EXHAUSTED, DRAINED, AND APATHETIC: AN EMERGING COACH'S EMOTIONAL TRAJECTORY DURING HER FIRST YEAR

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While instructional coaching can support teacher improvement and student learning, their effectiveness and longevity in the role may be influenced by teachers' emotions, the quality of the teacher-coach relationship, as well as the cognitive and emotional climate of the school. In this study, we analyze the emotional experiences of a novice mathematics instructional coach at multiple time points over one school year, through 14 reflective interviews. We categorize the coach's descriptions of her emotions as positive, negative, and neutral and describe themes that explain why she felt the way she did in her experiences. Our analysis points to three major reasons underlying her emotional trajectory which ultimately led to her decision to discontinue her role as a coach: (a) unmet expectations (b) student learning, and (c) teacher engagement.

Keywords: Professional Development, Affect, Emotions, Beliefs, and Attitudes

Introduction

Instructional coaching is a promising way to support teachers in improving their instruction and content knowledge (Campbell & Griffin, 2017; Kraft & Hill, 2020), and has been shown to support student learning (Campbell & Malkus, 2011; Kraft et al., 2018). Thus, the needs of instructional coaches are important to consider. The work of instructional coaches has been framed in a range of ways because these roles are often designed to serve the needs of the school or district, in addition to teachers. Coaches often function in leadership roles but are distinct from other school leaders because they are also closely connected to teachers' work (Wenner & Campbell, 2017). In many cases, teacher-coach interactions significantly advance teachers' thinking and practices as they provide support in a safe, non-evaluative way (Costa & Garmston, 2016). However, how the coach is positioned within the school can influence the quality of the relationships they develop with teachers and the extent to which they can establish trust and rapport (Comstock & Margolis, 2021). Straddling the boundary between being affiliated with leadership and building trust with teachers is a potentially emotionally challenging aspect of coaching, which may ultimately contribute to decreased effectiveness or attrition. Given the dearth of research on coaches' emotional experiences, in this study, we explored the experiences of an emerging coach during her first year to understand how they influenced her emotional well-being and decisions about continuing in her role as coach. We focused on answering the

following research questions: (i) What is the trajectory of emotions of an emerging math coach during her first year? (ii) What factors influence this emotional trajectory? (iii) In what ways do these emotions contribute to her career decision-making?

Teachers' and Coaches' Emotions

When considering the complexities of coaching in a school setting, it's important to consider the multiple layers of emotional interactions that can ultimately influence teaching and learning. We frame this study by examining the impact of teacher emotions, teacher engagement, and the overall emotional climate of the school on a coach's emotional well-being. Our definition of emotions is guided by prior work as "socially constructed, personally enacted ways of being that emerge from conscious and/or unconscious judgments regarding perceived successes at attaining goals or maintaining standards or beliefs during transactions as part of social-historical contexts" (Schutz et al., 2006, p. 344). Emotions are relational, meaning they are elicited through person-environment interactions based on how the person perceives progress towards achieving desired goals.

Teachers' emotions are elicited based on their perceptions of how they are progressing towards achieving their instructional or other teacher-related goals (Schutz & Zembylas, 2009). They are influenced by various factors, including interactions with students (Chaves, 2009; Hargreaves, 2000; Sutton, 2003), student learning (Reyna and Weiner, 2001; Russo et al., 2020, Trigwell, 2012), level of autonomy in their teaching (Lee, 2005; Russo et al., 2020), and contextual factors such as lack of support (Van Veen et al., 2005; Chaves, 2009) or time (Van Veen et al., 2005). Emotions have also been found to play a significant role in the interactions between teachers and instructional coaches (Cross Francis et al., 2021). Similar to teachers, goal setting is a key aspect of coaches' work. They too, set goals that are teacher-, student- and/or school-focused and experience emotions as the judge how well events unfolding daily are helping them make progress towards those goals. To be effective, it is important that coaches support teachers in regulating their emotions in ways that bode well for student learning, while also regulating their own emotions as they manage the complexities of their own work. By acknowledging the emotional aspect of their work and engaging in discussions about emotions, coaches and teachers can understand and support each other's experiences, as well as develop a shared vision for teaching and learning (Hunt, 2016). When difficult emotions arise in the context of coaching interactions, coaches' engagement with these emotions can support teachers' change toward effective practices (McGugan et al., 2023). By acknowledging, addressing, and leveraging their emotions, both coaches and teachers can contribute to a more supportive and productive educational environment.

The multi-faceted nature of coaches' roles may also play a part in their emotional experience. Coaches often work with multiple teachers within a school or across schools. Although not an explicit requirement of their role, coaches are integral in maintaining both a positive academic and emotional climate within schools by supporting teachers' efficacy and engagement (Lobaugh, 2022). Additionally, coaches must navigate their relationships with administrators and communicate expectations from school leadership, while also building trust and rapport with teachers. Efforts to meet these implicit expectations can be a physically and emotionally burdensome endeavor.

Lamberg, T., & Moss, D. (2023). *Proceedings of the forty-fifth annual meeting of the North American Chapter of the International Group for the Psychology of Mathematics Education* (Vol. 1). University of Nevada, Reno.

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Methods

Participant

Arabella was a first-year instructional math coach in an urban K-5 Title I elementary school. She was supported by a colleague who was an experienced coach and had been the instructional literacy coach for six years. She was concurrently working on her doctoral degree at a large public university in the United States. Prior to being the math coach, she worked as a math interventionist for Grades 4-5. As a coach, she was required to support core curriculum implementation, including 1:1 coaching cycles, facilitating professional learning teams, co-planning, analyzing data, and providing professional development.

Data Collection

Semi-structured interviews were the main data source. There were two anchor interviews, a pre-interview with Arabella before she began coaching and a post-interview after 14 reflection sessions at the end of her coaching role. During the coaching experience, the research team conducted bi-weekly reflection sessions with her to hear about her experiences, reflections, and the events that occurred between sessions. For this paper, we focused on two questions from these reflections that targeted her emotions: What were your primary emotions during these past couple days while working as a math coach? What were the reasons for these emotions?

Analysis

We identified the statements that Arabella shared in relation to her emotions. We organized the data in a table with the stated emotions in one column and the accompanying emotion reason in an adjoining column. The research team read each stated emotion and coded it in terms of valence – positive, negative, and neutral – referring to the pleasant and unpleasant multi-component responses to external stimuli respectively. This is displayed visually in Figure 1. We identified the responses provided in the pre- and post-interviews to capture the emotions at distinct time points – prior to the start of her coaching role and at the end of the year – and the reasons underlying the emotions. Then we focused on understanding the trends of emotions across the reflective interviews to document how events unfolding within the school, and with teachers and students impacted the coach's emotional experiences. We read and coded each emotion reason using a code that captured the essence of what Arabella was trying to communicate. Then, we organize the codes grouping those with similar meanings into themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In what follows, we describe the emotions and reasons that she experienced these emotions at the two distinct time points. We also describe the themes that summarize the reasons underlying the emotions she experienced over the year.

Findings

We describe Arabella's emotional experience at the beginning and end of her coaching role. Then we discuss how her emotional experiences changed across the 14 reflective interviews, and her emotions after deciding to leave her position as a coach.

Emotions at the beginning and end of the coaching role

Before starting her work with teachers, Arabella was eager, excited, and grateful to start her role as a coach because she had worked hard to get this position. She stated her feelings and described why she wanted to become a coach.

> I feel like I've worked hard for this position as well. Like this is something that I've wanted for a couple years now. And I knew I had to go to grad school for it and even after I went to grad school for it, I still like there wasn't an opportunity and I didn't necessarily like really

seek it out … so it's this is something that I've wanted to do, and now that I'm in it, I'm just like really loving it. And so, I think just like eagerness and fun and exciting like every day.

I enjoy working with the teachers, I enjoy being in their classrooms. I enjoy when they come to me and ask me questions. I just enjoy seeing their classes...be successful.

Arabella wanted to be a coach. She worked hard to achieve the qualifications for the position and had exercised patience. Feelings of *enjoyment* seemed to come from the fact that she loved working with teachers, providing them with effective support, and positively influencing students through that support. Arabella also mentioned that she was anticipating feeling some *disappointment* in cases where she might not be able to help teachers. She was looking forward to functioning as a "good support" for teachers to help ensure that they "feel successful".

At the end of the year, when asked about her emotions related to the coaching experience in its entirety, Arabella described being *exhausted, frustrated, challenged,* and *confused.* She explained the reasons for these emotions,

I think that was just really frustrating not feeling impactful. The lack of accountability. All that was frustrating day to day. I'm exhausted in multiple ways, like physically just like getting up every morning at 6 am being here all day. And then going home and like just feeling totally burnt out. than being surrounded by people who were feeling burnt out. Just all very exhausting. [I am also] I'm hopeful because there were times where like, I did get to do coaching cycles with the teachers and there were teachers who, you know, were working with me and and you found the value in talking to me and working with me.

Though there were multiple negative emotions that she shared, she still sounded *hopeful* and *enjoyed* it when she did have opportunities to engage in the work of coaching, particularly when she was able to directly work with teachers and build relationships.

To understand how Arabella's emotions changed over time we explored the nature of the transitionary emotions she experienced from the reflective interviews and organized the reasons for these emotions in themes.

Trajectory of Emotions

Figure 1 shows Arabella's emotions, categorized as positive, negative, or neutral, over the first year in the role. It shows that over the course of the first year Arabella experienced a range of positive, negative, and neutral emotions; however, she consistently experienced negative emotions following reflective interview 6.

	Pre	RI 1	RI 2	RI 3	RI 4	RI 5	RI 6	RI 7	RI 8	RI 9	RI 10	RI 11	RI 12	RI 13	RI 14	Post
Positive	X		X	X	X		X	X	X	X		X			X	X
Neutral		X	X					X								
Negative			X	X	X	X		X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X

Figure 1: Trajectory of Emotions Across Reflective Interviews (RIs)

Unmet Expectations

During the initial days of her role as a coach, Arabella experienced **neutral** emotions. She noticed that teachers in the school appeared to have a depressed mood (as they were transitioning

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back to in-person learning after COVID) and were feeling overwhelmed by the increased expectations they were experiencing. Though these negative emotions (e.g., burn-out) were not Arabella's emotions, they dampened her excitement about her new role. Though she had started her position on a positive note with a zeal to help teachers, during her second through fifth reflective interviews, Arabella expressed some **negative emotions**, which she described as a *feeling of being lost.* This reflected her struggle to understand the purpose of her role as a coach. She mentioned during the second week's reflection,

> I was feeling like, I'm just kind of like lost, what is my purpose? When I started this, I was so excited. But now I feel it's been hard for teachers coming back from COVID. And they've been feeling so drained. I think drained and burnt out would be the words they would use...so I think I've been like, well, how do I help? Basically, it's like, what is my purpose here? Like, because I want to coach, I want to help but like, that's not where we're at. Right? What I can do to help at that moment is like, okay, we can, you know, work on this math problem, We can have conversations, like, it's not the typical coaching cycles. That's not, that's not how it works.

Arabella's emotions started to mirror those of the teachers within the first few months in her role. She described experiencing *stress, exhaustion,* and *irritation* due to *stress on teachers* and recognizing that her school's administration considered improving students' standardized test scores to be a major part of her role. Specifically, during her fifth reflection, she described feeling irritated because her role required her to wear multiple hats and perform at distinct levels, (i.e., ensuring that students' scores improved) which took away time she wanted to spend on her actual job role - which she saw as coaching and working with teachers.

Student Learning

Arabella reported **positive emotions** throughout the sixth to eighth reflective interviews. She had introduced EOG Fridays with 3rd-5th grade teachers. Every other Friday, students would take a short standards-based assessment to help teachers gather data to analyze student learning to help them prepare for their upcoming standardized tests. EOG Fridays was received well by some teachers while other teachers pushed back. They intended to be encouraging and motivating and students earned rewards for growth and proficiency. Students enjoyed participating so they continued to the end of the year. During this time, she expressed emotions like – excitement, hopeful, feeling good, and contentment. Arabella proposed the idea for EOG Fridays based on her prior experiences with students. The leadership accepted the idea and following its implementation they observed an improvement in test scores. Although implementing this plan seemed tangential to what she perceived was her coach role, she felt acknowledged within the leadership team, and was pleased to see that her hard work seemed to improve students' scores. Soon after, during her ninth reflection, Arabella experienced **a mix of positive and negative emotions.** On one hand, she was excited as she found that students had scored well after implementing the new practice of EOG Friday in the school. She shared,

> I'm excited I think that the math data the trajectory from this past benchmark was like pretty good. We saw a lot of growth. I think overall the math teachers felt pretty good about it. That was exciting. The students felt good about it so definitely excited.

Contrarily, she reported feeling frustrated because of the behavior of some teachers in the school. She was feeling some tension with some of the teachers who remained distant and not open to engaging in coaching cycles.

Teacher Engagement

The residue of these **negative emotions** carried forward in Arabella's experience for the next four reflection interviews (tenth to thirteenth interviews). During this time, she reported emotions like tired, frustrated, drained, exhausted, and apathetic. The primary reason she associated with these emotions was the lack of teacher engagement she was encountering. She started feeling animosity with one teacher in particular, whose behavior she interpreted as resistant to engage in coaching aimed at improving her instruction. This created a toxic environment which she felt made it difficult for her to function effectively as a coach. She explained her feelings as follows:

> I think tired, exhausted, drained, I don't know if drained is an emotion, but I think the negativity and the toxicity of some of the attitudes are really hard to like deal with and so I think just like tired. I was just like...exhausting to deal with.

Although Arabella focused on her interactions with one teacher in this statement, she noted that the experience with this teacher was reflective of her broader feelings of disconnection in her interactions with teachers at the school in general. The negative emotions that Arabella began to express in the second interview persisted for most of the school year, with only sporadic positive emotions, and this ultimately seemed to inform Arabella's decision to actively seek other job opportunities at the end of the school year. After making this decision (by the fourteenth interview), she re-focused on the positive aspects of her role. She reported feeling hopeful and excited about two teachers who were willing to work with her, and about the continued improvements in students' test scores, ending the school year on a positive note.

Discussion and Significance of this Study

This study's findings highlight the transitory nature of the emotions of an emerging math coach during her first year and point to teachers' emotions, coach-teacher interactions, and the emotional climate of the school as key factors that influenced a novice coach's emotional trajectory and her ultimate decision to leave her role as coach. After beginning her new role with optimism and excitement, Arabella experienced increasingly negative emotions related to the challenges of coaching, followed by a brief improvement in her emotional well-being toward the end of the school year, which can be attributed to her sense of relief at having made the decision to leave her position. As the school year progressed and challenging learning conditions persisted because of the COVID 19 pandemic, Arabella described the way in which teachers' feelings of overwhelm negatively influenced her own emotional state, noting the uncertainty and anxiety that resulted from not knowing how she could support teachers. The nature of her interactions with teachers also contributed to Arabella's emotional decline, as she described feeling exhausted by teachers' resistance to improving their instruction through coaching. The overall emotional climate of the school was a third factor to which Arabella attributed her negative emotional trajectory as the year wore on. The expectations placed on Arabella to increase test scores while trying to build relationships with overwhelmed teachers resulted in increased levels of stress. Arabella was bolstered throughout the year by continued improvements in students' standardized test scores, which she felt was an indication that despite the challenges she faced in working with teachers, she was contributing positively to student learning. Ultimately, however, this was not enough to counteract the heightened negative emotional experience resulting from teachers' emotions, challenging teacher-coach interactions and the overall school climate, finally leading to her decision to leave her coaching role.

The trajectory of negative emotions we observed in this study extends the literature which documents the relationship between teachers' and students' emotions (e.g., Chaves 2009; Hargreaves, 2000; Sutton, 2003), and between student learning and teachers' emotions (e.g., Reyna and Weiner, 2001; Russo et al., 2020), by demonstrating existing commonalities in the relationship between teachers' and coaches' emotions. Arabella's experience illustrates that coaches' emotions are influenced by factors including teachers' emotions, teacher (dis) engagement, student learning outcomes, and the overall cognitive and emotional climate of the school. Similarly, Arabella reported feelings of excitement and hope in connection with teachers' engagement and growth, suggesting that like teachers, coaches experience positive emotions when they see the learners in their charge developing positively (i.e., teachers growing professionally in ways that support student learning). By illustrating the influence of teachers' emotions and engagement on coaches' emotions, these findings add to the existing literature (e.g., Hunt, 2016) on the role of emotions in instructional coaching. Additionally, this study provides insight into the emotional challenges that novice instructional coaches may face and extends what we know about the emotionality of coach-teacher relationships (McGugan et al., 2023). We also noted that many of the words used by the coach were not emotion words as described in the literature; instead, many described the physical state of their bodies. This aligns with existing work (Cross Francis et al., 2019, Cross Francis et al., 2020) but also emphasizes that coaching can take both an emotional and physical toll.

Hiring and retaining effective coaches requires a significant investment of resources and time on the part of schools and districts, and our results highlight the importance of supporting coaches as they manage the emotions they may experience while engaging with teachers and supporting schools. Based on the work coaches do, engaging with human beings in contexts that are challenging and complex, it is inevitable they have to contend with the emotions of others and their own. Thus, it is essential that coaches acknowledge the emotional and affective terrain of teachers and learn to understand and support individuals in regulating their emotions (Cross Francis et al., 2019). To prevent burnout and support the emotional well-being of instructional coaches, it's important for schools to prioritize building a positive emotional culture, provide ongoing support and professional development, and ensure that coaches have clear expectations and boundaries. By creating a supportive environment, instructional coaches are more likely to thrive in their roles and make a positive impact on student learning.

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