

PEER COACHING AS A SUPPORT FOR TEACHERS TO IMPROVE PRACTICES IN  
LITERACY

by

MICHAEL C. CRUMLEY

(Under the Direction of Sally J. Zepeda)

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this action research case study was to examine peer coaching of third-grade teachers during the implementation of a literacy framework in a suburban elementary school. Through such an effort, the hope was to support teachers using job-embedded, reflective processes to refine current instructional practices related to the Comprehensive Reading Solutions Literacy Framework (Walpole & McKenna, 2017). This qualitative case study connects Vygotsky's (2012) constructivist theory with the adult learning theory by Knowles (1989). Both theories share the importance of social interactions with peers to apply learning to individual settings.

Data collection methods included individual interviews, observations, audio-recordings of coaching conversations, document analysis of artifacts from the peer coaching process, an ethnographic research journal, supplemental quantitative data, and classroom observation notes. The study included six third-grade teachers, an action research team, and school and district leadership members. Data were organized and interpreted to determine if any instructional changes took place during the peer coaching cycles and to see what was learned among the teachers and school leaders during the process. The third-grade teachers were paired

and repeated the peer coaching cycle twice. A mid-course adjustment review was held in between the cycles to make necessary changes. Thematic analysis uncovered three themes related to the commencement of peer coaching: peer coaching opens closed doors, post-observation conferences lead to the next steps, and reflective practices take time to learn.

Findings have implications for further research. Implications for practitioners include the necessity for developing and sustaining job-embedded practices, such as peer coaching to promote continuous teacher growth and reflective practices. Implications also include that more time is needed to initiate the peer coaching process and to see if there are any effects on school culture.

INDEX WORDS: Job-embedded learning; Literacy; Peer coaching; Peer observations; Professional learning

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by

MICHAEL C. CRUMLEY

B.S., University of Georgia, 2000

M.Ed., University of North Georgia, 2003

Ed.S., University of Georgia, 2008

A Dissertation Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of The University of Georgia in Partial  
Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree

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MICHAEL C. CRUMLEY

Major Professor:	Sally J. Zepeda
Committee:	Jami R. Berry
	Karen C. Bryant

Electronic Version Approved:

Ron Walcott  
Interim Dean of the Graduate School  
The University of Georgia  
May 2020

## DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to all of the students who I have taught and teachers who I have had the pleasure of working with, especially the participants in this study. All of you made me a better person. Collaboration benefits everyone. Pausch and Zaslow (2008) share, “Everyone has to contribute to the common good. . . . When we’re connected to others, we become better people.” As we become better, each community around us improves, and the next generation learns to become future leaders. For the teachers who participated in this study, thank you, especially for improving our community, our school, and the next generation, including my daughter, who brings a brighter tomorrow.

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To my church family – For my entire life, you have always been there for my wife and me. You know every struggle and celebration. Thank you for always showing God’s love to my family. Now that our home is built, my wife and I can sit on our front porch and reflect on life’s milestones as we see the sun shining on the steeple. To my church family – Continue to be the lighthouse on the hill for the community.

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To my niece and nephew – You are both very special to me, and I love you dearly. You make this world a better place because of your caring nature and huge hearts. I am honored to be your uncle. Keep smiling and trust that God is always there to lead, guide, and protect you every step of your journey. I know that is my prayer for you both.

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To all of you – Thank you for reading. Please use your inner passion to help make this world a better place and find the one true Light to guide your path along the way. God speed.

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## **CHAPTER 1**

### **INTRODUCTION**

The present study is situated at Cool Springs Academy (CSA, a pseudonym), a school that houses students in pre-kindergarten through fifth grade, in the Bark Camp District (BCD, a pseudonym). Cool Springs Academy, a high-needs school, has struggled with early literacy interventions. A high-needs school is defined by having a large population of students living in poverty and a significant percentage of students in under-served populations, both linguistically and racially (Chetty, Hendren, & Katz, 2016). To improve literacy achievement and to align practices across the district, Bark Camp District adopted a new literacy framework. This action research case study examined peer coaching as a potential intervention to enhance instructional practices around literacy.

Peer coaching is a professional development model with a focus on teacher growth as a reflective, collaborative format (Joyce & Showers, 1995, 2002). Joyce and Showers (1981, 1982) also share that the peer coaching model includes teachers observing their peers and working to improve practices by discussing information from the observations. Four steps are included in the peer coaching cycle: the pre-observation conference, the observation, the post-observation conference, and follow-up coaching. For the purpose of this study, peer coaching is defined by Zepeda (2019) in the following manner, “Peer coaching is a multifaceted tool that can be implemented as an instructional strategy, a professional development strategy, and a complement to instructional supervision” (p. 167). While the coach who is leading the



conversations may be a school leader, in the peer coaching model, teachers fully engage in the process of helping to lead the necessary changes within their classrooms.

Professional development is often used as a tool to influence teacher performance (Guskey, 2014). Regardless of the time and money spent on professional development, most current structures do not directly impact teacher practice (Darling-Hammond, Hyler, & Gardner, 2017). One of the reasons why professional learning does not lead to change in practice according to Joyce and Showers (1981) is a lack of follow-up to see if what was learned transfers to practice. Joyce and Showers (1981), the pioneers of the peer coaching model, found that the transfer of learning is complex and, more pointedly, that “Transfer of training to the learning environment requires skillful decision making by the classroom teacher and redirection of behavior until the new skill is operating comfortably within the flow of activities in the classroom” (p. 2).

To assist with the transfer of learning, Joyce and Showers (1981) introduced peer coaching as a method to offer teachers support from their peers and to provide the needed companionship to help offset stressors that were typically involved with learning and then applying new skills into practice. The results of Joyce and Showers (1981) seminal research indicated that peer coaching had a significant effect on the transfer of training, and “teachers who were not coached tended to discontinue use of the new models after initial training” (pp. 17-18). The findings further elaborate that teachers were able to transfer their learning to daily practice with an increased sense of self-efficacy, their beliefs of being able to do the job well.

Teacher reflection is a critical practice in the peer coaching process. Metacognition is essential for improving instructional practices and promoting change. School leaders must consider teachers’ feelings and how overall improvements are implemented throughout the

school. Zepeda (2019) affirms that “coaching will not flourish until teachers feel valued and supported in their efforts to improve instruction. Effective principals focus their attention here” (p. 177). According to Vygotsky’s (2012) theory of constructivism, adults construct new learning as they experience multiple social interactions with peers and use tools to apply the learning to their individual setting. Time in a teacher’s work schedule is needed to adjust instructional practices so that improvements can be derived daily from studying classroom practices within the classroom. In other words, when learning is embedded within practice as in the case of peer coaching, teachers are engaged in job-embedded learning (Zepeda, 2019). With job-embedded practices that include supports such as peer coaching, teacher learning becomes focused on classroom improvements that benefit students.

With a school culture in which teachers push themselves and others to learn and grow, job-embedded learning is the norm. Wood and Killian (1998) define job-embedded learning as “learning that occurs as teachers and administrators engage in their daily work activities” (p. 52). After any professional development, teachers need time to practice new skills. The peer coaching model offers a way for teachers to continue learning and to be provided with feedback from their colleagues (Zepeda, 2019). An effective method for providing feedback is the post-observation conference. When providing teacher support, Anast-May, Penick, Schroyer, and Howell (2011) stated:

nothing takes the place of face-to-face conferencing nor can the same information be relayed in an email or a little note left on a desk after the observation . . . face-to-face discussion is more powerful and has a greater impact. (p. 5)

Peer coaching, a job-embedded process for learning and continued support, includes feedback and reflection throughout the coaching cycle.

This action research case study examined peer coaching as a way for teachers to transfer increased learning of a new literacy framework, specifically in third grade. Students in third grade are beginning to transition from learning to read to reading to learn. Hernandez (2011) indicated that students who cannot read after third grade are at risk of not graduating from high school. Zemelman, Daniels, and Hyde (2012) positioned that many best practices to help students in reading are dependent on how teachers help students use reading as the tool for learning. Zemelman et al. (2012) provided additional strategies to help struggling schools. One essential component includes a professional learning community in which teachers can collaborate while being accountable for each other (Zemelman et al., 2012). Third-grade teachers examined segments of the Comprehensive Reading Solutions (CRS) to improve their own practices, and this study follows teachers as they engage in peer coaching as a means to foster professional growth.

### **Description of the Study Context**

Cool Springs Academy is nestled within a small district in northern Georgia. Bark Camp District is an inner-city school district that works closely with the surrounding county school district. Bark Camp District is a charter school system in Georgia. Being a charter district, the school system utilizes flexibility in local school governance and provides innovative learning environments for approximately 8,000 students. Bark Camp District currently has six elementary schools that feed into one middle school. The middle school students then go to the one high school in the district where a variety of opportunities are provided for students to foster academic success. Various initiatives ensure the district provides corresponding support services through community partnerships to ensure the success of all students.

Each of the six elementary schools provides a unique focus that recognizes individual student needs and interests. Families have the opportunity to select their school of choice through an annual enrollment process. Regardless of the elementary school's focus area, a full range of learning opportunities are provided with the goal of equitable services for each student. Cool Springs Academy's focus area is arts-based instruction. Arts-based instruction provides students with the opportunity to integrate learning with a focus on performance arts. Cool Springs Academy is a high-needs school with average student performance on state assessments but below average results when comparing disadvantaged students with other students in the state. The demographics at Cool Springs Academy include 58% Hispanic, 20% Caucasian, and 14% African American. A more detailed description of the study context is offered in Chapter 4.

### **Statement of the Problem**

The action research examined a problem set in a high-needs school, with a caring environment for students. However, more questions arise when it comes to defining the problem. Do teachers believe that all students can learn? Do teachers believe that certain students should only be contained in a specific class, and does each teacher feel that she/he can innately teach? These questions are centered around a culture created at Cool Springs Academy by the past administration. With structure provided by a new school administration, the teachers are ready to open doors and learn from each other.

### **Background**

With six elementary schools feeding into one middle school, the Bark Camp District wanted a uniform literacy framework backed by research, to help a high-needs population. With a large group of English Language Learners (ELLs) and students underperforming in literacy, Comprehensive Reading Solutions became the district focus in all professional learning in the

elementary grades. However, more problems existed for Cool Springs Academy than the rollout of Comprehensive Reading Solutions. In 2015, Cool Springs Academy was provided with a new leadership team including a first-year principal, an assistant principal new to the elementary school level, and a veteran assistant principal with over 30 years of experience working in elementary schools. The new principal, having worked as a teacher and assistant principal at Cool Springs Academy prior to becoming principal, had built relationships. Shortly after the changes in the administration were announced for the school, the district met with the leadership team regarding the state's Focus designation, due to the school's low achievement for the past three years in the area of mathematics.

Prior to 2015, limited feedback was provided to teachers about their performance; however, for six years, teachers received all proficient ratings on their summative evaluation scores. These ratings were given so that the teachers could have the same opportunity of earning the additional funds associated with the Race to the Top grant (U.S. Department of Education, 2016). Decisions were also made to provide teachers with smaller class sizes. For example, ELLs were taught mathematics solely by their English as a Second Language (ESL) teacher, a teacher with specialized training for English acquisition. With this type of ESL scheduling, the class size decreased due to the students leaving who needed ESL services to attend small group ESL instruction. While the ESL scheduling made the class easier to teach with smaller class sizes, ultimately this decision led to the Focus designation. Peer observations were not part of the school culture other than supporting new teachers.

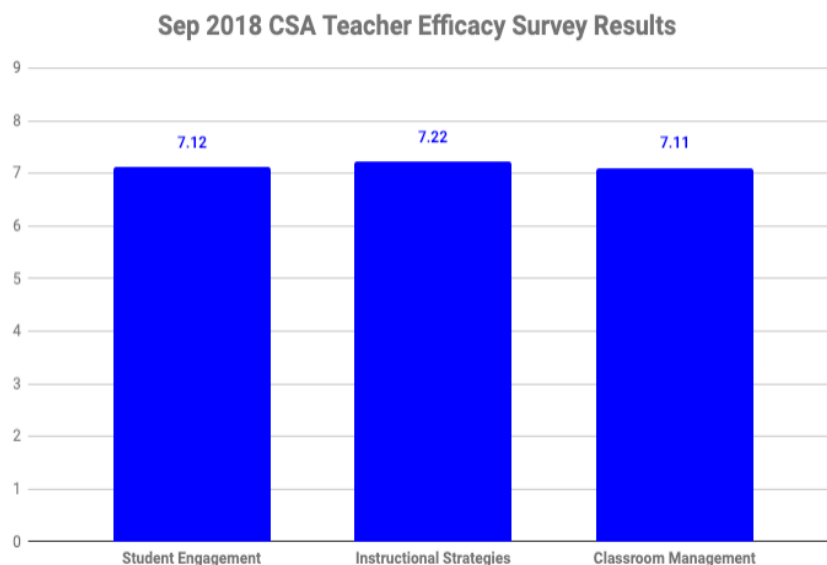
Between 2015-2018, a sense of urgency was evident at Cool Springs Academy. With structures in place by the new administration, district resources, and support offered by the local Regional Educational Service Agency (RESA), staff members were absorbed in removal from

the Focus ‘list’ as quickly as possible. During this time, two frameworks began at Cool Springs Academy including Comprehensive Reading Solutions, a district initiative for literacy, and “Math in the Fast Lane,” a school initiative for mathematics. Rollins (2017) developed “Math in the Fast Lane” to help increase student learning in an active classroom and is designed for grades 3-8. Because “Math in the Fast Lane” offered resources for grades 3-5 at Cool Springs Academy, more time was provided to the lower grades to help develop appropriate resources to fit the new mathematics framework. For mathematics, the initial focus was the design of the teacher’s lesson and the level of student engagement throughout the lesson.

With a push for professional learning during this time, the district asked elementary schools to begin the skills groups, a portion of Comprehensive Reading Solutions that includes teaching a specific reading skill to a small group of students within 15 minutes, and the teachers could offer three groups during a 45-minute segment. Students took an Informal Decoding Inventory (IDI) assessment for group assignment. Students move from a basic skill to a more advanced skill as they learn how to read and comprehend what they are reading (Walpole & McKenna, 2017). Interventions for reading skills start with phonemic awareness and change as the student’s reading level increases to include vocabulary and comprehension (Walpole & McKenna, 2017). During this time, a greater focus on Response to Intervention (RTI) procedures was put into place that helped to support struggling students. At the end of the 2017-2018 school year and after strategic interventions were implemented, Cool Springs Academy celebrated coming off the state’s Focus ‘list.’

### *Teacher's Sense of Self-Efficacy*

At the beginning of the 2018-2019 school year, the teachers at Cool Springs Academy were surveyed to learn more about their self-efficacy. Defined by Bandura (1986, 2010), self-efficacy is the belief of being able to do a job to a desired level of performance and the foundation for motivation and achievement. The survey is called the *Teacher's Sense of Efficacy Scale*, created by the Ohio State University (Tschannen-Moran & Woolfolk, 2001), and teachers took the survey anonymously. The survey had 24 questions with ratings from 1 (being lowest) to 9 (being highest). The administration included an additional question asking the staff for any additional feedback in the form of an open-ended question. The open-ended question asked teachers for suggestions to help build teacher self-efficacy at Cool Springs Academy. Fifty-eight responses were collected, and 21 short-answer responses were collected. Using the directions from the survey, questions were grouped together into categories to help the school and teachers understand a baseline score. These categories include student engagement, instructional strategies, and classroom management. The results of the survey are provided in Figure 1.1.



*Figure 1.1: Baseline Efficacy Survey (CSA internal study, 2018)*

According to the survey, the teachers at Cool Springs Academy have a high sense of self-efficacy in the areas of student engagement, instructional strategies, and classroom management. Of the 21 short answers, seven desired more time to see Comprehensive Reading Solutions from peers, six would like more shared leadership opportunities, five wanted school behavioral management support (and support from administration), and three suggested creating a more rigorous environment to engage students. One teacher responded to the open-ended question that more “training (is needed) and the opportunity to observe other teachers who are strong at working with Bookworms” would be meaningful. Bookworms is another name for Comprehensive Reading Solutions. Using the results of this survey and knowing the past culture of the Cool Springs Academy, the action research team took small, but needed, steps to help teachers with peer coaching.

### **Urgency for Peer Coaching**

Kotter (2012) describes eight steps for leading change with the first one being establishing a sense of urgency. With the many challenges that Cool Springs Academy continues to face, the time for change was now. Between 2009-2015, the past administration rated all teachers with a proficient score to avoid any conflict. Looking back at Figure 1.1, the teachers are confident in self-efficacy according to the 2018 teacher survey conducted at Cool Springs Academy. According to the survey results, the teachers rated the areas of student engagement, instructional strategies, and classroom management higher than a seven on a scale from zero to nine (Tschannen-Moran & Woolfolk, 2001). However, are the teachers feeling the “Widget Effect” (Kraft & Gilmour, 2017, p. 234) where everyone is rated the same? Kraft and Gilmour (2017) describe how the feedback from teacher evaluations becomes meaningless and how the principals feel that they are not able to support the teachers. A new administrative team



was charged with leading Cool Springs Academy, establishing a new school culture, and providing support for the district initiative, Comprehensive Reading Solutions Literacy Framework.

Also prior to 2019, teachers were not observed by their peers. According to the results from the 2018 self-efficacy survey, the teachers are asking to observe others. Demographic changes and district professional development initiatives indicate the need for a job-embedded approach, like peer coaching, to support teachers at Cool Springs Academy. Traditional professional development, like most district-led training, is frequently ineffective, and the intervention, peer coaching, is a highly interactive process centered around the direct transfer of learning (Joyce & Showers, 2002; Zepeda, 2019).

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this action research case study was to examine peer coaching of third-grade teachers during the implementation of a literacy framework in a suburban elementary school. Through such an effort, the hope is to support teachers using job-embedded, reflective processes to refine current instructional practices related to the Comprehensive Reading Solutions Literacy Framework (Walpole & McKenna, 2017). Several questions led to this purpose: Can coaching help teachers to improve their practices as they implement a new curriculum? Does coaching support instructional development while increasing teacher collaboration? What aspects of coaching are most beneficial to teachers? Coaching in the context of literacy is important because learning to read by the end of third grade is a critical milestone for students (Hernandez, 2011). The literacy framework is based on the work of Walpole and McKenna (2017). Walpole and McKenna (2017) refer to the literacy framework as the Comprehensive Reading Solution (CRS) or the Bookworm lesson format.

## **Research Questions**

Districts desire consistency in curriculum implementation and assessment during the process of working toward demanding achievement goals. Quality instruction includes the use of research-based, best practices such as those embedded in the Comprehensive Reading Solutions Literacy Framework (Walpole & McKenna, 2017). This action research study addressed the following questions:

- 1) How might peer coaching be used to improve teacher practice using the Comprehensive Reading Solutions Literacy Framework?
- 2) What is learned by teachers and administrators as they work collaboratively to implement peer coaching as it relates to implementing the Comprehensive Reading Solutions Literacy Framework?
- 3) What can school leaders learn about supporting peer coaching among teachers?

## **Definition of Terms**

Various terms were used as they apply to the present study. These terms include:

- 1) Literacy – For practicality, literacy is defined as the conceptual understanding associated with reading and writing. According to Walpole and McKenna (2017), early literacy programs provide instruction in phonological awareness, word recognition, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension as students become avid readers.
- 2) Professional learning – “Professional learning is the means by which teachers, administrators, and other staff acquire, enhance, and refine the knowledge, skills, practices, and dispositions necessary to create and support high levels of learning for all students” (Georgia Department of Education, 2019c, para. 1).

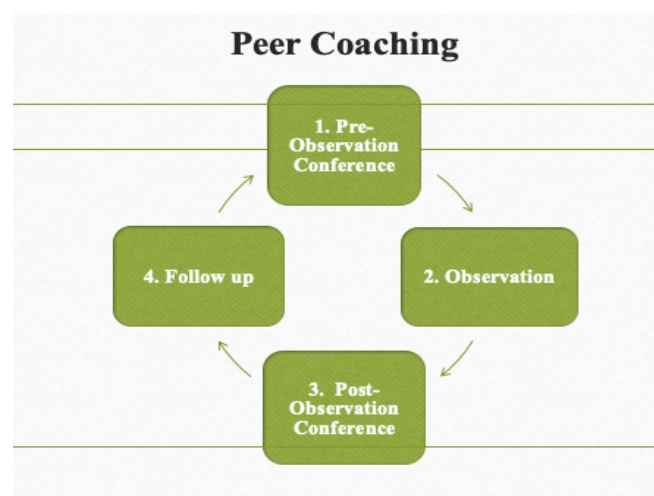
- 3) Job-embedded learning – Wood and Killian (1998) define job-embedded learning as “learning that occurs as teachers and administrators engage in their daily work activities” (p. 52).
- 4) Peer coaching – Peer coaching includes teachers observing their peers and improving practices by discussing critical pieces from the observations. For the purpose of this study, peer coaching is defined by Zepeda (2019) in the following manner. “Peer coaching is a multifaceted tool that can be implemented as an instructional strategy, a professional development strategy, and a complement to instructional supervision” (p. 167).
- 5) Transfer of learning – Transfer of learning is defined as the ability to transfer knowledge and skills mastered in professional learning sessions to practice (Joyce & Showers, 1981).
- 6) Reflection – Reflection is the technical term for conceptual and methodological practices used during any learning experience (Moon, 2004). An individual reflects when he or she desires to dive deeper into the learning or a problem that he or she may be facing. The term, *reflective practice*, is also used having the same meaning. Teacher reflection is a critical component of job-embedded learning.
- 7) Self-efficacy – Self-efficacy is the belief of being able to do a job to a desired level of performance. According to Bandura (1986, 2010), self-efficacy is the foundation for motivation and achievement.

### **Conceptual Framework**

Adults construct new learning in stages depending on circumstances surrounding them (Vygotsky, 2012). Teachers continue to learn and grow as professionals, building their

professional knowledge. To meet the demands of improved student growth and achievement, along with the many changes brought forward to meet the needs of students, new instructional practices are essential. A trusting, non-judgmental environment can help support teacher growth and build a foundation of continued self-improvement.

Peer coaching represents a four-step cycle. First, teachers have pre-observation conferences that include identifying specific behaviors to observe, reviewing lesson plans, and setting learning goals. Second, teachers observe each other, and document observed behaviors and practices identified in the pre-observation conference. Next, the teachers return for a post-observation conference in which the coach and teacher engage in conversations, self-analysis, and reflection of the observed behaviors and classroom practices. In the last step of the coaching cycle, follow-up plans are made for the teacher and coach to engage in opportunities to give follow-up support that could include, for example, additional classroom observations, and the examination of student-generated work. It is the last part of the cycle, follow-up support, that promotes transfer of practice (Zepeda, 2017, 2018, 2019). The cycle for peer coaching is illustrated in Figure 1.2.

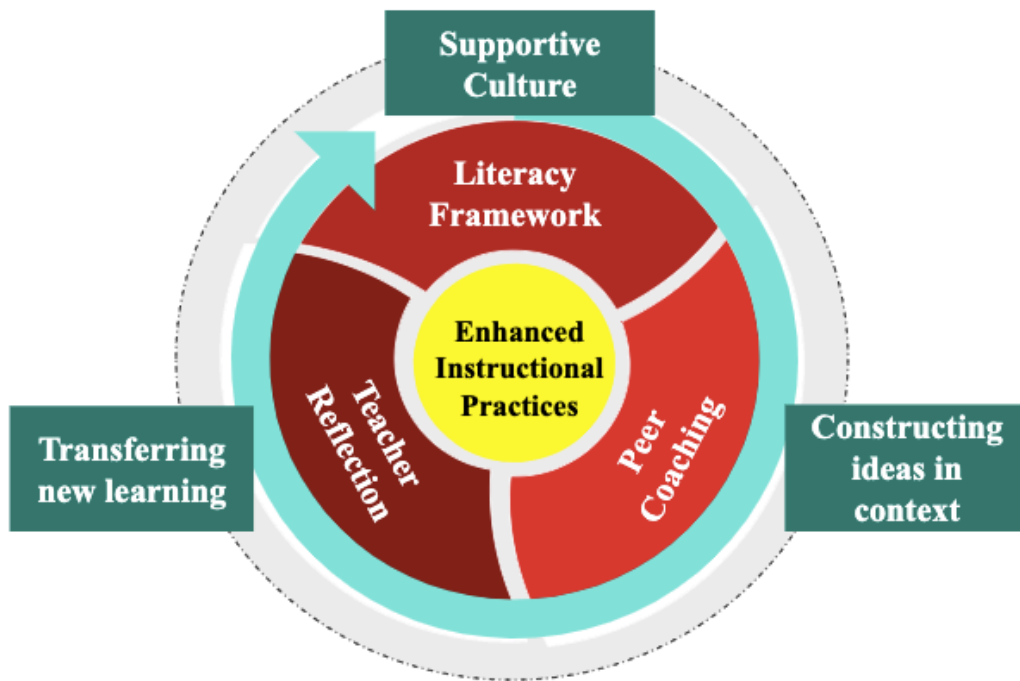


*Figure 1.2: Peer Coaching Cycle, used by permission from Zepeda (2019)*

The purpose of this action research case study was to examine peer coaching of third-grade teachers during the implementation of a literacy framework in a suburban elementary school. Through such an effort, the hope is to support teachers using job-embedded, reflective processes, namely peer coaching, to refine current instructional practices related to the Comprehensive Reading Solutions Literacy Framework (Walpole & McKenna, 2017). By using the intervention of peer coaching to help teachers learn and grow in an active, job-embedded environment, the overall purpose of instructional improvement can be accomplished.

The conceptual framework of the study consists of three major components: Comprehensive Reading Solutions, peer coaching, and teacher reflection. All three components are founded in current research that offers a method for teachers to construct learning through job-embedded practices (Wood & Killian, 1998; Zepeda, 2017, 2018, 2019). Teachers can continue to hone their skills from professional learning offered by the Bark Camp District in the area of the Comprehensive Reading Solutions Literacy Framework in a collaborative environment that will build trust.

A supportive culture within a school ensures the necessary foundation for improving instructional practices and leading necessary changes. Peer coaching is the method used for teachers to set specific goals, observe others in action, receive feedback, and reflect. When a teacher observes other teachers, he/she can construct new ideas centered around goals that directly enhance instructional practices. The conceptual framework represents a cycle without a specific starting point. When the concepts are structured together, teachers can directly influence their pedagogy while school leaders can target strategic content areas. The conceptual framework is illustrated in Figure 1.3.



*Figure 1.3: Conceptual Framework*

### **Interventions**

The interventions of the action research study were used for multiple purposes with the ultimate goal of supporting teachers. Bark Camp District provided a new instructional framework to build consistency in teachers' practices in the areas of reading and writing throughout the six elementary schools in the district. This research-based literacy framework is called Comprehensive Reading Solutions or Bookworms (Walpole & McKenna, 2017). The new literacy framework offers segments of learning to improve literacy including an interactive read-aloud segment, a shared reading segment, skills groups segment, and a writing segment. The interactive reading segment is whole group with the teacher reading a text that is grade appropriate. The shared reading segment offers a text appropriate to the level of the students with many reading strategies being used such as choral reading and partner reading. The skills group time provides each student with essential skills to increase each student's reading ability.

The writing is structured to provide a connection with the text used during the interactive read aloud segment.

Cool Springs Academy, a high-needs school and the research site, faces challenges working with students living in poverty, English language learners, and teachers who desire more support with a new literacy framework. While professional development has been provided by the district and continues to be modeled by the school's instructional coach, teachers continue to ask for assistance. Evidence of teachers desiring support is shown in meeting minutes and observations conducted by the school and district administration as well as informal surveys conducted by the instructional coach or school administration. To meet this demand, the intervention of peer coaching was used to enhance or refine current practices (Joyce & Showers, 1995, 2002; Zepeda, 2019). The intervention of peer coaching offered teachers with time to transfer new learning and construct ideas within the context of the classroom. By using peer coaching, the teachers can improve a collaborative culture within a team while enhancing their own skills from reflection and action steps created throughout the process (Bambrick-Santoyo, 2018).

Another intervention used in the action research case study was to improve the existing supportive culture for teachers. The action research team, the administration, and the researcher worked closely to communicate regularly with the teachers and to build professional learning communities. DuFour (2004) stated three big ideas that are always present in professional learning communities: ensuring students learn, building a culture of collaboration, and focusing on results. Milner (2015) describes the process of learning from each other "leadership development" (p. 148). Along with improving the performance of the professional learning communities, the action research team and the administration provided more planning time to all

teachers and restructured the evaluation of the teachers so that the researcher was not evaluating the teachers participating in the study. This effort increased communication and built trust, which are key elements that encompass a supportive culture.

### **Significance**

With the problems facing teacher shortages in the state of Georgia and the nation, professional learning is essential to growth and support for all professionals. According to Castro, Quinn, Fuller, and Barnes (2018), a 10 percent decline in teacher preparation programs from 2004 to 2012 continues across the nation. With a growing and ever-changing population, finding high-quality teachers becomes a challenging feat. And, many districts face teacher turnover issues. Teacher turnover occurs when a teacher transitions to another school, district, or leaves the profession entirely. Castro et al. (2018) stated that 90 percent of the teacher demand from year to year is due to teacher turnover, and between 19 percent and 30 percent of teachers leave the profession before they ever reach their fifth year. Castro et al. (2018) concluded that turnover has damaging effects on school climate due to the inability to build trust among staff. To improve the school climate and aid with teacher preparation, Castro et al. (2018) recommended job-embedded professional learning.

Zemelman et al. (2012) described an 11-year case study in which the teachers' continuous learning among each other, constant communication, and encouragement helped a school in Huntsville, Ohio dramatically increase reading and writing achievement. This effort was led by a new principal when two elementary schools merged in a rural district. Zemelman et al. (2012) described how the school culture changed, everyone came together, class libraries were purchased and put to use, professional development was used over time, and eventually how the school led the way to the "second-highest year-to-year jump in the state" in reading (p.



258). Zemelman et al. (2012) concluded that the professional learning community was the key change that included transparent communication, trust among all team members, leadership stability, and continual job-embedded learning opportunities.

Peer coaching is a practice many schools need to aid teacher growth, to help build relationships to minimize teacher turnover, and to improve existing professional learning efforts. Reading is essential to become a successful citizen. To be on track to graduate high school, a student should be reading fluently in third grade (Hernandez, 2011). For elementary schools, teaching reading is key. Peer coaching is a model that can be used within the school from day to day to promote reflective practice and on-going, job-embedded learning for continuous school improvement.

### **Organization of the Dissertation**

This dissertation is organized into seven chapters. Chapter 1 explores the purpose of the study, the research questions, the definitions of key terms, the conceptual framework for the study, the significance of the study, and the overview of the research procedures. Chapter 2 offers a review of the literature relevant to peer coaching and job-embedded learning. The review includes action research, professional learning, administrative support, and comparison of literacy frameworks.

Chapter 3 discusses the study's action research design and methodology, including the selection of the participants, data collection tasks, data analysis procedures, and any limitations of the study. Chapter 4 describes the context of the study site. Chapter 5 presents the findings of the study, and Chapter 6 examines themes derived from the data analysis. Chapter 7 presents the conclusions, suggestions for future research, implications for practice, and overall summary of the study.

## **CHAPTER 2**

### **REVIEW OF THE RELATED LITERATURE**

Learning to read is the key to unlocking a student's potential for future success. The expectations of the next generation are greater by far today than they have ever been to be successful. Students are expected to graduate from high school, enroll in a college or university, and assume civic responsibilities. Many students desire to join the workforce or attend technical schools to hone skills and better their lives. Regardless, the educational journey does not have to be same. When students enter kindergarten, they come from various backgrounds with a different foundation. Research indicates that learning begins at birth, and key factors contribute to specific hurdles for some ethnicities and socio-economic classes more than others (Garcia & Weiss (2015).

Before kindergarten students enter school, educational gaps have formed. According to Garcia and Weiss (2015), students coming from low social class face hardships when learning to read and in mathematics, and African American students and Hispanic students have the greatest disparities with links to minorities and social status. Garcia and Weiss (2015) related that “children in the highest socioeconomic group (the high SES fifth) have reading and math scores that are significantly higher—by a full standard deviation—than scores of their peers in the lowest socioeconomic group” (p. 3). Garcia and Weiss (2015) called for policy action to aid the disadvantaged families to help offset the educational gaps.

Kotter (2012) described eight steps for leading change with the first one being establishing a sense of urgency. Kotter (2019) defined a sense of urgency as the feeling that a person has when he/she comes to work and is focused on the important issues of the day. A sense of urgency is vital in schools to ensure student learning and teachers are also learning through job-embedded processes. Zepeda (2019) shared that school leaders must provide professional learning that is “responsive to the needs of their teachers” (p. 5). If professional learning was also differentiated to the needs and focused on supporting teachers, the attrition and retention issues may be alleviated (Zepeda, 2019).

While professional development has been provided by the district and continues to be modeled by the school’s instructional coach, teachers continue to ask for assistance. Evidence of teachers desiring support is shown in meeting minutes and observations conducted by the school and district administration as well as informal surveys conducted by the instructional coach or school administration. To meet this demand, the intervention of peer coaching can be used to enhance or refine current practices (Joyce & Showers, 1995, 2002; Zepeda, 2019).

The literature that follows provides a foundation for the action research case study. In an effort to answer the research questions, a review of the related literature provides a foundation for the case study. To examine how teachers can improve literacy instruction, the following topics present seminal and current research surrounding the topics: 1) literacy frameworks, 2) adult learning, 3) professional learning, 4) job-embedded learning, 5) peer coaching, 6) efficacy, and 7) administrative support. The topics follow the purpose and research questions.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this action research case study was to examine peer coaching of third-grade teachers during the implementation of a literacy framework in a suburban elementary school. Through such an effort, the hope is to support teachers using job-embedded, reflective processes to refine current instructional practices related to the Comprehensive Reading Solutions Literacy Framework (Walpole & McKenna, 2017). Coaching in the context of literacy is important because learning to read by the end of third grade is a critical milestone for students (Hernandez, 2011). The literacy framework is based on the work of Walpole and McKenna (2017) who refer to the literacy framework as the Comprehensive Reading Solutions or the Bookworm lesson format.

### **Research Questions**

This action research study addressed the following questions:

- 1) How might peer coaching be used to improve teacher practice using the Comprehensive Reading Solutions Literacy Framework?
- 2) What is learned by teachers and administrators as they work collaboratively to implement peer coaching as it relates to implementing the Comprehensive Reading Solutions Literacy Framework?
- 3) What can school leaders learn about supporting peer coaching among teachers?

### **Literacy Frameworks**

Reading is the initial foundation for all learning. Fisher and Ivey (2005) agreed that ‘every teacher is a teacher of reading,’ but established that no major changes have occurred in the way reading and writing have been taught in secondary schools. For a student to be on track to graduate from high school, a student needs to be reading and processing informational text by

the end of their third-grade year (Hernandez, 2011). Students who are classified as at-risk are students living in poverty, students with high residential mobility, ELLs, and minority students. These students have increased disparities in schools. Teachers need a mixture of building necessary skills and reading on or above grade-level text in their literacy lesson. Wexler (2019) said,

They [teachers] might want to try spending less time on ‘skills’ and more on just plunging into a good, long story. Not only could that boost comprehension, it [reading a novel] might also acquaint students with the joys of reading. (para. 15)

With a variety of student needs in the classroom, the teachers have to collaborate with a team to better equip students and push them to the next level.

Herbers et al. (2012) conducted a study of 18,011 students and 10% of the participants were at-risk. The study was conducted in the Minneapolis Public Schools District in Minnesota. Students in eighth grade took the Northwest Evaluation Association (2017) computer adaptive test provided by the district. Then, data analysis was conducted looking at the student’s progress over time and his/her first-grade oral reading measure, provided by universal screeners within the district. Herbers et al. (2012) concluded:

Children who begin school with academic readiness skills and are prepared to engage with teachers, peers, and curricula likely have successes in their earliest school experiences that support their motivation for learning and other opportunities that schools may offer them. Conversely, children who struggle early on may become discouraged and disengaged, particularly if they are not identified for appropriate interventions. (pp. 370-371)

This case study emphasized the importance of early interventions, especially for at-risk populations.

These well-established literacy programs use a framework to surround daily instruction and pedagogy. According to Fisher and Frey (2007), a literacy framework is another name for an instructional framework. A frame, like a picture frame, surrounds the content and attempts to show off the masterpiece. Fisher and Frey (2007) dedicated three years to developing the literacy framework which contains the elements of reading, writing, and oral language and specific pedagogical elements within each content. For example, the components of reading include phonological awareness, word recognition, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension (Fisher & Frey, 2007). One well-known literacy framework used in many elementary schools across the nation is called Guided Reading (Fountas & Pinnell, 2012). Guided reading was used as the literacy framework at the action research site prior to 2017 for well over 10 years.

### *Guided Reading*

Fountas and Pinnell (2012) defined Guided Reading as a literacy practice involving a teacher working with a small group of students on a similar reading level. Teachers using Guided Reading provide students with support to develop new vocabulary and develop better reading practices. Guided Reading is also called balanced literacy or the differentiated reading program and is considered one of the most widely used approaches to early literacy in the United States (Denton, Fletcher, Taylor, Barth, & Vaughn, 2014). Teachers divide students into groups based on each student's reading level, rather than a Lexile measure. Then, the teacher provides instruction by a leveled text that matches the group's reading level.

Duke and Del Nero (2011) affirmed that the Guided Reading Literacy Framework is a best practice. Students work in groups and work independently on reading and writing activities. The groups are structured based on the student reading level from a basal leveling system. A basal leveling system, or a guided reading level, uses the alphabet as a way to level books and each grade has several levels to help provide specific reading instruction to students (Fountas & Pinnell, 2012). For example, the different levels in second grade range from J through M (Fountas & Pinnell, 2012). The teacher meets with students in the leveled groups at least twice weekly and Guided Reading lessons that supplement the group work is provided twice weekly. Students read independently while the teacher works with other groups (Duke & Del Nero, 2011).

During Guided Reading, the teacher discusses the text with the students to lift the students' comprehension, and explicit teaching is provided to build vocabulary and fluency (Fountas & Pinnell, 2012). One major advantage of Guided Reading includes an extended reading time in which students have large amounts of times to read independently. Also, groups can be formed heterogeneously for daily independent reading practice and homogeneously for small group instruction based on the needs of the students. Writing is completed when students are working independently using a checklist and a word wall for assistance (Duke & Del Nero, 2011). The teacher uses either small groups or whole group for grammar instruction with an emphasis on exemplars posted in the classroom.

Denton et al. (2014) conducted a study in the Southwestern United States. The study was conducted in an urban school district having a majority Hispanic population and 80% percent of the students were classified as economically disadvantaged. Denton et al. (2014) explained that a sample of 218 first-grade students were randomly assigned to receive Guided Reading

instruction, the explicit reading instruction provided by the district, or reading instruction with no researcher-provided intervention. The students in the sample were selected because of their low performance and potential for being at-risk. The students were assessed again the following year in second grade. Denton et al. (2014) concluded:

the findings support the use of Guided Reading for the development of word reading in students with difficulties but suggest that a more explicit approach is associated with stronger effects on students' phonemic decoding, text reading fluency, and reading comprehension. In particular, students with learning difficulties may benefit from instruction in listening and reading comprehension that is more structured, sequential, and explicit than is typically provided. (p. 290)

The study provides evidence that Guided Reading may not be the most effective intervention for at-risk students (Denton et al., 2014). During professional learning provided to the Bark Camp District, Sharon Walpole stated that Comprehensive Reading Solutions was created as the “antidote for Guided Reading” (S. Walpole, personal communication, January 4, 2019).

### *Comprehensive Reading Solutions*

Comprehensive Reading Solutions is the work of Walpole and McKenna (2017). Using the Comprehensive Reading Solutions Literacy Framework, students hear text at their respective grade level usually in a whole group setting, students engage with a text on their own reading level in shared reading in a small group setting, and students participate in a small group with a teacher to work on a specific literacy strategy like phonics, word recognition, fluency, vocabulary, or comprehension (Walpole & McKenna, 2017). At Cool Springs Academy, the action research site, the first full year of implementation for Comprehensive Reading Solutions was in the 2017-2018 school year.



Comprehensive Reading Solutions consists of four activities: a read-aloud segment, a shared-reading segment, skills group time, and writing. The suggested instructional time for each activity is 45 minutes, except for writing which occurs as students are rotating in and out of different skills groups. Much of the Comprehensive Reading Solutions Literacy Framework is scripted with daily plans provided to teachers. A visual of the Comprehensive Reading Solutions Literacy Framework is offered in Figure 4.4 (Chapter 4).

Guided Reading and Comprehensive Reading Solutions have some similar activities. In Guided Reading, the teacher provides a Guided Reading lesson with the students building vocabulary and comprehension skills. In Comprehensive Reading Solutions, the teacher reads to the whole class building those same skills. This allows for the structure, or framework, in which the reading lesson is carried out to change. The disadvantage entails that more time is needed to schedule the components of the Comprehensive Reading Solutions Literacy Framework.

Two major differences between Guided Reading and Comprehensive Reading Solutions are the shared reading and the skills groups that are used in the Comprehensive Reading Solutions Literacy Framework. During shared reading, each student in the class has the same book. The teacher uses pedagogy like ‘turn and talk,’ where a student talks to a neighboring student about the text. The teacher also uses choral reading to help build fluency. Shared reading is a daily routine where all students have books and are being exposed to new vocabulary and a method to become better readers (Walpole & McKenna, 2017). The read-aloud segment and/or the shared-reading segment are structured to incorporate writing with students responding to a prompt and incorporating evidence from the text.

The skills group time seems to be structured similarly to the Guided Reading Literacy Framework. However, the process is data-driven. First, students take the Informal Decoding Inventory to assess if the student can decode single-syllable words and/or multisyllabic words (Walpole & McKenna, 2017). The teachers use the students' results to place them into skills group. These groups range from phonological awareness and word recognition to vocabulary and comprehension. The skills are taught and reassessed in a three-week cycle. Walpole and McKenna (2017) express, "Ultimately, the question of group placement arises at the beginning and end of the cycle and assessment is best viewed as a recurring process" (p. 21). Skills group in the Comprehensive Reading Solutions Literacy Framework is a data-driven process used to provide students with specific reading skills and allows teachers to track students' progress over time (Walpole & McKenna, 2017).

In Guided Reading, students are not exposed to grade-level text consistently and specific interventions are not used to build the necessary foundations of reading, like specific skills groups (Walpole & McKenna, 2017). Nacrelli (2018) provided an evaluation of Comprehensive Reading Solutions. The case study is conducted in a mid-Atlantic school district with most of the students "are not meeting grade level proficiency in reading according to national (NAEP) and state (PARCC) assessments" (p. 44). The NAEP is the National Assessment of Educational Progress given to students in grades 4, 8, and 12, and PARCC, named for the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Career, is a state's standardized assessment given to students each year. After one year of implementation, Nacrelli (2018) concluded that Comprehensive Reading Solutions "had a statistically significant effect on the reading achievement of third, fourth, and fifth grade students in the Spring Valley School District" (p. 93) when comparing the pre-test and post-test measures. When comparing the cohort growth, all

14 schools in the district demonstrated positive growth for each grade: third, fourth, and fifth (Nacrelli, 2018).

As teachers and school leaders are working to make changes in literacy, knowing when a specific element is addressed is important. A strong level of confidence is provided for students to develop phonological awareness in lower grades (Foorman et al., 2016). As soon as students have that foundational skill, teachers can teach more reading and spelling to students and then begin to engage students in more complex reading as students become more fluent (Walpole & McKenna, 2017). Vocabulary should be introduced in context with the reading for students to make more meaning of the words and should be taught throughout elementary grades. Teachers and school leaders must make sure that each student has multiple opportunities to read daily to support reading accurately, fluently, and to build comprehension. Foorman et al. (2016) and Walpole and McKenna (2017) provided necessary tools for students to receive a strong literacy foundation. While ensuring all students are surrounded with the right tools for success, school leaders also need to make certain that all adults are learning and growing as professionals in a society filled with opportunity.

### **Adult Learning**

Adult learning is often overlooked due to the pressure of testing and accountability. A teacher's pedagogy is normally the focus, especially in at-risk schools where the demands of higher student achievement are at the forefront of every discussion. The term andragogy is connected to how adults learn, whereas pedagogy is centered around the instruction and learning that students receive. According to Knowles, Holton, and Swanson (1990), andragogy is defined as "the art and science of helping adults learn" (p. 54). Knowles (1989) ceased calling andragogy a theory of adult learning but instead reputed that it is "a model of assumptions about

learning or a conceptual framework that serves as a basis for an emergent theory” (p. 112).

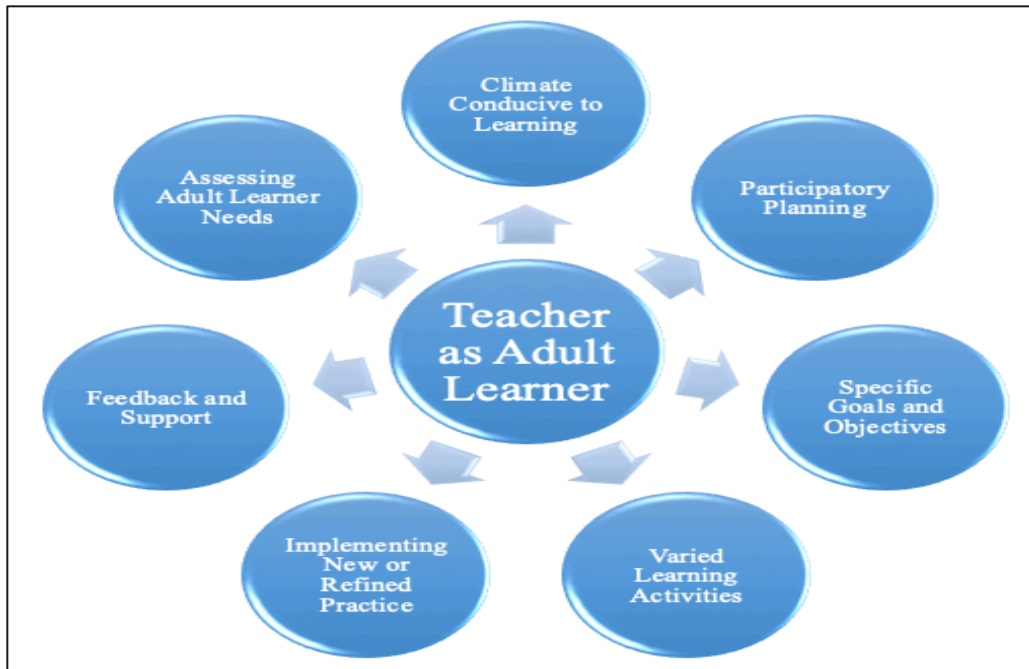
Merriam and Bierema (2013) reported that North America uses the term adult education rather than andragogy, and it “is primarily presented as a way of differentiating adult learners from children” (p. 56).

Understanding how adults learn is important to enhance the professional learning opportunities adults are provided within an ever-changing society (Zepeda, 2019). Knowles, Holton, and Swanson (2015) offered six assumptions to aid adult learning.

1. Adults need to be self-directed.
2. Adults provide a vast resource to the learning environment based on their own life experiences.
3. Adults’ readiness to learn is connected to their social environment.
4. Adult learning is applied immediately.
5. Both intrinsic and extrinsic motivation are established for adults.
6. Adults need to know why.

Using these six assumptions to frame adult learning sets the stage for all professional learning.

The tempo for adult learning is set by the overall culture of the school including the principal, teachers, and the relationships between teachers and administration (Zepeda, 2019). Ongoing efforts to ensure that professional development is a job-embedded process that is tied to clear objectives help to support teachers in an active way. Figure 2.1 shows how adults should be involved in the professional learning processes.



*Figure 2.1: Adult Learning, used by permission from Zepeda (2019)*

Adults are motivated by success, which is connected to job satisfaction (Knowles et al., 2015). Zepeda (2019) asserted, “a critical component of effective learning is that teachers become more satisfied, gain self-confidence, and derive value from their work with others” (p. 47). When school leaders differentiate professional learning according to the adult’s needs and use the principles of Maslow’s (1954) hierarchy of needs, teachers are supported and a foundation for growth and learning is established. Zepeda (2019) offered that “effective professional development does not ‘fix’ teachers, [but rather, it] . . . attends to the social needs of adults, . . . acknowledges prior experiences,” (p. 40) and is connected to 21<sup>st</sup>-century technologies. Brookfield (2013) established that adult learning theory is a social event because “learning in the company of others is a more powerful design for professional development that supports the adult learner” (Zepeda, 2019, p. 40).

Knowles et al. (2015) stated that clearly defining the goals of the professional learning is the final step and that they must be clearly connected to the teacher's individual growth, the school's growth, and the overall community's growth. Bambrick-Santoyo (2018) described that the professional learning process needs to be data-driven with time to practice or refine the new skills. According to Bambrick-Santoyo (2018), the goals for professional development should be actionable, evaluable, and feasible. During professional development, teachers should be able to articulate the desired result of the training and then be provided time to hone the new skills with timely feedback. Bambrick-Santoyo (2018) also suggested developing a collaborative school culture by using peer observations and teacher reflection.

### **Professional Learning**

Professional learning is connected to the science of adult learning. The Georgia Department of Education (2019c) stated, "Professional learning is the means by which teachers, administrators, and other staff acquire, enhance, and refine the knowledge, skills, practices, and dispositions necessary to create and support high levels of learning for all students" (para. 1). Klingner (2004) stressed that teachers must understand the conceptual and technical changes to overcome potential barriers when implementing new practices. The conceptual change is the background knowledge that teachers need to understand why the change is necessary, and the technical change represents how the changes will occur and what resources are needed (Klingner, 2004). Some possible barriers to a new implementation include the anxiety of "high-stakes testing, pressure to cover content, a mismatch between teacher style and the practice, and not having an in-depth understanding of the practice" (Klingner, 2004, p. 249). Regardless, professional learning is needed to support improved teacher practice. Klingner (2004) pointed out that when teachers improve instructional practices students also learn.

As teachers start their careers, many enter lacking experience working with different demographics and must quickly learn firsthand ways to communicate with students who may not be able to communicate with them. Challenges also exist in teacher development programs. Ortiz and Robertson (2018) verified this stating, “Teacher education programs have not responded adequately to demographic changes in the U.S. student population or to the increasing number of ELLs enrolled in today’s schools” (p. 3). Many states now require certification to teach ELLs. However, obtaining this certification is a convoluted process depending on the state. According to the research, 60% of teachers indicate that they need more training to work effectively with ELLs (Ortiz & Robertson, 2018). The work of Lopez and Santibanez (2018) provided evidence that teachers need support to teach ELLs effectively, and it implies that current policies need to be updated. Samson and Collins (2012) also supported the need for more teacher preparation, and the gaps in policy for general education teachers that also support ELLs need to be updated. To match ever-growing demands and changing demographics, leadership for professional growth in this area is recommended to ensure best practices for a diverse population.

Georgia educators are required to be a part of a professional learning community and to set performance goals. This policy change provides educators less of a financial burden to continue graduate work, attend conferences, etc. Professional learning communities, as defined by DuFour (2004), provide the main mechanism for teacher collaboration and teacher growth. A professional learning community is a group of individuals who come together with a common interest to discuss a common problem (or practice) and to set specific goals that can be used to measure any improvements made. Teacher collaboration is needed to implement specific goals and to reflect on instructional adjustments. In schools, DuFour (2004) stated three big ideas that

are always present in professional learning communities: ensuring students learn, building a culture of collaboration, and focusing on results. Milner (2015) describes the process of learning from each other “leadership development” (p. 148) and continued describing how new teachers have “to learn leadership skills to work with their colleagues in building a school culture of success” (p. 148). Active participation in professional learning communities helps to support teacher growth.

Administration evaluates teachers on their performance throughout the year, and one major artifact of teacher growth includes collaboration and participation in professional learning communities. As part of the evaluation process, the administration certifies that an educator works in a professional learning community. Teacher certification in Georgia is directly linked to professional growth. DuFour and Eaker (1998) provided four critical questions that effective professional learning communities should address. They are:

1. What are the students’ learning targets?
2. What assessments are used to monitor student learning?
3. What interventions are used when students do not meet the learning targets?
4. What activities, or enrichment opportunities, are provided to students when they meet the learning targets?

DuFour and Eaker (1998) described how student learning targets need to be clear and measurable. The learning targets are like the starting line for a race, the map is like the instruction and resources provided by the teacher, and the finish line represents the understanding of the lesson’s learning targets. Marzano (2016) provided schools with next steps in professional learning communities by providing two additional steps for the team to reflect. These steps include how teachers will grow professionally and how their efforts fit into the



overall school improvement efforts. These two additional steps help teachers to reflect on professional growth and provide teachers the opportunity to connect their efforts with the school's improvement efforts.

According to Fullan (2014), professional “development must be conceptualized much more thoroughly than it has been” (p. 6). Fullan (2014) provided empirical studies from Canada, England, and the United States in the area of teacher development. Professional learning is personal, especially in early teacher development (Fullan, 2014). Fullan (2014) also described how professional development is connected to a continuous cycle of development that is relevant to the teacher and links successful professional development to the success of school improvement initiatives. The goal for any professional learning activity should include multiple forms of job-embedded processes such as peer coaching, book study, or action research, for example (Zepeda, 2019).

### **Job-embedded Learning**

Wood and Killian (1998) defined job-embedded learning as “learning that occurs as teachers and administrators engage in their daily work activities” (p. 52). Adults construct new meaning in multiple, complex ways (Vygotsky, 2012). Zepeda (2019) stated that “learning needs to be consistent with the principles of adult learning” (p. 126). For teachers to be able to understand on-going professional learning, the learning itself should be realistic and relevant.

Teachers want to learn and continue to grow. Another key component that must be present for effective teacher development within a professional learning community or the school includes trust. Zepeda (2019) stated, “Trust in the process, in colleagues, and in the learner him-/herself” is another condition (p. 126). Teachers are obliged to trust that constructive feedback will be provided throughout the learning process and especially during peer coaching meetings.

Fullan (2015) believed that “all real change involves, loss, anxiety, and struggle” (p. 25). With the understanding that mistakes are learning opportunities, teachers can build trust in each other and in the process of peer coaching (Zepeda, 2019). Time is always crucial and must be provided during the regular school schedule to maximize learning, and “sufficient resources must be available to support learning” (Zepeda, 2019, p. 126).

When the right school culture is in place, teachers prove that they want to improve. Galson (2016) illustrated how teachers use peer coaching in a high school mathematics setting to improve teacher practices. Teachers within the Mathematics Department were paired depending on the courses they taught. For example, an algebra teacher could observe a geometry teacher. This was the design model chosen by the department to gain more insight from each other. A pre-observation was conducted with the teachers where the teacher pairs decided the learning goals, the time and location of the observation, and any necessary information needed about the class makeup. Following the observation, a post-observation conference was held with questions adapted from Knight et al. (2015). Both the teacher being observed and the observer complete the questions and then share feedback together. The questions included:

1. How did the lesson feel in regards to the learning goals?
2. What evidence was observed to answer the goals?
3. Did any of the data influence future instruction? If so, how?
4. Did anything new surface during the observation?

With this being job-embedded, the department wanted to naturally dive deeper into the focus questions and complete more rounds of observations for increased professional growth.

Teachers, including school leaders, want to grow professionally and value working collaboratively. When teachers are placed in the needs-based professional learning community

and within the right school culture, they can be supported and pushed to learn more. When professional development is relevant, authentic learning can take place with teachers making direct connections to instructional practices. Darling-Hammond, Wei, Andree, Richardson, and Orphanos (2009) stated, “Professional development should be intensive, ongoing, and connected to practice” (p. 9). Professional learning should be job-embedded, a normal part of the teacher’s schedule, and differentiated to support the needs of the teacher (Zepeda, 2015).

One job-embedded practice includes peer observations. Peer observations can be used to improve instruction in multiple ways. Zepeda (2015) shared that “peer observations play an integral part in numerous professional development models including, for example, lesson study, peer coaching, cognitive coaching, critical friends’ groups, and other system improvement strategies such as learning walks, instructional rounds, and walk-throughs” (p. 47). Peer observations provide a needed step toward improving teacher practice and growth as well as school improvement. With peer coaching, being a job-embedded practice, continuous action research is also occurring as teachers adjust their practice. Zepeda (2015) shared that the benefits of this authentic action research include teachers being intrinsically motivated to grow.

### **Peer Coaching**

In an increasingly complex and ever-changing society, school leaders need a school culture that supports the continuous growth of teachers in a way that is job-embedded and self-guided by teachers. Peer coaching includes teachers observing their peers and improving practices by discussing critical pieces from the observations. For the purpose of this study, peer coaching is defined by Zepeda (2019) in the following manner: “Peer coaching is a multifaceted tool that can be implemented as an instructional strategy, a professional development strategy,

and a complement to instructional supervision” (p. 167). Figure 1.2 (Chapter 1) illustrates the peer coaching cycle.

Joyce and Showers (1996), the original designers of peer coaching, discussed how professional learning was scrutinized due to the lack of school improvement. Joyce and Showers (1996) hypothesized that if teachers could model and practice the professional learning being demonstrated and then be provided feedback about the experience, then teachers would master new skills much easier than in a normal professional learning environment. Joyce and Showers (1996) suggested,

Adding peer coaching study teams to school improvement efforts is a substantial departure from the way schools often embark on change efforts. On the surface, it appears simple to implement—what could be more natural than teams of professional teachers working on content and skills? It is a complex innovation only because it requires a radical change in relationships among teachers, and between teachers and administrative personnel. (p. 16)

As all school professionals learn new practices to better the lives of the next generation, teachers and school leaders are obligated to pause and reflect continuously.

### *Reflection*

An individual reflects when he or she desires to dive deeper into the learning or a problem that he or she may be facing. Reflection is the technical term for conceptual and methodological practices used during any learning experience (Moon, 2004), and teacher reflection is a critical component of peer coaching.

Costa and Garmston (2015) described cognitive coaching, which is another name for peer coaching, “as a nonjudgmental, developmental, reflective model” (p. 1) that can strengthen

teachers' capabilities. Cognitive coaching "is informed by current work in brain research and focuses on the practitioner's cognitive development" (Costa & Garmston, 2015, p. 1). Costa and Garmston (2015) describe how an instructional coach, or a 'cognitive coach,' can strengthen teachers' metacognition regarding their pedagogy. Having another adult to interact with is the essential component. Making this process a job-embedded approach would include teachers sharing practices during regular teacher meetings with or without an instructional coach or a school leader present.

Having an individual who is trained to coach teachers is a great asset to schools. According to Costa and Garmston (2015), the coach can keep in mind four conversations to help foster the discussion. When implementing a new practice, the coach may have a "Planning Conversation" (Costa & Garmston, 2015, p. 6). The Planning Conversation is planning how the new task will be applied in a lesson and using any new or available resources. A "Reflecting Conversation occurs after a colleague conducts or participates in an event or completes a task" (Costa & Garmston, 2015, p. 6). When a teacher may feel stuck, a Problem-Resolving Conversation occurs to help resolve an issue or provide mediation during a crisis (Costa & Garmston, 2015, p. 6).

Similar to a Problem-Resolving Conversation, the Calibrating Conversation provides an opportunity for teachers to reflect on their own practice and solve problems within their classrooms. Costa and Garmston (2015) continued to state the importance of the conversations, "The Calibrating Conversation engages teachers in assessing their own performance related to a set of standards or external criteria, so that they share responsibility for self-assessing, and then self-prescribing personal responses" (p. 6). A trained individual can assist teachers and foster teacher growth, provided that trust is built between the coach and the teachers.

Education is ever-changing. The strength of an instructional coach includes helping to manage necessary changes and to focus on student outcomes. School leaders ask instructional coaches to support teachers in implementing a new practice and to raise student test scores as an end result (Toll, 2018). Toll (2018) offered four models to help coaches to support change in schools. The first model focuses on what teachers should do. Coaches demonstrate a practice and provide follow up observations and discussions to help teachers with implementation (Toll, 2018). Another model includes how teachers feel. How teachers feel can affect many areas including trust and teacher efficacy (Toll, 2018).

Toll (2018) favored the intellectual model, requiring teachers to think, and the collaborative model, supporting teacher collaboration. When teachers reflect on their practice and collaborate with teams, the changes can “lead to more informed decision making . . . that benefit students” (Toll, 2018, p. 20). The change process starts with teacher development. Also, a positive symbiotic relationship occurs within a professional learning community. As teachers collaborate in the professional learning community, the entire team benefits. Zepeda (2018) stated, “Collaboration allows for an exchange of ideas through purposeful conversations as well as provide opportunities for teachers to support their own learning as well as their colleagues” (p. 81). Collaboration is one key component that provides authentic learning to teachers in a job-embedded, school culture. As all school professionals learn new practices to better the lives of the next generation, teachers and school leaders have to pause and reflect continuously.

### *Feedback*

As teachers are learning from each other and discussing next steps, peer coaching is occurring. Peer coaching includes teachers observing their peers and improving practices by

discussing critical pieces from the observations. Kachur, Stout, and Edwards (2013) described how peer observations provide opportunities for teachers to see other staff in action and provide opportunities to improve instructional strategies. When implementing a new practice or to monitor an existing one, teachers and leaders can reflect on observations and see if the practice is being delivered consistently. As with professional learning communities, peer observations support teacher growth. Kachur, Stout, and Edwards (2013) provided important takeaways that may help to get the process started including providing time for teachers to conduct the observations, using protocols with teachers to examine student work rather than only the teacher teaching, and having teachers to provide positive, nonjudgmental feedback to each other. The discussion is vital for growing and reflecting on next steps.

To take this one step further, Knight (2014) supported the use of video for teachers to reflect on their own teaching practice. Knight (2014) described how “video learning teams” can improve instruction with teachers watching others and providing feedback to each other (p. 91). The goal includes “teachers collaboratively exploring video to improve student learning” (Knight, 2014, p. 90). As a professional learning community collaborates, the team designates a leader that they trust and can emphasize the positive, and the team leader must be able to “walk the talk” (Knight, 2014, p. 103). Team selection is a critical step. The team must all agree with the process and the goals. Along with having the right team in place, the team must agree on the norms of the group. The norms form the working culture of the group (Knight, 2014). Having the right leader, team, and values are initial steps for the team.

The last three steps for creating video learning teams are central to the theme of peer coaching. The video learning team must agree that the overall process is for teacher growth with a hope of improving student achievement. The next step for the team to discuss includes specific

goals. For example, the video learning team could focus on one component of the Comprehensive Reading Solutions Literacy Framework to improve this practice. The last step includes effective communication that is “powerful, easy (to understand), emotionally compelling, reachable, and student focused” (Knight, 2014, p. 125). Knight (2014) described how an instructional coach can greatly help lead this initiative.

With the technology present in the classroom today, teachers can have support from experts who are not even in the room. Rock, Zigmond, Gregg, and Gable (2011) discussed how virtual coaching can “encourage teachers to remain in critical teaching positions, such as special education” (p. 38). Often, teachers are not prepared for challenges dealing with diversity (Ortiz & Robertson, 2018). Project TEEACH (Transforming Elementary Educators into Advocates, Change Agents, and Highly Qualified Special Educators) offers an innovative solution using 21<sup>st</sup>-century tools to assist teachers working with classroom challenges. Rock et al. (2011) described the meaning of Project TEEACH.

Project TEEACH, which stands for Transforming Elementary Educators into Advocates, Change Agents, and Highly Qualified Special Educators, was developed to address these issues. A professor, a leading expert, can observe the teacher using Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP) technology, such as Skype. The teacher being observed wears a Bluetooth-enabled bug in her ear. As the teacher works with students, the professor coaches her. (p. 37)

Virtual coaching is another way that can be used to support teachers.

Castañeda-Londoño (2017) illustrated how the peer coaching process offered more feedback to teachers than feedback given by administration during a formal observation. Castañeda-Londoño (2017) described how teachers are cautious about the process being a new



method for professional learning. The action research was conducted with English teachers and their perceptions about peer coaching. Similar to Cool Springs Academy, surveys were conducted prior to the research that implied teachers desired more support. Teachers were interviewed before and after coaching sessions. With teachers being cautious, implications include that time is needed to build trust and not to feel threatened. However, teacher reflection was highlighted in all of the responses provided. Reflection is a critical mechanism needed for change.

Zepeda, Parylo, and Ilgan (2013) conducted an international study that describes peer coaching as an effective form of professional development. The study examined cross-national differences in educator's beliefs about peer coaching by comparing survey responses of American and Turkish educators (Zepeda et al., 2013). The findings of the study included that both groups regard peer coaching as a high level of professional learning, and "American participants believed that peer coaching was much more applicable than did the Turkish participants" (Zepeda et al., 2013, p. 64). The value of this study provides a look at teacher's beliefs which can influence how he/she may respond to peer coaching. Through the intervention of peer coaching, in which teachers receive critical feedback and reflect on instructional practices, a teacher's sense of self-efficacy could possibly be influenced.

### **Efficacy**

Efficacy is the ability to produce an intended target or result and self-efficacy is the foundation for motivation and achievement (Bandura, 1986, 2010). Today's research on self-efficacy traces back to the seminal piece by Bandura (1977) who used the phrase "efficacy expectation" to portray the "conviction that one can successfully execute the behavior required to produce the outcomes" (p. 193). Efficacy expectation differs from the outcome expectancy. The

outcome expectancy is defined as a person's estimate that a given behavior will lead to certain outcomes (Bandura, 1977). If a person has serious doubts about his/her performance, this does not necessarily change the overall behavior to meet the desired target (Bandura, 1977).

Bandura laid the groundwork for social cognitive theory. Bandura (1997) noted, "people do not live their lives in isolation; they work together to produce results they desire" (p. 3). A teacher's sense of self-efficacy can be influenced by professional learning and in a school with a supportive environment. Teacher efficacy does not appear to be related to teacher training during the first three years of teaching, but teachers need to validate their instructional practices (Lopez & Santibanez, 2018).

As teachers are learning and receiving feedback during peer coaching sessions, they are constantly reflecting on their practices and making necessary adjustments to instructional practices so that students can receive the best instruction. Bandura (1997) concluded that "perceived self-efficacy is not a measure of the skills one has but a belief about what one can do under different sets of conditions with whatever skills one possesses" (p. 37). For this study, the different set of conditions at the research site is the intervention of peer coaching, a job-embedded process. One intervention that is in place at the research site includes an induction process that includes mentoring for first-year teachers.

### *Self-Efficacy*

Teacher's self-efficacy is believed to be closely related to student achievement. A meta-analysis was conducted by Kim and Seo (2018) found no direct correlation, however. Nonetheless, Kim and Seo (2018) did connect the relationship of a teacher's self-efficacy and student achievement with a teacher's years of experience. The more experience a teacher has, the more likely the relationship between teacher's self-efficacy and student achievement.

With the sense of urgency to promote and retain quality teachers, a teacher's positive job satisfaction is vital in the school culture. The research of Turkoglu, Cansoy, and Parlar (2017) linked teacher's self-efficacy to job satisfaction. Turkoglu et al. (2017) stated, "self-efficacy correlated positively with teacher job satisfaction, which shows that when teachers' perceptions of self-efficacy increase, their job satisfaction will also increase" (p. 770). Approximately, one out of five teachers leave the teaching profession during their first three years (Gray & Taie, 2015; Zepeda, 2019). As teachers work collaboratively to implement new instructional practices, they influence their individual efficacy and the group's collective efficacy.

### *Collective Efficacy*

Since the action research study is using peer coaching with a group of third-grade teachers as an intervention, collective teacher efficacy needs to be explored. Goddard, Hoy, and Hoy (2000) defined collective teacher efficacy as "the perceptions of teachers in a school that the efforts of the faculty as a whole will have a positive effect on students" (p. 480). In another study, Goddard and Goddard (2001) shared "where teachers tend to think highly of the collective capability of the faculty, they may sense an expectation for successful teaching and hence work to be successful themselves" (pp. 815-816). Peer coaching involves much teacher collaboration. According to Fisher, Frey, and Hattie (2016), "when teachers experience success collaborating with peers and those collaborations improve teaching and learning, they notice" (p. 135). Fisher et al. (2016) claimed that collective teacher efficacy has a direct correlation with student achievement. As Kim and Seo (2018) pointed out, the context of the school and the teachers is important before making statistical claims.

The research of Tschannen-Moran and Barr (2004) reported a positive correlation between collective teacher efficacy and student success. Tschannen-Moran and Barr (2004) defined collective teacher efficacy as the “collective self-perception that teachers in a given school make an educational difference to their students over and above the educational impact of their homes and communities” (p. 190). Teachers who are filled with hope, helping students regardless of their backgrounds, make a positive impact on students. Tschannen-Moran and Barr (2004) reported that when teachers have the collective spirit of success within the school, a positive correlation between collective teacher efficacy and student success is evident.

Barr and Gibson (2013) described a similar concept called the collaborative school. Six conditions are regarded as essential according to the studies of DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, and Karhanek (2010), Elmore (2008), Fullan (2015), and Barr and Gibson (2013). These conditions include:

1. A belief that all students can learn
2. Shared goals for the school
3. Reliance on data
4. Time for collaboration
5. Time to monitor student progress
6. A plan for refining interventions

Teachers in a collaborative school are supported by a professional learning community and the performance culture of the school. These qualities ensure a teacher feels efficacious and motivated. Creating a collaborative school is at the forefront of all school leaders.

Cassada and Kassner (2018) conducted a study to benefit teachers examining peer coaching while using video-recorded lessons. The study had a total of 38 participants, and the participants completed two cycles of video review for a total of 76 collaborative peer coaching video experiences. Using the format of peer video review, a theme of continuous improvement at the classroom level emerged. Cassada and Kassner (2018) stated,

Examination of instructional practices and strategies for improvement becomes the focus of school improvement at the classroom level – in every classroom – bringing about more coordinated, comprehensive, cohesive change. This change can empower teachers to believe they are part of the solution and critical actors for change, boosting their efficacy related to changing the outcomes for students. (p. 432)

As teachers build their efficacy and share their perspectives with their professional learning community, teachers adjust instructional practices and build confidence collaborating with a group. The collective efficacy is affected.

DeWitt (2019) discussed how he faced obstacles as a principal, but “we did not let this fracture our building-level community” (p. 35). DeWitt (2019) concluded,

As a staff, we decided we would band together to take control of some of our learning and create a new mindset on what we could achieve, starting with the practice of providing effective feedback. I didn’t realize it [changing the school culture] at the time, but we were indeed building a collective teacher efficacy. (p. 35)

DeWitt (2019) shared that teachers worked through a collective efficacy cycle similar to the peer coaching cycle. Given a situation to improve, the teachers collaborate on a goal, explore resources needed, try a strategy to help the situation, evaluate the impact, and then reflect on the

outcome. Understanding the importance of why a change is needed builds collective efficacy as teachers and leaders analyze the data (DeWitt, 2019).

### **Administrative Support for Peer Coaching**

Starting a peer-coaching program, the school administrative team will need to take small steps and build momentum. Zepeda (2019) mentioned that in time school leaders may be able to let the teachers fully “run the program” (p. 175). This would result in shared leadership within the school. In the meantime, leaders can be transparent about the process and build a culture of trust.

According to Zepeda (2019), principals support peer coaching when they strengthen their political networks by encouraging support from the district office, regional educational service agency (RESA), the state, or the national levels. Professional learning practices that are job-embedded provide teachers with ongoing support, learning new practices while refining existing ones. The principal must allocate the necessary resources to initiate the process and obtain funds to keep peer coaching an established part of the school culture. The principal may act as the facilitator by “modeling listening and questioning skills” (Zepeda, 2019, p. 174). During the discussion, the school leaders must provide feedback to encourage and promote growth, removing potential barriers along the way. Finally, the principal must value time for teacher reflection. Metacognition is an essential piece for improving instructional practices and promoting change. School leaders must consider teachers’ feelings and how overall improvements are being made throughout the school. Zepeda (2019) affirmed that “coaching will not flourish until teachers feel valued and supported in their efforts to improve instruction. Effective principals focus their attention here” (p. 177).

Engaging in a peer-coaching program, teachers are provided support in multiple ways. The teachers collaborate with each other, observing, and then modeling lessons. According to Bandura (1986), the teacher's inner drive of being able to do the job is encouraged and the teacher can validate his/her practices. In a school like Cool Springs Academy where peer coaching has not been established, the school administrative team will need to take small steps and build momentum. To initiate a new process, professional learning is the first step if the school culture and climate are conducive to peer coaching.

### *School Culture and Climate*

The school climate and culture greatly affect student learning. According to the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development's (2018) authors DeWitt and Whitaker, school climate is the feeling within the school, and school culture includes the overall school processes. Regardless of how the school feels, students must have a positive, caring environment to feel safe so that learning can occur (Jensen, 2009). High-needs schools often have environments where students suffer from radical changes to instruction or adult behavior. According to No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001, a high-needs school has a high rate of teacher turnover, teachers that are not highly qualified, and students living in poverty. Regardless, all discussions in a high-needs school need to be centered on student learning.

Changing a school culture takes years to accomplish, but it is a necessary task especially when drastic changes have occurred or are occurring in the school. School leaders can take surveys to establish a baseline while also comparing the teachers' beliefs with the school's mission (Gruenert & Whitaker, 2015). The school climate may be an appropriate first step of changing a culture. Gruenert and Whitaker (2015) compared the culture to a school's personality and the climate to its attitude.

Student achievement is impacted the most by the many instructional practices a teacher decides to use inside the classroom (Fisher, Frey, & Hattie, 2016). Robbins (2015) asserted that “school culture is the next most influential factor” (p. 111). When professional learning communities are focused on improving students’ lives, teachers can build trusting relationships without fear of any judgment from taking risks or trying something new. Tschannen-Moran and Barr (2004) suggest that the trust formed between teachers can produce increased student achievement.

To help form trusting relationships, successful schools have a “structure of interaction” for teachers to continuously make improvements in their instructional practices using a peer coaching cycle (Robbins, 2015, p. 113). Then, teachers discuss with colleagues about critical next steps and reflect on their own learning process. The school culture has a positive correlation with teacher quality and teacher burnout (Robbins, 2015) and is a vital step for transforming a school.

### **Chapter Summary**

A lens of adult learning was used to frame the literature, especially consideration of the ways in which teachers learn from each other. The constructivist theory is a major theme in education in which learners construct new ideas based on their existing knowledge (Vygotsky, 2012). Vygotsky (2012) explains how adults learn in stages similar to a child’s development. As a child develops, he/she learns in stages, applying needed skills and making connections as the child matures. Looking at literacy as an example, students learn how to read in stages. First, phonemical awareness is developed with students learning letter recognition and sounds. Then, students learn word patterns as they begin to recognize and learn new words. As students learn letter patterns and how to sound out new words, they become more fluent readers. Last, students



build on existing vocabulary and comprehend more advanced text. Similarly, adults construct meanings and make connections to improve and grow personally and professionally. In a job-embedded process, like peer coaching, teachers can embrace new opportunities while validating their practices with their fellow colleagues. Chapter 3 examines the research design and methods.

## **CHAPTER 3**

### **RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY**

This action research case study examined how third-grade teachers interact and learn from each other while implementing a new literacy framework, Comprehensive Reading Solutions (Walpole & McKenna, 2017), while using the intervention of peer coaching. Peer coaching is a professional development model with a focus on teacher growth as a reflective, collaborative format (Joyce & Showers, 1995, 2002). Joyce and Showers (1981, 1982) also share that the peer coaching model includes teachers observing their peers and working to improve practices by discussing information from the classroom observations.

The research design and methodology outlined in this chapter provides an account of the action research process used for this study. The chapter is divided into 10 sections: 1) purpose of the study, 2) research questions, 3) action research, 4) conceptual framework, 5) design of the study, 6) data sources, 7) data collection, 8) data analysis, 9) ethics, and 10) limitations of the study.

#### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this action research case study was to examine peer coaching of third-grade teachers during the implementation of a literacy framework in a suburban elementary school. Through such an effort, the hope is to support teachers using job-embedded, reflective processes to refine current instructional practices related to the Comprehensive Reading Solutions Literacy Framework (Walpole & McKenna, 2017).

Coaching in the context of literacy is important because learning to read by the end of third grade is a critical milestone for students (Hernandez, 2011). The literacy framework is based on the work of Walpole and McKenna (2017). Walpole and McKenna (2017) refer to the literacy framework as the Comprehensive Reading Solution (CRS) or the Bookworm lesson format.

### **Research Questions**

Districts desire consistency in curriculum implementation and assessment during the process of working toward reaching achievement goals. Quality instruction includes the use of research-based, best practices such as those embedded in the Comprehensive Reading Solutions Literacy Framework (Walpole & McKenna, 2017). This action research study addressed the following questions:

- 1) How might peer coaching be used to improve teacher practice using the Comprehensive Reading Solutions Literacy Framework?
- 2) What is learned by teachers and administrators as they work collaboratively to implement peer coaching as it relates to implementing the Comprehensive Reading Solutions Literacy Framework?
- 3) What can school leaders learn about supporting peer coaching among teachers?

### **Action Research**

Action research is used for this case study to address the contextual problem of literacy and an intervention—coaching. Action research allows for implications to be derived from the processes in an iterative manner where data informs further refinement of practice. Stringer (2014) defines action research as “a systematic approach to investigation that enables people to find effective solutions to problems they confront in their everyday lives” (p. 1). Action research

provides the means to initiate change while helping to understand the issues related to teacher development in the present study about literacy at Cool Springs Academy.

Action research allows school leaders and others the opportunity to step back, slow down, and observe the complex world of education. Often when implementing new practices in schools, Bryk, LeMahieu, Grunow, and Gomez (2015) state,

We become disappointed when dramatic positive results do not readily emerge, and then we just move on to the next reform idea. This should trouble all of us. If we continue to seek improvement in the ways we have always done, we are likely to continue to get what we have always gotten. (p. 6)

While a new practice is being introduced, action research can provide school leaders and teachers with specific measures that will describe if the new practice is an improvement. Bryk et al. (2015) provide a clear explanation of how “we cannot improve at scale what we cannot measure” (p. 14). As a new practice is being implemented, data must be shared with teachers regarding the progress toward a specific and measureable goal. The data discussion is critical so that the new practice can be refined and eventually validated. Both refinement and validation are critical components of the action research process (Glanz & Heimann, 2019; Stringer, 2014).

The data used in the action research process is qualitative. The qualitative data include pre- and post-conferences with teachers during the peer coaching process, notes taken for reflection purposes, minutes from meetings, and teacher interviews. Merriam and Grenier (2019) shared, “[In] qualitative research . . . the researcher is interested in understanding how participants make meaning of a situation or phenomenon. This meaning is mediated through the researcher as instrument, data analysis is inductive, and the outcome is descriptive” (p. 7). The researcher desires to support teachers using the intervention of peer coaching by closely looking

at the Comprehensive Reading Solutions Literacy Framework (Walpole & McKenna, 2017). By teachers working closely with their peers in a coaching cycle, the researcher hopes the teachers will learn from each other and better their own practices, continuing the professional learning the district provided initially two years ago. The peer coaching cycle is illustrated in Figure 1.7 (See Chapter 1). With all the participants teaching third grade, learning to read in this grade is a critical milestone for students so they can graduate from high school and for secure future success (Hernandez, 2011).

Action research places the researcher in the field working directly with the participants. When teachers are learning from each other in a non-judgmental environment, the teachers can grow professionally by supporting their peers and increasing their self-efficacy at the same time (Zepeda, 2019). Teachers involved in action research benefit from learning from each other—what’s working and what’s not, but more profoundly generating alternative approaches based on the data from action research. Using data sources such as minutes from coaching conferences, notes from teachers’ reflections, and individual teacher interviews increases the trustworthiness of the study and provides for the triangulation of the data.

The social aspect of the action research was designed intentionally for teachers to observe their peers in action, requiring them to leave their own classrooms, and then reflect on what was observed during observations. Peer coaching is an intervention for this reason since teachers have not observed others in the past 10 years at the research site. Denzin and Lincoln (2011) stated:

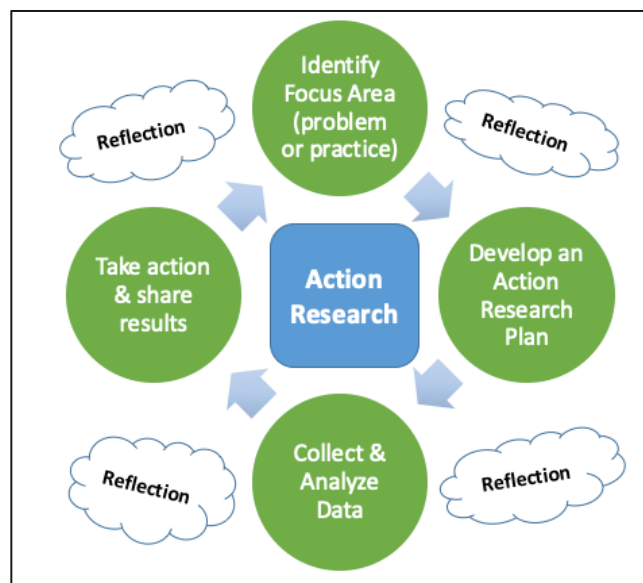
Qualitative researchers stress the socially constructed nature of the reality, the intimate relationship between the researcher and what is studied, and the situational constraints that shape inquiry. Such researchers . . . seek answers to questions that stress how social

experience is created and given meaning. (p. 8)

The data from peer coaching conversations and the interviews provide another opportunity for teachers to share their thoughts that can extend the action research process.

The action research process is more than solving problems. Action research is filled with multiple opportunities for “deliberate inquiry . . . to improve practices in educational settings” (Glanz & Heimann, 2019, p. 354). Glanz and Heimann (2019) discuss how appreciative inquiry is a key component of action research. According to Glanz and Heimann (2019), appreciative inquiry is more than a problem-solving approach by “encompassing in terms of its encouragement and deep conversations and reflections among many members of a given organization” (p. 355). Glanz and Heimann (2019) discuss how important inquiry and reflection are critical components of the action research process.

According to Zepeda (2019), the action research process includes four steps. However, reflection is included in each of the four steps. Figure 3.1 portrays the action research process.



*Figure 3.1: Action Research, used by permission from Zepeda (2019)*

The first step in the action research process is to identify the focus area or the problem of practice. To better an organization, the researcher must identify what he/she wants to investigate. After reflecting on the focus area, an action plan must be developed. This is the second step and includes collecting data that would provide more understanding to the problem of practice. The third step is to organize and analyze the data. When analyzing data, Zepeda (2019) shares that reflection with colleagues about the meaning of the data is vital. After collaboration with the action research team, the last step includes the sharing of the results and acting on what was learned as a way to improve the organization. However, this is a cyclic process, and multiple cycles informs any areas that need more support, making rich conversations along the journey.

Bryk et al. (2015) stress how critical new practices must be tied to specific, measurable improvement efforts in education. To support teachers with any new practices, teachers need support in a job-embedded learning environment. The Comprehensive Reading Solutions Literacy Framework, being fairly new in the district, is tied to school improvement initiatives at Cool Springs Academy (Walpole & McKenna, 2017). Peer coaching, an interactive professional learning model tied to the action research process, was used to support teachers and to improve instruction in the area of literacy.

### **Conceptual Framework**

The conceptual framework of the study consists of three major components: Comprehensive Reading Solutions, peer coaching, and teacher reflection. All three components are founded in current research that offers a method for teachers to construct learning through job-embedded practices (Wood & Killian, 1998; Zepeda, 2017, 2018, 2019). Teachers can continue to hone their skills from professional learning offered by the Bark Camp District in the

area of the Comprehensive Reading Solutions Literacy Framework in a collaborative environment that will build trust. Peer coaching is the method used for teachers to set specific goals, observe others in action, receive feedback, and reflect. The conceptual framework is illustrated in Figure 1.3 (See Chapter 1).

### Interventions

The action research examined the components of Comprehensive Reading Solutions through the intervention of peer coaching, including its focus on teacher transfer and best practices and the components—coaching conferences and teacher reflections—both the bedrock of all coaching models (Zepeda, 2019). Peer coaching includes teachers observing their peers and improving practices by discussing critical pieces from the observations. For the purpose of this study, peer coaching is defined by Zepeda (2019) in the following manner: “Peer coaching is a multifaceted tool that can be implemented as an instructional strategy, a professional development strategy, and a complement to instructional supervision” (p. 167). Figure 1.2 (Chapter 1) illustrates the peer coaching cycle. The interventions of the action research, which includes peer coaching, school structures, and the Comprehensive Reading Solutions Literacy Framework (Walpole & McKenna, 2017), are shown in Table 3.1 along with a brief description.

Table 3.1

<i>Interventions of the Action Research Team</i>	
Interventions	Description
Peer coaching	Supported instructional improvement Provided teacher growth Initiated change in teacher practice



Table 3.1 (continued)

Interventions	Description
School structures	<p>Established weekly meetings with administration</p> <p>Established weekly grade-level meetings</p> <p>Engaged instructional coach to assist with professional growth</p> <p>Involved learning supports to benefit student needs</p>
Comprehensive Reading Solutions (Walpole & McKenna, 2017)	<p>Embedded support for interventions in reading for all students</p> <p>Initiated change in teacher practice (district-led)</p> <p>Established pacing for literacy instruction</p>
Induction for new teachers	<p>Linked beginning teachers with a mentor teacher</p> <p>Provided a systematic structure of support for beginning teachers</p>

Prior to 2019, teachers at Cool Springs Academy were not observed by their peers. According to the results from the 2018 self-efficacy survey, the teachers asked to observe others. Demographic changes and district professional development initiatives indicate the need for a job-embedded approach, like peer coaching, to support teachers at Cool Springs Academy. Traditional professional development, like most district-led training, is frequently ineffective, and the intervention, peer coaching, is a highly interactive process centered around the direct transfer of learning (Joyce & Showers, 2002; Zepeda, 2019).

Third grade is a pivotal point for students learning how to read. Hernandez (2011) indicated that students who cannot read after third grade are at risk of not graduating from high school. In the state of Georgia, students begin taking state assessments in third grade in the areas of reading, writing, and mathematics. Along with these pressures and the recent changes to literacy instruction by the school and district, this action research case study examines the third-grade team at Cool Springs Academy. The six third-grade teachers were paired together based on the level of experience and completed two rounds of the peer coaching process. Before

starting the second round of the process, a mid-course adjustment review was held with the teachers to adjust instruction. Individual interviews were conducted with all teachers at the beginning of the study and at the conclusion of the study.

An informal meeting was held with the teachers prior to the action research study to build an initial understanding and overview of the expectations involved. After agreeing to participate in the study, the teachers were provided with an understanding of peer coaching by an outside expert. The outside expert was chosen to build trust and to foster more dialogue within the group. The expert was selected based on her knowledge and experience. She has 25 years in education with 6 years as an elementary teacher, 15 years as an instructional coach, and 4 years as the K-8 Literacy Content Specialist. She holds a Master's of Arts in Teaching and is certified in grades K-8. She also has earned National Board Certification and is currently enrolled in a doctoral program to continue her commitment to lifelong learning.

During the meeting, the expert engaged the teachers in an informal meeting about how she has used the peer coaching process and the outcomes. With a focus of literacy instruction, the expert provided examples while probing the teachers to gain understanding. She shared tools to help the process and ways to gather feedback. The teachers collaborated on the instrument to build more understanding of the leading questions. However, the teachers agreed to use the resource without making changes to the resources the expert presented. The document provided an opportunity for the teachers to have an open dialogue with a peer about some possible struggles they were facing. Figure 3.2 was one document shared for the initial pre-conference among the teachers.

Pre-Observation Conference Notes							
Teacher:					Date:		
Target Area:							
	Notes with Teacher			Notes for the Observer			
What is going well?							
Is anything a struggle right now?							
What would you like for me to focus on intently?							
Are there any students you would like for me to focus on during my visit?							
Where would you like for me to sit?							

*Figure 3.2: Pre-observation Conference Notes*

The document is used for teachers to discuss specific goals for the lesson while building a sense of understanding for the peer who will observe. Creating the tools collaboratively adds a step but also adds validity and reliability to the case study (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Figure 3.3 is a similar document used for the post-observation conference and is used for teachers to share evidence from the observed lesson while offering strategic feedback that can enhance instruction.

Post-Observation Conference Notes			
Teacher: _____		Date: _____	
What I noticed . . .	What I am wondering . . .	Next Steps	How can I support you?

Figure 3.3: Post-observation Conference Notes

## Design of the Study

Action research was selected as a method to examine peer coaching as an intervention among third grade teachers during the implementation stages of the Comprehensive Reading Solutions Literacy Framework (Walpole & McKenna, 2017). The research site, Cool Springs Academy, first implemented Comprehensive Reading Solutions in 2017. The intervention of peer coaching was used to continue with job-embedded learning while improving best practices.

The case study methodology was appropriate to use in this action research and as Yin (2003) stated, “You would use a case study method because you deliberately wanted to cover contextual conditions-believing that they might be highly pertinent to your phenomenon of study” (p. 13). Other contextual conditions include coaching conversations as they unfold at the site as well as observations made by the researcher and interviews. Creswell, Hanson, Clark, and Morales (2007) advocated, “Case study research builds an in-depth, contextual understanding of the case, relying on multiple data sources” (p. 245). Using an array of data sources that included coaching conversations, teacher interviews, and documents used to capture minutes and teacher

reflections helped to uncover what teachers learned from the experiences with peer coaching associated with the development of classroom practices and literacy.

Professional development is the first step. The participants, all third-grade teachers, were provided with professional learning regarding peer coaching. Peer coaching was as “a multifaceted tool that can be implemented as an instructional strategy, a professional development strategy, and a complement to instructional supervision” (Zepeda, 2019, p. 167). Peer coaching helps to solidify the transfer of learning with curriculum and instruction, while providing timely feedback or interventions along the way as job-embedded and real-time learning (Zepeda, 2019). The peer coaching process also allows the teacher to differentiate his/her learning, while transferring the new practices into the classroom using his/her own personal style of teaching (Zepeda, 2019). Providing the foundation and setting the stage are keys for implementation.

The team of teachers worked together to develop classroom observation protocols. These documents were used by participants during pre- and post-conferences, peer observations, teacher reflections, and team meetings. The teachers formed pairs based on experience of teaching third grade or the total number of years teaching experience. For example, a teacher with 15 years of teaching experience but only one year of teaching third-grade was paired with a teacher with four years of teaching experience and zero experience teaching third grade. The expectation was that teachers would observe one another for a minimum of 30 minutes each, they would engage in paired conversations, and then extend these discussions in team meetings that are scheduled weekly.

The action research examined teachers as they engaged in cycles of peer coaching as a way to gain an understanding of their experiences of working with one another in such activities as enacting the peer coaching cycle (pre-observation conferences, observations, post- observation conferences, and follow-up reflections), the conversations they have had during planning periods, and other related activities that may have evolved over the course of this study. After the professional learning, the six third-grade teachers were interviewed to learn any initial themes that can be shared with the participants and the action research team. The teachers set the focus during pre-observation conferences. The focus may have changed slightly during the cycle but continued to target literacy practices.

The teachers completed two rounds of the peer coaching cycle. Then, the researcher facilitated a meeting with the teachers highlighting any themes that arose and any mid-course adjustments with the teachers, if any, that needed to be made and shared the student universal screener data. To conclude, the researcher interviewed teachers to understand what was gained from the experience. In addition, the researcher interviewed four members on the action team, a district-level representative, the school principal, the instructional coach, and the third-grade chair. These four action team members offer varying perspectives from different levels: district leader, school leader, new leader, and teacher leader.

Four steps are provided in the action research cycle. The first step includes setting the focus area, which is literacy using the intervention of peer coaching. The action step that follows provides support for teachers with observations, conferences, and interviews. Teacher reflection and mid-course adjustments after the first action research cycle entail the third step. The researcher monitors the research goals and discusses details with the participants bring the cycle

to close. The process is cyclical and then repeats. Figure 3.4 offers a diagram to illustrate the design of the study and to show the connection to the action research model.



*Figure 3.4: Design of the Study*

#### *Action Research Facilitator*

In this case study, the researcher is the action research facilitator. The researcher coordinated efforts between the participants, action research team, and the school-wide leadership team. Since the researcher also performs the duties of an assistant principal, other administrators at the school conducted evaluations of the teachers in the study to eliminate any conflicts of interest and to help build trust. The researcher also contacted a local expert to provide the professional learning about peer coaching for the participants. The expert has vast experience as a literacy coach and leading peer coaching in different districts in Georgia. The purpose of the action research facilitator is to be aware of the roles each person plays and the

dynamics of each group (Stringer, 2014), ensuring each voice can be heard. The researcher led each meeting of the action research team and continued collecting feedback from each team member. The researcher collected data by interviewing teachers and action team members as well as observing the teachers during regularly scheduled meetings.

### *Action Research Team*

The action research team consisted of the district elementary director, the school principal, two assistant principals, the instructional coach, and the third-grade lead teacher. This team met and discussed findings throughout the cycles of the action research. The action research team also supported the process by providing any additional resources needed. For example, the action research team provided substitutes for the third-grade teachers to have additional time to analyze data, discuss any challenges along the way, and share any future action needed. The action team provided this extra planning time with half-day sessions for all of the teachers at Cool Springs Academy. Table 3.2 lists the members of the action research team along with duties at Cool Springs Academy and official job titles.

Table 3.2

### *Action Research Team*

Team Member	Primary Role	Action Research Role
Primary Researcher	Assistant Principal at Cool Springs Academy Roles include leading professional development in mathematics and providing positive behavior interventions for students	Leads and facilitates all research with the action research team. Brings 8 years of administrative experience to the team and 13 years in the classroom. He holds an Ed.S. in Education.



Table 3.2 (continued)

Team Member	Primary Role	Action Research Role
Mrs. Rachel Ohana	Instructional Coach at Cool Springs Academy	As a first-year instructional coach, she brings 21 years as a classroom teacher including 6 years as a third-grade teacher. Her highest degree earned is an Ed.S. in Education.
Ms. Becky Elliott	3 <sup>rd</sup> Grade Lead Teacher	Brings five years in teaching experience and a voice as a participant to help lead the research. Her highest degree earned is an Ed.S. in Education.
Mrs. Sara Ingles	Principal of Cool Springs Academy	Provides the overall drive for improvement and motivation. Brings over 25 years of experience with 10 years in administration. She earned an Ed.S. in Education.
Mrs. Lori Newman	Assistant Principal at Cool Springs Academy	Provides critical understanding of the literacy framework and its role out in the district. Brings 5 years as instructional coach. Her highest degree earned is an Ed.S. in Education
Dr. Idina Adams	Director of Elementary Schools for Bark Camp District	Brings over 20 years working in education including working in different leadership roles. Her highest degree earned is an Ed.D. in Educational Leadership.

### *Action Research Timeline*

The action research cycle represents an improvement process rooted in reflection. As participants go through the process, they act based on the results they learned. Herr and Anderson (2015) note that “this cycle of activities forms an action research spiral in which each

cycle increases the researcher’s knowledge of the original question, puzzle, or problem, and it is hoped, leads to its solution” (p. 5). The timeline for the action research follows the instructional calendar of the Bark Camp District as illustrated in Table 3.3.

Table 3.3

*Timeline and Activities for Action Research Team*

Date	Action Research Activity
July 2019	Action Research Team meetings; initial meetings and consent to participate in research explained by the researcher; Alignment of goals between research and school improvement efforts
August 2019	Professional learning – peer coaching introduced to participants; Individual teacher interviews; Action Research Team meeting
September 2019	Initial round of peer coaching among participants
October 2019	Mid-course Adjustment Review with teachers; Action Research Team meeting
November 2019	Alignment of research goals and school improvement efforts; Teacher reflection and planning
December 2019	Second round of peer coaching among teachers; Action Research Team meeting
January 2020	Individual teacher interviews conducted; Individual Action Research Team member interviews conducted; Alignment of research goals and school improvement efforts

With the teachers learning about peer coaching, creating documents to collect valuable information to improve practices, and setting goals about specific areas of focus, the teachers have ownership in the case study while the researcher is facilitating and taking note of all the underlying pieces. The context is important for future cycles and future studies. Stringer (2014)

affirms, “This methodology seeks to generate knowledge that is objective (not amenable to the subjective or authoritative judgments of people, organizations, or institutions) and generalizable (applicable to a wide variety of contexts)” (p. 42). Action research tells a story of where the participants have come from and where they are going. By using the intervention of peer coaching, the dynamics of the social context within the third-grade team will help support teachers while improving literacy practices.

### **Data Sources**

The hope for this case study was to increase teacher support by providing a structure and needed intervention to increase teacher self-efficacy and at the same time improving the third-grade collective teacher efficacy. Teachers then would hopefully, improve their literacy instruction. The data collection was purposeful to capture the peer coaching conversations between teachers. The following sections provide details about the sampling process, research site, and participants.

#### *Sampling Process*

All third-grade teachers were selected to participate, which includes six teachers. The third-grade teachers agreed to participate in the study and were provided quality assurances for the action research. The teachers were selected because of students’ transition to literacy during third grade. During third grade, students begin to read for understanding instead of learning to read. Along with the literacy transition, Hernandez (2011) described the importance of students reading by the end of third grade and that students have more difficulty when they come from lower-socioeconomic homes. The participants were full-time teachers at Cool Springs Academy, a public school in northern Georgia. The teachers were also willing to participate in the professional learning provided about peer coaching, perform multiple cycles of peer coaching,

record their coaching conversations, be interviewed, and document the process along the way. All documents, including teacher reflections, were used as data not only to help drive each coaching cycle but also to examine what and how teachers learned.

### *Research Site*

The research site is in northern Georgia and is a public school for grades prekindergarten through fifth. Cool Springs Academy, a pseudonym for the school, has approximately 900 students in attendance and is the largest elementary school in the district. Cool Springs Academy's major ethnic groups include 58% Hispanic, 20% Caucasian, and 14% African American. Many students live in government housing and four percent of the families are protected under the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act of 1987. Thirty-four percent of the families around the school (2-mile radius) have an annual income of \$25,000 or less, and 31% work in manufacturing plants in the surrounding community. Figure 4.1 (Chapter 4) displays the demographics of Cool Springs Academy. The action research anticipates portraying the naturalistic elements of job-embedded learning vis-à-vis peer coaching throughout the normal demands of teaching.

### *Participant Profiles*

The case study includes six third-grade teachers as the participants. Teachers were paired together with another teacher with different levels of experience. For example, a teacher with one year of experience in third grade was paired with a teacher with four years of experience. Each teacher brings unique characteristics to the study by offering variety of experiences and expertise. Table 3.4 provides an overview for each participant in the action research case study. For the participant pairings, Elizabeth Xiang was paired with Uma Easterly; Becky Elliott was paired with Christina Nguyen; and Rena Irvin was paired with Rosa Saddler.

Table 3.4

*Profile of Participants*

Name	Years of Teaching Experience	Years of Teaching Third Grade	Highest Degree Earned
Elizabeth Xiang	3	0	B.S. in Early Childhood Education; B.S. in Special Education
Becky Elliott	5	3	Ed.S. in Education
Uma Easterly	4	4	B.S. in Early Childhood Education; enrolled M.Ed. program
Rosa Saddler	4	0	M.Ed. in Early Childhood Education
Rena Irvin	15	1	M.Ed. in Literacy
Christina Nguyen	1	1	B.S. in Early Childhood Education

**Data Collection**

This action research uses qualitative methods. Following Magana's (2002) suggestions, the researcher incorporated numerous qualitative methods to collect data including:

1. Individual interviews with all the six third-grade teachers at Cool Springs Academy and individual interviews among select action research team members;
2. Observations of regularly scheduled meetings, peer observations (teachers observing teachers);
3. Audio-recordings of coaching conversations

4. Document analysis of artifacts about the peer coaching process that participants were asked to keep written reflections along with minutes from meetings;
5. An ethnographic research journal in which the researcher reflected about meanings of data, experiences, and other items deemed noteworthy before, during, and after data collection over the six-month period of the study;
6. Supplemental Quantitative Data from universal screeners showing literacy progress from the beginning of the school year to the middle of the school year;
7. Other data sources to assist with triangulation include agendas from meetings and teacher's lesson plans. These perspectives were used to help clarify and confirm hunches about the data collected from the six third-grade teachers at Cool Springs Academy.

The methods were incorporated into the action research to ensure validity and to increase transparency among stakeholders.

### *Interviews*

Interviewing was a method used for the action research. Simons (2009) presented, "Compared with other methods, interviews enable researchers to get to core issues in the case more quickly and in greater depth, to probe motivations, to ask follow-up questions, and to facilitate individuals telling their past stories" (p. 31). Roulston (2019) provided that the descriptions taken during interviews are true representations of a person's values, and "much qualitative research rests on this approach in which participants' narratives are generated in open-ended interviews with the aim of generating findings that represent each participant's

‘voice’” (p. 6). The selection of the questions and format were based on the position of the researcher, to be elaborated in the ethics part of this chapter.

For this study, the researcher conducted three rounds of interviews. The teachers engaged in two rounds of interviews, one prior to starting the cycle of peer coaching and one at the end of the cycle. Appendix A and Appendix B provides these interview guides, respectfully. Appendix C provides the interview guide used for the Action Team members. Action Team members were interviewed and included a third-grade teacher, the instructional coach, the principal, and the director of elementary schools. Table 3.5 portrays an example of an interview question and responses from two participants.

Table 3.5

*Interview with Teachers*

Interview Question: What experience do you have observing other teachers? Describe any prior peer coaching experiences.

Participant	Quote
Miss Becky Elliott	For the past five years, I have not specifically been outside of the room to observe others. We (third-grade teachers) have only discussed the lessons and how things are going. I have had administrators provide feedback but don't recall having feedback specifically on a shared reading segment of the framework. The feedback has shown that we were following the framework and had an understanding of the components.
Mrs. Rena Irvin	I feel like when an administrator comes in the classroom that it is more of a punitive thing. It is seen not to help me grow or to help me get better. The administrator is critiquing me and telling me what I am doing wrong basically. I feel like that's why peer coaching could definitely be a little less threatening to teachers.

### *Peer Observations*

Peer observations were another method used in this study to collect data. Peer observations followed the methods originally prescribed by Joyce and Showers (1981, 1982, 1995, 2002). Joyce and Showers (1981) coined the term ‘transfer of training’ in their original research on coaching. According to Joyce and Showers (2002), ‘transfer of training’ is the knowledge gained from job-embedded practices such as peer coaching. After the observation, Hohensee and Lewis (2019) reported:

the teaching partner, not the observer, should take the lead during peer coaching.

Moreover, the teacher for that observation should provide the observer with written notes and a verbal explanation about what the teacher wants the observer to watch for.

(p. 104)

Each teacher recorded notes during the observation using the observation instrument the teachers agreed upon. This was developed during the professional learning the participants received. Reflections were also recorded and shared with the researcher. Afterwards, a post-observation conference was held between the two teachers and feedback was shared. Both teachers would take turns sharing their goals, the activities during the lesson observed, and if they accomplished the goals. This process was duplicated among the six third-grade teachers.

### *Audio-recordings of Coaching Conversation*

Coaching conversations are a critical, if not the most critical, part of the peer coaching process (Zepeda, 2019). For teachers to feel comfortable, the researcher did not want to be intrusive during the coaching conversations. Therefore, audio-recordings were used to capture the interactions between teachers. Teachers scheduled their own meeting time and made the researcher aware of when and where the coaching conversation would take place with at least



a 24-hour notice. The teachers recorded the pre-observation conference and post-observation conference with their peer for each of the four cycles. Audio devices were made available to all teachers who participated in the study, although most used their own devices. The teachers emailed the audio recording to the researcher within a 24-hour window of completing the conversation. The researcher then transcribed the audio recordings within a two-week timeframe.

Each coaching conversation is unique with each teacher bringing their own background of expertise and context of their classroom makeup. As the action research process cycle repeats, the hope is for the individuals to gain a sense of teacher self-efficacy and to establish a sense of trust within the team while they learn about their instructional practices. With teachers asking each other questions, expressing points-of-view, and students and their work, the conversations can present a sense of vulnerability. Roulston (2010) reveals that the connection between the teachers “is one in which genuine rapport and trust is established by the interviewer in order to generate the kind of conversation that is intimate and self-revealing” (p. 56). By using the audio recordings and transcribing the data, the researcher can more fully understand the phenomena that occur as teachers learn a new literacy framework and improve instructional practices. Hohensee and Lewis (2019) stated the importance of using multiple qualitative measures to build a strong foundation for a case study.

An example of the coaching conversations includes Miss Rosa Saddler, a new teacher on the grade level, and Mrs. Rena Irvin, a veteran teacher, sharing writing strategies. The post-conference was held after the teachers initially met to discuss instructional goals and then scheduling time to observe each other. The example of the data collected is shown in Table 3.6.

Table 3.6

*Audio-recordings of Coaching Conversations*

Participant	Quote	Researcher's notes	Initial Code(s)
Miss Rosa Saddler	I like how you had the sentence scramble. I felt like that was beneficial as a visual for each student. I usually just write it on the board and erase. Then, I ask my students if it makes sense. Then, I erase and write it over. I like the aspect of your lesson. The kids were super engaged. Also, I like how you gave them ideas if they were struggling.	A new teacher sharing her feedback with a more veteran team member	Writing strategies, Scaffolding, Student Engagement
Mrs. Rena Irvin	I loved the bubble map that you did for your super sentences. I know I need to start taking some of the 'training wheels' off of mine because I typically give them a sentence frame. I thought that was a good way to take the 'training wheels' off. It would still give them help but not as much support. I am definitely going to start doing that when we return after the break.	A veteran shared that she like the new teacher's graphic organizer for writing. The graphic organizer is used by the entire grade level for student writing based off of this conversation. (veteran teacher learning from a new team member)	Writing strategies, Student Independence

## *Documents*

The data used for the study, including audio-recordings from coaching conversations, notes from teacher reflections, and teacher interviews, were triangulated to contribute to the validity of the study and to continue the action research cycle. The coaching conversations were comprised of a pre-observation conference and a post-observation conference. During the pre-observation conference, the teachers set goals that support the literacy initiative using the Comprehensive Reading Solutions Literacy Framework, specifically the shared reading segment. Also, the teachers developed an observation instrument to use and documents to use to collect data from coaching conversations. The peer coaching cycle was completed with the pairs of teachers four times with the teachers rotating roles of observer and teacher. The role switching ensured that each teacher was observed twice and coaching conferences were directly tied to those observations. Both teachers reflected on the observation and lesson and discussed goals. The coaching conversations were collected on the post-observation document to analyze the results of the group. Also, minutes from meetings and lesson plans were examined to provide more understanding to instructional practices and the research goals.

The documents shared by the outside expert were found to be most helpful. The documents allowed teachers to share openly. The pre-observation notes (shown in Figure 3.2) is one example of the many documents that were analyzed. Mrs. Irvin's notes from the pre-observation conference are presented in Figure 3.5. Mrs. Irvin was paired with Miss Saddler.

Teacher Irvin Observation Conference Notes Date 12/18/19

Post 2

Target Area:

What is going well?	Students Know Procedures / expectations
Is anything a struggle right now?	Engaging fluency / comp groups.
What would you like for me to focus on intently?	Skills time.
Are there any students you would like for me to focus on during my visit?	L [redacted], C [redacted], J [redacted]
Where would you like for me to sit?	Anywhere.

Figure 3.5: Pre-observation Notes taken by Participants

Notes from the post-observation conference were also collected. The teachers used the Post-Observation Conference Notes document for this purpose (shown in Figure 3.3). Mrs. Irvin's notes from the post-observation conference with Miss. Saddler is depicted in Figure 3.6.

Post Observation Conference

Date 12/18/19 Teacher Irvin observing Saddler

What I noticed...	What I'm wondering...	Next Steps	How can I support you?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Kids were reading and on task</li> <li>- Good tempo, got through all Components.</li> <li>- Always positive and clear expectations</li> <li>- Students were on task + following procedures for re-reading.</li> <li>- Love the bubble map for super sentences.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- How do you determine who is Partner reading together?</li> <li>- Do you change periodically or is it usually the same?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Knowing when to go down the "rabbit hole."</li> <li>- Times for kids to track WPM?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Feels good about this segment, gave info about short reads and will implement</li> </ul>

Figure 3.6: Post-observation Notes shared by Participants

### *Ethnographic Journal*

Ethnographic journaling represents the fourth method of data collection. The researcher is constantly in the field observing and interacting with the participants and the action research team members. Simons (2009) upheld, "Observation is present throughout the whole research process from the moment you enter the field until you leave" (p. 43). The action research employed ethnographic practices. Prasad (2005) described ethnography as:

Very much part of the anthropological discipline within which it developed as a way to understand ‘natives’ in their own cultures . . . , [and] ethnography tends to be most forcefully equated with methods and methodologies calling for some form of in-depth fieldwork employing participant observation as a primary component of the research project. (p. 75)

The ethnographic journal was kept to depict the teachers in the field and in their natural element over extended periods of time. The researcher used ethnographic journaling to document field notes including reflections, meanings of data, experiences during teacher meetings, conclusions drawn during action research team meetings, and other items deemed significant over the course of the six-month period of the study. Table 3.7 demonstrates the researcher’s reflective practice with notes collected throughout the action research case study.

Table 3.7

*Ethnographic Journal Entry – Why Bookworms?*

---

Team Observation - September 16 - All members present

Xiang - new third grade member - passionate about math

Discussion about teaching multiplication and division as fact families instead of two separate operations. Others disagreed with Xiang.

Structure is needed to start slow and build trust. What can help bring the team together?

---

Xiang in an interview

Quote:

Math is my strength. Planning with my co-partner, we have different views and different ways of doing things. So being able to see those things may be able to give us our own ideas or provide feedback for ways to improve.

---

Elliott in an interview

(validates Xiang’s passion about math and being on a new team)

Quote:

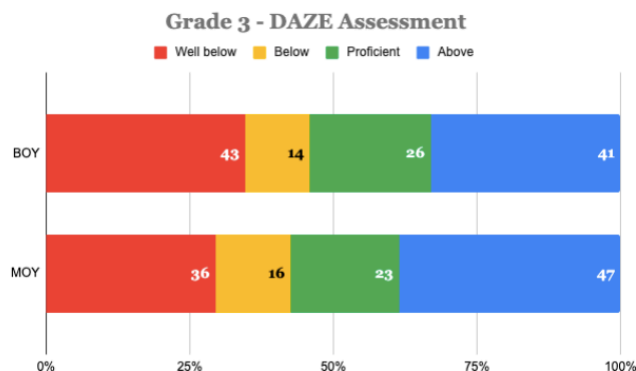
I think in other subject areas people are more passionate and it is not scripted. With Bookworms, you do this on day 1 and this on day 2. With less structure, the outcome could have been very different with some hurt feelings from the beginning of the school year.

---

### *Supplemental Quantitative Data*

Quantitative data were used to supplement the qualitative data collected at Cool Springs Academy. The methods used remains qualitative and not a mixed-method study. Simons (2009) affirmed, “Methodology does not define a case study, although it shapes the form of a particular study” (p. xv). Using both qualitative and quantitative data provides a deeper understanding of the action research and specific contextual evidence surrounding the case (Simons, 2009). The researcher examined quantitative data, such as universal screeners that all students at Cool Springs Academy take three times over the course of the school year. During the six-month period of the study, the researcher facilitated with the teachers and the action research team the change of universal screeners from August until November. Appendix D provides a summary of the data collection process.

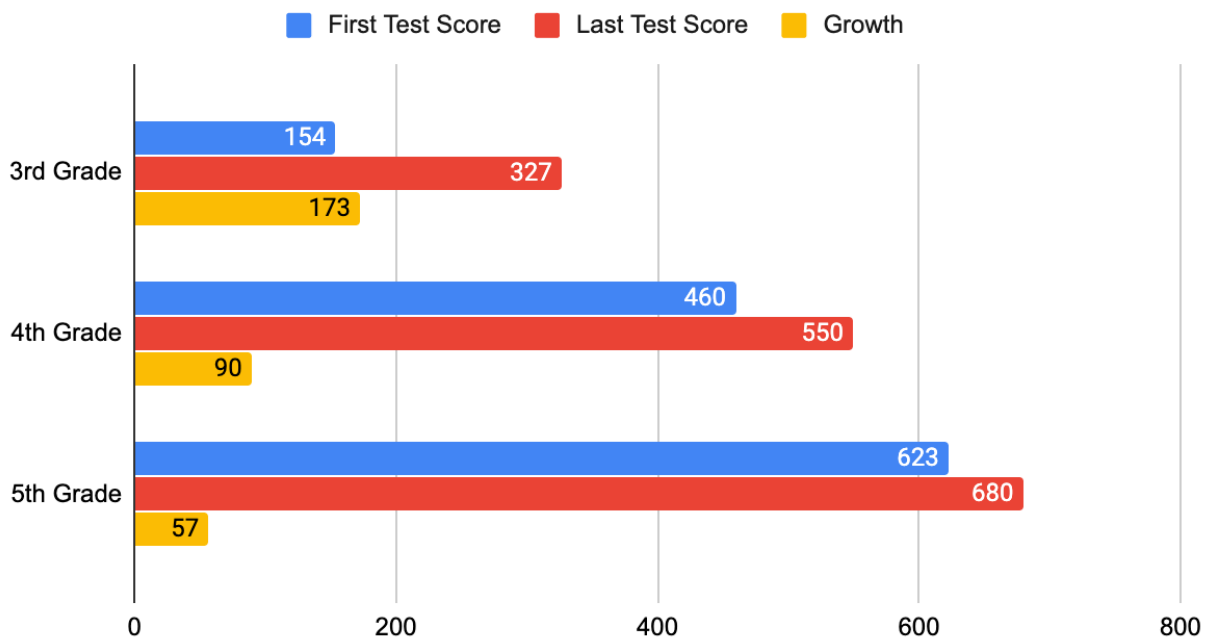
Third-grade students take one portion of the Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (University of Oregon, 2020) called the DIBELS Maze. The DIBELS Maze assesses reading fluency and comprehension. The term ‘BOY’ and ‘MOY’ refer to the beginning of the year and the middle of the year scores respectively. The red area represents the percent of students who are struggling the most, while the blue area represents the percent of students who are above the grade-level benchmark. Figure 3.7 portrays this quantitative data.



*Figure 3.7: Quantitative Data from the DIBELS MAZE (University of Oregon, 2020)*

Third-grade students also take the Reading Inventory (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2019). This assessment gives teachers the data to forecast student trajectories and to help with differentiation (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2019). Figure 3.8 demonstrates the overall student growth in third grade during the study compared to other grade levels.

### Cool Springs Academy - RI Results (Fall 2019)



*Figure 3.8: Quantitative Data from the Reading Inventory (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2019)*

#### *Other Data Sources*

Using other data sources increases the trustworthiness of the study and provides for the triangulation of the data. Other data sources also provide more context to the overall story, while extending the action research. Triangulation is defined as using multiple data sources from various perspectives (Flick, von Kardorff, & Steinke, 2002). This is imperative to minimize any researcher bias. According to Denzin (1978, 2012), triangulation was initially used for



validation purposes, but today it is used to provide a broader understanding of the action research. These data sources included minutes from coaching conferences, notes from teachers' reflections, teacher lesson plans, and agendas from grade-level meetings.

After coding the different data elements, the researcher looked for themes. Analyzing each element collected in the study increased validity and decreased the researcher's bias. An example of the triangulation method used by the researcher is displayed in Table 3.8. The table shows some of the themes that arose from the study, the data source, and the participant who originated the initial code.

Table 3.8

*Triangulation Method – Instructional Strategies*

Theme	Data Source(s)	Participant(s)
Student Grouping	Post-observation conferences Midcourse adjustment review Action Team minutes	Elliott, Nguyen, Easterly, Xiang, Irvin, Saddler, and Action Team members
Teacher self-efficacy	Interviews Action Team minutes	Elliott, Easterly, Xiang, Irvin, Saddler, Action Team members
Lesson Objective/Focus	Post-observation conferences Interviews	Easterly, Xiang, Irvin, and Saddler

### **Data Analysis**

Interviews, observations, audio-recordings, documents, journals, supplemental qualitative data, and more data were analyzed for initial codes and potential themes. To make sense of all of the data sources, the researcher had to make sense of each item. Stake (2010) stated, "All people make interpretations. All research requires interpretations. Qualitative research relies heavily on interpretive perceptions throughout the planning, data gathering, analysis, and write-up of the study" (p. 55). As each element was collected, the researcher began the data analysis process immediately. By doing so, the researcher was able to compare specific themes that emerged and

then categorize the results with the research questions. Creswell and Poth (2018) describe this qualitative approach as an “intrinsic case study” (p. 99). While the focus remains on the case itself, the context of study plays a vital role of understanding any data findings or implications (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Chapter 4 illustrates the context of the study.

Interviews and peer coaching conversations were audio-recorded from August 2019 to January 2020. Initial analysis took place when having conversations with the participants and additional analysis took place while reading the transcription. The researcher wrote notes and codes during the interviews and while listening to the peer coaching conversations. The ethnographic journal was used to capture initial thoughts and reflections. After the initial round of the peer coaching process, a mid-course adjustment review was held with the participants. The mid-course adjustment review included a meeting where thoughts about the first phase of the process were collected and developed action steps to adjust the second round of the action research. Appendix F is the summary of this meeting and provides an example of the data analysis process. Another example is found in Appendix G that includes notes collected from one of the action team meetings.

Interviews were used to capture the participants overall thoughts and feelings throughout the action research case study. The researcher ordered the interview questions, starting with questions the participants would feel more comfortable about and then building to the concepts surrounding peer coaching. Before beginning an interview, the researcher reminded the participant of the purpose of the study. Participants were assured of confidentiality to help them feel more open to respond. Afterwards, the researcher transcribed the interviews, listening to the interviews multiple times to reflect about each data element and analyze steps taken throughout the action research cycle. The peer coaching conversations were also recorded and transcribed in

a similar fashion. After transcribing, the researcher organized the data using the format in Table 3.9.

Table 3.9

<i>Sample of Analysis from Coaching Conversation Transcripts</i>			
Participant	Quote	Researcher Notes	Initial Codes
Miss Elizabeth Xiang	I am religious about using the PowerPoint. I noticed you were not using it.	Peer teacher discussing the use of instructional resources (Post-observation Conference)	Instructional strategies, Learning Target, Time management, Use of Technology
Miss Uma Easterly	Yeah it does put the comprehension questions and the writing prompts up. Thank you. I forgot about that.	Peer teacher discussing the use of instructional resources (Post-observation Conference)	Instructional strategies, Learning Target, Time management, Use of Technology
Miss Elizabeth Xiang	I like to use it because during partner time when a group finishes earlier than everyone else, they can go back and look at the focus and talk about it.	Peer teacher discussing the use of instructional resources (Post-observation Conference)	Instructional strategies, Learning Target, Time management, Use of Technology

After organizing the data, the researcher analyzed the initial codes to see if any themes developed. The researcher listed the themes together to see how many times the concept was discussed and triangulated the data for validity. For example, the instructional strategy of student grouping was discussed in six different times either in post-observation conferences by all participants, in the mid-course adjustment review with all participants, or in interviews conducted individually with all participants. Other codes like scaffolding, focus of the lesson,

and use of resources were also related to the theme of instructional strategies. Table 3.10 demonstrates the process of building initial codes

Table 3.10

*Instructional Strategy – Student Grouping*

Data Source	Participants Involved	Notes
Post-observation conference 1	Elliott/Nguyen	Nguyen had 15/20 BRs and could not pair. Elliott mentioned a way to record herself reading for students to use while listening and tracking in a small group with the lowest students. Then Nguyen can pair the remaining students.
Post-observation conference 1	Easterly/Xiang	Xiang ability groups students (a high student with a low student). She always assigns the student groups.
Mid-course adjustment review	All participants	A theme discussed during a meeting.
Post-observation conference 2	Easterly/Xiang	Easterly allowed students to partner read with the partner of their own choosing. This was random to help with classroom management. This was seen as a reward for students and the teacher does this periodically. The teacher believes it helps with motivation. The teacher's normal practice would be to assign peer partners for shared reading for two different books and then reassign new partners.

Table 3.10 (continued)

Data Source	Participants Involved	Notes
Post-observation conference 2	Irvin/Saddler	Saddler uses Lexiles to pair students. But she wants to make sure students are working and shows concerns about students who are quiet. She puts quiet students together so that someone has to initiate discussion. She sometimes puts students that normally distract others together. This makes them accountable and helps with overall classroom management.
Post Interview	Xiang	Difficulty of grouping students that were nonreaders and having a small group of students that were advanced readers.

The researcher organized the documents and made interpretations to answer the research questions. To increase validity and clarity, the researcher then asked the action team members to check the interpretations of the data. Creswell and Poth (2018) describes this step as “member checking or seeking participant feedback” (p. 261). Key members include a third-grade teacher who is also on the action team since she is the third-grade chair. Other members include the district elementary director, the school principal, and the school’s instructional coach.

### **Ethics**

A researcher must put in place safeguards to ensure that the research was ethical and trustworthy. The hope of the study was to support teachers using job-embedded, reflective processes to refine current instructional practices related to the Comprehensive Reading

Solutions Literacy Framework. All of the processes involved in the action research followed the high standards defined by the Georgia's Code of Ethics for Educators (2018). Simons (2009) warned, "The fundamental ethical principle in research, whatever methodology you choose, is to do no harm" (p. 85). The action research received approval from the Institutional Review Board with the school, the district, and the University associated with the study. To ensure ethical measures, the researcher was in constant review of the action research while reflecting on the work along the way.

### *Reliability and Validity*

When paying attention to ethics, the reliability and validity of the study were always at the forefront of processes. Simons (2009) noted, "Three qualitative methods often used in case study research to facilitate in-depth analysis and understanding are interview, observation, and document analysis" (p. 21). The methods were incorporated into the action research to ensure validity and to increase transparency among stakeholders. Other methods were used to provide contextual information and to aid in understanding the perspectives shared, and the context of the study.

The researcher addressed each research question by using multiple methods to triangulate the data. Table 3.8, earlier in this chapter, demonstrates how data was organized and triangulated for the first research question. Similarly, Table 3.10 displays the triangulation method used to help answer the third research question, providing ways to support the peer coaching process among teachers. Table 3.11 demonstrates a couple of themes that developed over the course of the action research case study

Table 3.11

*Triangulation Method – Ways to Support Peer Coaching*

Theme	Data Source(s)	Participant(s)
Collaborative grouping	Action Team interviews Interviews	Dr. Adams Mrs. Ingles Mrs. Ohana Mrs. Newman Miss Elliott Mrs. Irvin Miss Easterly Miss Saddler
Time management	Action Team meeting Post-observation conferences Mid-course adjustment review Interviews	Action Team members All participants

Also, Coghlan and Brannick (2014) supported, “action research projects are situation-specific and do not aim to create universal knowledge” (p. 172). Because the project was specific to Cool Springs Academy, applications to other schools or situations are challenging to make. That is, this action research does not attempt to generalize that would be universal to other schools; however, it is feasible that the lessons learned could inform future inquiry into peer coaching as a way to support the development of literacy methods that support student learning.

*Subjectivity Statement*

The researcher is also the assistant principal at Cool Springs Academy and works closely with the school principal. In addition to my leadership role in the school, I have lived in the community my entire life, and I am a parent at Cool Springs Academy, making this action research case study more personal. I recognized that additional steps were needed to unearth biases and to ensure neutrality.

The principal is the sponsor of the study and desires only the best for the school. Currently, the principal holds a Specialist Degree in education. The principal and researcher have been working together at Cool Springs Academy since the 2015-2016 school year. The principal is a veteran in the field of elementary education. The principal has been working at Cool Springs Academy for 15 years as a teacher, assistant principal, and principal. She became the school's principal at the beginning of the 2015-2016 school year.

The assistant principal, or the researcher, also holds a Specialist in Education Degree. With experience in multiple middle and high schools, the 2015-2016 school year was the first year working in an elementary school. My background is in mathematics education, where I taught 6<sup>th</sup> grade through post-secondary courses. I was a teacher, then instructional coach, before becoming an assistant principal. Having taught post-secondary courses and working as an instructional coach within the district, leading professional development has become a part of my job.

The action research case examined the practices of six teachers in third grade. The experience levels of the third-grade teachers vary ranging from a first-year teacher with a Bachelor's Degree to a veteran teacher with a Specialist in Education Degree having over 20 years of experience. These teachers all make up the same professional learning community and have the same planning time.

The administration meets with different teacher groups regularly. The school's leadership team meets monthly, which also acted as the advisory team for the research. School leaders meet with teachers once a week for job-embedded learning. The Response to Intervention (RTI) coordinator meets once a month with grade-level professional learning communities and more as needed with individual teachers. The instructional coach meets with



various groups to assist the school in professional learning and student achievement including meeting with new teachers once a month. Teachers collaborate multiple times throughout the week to plan accordingly.

Regarding this study, district office staff, the school principal, and the school's leadership understand about improving teacher practice by looking closely at Comprehensive Reading Solutions, the new literacy framework. At this point, the school principal and instructional coach understand more regarding the use of peer coaching.

Also, using peer coaching with the work of Walpole and McKenna (2017), documents were created to guide the action research process. Many tools were created using guidance from the text *Informal Classroom Observations on the Go* (Zepeda, 2012). However, the teachers used these tools as a basis to create their own guides to fit the context surrounding the case. Also, permission has been secured at this time from the district's Board of Education to approve and is included in the Appendices.

### **Limitations of the Study**

The action research was completed in a limited timeframe at a specific location. The study centered on six third-grade teachers as the focus group. The group of teachers had been introduced to prior professional knowledge of the Comprehensive Reading Solutions Literacy Framework (Walpole & McKenna, 2017). However, they had not worked as a team observing each other as intimately as they did over the course of this study. Stringer (2014) noted that “very few action research contexts provide the means to incorporate the necessary research design that would enable a practitioner to rigorously test a hypothesis or to generalize the results outside of the research contexts” (p. 133). Merriam and Grenier (2019) shared that even with a sample size of one that a picture could be painted that described “a fuller picture of what content

can be found within the app[lication]” (p. 402). Therefore, the findings were not generalizable but a clear picture was provided to describe the lessons learned.

### **Chapter Summary**

The action research case study used the peer coaching process as an intervention with the hope of initiating change. The participants, all third-grade teachers, were asked to complete two peer coaching cycles and to reflect throughout the process. Multiple data sources were collected including: interviews, observations, audio-recordings, multiple documents, journals, quantitative data, and other sources. These documents were analyzed for initial codes that developed into themes that developed over the course of the study. Chapter 4 presents the context of the study and the participants.

## **CHAPTER 4**

### **CONTEXT OF THE STUDY**

The context sets the stage for the action research case study and provides background information about the participants at the research site. As with a story, the setting provides a time and place, which helps to set the tone for future action and interaction with the characters. The participants at Cool Springs Academy, the research site, are at a pivotal time to develop essential support with the school hoping to aid school improvement. A story also has conflict. Cool Springs Academy, a high-needs school, has struggled with early literacy interventions. Representing the plot within a story which describes a sequence of events and their significance, the action research examined the components of Comprehensive Reading Solutions through the intervention of peer coaching.

The context of the case study outlined in this chapter provides a story of the action research, a foundation used to capture the backdrop surrounding the research site and the voices of all participants. The chapter is divided into eight sections: 1) purpose of the study, 2) research questions, 3) description of the study context, 4) initial literacy development, 5) researcher's role, 6) professional learning, 7) district charter status and history, and 8) chapter summary.

#### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this action research case study was to examine peer coaching of third-grade teachers during the implementation of a literacy framework in a suburban elementary school. Through such an effort, the hope is to support teachers using job-embedded, reflective

processes to refine current instructional practices related to the Comprehensive Reading Solutions Literacy Framework (Walpole & McKenna, 2017).

Coaching in the context of literacy is important because learning to read by the end of third grade is a critical milestone for students (Hernandez, 2011). The literacy framework is based on the work of Walpole and McKenna (2017). Walpole and McKenna (2017) refer to the literacy framework as the Comprehensive Reading Solution (CRS) or the Bookworm lesson format.

### **Research Questions**

Districts desire consistency in curriculum implementation and assessment during the process of working toward reaching achievement goals. Quality instruction includes the use of research-based, best practices such as those embedded in the Comprehensive Reading Solutions Literacy Framework (Walpole & McKenna, 2017). This action research study addressed the following questions:

- 1) How might peer coaching be used to improve teacher practice using the Comprehensive Reading Solutions Literacy Framework?
- 2) What is learned by teachers and administrators as they work collaboratively to implement peer coaching as it relates to implementing the Comprehensive Reading Solutions Literacy Framework?
- 3) What can school leaders learn about supporting peer coaching among teachers?

### **Description of the Study Context**

The peer coaching model was examined as a tool to offer needed steps for school improvement at Cool Springs Academy. With a focus on literacy instruction, peer coaching was examined to provide continued support for teachers in a nonjudgmental manner. Teachers

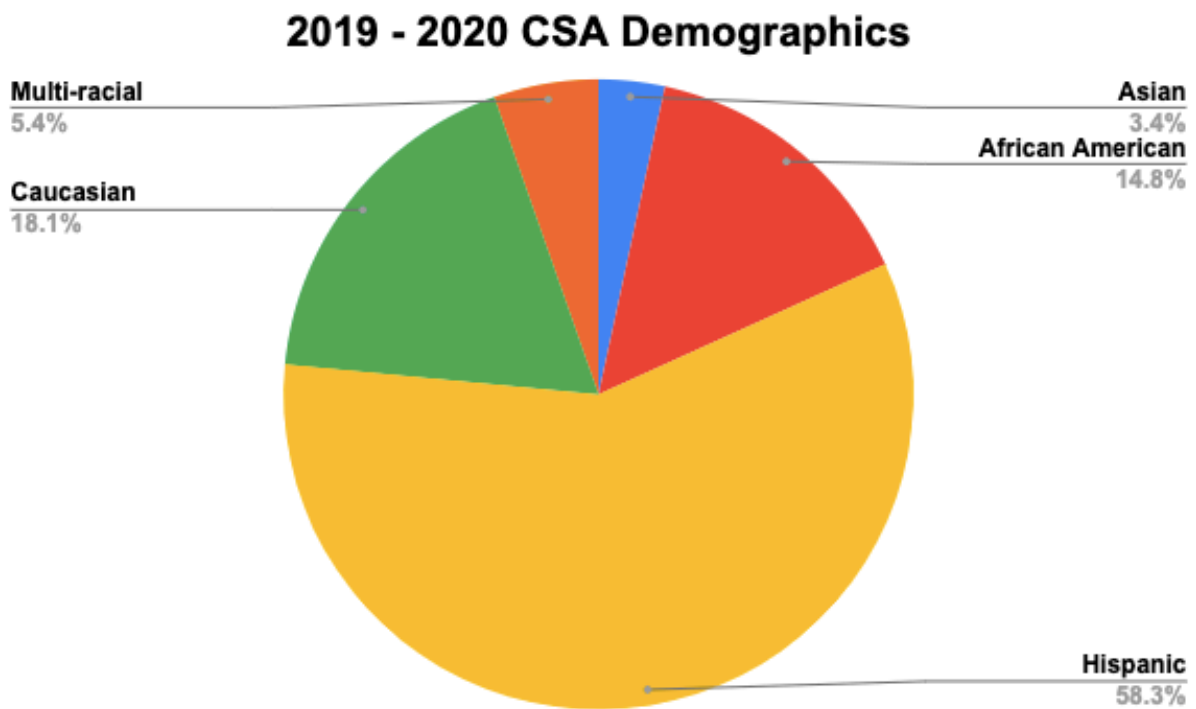
supported colleagues using the foundation the district provided for the new literacy framework. Administrative support was essential to building a culture of trust and collaboration. Zepeda (2017) presents that “coaching in any form breaks the isolation found in most K–12 schools and promotes collegiality” (p. 289). With classroom doors opening at Cool Springs Academy, peer coaching was used in an effort to help teachers grow while improving best practices in reading and ensuring that teachers were developing confidence in their abilities to teach effectively.

In the Bark Camp District, six elementary schools feed into one middle school and then into one high school. The Bark Camp District is a charter school system with a high-needs population. Eighty percent of the families living in the district are living in poverty, and the district has one of the largest English language learner (ELL) populations in the state. Through local school governance, the Bark Camp District Board of Education uses flexibility to provide innovative learning environments for approximately 8,000 students. The Bark Camp District involves the community to offer support services for students to keep them engaged in the learning process.

### *Demographics*

According to the U.S. Department of Education and the National Center for Education Statistics (2017), the percentage of ELLs is growing nationally. Between 2005 and 2015, the percentage of ELLs grew from 9.1 percent to 9.4 percent, or about by 300,000 students (U.S. Department of Education & National Center for Education Statistics, 2017). According to the Georgia Department of Education (2016), 104,000 students were ELLs in 2016, roughly 6% of Georgia’s student population. The Bark Camp School District student information system reflected that the district had an ELL population of 30% in January 2020 compared to a 40% population of ELL students at Cool Springs Academy.

Approximately 900 students attend Cool Springs Academy, the largest elementary school in the district. Cool Springs Academy's major ethnic groups include 58% Hispanic, 18% Caucasian, and 15% African American students. Many students live in government housing and four percent of the families are protected under the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act of 1987. Thirty-four percent of the families around the school (2-mile radius) have an annual income of \$25,000 or less, and 31% of the parents work in manufacturing plants in the surrounding community. Cool Springs Academy's ethnicities are displayed in Figure 4.1.



*Figure 4.1:* CSA Demographic Breakdown

The three major ethnicities at Cool Springs Academy have changed over the past nine years, representing a demographic shift. The school had a majority Caucasian population prior to 2010 as the Hispanic population continued to increase. The Other category consists of students from Multi-Racial, Asian, and American Indian populations combined. The African American

and Other categories remained consistent between 2010-2018. The data in Figure 4.2 illustrates demographic shifts between 2010 and 2018.

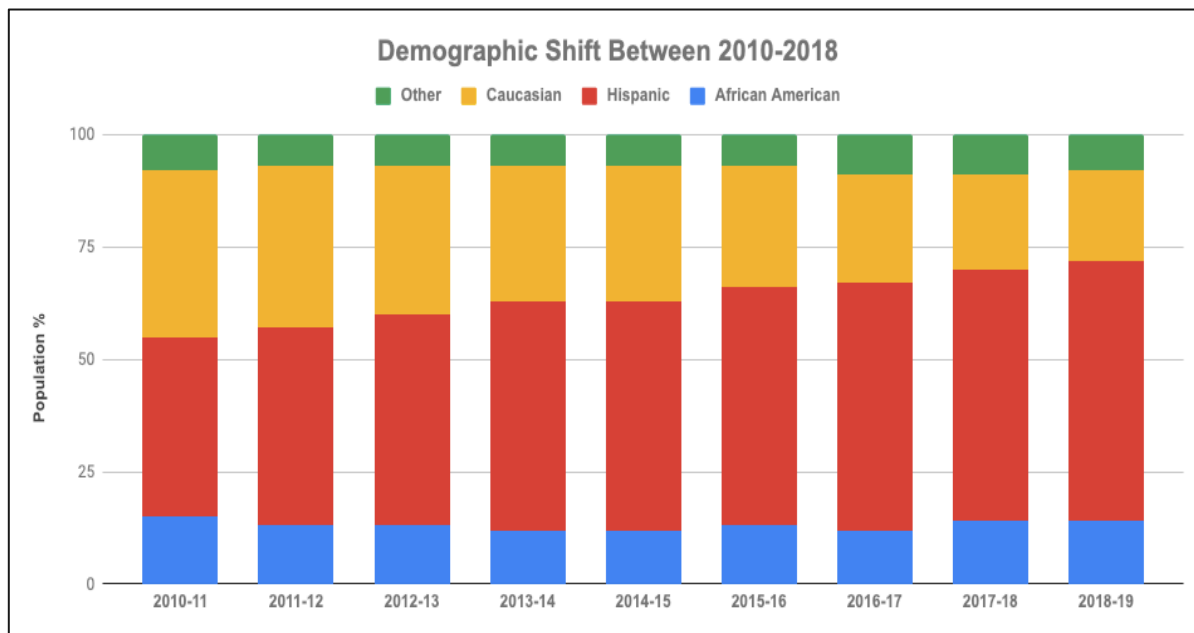


Figure 4.2: Demographic Shift at CSA (Georgia Office of the Governor, 2019)

### *Focus School Designation*

A number of characteristics determine if a school is designated as a Focus School in the state of Georgia. First, the school has a large low socio-economic student population that qualifies the school as being Title I. According to the U.S. Department of Education and National Center for Education Statistics (2019), a Title I School has at least a 40 percent low socio-economic student population. Another quantifier includes a three-year achievement gap in any content area on Georgia’s assessments that students in grades 3–12 take each year. Ansell (2011) defines an achievement gap as “the disparity in academic performance between groups of students” (para. 1). Finally, the state of Georgia ranks all schools based on three-year average achievement gap scores and designates the bottom 10 percent of schools in the state as Focus Schools (Georgia Department of Education, 2019a). Focus Schools are provided with funds

from the state to assist with academic initiatives and are monitored closely for at least three years to ensure improvement in student achievement.

In 2015, Cool Springs Academy, the host school for this action research case study was designated as a Focus School by the Georgia Department of Education. While students at Cool Springs Academy consistently performed well in the content areas of English Language Arts and reading, performance in mathematics and science consistently declined over the three-year period. Since students performed at a lower rate in mathematics for two of the three years, targeted academic interventions were developed and implemented. With successful implementation of interventions, Cool Springs Academy was removed from the Focus designation in the fall of 2017.

The highlighted data points in Table 4.1 represent drops from the previous year or a year without an increase. A vertical view reveals that the achievement gaps are noticeable in the areas of mathematics and science. Students with disabilities (SWDs) and ELLs have extremely low scores in these areas compared to other students. A horizontal view reflects that drops occur across all subgroups with the exception of the Asian/PI and Caucasian subgroups. Overall, the trend data demonstrated a decrease in student achievement for African Americans, Hispanics, students with disabilities, and ELLs especially in the area of mathematics. The leadership team continued math interventions and also closely examined the literacy practices based on this trend data. As the leadership team continued to look at the data and instructional practices, school improvement efforts addressed the math deficits but also addressed concerns in the area of reading. The leadership team started using tools from *Teaching in the fast lane: How to create active learning experiences* (Rollins, 2017) to provide a structure for math instruction. Table 4.1 represents the data that led to the Focus designation (Georgia Office of the Governor, 2018).



Table 4.1

*CSA Focus Data (Georgia Office of the Governor, 2018)*

	2012 CSA CRCT Meet / Exceed Rate				
	ELA	Reading	Math	Science	S. Studies
Asian/PI	87.5	93.8	87.5	87.5	87.5
African American	89.1	93.8	79.7	71.9	81
Hispanic	89.2	92.2	74.9	70.7	70.7
Caucasian	100	99.3	92.9	94.3	95
SWDs	78.6	92.9	71.4	53.6	60.7
ELLs	87.4	89.8	68.5	65.4	65.4
Econ Dis	90.3	92.3	76.9	72.5	75.2
	2013 CSA CRCT Meet / Exceed Rate				
	ELA	Reading	Math	Science	S. Studies
Asian/PI	95.2	100	90.5	90.5	95.2
African American	89.3	91.1	67.9	66.1	78.6
Hispanic	81.5	89.7	61.4	63	73.2
Caucasian	98	98.7	93.4	93.4	96.1
SWDs	75	81.8	54.5	52.3	51.2
ELLs	76.8	86.6	54.2	55.6	67.6
Econ Dis	89.8	94	76.5	76.5	84.1
	2014 CSA CRCT Meet / Exceed Rate				
	ELA	Reading	Math	Science	S. Studies
Asian/PI	95.7	95.7	91.3	91.3	91.3
African American	80.9	91.5	61.7	59.6	61.7
Hispanic	87.4	95.3	62	63	63.7
Caucasian	97.6	98.4	96.1	96.1	92.9
SWDs	75	87.5	65	55	57.5
ELLs	85.6	93.5	57.4	58.5	60.2
Econ Dis	90.5	96	74.6	74.8	74.7

Between the 2012-2014 school years, Cool Springs Academy focused on improving student achievement in the area of mathematics. However, when Cool Springs Academy's leadership team met each month, the discussions centered around the need for improving

literacy. With a new mathematics framework and improved student achievement in this area, the leadership team sought to support student growth in literacy with an enrichment period and a new literacy framework. The new mathematics framework, the student enrichment period, and the new literacy framework were major developments in the 2015-2016 school year.

### **Initial Literacy Development**

Bark Camp District sought consistent practices in literacy instruction in elementary grades to support continued student growth at the middle and high school levels. The Georgia Department of Education invited districts to attend Striving Readers institutes during the 2013-2014 school year. Teachers and district leaders who attended believed that the Comprehensive Reading Solutions (Walpole & McKenna, 2017) addressed many of the district's needs. At that time, the district applied for the grant called the Striving Readers Grant. However, the grant was discontinued. Two elementary schools still wanted to proceed with the new program. One school committed to the program and began to adopt the Comprehensive Reading Solutions Literacy Framework, purchasing corresponding literacy resources. This school had unprecedented growth on the Reading Inventory, a universal screener that measures student Lexile levels.

While moving toward full implementation, the principals realized that by overlooking the Bookworm lessons (Walpole & McKenna, 2017), the teachers were not consistent with the level of questions in a book and pacing of instruction. With six elementary schools feeding into one middle school and many of them using different resources to teach literacy, the Bookworm lessons provided the needed structure for consistent instruction across the district. Based on this data (Figure 4.3) and the fact that the system desired more cohesive elementary literacy practices, stakeholders from across the district, including teachers and school and district leaders,

designed the literacy framework using all the components of Comprehensive Reading Solutions (Walpole & McKenna, 2017).

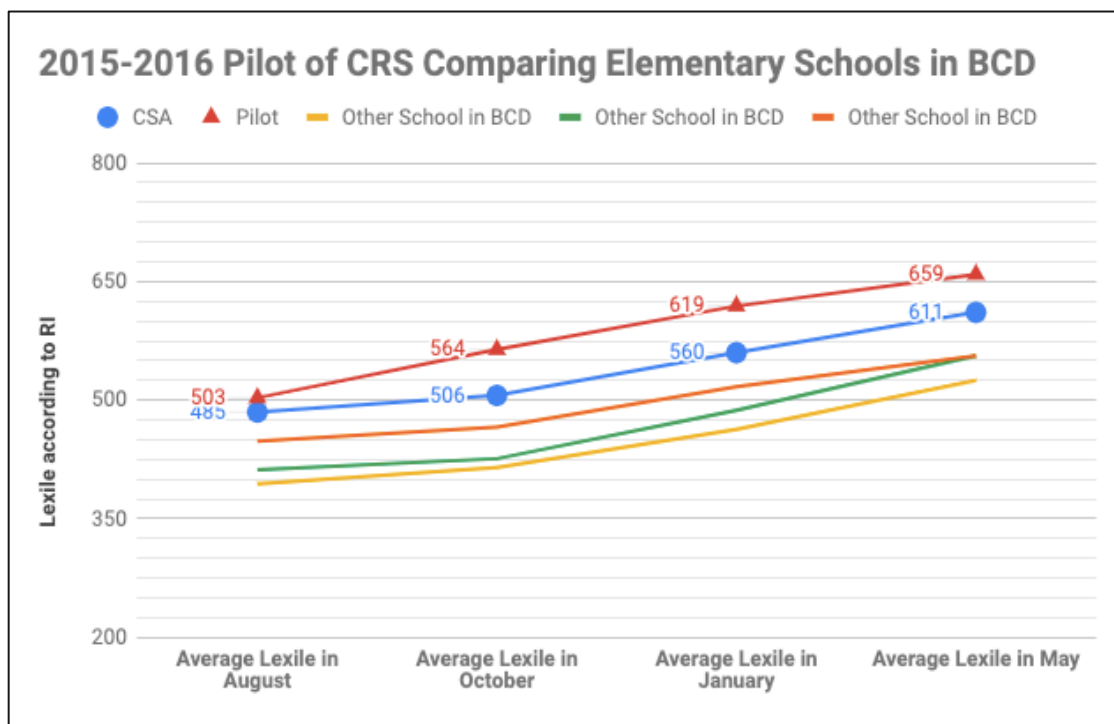
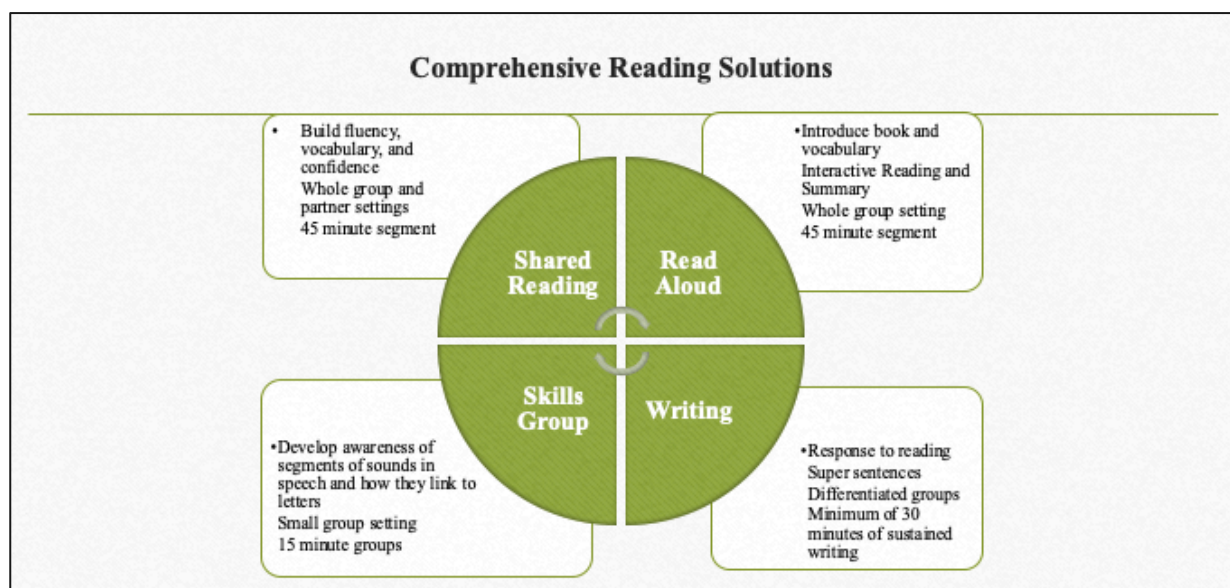


Figure 4.3: Comprehensive Reading Solutions Pilot Data in the BCD

For 10 years prior, Cool Springs Academy implemented the differentiated reading framework, also known as guided reading. Guided reading, through the work of Fountas and Pinnell (2012), was used for at least six years prior to the introduction of the Comprehensive Reading Solutions Literacy Framework by the district. In Guided Reading or differentiated reading, the teachers use small, ability groups of students for reading instruction. At Cool Springs Academy, two major changes occurred, an instructional change and a shift in demographics. Teachers used guided reading for an extended period of time. The demographic shift represented a rise in the Hispanic population over the last 10 years. While most of the teachers remained at Cool Springs Academy, the instructional framework and the students changed.

## *Comprehensive Reading Solutions*

Comprehensive Reading Solutions (CRS), also known as Bookworms, is the work of Walpole and McKenna (2017). Comprehensive Reading Solutions consists of four activities: a read-aloud segment, a shared-reading segment, skills group time, and writing. The suggested instructional time for each activity is 45 minutes, except for writing which occurs as students are rotating in and out of different skills groups. Much of the Comprehensive Reading Solutions Literacy Framework is scripted with daily plans provided to teachers. A visual of the Comprehensive Reading Solutions Literacy Framework is offered in Figure 4.4.



*Figure 4.4:* Comprehensive Reading Solutions Literacy Framework, adapted from Walpole & McKenna (2017)

In 2015-2016, the Bark Camp District started a Comprehensive Reading Solutions literacy pilot at one elementary school, and students improved in their Lexile scores at this school above other elementary schools in the district. In 2016-2017, elementary school leaders were asked to implement Comprehensive Reading Solutions, and professional development was provided to teachers across the district. The school year 2017-2018 was the first full year of implementation of the Comprehensive Reading Solutions Literacy Framework for elementary

schools within the Bark Camp District. A timeline of the Comprehensive Reading Solutions implementation is provided in Figure 4.5.

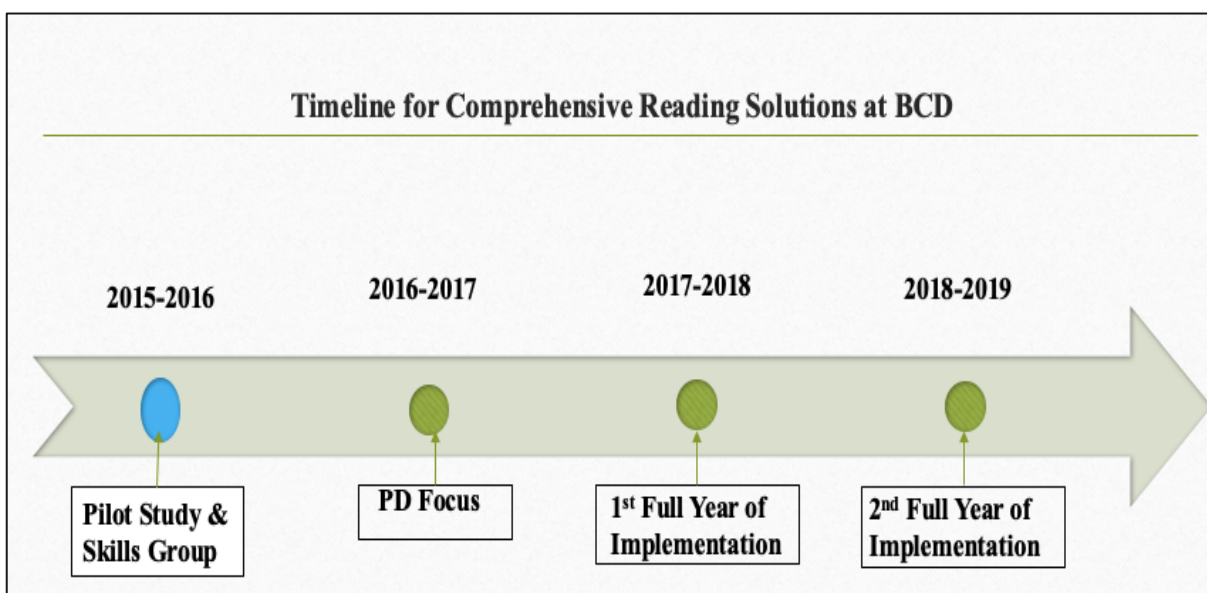


Figure 4.5: Comprehensive Reading Solutions Timeline

### *Skills Groups*

In 2018-2019, Cool Springs Academy made a slight schedule change. After much discussion with multiple stakeholders, the leadership team added a specific segment called skills group. Skills group is an enrichment period that was added during the years of the Focus designation. This time was originally designed for mathematics enrichment and/or remediation. However, this period became an enrichment period for different curriculum needs for students. With the departure of the Focus designation, Cool Springs Academy had more flexibility with this period, and it made sense that the skills group period would be offered near the end of the day. Then, students can respond to their reading because the read-aloud and shared-reading segments were completed earlier in the day. As students are writing independently, the teacher

can provide students with specific literacy interventions in small group settings. Walpole and McKenna (2017) recommend this operational management of the skills group period.

### **Researcher's Role**

As one who facilitated the action research intervention of peer coaching at Cool Springs Academy, the researcher also serves as the assistant principal, whose major role is to ensure the safety of all students. The school principal, another assistant principal, the instructional coach, and I make up the administrative team. This team was put in place in 2015 when the school was also designated a Focus School by the state of Georgia for low student achievement over the previous two years. In the 2019-2020 school year, one assistant principal moved to another school in the district to become principal, the instructional coach advanced into the role of assistant principal, and a new instructional coach was hired from within the faculty of the school. The action research case examines the literacy practices of the six third-grade homeroom teachers at Cool Springs Academy. However, a teacher of early intervention programs, a teacher who supports English acquisition skills, a teacher who supports students with special needs, and the instructional coach are included in the research as they also make up a collaborative learning community and have the same planning time. The desired outcome is that the results of this study will help teachers to grow professionally while having courageous coaching conversations along the way.

The action research case study examined the impact of peer coaching and peer observations, both forms of job-embedded learning. The action research examined the components of Comprehensive Reading Solutions through the intervention of peer coaching, including its focus on teacher transfer and best practices and the components—coaching conferences and teacher reflections—both the bedrock of all coaching models (Zepeda, 2019).

## **Professional Learning**

Teaching is a demanding job that requires a commitment to lifelong learning. According to Zepeda (2019), professional learning should be job-embedded and clearly aligned to the school's improvement efforts and needs of the teachers.

### *The District Overview*

The Georgia Department of Education invited districts to attend Striving Readers institutes during the 2013-2014 school year. Teachers and district leaders from the Bark Camp District who attended believed that the Comprehensive Reading Solutions (Walpole & McKenna, 2017) addressed many of the district's needs. The literacy framework consists of a shared reading segment, an interactive read aloud segment, a small group instruction segment for specific reading skills called skills groups, and writing.

In 2014-2015, two schools in the district piloted used skills groups, a piece of Comprehensive Reading Solutions (Walpole & McKenna, 2017). Based on the two schools' initial results, the district decided to implement skills groups throughout the district at each elementary school the following year. The district desired for elementary schools to be consistent with the literacy framework, starting with skills groups and then proceeding to add more of the literacy framework.

Professional learning was conducted across the district, being facilitated by district and school leaders. However, the bulk of the work was conducted by each school's instructional coach. The instructional coaches shared with teachers the research behind Comprehensive Reading Solutions (Walpole & McKenna, 2017) and the results from the pilot schools. They modeled each step of the process and how to schedule the skills groups into the school day. Many schools developed an assessment team so that each student could be assigned an initial

group for the specific skills he/she needed. The assessment is called Informal Decoding Inventory (IDI) that is also developed by Comprehensive Reading Solutions (Walpole & McKenna, 2017). After the assessment was provided to all students in kindergarten through fifth grades, the instructional coach helped the grade level to create the small groups and plan instruction accordingly.

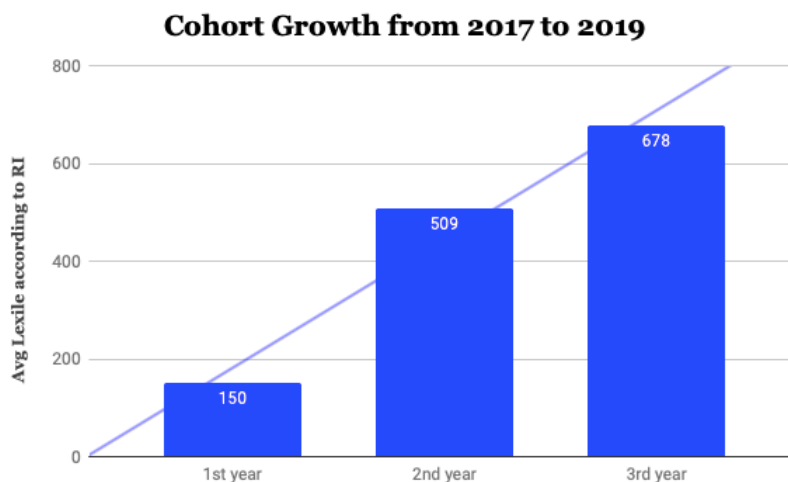
During a 45-minute window, the teachers taught three skills group with students rotating in and out of small groups while other students worked on writing. Some students had to go to another teacher or even another grade level for the correct skills group. This created anxiety among the teachers and the school culture had to be addressed. The culture of the school had to be performance driven and supportive. Teachers had to become comfortable with sending students out of their own classrooms, relying on a team to provide all students with their needed skills for reading.

While moving toward full implementation, the principals realized that by overlooking the Bookworm lessons (Walpole & McKenna, 2017), the teachers were not consistent with the level of questions in a book and pacing of instruction. With six elementary schools feeding into one middle school and many of them using different resources to teach literacy, the Bookworm lessons provided the needed structure for consistent instruction across the district. Bark Camp District decided in 2016-2017 to fully endorse Comprehensive Reading Solutions (Walpole & McKenna, 2017) and provide additional professional learning to all teachers. School leaders and all teachers were provided with online training from the creator of the framework, Dr. Sharon Walpole.



During the 2016-2017 school year, the district provided more training and offered more modeling to all teachers. Some teachers went to the Bookworms team at the University of Delaware's Professional Development Center for Educators. All teachers were provided with manuals to teach the literacy segments including shared reading, interactive read aloud, differentiated skills group, and writing. Resources were purchased including many student texts, and schedules were created to sustain the literacy framework so that each of the segments could have a maximum of forty-five minutes of instruction. With professional learning being provided, necessary resources, a schedule to maximize the time needed for the pace of Comprehensive Reading Solutions (Walpole & McKenna, 2017) and for student learning, and a supportive climate, Bark Camp District started to fully implement the literacy framework in during 2017-2018.

Another assessment that Bark Camp District uses to assess reading progress is the Reading Inventory provided by Houghton Mifflin Harcourt (2019). The district assesses students in grades 3–12 using the Reading Inventory. This assessment provides each student with a Lexile measure and teachers can use the data to adjust instruction as needed. For kindergarten to third grade, the district uses the Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (University of Oregon, 2020), also called DIBELS. The purpose for the Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills is to provide teachers with specific progress monitoring tools to address student reading deficits such as phonemic awareness, vowel teams, or fluency. Figure 4.6 provides data collected from one grade level at Cool Springs Academy over the past three years, 2017-2019. This cohort is currently in the 5<sup>th</sup> grade, and according to Houghton Mifflin Harcourt (2019), students in 5<sup>th</sup> grade should have a Lexile between 830-1010.



*Figure 4.6: Student Cohort Data from 2017-2019*

### *The School Focus*

While the district was providing professional learning for the early stages of the Comprehensive Reading Solutions Literacy Framework (Walpole & McKenna, 2017) in 2016-2017, Bark Camp District also sent school teams to a weeklong instructional coaching conference in Lawrence, Kansas. The school teams consisted of district leaders, school leaders, instructional coaches, and teachers. The team was presented with the research behind instructional coaching, having better conversations, becoming better school leaders, building better schools, and an instructional playbook (Knight et al., 2015; Knight, 2014). The discussions from the conference that arose became pivotal next steps for the schools in the district. This included how the schools used their instructional coaches and defining an instructional playbook, essentially providing an umbrella for on-going support.

The role of the instructional coach is valuable for job-embedded professional learning. The instructional coach role in Bark Camp District was focused more on academic content and assessments. After attending the conference in Lawrence, Kansas, schools reprioritized the role to have a clear focus on improving teacher practices and instruction. Teemant, Wink, and Tyra

(2011) emphasize that instructional coaching is a partnership between the coach and the teacher that targets a teacher's performance with specific goals to improve instruction. The instructional coach can be another peer, a teacher with veteran experience, or an outside expert.

Typically, the focus of instructional coaching is on instruction, assessment procedures, classroom management, and/or academic content (Knight, 2014; Teemant et al., 2011).

Instructional coaches worked to develop a trusting relationship with the teachers since they were seen as part of the administrative team. They worked closely with new teachers, and the instructional coaches used video to help teachers to create reflective, supportive practices.

Discussions also initiated from the conference in Lawrence, Kansas regarding the instructional playbook. According to Knight (2019):

an instructional playbook includes: (a) a list of the teaching strategies instructional coaches share with teachers to enable them to hit peer goals; (b) one-page summaries of the most important information related to each strategy; and (c) all the checklists coaches would need to describe each strategy. (p. 11)

Knight (2019) stresses the importance of using the high-impact strategies that Fisher, Frey, and Hattie (2016) list. For example, vocabulary programs have an effect  $d = 0.62$ . According to Fisher et al. (2016), Cohen's  $d$  should be greater than 0.4 for a positive impact on student performance.

Another example includes teacher clarity with  $d = 0.75$  (Fisher et al., 2016). Teacher clarity includes having and maintaining a focus for the lesson. If the effect size from the meta-analyses conducted by Fisher et al. (2016) are listed alongside the strategies in the instructional playbook, the instructional coach and teacher can select what is best for a specific application (Knight, 2019). After selecting a strategy (or multiple strategies), the instructional coach and

teacher can continue the cycle of coaching which includes setting instructional goals, observing the practice, conferencing, and reflecting on next steps.

District and school leaders developed an instructional playbook with specific strategies for content. The instructional playbook is still under development but lists the practices and resources used in different content areas. For example, the strategies involved with the Comprehensive Reading Solutions (Walpole & McKenna, 2017) are listed for literacy including a specific pacing guide alongside resources needed. Specific strategies are listed to target students needing more assistance, and the procedures for Response to Intervention (RTI) are more clearly defined to better support student learning and needs. For example, students not making progress in a skills group would see another teacher to work on the same skill needed to progress in literacy. Teachers supporting students with English acquisition provides more vocabulary reinforcement with visuals and helping students to understand context clues. With a large population that is learning to speak English, job-embedded learning occurs continuously.

#### *Professional Learning for the Third-Grade Team*

Third grade is a pivotal point for students learning how to read. Hernandez (2011) indicated that students who cannot read after third grade are at risk of not graduating from high school. In the state of Georgia, students begin taking state assessments in third grade in the areas of reading, writing, and mathematics. Along with these pressures and the recent changes to literacy instruction by the school and district, this action research case study examines the third-grade team at Cool Springs Academy. Six third-grade teachers represent the participants of this study with three teachers having more experience than the other three teachers. Table 3.3 in Chapter 3 provides a profile of the participants listing their overall experience, their experience in third grade, and their highest degrees earned. Before starting the study, a consensus was

formed stating that the instructional practices were similar using “a scripted program” and the same resources, meaning the Comprehensive Reading Solutions Literacy Framework (Walpole & McKenna, 2017) was used.

After the participants agreed to be in the study, professional learning was provided by an outside expert to provide a foundation of peer coaching for the teachers. The professional learning was conducted at the beginning of September 2019, having the pressures of starting school behind the teachers. The outside expert was chosen to create an open dialogue with the teachers and to build trust. The expert provided the research behind peer coaching and how she has used the method in the past with teachers. The peer coaching process includes four steps: the pre-observation conference, an observation, the post-observation conference, and the action step or the teacher reflection. The expert also shared documents to help aid the process. Figure 3.2 provides a method for teachers to record information from a pre-observation conference and then to gather data during the observation, the first two steps of the process, and Figure 3.3 shows another document used for teachers to record next steps during the post-observation conference. Both Figure 3.2 and Figure 3.3 are found in Chapter 3.

The third-grade teachers were paired together based on experience. For example, a teacher new to the field was paired with a veteran teacher. The teachers completed two cycles of peer coaching with the same pairings. Before starting the last cycle, a mid-course adjustment review was held with the third-grade team. The purpose for this meeting was to reflect on the first cycle and to make any necessary adjustments before starting another cycle. Robbins (2015) shared that participants involved in peer coaching will expect mid-course adjustments “for this is the synergy that comes from the coaching process and is the origin of some of our best ideas” (p. 21).

During the review at Cool Springs Academy, more time was asked for by the participants. The third-grade lead teacher and the researcher engaged the action research team with this request, and the action research team, representing the leadership at the school, provided planning days for the entire school. The participants requested more time to update resources and for planning purposes. Another example of time was given with the last cycle of peer coaching being pushed back until after the planning day could be scheduled for the third-grade team. Also, during the mid-course adjustment review, codes started to emerge. Time management was discussed by the teachers with teachers discussing their rate of reading, using different resources, and/or asking comprehension questions. This discussion led a peer team to study each teacher's rate of reading (or the words per minute) in the next peer coaching cycle. The mid-course adjustment review for the participants is found in Appendix F.

The decision to add professional learning days to support all teachers at Cool Springs Academy is one example of changes from the action research study. The peer coaching process influenced many changes at the research site. In a meeting with the action team, the grade-level chair, Ms. Elliott, shared how the process was going. She commented,

Third grade has enjoyed the peer coaching experience. We have enjoyed getting to reflect with each other about our experiences and our different approaches when facilitating the Bookworm lessons. It has allowed us to enact different strategies and approaches into our instruction.

At another action team meeting, the instructional coach, Mrs. Ohana, shared how she is using the protocols provided from the outside expert that led the initial peer coaching training to the participants with all teachers. Mrs. Ohana shared,

This system (the peer coaching process) provides next steps and additional ways that I as the academic coach can support their (teachers') instructional needs. The teachers have been very open to the use of the forms as well and find them to be an avenue to receive needed feedback in a non-threatening manner.

More changes are described in Chapter 5.

### **District Charter Status and History**

Bark Camp District is a charter district and a district that was approved for federal grants tied to Race-to-the-Top initiatives. A charter district is a public school that operates under the terms of a contract between the local school board and the state school board (Georgia Department of Education, 2019b). A charter school (or district) is provided more flexibility with the expectation of raising student achievement (Georgia Department of Education, 2019b). President Obama initiated Race-to-the-Top grants for states to reform four specific areas: adopting rigorous standards and assessments, building data systems to measure student growth, recruiting, developing, rewarding, and retaining effective teachers and principals, and turning around the lowest-achieving schools (U.S. Department of Education, 2016). The grants for these initiatives totaled \$4 billion.

During 2007-2008, the district worked on achieving charter status. Dr. Estrada, the superintendent of Bark Camp District from 2008-2014, worked as a principal to achieve charter status. In a personal interview, she portrayed the message that the district was already in the innovative mode and only had to put in place school-level governance that worked cohesively with the local school board (O. Estrada, personal interview, December 28, 2019). She continued stating that "the pros of charter status are many: flexibility, spirit of innovation, broad waivers, and defining the system (schools) as those with increased autonomy" (O. Estrada, personal

interview, December 28, 2019). The district achieved charter status in June 2008, a month before Dr. Estrada became superintendent.

Dr. Estrada inherited a large financial deficit and was faced with a recession that presented decrease in local tax revenues and a federal sequestration of more funds. Dr. Estrada shared:

the rationale for Race-to-the Top was purely economic. By participating in Race-to-the-Top and decreasing the school calendar (furlough days), we were able to keep our people employed during the recession, and we were able to develop teacher-leaders with the funds. (O. Estrada, personal interview, December 28, 2019)

In addition to receiving the funds, she asserted that the work behind the scenes was “unrealistic and did not appear to impact student achievement” (O. Estrada, personal interview, December 28, 2019). The work included implementing a new data system, a new teacher-leader evaluation system, and the Common Core State Standards in a way that supported schools, while having a decreased number of district office staff.

Dr. Estrada’s career encompassed an era of social change. She began teaching in Mississippi during court-ordered desegregation and returned to Georgia during the early years of integration and rapid immigration. Dr. Estrada said, “Although each had different circumstances, what I learned is that educators must care deeply about the cultural and personal experiences of those they serve” (O. Estrada, personal interview, December 28, 2019). In the last 10 years, a concentrated effort by the district to diversify the teacher and leader work force in terms of race, ethnicity and gender is apparent (O. Estrada, personal interview, December 28, 2019). She articulated that “the most powerful changes in the district come from the prioritization of learning supports” (O. Estrada, personal interview, December 28, 2019). The



learning supports address the challenges to learning by integrating academics with social-emotional, mental health, and behavioral supports. Similar to building a foundation for literacy, learning supports is the foundation for academic success.

### **Chapter Summary**

The third-grade teachers are the main characters in this story. The action research team addresses the conflicts that arise, and the intervention of peer coaching offers the climax of the story. The peer coaching process provides the team with more collaboration and time to plan, reflect, and build trust. A common challenge to professional learning is time. To maximize time, professional learning should be aligned to school improvement efforts and address areas in school or district accreditation and the priorities of the local school board. Learning supports should be included to address the holistic needs of all students. Peer coaching presents the opportunity for quality, job-embedded professional learning that addresses these areas. Chapter 5 presents the findings for this action research study.

## **CHAPTER 5**

### **FINDINGS**

The findings for the action research case study were organized to address the research questions. The data from the interviews, observations, audio-recordings, document analysis, research journal, and supplemental data sources were arranged to help tell a story. Action team members were actively involved in vetting the process by sharing their feedback and opinions of next steps, a critical process for establishing credibility (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

#### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this action research case study was to examine peer coaching of third-grade teachers during the implementation of a literacy framework in a suburban elementary school. Through such an effort, the hope is to support teachers using job-embedded, reflective processes to refine current instructional practices related to the Comprehensive Reading Solutions Literacy Framework (Walpole & McKenna, 2017). Coaching in the context of literacy is important because learning to read by the end of third grade is a critical milestone for students (Hernandez, 2011). The literacy framework is based on the work of Walpole and McKenna (2017) who refer to the literacy framework as the Comprehensive Reading Solutions or the Bookworm lesson format.

#### **Research Questions**

This action research study addressed the following questions:

- 1) How might peer coaching be used to improve teacher practice using the Comprehensive Reading Solutions Literacy Framework?

- 2) What is learned by teachers and administrators as they work collaboratively to implement peer coaching as it relates to implementing the Comprehensive Reading Solutions Literacy Framework?
- 3) What can school leaders learn about supporting peer coaching among teachers?

### **Research Question 1**

The first research question sought the perspectives of the teachers related to how peer coaching might be used to improve teacher practice using the Comprehensive Reading Solutions Literacy Framework (Walpole & McKenna, 2017). The findings from the first research question are presented: 1) teacher support, 2) building trust, 3) modeling the lesson, and 4) instructional strategies.

#### *Teacher Support*

Third-grade teachers were paired together based on their levels of experience. One teacher was a more experienced teacher and her peer was a teacher with less experience in third grade. Becky Elliott was paired with Christina Nguyen; Elizabeth Xiang was paired with Uma Easterly; and Rena Irvin was paired with Rosa Saddler. The Table 3.4 in Chapter 3 provides the level of experience for each teacher and her highest degree earned.

Each teacher had some level of training with the Comprehensive Reading Solutions Literacy Framework. Mrs. Lori Newman, an assistant principal at Cool Springs Academy and former instructional coach, provided the explanation of the level of support for teachers during the implementation of the Comprehensive Reading Solutions Literacy Framework, sharing:

As the former Instructional Coach during the implementation of Bookworms, I know that teachers were supported with each of the 45-minute segments during the three-year start.

The school started with skills groups followed by shared reading, and finally the interactive read aloud and writing. With each additional expected component, support at the school and district level were provided through modeling, coaching, planning, and professional learning. These supports were both offered at the grade level as well as at the school and district level.

Mrs. Newman mentions three years. The first year, Cool Springs Academy initiated only the skills groups, but not all schools in the district made this same decision. Afterward, all schools in the district fully implemented the literacy framework.

The teachers in the case study have a different perspective than Mrs. Newman. Mrs. Elliott described how the Bookworms lessons by Walpole and McKenna (2017) were discussed and modeled. She stated, “We watched videos that were not realistic because there were not in real classrooms.” Mrs. Irvin described the initial experience by comparing the process to building a plane. “I think that the phrase, build the air plane as we are flying [it], would probably describe how the work with Bookworms started,” Mrs. Irvin conveyed. Miss Saddler said that she was introduced to the literacy framework by co-teaching lessons intended for students acquiring English during her first year at Cool Springs Academy. She used the strategy of parallel teaching and planned closely with other teachers on her team at the time as she was learning the Comprehensive Reading Solutions Literacy Framework. Miss Saddler is now a third-grade teacher with students who vary in ability and skills.

Even though the school administration has provided feedback in observations and focus walkthroughs, the teachers feel they have received little feedback. The teachers desire to validate their practices using the new literacy framework. Mrs. Irvin said:

I have not ever formally done any peer coaching or peer observations. I have had people come into my room to observe me, but I have never gone into another classroom to observe another teacher except for student teaching. And, this is the beginning of year fourteen at this school.

Miss Elliott voiced a similar concern about receiving little feedback and shared that she has not been outside of her classroom to observe others. Regarding feedback from administration, she commented, “I have had administrators provide feedback but don’t recall having feedback specifically for the shared reading segment of the framework.” Mrs. Irvin and Miss Elliott are the most veteran among the third-grade teachers. Both teachers articulated that they have not conducted peer observations during their professional careers, while expressing that little feedback has been received to validate their own teaching practices.

Even though Cool Springs Academy offers an induction process for new teachers to learn new skills while working with a mentor teacher, the peer coaching process offered a structured process to support new members on the third-grade team. Miss Easterly started her career at Cool Springs Academy. She went through the new teacher induction process and observed other classrooms during her first year of teaching. This past year, she was a mentor teacher for a new teacher on her team, Miss Nguyen. With other new members on the third-grade team, Miss Easterly summed it up by saying, “Our new team member would say things like ‘I know what we teach but how do we teach it?’ We have modeled a lot of that in almost all of the subject areas but not before this year.” The peer coaching cycle initiated a level of support that the teachers have not been exposed to in previous years.

## *Building Trust*

Since teachers have not experienced a peer coaching model or conducted peer observations in over 10 years, the researcher wanted to start with a structured content to begin building trust and for teachers to learn how to give and accept constructive criticism from their fellow colleagues. The literacy framework offers the structure with a strict pacing guide and a daily lesson to follow. When starting the peer coaching cycle, Robbins (2015) suggested to start slow and expect some problems along the way, asserting: “The development of trust takes time and is enhanced by consistency. Trust among professional colleagues influences individuals’ willingness to expose their knowledge or skills” (p. 117). The participants discussed how the relationship with their peers was an important part of the process.

The peer coaching process provided an intervention for a group of teachers with new team members to help build trust. In an interview, Miss Xiang said,

You have to trust the person and respect the person that is coming in to observe you. If there is a lack of respect or a lack of value of what you are doing, then there would be no point of doing peer coaching.

Miss Xiang was paired with Miss Easterly. Miss Easterly was asked by the school leadership to attend the Bookworms Institute over the summer, a continued effort by the district to support the implementation of the literacy framework. Miss Xiang continued,

My peer coach is someone that I feel the most comfortable with on my grade level. She has been in the third grade longer than I have been teaching. She also went to the Sharon Walpole training over the summer. She was super knowledgeable about all of the pieces . . . and that helped me to understand what was the important aspects.

According to Miss Easterly, peer coaching provided the necessary structure to “build rapport with a new team member.” Miss Easterly confirmed,

The process is vulnerable but when you trust the person . . . that they are not there to make judgements but to look for things and to give pointers to make things better, then it is just like a practice.

Miss Easterly revealed her feelings of giving and receiving feedback, while building a trusting relationship.

Trust and collaboration are key elements in learning communities (Hallam, Smith, Hite, Hite, & Wilcox, 2015). Mrs. Irvin shared, “When you . . . create a relationship with a colleague, and you know that you are on the same side, then the hope is that you are trying to improve and that things will be beneficial.” Mrs. Ohana, the instructional coach, discussed how collaboration provides an opportunity for teachers to learn new perspectives. She stated,

I think that anytime we collaborate with our peers we have the opportunity to learn new skills and practices, whether or not we take it as a personal choice. Our self-efficacy can sometimes be a hinderance when it comes to being open-minded to receive feedback from a peer coach.

When teachers trust each other, instructional practices can be openly shared without fear of judgment or recourse (Hallam et al., 2015).

In an interview with the grade-level chair, Miss Elliott shared how the peer coaching cycle has improved the relationships on the team. She voiced,

With the process of peer coaching and having new team members, it allowed us to have conversations with each other and get to know each other on a different level. I think both the discussions and modeling the literacy program helped us to solidify thoughts

about the framework and with the new team members.

She continued to explain that “relationships with people were strengthened. At the beginning of the school year, some feelings were hurt when members of the team were introduced to working with new members. Having them to work together through this process benefited the team.”

Miss Elliott explained how teachers were teamed to teach science and social studies segments. School leadership paired the teachers based on overall teaching experience in third-grade. This is the same way the teachers were paired for this study.

### *Modeling the lesson*

Over the past 14 years, Mrs. Irvin disclosed that peer observations have not taken place during her experience at Cool Springs Academy. The interventions currently in place at the research site include the new teacher induction process and learning supports, where a teacher visits classes to support students needing additional services. A learning support teacher, like Miss Saddler, scaffolded her teaching to the students who needed English acquisition skills last year. During the action research case study, peer coaching was used as an intervention for teachers to learn from each other, while being able to observe specific elements they discussed and to provide feedback on those elements during a post-observation conference.

Multiple data point to the theme of modeling the lesson. The best example was captured by Mrs. Irvin and Miss Saddler, when they discussed during a post-observation conference how the lesson is supposed to progress during a shared reading segment. The two teachers discuss how Mrs. Irvin asked comprehension questions during the lesson to engage more conversation with the students when Miss Saddler asked the questions at the end of the lesson. Miss Saddler stated, “I think knowing when these conversations pop up in the book would be helpful, but I



think that may just come with time.” Miss Saddler later shared that reading through the text beforehand would be beneficial if she was provided with more planning time.

Also, during the post-observation conference, the two teachers discussed how they support their students’ writing. Mrs. Irvin learned how Miss Saddler used a graphic organizer to help students frame their writing responses. Mrs. Irvin said, “I thought that was a good way to take the ‘training wheels’ off. It would give them (students) help but not as much support. I am definitely going to start doing that when we return from the break.” This example demonstrated how the two teachers benefited from the experience.

Another example comes from the discussion during the mid-course adjustment review with the participants. The teachers modeled how to present the first and second focus of the shared reading segment to students. The objective of shared reading includes building fluency and improving comprehension. The class chorally reads with the teacher a chapter of a book. Before doing so, the teacher will share the focus, or learning target. Then, a second focus is shared as students are paired together to read the same passage a second time. All of the teachers discussed the flow of the lesson and the use of a PowerPoint as a visual.

Mrs. Irvin stated the importance of modeling this portion of the lesson with everyone. She stated, “I feel like that it [using the PowerPoint] is essential to be modeled . . . because if we have not been intentional with the students about how to have a conversation then it [this portion of the lesson] can become a playtime.” Teacher clarity, having a concise lesson focus, is a high impact strategy for instruction (Fisher et al., 2016).

One more example occurred due to one teacher on the grade level going to the Bookworms Institute in Delaware over the summer. Miss Easterly redelivered content from the

training to her team. She modeled how to teach decoding and different syllable types that are used during skills groups, and the team practiced among themselves.

Miss Easterly continued sharing concepts from the summer training with Miss Xiang during a post-observation conference as they discussed struggles with grouping nonreaders. Miss Easterly questioned Miss Xiang about her reading groups and asked, “Did you have some kids who are not reading at all?” Miss Xiang confirmed, “Some groups have a nonreader. Some groups were asked to take turns, but more so on one end. They are unbalanced with ability.” Miss Easterly concluded, “So you have to have a conversation with the partners to let them know that they can read everything. When they are done, they can then both discuss the comprehension questions.” Miss Easterly provided insight to Miss Xiang using the information she learned from the summer institute to help the teachers discuss better understand ways to group students who are nonreaders.

Miss Saddler avowed in an interview, “Peer coaching provides more learning on top of the normal work in a professional learning community and is supportive and collaborative.” The structure of peer coaching offered the participants a method to openly discuss their teaching practices, model targeted segments, and reflect on any next steps.

### *Instructional Strategies*

Findings demonstrated that all participants gained from the experience. The teachers discussed multiple instructional strategies and their connections with the Comprehensive Reading Solutions Literacy Framework. Miss Saddler, a new member on the third-grade team, uttered, “Peer coaching provides more learning on top of the normal work in professional learning communities and is supportive and collaborative.” Over the course of the action

research case study, different instructional strategies were discussed like teacher clarity, use of class time, use of resources, and more.

Miss Xiang and Miss Easterly discussed how to improve teacher clarity and the use of class time. When Miss Xiang conferenced with Miss Easterly, she questioned Miss Easterly about her lack of using the PowerPoint for the shared reading segment. The third-grade team created a PowerPoint to use alongside the Bookworms lesson which includes the focus for the lesson and comprehension questions. Miss Xiang said, “I am religious about using the PowerPoint, and I noticed you were not using it.” Miss Easterly confirmed, “Yeah, it does put the comprehension questions and the writing prompts. Thank you. I forgot about it.” Miss Xiang continued, “I like to use it because during the partner time when a group finishes earlier than everyone else, then they can go back and look at the focus and talk about it.” In an interview with Miss Easterly, she said,

I make sure that I use the PowerPoint that go along with the lesson. I also make sure that I am clear about the reading focus both the first and second focus throughout the lesson. Students can then have those conversations before we have them in a whole group setting. I have noticed that students have more to say because the conversation has already taken place with their peer and they feel more comfortable talking whole group. They feel more comfortable talking whole group because their thoughts have already been validated with a peer.

Making use of the PowerPoint that the third-grade team created collaboratively, Miss Xiang and Miss Easterly discussed teacher clarity while maximizing class time for student and whole-group discussions. Teacher clarity has a positive impact on student achievement (Fisher et al., 2016).

Instructional strategies directly tied to improving literacy were also shared. The use of resources was examined during a post-observation conference. Miss Nguyen and Miss Elliott discussed improving fluency. Miss Elliott imparted tips to help struggling students by using fluency trackers and fluency phones. A fluency tracker is a visual aid for students to use that will highlight lines in the text as they read, and fluency phones are PVC pipes with glued on corners allowing a student to hear him/herself as he/she read. Miss Elliott stated, “I think the students did a good job with tracking on the computer and staying on pace. One thing I was wondering if you used a tracking highlighter [or a fluency tracker] to help with choral reading.” Mrs. Elliott continued saying how the fluency trackers could help Miss Nguyen’s students and also help with students’ attention during the lesson.

During a post-observation conference with Mrs. Irvin and Miss Saddler, Mrs. Irvin explained how using a shorter book provided more structure to the lesson instead of using a chapter book. Miss Saddler voiced how difficult starting a lesson and/or closing a lesson when the story has not ended. Miss Saddler learned how to find books leveled books appropriate to grade-level standards. In an interview, Miss Saddler verbalized,

I was made aware of reading resources that we have in the library that I was unaware of.

This has really helped me to better plan and target specific skills during my fluency and comprehension skills group as well as my fluency and vocabulary skills group.

The teacher imparted how this strategy provided a start and end to the skills group time instead of using the practice of chapter books, her past teaching practice. More in-depth analysis of instructional strategies is presented within the findings of research question two.

## Research Question 2

The second research question addressed what the teachers and the administrators learned as the peer coaching cycle was implemented during literacy instruction. The participants observed their peers while using the Comprehensive Reading Solutions Literacy Framework either in the interactive read aloud segment, the shared reading segment, or the skills groups segment. The findings examined here include: 1) instructional strategies, 2) classroom management, 3) feedback, 4) reflection, 5) teacher self-efficacy, and 6) leadership.

### *Instructional Strategies*

Teaching is centered around student learning. As a teacher refines her craft, like a carpenter whittling his pencil, the student benefits from the improved instructional practices (Zepeda, 2019). Research surrounds best practices for teachers to improve their craft using high-impact strategies such as the work of Knight (2014) or Fisher et al. (2016). Instructional strategies that became evident in the findings include collaborative learning, scaffolding, and using instructional resources.

**Collaborative learning.** Student grouping or student pairing is an important practice in the Comprehensive Reading Solutions Literacy Framework. During the shared reading segment, teachers chorally read a passage with their students to demonstrate fluency and build new vocabulary. According to the research by Walpole and McKenna (2017), a struggling student is paired with higher reader. The teacher uses an Informal Decoding Inventory (IDI) and the data from the universal screeners to group students accordingly. After the teacher reads the passage the first time, the students then reread the passage with the other student(s) in the group. There is also a set focus for each reading of the text.

Miss Elliott and Miss Nguyen discuss in a coaching conference how difficult grouping of students is, especially with students who are not reading. Miss Elliott is the current grade chair and Miss Nguyen has completed one year of teaching. Miss Nguyen had 15 out of 20 students who were nonreaders at the beginning of the study. Miss Elliott mentioned a way to use a device to record the teacher reading. Then, the students could use this audio as they attempt tracking in the text. Miss Elliott also mentions that she has done this in the past. She also shared how Miss Nguyen could form a small group of students with the most needs so that the teacher could read the passage again the group as other students were grouped or listening to an audio of the text. In a mid-course adjustment review, Miss Nguyen stated, “I pull the lowest students into a small group with me, while I pair the others with a higher student.” Miss Nguyen started the strategy that Miss Elliott provided after the first cycle of peer coaching.

Miss Saddler was paired with Mrs. Irvin. During a coaching conference she shared how she uses the Lexile scores from the most recent Reading Inventory (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2019), a universal screener. Miss Saddler revealed in a coaching conference how she is concerned about students who are always quiet and students who are distractions to others. She articulated,

I put quiet students together so that someone has to initiate discussion, and I sometimes put students that normally distract others together. But, I do not do that all the time. This makes them accountable for each other and helps with the overall classroom management.

Miss Saddler has four years of teaching experience working with students who are acquiring the English language. This is her first-year teaching third grade.

Miss Xiang, who has three years of teaching experience in fourth grade, articulated how difficult grouping students is. She stated in an interview that she has many students who were nonreaders and three students who were advanced readers. The teacher strategically placed the three advanced readers together so that when they were absent from the regular classroom environment everyone would still have a partner. The three students are served once a week in another class to help enrich the learning experiences. In a post-observation conference, Miss Xiang shared with Miss Easterly, her peer, that she groups the remaining students using the model Walpole and McKenna (2017) provide. However, she also voiced how difficult the process is because the students are “so close in reading ability.”

Continuing the discussion in the post-observation conference, Miss Xiang and Miss Easterly discussed how students had to “have compatible personalities” in order for the group to thrive. In an interview, Miss Xiang said, “Something that my peer pointed out was making sure my students were a good fit for their partner. A lot of times the guideline provided by Walpole doesn’t make every student fit or have a place.” Even though Miss Xiang was committed on using the research by Walpole & McKenna (2017), she learned that the students have to be able to work together.

Miss Easterly discussed the hardships of students who are nonreaders. Miss Easterly and Miss Xiang discussed how students are becoming more fluent as they are choral read. Miss Easterly, who went to the summer institute, concluded,

According to the work of Walpole, we have to keep on going and eventually they will catch up as long as they are exposed to the pacing that they are supposed to be reading at. At this point, my students could not even track as fast. But now, they can track. They just can't decode it and then get it out. Some have to decode and also translate

the words into English and then get it out.

Miss Easterly made a generalization that she learned from participating in the Bookworms Summer Institute.

In a coaching conference with Miss Xiang, Miss Easterly shared how she groups her students by pairing students with a lower Lexile level with a student that has a higher Lexile level. She stated how she uses the same peer groups for at least two books and then adjusts the groups to better the positive learning environment. Miss Easterly uttered in the coaching conference how students were arguing. Miss Easterly said, “Instead of having to put out the fires, I allowed them to pick their own partners that day. It was like a reward but also helped with motivation to accomplish the goals of the lesson.” This is not a normal practice conducted by Miss Easterly, but both teachers learned the benefits from the students being able to select their own partners.

**Scaffolding.** Learning how to read is a priority in elementary schools. Zemelman et al. (2012) concluded that “the act of reading is no longer the ‘black box’ mystery it was thirty years ago. We now understand quite well how reading works” (p. 96). Modeling with visuals and building vocabulary are essential pieces to have in literacy instruction (Zemelman et al., 2012).

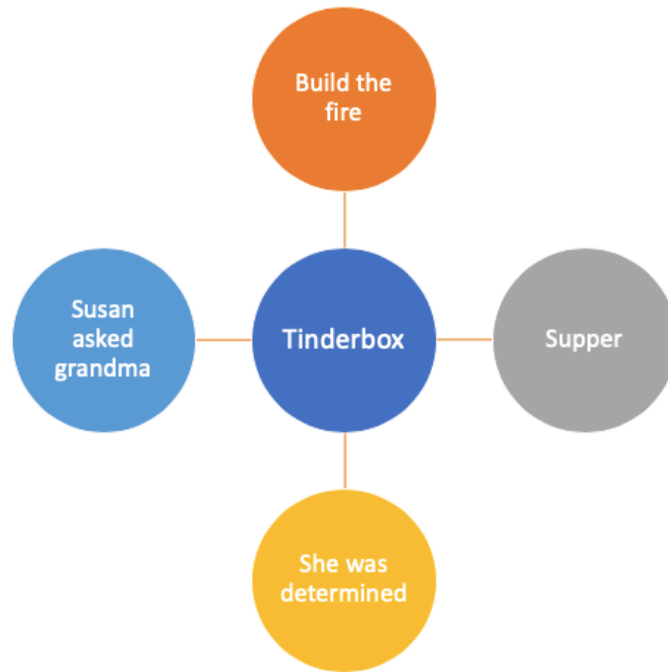
Miss Saddler disclosed that she learned how to use notecards when presenting a sentence scramble to the class from the observation of her peer. A sentence scramble is used in the Bookworm lesson to help students connect new vocabulary while building sentence structure. She said, “Breaking down the sentence scramble during the interactive read aloud segment and putting them [the words from the sentence] on notecards so that the students can physically move the words around to help them visualize was very useful for my students.” Using notecards also helped Miss Saddler with time management. Before using the notecards, she was writing each



word on the board and then arranging the words in order as the students call out different variations. With each new sentence, Miss Saddler would write the possibility on the board until the class decided on the correct solution.

Miss Saddler also learned how to use a graphic organizer from observing Mrs. Irvin to scaffold the writing process. The graphic organizer was not being implemented during the observation, but Miss Saddler saw the graphic posted during the observation and started using it to better her students' writing. During a post-observation conference, Miss Saddler said, "I do like the response circle [the graphic organizer]. . . . I was wondering if we could use that for writing and for shared reading."

Then, the teachers discussed how the graphic organizer can be used for both literacy segments. Eventually this led to a more solidified practice in writing for the entire third grade. Miss Saddler also has begun using Google Classroom in place writing journals to allow students more opportunity to practice typing. She said, "Google Classroom helps to scaffold students writing and prepare them for the test [Georgia Milestones End of Grade Assessment]." Third-grade students are learning how to use the computer and the Georgia Milestones End of Grade Assessment is administered all online. The Georgia Milestones End of Grade Assessment assesses third-grade students in reading, writing, and mathematics. Third-grade teachers used a graphic organizer to scaffold students writing and learn new vocabulary. The new vocabulary word is placed in the middle of the graphic organizer. Then, the meaning of the term and connections to the book are placed in circles around the term. Figure 5.2 portrays an example of the graphic organizer third grade has started using for writing and shared reading time.



*Figure 5.2: Graphic Organizer used for Writing, adapted from Walpole & McKenna (2017)*

Miss Nguyen learned how to implement a vocabulary strategy to help her students practice decoding. In an interview with Miss Nguyen, she described the strategy similar to a spelling test. She stated,

I introduced the vocabulary and then did a mock spelling test. The students would decode the words and then use their desk to write the spelling of the words. This would help my students as well because my students are not doing so well at it.

Third-grade students have a word study test, similar to a spelling test, on most Fridays. The words come directly from the texts the students are reading, building meaning directly from context clues.



Mrs. Irvin shared a strategy with another graphic organizer for students to learn new vocabulary as the words are being introduced. Each week the third-grade team provides students with a word study organizer. This graphic organizer provides a space for students to write the word as they come across it during the reading lesson, the definition, a picture for students to

help visualize the meaning, and an example of how the term is used. Each Friday, the students are assessed over the new vocabulary. With the majority of students at Cool Springs having Spanish as their native language, the teachers desired to add a column to the graphic organizer showing the Spanish translation. Mrs. Irvin stated in a post-observation conference, “Wouldn’t it be great to have the time to add a column for our students speaking Spanish, especially the newcomers.” Mrs. Irvin shared that a next step for the third-grade team is to create an additional column on the graphic organizer to add a Spanish translation of the term.

Table 5.1 provides an example of the graphic organizer used for vocabulary. The table shows a complete array with the terms, definitions, pictures, and examples. The graphic organizer is similar to slotted notes, where students fill in certain aspects like the words and pictures.

Table 5.1

*Graphic Organizer used for Vocabulary, adapted from Walpole & McKenna (2017)*

Word	Definition	Picture	Example
Produce	(noun) fruits and vegetables; (verb) to make		Maria went to the _____ section in the grocery store to find the corn.
Exception	(noun) not included (except)		Ms. Easterly likes all condiments with the _____ of mayonnaise.

During the first cycle of peer coaching, fluency became a theme. The original discussion was held between Miss Elliott and Miss Nguyen during a post-conference. Miss Elliott suggested the use of fluency trackers to support the students who are nonreaders or beginning to read. This topic was later discussed at the mid-course adjustment review with all participants and also was mentioned during an action team meeting. Fluency trackers was ordered as a result for students to use so they are able to highlight a line in a text as they are reading.

Miss Elliott and Miss Nguyen continued the discussions surrounding fluency as they moved into the second cycle of peer coaching. The two teachers were curious to know how fast they were reading to their students compared to a third-grade level. According to the University of Oregon (2020), students should be reading on average 110 words per minute or more by the end of third grade. Both teachers observed their peer and calculated their fluency to be much faster than the third-grade rate. Miss Elliott's rate was 131 words per minute, and Miss Nguyen's rate was 139 words per minute. Miss Nguyen said, "I am making sure that I slow my reading pace down to a normal third-grade pace. I have noticed during our reread the students are saying their words more fluently. I have noticed an overall improvement in fluency." She also discussed how the instruction fills the time, whereas last year she had extra time left in the segment.

**Using instructional resources.** Instructional resources are imperative to teaching. Many resources are used to manipulate a concept, while others provide the lesson with concrete tools for structure. All of the participants discussed how the use of instruction resources and the time needed to implement the resources are vital elements to a lesson.

In a mid-course adjustment review, the teachers provided the argument for more planning time. All elementary teachers in the district were provided with updated manuals that are used for daily lesson planning, but the teachers did not receive any planning time devoted to updating the necessary resources that help format the lesson. Miss Saddler said during the meeting, “I know many districts provide planning days for teachers, and it is a lovely thing because I have experienced it. The extra planning time would help us to update the resources that match the manual.” The administration provided a half-day planning for all the teachers at Cool Springs Academy shortly after the mid-course adjustment review.

Also, in the mid-course adjustment review, more discussions of instructional resources were disclosed. Miss Easterly shared how she forgot to use the PowerPoint that displayed the lesson focus and the comprehension questions. In a post-observation conference, Miss Easterly said, “It [the PowerPoint] does put the comprehension questions and the writing prompts up. Thank you. I forgot about that.” Her peer, Miss Xiang replied, “I like to use it because during partner time. When a group finishes earlier than everyone else, they can go back and look at the focus and talk about it.” When conferencing with her peer, Miss Saddler also said, “I forgot to use the PowerPoint that day. I am trying to take attendance and do lunch counts on the computer and sometimes forget to use the it [the PowerPoint].” The PowerPoint provided structure to the lesson and helped to maximize instructional time. During the same meeting, Miss Nguyen continued the discussion by sharing,

I forgot that we had real books so I was doing shared reading on the computer. I paired students with a computer and had them to follow along on their computer as I pointed to every word on the screen on my computer with my cursor. Miss Elliott, my partner, suggested using real books and fluency trackers with my students. So, I have to figure

out where to find them.

This is Miss Nguyen's second year of teaching and using the Bookworms Lessons.

Miss Saddler discussed the visuals that Mrs. Irvin has displayed in her classroom during a post-observation conference. Mrs. Irvin explained, "Those are the favorite things in my classroom. Those show the different elements of each genre of writing. Because every single time we write, I reference those." Miss Saddler said, "I could see how that would be beneficial to the entire grade," and she desired to add the visuals in her classroom and to start the same instructional practice. In an interview, Dr. Adams, the director of elementary schools for the district, concluded, "A willingness to provide resources is also critical. I have to admit I was surprised that teachers articulated a need for modeling the use of visuals. Being a visual person myself, that would never have occurred to me." Findings addressed multiple instructional practices that teachers improved on during the course of the study while also addressing the need for leaders to provide the time for teacher collaboration and reflection.

### *Classroom Management*

In a podcast, Pierson (2013) clearly articulated how teachers must have a relationship with each student in their classroom. She communicated that "kids don't learn from people they don't like" (Pierson, 2013). Both the teacher-student relationships and the class structure are focal pieces that contribute to a positive learning environment.

In a coaching conference between Miss Nguyen and Miss Elliott, Miss Nguyen explained how the use of sticky notes may help a student that continued to ask questions that were off topic. Miss Elliott commented on Miss Nguyen's class 'call.' Miss Elliott said, "The first thing that I noticed was your turkey call to get the class's attention and to transition to shared reading." The class 'call' is a class procedure that Miss Nguyen taught her student to begin a transition to a

new learning segment. At the conclusion of the post-observation conference with Miss Nguyen, Miss Elliott summarized her action steps like this,

The next steps would be to incorporate the ideas into our lesson. I like the idea of using sticky notes and making sure the students are on topic. Plus, if the students are all in a circle instead of sitting all around the room, I can see them better.

Miss Elliot was reflecting on the suggestion that Miss Nguyen provided to have the students to sit in a circle instead of at their desks and her proximity to the students may minimize class interruptions.

Miss Elliott also confided in Miss Nguyen the difficulties of parallel teaching. Miss Elliot had a co-teacher who was supporting students with English acquisition during the shared reading segment that Miss Nguyen observed. Miss Nguyen had similar support in her classroom last year and shared how teacher proximity may also help some of the classroom management issues. Miss Nguyen suggested having students grouped in a circle so the teacher can clearly see who is participating may support more positive engagement with students during the shared reading segment.

When Mrs. Irvin conferenced with Miss Saddler, they shared multiple ways to strengthen classroom management. Mrs. Irvin stated, “There is definitely a plus of knowing the kids. . . . That was nice to tell you specifically who was doing what.” Mrs. Irvin provided support for Miss Saddler by allowing her students to train Miss Saddler’s students on class procedures to help maximize instruction. Mrs. Irvin noticed a way to improve Miss Saddler’s transition from reading to mathematics. Mrs. Irvin said,

I noticed the transition from shared reading to math facts. I have kids during second load every day. They help me organize the math facts and pass them out for the next day. It is

quicker and one less thing that I have to do. If you would like for some of my students to train yours, I can show them and it would be one less thing on your plate.

Additionally, Mrs. Irvin complimented Miss Saddler on her “proximity control” with students who were beginning to be off-task.

During the same post-observation conference, Miss Saddler and Mrs. Irvin discussed a class ‘call’ and collaborative groups. Mrs. Irvin started by complimenting Miss Saddler on her class ‘call’ to help the students transition and to get their attention. Miss Saddler taught this procedure to the students so that they would know what to do and would also know her expectations. Mrs. Irvin questioned her groups, and Miss Saddler responded,

I put quiet students together so that someone has to initiate discussion, and I sometimes put students that normally distract others together. But, I do not do that all the time. This makes them accountable for each other and helps with the overall classroom management.

Mrs. Irvin said shockingly, “When I saw that you had grouped the two students together, I was like whew. This is going to be interesting, but I was pleasantly surprised.” Miss Saddler took a risk with her students by making them more accountable for their actions and it appeared to have paid off.

Miss Easterly and Miss Xiang examined their classroom procedures as well. Miss Xiang noticed how Miss Easterly has her class sit on the carpet during shared reading, while Miss Xiang conveyed the rationale for her students remaining at their desks. Miss Xiang said, “Coming from fourth grade, I never had carpet time. It was interesting to see how the students interacted.” Miss Easterly uttered the importance of class procedures and use of resources as her rationale for having “carpet time.” During this same post-observation conference, Miss Easterly



shared how she allows her students to pick their own partners during shared reading. Miss Easterly shared how the students feel this is a “reward,” and how this little change motivated the students.

Later, she revealed to Miss Xiang how using something to store the books would help with loss prevention. Miss Easterly said, “Maybe the students can keep the books in the bucket and that would help. I have students that lost a book as well. That way all the books stay in the bucket and they don’t get lost.” Miss Easterly made a classroom practice for the students to transition to the carpet by passing by her reading bin and picking up a book. Afterwards, students would return to their desk by placing the book back in the bin.

### *Feedback*

A collaborative learning session was held at the beginning of the peer coaching process. An outside expert was used to help build trust and for teachers to openly share their thoughts. During the session, the peer coaching cycle was shared and discussed along with applicable action research. The expert shared the importance of giving feedback in a nonjudgmental style. The expert used the steps from Zepeda (2017) which are:

1. Revisit the observation goals
2. Resist the urge to make connections with personal beliefs or values
3. Determine if the observation notes are appropriate or need to be rewritten
4. Develop a strategy to present the evidence to the peer

The forms for the pre-observation conference and the post-observation conference were created by the third-grade teachers during this meeting.

In an interview with Miss Elliott, she voiced how the peer coaching process has strengthened the third-grade team. Miss Elliott stated,

With the process of peer coaching and having new team members, it allowed us to have conversations with each other and to get more comfortable with each other and get to know each other on a different level. I think both the discussions and modeling the program helped to solidify thoughts about the framework the new team members.

Miss Elliott also shared how the phrase “I wonder” on the post-observation conference form provided a way for the peer to share her thoughts in a positive, nonjudgmental way. In a post-observation conference, Miss Nguyen disclosed her concerns for a student sitting in the hall outside of Miss Elliott’s class. Miss Nguyen provided suggestions to help students who appeared off-task and made the comment, “I wonder if the student outside was reading.” Miss Nguyen did not make a judgmental call and resisted the urge to provide her beliefs about the situation.

Miss Elliott, the third-grade chair, communicated in an interview about building trust and providing feedback. She articulated,

It [the outcomes from peer coaching] may come down to if you trust that person to be honest with the way they feel and about what is going on in the classroom or if they are going to say something to someone else. Also, with giving feedback, I think there has to be a place that we respect each other. If we respect each other, then we will trust each other.

Miss Elliott also stated how the structure of peer coaching provided the necessary structure and time to build relationships, especially with the new team members.

In an interview, Miss Xiang remarked how her peer has different perspectives and offered feedback on how to improve. Miss Xiang and her peer, Miss Easterly, plan together and exchange their students during the science and social studies segment. Miss Xiang then teaches Miss Easterly's students and vice versa. Miss Xiang commented,

Planning with my co-partner, we have different views and different ways of doing things. So being able to see those things we were able to give us our own ideas, and my partner provided feedback for ways to improve. . . . It [the peer coaching process] takes someone who is open. That is a big part of it.

Miss Xiang continued, "I have never taught third grade. I do not know what is in front of me." Miss Xiang was expressing her concerns of the state-mandated assessments but how a veteran provided her support as she transitioned from a fourth-grade setting to a third-grade one.

The researcher asked Miss Xiang what was meant by the word "open" in her last comments. She discussed the importance of having a trusting relationship and "wanting to make yourself better no matter where you are in the teaching process." Miss Xiang resumed,

I think when you see some teachers that have been teaching for 15 or 20 years that they think they have reached the top of their game. There is a lot of burnout and a lot of wistfulness of how the teaching profession used to be where there was not a ton of guidelines. I think that inhibits the perspective that you can always do better than where you are.

Teaching is a challenging profession, and Miss Xiang revealed how teachers need a reflective practice and a commitment to life-long learning.

Sharing feedback to an individual that you have not worked with in the past can be difficult. Miss Easterly shared the concern and summarized how peer coaching forced her to think of how to phrase the feedback positively. She said,

I think I learned more how to give constructive criticism to a peer. To me it is easier to hear it than to tell somebody [a peer] how she/he can do something better when she/he are a peer because she/he will think what you are doing is not working. It [the feedback] is hard to provide that positively. You just want to say, “Oh, that was great!” But instead, you say, “Why don’t you try it this way?” Being able to be confident enough to give constructive feedback and know that the peer will receive it for what it is and not like saying, “You suck. I’m going to do it my way.”

Miss Easterly openly disclosed how providing constructive feedback can be strenuous.

In an interview with Miss Saddler, she provided understanding of transitioning to third grade and from learning support teacher to a regular education teacher. Miss Saddler stated,

I feel more confident. This is my first time teaching a class and not mirroring what the teacher was doing for ESOL. . . . I definitely have learned that teachers’ personalities are different between the upper and the lower grades.

Miss Saddler continued to discuss how the feedback helped her to feel more efficacious and voiced, “I feel more confident, even receiving things that I need to improve on. I also learned that I was not off in left field. I am doing this right and I received positive feedback, making me feel more confident.” Peer coaching helped Miss Saddler transition to a regular classroom teacher, while providing support that normally would not be present.

When providing feedback to colleagues, a certain level of professionalism must be present. In an interview, Mrs. Irvin shared that feeling. She stated, “There has to be a certain level of professionalism, and sometimes people are concerned that there is not professionalism being demonstrated when people are going into other people's classrooms.” Mrs. Irvin was articulating the connotation of multiple individuals observing a teacher and how, prior to peer coaching, the experience has been received as threatening. Mrs. Irvin also disclosed how she has received little to no feedback in the 14 years she has been at Cool Springs Academy with no experience of observing others.

The findings addressed how creating positive feedback can be shared with a peer may be “nerve-wracking,” but the benefits include building trusting, nonjudgmental relationships with colleagues. The findings also addressed how the pre-observation conference tool and post-observation tool provided the necessary springboard for teachers to reveal their comments regarding an observation in a professional manner.

### *Reflection*

Reflection is the technical term for conceptual and methodological practices used during any learning experience (Moon, 2004), and teacher reflection is a critical component of peer coaching. Collaboration is one key component that provides authentic learning to teachers in a job-embedded, school culture. As all school professionals learn new practices to better the lives of the next generation, teachers and school leaders have to pause and reflect continuously.

In her interview, Miss Nguyen disclosed a reflective practice by stating her goal that developed during the second cycle of peer coaching. The goal included slowing her own rate of reading to that of a third-grade reading rate. Both Miss Elliott and Miss Nguyen researched an appropriate rate for third-grade students and noticed how they were both reading faster than the

average third-grade rate. Miss Nguyen said, “I am making sure that I slow my reading pace down to a normal third-grade pace. I have noticed during our reread the students are saying their words more fluently. I have noticed an overall improvement in fluency.” She also discussed how the instruction fills the time, whereas last year she had extra time left in the segment.

Miss Xiang revealed the importance of peer coaching for a new member on the team. She stated,

I am a true proponent of peer coaching especially for someone like me that is new on a grade level. It helped me to prioritize what was the point of what we were doing. I don’t think I ever really understood that.

Plus, Miss Xiang shared how “everyone has strengths that people can benefit from.” Miss Easterly was paired with Miss Xiang. She added, “We were able to look for different things but also reflect on how the lesson looked from the first time to the second time.” Miss Xiang communicated the importance of creating the persistence to drive teacher growth.

Mrs. Irvin communicated how she did not “feel like I (she) had a lot of ah-ha moments” but provided clarity for a new team member. In an earlier post-observation conference, Mrs. Irvin reflected on her use of time. She said that she led “conversations throughout the reading, but sometimes we (the class) talk too much which can be my downfall. Then, that (the class discussions) pushes me behind.” Regarding the graphic organizer that was used for writing, Mrs. Irvin stated in a post-observation conference with Miss Saddler, “I thought that [the graphic organizer] was a good way to take the 'training wheels' off. It [the graphic organizer] would still give them help but not as much support. I am definitely going to start doing that . . .” In an interview, Mrs. Irvin discussed how she felt like a mentor for Miss Saddler but always wanted to learn from the coaching conversations.

In an interview with Miss Saddler, she said,

Some of the benefits are learning different perspectives and new strategies to put forth in my teaching and being able to see things in a different way. We all have different approaches. Being able to see and incorporate those into your own style was a beneficial part of the process, especially being new to the grade level.

Miss Saddler also said in an interview that she loved the peer coaching experience and would enjoy keeping the process going in different content areas and with different peers.

In an interview with Dr. Adams, the director of elementary schools for the district, voiced the importance of having a structure for teachers to reflect. She stated, “Requiring teachers to reflect pre and post establishes a framework for what is to occur and puts the onus of responsibility back on the teacher.” The peer coaching process forced the teachers to have a reflective practice regardless of how the teachers felt about the Comprehensive Reading Solutions Literacy Framework.

### *Teacher Self-Efficacy*

When teachers are learning from each other in a non-judgmental environment, the teachers can grow professionally by supporting their peers and increasing their self-efficacy at the same time (Zepeda, 2019). Self-efficacy is the belief of being able to do a job to a desired level of performance. According to Bandura (1986, 2010), self-efficacy is the foundation for motivation and achievement.

During a mid-course adjustment review with the participants, the teachers were reflecting on the instructional strategies they discussed during the first peer coaching cycle. Miss Saddler stated, “Teaching is a lonely thing.” Miss Saddler, being new to the third-grade team,

was feeling overwhelmed with the many things to learn. This feeling was discussed during an action team meeting. Principal Ingles articulated:

Many times, teachers feel like they are on an island and are the only one that is facing certain challenges. Peer coaching provides time for teachers to reflect with a colleague on specific areas of concerns like organizational practices, instructional strategies, classroom management, etc. Then, they can learn from each other.

This “lonely” feeling is the inner struggle of teacher self-efficacy, the desire to do the job but the overwhelming feeling of not knowing if a person can.

Miss Saddler learned how to use a graphic organizer from observing Mrs. Irvin. The graphic organizer was not being implemented during the observation, but Miss Saddler found the graphic and started using it to better her students’ writing. Eventually this led to a more solidified practice in writing for the entire third grade. In an interview, Miss Saddler said, “I feel more confident, even receiving things that I need to improve on. I also learned that I was not off in left field. I am doing things right, and I received positive feedback, making me feel more confident.” Miss Saddler also shared that she feels more confident teaching the Comprehensive Reading Solutions Literacy Framework after observing all of the components of the program.

Miss Elliot stated earlier that she received little feedback about the literacy framework. Additionally, a practice of the third-grade team was to discuss instructional strategies during planning. Miss Elliott articulated during an interview, “With actually seeing other people teach, we can form our own perspectives instead of just by word of mouth,” and she continued, “We had to learn how to give constructive feedback.” Miss Elliott believed that the experience was worthwhile saying, “Having them to work together through this process benefited the team,” concluding the interview by saying how relationships of the third-grade teachers have



strengthened. With the structure peer coaching provided, she believed everyone feels supported enough to teach.

### *Leadership*

According to Fisher et al. (2016), a teacher has the most effect on student achievement, especially considering the many best practices that he/she can use to help students grow. The principal (or school leadership) has an effect size of  $d = 0.32$ , which is likely to have a positive impact on student achievement (Fisher et al., 2016). Robbins (2015) asserted, “Principals play a vital role in determining the success or failure of peer coaching. For coaching to succeed, principals must demonstrate their support in words and deeds, and they must genuinely value and believe in it” (p. 119). The school culture, and the expectations therein, is directly attributed to the school leadership.

A key finding was the use of time. Over the course of the study, extra planning time was provided for the participants to collaborate together, to update resources, to reflect, and to make any necessary adjustments to instruction. Mrs. Newman, an assistant principal, identified with this and shared during an interview,

Time is always a concern. There is never enough time for teachers to be able to collaborate. Setting up a time with intentional peer coaching goals would guarantee that teachers were able to collaborate with a focus on instruction and student learning.

The tools developed by the participants helped to set the focus on instruction and student learning. Involving the team members in the development of the tools is a necessary condition for a successful peer coaching initiative (Zepeda, 2017). The pre-observation conference tool included questions such as: What is the learning target? What things are going well? and What are some struggles? The post-observation conference tool provided questions like: What I

noticed? What I am wondering? and How can I support you? These tools are provided in Chapter 3 in Figure 3.2 and Figure 3.3.

Mrs. Ingles, the school principal, shared, “Providing time for reflective practices is vitally important and often overlooked. Protecting that time is necessary.” For peer coaching to be successful, providing the time and structure for a reflective practice must be a priority. Dr. Adams, the director of elementary schools, said, “I have learned that the process [peer coaching] has renewed my commitment to the importance of oversight, leadership, and effective management. Also, that no matter how much time is provided, it is never enough.” If reflective practices are a priority for teachers, appropriate time must be provided for them to continue learn and grow professionally.

Dr. Adams continued, “Peer coaching has to be an expectation, and what is expected gets inspected. However, peer coaching cannot exist in a vacuum. Peer coaching has to be balanced with quality professional learning supporting the needs of teachers.” According to Zepeda (2017), peer coaching offers another layer of supervision “by situating teachers at the center of their own learning” (p. 289). By providing time and a structured process, school leadership can use peer coaching to assist with instructional supervision.

Dr. Adams also provided a different perspective on planning for a reading lesson, which was an interview question for all participants and action team members. All participants and action team members communicated the importance of using the standards, resources, pacing, etc. Dr. Adams articulated, “When planning for a typical reading lesson, I would hope that teachers are using collaborative planning time to strategically plan for all three components: shared reading, read aloud, and differentiated skills groups.” Dr. Adams is the only individual that used the term “collaborative planning.” To the researcher, this aspect demonstrated how the

processes during the professional learning communities needed to be more structured with a focus on data-driven instruction.

Mrs. Ingles, the school principal, made connections with the peer coaching process to improvement in instruction, while using the Comprehensive Reading Solutions Literacy Framework. In an interview, Mrs. Ingles said,

More intentionality in conversations has taken place regarding the implementation of the components of the Bookworms curriculum. Teachers have been more receptive to input from their peers after having an opportunity to observe and be observed by their colleagues. Teachers have also made adjustments in their instruction that have improved time-on-task for students.

Mrs. Ingles shared her perspective on the peer coaching process at Cool Springs Academy as the third-grade teachers continued to implement the Bookworms Lessons.

The findings addressed the use of instructional resources. School leaders must provide the necessary tools to maximize the learning opportunities for all students and the time to plan to use those tools. With the burden of starting school, the third-grade teachers did not receive adequate time to plan using the new manual for the Comprehensive Reading Solutions Literacy Framework. Dr. Adams hinted on this aspect during an interview. She stated, “A willingness to provide resources is also critical. I have to admit I was surprised that teachers articulated a need for modeling the use of visuals. Being a visual person myself, that would never have occurred to me.” The findings addressed that the teachers needed time to update instructional resources that influenced the lesson layout.

Changing adult behavior and a school culture takes time (Joyce & Showers, 2002; Robbins, 2015). The study's findings demonstrated the urgency of peer coaching for teachers to step foot outside their classrooms and to gain new perspectives. Mrs. Irvin stated that she "did not have a lot of ah-ha moments," and that she also has not observed another teacher in her 14 years of teaching. Mrs. Irvin's statement conflicted her comment of feel more efficacious by being able to model lessons for Miss Saddler, a new teacher on the third-grade team. This conflict may be due to the 'widget effect' that Kraft and Gilmour (2017) discussed when the teacher evaluations become meaningless. In a mid-course adjustment review, Miss Saddler uttered, "Teaching is a lonely thing." This could be from the overwhelming feeling Miss Saddler has being basically a new teacher again, while learning a new literacy framework. However, Miss Saddler's feeling could also be from the collaboration with her new team. Regardless, the findings addressed the commencing of the peer coaching process and changing a school culture.

### **Findings for School Leaders**

There were both benefits and struggles discovered as the peer coaching process was implemented among the third-grade teachers. The third research question addressed the perspectives of school leaders as they supported the peer coaching process. "Peer coaching is a multifaceted tool that can be implemented as an instructional strategy, a professional development strategy, and a complement to instructional supervision" (Zepeda, 2019, p. 167). To instill a school culture with lifelong learning, school leaders must reflect on the current practices in order to improve teacher feedback and to ensure a process is in place for reflection. The findings are organized in the following manner: 1) start small, 2) it takes time, and 3) professional learning communities.

### *Start Small*

With a new team in third grade, the researcher desired to start small. Robbins (2015) verified that when a school starts the peer coaching process, the school wants to put structures in place to focus the discussion between the teachers on the students and to take small steps. The researcher selected a structured program that is strategically planned each day. Many participants shared that they wanted to observe other content areas either after the first cycle or second cycle of peer coaching. However, the researcher did not deviate and participants observed during segments of the Comprehensive Reading Solutions Literacy Framework.

Mrs. Irvin shared the concern about the structure of the literacy framework. She voiced, “I think for the most part that I would like to see the delivery of other people rather than just one person. I was not seeing a whole lot of difference between the two of us.” Miss Xiang made a similar comparison but expressed her desire to observe in mathematics. She said, “Math is my strength. When planning with my co-partner, we have different views and different ways of doing things. Being able to see those things may be able to give us our own ideas and ways to improve.” This quote also shows how passionate Miss Xiang was about mathematics instruction. With Miss Xiang being a new third-grade team member and being passionate about mathematics, some feelings were hurt during planning that the researcher was asked to join.

When interviewing Miss Elliott, she described those feelings but shared the importance of starting with a structured format to help build working relationships. She stated,

I think in other subject areas people are more passionate, and it is not as scripted. With Bookworms, you do this on day one and this on day two. With less structure, the outcome could have been very different with some hurt feelings from the beginning of the school year.

Later, Miss Elliott concluded,

As a leader for the grade level, we were able to discuss as a team different challenges with the program and try to discuss those while bouncing ideas around. . . . It [peer coaching] allowed us to have . . . to get more comfortable with each other and to get to know each other on a different level. I think both the discussions and modeling the program helped to solidify thoughts about the framework.

As the third-grade chair, Miss Elliott believed that the adult relationships were strengthened from having them to work together through a structured content area and a structured process.

With full implementation of the Comprehensive Reading Solutions Literacy Framework for over two years, questions continue to arise. In an interview, Mrs. Irvin struggled with a quote that the school superintendent shared concerning the Bookworms lessons (Walpole & McKenna, 2017). Dr. Landon, Bark Camp Schools Superintendent, concluded that the Bookworms lessons (Walpole & McKenna, 2017) is the “floor and not the ceiling.” Mrs. Irvin questioned, “I know that I asked for clarity about the statement Dr. Landon said. I know that in my personal opinion that if something is the floor and not the ceiling that I can take and tweak it to make it more fun and engaging . . .”

In an email from Dr. Landon, he concluded,

While the implementation of Bookworms is often seen as scripted, it truly serves as the foundation for a core reading expectation. As educators, our role is to take the standards and build on them. The engagement that is created in the classroom is not through the words on a piece of paper, but the questioning, interactions, and creativity of the teacher to make ideas and standards come alive. Bookworms should serve as the catalyst for growing effective readers and writers in the classroom. It is up to the teacher to

synthesize the curriculum and make the instruction come alive.

With any instructional framework, the teacher can make the learning unique based on their own interpretation of the important elements of the program and his/her own teaching style.

Dr. Landon, Bark Camp School Superintendent, articulated how the Comprehensive Reading Solutions Literacy Framework was the “floor.” In an email with Dr. Landon, he explained this includes the use of the Bookworm Lessons and instructional resources. If a teacher strictly used the manual provided by the Bookworm Lessons, the different books for shared reading and the interactive read aloud, and the resources for differentiated skills groups, then the teacher can achieve results if used consistently and confidently (Walpole & McKenna, 2017). Dr. Landon continued to explain that when the teacher uses the resources and understands the standards, he/she can take a scripted lesson and make it their own.

The findings addressed multiple discussions that illustrated how the third-grade teachers engaged the Bookworm Lessons by creating their own flare. In a post-observation conference, Miss Saddler and Mrs. Irvin as well as Miss Easterly and Miss Xiang discussed the use of a PowerPoint that was created by the third-grade team. Miss Saddler and Miss Easterly mentioned that they sometimes forget to use the PowerPoint, and Miss Xiang shared that she uses the PowerPoint “religiously.” The PowerPoint displayed the lesson targets and comprehension questions.

All six participants voiced the difficulties when it comes to grouping students who are nonreaders. For example, Miss Elliott provided Miss Nguyen with a strategy to group students that were struggling to read. In the strategy, the struggling students were placed in a small group so that Miss Nguyen can read with them. The non-struggling students were paired and read to each other. Another resource was provided to support teachers in scaffolding instruction. The

third-grade teachers created a graphic organizer for students to make connections to new vocabulary and another graphic organizer was used to help students improve their writing.

### *It takes Time*

When building the school schedule, more instructional time was provided for the literacy framework. Adjustments had to be made to allow at least 45 minutes of each segment of the Comprehensive Reading Solutions Literacy Framework including the interactive read aloud, the shared reading, and the differentiated skills groups.

A key finding was the use of time. Over the course of the study, extra planning time was provided for the participants to collaborate, to update resources, to reflect, and to make any necessary adjustments to instruction. Mrs. Newman, an assistant principal, identified with this them and said during an interview,

Time is always a concern. There is never enough time for teachers to be able to collaborate. Setting up a time with intentional peer coaching goals would guarantee that teachers were able to collaborate with a focus on instruction and student learning. The tools developed by the participants helped to set the focus on instruction and student learning. These tools are provided in Chapter 3 in Figure 3.2 and Figure 3.3.

Mrs. Ingles, the school principal, shared, “Providing time for reflective practices is vitally important and often overlooked. Protecting that time is necessary.” For peer coaching to be successful, providing the time and structure for a reflective practice must be a priority. Dr. Adams, the director of elementary schools, said, “I have learned that the process (peer coaching) has renewed my commitment to the importance of oversight, leadership, and effective management. Also, that no matter how much time is provided, it is never enough.”



Another finding includes the struggle of time away from the classroom. In an interview, Miss Nguyen revealed, “One struggle was leaving my class to observe and having to come back to play catch up to learn what the students did so I could continue.” Even though this was not stated by other participants, the feeling was apparent when a teacher has to step outside of the classroom for any amount of time. This conflict was also observed when teachers planned for substitutes when they had the opportunity to collaborate with their team during the normal school day for an extra planning session. The participants asked for this extra planning time, and the school administration provided a half-day planning day for all of the teachers at Cool Springs Academy.

Changing the school climate and culture takes time. Fiore (2013) used the analogy of an iceberg to describe the differences between the school climate and culture. The school climate represents the top of the iceberg, the processes of the school that are “readily observable” (Fiore, 2013, p. 9). The school culture represents the portion of the iceberg that lies underneath the water’s surface. Fiore (2013) depicted, “. . . this mass of ice below sea level is larger, often more complex, and provides supporting structures necessary for the existence of the part of the iceberg we are able to see. School culture is analogous to this image” (p. 9). Peer coaching was an intervention used to address needed changes to school culture by adjusting the professional learning teachers received.

### *Professional Learning Communities*

Zemelman et al. (2012) concluded that professional learning communities were the key change element for school improvement if the learning community included transparent communication, trust among all team members, leadership stability, and continual job-embedded learning opportunities. The peer coaching process provided the necessary structure for the third-

grade teachers to reflect on instructional practices and to build trusting relationships with new team members. Using an outside expert provided the team with an opportunity to collaborate on expectations and tools that were used during the peer coaching process. These tools are Figure 3.2 and Figure 3.3 found in Chapter 3.

Mrs. Ohana, the instructional coach, confirmed that the pre-observation conference form and the post-observation conference form “have become regular tools I use with teachers.” She continued,

I use it to give teachers the constructive feedback necessary in a professional, timely manner. Additionally, this system provides next steps and additional ways that I as the instructional coach can support a teacher's instructional needs. The teachers have been very open to the use of the forms as well and find them to be an avenue to receive needed feedback in a non-threatening manner.

Mrs. Ohana participated in the original professional learning with the outside expert and began using the forms developed during the session.

In an interview, Miss Elliott verbalized how giving feedback was awkward during the first action research cycle. She said,

Giving someone feedback was uncomfortable just because I didn't want to necessarily hurt someone's feelings. I wanted to be thoughtful and share what was important to me. . . I think the word 'wondering' makes it less judgmental. I would use that word so it was like a thought and not something that was negative.

Miss Elliott also shared that providing feedback to her peers became easier during the second cycle when the process was more established.

Mrs. Ohana also worked with the Technology Department to purchase cameras specifically intended for teacher observations. Even if she cannot physically observe all classrooms, Mrs. Ohana followed the same procedures with teachers as they share a 25-minute videoed lesson with her. Mrs. Ohana conducted post-observation conferences with the teachers in a timely manner to share feedback. Mrs. Ohana stated,

As the current instructional coach, my take away from the peer coaching experience has actually become part of my job. The pre-observation conference tool . . . has been a specific way for me to gain invaluable information prior to going into a classroom to observe.

Mrs. Newman originated the work with using video within the past couple of years after attending professional learning in Kansas by Jim Knight. Mrs. Newman had difficulties arise with the use of technology. The work follows the concepts in Knight's (2014) book, *Focus on Teaching*.

In an interview, Dr. Adams discussed how collaborative planning time can easily be derailed if the process is not monitored by administrators. She affirmed,

. . . the designated time often gets consumed with other things and best intentions ultimately fall by the wayside. Requiring teachers to reflect pre and post establishes a framework for what is to occur and puts the onus of responsibility back on the teacher.

The findings demonstrated changes within the professional learning communities. Mrs. Ingles concluded,

Teachers have been more receptive to input from their peers after having an opportunity to observe and be observed by their colleagues. . . . Implementing a peer coaching

protocol – and using it with fidelity – would build a growth mindset among the staff. It would build a culture of continual improvement for all staff members.

The findings addressed how the structure of the peer coaching process supported changes to the existing practices within professional learning communities at Cool Springs Academy over the course of the action research case study.

### **Chapter Summary**

The findings from this action research case study tell a story about six third-grade teachers and their school. While continuing to struggle with changes in demographics and the stress that poverty has on the community and the school environment, the findings addressed the intervention of peer coaching as teachers used the Comprehensive Reading Solutions Literacy Framework. The findings addressed each of the three research questions and demonstrated tangible and intangible elements that teachers used to make changes to their instructional practice. Instructional practices and changes to classroom management are some examples of observable differences. Providing time for a reflective practice and making enhancements to school culture are elements that may go unnoticed, but these elements will make an impact in the near future.

Miss Nguyen said it best, “When peers observe you, you naturally want to go above and beyond what you typically do every day.” Miss Nguyen made a proactive, productive use of her peer by collaborating on mutual classroom challenges and transferring new skills into her practice. This vital element of making proactive, productive use of peers is one step towards making a sustained practice of school improvement (Joyce & Showers, 2002). Chapter 6 portrays the thematic analysis.

## **CHAPTER 6**

### **THEMATIC FINDINGS**

According to Creswell and Poth (2018), themes start to emerge after the researcher has analyzed the data for codes and categories, and themes are “broad units of information that consist of several codes aggregated to form a common idea” (p. 328). The themes drawn from the findings include: 1) peer coaching opens closed doors, 2) post-observation conferences lead to the next steps, and 3) reflective practices take time to learn. The thematic findings follow the purpose of the study, the research questions, and the thematic analysis.

#### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this action research case study was to examine peer coaching of third-grade teachers during the implementation of a literacy framework in a suburban elementary school. Through such an effort, the hope is to support teachers using job-embedded, reflective processes to refine current instructional practices related to the Comprehensive Reading Solutions Literacy Framework (Walpole & McKenna, 2017). Coaching in the context of literacy is important because learning to read by the end of third grade is a critical milestone for students (Hernandez, 2011). The literacy framework is based on the work of Walpole and McKenna (2017) who refer to the literacy framework as the Comprehensive Reading Solutions or the Bookworm lesson format.

### **Research Questions**

This action research study was guided by the following questions:

- 1) How might peer coaching be used to improve teacher practice using the Comprehensive Reading Solutions Literacy Framework?
- 2) What is learned by teachers and administrators as they work collaboratively to implement peer coaching as it relates to implementing the Comprehensive Reading Solutions Literacy Framework?
- 3) What can school leaders learn about supporting peer coaching among teachers?

### **Thematic Analysis**

One common belief in education is in continuous learning and high expectations for all students. However, many times educators do not value the same principles that we expect from our students. Teaching perspectives are valued because they can provide other teachers with instructional support for a similar classroom struggle. However, if schools do not engage in job-embedded learning practices, such as peer coaching, teachers will not grow.

In the past, the teachers were rated on their evaluations as proficient, and the school culture did not include a peer coaching process. Even though Mrs. Irvin had multiple observations over the years, she stated that she had not exited the room to observe another teacher in the school in 14 years. With teachers receiving all proficient on past evaluations, are they feeling ‘widget effect’ as Kraft and Gilmour (2017) described? Do teachers desire more feedback to feel more efficacious about using the Comprehensive Reading Solutions Literacy Framework (Walpole & McKenna, 2017)? Regardless, teachers deserve dedicated time to reflect on their instructional practices and to adjust their practices.

Cool Springs Academy became a low achieving school due to underlying circumstances. Cool Springs Academy changed from having a majority Caucasian student population to a majority Hispanic student population. However, instructional practices did not change. Also, the teachers who were certified to teach English acquisition skills taught segments of mathematics. Along with this change and not having supports in place for the teachers at Cool Springs Academy, the school was designated as a Focus school (Georgia Department of Education, 2019a).

One aspect of the peer coaching process was to examine the effects on the collaboration between teachers and to cause positive change in the area of school culture. Table 6.1 highlights how the themes were derived using the findings that was presented in Chapter 5.

Table 6.1

*Thematic Analysis*

Research Question	Broad Area of Findings	Themes
How might peer coaching be used to improve teacher practice using the Comprehensive Reading Solutions Literacy Framework?	Peer coaching to Improve Teacher Practice in Literacy	Peer coaching opens closed doors
What is learned by teachers and administrators as they work collaboratively to implement peer coaching as it relates to implementing the Comprehensive Reading Solutions Literacy Framework?	What Teachers Learned about implementing Peer Coaching	Post-observation conferences lead to the next steps
What can school leaders learn about supporting peer coaching among teachers?	School leaders supporting peer coaching	Reflective practices take time to learn

## **Peer Coaching Opens Closed Doors**

Since teachers have not experienced a peer coaching model or conducted peer observations in over 10 years, the researcher wanted to start with a structured content to begin building trust and for teachers to learn how to give and accept constructive criticism from their fellow colleagues. Having teachers to step outside of their classrooms was not a practice among the school culture. The literacy framework offers the structure with a strict pacing guide and a daily lesson to follow. When starting the peer coaching cycle, Robbins (2015) suggested to start slow and expect some problems along the way, asserting: “The development of trust takes time and is enhanced by consistency. Trust among professional colleagues influences individuals’ willingness to expose their knowledge or skills” (p. 117). Peer coaching also provided a structure with tools to aid conversation and provide feedback during the pre-observation conferences and the post-observation conferences.

As the researcher began the journey, he first asked the principal, assistant principal, instructional coach, and district office personnel for their thoughts on peer coaching as a way to support instruction and ongoing professional learning. Dr. Adams, the director of elementary schools, hinted at the use of the Comprehensive Reading Solutions Literacy Framework. As the ideas were formulated, the researcher discovered additional support was needed in third grade due to the pressure of high-stakes testing and teaching students how to read in a low socioeconomic environment. Hernandez (2011) provided evidence that students in such a situation are at risk of not graduating from high school. The researcher went to third-grade teachers to capture their initial thoughts of the study. The teachers were excited and willing to learn from each other.



After the teachers agreed to participate in the study, an outside expert officially set the stage for peer coaching. In a collaborative learning session, she shared overarching goals that established a connection with the teachers. The goals included: building relationships, improving literacy practices, and growing as a professional. The outside expert was used to help build trust and for teachers to share their thoughts openly. She has 25 years in education with 6 years as an elementary teacher, 15 years as an instructional coach, and 4 years as the K-8 Literacy Content Specialist. The expert is enrolled in a doctoral program and is known as one of the best candidates to work with to improve professional learning. The expert articulated the importance of giving feedback in a nonjudgmental style and provided resources to help the third-grade teachers to create documents to aid conversations during the pre-observation conference and the post-observation conference. The tools the team created are portrayed in Figure 3.2 and Figure 3.3 in Chapter 3.

Mrs. Ohana, the school instructional coach, was present for the professional learning that the outside expert shared. Mrs. Ohana confirmed that the pre-observation conference tool and the post-observation conference form “have become regular tools I use with teachers.” She uses the documents to provide feedback to teachers and to guide the post-observation conferences in a professional manner. Mrs. Ohana shared how the documents are a necessary part of the peer coaching process and provide structure to the conversations. Mrs. Ohana’s started the school year 2019-2020 as her first year being the school instructional coach. During the course of the study, Cool Springs Academy grew, needing an additional assistant principal. Mrs. Newman, the former instructional coach, filled the opening. Then, the leadership team selected Mrs. Ohana, a veteran teacher with much classroom success, to fill the vacancy that Mrs. Newman’s move created.

With a new team in the third grade, the researcher desired to start small. Robbins (2015) verified that when a school begins the peer coaching process, the school wants to put structures in place to focus the discussion between the teachers on the students and to take small steps. The researcher selected a structured program that is strategically planned each day as well as documents that the team collaboratively created to provide structure to conversations. Even though many participants shared that they wanted to observe other content areas, the researcher did not deviate, and the participants observed during segments of the Comprehensive Reading Solutions Literacy Framework.

In an interview with Miss Elliott, the third-grade chair, she voiced how the peer coaching process has improved the relationships on the team. She stated,

With the process of peer coaching and having new team members, it allowed us to have conversations with each other and get to know each other on a different level. I think both the discussions and modeling the literacy program helped us to solidify thoughts about the framework and with the new team members.

Miss Elliott also communicated how trust plays a vital role in the relationship. With regards to providing feedback to a colleague, she said, “. . . with giving feedback, I think there has to be a place that we respect each other. If we respect each other, then we will trust each other.” Miss Xiang shared a similar finding saying how her “peer coach is someone that I feel the most comfortable with on my grade-level.” If teachers are not comfortable with each other, they cannot be asked to provide nonjudgmental feedback to each other. Building trust in the relationships of all participants is a key element to unlocking closed doors.

Trust and collaboration are crucial elements in learning communities (Hallam, Smith, Hite, Hite, & Wilcox, 2015). Mrs. Irvin shared, “When you . . . create a relationship with a colleague, and you know that you are on the same side, then the hope is that you are trying to improve and that things will be beneficial.” Mrs. Ohana, the instructional coach, discussed how collaboration provides an opportunity for teachers to learn new perspectives. She stated,

I think that anytime we collaborate with our peers we have the opportunity to learn new skills and practices, whether or not we take it as a personal choice. Our self-efficacy can sometimes be a hinderance when it comes to being open-minded to receive feedback from a peer coach.

When teachers trust each other, instructional practices can be openly shared without fear of judgment or recourse (Hallam et al., 2015).

Miss Saddler stated, “Teaching is a lonely thing.” Miss Saddler, being new to the third-grade team, was feeling overwhelmed with the many things to learn. This feeling was discussed during an action team meeting. Principal Ingles articulated, “Many times teachers feel like they are on an island and are the only one that is facing certain challenges. Peer coaching provides time for teachers to reflect with a colleague on specific areas of concerns.” The action team concluded with the promise of using mentor-teacher relationships for more than first-year teachers. The mentor program for new teachers is a school intervention.

This “lonely” feeling that Miss Saddler spoke of is the inner struggle of teacher self-efficacy, the desire to do the job but the overwhelming feeling of not knowing if a person can. In an interview, Miss Saddler said, “I feel more confident, even receiving things that I need to improve on. I also learned that I was not off in left field. I am doing things right, and I received positive feedback, making me feel more confident.” Miss Saddler also shared that she feels

more confident teaching the Comprehensive Reading Solutions Literacy Framework after observing all of the components of the program.

In an interview, Miss Elliott believed that the peer coaching experience was worthwhile sharing, “Having them to work together through this process benefited the team,” concluding the interview by saying how relationships of the third-grade teachers have strengthened. With the structure peer coaching provided, Miss Elliott believed everyone feels supported enough to teach. In an interview with Miss Easterly, she provided insight into the discussions in the third-grade professional learning community meetings. The school provides a 50-minute planning period for all teachers, and one day is set aside for grade-level meetings. However, most grade-levels meet more frequently. Miss Easterly said,

We had conversations in PLC [professional learning community] meetings on things that we wished we could change but cannot. The process helped those conversations. It [peer coaching] broke the ground to have those conversations. Before, we were not having conversations because we thought we were doing the same thing. . . . It [Bookworms] is scripted.

Miss Easterly articulated that the peer coaching process “broke the ground” by opening up conversations during team meetings. The peer coaching process also opened closed doors.

### **Post-Observation Conferences Leads to the Next Steps**

Third-grade teachers were paired together based on their level of experience. One teacher was a more experienced teacher, and her peer was a teacher with less experience in third grade. Becky Elliott was paired with Christina Nguyen; Elizabeth Xiang was paired with Uma Easterly; and Rena Irvin was paired with Rosa Saddler. Table 3.4 in Chapter 3 provides the level of experience for each teacher and her highest degree earned.

With a new team in the third grade, the researcher desired to start small. Robbins (2015) verified that when a school begins the peer coaching process, the school wants to put structures in place to focus the discussion between the teachers on the students and to take small steps. The researcher selected a structured program that is strategically planned each day. Many participants shared that they wanted to observe other content areas either after the first cycle or second cycle of peer coaching. However, the researcher did not deviate, and participants observed during segments of the Comprehensive Reading Solutions Literacy Framework.

The third-grade teachers had different viewpoints from the administration at Cool Springs Academy. The teachers felt they were unsupported at the beginning of the implementation of the literacy framework. Mrs. Irvin stated, “I think that the phrase, build the airplane as we are flying [it], would probably describe how the work with the Bookworms started.” Also, the teachers shared that they received little feedback on the literacy framework. With other new members on the third-grade team, Miss Easterly summed it up by saying, “Our new team member would say things like ‘I know what we teach but how do we teach it?’ We have modeled a lot of that in almost all of the subject areas but not before this year.” The peer coaching cycle initiated a level of support that the teachers have not been exposed to in previous years.

Multiple data point to the theme of modeling the lesson. The best example was captured by Mrs. Irvin and Miss Saddler when they discussed during a post-observation conference how the lesson is supposed to progress during a shared reading segment. The two teachers discuss how Mrs. Irvin asked comprehension questions during the lesson to engage in more conversation with the students when Miss Saddler asked the questions at the end of the lesson. Miss Saddler stated, “I think knowing when these conversations pop up in the book would be helpful, but I think that may just come with time.” Mrs. Irvin learned how Miss Saddler used a graphic

organizer to help students frame their writing responses. Mrs. Irvin said, “I thought that was a good way to take the ‘training wheels’ off. It would give them (students) help but not as much support.” Miss Saddler also shared with Mrs. Irvin how she uses Google Classroom to help support the student’s typing.

Miss Easterly, who went to the Bookworms Institute in Delaware over the summer, redelivered content from the training to her team. She modeled how to teach decoding and different syllable types that are used during differentiated skills groups, and the team practiced among themselves. The redelivery that Miss Easterly provided was essential to the third-grade teachers due to the number of students who were nonreaders. The third-grade teachers continued this discussion and applied their new knowledge to cooperative learning practices during shared reading.

All of the participants discussed the hardship of grouping the students who were nonreaders. The teachers learned that instead of partner grouping all students, they could make a small group of nonreaders. Then, the teacher could use the choral reading strategy with the students and ask comprehension questions to begin building fluency and understanding. Teachers can also use technology to record themselves reading, if the students would respond more appropriately in that manner. Miss Easterly concluded that the students “will catch up as long as they are exposed to the pacing that they are supposed to be reading at,” a generalization she learned through participating in the Bookworms Summer Institute.

The next step included the use of instructional resources. The third-grade teachers use a PowerPoint to structure their literacy lesson and to provide a lesson focus. All of the teachers discussed the use of the PowerPoint and later discussed the need to update the resource. Mrs. Irvin stated the importance of modeling this portion of the lesson with everyone during a mid-

course adjustment review. She said, “I feel like that it [using the PowerPoint] is essential to be modeled . . . because if we have not been intentional with the students about how to have a conversation then it [this portion of the lesson] can become a playtime.” When the teachers modeled using the PowerPoint, they improved the clarity of the lesson focus.

The findings were derived from multiple discussions between the teachers that led to improving scaffolding practices for students. During the peer coaching process, Miss Saddler learned how using a graphic organizer for writing can improve students writing and their independence. Figure 5.2 in Chapter 5 portrays the graphic organizer used for writing. Miss Nguyen learned how to implement a vocabulary strategy to help her students practice decoding. In an interview with Miss Nguyen, she described the approach similar to a spelling test. She stated,

I introduced the vocabulary and then did a mock spelling test. The students would decode the words and then use their desk to write the spelling of the words. This would help my students as well because my students are not doing so well at it.

The findings also addressed a graphic organizer used for vocabulary. Figure 5.1 in Chapter 5 displays the graphic organizer used for vocabulary. As a next step, the third-grade teachers desired to include the vocabulary along with the Spanish translation for the students learning English.

The teachers felt the Comprehensive Reading Solutions Literacy Framework is scripted and hardly able to adjust for their unique style. Mrs. Irvin voiced her concern with the quote from the school superintendent regarding the Bookworms lessons. Dr. Landon, Bark Camp Schools Superintendent, concluded that the literacy framework is the “floor and not the ceiling.” Dr. Landon explained, “The engagement that is created in the classroom is not through the words

on a piece of paper, but the questioning, interactions, and creativity of the teacher to make ideas and standards come alive.” The third-grade teachers detailed different ways their lessons ‘came alive.’ Examples include creative student grouping and the use of instructional resources to help with the lesson focus and for scaffolding purposes. Many more examples are illustrated in Chapter 5.

Miss Nguyen said it best, “When peers observe you, you naturally want to go above and beyond what you typically do every day.” Miss Nguyen made a proactive, productive use of her peers by collaborating on mutual classroom challenges and transferring new skills into her practice. This vital element of making proactive, productive use of peers is one step towards creating a sustained practice of school improvement (Joyce & Showers, 2002).

### **Reflective Practices Take Time to Learn**

The action research examined the components of Comprehensive Reading Solutions through the intervention of peer coaching, including its focus on teacher transfer and best practices and the components—coaching conferences and teacher reflections—both the bedrock of all coaching models (Zepeda, 2019). Reflection is the technical term for conceptual and methodological practices used during any learning experience (Moon, 2004), and collaboration is one key component that provides authentic learning to teachers in job-embedded practices founded in the existing school culture. As all school professionals learn new practices to better the lives of the next generation, teachers and school leaders have to pause and reflect continuously.

Trust and collaboration are crucial elements in learning communities (Hallam, Smith, Hite, Hite, & Wilcox, 2015). Mrs. Irvin shared, “When you . . . create a relationship with a colleague, and you know that you are on the same side, then the hope is that you are trying to



improve and that things will be beneficial.” Mrs. Ohana, the instructional coach, discussed how collaboration provides an opportunity for teachers to learn new perspectives. She stated, “I think that anytime we collaborate with our peers we have the opportunity to learn new skills and practices, whether or not we take it as a personal choice.”

When teachers trust each other, instructional practices can be openly shared without fear of judgment or recourse (Hallam et al., 2015). Miss Saddler avowed in an interview, “Peer coaching provides more learning on top of the normal work in a professional learning community and is supportive and collaborative.” The structure of peer coaching offered the participants a method to openly discuss their teaching practices, model targeted segments, and reflect on any next steps.

In an interview, Miss Xiang remarked how her peer has different perspectives and offered feedback on how to improve. Miss Xiang and her peer, Miss Easterly, plan together and exchange their students during the science and social studies segment. Miss Xiang then teaches Miss Easterly’s students and vice versa. Miss Xiang commented,

Planning with my co-partner, we have different views and different ways of doing things. So being able to see those things we were able to give us our own ideas, and my partner provided feedback for ways to improve. . . . It [the peer coaching process] takes someone who is open.

Miss Xiang continued, “I have never taught third grade. I do not know what is in front of me.” Miss Xiang was expressing her concerns of the state-mandated assessments, and she voiced how reflective practices take time to learn new skills and establish a sense of self-efficacy.

The researcher asked Miss Xiang what was meant by the word “open” in her last comments. She discussed the importance of having a trusting relationship and “wanting to make yourself better no matter where you are in the teaching process.” Miss Xiang resumed,

I think when you see some teachers that have been teaching for 15 or 20 years that they think they have reached the top of their game. . . . I think that inhibits the perspective that you can always do better than where you are.

Teaching is a challenging profession, and Miss Xiang revealed how teachers need a reflective practice and a commitment to life-long learning.

In her interview, Miss Nguyen disclosed a reflective practice by stating her goal that developed during the second cycle of peer coaching. The goal included slowing her own rate of reading to that of a third-grade reading rate. Both Miss Elliott and Miss Nguyen researched an appropriate rate for third-grade students and noticed how they were both reading faster than the average third-grade rate. Miss Nguyen said, “I am making sure that I slow my reading pace down to a normal third-grade pace. I have noticed during our reread the students are saying their words more fluently. I have noticed an overall improvement in fluency.” She also discussed how the instruction fills the time, whereas last year she had extra time left in the segment.

Miss Xiang revealed the importance of peer coaching for a new member on the team. She stated,

I am a true proponent of peer coaching, especially for someone like me that is new on a grade level. It helped me to prioritize what was the point of what we were doing. I don’t think I ever really understood that.

Plus, Miss Xiang shared how “everyone has strengths that people can benefit from.” Miss Easterly was paired with Miss Xiang. She added, “We were able to look for different things but also reflect on how the lesson looked from the first time to the second time.” Miss Easterly communicated the importance of creating the persistence to drive teacher growth.

In an interview with Miss Saddler, she said,

Some of the benefits are learning different perspectives and new strategies to put forth in my teaching and being able to see things in a different way. We all have different approaches. Being able to see and incorporate those into your own style was a beneficial part of the process, especially being new to the grade level.

Miss Saddler also said in an interview that she loved the peer coaching experience and would enjoy keeping the process going in different content areas and with different peers. With the teachers desiring to implement the peer coaching process in other areas, this demonstrated that reflective practices take time to influence school culture.

In an interview with Dr. Adams, the Director of Elementary Schools for the district, stressed the importance of having a structure for teachers to reflect. She stated, “Requiring teachers to reflect pre and post establishes a framework for what is to occur and puts the onus of responsibility back on the teacher.” The peer coaching process forced the teachers to engage in reflective practices regardless of how the teachers felt about the Comprehensive Reading Solutions Literacy Framework.

Mrs. Ingles, the school principal, shared, “Providing time for reflective practices is vitally important and often overlooked. Protecting that time is necessary.” For peer coaching to be successful, providing the time and structure for a reflective practice must be a priority.

Dr. Adams, the director of elementary schools, said, “I have learned that the process (peer coaching) has renewed my commitment to the importance of oversight, leadership, and effective management. Also, that no matter how much time is provided, it is never enough.”

Another finding includes the struggle of time away from the classroom. In an interview, Miss Nguyen revealed, “One struggle was leaving my class to observe and having to come back to play catch up to learn what the students did so I could continue.” Even though this was not stated by other participants, the feeling was apparent when a teacher has to step outside of the classroom for any amount of time. This conflict was also observed when teachers planned for substitutes when they had the opportunity to collaborate with their team during the normal school day for an extra planning session. The participants asked for this extra planning time, and the school administration provided a half-day planning day for all of the teachers at Cool Springs Academy.

Changing the school climate and culture takes time. Fiore (2013) used the analogy of an iceberg to describe the differences between the school climate and culture. The school climate represents the top of the iceberg, the processes of the school that are “readily observable” (Fiore, 2013, p. 9). The school culture represents the portion of the iceberg that lies underneath the water’s surface. Fiore (2013) depicted, “. . . this mass of ice below sea level is larger, often more complex, and provides supporting structures necessary for the existence of the part of the iceberg we are able to see. School culture is analogous to this image” (p. 9). Peer coaching was an intervention used to address needed changes to school culture by adjusting the professional learning teachers received.

## **Overall Summary of the Findings**

Given that the purpose of this study was to examine peer coaching of third-grade teachers during the implementation of a literacy framework in a suburban elementary school, three research questions guided the study and the corresponding data analysis. Data were collected from individual interviews, teacher observations, audio-recordings of coaching conversations, document analysis, an ethnographic research journal, supplemental quantitative data, and other data sources to assist with triangulation. The participants were the six third-grade teachers. An action research team guided the research by providing resources and establishing a deeper understanding of the findings. The school's principal, assistant principals, instructional coach, third-grade chair, and the district's Director of Elementary Schools were the action research team. The study was conducted between August 2019 and January 2020 at Cool Springs Academy.

Three themes emerged from analyzing the findings. The themes aligned with the three research questions as shown in Table 6.1 (see Chapter 6). The first research question states, How might peer coaching be used to improve teacher practice using the Comprehensive Reading Solutions Literacy Framework? The broad area of findings that centered around the first research question demonstrated how peer coaching improved teacher practice in literacy. Miss Easterly concluded, "The process helped those conversations. It [peer coaching] broke the ground to have those conversations." Miss Easterly voiced how the process opened teacher's doors that were once closed to peer observations.

Similarly, the theme, post-observation conferences lead to the next steps, surfaced from the broad area findings of what teachers learned about implementing peer coaching. Miss Nguyen described, "When peers observe you, you naturally want to go above and beyond what

you typically do every day.” The last theme, reflective practices take time to learn, transpired from the action research cycle and having had multiple meetings about the overall process. Mrs. Ingles, the school principal, shared, “Providing time for reflective practices is vitally important and often overlooked. Protecting that time is necessary.” Mrs. Ingles was supportive of the process and desired for the improvement of instructional practices as well as teacher growth.

Chapter 7 provides a summary of the case study and presents discussion based on the research. Implications for further research are also offered.

## **CHAPTER 7**

### **SUMMARY, DISCUSSION, AND IMPLICATIONS**

The final chapter answers the question of why the study was conducted and how the peer coaching model affected the instructional practices of the third-grade teachers. Peer coaching provided the structure for the participants to prioritize reflective practices. The chapter is divided into eight sections: 1) purpose of the study, 2) research questions, 3) summary of the study, 4) discussion, 5) implications for practitioners, 6) implications for policy, 7) implications for further research, and 8) concluding thoughts.

#### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this action research case study was to examine peer coaching of third-grade teachers during the implementation of a literacy framework in a suburban elementary school. Through such an effort, the hope is to support teachers using job-embedded, reflective processes to refine current instructional practices related to the Comprehensive Reading Solutions Literacy Framework (Walpole & McKenna, 2017). Coaching in the context of literacy is important because learning to read by the end of third grade is a critical milestone for students (Hernandez, 2011). The literacy framework is based on the work of Walpole and McKenna (2017) who refer to the literacy framework as the Comprehensive Reading Solutions or the Bookworm lesson format.

## **Research Questions**

This action research study addressed the following questions:

- 1) How might peer coaching be used to improve teacher practice using the Comprehensive Reading Solutions Literacy Framework?
- 2) What is learned by teachers and administrators as they work collaboratively to implement peer coaching as it relates to implementing the Comprehensive Reading Solutions Literacy Framework?
- 3) What can school leaders learn about supporting peer coaching among teachers?

## **Summary of the Study**

This journey started over three years ago. As a researcher and being more analytical, I wanted to challenge myself and also complete a milestone. With support from the district and my major professor, I decided on peer coaching to better relationships and the Comprehensive Reading Solutions Literacy Framework (Walpole & McKenna, 2017) to broaden my content strengths. After learning the intricacies of both, I knew Cool Springs Academy was the right research site, and I quickly sensed the urgency for peer coaching was on the horizon after sharing the ideals with school leadership.

Having a vested interest in the study, third grade was a logical decision. As I researched more, I learned how third grade is a crucial year for students to learn to read (Hernandez, 2011). Also, the third-grade teachers have the pressure of student performance as students in the state of Georgia take the Georgia Milestones End of Grade Assessment as a first high-stakes test. The teachers have this pressure as well as the many new standards in the grade level to teach. Along with these demands, the teachers in the Bark Camp District have been asked to use the Comprehensive Reading Solutions Literacy Framework (Walpole & McKenna, 2017). These



instructional changes are a shift from the Guided Reading Literacy Framework at Cool Springs Academy within the past two years. Thus, the idea was simple: teachers need time to reflect on the changes in literacy and how that impacts their instructional practices. Also, the third-grade team consisted of three newer members to the team that needed more support.

After discussions with school leadership, the researcher asked the third-grade teachers their initial thoughts about a study. The study was explained to the teachers during a summer planning session for teachers to openly ask questions. After going over the peer coaching process and describing the requirements, the teachers were ready and each one signed consent for the purpose of the action research case study. The researcher then began to set up initial resources and training for the teachers as interviews were being conducted with the participants. Having the beginning of school under each teacher's belt, the teachers participated in an initial training regarding the peer coaching process with an outside expert. The first peer coaching cycle quickly started afterwards.

In mid-October, the research led the third-grade team in a mid-course adjustment review. The purpose of this meeting was to provide teachers with an outlet to share about the process and to see if any additional resources were needed. Instructional strategies were shared along with the need for more time to make the adjustments the peers provided and to make necessary adjustments with class resources. A planning day was provided for the third-grade team to allow the teachers to plan together and fulfill their request. The second cycle of the peer coaching process was completed in December with teacher interviews immediately following.

Along the same timeline, the action research team met monthly to discuss school implications and any desired next steps. The action research team represented the principal, the assistant principals, the instructional coach, the grade-level chair, and the director of elementary

schools. As the study was being conducted, the instructional coach used the peer coaching process with other teachers and used the peer coaching documents that she learned in the initial training by the outside expert. Benefits continue to be learned from the initialization of the case study.

This action research used qualitative methods. Following Magana's (2002) suggestions, the researcher incorporated numerous qualitative methods to collect data including:

1. Individual interviews with all the six third-grade teachers at Cool Springs Academy and individual interviews among select action research team members (Appendices A, B, C);
2. Observations of regularly scheduled meetings, peer observations (teachers observing teachers);
3. Audio-recordings of coaching conversations
4. Document analysis of artifacts about the peer coaching process that participants were asked to keep written reflections along with minutes from meetings;
5. An ethnographic research journal in which the researcher reflected about meanings of data, experiences, and other items deemed noteworthy before, during, and after data collection over the six-month period of the study;
6. Supplemental Quantitative Data from universal screeners showing literacy progress from the beginning of the school year to the middle of the school year;

7. Other data sources to assist with triangulation include agendas from meetings and teacher's lesson plans. These perspectives were used to help clarify and confirm hunches about the data collected from the six third-grade teachers at Cool Springs Academy.

The methods were incorporated into the action research to ensure validity and to increase transparency among stakeholders.

## **Discussion**

The researcher formulated three research questions that guided this action research case study. The research questions were centered around peer coaching, the intervention used to support teachers. Based on analysis of the data, three themes emerged that were aligned with the research questions. Findings addressed each of the research question in Chapter 5, and Chapter 6 presented how the themes were derived. Discussions centered around the review of related literature included adult learning, professional learning, job-embedded learning, peer coaching, efficacy including self-efficacy and collective efficacy, and leadership including school culture.

### *Discussion of Findings from Research Question 1*

The constructivist theory is an idea in education in which learners construct new ideas based on their existing knowledge (Vygotsky, 2012). Vygotsky (2012) explains how adults learn in stages similar to a child's development. As a child develops, he/she learns in stages, applying needed skills and making connections as the child matures. Looking at literacy as an example, students learn how to read in stages. First, phonemical awareness is developed with students learning letter recognition and sounds. Then, students learn word patterns as they begin to recognize and learn new words. As students learn letter patterns and how to sound out new words, they become more fluent readers. Last, students build on existing vocabulary and

comprehend more advanced text. Similarly, adults construct meanings and make connections to improve and grow personally and professionally. In a job-embedded process, like peer coaching, teachers can embrace new opportunities while validating their practices with their fellow colleagues.

Traditional professional development, like most district-led training, is frequently ineffective (Knight, 2019). However, peer coaching is a highly interactive model of professional learning that includes a process centered around the direct transfer of learning (Joyce & Showers, 2002; Zepeda, 2019). To assist with the transfer of learning, Joyce and Showers (1981) introduced peer coaching as a method to offer teachers support from their peers and to provide the needed companionship to help offset stressors that were typically involved with learning and then applying new skills into practice. The results of Joyce and Showers (1981) seminal research indicated that peer coaching had a significant effect on the transfer of training, and “teachers who were not coached tended to discontinue use of the new models after initial training” (pp. 17-18). Peer coaching was an intervention used in the present study to address needed changes to school culture by adjusting the professional learning teachers received.

Kotter (2012) describes eight steps for leading change, with the first one being establishing a sense of urgency. Between 2009-2015, the past administration rated all teachers with a proficient score to avoid any conflict. Based on an informal survey conducted in 2018 (displayed in Figure 1.1 in Chapter 1), were teachers feeling the “Widget Effect” (Kraft & Gilmour, 2017, p. 234) where everyone is rated the same. Kraft and Gilmour (2017) described how the feedback from teacher evaluations becomes meaningless and how the principals feel that they are not able to support the teachers.

A new administrative team was charged with leading Cool Springs Academy in 2015. Establishing a new school culture, the new administrative team also had to provide support for the Comprehensive Reading Solutions Literacy Framework in 2017. Also, before this present study, teachers were not observed by their peers. According to the results from the 2018 informal survey, the teachers were asking to observe others.

According to Fisher and Frey (2007), a literacy framework is another name for an instructional framework. A frame, like a picture frame, surrounds the content and attempts to show off the masterpiece. One well-known literacy framework used in many elementary schools across the nation is called Guided Reading (Fountas & Pinnell, 2012). Guided Reading was used as the literacy framework at the action research site prior to 2017 for well over 10 years. Guided Reading offers more teacher freedom of instructional resources and is a widely used literacy framework (Duke & Del Nero, 2011).

During professional learning provided to the Bark Camp District, Sharon Walpole stated that the Comprehensive Reading Solutions Literacy Framework was created as the “antidote for Guided Reading” (S. Walpole, personal communication, January 4, 2019). The Comprehensive Reading Solutions Literacy Framework provides a manual for the teachers to follow, including a daily schedule and specific texts to use for the different grades. The Comprehensive Reading Solutions Literacy Framework is grounded in recent research, especially when used as an intervention for at-risk students (Walpole & McKenna, 2017; Foorman et al., 2016; Nacrelli, 2018; Denton et al., 2014).

With six elementary schools feeding into one middle school, the Bark Camp District wanted a uniform literacy framework backed by research, to help a high-needs population. With a large group of English language learners (ELLs) and students underperforming in literacy,

Comprehensive Reading Solutions became the district focus in all professional learning in the elementary grades starting in 2017. The research emphasized the importance of early interventions, especially for at-risk populations (Garcia & Weiss, 2015; Herbers et al., 2012). Hernandez (2011) provided evidence for the importance of students learning proficiently by the end of third grade.

The researcher desired to support the ongoing efforts of the district along with providing needed support for teachers. Having not conducted peer observations in over 10 years and being rooted in the former literacy framework, teachers used the structure of peer coaching to initiate discussions of the strategies used with the Comprehensive Reading Solutions Literacy Framework. When interviewing Miss Elliott, she described those feelings but shared the importance of starting with a structured format to help build working relationships. She stated,

I think in other subject areas people are more passionate, and it is not as scripted. With Bookworms, you do this on day one and this on day two. With less structure, the outcome could have been very different with some hurt feelings from the beginning of the school year.

During another interview, Miss Easterly said,

We had conversations in PLC [professional learning community] meetings on things that we wished we could change but cannot. The process helped those conversations. It [peer coaching] broke the ground to have those conversations. Before, we were not having conversations because we thought we were doing the same thing. . . . It [Bookworms] is scripted.

Miss Easterly articulated that the peer coaching process “broke the ground” by opening up conversations during team meetings. The peer coaching process also opened closed doors.

The peer coaching process opened closed doors became a theme that emerged from the findings. This theme surfaced from the findings illustrating how peer coaching led to improving teacher practices in literacy, relating to the first research question. To create an open dialogue and to begin building trust, the researcher discussed the overall purpose and research questions with the participants prior to starting the study. An outside expert was used to present the peer coaching process to the participants and to collaborate on the tools used during the pre-observation conference and post-observation conference. Creating the tools collaboratively adds a step but also adds validity and reliability to the case study (Creswell & Poth, 2018). After the first research cycle, a mid-course adjustment review was held with the teachers. The teachers shared the importance of collaboration and modeling different aspects of the lesson. They also shared the importance of planning time. After discussing this need with the action research team, a half-day of planning was provided to all teachers at Cool Springs Academy.

#### *Discussion of Findings from Research Question 2*

According to Knowles, Holton, and Swanson (1990), andragogy is defined as “the art and science of helping adults learn” (p. 54). Knowles (1989) ceased calling andragogy a theory of adult learning but instead reputed that it is “a model of assumptions about learning or a conceptual framework that serves as a basis for an emergent theory” (p. 112). Adults are motivated by success, which is connected to job satisfaction (Knowles et al., 2015). Zepeda (2019) asserted, “a critical component of effective learning is that teachers become more satisfied, gain self-confidence, and derive value from their work with others” (p. 47). Brookfield (2013) established that adult learning theory is a social event because “learning in the company of others is a more powerful design for professional development that supports the adult learner” (Zepeda, 2019, p. 40).

Joyce and Showers (2002) shared that adults take longer to learn tasks than children. Joyce and Showers (2002) estimated that teachers took a “substantial period of time (8-10 weeks, involving around 25 trials) to ‘bring a teaching model of medium complexity under control’” (p. 2). Joyce and Showers (1996) hypothesized that if teachers could model and practice the professional learning being demonstrated and then be provided feedback about the experience, then teachers would master new skills much easier than in a normal professional learning environment. Joyce and Showers (1996) suggested,

Adding peer coaching study teams to school improvement efforts is a substantial departure from the way schools often embark on change efforts. On the surface, it appears simple to implement—what could be more natural than teams of professional teachers working on content and skills? It is a complex innovation only because it requires a radical change in relationships among teachers, and between teachers and administrative personnel. (p. 16)

The researcher selected the peer coaching process to shift the school culture and change adult behavior while enhancing the professional learning provided by the district for Bookworms Lessons.

Another critical component that must be present for effective teacher development within a professional learning community or the school includes trust. Zepeda (2019) stated, “Trust in the process, in colleagues, and in the learner him-/herself” is another condition (p. 126). Teachers are obliged to trust that constructive feedback will be provided throughout the learning process and especially during peer coaching meetings. Fullan (2015) believed that “all real change involves, loss, anxiety, and struggle” (p. 25). With the understanding that mistakes are learning opportunities, teachers can build trust in each other and in the process of peer coaching



(Zepeda, 2019). A theme emerged from the findings: post-observation conferences lead to the next steps. The peer coaching process built trusting relationships and demonstrated a level of vulnerability among the teachers with feedback being given for the first time in many years among the teachers.

In an interview, Miss Elliott verbalized how giving feedback was awkward during the first action research cycle. She said,

Giving someone feedback was uncomfortable just because I didn't want to necessarily hurt someone's feelings. I wanted to be thoughtful and share what was important to me. . . I think the word 'wondering' makes it less judgmental. I would use that word so it was like a thought and not something that was negative.

Miss Elliott also shared that providing feedback to her peers became more comfortable during the second cycle when the process was more established. Miss Nguyen described, “When peers observe you, you naturally want to go above and beyond what you typically do every day.” The theme, post-observation conferences lead to the next steps, surfaced from the broad area findings of what teachers learned about implementing peer coaching.

The action research examined the components of Comprehensive Reading Solutions through the intervention of peer coaching, including its focus on teacher transfer and best practices and the components—coaching conferences and teacher reflections—both the bedrock of all coaching models (Zepeda, 2019). By discussing perspectives in coaching conferences, the teachers learned new approaches to instructional practices. Also, the teachers solidified literacy practices used during the observations of the Bookworms Lessons. As an example, the teachers learned the importance of the shared reading segment and the strategies used during the segment, such as choral reading and partner reading. Another example included the use of a graphic

organizer and how it became a writing resource for all students in third grade after a teacher's observation of her peer. Many instructional strategies are addressed in the data findings in Chapter 5.

### *Discussion of Findings from Research Question 3*

The theme, reflective practices take time to implement, emerged from the findings that addressed school leaders supporting the peer coaching process. When starting the peer coaching cycle, Robbins (2015) suggested to start slow and expect some problems along the way, asserting: "The development of trust takes time and is enhanced by consistency. Trust among professional colleagues influences individuals' willingness to expose their knowledge or skills" (p. 117). The participants discussed how the relationship with their peers was an essential part of the process.

Changing the school climate and culture takes time. Fiore (2013) used the analogy of an iceberg to describe the differences between the school climate and culture. The school climate represents the top of the iceberg, the processes of the school that are "readily observable" (Fiore, 2013, p. 9). The school culture represents the portion of the iceberg that lies underneath the water's surface. Fiore (2013) depicted, "... this mass of ice below sea level is larger, often more complex, and provides supporting structures necessary for the existence of the part of the iceberg we are able to see. School culture is analogous to this image" (p. 9). Peer coaching was an intervention used to address needed changes to school culture by adjusting the professional learning teachers received.

Zemelman et al. (2012) concluded that professional learning communities were the critical change element for school improvement if the learning community included transparent communication, trust among all team members, leadership stability, and continual job-embedded

learning opportunities. The peer coaching process provided the necessary structure for the third-grade teachers to reflect on instructional practices and to build trusting relationships with new team members.

Reflection is the technical term for conceptual and methodological practices used during any learning experience (Moon, 2004), and teacher reflection is a critical component of peer coaching. Collaboration is one key component that provides authentic learning to teachers in a job-embedded, school culture. As all school professionals learn new practices to better the lives of the next generation, teachers and school leaders have to pause and reflect continuously.

In an interview, Dr. Adams discussed how collaborative planning time could easily be derailed if administrators do not monitor the process. She affirmed, “Requiring teachers to reflect pre and post establishes a framework for what is to occur and puts the onus of responsibility back on the teacher.” The findings demonstrated changes within the professional learning communities. Mrs. Ingles concluded,

Teachers have been more receptive to input from their peers after having an opportunity to observe and be observed by their colleagues. . . . Implementing a peer coaching protocol – and using it with fidelity – would build a growth mindset among the staff. It would build a culture of continual improvement for all staff members.

The findings addressed how the structure of the peer coaching process supported changes to the existing practices within professional learning communities at Cool Springs Academy throughout the action research case study.

In her interview, Miss Nguyen disclosed a reflective practice by slowing her own rate of reading to that of a third-grade reading rate. She discussed how the instruction fills the time,

whereas last year, she had extra time left in the segment. Miss Xiang revealed the importance of peer coaching for a new member on the team. She stated,

I am a true proponent of peer coaching, especially for someone like me that is new on a grade level. It helped me to prioritize what was the point of what we were doing. I don't think I ever really understood that.

Plus, Miss Xiang shared how “everyone has strengths that people can benefit from.” Miss Easterly was paired with Miss Xiang. Miss Easterly added, “We were able to look for different things but also reflect on how the lesson looked from the first time to the second time.” Mrs. Irvin communicated how she did not “feel like I (she) had a lot of ah-ha moments” but provided clarity for a new team member. By reflecting on the graphic organizer that students used for writing, Mrs. Irvin stated how it built independence during the writing process. Miss Saddler said in an interview that she loved the peer coaching experience and would enjoy keeping the process going in different content areas and with different peers.

Bandura laid the groundwork for social cognitive theory. Bandura (1997) noted, “people do not live their lives in isolation; they work together to produce results they desire” (p. 3). A teacher's sense of self-efficacy can be influenced by professional learning and in a school with a supportive environment. Teacher efficacy does not appear to be related to teacher training during the first three years of teaching, but teachers need to validate their instructional practices (Lopez & Santibanez, 2018). As teachers were learning and receiving feedback during peer coaching sessions, they were constantly reflecting on their practices and making necessary adjustments to instructional practices so that students can receive the best instruction.

As teachers build their efficacy and share their perspectives with their professional learning community, teachers adjust instructional practices and build confidence collaborating with a group. The collective efficacy is affected. DeWitt (2019) discussed how he faced obstacles as a principal, but “we did not let this fracture our building-level community” (p. 35). DeWitt (2019) concluded,

As a staff, we decided we would band together to take control of some of our learning and create a new mindset on what we could achieve, starting with the practice of providing effective feedback. I didn’t realize it [changing the school culture] at the time, but we were indeed building a collective teacher efficacy. (p. 35)

DeWitt (2019) shared that teachers worked through a collective efficacy cycle, similar to the peer coaching cycle. The teachers and leaders in the present study decided to take control of the situation at Cool Springs Academy by improving literacy practices for all of the third-grade students. Given a situation to improve, the teachers collaborated on a goal, explored resources needed, tried new strategies to help the situation, evaluated the impact, and then reflected on the outcome. This improved the school culture at the research site with new perspectives being provided during the post-observation conferences.

The teachers are desiring to continue the peer coaching process in other areas or with new peers to gain more perspectives. The teachers eager to continue the peer coaching process demonstrates a change in the school culture and a desired next step. The instructional coach learned from the study the importance of collaboration and building trust. She began to use the same forms as the pre-observation conference tool and post-observation conference tool displayed in Figure 3.2 and Figure 3.3 in Chapter 3 as she observed teachers throughout the school. Mrs. Ohana, the instructional coach, concluded that the structure of the present study

provided the teachers with the opportunity to learn instructional strategies by observing others and the time to reflect on current practices and to adjust as necessary.

### **Implications for Practitioners**

The findings from the present study addressed how teachers improved practices in the area of literacy at Cool Springs Academy. All the participants improved their practices and validated a variety of instructional strategies with a peer. Teachers, including school leaders, are committed to life-long learning. The study may offer implications for practitioners in other school contexts. The findings addressed how the teachers began to model different strategies and plan more collaboratively.

Modeling different aspects of the lesson became a vital aspect that is addressed in the findings. With teachers discussing instructional practices before the study, the teachers began modeling instructional strategies like the lesson focus and scaffolding devices. Peer coaching opened up discussions among the teachers. One teacher saw a graphic organizer posted in another teacher's classroom and began to use it with her class to help improve her student's writing. Another graphic organizer was enhanced to help students acquire English. The teachers started to add a translation for each vocabulary term. These elements provide evidence of how teachers need time to reflect on their instructional practices and to make adjustments. The structure of peer coaching and the forms the teachers used required the teachers to reflect. According to the observations that the teachers and the researcher conducted, the instructional practices were enhanced.

The peer coaching process provided the needed structure for the participants to learn new perspectives from observing teacher's classrooms. The participants' discussions uncovered the importance of shared reading and the necessity for a first focus with the teacher choral reading

with the class and then a second focus with the students paired together to build fluency and comprehension. Miss Saddler and Mrs. Irvin shared how they may miss the second focus when Miss Easterly and Miss Xiang voiced the structure of shared reading is imperative to remain intact with both the first and second readings. During the grade-level meeting, the team discussed how the schedule might have to be altered to accommodate the totality of the shared reading segment including both readings of the text. Regardless of the literacy framework, the shared reading segment should be a priority for the literacy lesson along with the instructional practices presented.

Traditional professional development, like most district-led training, is frequently ineffective, and the intervention, peer coaching, is a highly interactive process centered around the direct transfer of learning (Joyce & Showers, 2002; Zepeda, 2019). The peer coaching process provided the necessary structure for the third-grade teachers to reflect on instructional practices and to build trusting relationships with new team members. Using an outside expert provided the team with an opportunity to collaborate on expectations and tools that were used during the peer coaching process. These tools are Figure 3.2 and Figure 3.3, found in Chapter 3.

According to the interviews conducted, the teachers need to continue to strengthen collaboration by planning and sharing more. The findings from the interviews pointed to the fact that the teachers continue to plan independently. With a new team and a new peer coaching process in place, more time is needed to increase collaboration and strengthen relationships. Even though the process took time away from teachers being in their classroom, the teachers grew and became more efficacious. Finding the time for teachers and leaders to reflect is essential for continuous growth and improvement.

## **Implications for Policy**

The action research case study presented implications for policy. Implications to policy include the changes made at the national, state, or district levels. Three areas were addressed in the findings and connected to the related literature. The implications are the structure of peer coaching, changes to teacher preparation, and the addition of prekindergarten classrooms, especially in poverty-stricken areas.

With the structure of peer coaching, professional learning became job-embedded and helped to provide opportunities for teachers to collaborate on instructional practices. The peer coaching cycle would be beneficial for future professional learning to offer the specific development for teachers while providing exemplars of the instruction lead by the teachers. The state of Georgia mandates teachers is a part of professional learning communities, and the peer coaching cycle would strengthen the discussions among the team.

Practitioners benefit from a culture of peer coaching. The present study provided evidence of how new teachers in a grade level were supported. The findings of this study could enhance the new teacher induction phase if the school used the peer coaching process. Having new teachers engage in the peer coaching process could support making sense of teaching. Similarly, as educators, move from school to another school or advance to a new role, the peer coaching process may help with the transfer of learning specific to the context.

Another implication is in the area of teacher preparation. Cool Springs Academy struggled to make student achievement, especially for students who are learning English. Ultimately, the school culture and school decisions led Cool Springs Academy to becoming a Focus school (Georgia Department of Education, 2019a). The question arises: Do teacher preparation programs need to make adjustments in course offerings to account for the growing



population of English Language Learners? The work of Lopez and Santibanez (2018) provided evidence that teachers need support to teach ELLs effectively, and it implies that current policies need to be updated. Samson and Collins (2012) also supported the need for more teacher preparation, and the gaps in policy for general education teachers that also support ELLs need to be updated. To match ever-growing demands and changing demographics, school leaders should provide professional growth in this area to ensure best practices for a diverse population.

Before kindergarten students enter school, educational gaps have formed. According to Garcia and Weiss (2015), students coming from low social class face hardships when learning to read and in mathematics, and African American students and Hispanic students have the most significant disparities with links to minorities and social status. Garcia and Weiss (2015) related that “children in the highest socioeconomic group (the high SES fifth) have reading and math scores that are significantly higher—by a full standard deviation—than scores of their peers in the lowest socioeconomic group” (p. 3). Garcia and Weiss (2015) called for policy action to aid the disadvantaged families to help offset the educational gaps. To help, the state of Georgia started a reading campaign aligned to families with infants called the “Talk with Me Baby” initiative (Georgia Department of Public Health, 2016). School districts need to work with the community to promote these resources. School districts could also offer more prekindergarten classes depending on the needs of the community.

### **Implications for Further Research**

The present study was conducted in the Bark Camp District at Cool Springs Academy, an average size district with approximately 8,000 students embedded in a poverty-stricken area, and Cool Springs Academy accommodates near 900 students in grades prekindergarten to fifth. Three populations comprise the majority of the students in the school and district: Hispanic, African American, and Caucasian. The district has one of the largest percentages of English language learners in the state. The findings of the study are specific to the context and the participants at Cool Springs Academy. Most elementary schools in Bark Camp District hold 600 students. Regarding Bark Camp District, further research may uncover additional findings examining the aspects of peer coaching in a smaller school setting.

Potential research surrounds the context of a school having a large English Language Learner percentage and working with students in poverty. Research provides clear evidence of the inequalities students face when living in poverty and learning how to read (Garcia & Weiss, 2015; Herbers et al., 2012). The findings addressed how the relationships in the third-grade team improved and the teachers were able to provide feedback to each other. Further research is needed to see if the same effects are true in more affluent areas or schools with a lower percentage of English language learners.

Additional research would also avail if a longer study was conducted comparing the findings between the Guided Reading Literacy Framework (Fountas & Pinnell, 2012) and the Comprehensive Reading Literacy Framework (Walpole & McKenna, 2017). With the importance of learning how to read in third grade (Hernandez, 2011), the researcher selected third grade as the context of the study. Further research is needed among other grades, including the middle school and high school grades. A longitudinal study would provide additional

context if the study was conducted at multiple schools within the district and may uncover common instructional practices in literacy or additional supports for teachers.

### **Concluding Thoughts**

As the researcher, this study has renewed my commitment to provide the time for reflection for both the teacher and the school leader. At Cool Springs Academy, teachers were provided with a half-day of planning with their grade-level team to update resources and to reflect on adjustments to their instruction. For the upcoming school year 2020-2021, the Bark Camp District has approved a calendar with more days built-in throughout the year for professional learning. From the researcher's perspective, this study can directly affect professional learning in the district with the next steps of building practices that are job-embedded and specific to teachers' needs.

Also, the teachers at Cool Springs Academy are starting the peer coaching process using video-recorded lessons and being led by the instructional coach, who uses the pre-observation and post-observation conferencing tools from this study. While the Comprehensive Reading Solutions Literacy Framework (Walpole & McKenna, 2017) provided the content for teachers to observe, teachers may feel more able to make changes using another framework or a different content area. The participants at Cool Springs Academy desired to start observing other teachers in mathematics. Regardless, the literacy framework was needed to provide the necessary structure for teachers to begin the process of peer coaching. From the researcher's perspective, the peer coaching process can build teacher's self-efficacy while using new content as future national and state standards are adopted. For a six-month study, measuring efficacy is beyond the scope of the present study, but implications are examined for further research.

Out of the four steps in the peer coaching cycle, the post-observation conference was the most valuable for teachers. The peers discussed feedback about their lesson and the next steps in a nonjudgement, noncritical manner. This built trust and improved relationships. Peer coaching was a necessary intervention for Cool Springs Academy to help break down barriers and provide school improvement. Lastly, peer coaching is a job-embedded practice to enable teachers to acquire new skills while improving their practices. School leaders must ensure that teachers have time devoted for reflective practices to learn and hone new skills.

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**APPENDIX A**  
**INTERVIEW GUIDE #1**

## Interview Guide #1

### Developing Rapport and Trust with the Teacher

Have casual small talk

Restate purpose of the study and confidentiality

### Answering Research Question #1: How might peer coaching be used to improve teacher practice using the Comprehensive Reading Solutions Literacy Framework?

Describe steps taken to plan for a typical reading lesson.

Tell me about the Comprehensive Reading Solutions (or Bookworms) Literacy Framework and level of support provided prior to this point (professional learning, observations, feedback, etc.).

How do you feel about the Comprehensive Reading Solutions Literacy Framework? Explain why you feel that way.

What experience do you have observing other teachers? Describe any prior peer coaching experiences.

Do you have any feelings associated with observations--you observing a teacher or someone observing you? Please explain.

**APPENDIX B**

**INTERVIEW GUIDE #2**

## Interview Guide #2

### Developing Rapport and Trust with the Teacher

Have casual small talk

Restate purpose of the study and confidentiality

### Answering Research Question #2: What is learned by teachers and administrators as they work collaboratively to implement peer coaching as it relates to implementing the Comprehensive Reading Solutions Literacy Framework?

Describe steps taken to plan for a typical reading lesson.

Walk me through the peer coaching process. What did you do? How did you feel?

How have your classroom practices been impacted by the peer coaching process?

Throughout the peer coaching process, describe any benefits and/or challenges you encountered.

Share any skills that you learned or became more confident with during the peer coaching experience.

Did peer coaching help you feel more confident teaching the Comprehensive Reading Solutions Literacy Framework? If so, how?

**APPENDIX C**

**INTERVIEW GUIDE #3**



### Interview Guide #3

#### Developing Rapport and Trust with the Action Team Member

Have casual small talk

Restate purpose of the study and confidentiality

#### **Answering Research Question #3: What can school leaders learn about supporting peer coaching among teachers?**

Describe steps that teachers take to plan for a typical reading lesson.

What supports have been provided to teachers to implement Comprehensive Reading Solutions (or Bookworms) Literacy Framework?

How have the third-grade classroom practices been impacted by the peer coaching process? Explain.

Do you see peer coaching as a way for teachers to learn new skills and practices? Please explain your thoughts and any benefits and/or challenges.

Through the peer coaching experience, what practices have you learned as a leader?

Would the initiative of peer coaching improve Cool Springs Academy, the research site? If so, how?

## **APPENDIX D**

### **SUMMARY OF DATA COLLECTION METHODS**

### Summary of Data Collection Methods

Research Question	Data Collection Sources	Participants
<b>1. How might peer coaching be used to improve teacher practice using the Comprehensive Reading Solutions Literacy Framework?</b>	Individual Adult Interviews - Initial and Follow-up Peer Observations among paired teachers	6 Third-grade teachers
	Observations at scheduled meetings	6 Third-grade teachers
		Researcher
	Ethnographic journal	Researcher
	Document analysis	6 Third-grade teachers
	Data from universal screeners	
	Audio-recordings of coaching conversations	6 Third-grade teachers
<b>2. What is learned by teachers and administrators as they work collaboratively to implement peer coaching as it relates to implementing the Comprehensive Reading Solutions Literacy Framework?</b>	Individual Adult Interviews - Initial and Follow-up Peer Observations among paired teachers	6 Third-grade teachers
	Observations at scheduled meetings	6 Third-grade teachers
		Researcher
	Ethnographic journal	Researcher
	Document analysis	6 Third-grade teachers
	Data from universal screeners	
	Individual Adult Interviews - Follow-up	Action Team Members

	Audio-recordings of focus group meetings	Action Team Members
<b>3. What can school leaders learn about supporting peer coaching among teachers?</b>	Individual Adult Interviews - Initial and Follow-up Peer Observations among paired teachers	6 Third-grade teachers
	Observations at scheduled meetings	6 Third-grade teachers
		Researcher
	Ethnographic journal	Researcher
	Document analysis	6 Third-grade teachers
	Data from universal screeners	
	Individual Adult Interviews - Follow-up	Action Team Members
	Audio-recordings of focus group meetings	Action Team Members

**APPENDIX E**

**DISTRICT RESEARCH APPROVAL**



Attachment E

Gainesville City Schools  
508 Oak Street  
Gainesville, GA 3051

**Application to Conduct Research  
in the Gainesville City School System**

**DISPOSITION**

Researcher Chad Crumley

Title of Proposed Research Study

PEER COACHING AS A SUPPORT FOR TEACHERS TO IMPROVE PRACTICES IN  
LITERACY

Date Considered by the Administration and/or Gainesville City Schools Board of  
Education:

January 2019

Administratively or Board approved:

X Yes

\_\_\_\_\_ No

**Note: Research will take place at Centennial Arts Academy**

**Please provide the school district a copy of the results of your research upon  
completion.**

Priscilla Collins

## **APPENDIX F**

### **MID-COURSE ADJUSTMENT REVIEW OF THE PARTICIPANTS**

## **Mid-Course Adjustment Review with Third-Grade Teachers**

**Topic: Peer Coaching**

### **Research Questions:**

1. How might peer coaching be used to improve teacher practice using the Comprehensive Reading Solutions Literacy Framework (or Bookworms)?
2. What is learned by teachers and administrators as they work collaboratively to implement peer coaching as it relates to Bookworms?
3. What can school leaders learn about supporting peer coaching among teachers?

**Members present for the Mid-Course Adjustment Review:** All third-grade teachers, Instructional Coach, Researcher

### **Timeline:**

August - Gather permission and discuss goals

September - Outside expert presents Peer Coaching to the group

October - Round of interviews and starting the 1st cycle of Peer Coaching with identified peers

November - Reflection

December - Planning Day and 2nd Round of Peer Coaching (adjusted)

January (early) - Interviews of action team and leadership team

The researcher reviewed the Peer Coaching Process and then had an open discussion regarding progress and next steps.

### **Peer Coaching Cycle:**

- Pre-observation Conference between the teachers (peers) to set up specific areas to observe and goals
- Observe - schedule the observation and coverage - at least 30 mins
- Post-observation Conference between the teachers - discuss the goals and evidence
- Reflection / Action - both teachers reflect on next steps and make any adjustments

### **Goals that were shared from the group:**

1. Prioritize the components of the lesson - purpose and model
2. Use of time
3. Teacher / student talk
4. Use of fluency trackers

### **Next steps:**

Time was an issue mentioned among the group. Time was needed to make necessary adjustments to instruction and to update resources (manipulatives, presentations, plans, etc.).

### **Notes:**

The team meets regularly throughout the week during normal planning times - 45 mins a day. During this time, an admin meeting is normally 1 day of the week with a specific focus for improving. The team also meets after school for an hour (or more) each Monday.



The administration provided a ½ day of planning on Monday, December 9 for teachers to be provided with more time to plan and update resources as needed. The teachers used this time to plan together, make adjustments instructionally, and make updates to resources to maximize instruction.

**APPENDIX G**

**ACTION TEAM MEETING**

**Action Research Team  
Discussion / Comments**

**Members: Dr. Adams, Mrs. Ingles, Mrs. Newman, Mrs. Ohana, Miss Elliott, and researcher**

**Topic: Peer Coaching**

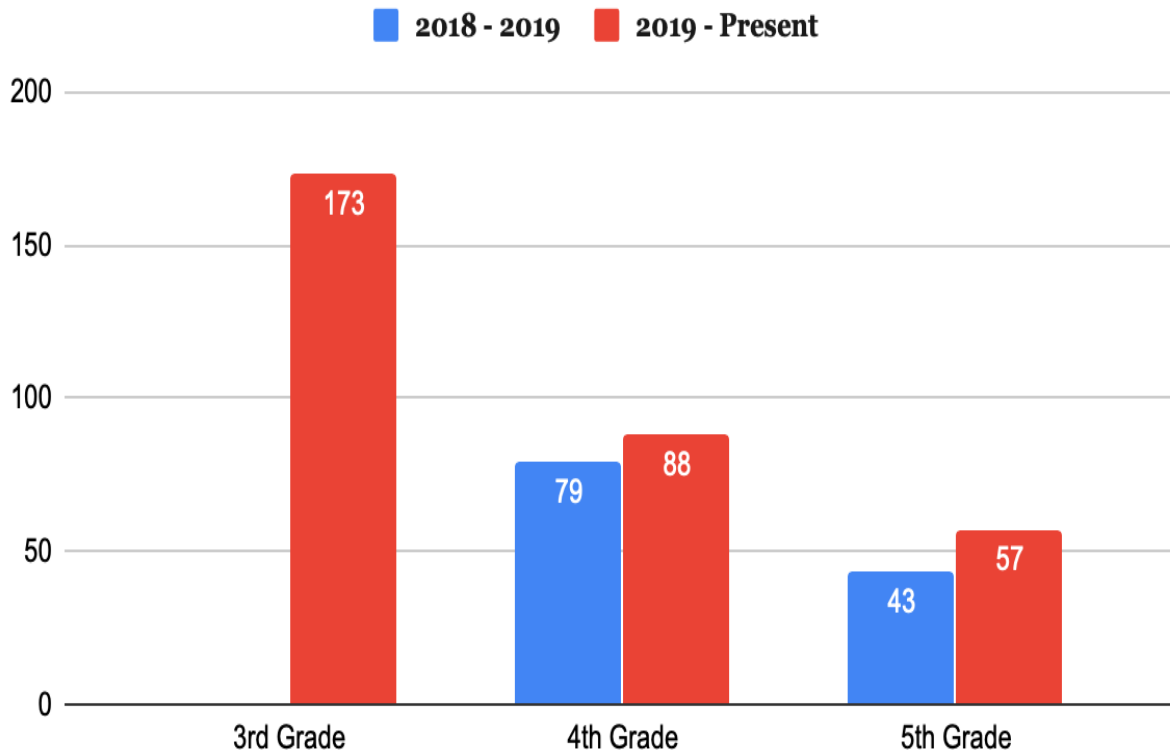
**Research Questions:**

1. How might peer coaching be used to improve teacher practice using the Comprehensive Reading Solutions Literacy Framework (or Bookworms)?
2. What is learned by teachers and administrators as they work collaboratively to implement peer coaching as it relates to Bookworms?
3. What can school leaders learn about supporting peer coaching among teachers?

This Document is a tool to gather your thoughts about the process as openly as possible. At first teachers discussed how the Bookworms framework was scripted and that differences between them would not avail too much. After pairing the teachers together and agreeing to look at an action research approach, the team followed the peer coaching process looking at topics in literacy that were tailored to their own needs.

**Note from Miss Elliott about her input as the Grade Level chair:**

Third grade has enjoyed the peer coaching experience. We have enjoyed getting to reflect with each other about our experiences and our different approaches when facilitating the Bookworms lessons. It has allowed us to enact different strategies and approaches into our instruction. However, something that has continuously been discussed when referencing the Bookworms lessons and how to put our own flair on the lessons has been the issue of not having enough time to create materials that are needed to best support the facilitation of the lessons.



**Average Lexile Growth by Cohort**

**Summary:**

The six third-grade teachers were paired together based on scheduling and experience. Each teacher in the pair followed the peer coaching cycle twice to discuss specific instructional goals related to Bookworms. Interviews happened at the beginning and will follow after all other data has been collected.

**To do (Review and reflect):**

What are any insights that you can provide about the peer coaching experience in 3rd Grade at CAA (or how the idea has led to changes in other areas)?

**Notes:**

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**Dr. Adams** - Did teachers still find that differences in instructional delivery were minimal due to the scripted nature of Bookworms, or was there more variation than anticipated? If so, why, and where did the most creativity occur? What are creative solutions to answer the dilemma of too little time?

**Mrs. Ingles**- I had the same question as Dr. Adams...was there more variation than expected? What were some of the examples where teachers have made

adjustments to their instructional practices based off the opportunity to observe a peer.

Researcher - At first teachers were focused on giving feedback for their shared reading segments. Teachers were paired together (one with more experience with another that is “new”). During the first cycle of peer coaching many shared feedback with what they saw from the observation of the peer’s lesson. After discussing this again, connections were made for teachers to possibly have related goals so that they could relate to what the teacher was doing and learn “firsthand” with the teacher modeling their own style of other teacher’s focus. The goals changed based on the teachers’ wishes and their own goals.

More variation was anticipated. Most of the group worked on individual flares that they put into their lessons and why. For example, grouping of students or classroom management. The teachers commented on the use of instructional materials and pacing. Many desired to make things more interactive (shared reading in particular). Teachers discussed how the new manual forced teachers to update resources and visuals in the room. Strategies were improved like pairing students accordingly and/or using technology. Different teachers mentioned how students were tracking in some rooms and grouping students needed to change periodically to make all students more accountable. Discussions continued about the pacing and setting clear focus/goals while prioritizing specific concepts throughout the lesson. A teacher shared that she forgets to set the target and to use the visuals/PPT to help set the focus. These resources are great to use for reminders. Another teacher shared how that the visuals needed modeling for teachers and shared with the entire group how to effectively use the resources as opposed to just having the visuals available. Teacher shared her own focus on was on teacher talk for first cycle and then both teachers focused on how the words per minute with reading for the second cycle.

#### **Time:**

Time was provided through normal planning times. Teachers are given 50 minutes of planning each day. Also, teachers meet after school and can start immediately after 1st load buses (with scheduling of remaining students for coverage). This allows the teachers to begin meeting at 2:15 rather than having to wait until 3. Weekends were made available for teachers if they desired to come. Also, all teachers were provided with ½ day planning during the month of December. This “extra” time helped teachers to update resources and plan accordingly while working in a professional learning community.

Dr. Adams - Why do you think there is still a perception of not enough time?

Researcher - Trying to update resources using a new manual, modeling for new team members, and building a professional learning community.

#### **Mrs. Ohana**

As the Academic Coach, my take away from the peer coaching experience has actually become part of my daily job. The “Pre-Observation” Notes where teachers are asked to

reflect on what is going well, what is a struggle right now, students who are particularly difficult, and how I can be a support has been a way for me to gain invaluable information prior to going in to a classroom to observe. Huge time saver! The “Post-Observation Conference” form has become a regular tool I use to give teachers the constructive feedback necessary in a professional manner. Additionally, this system provides next steps and additional ways that I as the Academic Coach can support their instructional needs. The teachers have been very open to the use of the forms as well and find them to be an avenue to receive needed feedback in a non-threatening manner.

Dr. Adams - I wonder what results would look like if you paired teachers with like experience together?

Researcher - Great question. The team would like to continue. That could be a next step.