because it allowed them to make informed adjustments and illuminated emerging findings. The next section explains how observation data was used in the context of this study.

Observations

Observations provided the researcher invaluable insights from data collected in real-time. Marshall and Rossman (2016) argued that observation is vital to qualitative research due to the insight it sheds on “complex interactions in natural social settings” (p. 143). In this study, the researcher collected observation data from classroom walkthroughs. The intent of these walkthroughs was to gain an understanding of teachers’ ability to lead and implement reading instruction and interventions in their classrooms. The components of successful classroom implementation was defined by the ARDT to guide the purpose and focus of classroom observations. The next section details how artifacts were used and analyzed by the primary researcher to gain insights about the study.

Artifacts

Merriam (2016) asserted that obtaining artifacts was “generally a systematic procedure that evolves from the topic of inquiry itself” (p. 175). Therefore, in the context of this study, relevant materials and artifacts took shape in the form of lesson plans, coaching logs, student assignments, grade reports, and observation notes. The ARDT remained open-minded about additional artifacts and materials that might provide

valuable insights throughout the action research study (Merriam, 2016). The goal was to collect and analyze any resources that would tell the story of the research and the lived experiences of the participants during the duration of the study. Finally, the last section the use of field notes and the researcher's journal during the action research study.

Field Notes and the Researcher's Journal

Marshall and Rossman (2016) described field notes as “detailed, nonjudgmental (as much as possible), concrete descriptions of what has been observed” (p. 143). This piece of qualitative data was important for the ARDT to analyze to help make meaning of the interactions between teachers and instructional coaches, particularly as it related to teacher development as leaders within their classrooms. It was important for the ARDT to pay attention to the actions, conversations, and specific coaching moves that made a positive impact on teachers' perceived ability to successfully implement components of literacy intervention and instruction in their classrooms. Similarly, the researcher's journal was a key instrument in this action research study as it shed light on the reflections and developing insights of the primary researcher during the study.

The evolution of findings helped inform the ARDT as they sought to make adjustments between action research cycles. Throughout the study, interventions were developed and deployed by the primary research and ARDT members, and the team evaluated the effectiveness of each intervention on teacher practice. The next section outlines the interventions that were developed and deployed by the researcher and ARDT members.

Interventions

Action research is commonly defined by its cyclical nature (Lewin, 1946; Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988a; Kemmis et al., 2014). The cycles included certain activities that informed the researcher in intentional ways; these activities included:

- *Planning* a change,
- *Acting* and *observing* the process and consequences of the change,
- *Reflecting* on these processes and consequences, and then
- *Re-planning*,
- *Acting* and *observing*,
- *Reflecting*, and so on... (Kemmis et al., 2014, p. 18)

In the context of this action research study, planning for change referred to the planned interventions, or treatments developed by the action researcher and the Action Research Design Team (ARDT) (Glanz, 2014).

Interventions were defined as “a specific instructional practice, program, or procedure that is implemented by a researcher in order to investigate its effect on the behavior or achievement of an individual or group” (Glanz, 2014, p. 64). For this study, interventions were developed based on the purpose and the logic model that guided the researcher. This action research study sought to examine how instructional coaching fostered the development of teacher leaders, and how this development impacted the literacy initiative and overall school improvement goals centered around literacy. Therefore, the interventions deployed in this study were intended to develop teacher leaders and improve reading and literacy outcomes.

The Action Research Design Team (ARDT) deployed three interventions that took place during three action research cycles. The first intervention was the facilitation of coaching cycles using the Identify, Learn, Improve framework (Knight, 2019). During the second cycle of action research, job-embedded professional learning was facilitated through a coach-led professional learning community (PLC). Finally, the third intervention that was used during the third cycle of action research was a teacher leader-led professional learning community (PLC) that addressed a content-specific skill or strategy.

The interventions in this study were examined through (1) observation and feedback, (2) job-embedded professional learning, (3) coaching cycles, and (4) professional learning community (PLC) facilitation and activation. The interventions were rooted in the literature that guided this action research study, and the related research suggested that these activities would yield positive outcomes or change related to the purpose of the study.

Knight (2018) suggested that observation and feedback are key components of the Impact Cycle, a framework that positions instructional coaches as resources for developing individual teacher capacity. The framework included three components: identify, learn, and improve. Within this framework, coaches and teachers work in a partnership to set goals, model behaviors and practices, and monitor progress toward goals.

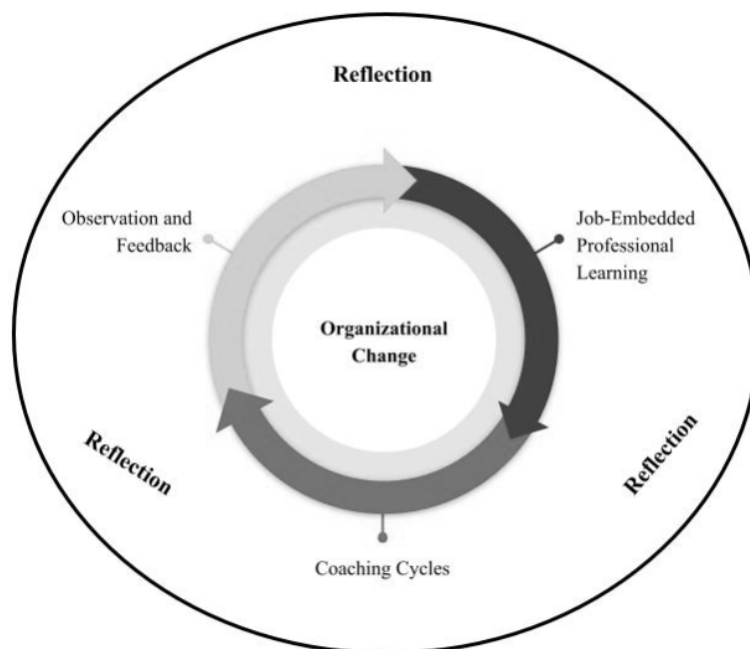
This action research study hinged on effective adult learning and development. Thus, it was crucial to understand the conditions that were conducive to learning. The literature suggested that effective professional learning results in a change in teacher

practice, rather than mere exposure to a concept or idea (Gulamhussein, 2013). The tenets of job-embedded professional learning support the principles of adult learning; when the principles are upheld, adult learning is effective (Knowles, 1990; Zepeda, 2015; Zepeda, 2019).

Finally, the literature suggested that instructional coaching was a modern form of professional development that addressed the pitfalls of the whole-group, one-size-fits-all approach to professional development (Neufeld & Roper, 2003; Yoon, 2007; Zepeda, 2019). During the action research study, teachers received individualized support through coaching cycles conducted by the instructional coach. Figure 3.5 illustrates the intervention cycle that guided the action researcher.

Figure 3.5

Intervention Cycle



Observation and Feedback

The components of the reading intervention and instruction program included explicit vocabulary instruction, the use of the engagement cycle, oral reading fluency, and targeted phonics instruction. During the study, English Language Arts (ELA) teachers at Live Oak Middle School (LOMS) were expected to carry out the components of the intervention in their classrooms. The researcher developed an observation form that included specific criteria and “look-fors” related to the components of instruction. Table 3.5 outlines the content of the observation form that was used in classrooms.

Table 3.5

Leaders of Literature Observation Form Questions

Open-Ended Questions	Likert-Scale Questions (on a scale from 1-5)
Write a short description of the goal/strategy that you collaboratively identified with your coachee.	To what degree are students behaviorally engaged in the lesson?
General notes about the lesson.	To what degree are students cognitively engaged in the lesson?
Which part(s) of the lesson did you observe?	To what degree are students emotionally engaged in the lesson?
Glow	To what degree did the teacher meet the objectives and desired outcomes that were collaboratively set at the beginning of the coaching cycle?
Grows	

This form was shared with teachers so there was consensus about what was being evaluated during an observation. Teachers were then observed with the tool, and, finally,

feedback was provided to the teachers based on their implementation of the instructional components.

Job-Embedded Professional Learning

ELA teachers received timely, targeted, and content-specific professional learning around the literacy instruction and intervention components. This professional learning was intended to support their ongoing learning and developing capacity to successfully implement the various components of the instruction. Additionally, the content of the professional learning was connected to the criteria included in the observation forms, which was intentional to create cohesion and continuity throughout the action research study.

The planning and meeting structure at LOMS was conducive for content-specific learning to happen within professional learning communities (PLCs). Thus, job-embedded professional learning was mainly facilitated through PLCs, either led by an instructional coach or a teacher leader. The content of the PLCs were aligned with teacher goals and instructional needs that were made apparent through coaching cycles and classroom observations.

Coaching Cycles

Members of the Action Research Implementation Team (ARIT) were involved in individual coaching cycles as an additional layer of building efficacy and capacity. Coaching cycles were implemented by the instructional coach and included goal setting and action planning connected to the implementation of the literacy instruction and intervention. The timing, frequency, and focus of each coaching cycle varied based on the individual teacher. The interventions for this study are shown in Table 3.5.

Table 3.5*Interventions for the Study*

Components of Organizational Change	Intervention Activities	Target Groups	Frequency of Intervention
Coaching Cycles	Individualized goal setting, observation, and feedback connected to literacy instruction and intervention	English Language Arts teachers	Ongoing
Job-Embedded Professional Learning through Professional Learning Communities (PLCs)	Create targeted and specific agendas to that align with teacher goals and departmental needs	English Language Arts teachers	Weekly
Teacher-led Professional Learning Communities (PLCs)	Empower teacher leaders to facilitate learning activities that align with teacher goals and departmental needs.	English Language Arts teachers	Weekly

Professional Learning Community (PLC) Facilitation and Activation

The instructional coach in this study served as the primary facilitator and activator for the professional learning communities (PLCs) within which the research participants engaged. PLCs served as the collaborative space where teachers planned and prepared to deploy various components of literacy instruction in their classroom. PLCs also served as the forum for analyzing student data to evaluate student learning and the efficacy of various instructional strategies and interventions. As the facilitator and activator of PLCs, the instructional coach was responsible for creating the necessary conditions for efficient

and effective meetings. The instructional coach used a number of strategies to conduct successful PLCs, such as the use of group norms, agenda setting, and the distribution of roles among members.

The next section details the data analysis methods that were used to gain insights about the data collected during the action research cycles.

Data Analysis Methods

The analysis of qualitative data relies on the generation of categories, themes, and patterns (Glanz, 2014). These recurring concepts point to important takeaways that allow the researcher to make hypotheses and, ultimately, draw conclusions about the data and the impact of various factors and interventions. Mertler (2020) outlines a three-step process for conducting this analysis: organization, description, and interpretation. Data analysis in qualitative research is iterative and allows the researcher to make adjustments based on insights gleaned from each cycle of research.

The researcher was interested in learning what common themes and insights were shared among participants in the study. To triangulate the data and identify commonalities, the researcher collected and analyzed interview transcripts, related documents, and field notes to look for themes and recurring patterns throughout the action research process. The researcher used coding to *reduce* the data, a process that is defined as “taking the voluminous data collected and reducing them to patterns, categories, or themes” (Glanz, 2014, p. 166). Table 3.6 outlines a sampling of codes that were used to support the primary researcher’s analysis.

Table 3.6*Code Sampling for Data*

Code	Meaning	Data Sample
TL	Teacher Leadership	“I think identifying the strengths of those who want to lead or those who can lead through their qualities helps them have ownership within the school, helps them feel empowered, (and charges them) to move their peers and instruction.”
LI	Literacy Initiatives	“I think we need to lean into (the districtwide effort towards a culture of literacy) and continue to push all content areas to build opportunities for daily reading and writing.”
F	Feedback	“Feedback is a really good way to help people feel like, okay, my coach cares. They want to see my children succeed.”
PLC	Professional Learning Community	“I believe the instructional coach’s role is to really guide the work of the PLC...and align the group with the standards...and bring it back full circle to meet the needs of students that we might not think of initially.”

The generation of codes allowed the research to identify trends and commonalities across all data sources, pointing to key takeaways and themes.

The researcher conducted content analysis on the interviews and questionnaires that were conducted to categorize their findings. The combined processes of reduction and content analysis allowed the researcher to make informed inferences about the findings and the implications of the study. The emergent themes and categories informed the purpose of the research and the goal of exploring how instructional coaching supported the development of teachers as leaders.

To help pinpoint emergent themes in the study, the researcher followed the six phases of thematic analysis as suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006):

1. Familiarize yourself with the data
2. Generate initial codes
3. Search for themes
4. Review themes
5. Define and name themes
6. Produce the report

It is important to note that the Action Research Design Team (ARDT) was flexible in their approach to thematic analysis. The team adopted this adaptable disposition to account for new insights or findings that emerged throughout the action research process.

In the familiarization phase, the researcher engaged in multiple readings of the data collected from interview transcripts and questionnaires. It was important for the researcher to have a comprehensive understanding of the perspectives, opinions, and experiences shared in these data formats before engaging the subsequent phases of thematic analysis. During the second phase of data analysis, the researcher developed initial codes based on findings from interview transcripts and questionnaires. Primarily, perspective and activity codes were developed to find patterns in participant perspectives and behaviors in response to the interventions or other related components of the study. The collection of codes further informed the researcher about themes within the data.

In the subsequent phases of data analysis, the researcher collected the various codes that emerged from the analysis of the data to find overarching messages and themes related to the research questions and the purpose of this study. The researcher

defined and named the apparent themes as they related to the action research study.

Finally, those findings were included and explored to make conclusions and connections to the research questions. Table 3.7 illustrates an example of how the primary researcher made connections during the analysis process to identify key takeaways.

Table 3.7

Sample of Connecting Codes, Findings, and Themes

Research Question	Findings	Codes	Theme
RQ1: How does instructional coaching impact the development of teacher leaders in literacy instruction and intervention?	Instructional coaching can be an effective form of professional development through consistent presence, feedback, and modeling.	Professional Development (PD) Presence (P) Feedback (F) Modeling (M)	Instructional coaching is an effective form of professional development when it is job-embedded, aligned with individual teacher goals, and includes consistent presence, feedback, and modeling.

The primary researcher attempted to “answer” the research questions using the collected data. Then, the researcher looked for key words and phrases that illustrated what was shared through the various data forms. These key words emerged as codes. Finally, the researcher was able to identify a theme as it related to the purpose of the study and its research questions. A protocol for mapping findings and themes can be found in Appendix E, and the process of aligning codes with research questions can be found in Appendix F.

The data collection and analysis process was achieved through thick description as a means of thoroughly describing the findings and all steps taken along the way. Thick description was coupled with an audit trail that included key artifacts, documents, and other forms of evidence collected during the action research process. This evidence showcased the detailed recollections and insights that led the researcher to draw the present conclusions about the action research study.

The next two sections of this chapter explore the reliability, validity, and generalizability of the data presented in this action research study. Both sections illustrate how trustworthiness was established and addresses subjectivity as it relates to the role and behavior of the primary researcher.

Subjectivity Statement

Peshkin (1988) asserted that subjectivity “is like a garment that cannot be removed” (p. 17). In the context of this study, it was imperative for the primary researcher to examine their own subjectivity and assess how preconceived notions, beliefs, or experiences impacted the research process. Qualitative researchers can engage in several strategies to enhance the credibility of the action research conducted, including accounting for personal biases and how they may have influenced research findings (Noble et al., 2015). Thus, this section aims to name the potential biases of the action researcher to enhance the credibility of the research conducted.

The researcher taught 7th and 8th grade English Language Arts (ELA) for four years at the site this study was conducted (Live Oak Middle School, LOMS). Additionally, the researcher has three years of experience as an Instructional Coach at LOMS. In their role as the Instructional Coach at LOMS, the researcher works primarily

with ELA and social studies teachers. As an instructional coach, the action researcher did not fulfill a role as a building administrator. However, the researcher was positioned as an instructional leader at LOMS and worked closely with the administrative team to inform and carry out action items and goals as they were outlined in the School Improvement Plan (SIP).

Given their role as an instructional leader at LOMS, the researcher had a vested interest in student achievement and teacher development. In their role as Instructional Coach, the researcher was charged with creating and implementing the scope and sequence of professional development. This responsibility included activities and development opportunities that were aligned with empowering teachers to lead literacy instruction and intervention, which was the focus of this action research study. Notably, the action researcher had substantial experience with conducting coaching cycles with teachers, providing feedback, modeling, and delivering targeted professional learning.

At the time of this action research study, the school district in which this study was situated was on the cusp of adopting new curricular standards and resources. The researcher felt compelled to ensure a successful implementation and served on the district-level implementation team for resources and standards. These curricular components were woven into the district-wide plan to increase reading achievement through systematic intervention and instruction. The next section explores the reliability, validity, and generalizability of the data presented. The next section will also detail how the researcher established trustworthiness as it relates to the data collected during the action research study.

Reliability, Validity, and Generalizability

Lincoln and Guba (1985) established four components of rigor to assess the trustworthiness of qualitative research: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Each of these components contributes to the legitimacy of the research in important ways. Credibility can be examined with specific data collection methods, along with coherence between the selected methods and the overall purpose of the action research study (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019).

Transferability evaluates the ability to reproduce the findings of the study across contexts. This reproduction includes the implementation of interventions, theories of change, and other structures from context to context based on the findings of the action researcher (Hays & Singh, 2023). Dependability considers the impact of the research over time and its significance (Guba & Lincoln, 1985). Finally, Confirmability refers to the “extent to which the data and interpretations of the study are grounded in events rather than the inquirer’s personal constructions” (Guba & Lincoln, 1985, p. 324).

In the present study, the action researcher engaged in specific, strategic actions and methodologies to promote trustworthiness and legitimacy of the data and findings. The specific strategies included:

1. Audit trail: a collection of physical evidence from interviews, relevant documents and work samples, and journals;
2. Peer debriefing: frequent conversations and consultations of teachers and staff at LOMS to gain insight and receive feedback from individuals with contextual knowledge and understanding;

3. Thick description: a detailed account of the data collection and analysis process, including findings from interviews and observations; and,
4. Triangulation: the researcher collected data from multiple sources and cross-checked recurring patterns and notes to identify themes and overarching ideas.

The research questions and the purpose of this study drove the ways the researcher sought to triangulate data. Table 3.8 details the connection between research questions and the triangulation methods used in this action research study.

Table 3.8

Triangulation of Research Methods

Research Question	Methods of Data Collection	Methods of Data Analysis	Approximate Timeline
RQ1: How does instructional coaching impact the development of teacher leaders in literacy instruction and intervention?	Interviews	Thematic Analysis and Coding	August 2024
	Questionnaires		September 2024-November 2024
	Observations		
RQ2: How do teachers describe the impact of instructional coaching on their capacity to lead literacy initiatives and to implement interventions in their classrooms?	Interviews	Thematic Analysis and Coding	August 2024
	Questionnaires		September 2024-November 2024
RQ3: How does the action research design team (ARDT) describe the impact of instructional	Interviews	Thematic Analysis and Coding	August 2024
	Observation		September 2024-November 2024
	Artifact collection		

The final section of this chapter discusses the limitations of the study and the potential impact on key findings.

Limitations

Time and relationships impacted the study and contributed to its limitations. The participants of the study were teachers who worked at Live Oak Middle School (LOMS). Thus, the timing of the action research cycles was dependent on teacher schedules which limited the flexibility of the schedule and timeline. Additionally, the role of the action researcher contributed to limitations of the study. In addition to their role on the Action Research Design Team (ARDT), the primary researcher served as one of the instructional coaches observed in this study. The overlapping roles and responsibilities created a certain level of researcher bias and subjectivity in the study.

Prior to and during the action research study, the primary researcher worked alongside the research participants as their instructional coach. Additionally, due to the nature of the study and its purpose, the interventions being evaluated (i.e., coaching cycles and PLC) were the same activities that were conducted outside of research. This overlap required research participants to think metacognitively about the impact of instructional coaching on their practice and zoom in on particular components of the relationship between teacher and instructional coach. The primary researcher recognized

that the inextricable nature of the study could potentially result in a lack of candor or transparency among participants.

To mitigate uncertainty, the primary researcher had clear, upfront conversations about the purpose of the study. It was explained that the data collected would be invaluable in informing the work of instructional coaching. Additionally, the primary researcher urged participants to be candid and honest in their responses, ensuring participants that their authentic perspectives would be deeply appreciated for the betterment of coaching and student achievement. As such, the strong and trusting relationship between the primary researcher and the research participants yielded clear and transparent responses that highlighted both positive and negative components of instructional coaching and its impact on teacher practice and development.

Chapter Summary

Chapter 3 described the qualitative researched methods used during this study. The research timeline was cyclical and iterative to learn and adjust based on data collected and deployed interventions during each cycle. The researcher collaborated with and collected insights from key stakeholders, including LOMS building leaders and teacher leaders. The goal of this collaboration was to design a study that would highlight how teacher leaders were empowered through high-leverage instructional coaching actions, such as professional learning community (PLC) facilitation and activation, observation and feedback cycles, job-embedded professional learning, and coaching cycles.

This chapter discussed the data sources that were collected and analyzed during the study. The researcher collected data in the form of interviews, questionnaires,

observation data, artifacts, and field notes from the researcher's journal. The data that was collected was thoroughly analyzed through systematic measures to identify themes and patterns in the data. The researcher coded and analyzed their findings to organize, describe, and interpret (Mertler, 2020) their findings. These findings informed the researcher about key activities and interventions that supported the development of teacher leaders through instructional coaching.

Chapter 4 presents and discusses the findings of the action research that was conducted at Live Oak Middle School (LOMS).

CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS FROM THE ACTION RESEARCH CASE

Pervasive gaps in reading achievement necessitate the development of teachers as leaders of literacy. In the context of this study, instructional coaching was used as a form of professional development to support the development of teacher leaders. When more teachers are positioned as leaders and their teaching practices are enhanced, collective efficacy and student achievement increases (Eells, 2011). Thus, it was important for the researcher to identify interventions that were driven by instructional coaching and coaching principles that would equip teachers with the capacity to serve as leaders of literacy in their own classrooms.

The purpose of this study was to examine how instructional coaching fostered the development of teacher leaders, and how this development impacted literacy instruction and overall school improvement goals centered around literacy. The researcher sought the perspective of instructional leaders, including administrators and coaches, as well as teachers, to learn more about building capacity through the development of teacher leaders. These perspectives were important to the study as they provided direct insight from the individuals who were primarily tasked with the implementation of the interventions surrounding the SoR approaches to literacy instruction.

This action research study was guided by the following questions:

1. How does instructional coaching impact the development of teacher leaders in literacy instruction and intervention?

2. How do teachers describe the impact of instructional coaching on their capacity to lead literacy initiatives and to implement interventions in their classrooms?
3. How does the action research design team (ARDT) describe the impact of instructional leadership, particularly through coaching, on the implementation of reading interventions and instructional initiatives?

This chapter communicates the findings from the action research study. First, the chapter includes the context of study and the urgency around the identified problem of practice. The chapter also describes the roles of the participants in the study, and it highlights their perspectives through findings from interviews, questionnaires, and observations. Finally, the chapter outlines the details of each action research cycle and the deployed interventions.

Context of the Study

This action research study was conducted at Live Oak Middle School (LOMS, a pseudonym). At the time of the study, LOMS faced unique challenges as it related to student achievement. Historical assessment data reflected significant disparities in subgroup performance. For example, the Spring 2024 Georgia Milestones Assessment System (GMAS) showed that 42% of the students at LOMS scored in the proficient or distinguished range of the reading assessment. However, subgroup data illustrated significant gaps among races and ethnic groups. The data illustrated that 14% of Black students scored within the proficient or distinguished range on the English Language Arts (ELA) GMAS; whereas, 32.5% of Hispanic students scored proficient or distinguished, and 82% of white students scored proficient or distinguished.

Urgency around literacy reform due to consistently disparate achievement data was fueled by statewide reform in literacy instruction. During the duration of the study, the state in which the study was situated passed legislation that was meant to address pervasive gaps in reading instruction and achievement. There were significant implications at the elementary level, including teacher training and resource adoption. Although literacy instruction is often associated with the elementary level, the impact extended to the secondary levels. As such, Live Oak School District (LOSD, a pseudonym) sought to address gaps in reading achievement at the middle level in systematic ways, including explicit vocabulary instruction, phonics intervention, engagement strategies, and the implementation of a newly adopted curricular resource.

The secondary resource adoption was an impactful component of literacy reform in LOSD. The curricular resource was adopted for all ELA teachers in grades 6-8 in LOSD. The resource was aligned with the principles of Science of Reading (SoR), included comprehensive teacher guidance, and granted students and teachers access to a vast number of texts for close reading and writing activities. This component of literacy reform was particularly impactful in LOSD because of the lack of comprehensive resources prior to this adoption. As a result, participants in this study frequently alluded to the impact of the new curricular resource.

The urgent literacy needs at LOMS, coupled with the district's multifaceted approach to addressing these literacy gaps, necessitated strong and impactful leadership and professional development. This leadership needed to support teachers in their implementation of the various components of literacy instruction and interventions. In the

context of this study, instructional coaches were positioned as the key players in providing this development of and guidance for classroom teachers.

As the primary leaders of teacher development and instruction, instructional coaches were responsible for communicating the purpose and vision behind the literacy reform, engaging administrators as instructional leaders, facilitating professional learning, conducting coaching cycles aimed at increasing teacher capacity, and providing opportunities for feedback, modeling, and practice.

Given the way Instructional Coaches were positioned, it was important to investigate how their efforts to support and develop teachers were perceived by teachers and instructional leaders at LOMS. There was simply too much at stake for the impact of the Instructional Coach to be anything other than positive. Thus, the primary researcher of this action research study sought to learn which components of instructional coaching were effective and ineffective in developing teachers as leaders of literacy.

Action Research Implementation Team

The primary researcher selected members of the Action Research Implementation Team (ARIT) based on their specific experiences, positions, and roles in literacy instruction at LOMS. To gain a comprehensive perspective about the impact of instructional coaching, it was important to select members who represented various grade levels, backgrounds, and teaching years of experience.

Prior to their role as Instructional Coach, the primary researcher worked on content and grade level teams alongside three of the four ARIT members—Mr. Shane Seward, Mr. Carter Williams, and Ms. Kaitlyn Lowe. The fourth ARIT member, Mrs.

Andrea Washington, was in her first year of teaching at LOMS, but brought a total of seven years of teaching experience at the high school level.

All the ARIT members were certified English Language Arts (ELA) teachers with a combined 40 years of teaching experience. Ms. Lowe and Mr. Williams had spent the entirety of their teaching careers at LOMS; Mrs. Washington and Mr. Seward brought teaching experience from surrounding counties. Table 4.1 provides additional details about each ARIT member.

Table 4.1

Action Research Implementation Team

Team Member	Grade Level / Position	Teaching Experience
Mr. Carter Williams	Sixth Grade Gifted Collaborator & Seventh Grade English Language Arts Teacher	Mid-career gifted teacher who primarily serves English Language Arts classes. Brings 11 years of classroom experience.
Ms. Kaitlyn Lowe	Seventh Grade English Language Arts Teacher	Has 5 years of experience as a 7 th and 8 th grade English Language Arts teacher. Serves as a content and grade level team leader. Teaches on-level and gifted classes to approximately 90 students.
Mr. Shane Seward	8 th Grade English Language Arts Teacher	Brings 15 years of classroom teaching experience. Serves as mentor teacher to new and pre-service teachers. Teaches advanced ELA to approximately 45 students.
Mrs. Andrea Washington	Sixth Grade English Language Arts Teacher	Sixth Grade English Language Arts Teacher

Brings 8 years of classroom teaching experience. In their first year of teaching at LOMS and first year of teaching middle school (prior experience at the high school level). Teaches ELA to approximately 90 students.

The next section serves to describe the members of the Action Research Design Team (ARDT) and the unique perspectives each member brought to the team.

Action Research Design Team

The Action Research Design Team (ARDT) was assembled based on their leadership roles at LOMS, their literacy-specific knowledge and experiences, and their roles in literacy instruction and intervention. Additionally, the primary researcher served as an ARDT member and served LOMS as an Instructional Coach at the time of study.

The interim principal of LOMS, Mr. David Martin, was an important part of the ARDT. He was appointed as interim principal the summer before this action research study began. Although he was new to his role, it was important to engage Mr. Martin as a member of the study. His participation on the ARDT gave him an avenue for developing as the primary instructional leader at LOMS. Furthermore, Mr. Martin's participation highlighted the importance of the partnership between principals and instructional coaches in facilitating instructional initiatives; both parties require the other's support and backing to have the desired impact on teacher practice.

Mrs. Karmen Bower was the math and science instructional coach at LOMS during the time of the study. Her participation as an ARDT member essential to the study. She was the counterpart to the primary researcher; the two worked in tandem to

lead school-based professional learning, develop teachers, and spearhead efforts to increase student achievement. Additionally, Mrs. Bower brought extensive experience as both an instructional coach and a classroom teacher in roles within and outside of LOSD. Mrs. Bower's perspectives from her robust career as an educator were significantly impactful on the ARDT as they discussed findings and determined interventions.

Finally, Mrs. Shannon Howard was selected based on her extensive literacy knowledge and experience. At the time of the study, Mrs. Howard was the media specialist at LOMS, a role she held for nearly 15 years. Prior to her role as the media specialist, she taught English Language Arts (ELA). Her nearly 20-year tenure took place at exclusively at LOMS, which suggested her deeply rooted institutional knowledge and experience. During her career, Mrs. Howard had experience teaching foundational reading and writing skills and delivering literacy instruction to below grade level readers and writers. Mrs. Howard also established innovative and creative ways to engage students in reading. At the time of the study, Mrs. Howard spearheaded an initiative to develop a culture of literacy at LOMS. This effort promoted literacy through celebrating and incentivizing independent reading among students and teachers.

The robust experiences of each ARDT member were significantly impactful on the trajectory of the action research study. Table 4.2 highlights key details about the ARDT members and their role at LOMS.

Table 4.2

Action Research Design Team

Team Member	Primary Role at Live Oak Middle School	Action Research Role
Primary Researcher	Instructional Coach, LOMS	Leads and guides the ARDT in all research activities. Brings eight

		years of experience in classroom teaching and instructional coaching.
Mr. David Martin	Principal, LOMS	Serves as primary instructional leader for LOMS. Brings over 20 years of experience in education, including classroom and administrative experience.
Mrs. Shannon Howard	Media Specialist, LOMS	Provides experience from over 20 years in the classroom and as a media specialist. Brings specific interest and skills in middle grades literacy and reading instruction.
Mrs. Karmen Bower	Instructional Coach, LOMS	Provides over 15 years of experience in classroom teaching and instructional coaching. Brings insight regarding professional learning and coaching cycles for teachers at LOMS.

The next section describes approaches the ARDT took to investigate this case, and it provides detailed analysis and accounts from data collected from interviews, observations, questionnaires, and artifacts.

Findings from the Case

The Action Research Design Team (ARDT) developed and implemented interventions that were meant to gauge the effectiveness of instructional coaching and its impact on the development of teachers as leaders of literacy. In total, three cycles of action research examined how instructional coaching fostered the development of teacher

leaders in a backdrop of a literacy development initiative. The findings from the action research cycles are presented to draw insights about building capacity through the development of teacher leaders.

The next section outlines the first cycle of action research and insights that informed the collection of findings for this action research study.

Action Research Cycle 1

The first cycle of this action research study began in October 2024 and lasted approximately four weeks. The primary researcher began this cycle by conducting individual interviews with each member of the action research implementation team (ARIT). After completing each individual interview, the primary researcher facilitated the first meeting with the action research design team (ARDT). During this meeting, ARDT members grounded themselves in the purpose of the study and the research questions guiding the study. To provide this context, the primary researcher prompted discussion about how this study could potentially impact teacher development and student achievement at Live Oak Middle School (LOMS, a pseudonym). The agenda for this initial meeting with ARDT members can be found in Appendix D.

The primary researcher facilitated an in-depth conversation around the purpose of study so ARDT members could make connections to Live Oak Middle School (LOMS), and so they could begin to consider the potential impact of the study on teachers and students. After reviewing the purpose of the study, the primary researcher asked the team how the study might benefit teachers and students at LOMS. The design team shared insightful feedback regarding the purpose of the study.

Mrs. Howard was the media specialist at LOMS and had an extensive background in literacy instruction and pedagogy. In the initial ARDT meeting, Mrs. Howard shared that she was excited about the study's specific focus on middle school students. She shared, "I like how (the study) is focused on literacy, specifically in middle school...there is a giant gap in literacy information for middle school."

As the math instructional coach, Mrs. Bower expressed optimism about the potential impact of the work across all disciplines. The primary researcher discussed that this specific action research study was focused on literacy instruction in ELA classrooms, but also agreed that the findings from the study could potentially inform coaching practices across all content areas.

Mr. David Martin was the interim principal at LOMS during the time of the action research study, and he also served as an ARDT member. Mr. Martin highlighted the unique timing of the action research study, and he noted that the research was occurring in conjunction with the statewide implementation of new English Language Arts (ELA) standards. Mr. Martin shared, "(The study) will be a natural segue to re-engage" in effective literacy instruction.

The primary researcher also led ARDT members in a discussion around the research questions used to guide the study. The researcher asked the team to provide preliminary responses to RQ3: How does the action research design team (ARDT) describe the impact of instructional leadership, particularly through coaching, on the implementation of reading interventions and instructional initiatives? The design team shared the following preliminary insights about the role of instruction leaders as it related to the purpose and scope of this study.

Mr. Martin explained the complex role that instructional coaches serve as it relates to resource adoption and training. He noted that instructional coaches are often tasked with being the primary individuals to implement, train, and support instructional initiatives, even if coaches are not “Always involved in the primary selection of the materials, or at all.” Mr. Martin also discussed that coaches play a key role in providing support with non-evaluative feedback through coaching cycles, and that coaches serve an important role as champions of successes related to instructional initiatives.

Mrs. Bower highlighted a key issue related to the implementation of an instructional initiative. She shared that instructional coaches are often positioned more as trainers, rather than coaches. She communicated a desire for more teacher leadership and, “Moving teachers to take ownership of that resource is kind of where I wish we were, so that (teachers) can make the resource work for us instead of us work for the resource, which is how it feels a lot of the time.”

Mrs. Howard pointed out that instructional coaches were often in the position to simply instruct teachers on how to use resources due to the newness of the staff and the limited content experience of the ELA Department at LOMS. However, Mrs. Howard also shared optimism around the implementation of the new curricular resources. At the time of study, ELA teachers at LOMS were in the initial phases of implementing a new resource that was aligned with the Science of Reading (SoR), and included comprehensive teacher supports. The resource provided guidance around the implementation of tools such as close reading strategies, differentiation, and family engagement. Mrs. Howard echoed the sentiments shared by Mrs. Bower and stated,

“Now that we have a resource that is more aligned with the things we’re trying to do, I hope that the ownership piece and the reflective piece comes into play.”

Intervention for Action Research Cycle 1

During the first ARDT meeting, the primary researcher led the ARDT members in a review of the literature and research related to the purpose of the study. The ARDT members learned about and discussed the Identify, Learn, and Improve coaching framework (Knight, 2018). The findings of this research influenced the identification and selection of the intervention for the first cycle of action research. The intervention for the first cycle of action research was the facilitation of coaching cycles using the Identify, Learn, and Improve coaching framework. Each member of the ARDT was paired up with ARIT members to conduct these coaching cycles. During this intervention, ARDT members collected observation data, and ARIT members shared how they perceived the impact of the cycles through the completion of a questionnaire.

To deploy this intervention, each ARDT member was paired with an ARIT member with the purpose of conducting a coaching cycle that used the Identify, Learn, Improve Framework. In the context of this intervention, the term “coach” refers to a member of the ARDT, and the term “coachee” refers to a member of the ARIT. ARDT members were tasked with scheduling an initial coaching conversation that would then lead to the processes of the Identify, Learn, Improve Framework where they were asked to:

- Identify: Schedule observation of coachee and determine a goal related to literacy instruction (i.e., the implementation of a reading or writing strategy, engagement strategies, assessment strategies, etc.);

- Learn: Coach and coachee learn and practice with one another; coach models and offers opportunities for practicing before classroom implementation, and;
- Improve: Coach observes coachee's implementation of the identified strategy and offers feedback and adjustments.

To facilitate the coaching cycles for this intervention, ARDT and ARIT members were intentionally paired based on backgrounds and expertise.

Mr. David Martin, the principal of LOMS, was paired with Mr. Shane Seward. Mr. Seward had 15 years of classroom teaching experience and taught 8th grade English Language Arts (ELA) and social studies at the time of the study. Mr. Martin opted to work with Mr. Seward during the first cycle of action research because of his instructional background and expertise. Before becoming an administrator, Mr. Martin taught science and gained certification in social studies. Because of Mr. Martin's background, the ARDT thought that Mr. Martin's expertise would have a significant impact in Mr. Seward's instruction. Additionally, since Mr. Seward was a dual-content teacher, the ARDT thought their partnership could be a creative way to expand literacy practices across multiple content areas.

Mrs. Shannon Howard, the media specialist at LOMS, was paired with Mr. Carter Williams. At the time of the study, Mr. Williams was a 7th grade English Language Arts teacher, and a gifted collaborator. In this collaborative role, Mr. Williams provided gifted services to students through planning with grade level ELA teams. Additionally, Mr. Williams had 11 years of classroom experience at the time of study, all of which were spent at LOMS. Mrs. Howard was paired with Mr. Williams based on their previous working experience with each other. Prior to the action research study, Mrs. Howard and

Mr. Williams had collaborated on literacy-based projects and initiatives, and they had an established working relationship. The ARDT determined that their experience in working with each other would serve the study well and yield authentic results.

Mrs. Karmen Bower, the math instructional coach at LOMS, was paired with Ms. Kaitlyn Lowe. At the time of the study, Ms. Lowe was a 7th grade ELA teacher at LOMS with 5 years of experience. Prior to her role as a 7th grade teacher, Ms. Lowe taught 8th grade ELA. Early on in her career, Ms. Lowe exhibited the qualities of a teacher leader and assumed additional roles, such as head cheerleading coach and grade level team leader. The ARDT determined that Ms. Lowe and Mrs. Bower would be a good pairing because of Mrs. Bower's extensive coaching experience. Mrs. Bower's seven years of instructional coaching provided her with expert strategies to leverage and empower early career teachers and those who expressed interest in leadership.

Finally, the primary researcher was paired with Mrs. Andrea Washington. At the time of the study, Mrs. Washington was a in her first year of teaching 6th grade ELA teacher. Prior to her role at LOMS, Mrs. Washington had seven years of high school teaching experience from surrounding counties. She brought a unique perspective to the action research study due to her prior experience. Unlike the other participants in the study, the primary researcher did not have extensive or established relationship with Mrs. Washington; they had only engaged in a coach/coachee relationship for a couple of months prior to the start of the study. The action research study was a positive opportunity for the primary researcher and Mrs. Washington to develop their coaching relationship.

During the Identify phase of the coaching cycle, each coaching pair identified a goal unique to their respective ARIT member. The goal was collaboratively identified between ARDT and ARIT member, and it was aligned with an area in which the ARIT member desired to grow professionally. Table 4.3 outlines the unique strategies selected by each coaching pair.

Table 4.3

Strategies Selected by ARDT and ARIT Coaching Pairs

ARDT Member	ARIT Member	Description of Selected Strategy for Implementation
David Martin	Shane Seward	Enhancing the Claim-Evidence-Reasoning writing structure through the incorporation of student discourse and discussion
Shannon Howard	Carter Williams	3-2-1 Reading Strategy to promote deeper engagement with texts
Karmen Bower	Kaitlyn Lowe	Thinking Map for comparing and contrasting types of constructed responses; Simultaneous Round Table Organizer to prompt student discussion and feedback about a writing task
Primary Researcher	Andrea Washington	Paraphrase Chunks, Then Put It Together (Serravallo, 2015) reading strategy to increase deep engagement and comprehension with texts

The ARDT determined that they would collect coaching logs and observation notes as data for this intervention. The collection of coaching logs would point to trends

in goals that ARIT members identified to enhance their literacy instruction. Observation data was collected with the use of a common observation form that looked for evidence of implementation of the goals that were determined during the identify phase of the coaching cycle. The observation form also collected data about the effectiveness of the strategy through the lens of student engagement. Table 4.4 outlines the data collection methods for each phase of the coaching cycle.

Table 4.4

Data Collection Methods for Coaching Cycles

Phase of Coaching Cycle	Data Collection Method
Identify	Coaching logs used by ARDT members
Learn	Coaching logs used by ARDT members Use of common observation form Questionnaire distributed to ARIT members
Improve	Coaching logs used by ARDT members

Findings from Action Research Cycle 1

The researcher used multiple data collection methods to collect qualitative and quantitative data during Cycle 1. At the beginning of the research study, the researcher collected data through conducting individual interviews with each Action Research Implementation Team (ARIT) member. During the research cycle, members of the Action Research Design Team (ARDT) collected data through a common observation form. At the end of the cycle, data was collected from a questionnaire submitted by ARIT members that communicated their perception of the intervention and its impact on their practice.

Initial Interviews of ARIT

At the start of the action research study, the primary researcher conducted individual interviews with each ARIT member. The purpose of conducting interviews was for the researcher to gain insight into the perspectives of ARIT members. In particular, the primary researcher was interested in learning how teachers perceived the impact of instructional coaching on their practice as a teachers and leaders of literacy. The interview questions allowed teachers to speak openly about what they perceived as effective and ineffective components of instructional coaching. During these initial interviews, overarching ideas emerged among the ARIT members:

1. Teachers look to instructional coaches to serve as curricular leaders who guide them toward effective planning and instruction.
2. Teachers desire frequent feedback and presence from their instructional coach to inform their practice.
3. There are secondary-specific literacy challenges that middle level teachers face when facilitating reading and writing instruction.

The primary researcher explored these emergent concepts in detail to collect key takeaways and understandings.

Each of the interviewed teachers highlighted various ways that the instructional coach is sought after as the instructional leader. The teachers expressed that they looked to the instructional coach for guidance around resource implementation, state standards alignment, instructional planning, and instructional facilitation. Mr. Seward likened the role of the instructional coach as a General, and asserted, “In regard to instruction, [the

instructional coach] is leading us to battle with these new concepts and weapons to use in the classroom.”

Mr. Williams also spoke to the positive impact an instructional coach has on instructional guidance. However, Mr. Williams went on to lament about the collaborative planning structure that LOMS implemented at the beginning of the school year. Prior to this school year, instructional coaches were present in collaborative planning periods twice a week. However, in an effort strengthen professional learning community (PLC) structures, and to delineate them from tasks that are more appropriate for collaborative planning (i.e., lesson planning, creating materials, etc.), instructional coaches facilitated coach-led PLC once a week, and content lead teachers led collaborative planning once a week.

Mr. Williams expressed that this shift took away an instructional coaching support in which he found great value. While reflecting on the structural shifts in collaborative lesson planning, Mr. Williams discussed, “I see the value of our structures this year, but I really miss the impact of having the coach threaded into part of the team and having the mindset of, ‘roll your sleeves up, we’re figuring out our plans.’”

During her five years as an ELA teacher at LOMS, Ms. Lowe has taught with new content teams nearly each year. However, what remained constant, Ms. Lowe shared, was the “direct impact” that instructional coaching has had on her practice by supporting her discernment of lessons and activities. As a result of instructional coaching, Ms. Lowe said she asks herself, “Does this meet the standards? Is it helping our students?”

Mrs. Washington was new to LOMS this school year, but she was not new to teaching. She brought seven years of teaching at the high school level from surrounding

counties. However, Mrs. Washington expressed that her experience with instructional coaching at LOMS varied from what she had experienced previously. Prior to this school year, she shared that she had not experienced an instructional coach who observed her and provided feedback. Despite being new to experiencing instructional coaching, Mrs. Washington expressed optimism about having someone who served in this type of role and the impact it could have on her instructional practices.

During her first year at LOMS, Mrs. Washington explained that her understanding of instructional coaching evolved, and she expressed excitement that, “A coach comes in and helps you put [instruction] into perspective and looks at it from a more objective point of view. [The coach] can point out ways that students can better understand what’s going on.”

In addition to conversations around instructional guidance, the interviews also suggested that frequent feedback and presence from a coach was highly sought after. Despite the importance and the perceived importance of frequent and detailed feedback, the role of the instructional coach at LOMS required the fulfillment of many duties besides providing teacher feedback. As such, the interviews seemed to communicate the importance of feedback, but a longing for more than what teachers were receiving. This sentiment was reinforced by Mr. Williams who described a singular instance where feedback was provided for a particularly challenging class, but stated, “I would love to have more time where [an instructional coach] is in my class, both good or bad, [to help me] think about a different approach.”

With 15 years of experience, Mr. Seward was the most veteran teacher interviewed. He reflected on previous times at LOMS when he did not perceive

instructional coaching as impactful or informative. However, he shared that his perspective had changed during the last four to five years as the role was taken more “seriously” and the frequency of feedback increased.

[Instructional coaching] didn’t use to [have an impact on my practice], but now it does. I’m being challenged more to step outside of what I’m used to doing. Now, I receive a lot of good feedback, and I receive some feedback where I have to grow. Sometimes that raises the hair on my neck. But it’s good feedback because I need to grow, and if I don’t receive feedback I don’t grow.

An increase in quality feedback, coupled with instructional leadership and guidance, renewed Mr. Seward’s faith in the impact of instructional coaching.

Ms. Lowe and Mrs. Washington echoed the sentiments about the impact of feedback on their practice. Ms. Lowe suggested that feedback is an effective way for an instructional coach to communicate their genuine care for both teachers and students. Mrs. Washington again expressed optimism about the impact of feedback from coaching and stated, “I always feel new at this. I appreciate any tips, and hopefully the more (a coach) comes in, the more it will sink into my instruction every day.”

The third and final theme that emerged from the initial interviews is that there were secondary-specific literacy challenges that middle level teachers faced when facilitating reading and writing instruction. While there are certainly challenges associated with literacy instruction at every level, there are unique barriers presented at the middle level. The interviewed teachers shared frustrations around engagement, teacher preparation, meeting diverse learning needs, and having sufficient time to plan comprehensive lessons.

Ms. Lowe, who has taught 7th and 8th grade ELA at LOMS, expressed that middle school students “fall out of love with reading” when they transition from elementary school, and that getting students to read often felt like “pulling teeth.” However, Ms. Lowe expressed optimism about the structure of the new curricular resource that was adopted for the current school year. The resource features thematic units with a variety of texts and genres, a stark contrast to the previous resource that was hyper-focused on a specific skill or genre for six to eight weeks at a time. Ms. Lowe was excited about how the newly implemented resource was engaging students and asserted, “The new curriculum gives the variety they need to stay more engaged in the text.”

Mr. Williams and Mrs. Washington shared a common challenge of meeting the diverse needs of learners in their classrooms. Mr. Williams stated that there was a “pretty good variance of students” in his advanced ELA class, and it was a challenge to “meet those individualized needs of students.” Mrs. Washington expounded upon this sentiment and shared, “There are vast levels of different things. They’re all on different levels of what they’re able to read and comprehend and retain, and I think they’re on different levels of how they feel about themselves in an ELA situation.”

While middle level teachers are serving students of all achievement levels, their teacher preparation does not consistently prepare them to teach some of the most vulnerable learners. In his teacher preparation program, Mr. Williams shared, “There was not actually explicit instruction on how to teach reading and writing.”

Observation Data

During Cycle 1, ARDT members conducted observations of ARIT members. ARDT members used a common observation form to evaluate the effectiveness of the

strategy that was identified during the Identify, Learn, Improve coaching cycle. In the context of this coaching cycle, effectiveness was measured by levels of student engagement and the degree to which the teacher met the goal that was identified during the coaching cycle. More specifically, student engagement was observed through cognitive, emotional, and behavioral engagement. The common observation form included a variety of Likert-scale and open-ended questions for ARDT members to complete while they were observing lessons facilitated by ARIT members.

The observation form asked observers to note the following items:

1. A short description of the goal/strategy that was collaboratively decided on by the coach/coachee pair
2. General notes about the lesson being observed
3. The parts of the lesson that were observed (i.e., opening, transition to work session, etc.)
4. Likert scale questions that evaluated the levels of engagement
5. A Likert scale question that evaluated the degree to which the teacher met the identified goal/strategy
6. General areas of strengths and weaknesses

ARDT members completed the common observation form while observing their ARIT coachee. The data was collected in a central location that the primary researcher used for further analysis.

In total, there were four Likert scale questions that asked ARDT members to evaluate student engagement and the overall implementation of the identified strategy or skill. On a scale from one to five, one indicated low engagement or implementation, and five

indicated high engagement or implementation. All ARDT members recorded scores of four or higher on all Likert scale questions included on the observation form, indicating high levels of engagement and implementation.

The anecdotal data suggested that the strategies each ARIT member used were collaborative in nature and elicited discussion among students in the classroom. The discussion opportunities allowed students to provide feedback, respond to others' thinking, and/or participate in rich discussion that posed higher order thinking questions. One observer reported, "The connection between personal experiences coupled with their task of citing evidence from the text increased the cognitive lift within the assignment."

The observation data also indicated that there were opportunities to process questions and prompts individually and collaboratively, allowing students to revise their thinking based on peers' responses. For example, observation data submitted by Mrs. Bower stated, "Students are giving and receiving feedback to each other throughout the activity. They receive feedback on their first story choice, then an entirely different set of feedback on their second story."

While the scores and feedback around engagement and implementation were generally high, the anecdotal data collected indicated room for growth around the structures and facilitation of the strategies. In other words, all ARIT members successfully delivered the identified strategy, but the implementation could have been improved with structural supports, such as timers, clearer directions, and a combination of verbal and visual cues.

Questionnaire Data

To determine the impact of the intervention used in Cycle 1, the researcher distributed a questionnaire to be completed by ARIT members. The questionnaire included a combination of Likert scale questions and open-ended questions. The items included in the questionnaire were included to paint a comprehensive picture of how ARIT members perceived the impact of the coaching cycle intervention on their teaching practice.

Mr. Williams reported overwhelmingly positive feedback regarding the impact of the coaching cycle. On a scale of one to five, one indicated that the intervention had little to no impact on teaching practice, and five indicated significant positive impact on teaching practice. In this context, Mr. Williams rated the coaching cycle intervention as a five, significant positive impact. He also rated his level of confidence in implementing the identified strategy as a five, indicating he was “extremely confident” in his implementation.

Anecdotally, Mr. Williams shared that the coaching cycle was effective because, “It was a great way to explore options I hadn’t made use of.” Furthermore, Mr. Williams reported,

Pairing up with a coach who was focused on her observation, conversation, and implementation did a lot to make sure I was meeting the needs of very specific challenges. I did see a difference from this work.

Additionally, Mr. Williams believed there was, “value in observation coupled with shared exploration of ideas and then implementation. The individualized nature of (the coaching cycle) is what helped make it so effective.”

Mr. Seward reported similarly a positive experience with the coaching cycle intervention. He scored the effectiveness of the intervention as a five, indicating significant positive impact on his teaching practice. Additionally, he rated his confidence level in facilitating the literacy-specific strategy as a five, communicating he was “extremely confident.”

For the first intervention, Mr. Seward shared anecdotal data that discussed how the implementation of the literacy strategy could have been improved. In their coaching pair, Mr. Seward and Mr. Martin determined that Mr. Seward would implement the Claim-Evidence-Reasoning writing strategy with a focus on student discourse. When asked how an instructional coach could better support him in his work to deliver the strategy, Mr. Seward suggested that the coach could help him “intentionally plan for students to discuss (or) debate controversial topics after completing a CER and/or completing an inquiry task.”

Mrs. Washington rated the effectiveness of the coaching cycle intervention as a four out of five, which suggested moderate efficacy. Mrs. Washington believed that the implementation of the strategy identified during the coaching cycle was effective because the strategy, “allowed for the time to really dissect the text, which I believe led to greater overall understanding.” Mrs. Washington indicated that she felt “very confident overall” in implementing the strategy, and that she would opt to rely on paper and pencil (versus incorporating student computers) in future facilitation of the strategy. To increase the efficacy of the instructional coach, Mrs. Washington suggested that “[Instructional Coaches] could send reminders or require one or two of these strategies per week in the lesson plans.”

Ms. Lowe rated the coaching cycle as a five out of five, which suggested that the intervention had significant positive impact on her practice. When asked to explain her reasoning, Ms. Lowe recalled,

I was able to receive clear feedback that impacted my teaching. It helped me to think of a new way to add less teacher talk and more student-led activities and engagement. It also allowed me to structure a lesson that gave students more accountability in the learning.

Ms. Lowe's coaching cycle, conducted by ARDT member Mrs. Bower, addressed student engagement and comprehension. These focal points were identified by Ms. Bower and Ms. Lowe in their pre-coaching conversations as high leverage areas. At the time, student engagement and comprehension were also areas of focus for the entire department and school, which allowed for cohesive and relevant goal setting.

Ms. Lowe found value in learning a specific strategy to implement in her classroom, and she felt that, moving forward, the instructional coach could provide additional resources or extensions of engaging strategies with which the PLC could plan with regularly.

At the conclusion of the first action research cycle, ARDT members met to discuss findings and insights from the first cycle to determine next steps for the second cycle. The researcher asked the design team members to share highlights from their experience with the coaching cycle intervention, and their perception of its effectiveness.

It is also relevant to note that student engagement was an area of focus for all schools in Live Oak School District (LOSD, a pseudonym) at the time of the research study. Additionally, the primary researcher framed effective literacy instruction through

authentic student engagement. Perhaps not coincidentally, all the selected strategies that were implemented within coaching pairs involved increasing engagement with text and/or writing. Mrs. Howard summarized it best when she said, “We talked about ways to deepen (student) engagement with the text in order to read the text at a deeper level.” As such, the ARDT discussion at the conclusion of the first research cycle organically included discussions around student engagement.

Mrs. Howard suggested that the framework may have been effective partly due to the experience level of the teacher with whom she was paired. As the mentor in previous partnerships, Mrs. Howard said that teachers who were not traditionally certified, or those who had limited teaching experience, struggled to accurately identify an area of focus or a goal that was appropriate for their growth and development. However, in Mrs. Howard’s experience with Mr. Williams, a teacher with over 10 years of experience, she recounted that he was able to pinpoint a literacy-based goal that was closely aligned with moving students forward.

Mr. Martin highlighted that this intervention was effective because it allowed a segue into literacy conversations across contents. In their collaborative coaching work, Mr. Martin and Mr. Seward identified a writing strategy coupled with discussion for implementation. Mr. Martin recounted the robust conversations and learning that occurred as a result of their coaching work, and speculated about the potential impact on contents with less of a focus on literacy, such as science and social studies. Mrs. Howard heartedly agreed with the sentiment, arguing,

If we want to improve our literacy skills across the board, whether that be our discussion skills, whether that be our writing skills, whether that be our reading

skills, we have to engage it in beyond the ELA classroom. Some of the best writing instruction we had was when we used to do writing in science.

In all, ARDT members were overwhelmingly in agreement about the positive impact of the coaching cycle intervention, its individualized nature, and its impact on increasing engagement with literacy skills.

The next section details the intervention and findings from Action Research Cycle 2.

Action Research Cycle 2

The second action research cycle began in early November 2024 and lasted approximately three weeks. Based on the findings from the first research cycle, the ARDT determined that teachers would benefit from developing their capacity around engaging literacy strategies through job-embedded professional learning.

Intervention for Action Research Cycle 2

In the context of this study, job-embedded professional learning occurs within professional learning communities (PLCs). Typically, PLCs are facilitated weekly by an instructional coach at LOMS. Members of a PLC include the English Language Arts (ELA) teachers on a grade level and their instructional coach. The content of the PLCs varies on the timely needs of the content team but oscillates between a learning focus and a data focus. A learning focused PLC may include the demonstration or modeling of a strategy to be implemented in classrooms, and a data focused PLC involves the analysis of formative or summative assessment data to make informed instructional decisions. Thus, the ARDT determined that the second intervention for this study would be job-embedded professional learning through an instructional coach-led PLC.

For this intervention, the primary researcher, who served as the Instructional Coach at LOMS during the time of the study, conducted two PLCs that were aligned with grade-level literacy needs. Table 4.5 details the content and desired outcome of each PLC.

Table 4.5

PLC Agendas as Interventions in Cycle 2

Grade Level	Content of PLC	Rationale / Desired Outcome
6 th Grade ELA	Close Reading Strategies	Guide teachers to intentionally select and model strategies for deeper engagement with the text
	Norming of Assessment Expectations	Ensure alignment of teacher expectations for writing assessment to clarify expectations for students
8 th Grade ELA	Modeling use of Writable for writing instruction and assessment	Increase implementation of a new resource intended to increase individualized feedback and support to students on writing assessments

Agendas are a key component to PLC facilitation, and the primary researcher consistently used this structure to guide effective PLCs. However, it is important to note that PLCs must also be flexible and responsive to the timely needs of teachers. In the context of this intervention, this understanding was applied to the agenda set for the 6th grade ELA team. The instructional coach set an agenda item to select and model close reading strategies with an intent to deepen engagement with text.

When facilitating this PLC, the instructional coach began a conversation around strategies and pulled resources for teachers to consider. However, the conversation uncovered disconnects that teachers had about an upcoming writing assessment that had not been fully backwards designed. In other words, teachers had gaps in their understandings about what students were expected to produce for the final writing assessment of the unit. As a result of this disconnect, the coach guided the PLC through a calibration conversation around the assessment to align understandings. While this was not the initial intent for the agenda, it was crucial for clarifying expectations for students and re-centering the team of teachers.

The agenda for the 8th grade ELA PLC included modeling with a new writing resource, Writable. This was a timely, job-embedded professional learning topic that was highly sought after by teachers. Writable, a digital literacy program that incorporates Artificial Intelligence generated feedback, was a component of the newly adopted curricular resource. Due to district professional learning structures, there had not been adequate training with Writable, and teachers were unfamiliar with the tool and how to implement it. The instructional coach was also unfamiliar with many of its components, but dedicated time to independently learn as much of the platform as possible to model its use with teachers.

Writable modeling was a timely job-embedded professional learning topic for the 8th grade ELA team because they were approaching a summative writing task. Additionally, the team demonstrated high capacity to quickly learn and implement new tools in creative and innovative ways. As a result of this intervention, not only did the 8th grade ELA team implement Writable for the summative writing task, but they also took

the initiative to find opportunities to assign formative writing tasks using the digital platform.

In addition to the timeliness of Writable implementation as a PLC topic, it also aligned closely with goals to increase student literacy engagement. The platform empowers students to self-monitor their writing with interactive checklists and rubrics, provide anonymous peer feedback, chat with their teacher, and much more. The implementation of this tool provided an invigorating shot of much needed energy and engagement to writing instruction.

Questionnaire Data

At the conclusion of Cycle 2, the primary researcher distributed questionnaires to ARIT members. The purpose of this questionnaire was to evaluate the impact of the job-embedded professional learning used as an intervention during Cycle 2. The questionnaire included a combination of Likert scale questions and open-ended questions to gauge ARIT member perception of the job-embedded professional learning on their teaching practice.

On a scale of one to five, with one indicating little to no impact and five indicating significant positive impact, Mr. Seward rating the job-embedded professional learning PLC intervention as a five, significant positive impact. When asked to explain his reasoning for this rating, Mr. Seward stated,

Writable is such an amazing application embedded in the (curricular resource) platform; however, before the PLC, I didn't know how to even access it, let alone use it for writing instruction and assessment. Having participated in the PLC

allowed me to learn how to navigate the platform, create my own writing assessments, assess student submissions, and provide timely feedback.

Mr. Seward's commendation of the of the PLC underscored the effectiveness of the intervention and using a PLC to strategically support teachers in a variety of ways, including training and modeling with curricular resources.

In addition to gauging the effectiveness of the intervention, the primary researcher was interested in learning how the interventions built upon the confidence and capacity of teachers. Evaluating teacher confidence was important in learning how this action research study supported the development of teacher leaders through instructional coaching. Thus, the questionnaire also asked ARIT members to rate their level of confidence in facilitating the literacy-specific skill/strategy at the center of the intervention. In the context of Cycle 2, this meant evaluating teacher confidence with the topic discussed during the job-embedded professional learning PLC.

As an 8th grade ELA teacher, Mr. Seward's PLC was focused on Writable modeling and implementation. When asked about his level of confidence in using Writable as a result of the PLC, he rated a four out of five, which indicated moderate confidence. He supported his rating by explaining, "I am still learning (Writable); however, I have utilized it three times in the first week after being introduced to it. I am excited about using it for our longer writing task at the end of Unit 3."

In contrast to Mr. Seward's positive experience with the coach-led PLC, Ms. Lowe argued that "the vision of the Instructional Coach sometimes gets lost" during PLC facilitation. Ms. Lowe went on to explain that the purpose can become muddled when there are external factors impacting the functionality of the PLC, such as attendance,

timeliness, and member engagement. Ms. Lowe stated, “Although we have an agenda and we have items that we need to complete, it is hard for the instructional coach to facilitate [higher level needs] when members [are] missing.”

To address gaps in the effectiveness of PLC facilitation, Ms. Lowe asserted that Instructional Coaches should engage in the critical conversations around “timeliness, attendance, and being present for meetings.” These meeting norms were prerequisites for successful PLC facilitation, Ms. Lowe argued, and it was difficult to address PLC specific content, such as data analysis or peer modeling, without first establishing meeting non-negotiables.

Action Research Cycle 3

The final intervention of this action research study began in early December 2024, and it lasted approximately three weeks. One of the primary goals of conducting this action research study was to empower teachers as leaders through instructional coaching. As such, the ARDT determined that the final intervention of the study would be a teacher-leader planned and facilitated professional learning community (PLC). The ARIT members who facilitated PLCs during this intervention were supported by the instructional coach, but they were encouraged and equipped to be the primary facilitators of PLC for this intervention.

Intervention for Action Research Cycle 3

To determine the content of the PLCs facilitated by ARIT members for this intervention, the instructional coach met with each teacher individually to discuss timely needs of each grade level ELA team. The instructional coach brought the scope of the work that had been previously done in PLC to narrow the topics to be addressed. The

coach also facilitated discussion about findings from the first two action research cycles, and she pointed to trends that emerged from the data that was collected. To help ARIT members pinpoint a focus for the teacher-led PLC, the primary researcher shared the following trends from the action research:

- Students were not engaging deeply with the texts they were assigned to read
- There was a lack of intentional planning and implementation of reading strategies that were used in conjunction with the texts students were assigned
- The new curricular resource was not fully internalized by ELA teachers

As a result of these conversations with ARIT members, specific topics for PLC agendas were determined. Table 4.6 outlines the topics that the instructional coach collaboratively decided upon with each ARIT member.

Table 4.6

Topics for Teacher Leader Facilitated PLC

Grade Level	Content of PLC	Rationale / Desired Outcome
6 th Grade	Teacher modeling of Paraphrase Chunks, Put It Together Strategy	Increase collective teacher efficacy around strategy implementation
		Increase student engagement and comprehension with texts
7 th Grade	Teacher modeling of Simultaneous Round Table strategy	Increase collective teacher efficacy around strategy implementation
		Increase student collaboration, comprehension, and engagement

8 th Grade	Close Reading: Annotating and Paraphrasing	Increase collective teacher efficacy around strategy implementation
		Increase student engagement and comprehension with texts

In addition to supporting teachers in the selection of their PLC topic, the instructional coach also provided guidance on effective PLC facilitation. The instructional coach leveraged characteristics of an effective PLC to support the teachers in the creation of their PLC agenda. According to Fisher et al. (2019), the following conditions are required for effective PLC facilitation:

- Structural conditions
- Supportive relational conditions
- Shared values and vision
- Intentional collective learning
- Peers supporting peers
- Shared and supportive leadership

When introducing these effective characteristics, the instructional coach prompted the teachers to discuss how these conditions could be met in the context of their selected PLC topic.

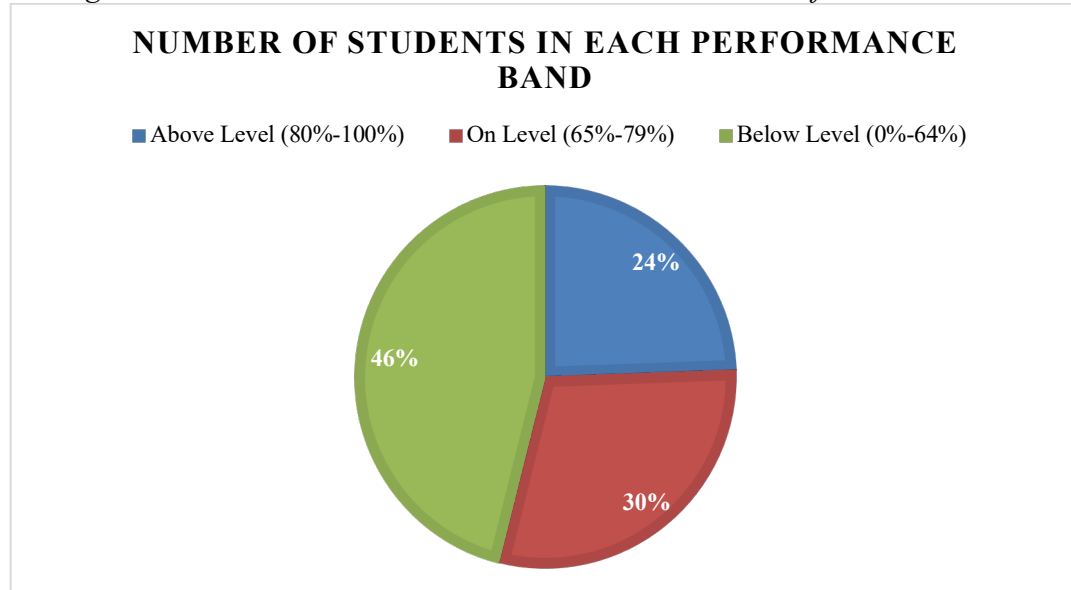
Mr. Seward, an 8th grade ELA teacher, described challenges that he saw with student comprehension of the texts that were assigned in class. The new curricular resource had the Notice and Note (Beers et al., 2012) close reading strategy embedded within it. This strategy called upon the use of annotating in the margins and looking for “signposts” that were intended to signal student thinking about specific textual elements.

Despite the integration of this strategy, Mr. Seward explained that the 8th grade PLC did not typically plan for explicit teaching with the tool. Additionally, Mr. Seward explained that he generally did not refer back to his students' annotations to check for their understanding when they were reading independently or in pairs.

The result of not using the Notice and Note strategy intentionally, Mr. Seward explained, was that there were not enough formative checks for understanding, and student achievement was negatively impacted. For example, basic student compliance may have suggested that students were completing the task as assigned (i.e., reading the text independently or in pairs), but there were limited discussions about the text and its main ideas, themes, analysis of characters, etc. As a result, performance on summative assessments suffered. Figure 4.1 illustrates the average summative assessment performance of students in 8th grade ELA during the 2024-2025 school year.

Figure 4.1

Average 8th Grade ELA Classroom Summative Assessment Performance Fall 2024



With the majority of students scoring “below level” on classroom summative assessments, the primary researcher agreed with Mr. Seward that the passive reading of texts was a pervasive issue. As a result, it was collaboratively decided that Mr. Seward would address close reading during his teacher-led PLC. In selecting a close reading strategy, Mr. Seward recounted previous success with the Paraphrase Chunks, Put It Together, a Serravallo (2015) strategy that promotes comprehension and synthesis. The primary researcher suggested combining this strategy with an intentional use of the Notice and Note strategy embedded within the student workbook. The pair reached consensus about the combination of reading strategies, prepared a presentation, and Mr. Seward was set to lead the PLC.

During the PLC facilitation, Mr. Seward introduced the problem as low engagement with texts. Next, he introduced the “Paraphrase Chunks, Put It Together” strategy and its purpose. He shared previous success with the strategy and showed student work samples that reinforced its efficacy. Finally, he suggested implementation of the strategy where:

1. students complete a first read of the text with intentional use of the Notice and Note structure (teachers call specific attention to details to annotate and look for while reading);
2. students complete a second read of the strategy using a graphic organizer that captures the paraphrased chunks of each paragraph; and,
3. teachers use the completed graphic organizers to check for understanding throughout the week leading up to an assessment.

The 8th grade PLC was enthusiastic about the strategy and expressed optimism about the potential positive impact on student achievement.

Teachers in the 8th grade PLC shared many ideas that would help structure the activity, including the use of pouches with different colored highlighters. The team also discussed ways to scaffold the activity for below and above grade level learners. Finally, the team determined a plan for implementation and agreed to try the strategy with the first text in their upcoming unit.

While reflecting about the teacher-led PLC, Mr. Seward shared his excitement about the climate of the meeting and the precedent it set for his team. He noted how engaged his teacher peers were in the conversation, and he speculated about the potential positive impact of having peers regularly lead PLC work. Mr. Seward acknowledged that he was empowered to successfully lead the PLC due to the support and preparation provided by the instructional coach.

The primary researcher consulted Mr. Williams and Ms. Lowe for the 7th grade teacher-led PLC. Mr. Williams had a unique perspective as he served as both a 7th grade ELA teacher and the 6th grade gifted collaborator. In the planning of the teacher-led PLC, Mr. Williams lamented about the lack of intentional planning around engaging strategies, particularly with texts. He recounted that the 7th grade ELA team often relied on the bare bones of the curricular resource to plan instruction. In other words, their planning informed the “what” but not the “how.” Mr. Williams believed that student engagement and achievement would be improved by conducting more intentional conversations around the facilitation of classroom activities.

Mr. Williams's insight was helpful in informing the primary researcher's approach to planning for the teacher-led PLC with Ms. Lowe. Ms. Lowe also shared frustrations around the collaborative planning structures, and she noted that dysfunction due to various inconsistencies (i.e., attendance, timeliness, etc.) were impacting the team's efficacy. Although Ms. Lowe self-identified as a content leader, the primary researcher could sense that these inconsistencies were impacting Ms. Lowe's overall morale. The teacher-led PLC was an opportunity to reassert Ms. Lowe as a content leader and re-engage the rest of the team.

The primary researcher recalled that Ms. Lowe experienced positive results from the coaching cycle in which she participated during the first cycle of the action research. She shared that the "Simultaneous Round Table" strategy, the activity she implemented in collaboration with her ARDT coach, Mrs. Bower, positively impacted student collaboration, accountability, and comprehension. Thus, the primary researcher leveraged this experience and suggested that she model this strategy for her team during the teacher-led PLC. Ms. Lowe was excited about the opportunity to showcase the Simultaneous Round Table strategy and agreed that it would be a positive learning experience for the 7th grade ELA team. In preparation for the PLC, Ms. Lowe found a text with which to model, and she adapted the graphic organizer to be used during the activity.

During the PLC, Ms. Lowe provided context for the use of the Simultaneous Round Table strategy and recalled the use of the strategy during her coaching cycle. Then, she passed out a text for members of the PLC to read. Finally, she distributed a graphic organizer that had a series of questions that were intended to prompt student

thinking about the characters in the text. Teachers had one minute to respond to the first prompt before being asked to pass the paper to their left. This repeated until all questions were answered on the worksheet.

After the modeling was complete, the team discussed how the Simultaneous Round Table strategy could support greater collaboration and comprehension while reading texts. Ms. Lowe used this opportunity to share how it was effective when she used the strategy in her classroom, and gave logistical suggestions, such as possible ways to set up desks and the necessary materials. The primary researcher underscored this PLC by asserting that the team would benefit from frequent peer modeling. As a result, the team agreed to take turns modeling strategies during their weekly PLC meetings. Although it was not the primary focus of this PLC, it may also be necessary for the team to revisit norms and meeting expectations if attendance and timeliness are persistent issues.

In collaboration with the Instructional Coach, Mrs. Washington determined that she would model the close reading strategy that she implemented during the first cycle of action research. This selected strategy, Paraphrase Chunks, Put It Together (Serravallo, 2015), was intended to promote comprehension and engagement through close reading and synthesis. In preparation of the teacher-led PLC, Mrs. Washington selected a text to model with the 6th grade ELA team. She prepared a document with the text and cues for annotation that were to be used during her modeling.

During Mrs. Washington's teacher-led PLC, she provided context for the strategy and explained how she had previously implemented it in her classroom. Before reading the text, Mrs. Washington asked teachers to preview the text and to determine what it

would likely be about based on its title. She directed teachers to use specific annotations, including circling and underlining, to note unknown words and important details. Then, she asked a teacher volunteer to read the first section of text. She modeled which words and phrases to annotate, and then prompted teachers to summarize the main idea of the first section. This modeling, Mrs. Washington explained, was how she implemented the strategy in her classroom. As a result of Mrs. Washington's modeling, the 6th grade team agreed to more intentional planning and preparation of reading strategies.

Questionnaire Data

At the conclusion of the third cycle of action research, ARIT members completed a final questionnaire to share their feedback regarding the third intervention, teacher-led PLC. The feedback from the final intervention was overwhelmingly positive; teachers recalled high levels of confidence and empowerment from driving PLC with their colleagues. The findings from this particular intervention were crucial for the primary researcher as they gained further insight about the impact of coaching on the development of teacher leaders.

Mrs. Washington, Mr. Seward, and Ms. Lowe facilitated the teacher-led PLCs during this intervention, and they each rated this intervention as a five out of five, communicating significant positive impact on their practice. These ARIT members reported that they felt confident in facilitating the PLC because of the preparation or experience that was previously facilitated by the instructional coach.

In preparation of the 8th grade ELA PLC, the instructional coach met with Mr. Seward to narrow the scope of topics that could potentially be addressed based on timely needs. The goal of this work was to help teachers feel prepared and confident in their

facilitation of PLCs with their colleagues. In response to this preparation, Mr. Seward recalled,

I felt incredibly empowered by my instructional coach to lead the PLC. She was effective in spelling out the expectations of what was needed from me, and gave me the confidence I needed to comfortably lead the PLC. I thoroughly enjoyed the experience and am open to leading more PLCs in the future.

Furthermore, Mr. Seward shared that, initially, he was nervous leading a PLC with his peers. However, by engaging in intentional preparation ahead of the teacher-led PLC, Mr. Seward shared, “my instructional coach was incredibly supportive in building my confidence by reminding me of my strengths in practicing literacy interventions.”

Ms. Lowe found value in her colleagues “switch[ing] roles and becom[ing] the student [to] see how students process information.” Also, she noted that it was helpful for teachers to “learn from another teacher about how to facilitate this lesson with their own teaching style.” Mrs. Washington recalled that the particular strategy she modeled for teachers was effective, but that she “probably could have explained it more clearly.”

Following teacher-led PLCs, ARIT members suggested that the coach offer opportunities for teacher reflection following to make teacher-led PLCs even more effective. For example, Ms. Lowe suggested that the coach gauge teacher confidence in implementing strategies before and after they are modeled by a peer. Mrs. Washington argued that it would be helpful for the instructional coach to model the strategy in classrooms with students.

Finally, the teacher-led PLC piqued a particular interest with Mr. Seward, the most veteran teacher of the group. He felt so positively about the experience that he

suggested coaches consider a consistent schedule of teacher-led PLCs that would give more teachers the opportunity to lead their peers. Mr. Seward argued that this would be impactful on teacher practice because of the high levels of confidence and empowerment he felt following his facilitation.

Final Interviews of ARIT

At the conclusion of the action research study, the primary researcher conducted interviews with ARIT members. The goal of these interviews was to learn the key takeaways and understandings of each participant as a result of their engagement in the study. In particular, the researcher was interested in learning how the ARIT members perceived the effectiveness of the interventions used in the study, if teacher perception of instructional coaching evolved as a result of the interventions, and which components of instructional coaching helped teachers feel empowered and confident in their literacy instruction. During these final interviews, common themes emerged among the participants:

1. Instructional coaching can be an effective vehicle for empowering teachers and increasing their confidence.
2. Informal leadership (i.e., teacher leaders), as the result of intentional and systematic development, is effective for creating teacher buy-in, empowering teachers, and increasing collective efficacy.
3. Instructional coaches should provide frequent opportunities for feedback, modeling, and reflection.

These themes were crucial for the primary researcher and ARDT members to identify key findings and takeaways connected to the research study.

The final interviews corroborated the data collected throughout the study and underscored an important point: teachers desired opportunities to develop and “flex” their leadership muscles. Moreover, teachers felt affirmed when their individual strengths were recognized and were given opportunities to model and teach their colleagues. Mr. Seward recalled,

I felt incredibly empowered when I was asked to [lead my PLC], and then being trusted to choose [a strategy] that hit all [our target areas]. Then, I felt empowered when I led the PLC because everyone participated. [This] surprised me because, being a veteran teacher myself, not all of us get engaged...but everyone engaged. I felt validated and confident in what I was doing.

Mr. Seward acknowledged the role of the instructional coach in empowering teacher leaders, and he attributed some of his increased confidence to his collaboration with the coach. In the context of this study, he explained that the meeting with the coach prior to the teacher-led PLC help him narrow his focus and capitalize on strategies and ideas already in his toolbox.

Mrs. Washington explained that the coaching cycle intervention that was used during the first cycle of action research was particularly impactful on building her confidence. She explained, “I really liked the strategy we worked on together because I don’t like to feel like [students] aren’t getting it. It’s a gross feeling. [Using the strategy] really made me feel more confident.”

Importantly, when teacher leader development opportunities were absent or lacking, teachers felt overlooked or disvalued. Mr. Williams shared his frustration around the lack of leadership development opportunities that had been provided in recent years.

He wondered about the various professional learning opportunities that had been extended to certain teachers that had not been made more widely available, calling into question a lack of a systemized approach to building teacher leaders. This discrepancy in development opportunities was especially impactful on teachers who demonstrated leadership characteristics or expressed desire in developing as a leader. Mr. Williams recalled, “if I think about [leadership] opportunities and how my school is communicating to me that it wants me to build [my leadership], it’s not present. It simply isn’t.”

Mr. Williams’s frustration contrasted with Mr. Seward’s positive experience with the teacher-led PLC. Regarding his PLC facilitation, Mr. Seward asserted,

When I’m being asked to lend my professional expertise to improve student growth, that’s an honor. That’s the type of stuff that makes me want to stay employed at a school. [Empowering teacher leaders is] a golden opportunity to improve teacher retention and student growth and literacy.

These contrasting perspectives and experiences point to an important and timely discrepancy to be addressed at LOMS.

During final interviews, the primary researcher asked ARIT members about the impact of “informal” leadership (i.e., teacher leaders). This question was framed in the context of the effectiveness of the teacher-led PLC that was conducted as the intervention during the third cycle of action research. The participants unanimously agreed that peer leaders are immensely impactful in numerous ways. Mr. Williams argued that the impact of teacher empowerment could not be overstated. He argued,

The culture of a school is led by empowerment. I think identifying the strengths of those who want to lead helps them to have ownership within the school, and it helps them move their peers and instruction. I think the impact of that is huge. Based on his experience with the teacher-led PLC, Mr. Seward believed that teacher leaders were able to generate more buy-in than their “formal” counterparts (i.e., principals, assistant principals, and coaches). Thus, Mr. Seward urged instructional leaders to seek opportunities to position teachers as leaders. He asserted, “I think there would be more [PLC] buy-in if they were periodically led by teachers. I think it would increase morale and student growth.”

Mrs. Washington saw the positive potential in teacher leadership, but she also weighed both sides of the scenario. She pondered, “When you round that corner [into formal leadership], there’s this underlying ‘us versus them’ [mentality]. Maybe an informal leader might not feel so separate...and empowers them more.” On further reflection, Mrs. Washington considered that there may be dynamic issues among teachers and teacher leaders if there are questions about authority and directives.

Finally, the content of the interviews suggested that instructional coaches should facilitate frequent opportunities for feedback, modeling, and reflection as a means of optimizing teacher talent and developing teacher leaders. Teachers desired feedback in many forms, including feedback during content planning, as well as feedback from classroom observations. Additionally, Mr. Williams explained that he thought trends in teacher feedback, collected by instructional coaches, should be thoughtfully considered by other school leaders when making decisions.

Mrs. Washington argued that more opportunities for classroom modeling would make instructional coaching more effective. She said, “I think having a coach come in and model with your students and [seeing how they react] to all the little hiccups [would be impactful].”

Final Interviews with the ARDT

In addition to meeting with ARIT members at the conclusion of the study, the primary researcher met with members of the ARDT to stamp the learning of the action research study. During the interview, the primary researcher brought key data points and trends that emerged during the study as considerations for the ARDT. The researcher asked the ARDT members to think through the lens of their leadership perspective when considering implications of the action research study and what these findings meant specifically for LOMS. The following key ideas emerged from meetings with ARDT members:

1. Instructional coaches can be positioned to mitigate the gap in systematic development of teachers as leaders at LOMS.
2. To address gaps in reading and writing achievement at the middle level, literacy skills need to be systematically addressed across all content areas.

These takeaways presented themselves as ARDT members spoke from their experience with the action research study and what they believed as next steps for LOMS.

Based on her coaching cycle experience with Ms. Lowe, Mrs. Bower gained new insights about the role of the instructional coach at LOMS. At the time of the study, instructional coaches served specific content areas; Mrs. Bower was the math and science instructional coach, and the primary researcher was the ELA and social studies

instructional coach. However, for the first cycle of action research, Mrs. Bower worked with Ms. Lowe, an ELA teacher. Mrs. Bower explained that working with an out-of-content teacher allowed her to think more broadly about pedagogy, rather than just focusing on content. Mrs. Bower recalled, “As I worked with Ms. Lowe, I realized that coaching isn’t necessarily subject bound; the type of coaching I was doing was more about, ‘how do students learn?’”

This coaching experience allowed Mrs. Bower to consider the possibility of empowering teachers to think more critically about their pedagogical approaches. She believed that this type of coaching would promote the development of teacher leaders and “redefine how we look at instructional coaching, and [help us realize] that so much of [coaching] is just providing the space, time, and support for teachers to grow in their practice.”

Regarding the development of teacher leaders, Mrs. Bower believed, “If you want to see change, everybody has to feel empowered at some point...[teacher leadership] doesn’t mean you have one teacher who’s a leader among their peers.” Despite the importance of this shared sense of leadership, Mrs. Bower noted that LOMS “hasn’t been very systematic about how we’re approaching that.” She argued that one way to address this gap would be to first identify the strengths of the staff. Then, Mrs. Bower asserted, expand instructional coaching opportunities beyond the confines of a content and develop a wider array of professional goals that any instructional coach could address through coaching cycles.

Mrs. Howard agreed that LOMS lacked a systematic approach to developing teachers as leaders, potentially resulting in promising teachers being overlooked. Mrs.

Howard thought back to “quiet leaders” who had leadership potential but were not acknowledged or developed. She poised the scenario, “If there’s not a systematic way other than [developing] the loudest person in the room, you don’t really know people’s leadership potential.” Additionally, Mrs. Howard urged building leaders at LOMS to re-examine the ways they were developing leaders to maximize opportunity for teachers.

With her extensive literacy experience as a media specialist and former ELA teacher, Mrs. Howard also identified whole school literacy efforts as an important recommendation based on this action research study. She urged instructional coaching and building leadership to focus on building literacy strength in all content areas and continue developing a culture of literacy. During the study, Mrs. Howard led extensive efforts to developing the culture of literacy at LOMS, primarily through promoting and celebrate leisure reading. She saw traction with these efforts and recommended that this continue to be an area of focus for the school.

Additionally, to make instructional coaching more effective at LOMS, Mrs. Howard noted two unique issues. First, she argued that there is a need for more focus on new and non-traditionally certified teachers. She recalled that she experienced success in her coaching cycle during the study, but she attributed some of it to the level of experience of the teacher with whom she was paired. Mrs. Howard speculated that the cycle may not have been as successful with a more novice teacher. Secondly, Mrs. Howard argued that coaches and principals should engage in partnerships to decrease disconnects between instructional visions. She recalled that previous partnerships had been impactful, but she also noticed a lack of cohesion in recent years.

Finally, this study illuminated the insight of the interim principal at LOMS, Mr. Martin. Mr. Martin explained that the findings of this study aligned with his leadership philosophy of “leading from behind.” He asserted that the success of implementing initiatives largely comes from teacher buy-in, and that “finding everybody’s individual strengths and things they’re proud of is a potential for exponential growth.” Moreover, Mr. Martin claimed that instructional coaching can unearth these individual teacher strengths due the intertwined relationship between teacher and coach.

Mr. Martin believed that his role in creating teacher buy-in was to “empower others to become the experts.” He noted the power in distributing leadership opportunities to individuals based on their individual skill sets. Additionally, he debunked the commonly held notion of the principal being the preeminent instructional leader and countered, “There’s no need to jump in front and try to make yourself do something that you don’t have the time, capacity, or skill set to do.” Furthermore, Mr. Martin asserted, “My role is to get the right people on board, make sure they have the resources, and let them execute their job.”

Chapter Summary

The primary researcher conducted three action research cycles to collect and analyze data connected to the purpose of the study. Each action research cycle featured an intervention that was determined based on the related literature, findings from the previous cycles, and insights from ARDT members. The first intervention was the facilitation of coaching cycles that used the Identify, Learn, Improve (Knight, 2019) framework. During this intervention, ARDT members served as coaches and ARIT members served as coachees. The second intervention was job-embedded professional

learning conducted through professional learning communities (PLCs). The third and final intervention was a PLC planned and conducted by ARIT members.

The primary researcher used a variety of data collection methods to paint a clear picture of the findings of this action research study. At the start of the study, data was collected from individual interviews of each ARIT member. Throughout the study, the researcher collected data from coaching logs, observation forms, and questionnaires. Data and insights were also collected from ARDT meetings and individual interviews that were facilitated throughout the study.

To attach meaning to the collected data, the researcher analyzed the qualitative and quantitative results to find emergent themes and findings. After careful data analysis and coding, the findings from the study suggested that:

1. Instructional coaching can be an effective form of professional development through consistent presence, feedback, and modeling.
2. Instructional coaching provides individualized support for teachers to enhance their content and pedagogical knowledge and skills.
3. When teachers are empowered through instructional coaching activities (i.e., coaching cycles, goal setting, etc.), teachers feel confident and emboldened to lead their peers.
4. Teachers look to instructional coaches to serve as content and curricular leaders who guide professional learning communities (PLCs) with certain expertise.
5. Instructional coaches must work in partnerships with the layers of leadership that exist within a school to achieve goals related to literacy instruction and achievement.

6. There is a need to address literacy across all content areas to address the pervasive gaps in literacy achievement at the middle level.
7. The layers of leadership within a school, including instructional coaching, must seek to systematically develop teachers as leaders to increase teacher empowerment and leadership.

These key takeaways in this chapter are further discussed and analyzed in Chapter 5.

CHAPTER 5

ANALYSIS OF FINDINGS FROM THE ACTION RESEARCH CASE

In this action research study, the primary researcher sought the perspectives of teachers, instructional leaders, and administrators. Their insights were crucial to building a comprehensive understanding of experiences related to teacher leadership, literacy instruction, and student literacy achievement at Live Oak Middle School (LOMS, a pseudonym). As the researcher collected qualitative data from questionnaires, interviews, artifacts, field notes, and observations, certain themes emerged. It was important use systematic approaches for analysis so the researcher could establish validity, reduce bias, and pinpoint relevant findings for the context of the study.

The researcher followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase process of thematic analysis to make sense of the findings collected during the research study. The phases included:

1. Familiarization of the data
2. Generation of initial codes
3. Searching for themes
4. Reviewing themes
5. Defining and naming themes
6. Producing the report

The systematic approach to thematic analysis allowed the researcher to organize, describe, and interpret (Mertler, 2020) the results of the study. Once themes were

determined, the researcher took deliberate steps to ensure the data was trustworthy. The researcher established reliability, validity, and generalizability by using thick description, an audit trail, peer debriefing, and data triangulation.

The purpose of this study was to examine how instructional coaching fostered the development of teacher leaders, and how this development impacted literacy instruction and overall school improvement goals centered around literacy. The researcher sought the perspective of instructional leaders, including administrators and coaches, as well as teachers, to learn more about building capacity through the development of teacher leaders. These perspectives were important to the study as they provided direct insight from the individuals who were primarily tasked with the implementation of the interventions surrounding the SoR approaches to literacy instruction.

This action research study was guided by the following questions:

1. How does instructional coaching impact the development of teacher leaders in literacy instruction and intervention?
2. How do teachers describe the impact of instructional coaching on their capacity to lead literacy initiatives and to implement interventions in their classrooms?
3. How does the action research design team (ARDT) describe the impact of instructional leadership, particularly through coaching, on the implementation of reading interventions and instructional initiatives?

To address pervasive gaps in literacy achievement at LOMS, it was urgently necessary to develop English Language Arts (ELA) teacher leaders.

In the context of this study, teacher leaders were defined as classroom teachers who “influence policy and practice in significant ways” (Harris et al., 2019, p. 124),

specifically related to literacy instruction and interventions. Furthermore, teacher leaders at LOMS were those who modeled professional attitudes and dispositions, shared their ideas and work, coached colleagues, collaborated with others, and advocated for change (Fairman & Mackenzie, 2015).

The key principles that guided this study were adult learning principles, job-embedded professional learning, and instructional coaching. The researcher and ARDT members sought to determine how these principles created the conditions to develop teachers as leaders of literacy. Additionally, the action research study was iterative and cyclical in nature, allowing multiple instances of observing, interpreting, planning, and acting (Coghlan, 2019; Mills, 2017). Conducting research in cycles allowed the ARDT to be flexible and responsive to findings and trends that emerged during the study.

To evaluate the impact of instructional coaching on the development of teacher leaders, the researcher conducted three cycles of action research that took place between September 2024-December 2024. Each action research cycle featured an intervention that was specifically designed to measure the impact of coaching. The researcher collected data on the interventions by collecting qualitative data from Action Research Implementation Team (ARIT) members.

The researcher collected data from observations, interviews, questionnaires, artifacts, and field notes. Chapter 4 outlined the findings from the collected data. Once the findings were established, the researcher used coding to reduce the data, a process that is defined as “taking the voluminous data collected and reducing them to patterns, categories, or themes” (Glanz, 2014, p. 166).

This chapter provides an analysis of the findings and themes that emerged from the data collection process. A summary of the emergent themes and findings, along with their connection to the study's research questions, is depicted in Table 5.1.

Table 5.1

Summary of Themes and Findings Related to the Action Research Questions

Research Questions	Findings	Themes
RQ1: How does instructional coaching impact the development of teacher leaders in literacy instruction and intervention?	• Instructional coaching can be an effective form of professional development through consistent presence, feedback, and modeling. • Instructional coaching provides individualized support for teachers to enhance their content and pedagogical knowledge and skills.	Instructional coaching is an effective form of professional development when it is job-embedded, aligned with individual teacher goals, and includes consistent presence, feedback, and modeling.
RQ2: How do teachers describe the impact of instructional coaching on their capacity to lead literacy initiatives and to implement interventions in their classrooms?	• When teachers are empowered through instructional coaching activities (i.e., coaching cycles, goal setting, etc.), teachers feel confident and emboldened to lead their peers. • Teachers look to instructional coaches to serve as content and curricular leaders who guide professional learning communities (PLCs) with certain expertise.	Effective instructional coaching empowers teachers to develop as content and curricular leaders by increasing confidence, building instructional capacity, and developing a repertoire of instructional strategies and skills.
RQ3: How does the Action Research Design	• Instructional coaches must work in	Collaboration must occur across all layers of

Team (ARDT) describe the impact of instructional leadership, particularly through coaching, on the implementation of reading interventions and instructional initiatives?	partnerships with the layers of leadership that exist within a school to achieve goals related to literacy instruction and achievement. • There is a need to address literacy across all content areas to address the pervasive gaps in literacy achievement at the middle level. • The layers of leadership within a school, including instructional coaching, must seek to systematically develop teachers as leaders to increase teacher empowerment and leadership.	leadership to achieve schoolwide goals related to literacy achievement.
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The key findings and themes that emerged from the data are discussed and analyzed in detail in the next section.

Research Question 1

The first question that guided the direction and purpose of the action research study was: How does instructional coaching impact the development of teacher leaders in literacy instruction and intervention? Findings connected to Research Question 1 included:

1. Instructional coaching can be an effective form of professional development through consistent presence, feedback, and modeling.

2. Instructional coaching provides individualized support for teachers to enhance their content and pedagogical knowledge and skills.

Theme 1: Instructional coaching is an effective form of professional development when it is job-embedded, aligned with individual teacher goals, and includes consistent presence, feedback, and modeling.

The primary researcher used the process of “coding” to reduce the data, a process that is defined as “taking the voluminous data collected and reducing them to patterns, categories, or themes” (Glanz, 2014, p. 166). As the data were being reduced, the following concepts were associated with Research Question 1: observation and feedback, time with coach, and professional learning. The data collected throughout the study supported these findings and are explained in this section.

Observation and Feedback

Research participants cited feedback as one of the most effective components of instructional coaching. More specifically, ARIT members believed feedback was particularly impactful due to its individualized nature and specificity. Mr. Seward explained how much he had grown to value the feedback provided by the instructional coach as it allowed him opportunities to reflect and enhance his practice. Additionally, Mr. Williams recalled the first cycle of action research and attributed the effectiveness of the coaching cycle intervention to the specific, targeted feedback he received from his ARDT coach, Mrs. Howard.

A common form of teachers receiving feedback is through classroom observations conducted by instructional coaches. This is a straightforward approach to gaining a firsthand account of a teacher’s practice and providing timely, actionable feedback. In

reflecting about the efficacy of observation and feedback, however, Mrs. Washington desired more opportunities to observe the instructional coach in action. Mrs. Washington suggested that having a coach model within the walls of teachers' classrooms would make instructional coaching more effective.

Feedback was also impactful due to the way it empowered teachers to adjust and lead their peers. For example, Ms. Lowe and Mrs. Washington incorporated feedback regarding their selected strategies in Cycle 1, which allowed them opportunity to reflect on the implementation of the strategies and ultimately lead their colleagues in teacher-led modeling of the strategies.

Another avenue of providing feedback through instructional coaching is the way it can help teachers reframe or adjust their mindsets. Mr. Williams spoke to the positive impact that instructional coaching had on "reframing what [his] next steps need to be" by serving as a "disruptive force." He explained that instructional coaching is effective when feedback is provided formally (i.e., in an explicit professional learning setting), or informally (i.e., in a follow up coaching conversation between teacher and instructional coach).

Time with Coach

The 'time with coach' concept refers to teachers' desire for consistent and intentional presence of the instructional coach. In this study, the guidance and leadership embedded within instructional coaching was highly sought after by the participants. With that being said, each ARIT member brought into the study unique experiences with, and perceptions of, instructional coaching. For example, Mr. Seward explained that, for him, coaching was once not impactful on his work. Additionally, Mrs. Washington, who

moved from a different school district, explained that she had not experienced instructional coaching in an impactful way prior to her employment at LOMS. However, despite these once negative perceptions of instructional coaching, both teachers had grown to see the value in instructional coaching, and they recognized the impact on their practice.

Ms. Lowe and Mr. Williams echoed these sentiments, albeit from a slightly different perspective. At the time of the study, Mr. Williams lamented about the lack of presence of the instructional coach in collaborative planning, which was a structural change from previous years. Mr. Williams desired more frequent presence from the instructional coach as he had previously experienced positive impact from more consistent coaching interactions. Ms. Lowe explained that instructional coaching was especially impactful in her instructional decision making and planning. However, Ms. Lowe explained that, during coach-led professional learning communities (PLCs), the vision “was sometimes lost” due to issues such as participant attendance and lack of meeting norms. She expressed desire in the coach re-establishing norms so the team could operate more cohesively and regain the vision of the instructional work.

The data reflected that the time with coach was effective not only when it was consistent, but when it was also intentional. Intentional time with coach referred to purposeful professional learning community (PLC) facilitation, coaching conversations, and goal setting. Mr. Seward’s perspective underscored these findings when he explained that his time as a teacher was limited; he did not have ample opportunity to explore the latest and greatest research and strategies that would improve student outcomes. Rather,

he grew to trust the instructional coach to bring timely and relevant strategies that could be implemented into planning and practice.

Intentional coaching conversations rely on a coach's purposeful prompting and guidance. During the study, the ARDT discussed the coaching cycles they facilitated with ARIT members and what made partnerships productive. For example, in her work with Ms. Lowe, Mrs. Bower explained that she had curated a list of engagement strategies prior to their initial coaching conversation. Mrs. Bower was able to curate this list based on her knowledge of school engagement efforts and consultations with the primary researcher. Taking the time to prepare for the initial coaching conversation allowed Mrs. Bower and Ms. Lowe to have a focused and efficient conversation. Their coaching work ultimately paved the way for Ms. Lowe to successfully implement the Simultaneous Round Table strategy in her class. Furthermore, Mrs. Bower's effective and efficient coaching empowered Ms. Lowe to model the strategy for her colleagues in the teacher-led PLC.

Professional Learning

The concept of 'professional learning' has become polarizing due to its varying levels of overall quality and relevancy. Mr. Williams explained the 'camps' that teachers fall into as it relates to professional learning by suggesting, "I think teachers have an interesting relationship with professional development. We work in bubbles, and most of the teachers that are [in my bubble] want and appreciate professional development." The other 'bubble' refers to teachers who disengage with, or do not see the value in, professional learning. Mr. Seward reiterated this idea by recounting his experience of observing veteran teachers regularly "tun[ing] out" of professional learning.

Instructional coaching can be an effective antidote to listless or uninspiring approaches to developing teachers. This study showcased how instructional coaching can be in itself a form a professional learning. Mr. Seward, a veteran teacher whose opinion of instructional coaching improved drastically, described that he gained a “deeper understanding and appreciation of” instructional coaching when he started to receive more frequent and hands-on feedback. The feedback, Mr. Seward explained, pushed him outside of his comfort zone and allowed him to grow and develop as a teacher.

The next section illuminates the theme and findings associated with Research Question 2.

Research Question 2

The second question that guided the direction and purpose of the action research study was: How do teachers describe the impact of instructional coaching on their capacity to lead literacy initiatives and to implement interventions in their classrooms? Findings connected to Research Question 2 included:

1. When teachers are empowered through instructional coaching activities (i.e., coaching cycles, goal setting, etc.), teachers feel confident and emboldened to lead their peers.
2. Teachers look to instructional coaches to serve as content and curricular leaders who guide professional learning communities (PLCs) with certain expertise.

Theme 2: Effective instructional coaching empowers teachers to develop as content and curricular leaders by increasing confidence, building instructional capacity, and developing a repertoire of instructional strategies and skills.

As the data were analyzed, the following concepts were associated with Research Question 2: teacher leadership and empowerment and professional learning communities (PLCs).

Teacher Leadership and Empowerment

This study showcased the profound impact that empowering teachers as leaders can have on building confidence and increasing collective efficacy. During Action Research Cycle 3, Mrs. Washington, Mr. Seward, and Ms. Lowe were positioned to lead their PLCs in a specific, targeted activity. The primary researcher, who also served as the instructional coach, took teachers through the deliberate process of identifying relevant needs and planning for the facilitation of the PLC. This planning opportunity allowed ARIT members a behind-the-scenes look into how professional learning is planned for teachers. The intervention also set the precedent for teachers co-planning and co-leading PLCs in the future, a prospect that was exciting and promising to the participating teachers.

When reflecting on what made the teacher-led PLC so effective, Mr. Seward recalled the engagement among his peers. He pondered the aspects that might have contributed to the buy-in and said,

I don't know if [the engagement] was because I'm considered 'one of their own,' or if [the PLC] hit all of the targets...I'm not sure what created the level of buy-in, but it was there and that felt incredibly awesome.

In all the teacher-led PLCs, the researcher noted that participating teachers were especially willing to engage and be vulnerable in a space led by their colleague. For example, the researcher's journal recounts suggestions that teachers gave to support the

implementation of the various strategies that were being modeled by ARIT members. Additionally, teachers readily participated in teacher-led modeling. When Mrs. Washington modeled her active reading strategy, participating teachers volunteered to read aloud and share out their thought processes for finding the key terms and phrases they noted when reading independently. This level of engagement and vulnerability in PLC is an essential component of making adult learning meaningful and transferrable.

Professional Learning Communities (PLCs)

One of the most impactful avenues that instructional coaching has for empowering teachers is through the thoughtful planning and facilitation of PLCs. Teachers in this study met weekly to engage in content-specific work aimed at improving student outcomes. As such, the instructional coach aimed to plan PLCs that included activities such as student data analysis, resource internalization, and strategy modeling. An overarching goal in this PLC work was to develop teacher capacity in planning and instruction.

Similarly, Mrs. Bower asserted that an instructional coach's role is to "empower teachers with student outcomes at the forefront." Instructional coaches lead through this lens when they guide teams of teachers through meaningful data analysis and instructional planning. Furthermore, PLC serves as a forum where teachers learn from one another, an aspect that Mrs. Bower argued is effective for developing teachers; she explained that teachers are often successful "in silos" and "don't venture past" their individual achievements. However, Mrs. Bower claimed that instructional coaching can harness the impact of individual efficacy and position teachers as leaders to see how their knowledge and expertise can "help others and hopefully broaden their own perspectives."

It is important to note that PLC facilitation is effective when it was job-embedded, timely, and aligned with teacher needs. Mrs. Washington recalled that the coach-led PLCs allowed her to engage in meaningful conversations with her grade level English Language Arts (ELA) team. She mentioned the positive impact of analyzing student diagnostic data during PLC, an activity she had not experienced previously. Furthermore, Mrs. Washington cited the helpfulness that PLC had on discussing relevant issues in the classroom with a team of peers. She asserted, “I like that [PLC] is a chance to talk about what’s going on in the classroom and how we can do better...[our issues] tend to align.”

Mr. Williams provided a different perspective on the impact of PLCs at LOMS. He explained that instructional planning with coaches felt “detached” due to the lack of coach presence in collaborative planning. The unintended consequence, he explained, was that his grade level PLC suffered from a lack of cohesion and forward thinking. The fragmented nature of the PLC resulted in not being able to engage in PLC activities (i.e., data analysis, backwards design, etc.) with fidelity.

Preliminarily, Mr. Williams thought a remedy to this was twofold. First, he reiterated the need for the instructional coach to be more embedded within collaborative lesson planning with teachers. Second, he argued that specific attention needed to be paid to “how we build [teacher] leadership within PLCs.” He claimed that creating a greater sense of teacher ownership in PLCs would empower teachers and allow the work to endure beyond the time spent with the instructional coach.

The next section illustrates the findings and themes associated with Research Question 3.

Research Question 3

The third and final question that guided the direction and purpose of the action research study was: How does the Action Research Design Team (ARDT) describe the impact of instructional leadership, particularly through coaching, on the implementation of reading interventions and instructional initiatives? Findings connected to Research Question 3 included:

1. Instructional coaches must work in partnerships with the layers of leadership that exist within a school to achieve goals related to literacy instruction and achievement.
2. There is a need to address literacy across all contents to address the pervasive gaps in literacy achievement at the middle level.
3. The layers of leadership within a school, including instructional coaching, must seek to systematically develop teachers as leaders to increase teacher empowerment and leadership.

Theme 3: Collaboration must occur across all layers of leadership to achieve schoolwide goals related to literacy achievement.

As the data was analyzed, the following concepts were associated with Research Question 3: partnerships within layered leadership and systematic development.

Partnerships within Layered Leadership

To achieve goals related to literacy achievement, partnerships must exist among all instructional leaders, including principals, assistant principals, and instructional coaches. Cohesion among these instructional leaders creates ripple effects of increased capacity throughout a school, directly impacting the development of teacher leaders. In

the context of this study, it was urgently necessary to address pervasive gaps in reading achievement among groups of students. The school at the center of this study was in the early implementation phases of a new curricular resource that was aligned with the Science of Reading (SoR) principles, and it was aimed at increasing student literacy achievement. Additionally, the school district in which this study was situated had engaged in district wide reform efforts related to literacy, such as phonics intervention and engagement strategies.

In Live Oak School District (LOSD, a pseudonym), instructional coaches were positioned as the primary facilitators of professional learning around district wide initiatives or resources. In preparation of leading teachers through training, instructional coaches often received training facilitated by district leaders, resource vendors, or hired consultants. A crucial piece of this professional learning model is ensuring that partnerships exist between instructional coaches, principals, and assistant principals. If cohesion is lacking among these parties, a certain level of dissonance arises between teachers and coaches. The disconnect is a result of teachers being trained on something that a primary instructional leader (i.e., the principal) does not seem to “own” or fully internalize.

With this layered partnership concept in mind, the primary researcher led the ARDT through a close reading of related literature detailing the various leadership roles aligned with literacy achievement. In summary, the articles asserted the following:

- The position of the principal is likened to a point guard in basketball and sets their team in motion with clear direction, vision, and guidance (Thomas-EL, 2023).

- Leaders frequently ask teachers targeted questions about literacy instruction (i.e., are students reading and writing daily? If so, how?) to create a culture of accountability and expectation around literacy practices (Gabriel, 2020).
- School leaders must stay abreast of relevant research related to literacy and adopt curricular resources that are aligned to key findings (Rhyne, 2024).
- Leaders must expect and create the conditions for quality literacy instruction to exist across all disciplines in a school (Ippolito & Fisher, 2019).

In all, the articles served as a prime example of how layers of leadership connect in a jigsaw to address literacy leadership and instruction. In processing the implications of the related literature, ARDT members discussed how certain components were already pervasive at LOMS (i.e., certain math teachers intentionally promoting leisure reading), and where there were notable gaps (i.e., holding all teachers accountable to intentional planning for reading and writing every day).

Systematic Development

While the data collected during this action research study suggested that teachers felt empowered by various coaching activities (i.e., observation and feedback, instructional leadership, etc.), this study also showed that, overarchingly, there was a gap in the systematic development of teachers as leaders at LOMS. Specifically, ARDT and ARIT members pondered the methods by which leaders followed to identify teachers who demonstrated leadership potential and how that potential was leveraged.

Mr. Williams, an 11-year veteran at LOMS, argued that his own professional development had not been nurtured in a meaningful way in recent years. Mrs. Howard, who had spent the entirety of her 20-year career at LOMS, discussed that she had

observed several “quiet” leaders who fell under the radar of administrators simply because they were less outspoken than some of their peers.

Thus, it is necessary that instructional coaching be viewed as a component of developing teachers, but not the sole method of doing so. For example, Mrs. Howard suggested administering surveys to all teachers to gain a more comprehensive understanding of teachers who have leadership aspirations. Mrs. Bower argued that it would behoove administrators to take inventory of the strengths that exist among the staff and find meaningful ways to position teachers as leaders in their respective areas of strength.

Similarly, Mr. Williams noted that teachers would feel empowered by leaders “identifying the strengths of those who want to lead and lead through those qualities.” Finally, Mr. Seward, after experiencing significant feelings of empowerment and leadership after leading his 8th grade ELA PLC, suggested that all members of a PLC take turns facilitating the meetings with their peers.

Chapter Summary

In the analysis of the data collected during this action research study, three primary themes emerged. First, it was determined that instructional coaching is an effective form of professional development when it is job-embedded, aligned with individual teacher goals, and includes consistent presence, feedback, and modeling. Second, effective instructional coaching empowers teachers to develop as content and curricular leaders by increasing confidence, building instructional capacity, and developing a repertoire of instructional strategies and skills. Finally, collaboration must

occur across all layers of leadership to achieve schoolwide goals related to literacy achievement.

To establish credibility and validity of the themes that emerged, the primary researcher systematically analyzed the data to look for emergent trends and patterns. For each theme, there were associated findings that connected to the research questions that guided the researcher in this study. Research Question 1 sought to examine how instructional coaching impacted the development of teacher leaders in literacy instruction and intervention. Thus, the findings explored the ways that instructional coaching is used as a form of professional development through time with the coach, observation, and feedback.

Research Question 2 explored teacher perception of instructional coaching and its impact. The researcher investigated this research question through the lens of empowerment and curricular leadership through professional learning community (PLC) facilitation. Finally, Research Question 3 studied how the Action Research Design Team (ARDT) perceived the impact of instructional leadership, particularly through instructional coaching, on literacy instruction and achievement. Based on key findings that emerged, this research question was studied through the concepts of layered leadership and systematic development.

Chapter 6 closes this study by presenting the conclusions, implications, and connections to leadership practices related to instructional coaching and literacy leadership.

CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSIONS, IMPLICATIONS, AND CONNECTIONS TO LEADERSHIP PRACTICES

The final chapter of this dissertation includes conclusions, implications, and connections to leadership practices based on the findings of this study. This chapter presents key highlights and recommendations related to the purpose of the study and its research questions.

The purpose of this study was to examine how instructional coaching fostered the development of teacher leaders, and how this development impacted literacy instruction and overall school improvement goals centered around literacy. The researcher sought the perspective of instructional leaders, including administrators and coaches, as well as teachers, to learn more about building capacity through the development of teacher leaders. These perspectives were important to the study as they provided direct insight from the individuals who were primarily tasked with the implementation of the interventions surrounding the Science of Reading (SoR) approaches to literacy instruction.

This action research study was guided by the following questions:

1. How does instructional coaching impact the development of teacher leaders in literacy instruction and intervention?
2. How do teachers describe the impact of instructional coaching on their capacity to lead literacy initiatives and to implement interventions in their classrooms?

3. How does the action research design team (ARDT) describe the impact of instructional leadership, particularly through coaching, on the implementation of reading interventions and instructional initiatives?

The next section provides a summary of the action research study, including the theory and logic that undergirded the study.

Summary of the Research Design

This action research study took place at Live Oak Middle School (LOMS, a pseudonym). LOMS is a Title I, semi-urban middle school with a population of approximately 700 students. Student achievement at LOMS is notably disparate, particularly among subgroups. Historically, White gifted students outperform Black and Hispanic students who are on or below grade level. Additionally, at the time of this study, reading and literacy achievement was a particular area of focus at LOMS and the entire Live Oak School District (LOSD, a pseudonym), and there were districtwide efforts to address pervasive gaps in achievement.

In response to the incongruent and languid reading achievement, the primary researcher of this study was interested in learning how instructional coaching empowered teachers to develop as leaders of literacy within their classrooms. The researcher assembled an Action Research Design Team (ARDT) that included the following staff from LOMS: the principal, media specialist, math and science instructional coach, and the primary researcher, who also served as an instructional coach at LOMS at the time of the study.

In addition to the formation of the ARDT, the primary researcher created the Action Research Implementation Team (ARIT) to serve as the participants of the study.

The ARIT included four English Language Arts (ELA) teachers, including one 6th grade teacher, two 7th grade teachers, and one 8th grade teacher. The participants engaged in cycles of action research and shared their perspectives to inform the trajectory and findings of the study.

Action Research

This action research study began in October 2024 and ended in December 2024. During this study, three cycles of action research were conducted to evaluate the effectiveness and impact of three unique interventions. Data was collected through numerous avenues during this study. At the beginning of the study, the primary researcher conducted individual interviews with each ARIT member to gain insights about how they perceived the impact of instructional coaching on their development and practice. Additionally, the ARDT met to calibrate around the purpose and scope of the study, and to collaboratively plan and deploy interventions that were aligned to the purpose of the study and its research questions.

During the first cycle of research, data regarding teacher practice was collected through a common observation form. At the end of each cycle, ARIT members completed separate questionnaires to provide feedback regarding the effectiveness of the deployed intervention. Also, the researcher kept a journal throughout the study to document teacher actions that resulted because of the interventions, as well as emergent themes. At the conclusion of the study, the primary researcher conducted individual interviews with each ARIT and ARDT member to evaluate the impact of the completed research study, and to determine key findings and implications.

Theoretical Framework

This action research study was focused on how the development of teachers as leaders increased the efficacy of literacy instruction. In particular, the study was propelled by evaluating instructional coaching as a form of professional development aimed at enhancing teacher capacity. Thus, the theoretical framework that drove this study examined how teachers were developed through instructional coaching, professional learning, and collective learning. Additionally, adult learning principles were an important component of the theoretical framework. It was essential for the researcher to deploy interventions that were aligned with these principles to maximize the impact of the action research study.

Logic Model

Organizational change was at the center of the logic model that guided this study. In the context of this research, change refers to increased student literacy achievement. The primary researcher sought to determine how instructional coaching could serve as an avenue to increase teacher capacity to implement and facilitate effective literacy instruction at the middle level. Specifically, organizational change was created through job-embedded professional learning, coaching cycles, classroom observations, and feedback. Furthermore, the logic model that drove this study asserted that change cannot occur without the continuous cycle of support and coaching for teachers, especially when developing teacher leaders.

The next section summarizes and discusses the findings of the study, including its emergent themes, as they relate to the purpose and research questions that guided the study.

Summary and Discussion of the Findings

After a thorough analysis of the data collected during the study, the primary researcher determined key findings. These findings were connected to the research questions that determined the direction of the study. The first research question sought to determine how instructional coaching impacts the development of teachers as leaders of literacy instruction and intervention. The second research question investigated how teachers described the impact of instructional coaching on their practice and capacity to lead others. Finally, the third research question explored how the ARDT described the impact of instructional leadership, particularly through instructional coaching, on the implementation of literacy instruction and initiatives.

Discussion of Findings from Research Question 1

Research Question 1 asked: How does instructional coaching impact the development of teacher leaders in literacy instruction and intervention? Based on the data collected and the analysis conducted the following key findings emerged:

1. Instructional coaching can be an effective form of professional development through consistent presence, feedback, and modeling.
2. Instructional coaching provides individualized support for teachers to enhance their content and pedagogical knowledge and skills.

Additionally, an enduring theme stamps these findings: Instructional coaching is an effective form of professional development when it is job-embedded, aligned with individual teacher goals, and includes consistent presence, feedback, and modeling.

Participants in this action research study unanimously agreed about the positive impact of frequent and individualized feedback, and these findings aligned with empirical

findings that guided this study. Based on their research, Elek and Page (2019) believed that observation, feedback, and goal setting were common elements of successful coaching partnerships. Feedback from coaching can exist in many forms: feedback from classroom visits, coaching conversations, and curricular planning. Participants of this study expressed a desire to receive feedback in these varying forms, and the participants suggested that responses from the instructional coach served as an effective “disruptor” or “informer” of mindsets, beliefs, or practices that impacted their development.

Additionally, participants in this study found instructional coaching to be effective when there was consistent coach presence in formal and informal settings. For example, coaches serve as a sounding board in a lower stake setting, such as collaborative planning. Coaches also serve as a pioneer in formal settings, such as professional learning sessions. The participants of this study found value in both forms, suggesting that coaching is effective when it is truly embedded within the fabric of teachers’ professional lives versus existing on the periphery.

Furthermore, this study showed that instructional coaching in itself can serve as an effective form of professional learning for teachers. Through goal setting, feedback, and general guidance, participants cited the positive impact that instructional coaching had on their individual development. This finding aligned with Desimone’s (2017) assertion that coaching can be evaluated through five “empirically predictive elements” of professional development: content focus, active learning, sustained duration, coherence, and collective participation (p. 3). With these elements, it can be concluded that instructional coaching includes activities that have known positive impact on teacher

practice (Burchinal et al., 2012; Buysse et al., 2010; Clements et al., 2011; Garet et al., 2001; Lee & Smith, 1996).

In addition to teacher development, this study also examined how instructional coaching increased teacher capacity to carry out literacy instruction and initiatives. While substantial research around literacy instruction has been conducted at the elementary level, this study provided a unique perspective into middle level literacy. Participants in the study spoke about the extremely disparate levels of literacy achievement in their classrooms and the challenge this posed for their planning and instruction. Middle level teachers are faced with the difficult task of teaching grade level standards and skills, such as analyzing theme and author's purpose, while many of their students lack the prerequisite skills to access higher order thinking and learning.

Interviews and observations collected during the study supported this assertion. Data illustrated that teachers were challenged by the complex task of planning instruction for students who presented significant deficits in foundational skills, to students who were multiple grade levels ahead of their peers. This conundrum was persistent, oppressive, and sometimes paralyzing to teachers who deeply desired to instill a love of reading and prepare their students for life of reading and writing success. This study showed that instructional coaching plays a key role in addressing this tall order through the training and implementation of high-quality instructional materials, coaching for quality Tier 1 instruction, and the development of targeted interventions based on the unique needs of students.

In this study, the instructional coach was primarily responsible for the training and implementation of the newly adopted curricular resource for all ELA teachers at

LOMS. At the time of the study, the resource was adopted to replace a resource that was incomprehensive and did not meet the wide variety of student learning needs. The coach played an integral role in training teachers with the new resource that better served teachers and students. Additionally, the coach served on the resource adoption committee that selected the new resource, providing them with additional insights and knowledge about the tool. It is crucial for instructional coaches to be embedded within decision making processes around resource materials so they can better serve and support teachers in their acquisition of newly adopted tools.

Instructional coaching can support quality Tier 1 instruction in several ways. The data from this study showed that teachers desired instructional coaches to participate in collaborative lesson planning in an authentic way; participants suggested that frequent coach participation in lesson planning felt cohesive and connected. In lesson planning, the coach can ask prompting questions, provide resources and strategies, and keep teachers in alignment with standards and desired outcomes. In addition to lesson planning, instructional coaches can support quality Tier 1 instruction through frequent observations and feedback on teacher practice. That said, participants in this study speculated that more instances of classroom modeling by the coach would better serve their instruction.

Lastly, instructional coaches collaborate with other school leaders to select and deploy targeted interventions to address specific student needs. During this study, the instructional coach worked with the principal and assistant principal to implement multiple iterations of literacy interventions to address pervasive gaps in reading achievement. The interventions were categorized in tiers based on student needs. The

intervention for the highest tier of support involved phonics instruction for specific students with significant deficits in foundational reading skills. A computer-based tool was used as the intervention for lower-level reading support needs. The instructional coach trained teachers in their implementation of these interventions, and they constantly evaluated the effectiveness of the selected tools to ensure students received the necessary supports.

Discussion of Findings from Research Question 2

In this study, Research Question 2 was: How do teachers describe the impact of instructional coaching on their capacity to lead literacy initiatives and to implement interventions in their classrooms? Based on data and analysis, the following findings were determined:

1. When teachers are empowered through instructional coaching activities (i.e., coaching cycles, goal setting, etc.), teachers feel confident and emboldened to lead their peers.
2. Teachers look to instructional coaches to serve as content and curricular leaders who guide professional learning communities (PLCs) with certain expertise.

Based on data and these findings, the following theme emerged: Effective instructional coaching empowers teachers to develop as content and curricular leaders by increasing confidence, building instructional capacity, and developing a repertoire of instructional strategies and skills.

This action research study intentionally positioned participants as teacher leaders. The ARDT developed interventions that progressively built on the capacity of participants by first engaging in a coaching cycle around an identified goal or skill. Then,

participants engaged in a coach-led professional learning community (PLC) with their grade level teams around a relevant topic or skill. Finally, for the third and final intervention, participants led their peers in a teacher-led PLC. The scope of this work was intended to gradually develop participants and build their confidence to co-lead their grade level content team alongside the instructional coach.

When empowered as teacher leaders, research participants truly blossomed. The ARIT members cited the profound impact that leading their peers had on their morale and confidence. The grade level team members who participated in the teacher-led PLCs were markedly engaged, too. The related literature suggested that the success of the teacher-led PLCs may be attributed to the informal nature of teacher leadership. In their study, Fairman and Mackenzie (2015) found that removing formal leadership titles allowed for more genuine relationships to develop and to flourish between teacher colleagues. Relationship building proved to be essential for creating the conditions for teacher leaders to influence and impact others.

Given the magnitude and potential positive impact that teacher leadership can have on increasing collective efficacy and student achievement (Campbell et al., 2018; Harris et al., 2017; Heck & Hallinger, 2009; Wieczorek & Lear, 2018), attention must be paid to how teachers are empowered to lead. In this study, instructional coaching was the avenue through which teacher empowerment was explored. Overwhelmingly, the data showed that teachers can be empowered and positioned as leaders through instructional coaching activities such as coaching cycles, goal setting, and content-specific development.

Despite the positive impact that instructional coaching can have on teacher empowerment and capacity building, there was a certain dichotomous nature of the role that had marked impact. On one hand, there was both an expectation and a desire among teachers and administrators that instructional coaches were inextricably connected with teachers and their individual development. This connectedness was expected to be visible through coaching cycles, curricular leadership, goal setting, etc. On the other hand, instructional coaches in LOSD were increasingly positioned to be the primary lifters of instructional initiatives and reform. While this positioning is not inherently bad, and in fact presents many impactful opportunities, there are certain factors that can contribute to negative outcomes.

First, dissonance is created when formal leaders are not visibly and authentically involved in reform or instructional initiatives. For example, any perceived or actual disengagement shown by the principal, who is situated as the primary instructional leader, can hinder teacher buy-in. Furthermore, as more district initiatives are placed on the shoulders of instructional coaches, the perception of their role can be likened to a messenger or puppet, stripping them of their own professional autonomy and discretion.

This push and pull can create an identity crisis among instructional coaches as they question the true purpose and value of their role—is it to serve teachers and their development, or is it to carry out top-down initiatives? More important than the existential questioning, however, is that this dichotomy can stunt the impact of the instructional coach if they are not perceived as authentically embedded in the work, or if they are pulled in too many directions.

Discussion of Findings from Research Question 3

The final research question that guided this study was: How does the action research design team (ARDT) describe the impact of instructional leadership, particularly through coaching, on the implementation of reading interventions and instructional initiatives? Data collection and analysis processes pointed the following findings:

1. Instructional coaches must work in partnerships with the layers of leadership that exist within a school to achieve goals related to literacy instruction and achievement.
2. There is a need to address literacy across all content areas to address the pervasive gaps in literacy achievement at the middle level.
3. The layers of leadership within a school, including instructional coaching, must seek to systematically develop teachers as leaders to increase teacher empowerment and leadership.

The final theme that emerged was: Collaboration must occur across all layers of leadership to achieve schoolwide goals related to literacy achievement.

ARDT members were specifically selected based on their leadership role within their school. However, the type of leadership varied among the members; in terms of leadership representation, there was formal leadership (the principal), informal leadership (the media specialist), and perhaps somewhere in between (the two instructional coaches). The unique experiences of these individuals, combined with their role in this action research study, unveiled the importance of collaboration among layered leadership roles in a school.

The literature suggested that the impact of layered leadership begins with the principal who uses distributive leadership to create webs of formal and informal leaders (Gabriel, 2020; Ippolito & Fisher, 2019; Rhyne, 2024; Thomas-EL, 2023). However, distributive leadership cannot stop here. Spillane (2006) argued that distributive leadership included three main elements of leadership practice, including situations, leaders, and followers. Importantly, the interactions between leaders and followers was what constituted leadership practice, serving as the catalyst for change and leadership in a school. In the context of this action research study, the data showed that collaboration must exist among formal and informal leaders to address schoolwide goals related to literacy achievement.

This study provided a unique opportunity to engage the interim principal in the action research. As a member of the ARDT, the interim principal engaged in the work of planning the scope of the study and carrying out interventions. Specifically, Mr. Martin, the interim principal, worked in a coaching cycle pair during the first cycle of action research. Mr. Martin explained that his role as the coach in a coaching cycle allowed for a focused, individualized growth opportunity with a teacher, one that is typically “rare to come by.” Mr. Martin explained that his work in tandem with the teacher brought extreme clarity around the goal and its execution, a process that he found valuable in accomplishing the vision set during the coaching cycle.

Mr. Martin’s participation in the coaching cycle underscores the importance of establishing partnerships between coaches and principals. The coaching work allowed Mr. Martin to zoom in on a specific instructional goal with a teacher. While this approach is likely not feasible in daily operations, establishing processes for the principal to remain

authentically engaged is crucial. The collaboration between principal and teacher allowed Mr. Martin to gain a more comprehensive understanding about classroom instruction and current strategies for engaging students. Being abreast of this information empowers a principal to pursue the right resources, be mindful of personnel placement, and have knowledgeable conversations about curricular resources and their implementation.

As leaders consider the role they play in addressing literacy achievement, specific attention must be paid to systematic teacher development. Research participants overwhelmingly cited the lack of intentional development as a hinderance to teacher growth at LOMS. While data suggested that components of instructional coaching were effective in individual teacher development (i.e., curricular leadership, coaching cycles, etc.), it was not viewed as universally accessible to all who might demonstrate a desire or willingness to develop, particularly as a teacher leader. Thus, it is necessary that instructional coaching be viewed as a component of developing teachers, but not the sole method of doing so.

As the ARDT discussed the impact of instructional leadership on instructional initiatives and reform, particularly as it related to literacy achievement, they concluded that leaders have the responsibility to develop and sustain a culture of literacy. At the middle level, specific attention must be paid to how reading is celebrated, promoted, and incentivized. Some participants attributed this need to waning student interest in leisure reading, perhaps due to the shift from reading for joy to reading for assessments. Moreover, leaders have the responsibility to explore avenues for literacy instruction to become ubiquitous, such as the use of a specific writing strategy across disciplines or designating a certain amount of each school day to be devoted to independent reading.

The next section discusses the limitations of the current study and steps the primary researcher took to mitigate their impact.

Limitations of the Current Study

Based on the nature and context of this action research study, certain limitations were present. The participants of the study were teachers who worked at Live Oak Middle School (LOMS). Thus, the timing of the action research cycles was dependent on teacher schedules which limited the flexibility of the schedule and timeline.

Second, it is important to note the overlapping roles of the primary researcher and the research participants. Prior to and during the action research study, the primary researcher worked alongside the research participants as their instructional coach. Research participants were asked to respond with candor regarding their experience with instructional coaching, but the primary researcher realized that the interconnectedness of the roles may impact participants' comfortability in being transparent.

Additionally, this study examined the perspectives of ELA teachers at the middle level. Elementary and high school literacy instruction differs greatly from that at the middle level, which may impact the role of instructional coaches at differing levels. Thus, the generalizability of this study's findings may be limited due to the scope of perspectives that were examined.

Implications and Recommendations for Practitioners

This action research study pointed to the effective and necessary use of distributive leadership. In a review of the related literature, extensive research asserted that the use of distributive leadership had direct effects on student outcomes and supported the development of teachers as leaders (Heck & Hallinger, 2009; Spillane,

2006; Wieczorek & Lear, 2018). Thus, a building leader who values distributive leadership experiences greater teacher and student success. As it pertained to this action research study, there were layers of leadership that occurred as a result of leadership roles being distributed at LOMS.

The principal entrusted instructional coaches to carry out the tasks and activities connected to teacher development. The purpose of this action research study was to examine exactly which instructional coaching activities were most effective in developing teacher leaders who could effectively carry out the components of a literacy instruction initiative. The leadership baton was passed from principal, to instructional coach, and then to teacher with the primary goal of improving student achievement as it related to literacy and reading proficiency.

The use of distributive leadership allowed the instructional coach at the center of this study to take ownership of their role as teacher developer, mentor, and coach. Distributive leadership de-centered the principal as the sole instructional leader, allowing a variety of individuals to be the experts and leaders of literacy. Additionally, this study, its outcomes, and its related literature showcased the tremendous positive impact that distributive leadership can have on student achievement (Leithwood et al., 2004).

While acknowledging the profound impact of distributive leadership, it is exceptionally important to maintain partnerships between principals, assistant principals, and instructional coaches. In other words, a certain level of dissonance is created when leadership is solely “distributed” by principals without maintaining support and communication. Participants in this action research study noted the positioning of instructional coaches at LOMS and the key role they played in training and developing

teachers around curricular resources and tools. As such, principals and assistant principals must collaborate with instructional coaches in this professional development to promote cohesion; operating as a united front ultimately impacts teacher buy-in and understanding.

In addition to the thoughtful partnerships among leaders, district and building leaders must consider the interventions they deploy to address gaps in literacy achievement. In the wake of COVID-19, significant efforts have been made to mitigate learning loss that may have occurred due to extended virtual instruction or other interruptions to learning. Moreover, leaders seek to propel student achievement beyond the return to academic homeostasis to prepare students to be competitive and prepared in the ever-evolving world.

Lewis (2025) recommended four leader actions for addressing urgent achievement needs: prioritize academic supports, leverage state support, target on-the-cusp students, and make middle school literacy a priority. The present action research study provides a snapshot of how to extend beyond these recommendations; the data presented in this study suggests how leaders can place the onus of responsibility on the layers of leadership that exist within a school, including principals, assistant principals, instructional coaches, and teacher leaders. The power to make meaningful change as it relates to student achievement exists among the leaders who are courageous enough to carry it out through their own development and initiative.

Implications and Recommendations for Researchers

This action research study explored the effectiveness of instructional coaching as a form of professional development, and it sought the perspectives of teachers and

instructional leaders to evaluate the impact of coaching. This study showed that instructional coaching was perceived as effective when it was job-embedded, aligned with individual teacher goals, and included consistent presence, feedback, and modeling. Thus, future research should dive deeper into determining the conditions that allow for these factors to exist. For example, what makes instructional coaching truly job-embedded? What are the reproducible structures that leaders can implement to ensure that these factors are evident in instructional coaching?

This study also illuminated the positive impact that empowerment has on the development of teacher leaders. Researchers should consider the various avenues through which empowerment is facilitated, beyond the scope of instructional coaching. Also, it would be important to deeply consider the impact of teacher empowerment on increasing collective efficacy and the subsequent impact on student achievement.

Finally, this study found that collaboration must exist across the layers of instructional leadership within a school to achieve goals related to literacy achievement. This finding implies that principals, assistant principals, and instructional coaches should operate in partnerships to cohesively implement instructional reform and teacher development opportunities. Future research should dive deeper into the partnership structures and how they might sustain reform efforts.

Implications and Recommendations for Policy

At the time this action research was conducted, the state in which this study was situated was experiencing seismic shifts in its approach to literacy and literacy instruction. In 2023, state legislators passed House Bill 538, a comprehensive piece of legislation that contained specific components aligned with the Science of Reading (SoR)

which are intended to address literacy in kindergarten through fifth grade. The key components of HB538 included instructional materials, screeners, interventions, professional learning, and teacher preparation. The passage of this bill had a profound impact on district and school level leaders as they transformed their approach to literacy instruction.

The scope of HB538 was vast and complex. There was a domino effect of the mandates included within the legislation. For example, one of the mandates included in the bill required districts to purchase high-quality instructional materials that were aligned with the SoR. Despite the state mandate, school districts were required to fund the various activities associated with the process of resource review and adoption. Additionally, while the legislation was centered on early literacy, there was marked impact at the secondary level, including schools like Live Oak Middle School (LOMS) and Live Oak School District (LOSD). Prior to the literacy initiative at the center of this action research study, leaders in LOSD recognized that the instructional resources at the secondary level were not meeting the needs of all learners, especially those who were below grade level readers. The energy behind HB538 and the subsequent adoption of elementary materials prompted secondary leaders to follow suit.

There were ongoing expectations for leaders to carry out components of the legislation following its initial passage. Hartley (2024) shared the specific guidance around the expectations of leaders as it pertained to HB538:

By 8/1/24 SDOE will publish list of approved ‘universal screeners,’ (at least one free) and schools will implement tiered reading intervention plans for students with significant reading deficiencies, by 12/1/24 LBOE must approve

high quality instructional materials and by 12/15/24 certify to SDOE (and every 8/1 thereafter), by 12/31/26 annual report by SDOE on impact of implementation.

The timeline outlined by Hartley (2024) showcased action items that required significant time, energy, learning, and resources. To make each of these components come to fruition, effective leadership will be paramount.

In addition to the more recent implications from the passage of HB538, it is important to note the historical background of the instructional coach role. The passage of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) in 2001, and the subsequent Every Student Succeeds (ESSA) in 2015, outlined specific requirements as it related to professional learning and development. With increased levels and measures of accountability, school leaders were more motivated than ever to equip all teachers with the resources and training that were necessary for increased capacity and efficacy. Both NCLB and ESSA “have attempted to influence teacher quality, teacher effectiveness, teacher evaluation systems, and professional learning” (Zepeda, 2019, p. 7).

NCLB spells out explicit guidance for schools to follow when planning and implementing professional learning. Professional learning must be ongoing, intensive, content-focused, aligned to state and district goals, and include opportunities for self-assessment and reflection (NCLB, SEC. 34, A). ESSA reauthorized the former NCLB, and the language of the legislation echoed that of the literature, arguing that professional learning should be on-going, standards-based, content-focused, and job-embedded (Desimone et al., 2017; Kraft et al., 2018; Zepeda, 2019).

Both pieces of legislation led to the further development and implementation of the instructional coaching role. While the instructional coach job description may vary across school districts, quality professional learning opportunities and teacher development are often at the center of the role.

In all, past and present legislation has greatly impacted literacy instruction and reading achievement among students. The heightened accountability measures and explicit guidance around professional development within NCLB and ESSA set the foundation for the instructional coaching role and its place in K-12 schools. More recent legislation, such as the passage of HB538, has led to the adoption and implementation of high-quality, SoR aligned instructional resources, screeners, professional learning, teacher preparation, and more. With the wave of new literacy expectations for teachers, it is more important than ever that instructional coaches work in partnerships with school leadership to support the development of teacher leaders.

Concluding Thoughts

The purpose of this study was to examine how instructional coaching fostered the development of teacher leaders, and how this development impacted literacy instruction and overall school improvement goals centered around literacy. The data that were collected, analyzed, and presented in this study pointed to key recommendations and takeaways that are crucial for leaders to consider as they seek to address pervasive gaps in literacy achievement. Notably, this study presented recommendations around the role of the instructional coach, teacher empowerment, middle school literacy, and the partnership among layers of school leadership.

Instructional coaching can be an effective form of professional learning when coaches are inextricably woven into the lives of teachers. The learning opportunities that coaches provide must be job-embedded and aligned to teacher goals. When coaches are consistent in presence and time, provide authentic and targeted feedback, and engage in opportunities for modeling and practice, teachers feel supported and can develop their own practice. Additionally, when instructional coaches establish themselves as fixtures for development, teachers look to instructional coaches to disrupt and inform their mindsets and behaviors regarding curriculum and pedagogy. Change permeates an organization when these seeds of disruption and information are planted.

There is great power in the impact of teacher leaders. In this study, participants were positioned as teacher leaders to measure this impact, and it was significant. Morale, buy-in, and engagement were noticeably high when teachers led among their peers. Instructional coaches play a crucial role in the development of teacher leaders as they are positioned to support teachers in their content and pedagogical capacity.

There are numerous opportunities for coaches to empower teacher leaders, formally and informally. In formal settings, such as professional learning sessions, coaches call attention to timely learning needs and resources. In informal settings, such as coaching conversations, coaches address areas for growth and improvement in classroom practice or belief systems. While instructional coaching can be an effective avenue for developing teachers, it is important to consider more universal opportunities for systematic development. There are quiet leaders waiting in the wings for an opportunity to enhance their impact as a teacher leader, and it is the responsibility of school leaders to encourage and leverage these voices for the sake of change and school improvement.

As leaders tackle the complex challenges associated with middle school literacy instruction, certain considerations must be taken into account. To achieve literacy goals, partnerships must exist among all layers of leadership within a school, including principals, assistant principals, instructional coaches, and teacher leaders. Each leadership role serves a unique purpose in the puzzle of enacting organizational change. For example, the principal must take initiative and lead the charge in terms of positioning personnel, adopting resources, and distributing responsibilities.

Other instructional leaders, such as assistant principals and instructional coaches, must establish an expectation around ubiquitous reading and writing instruction through actions such as implementing schoolwide strategies and asking probing questions about literacy during lesson planning. All stakeholders, however, play an essential role in establishing a culture of literacy through their efforts to promote, celebrate, and incentivize daily reading and writing.

Finally, as the role of the instructional coach continues to evolve, it is crucial for leaders to consider what makes coaching effective. This study showed that teachers found coaching to be most effective when it was frequent, personalized, and job-embedded. Currently, there are conflicting demands of instructional coaching. On one hand, coaches are positioned as the primary facilitators of district instructional initiatives. Conversely, instructional coaches are expected to be intimately connected to teacher development, requiring high levels of trust and confidence between teacher and coach. The two roles can conflict with one other if there is not cohesion, connection, and alignment among the layers of leadership. To mitigate challenges associated with these opposing roles,

principals must work alongside instructional coaches to support and engage in the work of district led initiatives to promote teacher buy-in and understanding.

In all, the proper positioning and utilization of instructional coaching can be profound on the development of teachers as leaders. As more teachers enhance their capacity to serve as leaders of literacy, the greater opportunity we have to address gaps in literacy achievement. Our students' lives as readers and writers depends on all layers of leadership to realize their role in enacting these necessary and urgent changes as suggested in the findings from this study.

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APPENDIX A

Empirical Findings Table

Author(s) , Date	Title	Purpose	Method(s)	Sample	Result(s)	Conclusions	Implication(s)
Admiraal, W., Schenke, W., De Jong, L., Emmelot, Y., & Sligte, H. (2021)	Schools as professional learning communities: What can schools do to support professional development of their teachers?	The purpose of the study was to understand what interventions could be used to establish and enhance secondary schools as professional learning communities.	Participating schools received funding to set up and extend activities that supported their school as a PLC. Documents, interviews, and focus groups were used to collect data.	Data was collected from 14 secondary schools during three school years.	Five “clusters” of activities were identified as extending or supporting schools as PLCs: (1) shared school vision on learning; (2) professional learning opportunities for all staff; (3) collaborative work and learning; (4) change of school organization; and (5) learning leadership.	If interventions are embedded within an organization, the more sustainable it will be with regard to its impact on developing teachers professionally.	To promote a school as a PLC, leaders must embed these “cluster” activities into the fabric of the organization.
Burns, M., Naughton, M., Preast, J., Wang, Z., Gordon, R., Robb, V., & Smith, M. (2018)	Factors of professional learning community implementation and effect on student achievement.	Examine which components of PLC most directly affect student achievement.	Data were collected from an audit conducted by the Missouri Professional Learning Communities Project to determine the effectiveness of PLCs.	The study worked with a total of 262 schools throughout Missouri. Data were collected from 181 schools in Missouri.	Collaborative leadership processes and data-driven systems for learning showed strong correlation with student achievement.	The data showed small to moderate relationships between PLC attributes and student achievement. Additional research is needed to determine what constitutes an effective PLC and one that has a positive impact on student achievement.	The PLC implementation rubric developed based on the results is a helpful tool for practitioners to assess the current status of PLCs.

Elek, C., & Page, J. (2019)	Critical features of effective coaching for early childhood educators: a review of empirical research literature	This study sought to determine which features of coaching are critical for improving the teaching practices of early childhood educators.	A systematic approach was used to examine relevant literature. A detailed analysis was conducted after the literature review to compile evidence and conclusions.	The terms coach, educator, professional development, preschool, and early childhood were used to search for related literature. After the search, a total of 2,630 articles were included in the data base.	The results showed that effective coaching could be categorized into two areas: structural and process. Structure included dose and contextual. Process included individualization and active engagement.	Observation, feedback, goal-setting, and reflection were found to be common elements of successful coaching programs across all contexts.	The findings from this study are important for coaches and leaders to consider as they build coaching programs and prioritize certain coaching actions that are intended to move teachers and students forward.
Glover, T., Reddy, L., & Crouse, K. (2023)	Instructional coaching actions that predict teacher classroom practices and student achievement	This study sought to better understand the potential impact of certain coaching actions (i.e., modeling, practice, and feedback) on teacher classroom practices and student achievement.	The study analyzed data from the School System Improvement (SSI) Project. The study used coaching and teacher implementation data collected from school personnel.	16 high-poverty schools were featured in the study, including a total of 133 K-12 classroom teachers.	Facilitating opportunities for practice may be crucial for teachers' implementation in the classroom and student outcomes. Feedback was a significant predictor of ELA achievement among students in coached teachers' classrooms. Modeling was found to have insignificant impact.	This study shares insight into the potential impact of feedback and opportunities for practice on teacher actions and student achievement.	The findings from this study should inform coaches and school leaders about the inclusion of specific actions during coaching in the school setting. Coaches should consider setting aside sufficient time during coaching sessions for teachers to practice newly learned skills.

APPENDIX B

Interview Protocols

Action Research Implementation Team Initial Interview Questions

1. What is the role of an instructional coach the implementation of the reading and instruction initiative? (RQ1)
2. What is challenging about implementing literacy intervention and instruction in the classroom? (RQ1)
3. How does instructional coaching impact your teaching practices? (RQ2)
4. How do you describe your level of confidence in facilitating literacy initiatives in your classroom? (RQ2)
5. Would you describe yourself as a leader of literacy? Why or why not? (RQ2)
6. What are the effective components of instructional coaching in leading schoolwide change through intervention and instruction? What is ineffective? (RQ3)
7. What makes coaching conversations effective? Ineffective? (RQ3)

Action Research Implementation Team Final Interview Questions

1. Thinking back to the interventions used in this study (coaching cycle, coach-led PLC, and teacher-led PLC), what was the most impactful on your practice? Why? (RQ1)
2. What insights, if any, did you gain about the role of the Instructional Coach during this action research study? (RQ2)

3. How would you describe your level of confidence in carrying out reading and writing instruction? Did any of the interventions in particular help you feel more confident? (RQ2)
4. What is one thing you would change about instructional coaching to make it more effective? (RQ1)
5. How would you describe the impact of teacher leadership versus "formal" leadership (i.e., principals, APs, coaches, etc.)? (RQ3)
6. In your opinion, what are the implications of this work? What recommendations would you make to school leaders regarding instructional coaching? (RQ3)

APPENDIX C

Questionnaire Items for Action Research Implementation Team Members

1. On a scale of 1-5, how would you rate the overall effectiveness of the intervention?
2. Optional: explain your rating for question 1.
3. What were the specific components of the intervention that made it either effective or ineffective?
4. On a scale of 1-5, how would you rate your overall confidence in facilitating the literacy-specific skill/strategy at the center of this intervention?
5. Optional: explain your rating for question 4.
6. What could the instructional coach do to better support you in the internalization of this intervention?

APPENDIX D

Agenda for Initial Action Research Design Team Meeting

Topic	Information
Welcome	
Today's Agenda	• Quick recap of the purpose of the study • The role of an ARDT member • Centering our work in the research • Identification of interventions • Timeline and action steps for Cycle #1
ARDT Members and Their Roles	Primary Researcher, Instructional Coach Mr. David Martin, Principal Mrs. Shannon Howard, Media Specialist Mrs. Karmen Bower, Instructional Coach
Purpose of the Study	The purpose of this study was to examine how instructional coaching fostered the development of teacher leaders, and how this development impacted literacy instruction and overall school improvement goals centered around literacy. The researcher sought the perspective of instructional leaders, including administrators and coaches, as well as teachers, to learn more about building capacity through the development of teacher leaders. These perspectives were important to the study as they provided direct insight from the individuals who were primarily tasked with the implementation of the interventions surrounding the SoR approaches to literacy instruction. • Discuss: How can this study benefit our teachers and students at LOMS?
Research Questions	1. How does instructional coaching impact the development of teacher leaders in literacy instruction and intervention? 2. How do teachers describe the impact of instructional coaching on their capacity to lead literacy initiatives and to implement interventions in their classrooms? 3. How does the action research design team (ARDT) describe the impact of instructional leadership, particularly through coaching, on the implementation of reading interventions and instructional initiatives? • Discuss: ○ How do you currently describe the impact of instructional coaching on the implementation

	of reading interventions and instructional initiatives? ○ What is the role of an instructional coach in leading change through instruction? ○ Is instructional coaching effective in developing teacher leaders?
Centering our Work in the Research	● Partnership Principles (Knight, 2007) ● Framework for coaching: identify, learn, improve ● Thinking about student achievement through engagement: coaching needs to address student engagement as well as achievement
Interventions in Action Research	Interventions are defined as “a specific instructional practice, program, or procedure that is implemented by a researcher in order to investigate its effect on the behavior or achievement of an individual or group” (Glanz, 2014, p. 64).
Interventions	● Coaching cycles with ARIT members ● Use of Knight framework: identify, learn, improve ● Identify: select one goal connected to literacy instruction ● Learn: Describe, model, and practice skill/strategy connected to goal ● Improve: Try selected strategy and make adaptations until the goal is met ● Discuss: Do we need to add or adjust any interventions?
Timeline and Action Items	1. Select ARIT member for coaching 2. Schedule initial coaching conversation with coachee 3. Identify: schedule observation of coachee and determine goal 4. Learn: Select a skill/strategy for coachee to implement; model and practice 5. Improve: Observe mentee’s implementation of strategy; offer feedback and adjustments
Next Steps	● Schedule ARDT Meeting #2 ● Primary researcher will send out observation form ● Keep a journal/log of coaching conversations

APPENDIX E

Mapping Findings and Themes

RQ1: How does instructional coaching impact the development of teacher leaders in literacy instruction and intervention?
Findings: 1. Instructional coaching can be an effective form of professional development through consistent presence, feedback, and modeling. 2. Instructional coaching provides individualized support for teachers to enhance their content and pedagogical knowledge and skills.
Theme 1: Instructional coaching is an effective form of professional development when it is job-embedded, aligned with individual teacher goals, and includes consistent presence, feedback, and modeling.

RQ2: How do teachers describe the impact of instructional coaching on their capacity to lead literacy initiatives and to implement interventions in their classrooms?
Findings: 1. When teachers are empowered through instructional coaching activities (i.e., coaching cycles, goal setting, etc.), teachers feel confident and emboldened to lead their peers. 2. Teachers look to instructional coaches to serve as content and curricular leaders who guide professional learning communities (PLCs) with certain expertise.
Theme 2: Effective instructional coaching empowers teachers to develop as content and curricular leaders by increasing confidence, building instructional capacity, and developing a repertoire of instructional strategies and skills.

RQ3: How does the Action Research Design Team (ARDT) describe the impact of instructional leadership, particularly through coaching, on the implementation of reading interventions and instructional initiatives?
Findings: 1. Instructional coaches must work in partnerships with the layers of leadership that exist within a school to achieve goals related to literacy instruction and achievement. 2. There is a need to address literacy across all contents to address the pervasive gaps in literacy achievement at the middle level. 3. The layers of leadership within a school, including instructional coaching, must seek to systematically develop teachers as leaders to increase teacher empowerment and leadership.
Theme 3: Collaboration must occur across all layers of leadership to achieve schoolwide goals related to literacy achievement.

APPENDIX F

Aligning Codes with Research Questions

RQ1	RQ2	RQ3
• Observation • Feedback • Time with coach • Content knowledge • Reading instruction • Professional learning	• Teacher leadership • Middle school literacy instruction • Professional learning communities • Empowerment	• Positioning of instructional coach • Literacy initiatives • Instructional leadership • Role of instructional coach • Layered leadership • Resource implementation • Leadership • Collaboration