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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Exploring Within Team Differences in Coaching Supports

Rosalie Hiuyan Chung 

ABSTRACT

Background/purpose – Coaching supports teachers to varying degrees, and the same coach may engage different teachers in distinct ways. This study explores this variation in coaches' interactions with different teachers over 2 years to identify supports for coaches to develop positive coaching dynamics with teachers.

Materials/methods – The study presents a comparative case study of two coaches who each oversaw two different teachers. Drawing on interviews with teachers and coaches over 2 years and videorecorded observations of coaching sessions, coach-teacher interactions were examined as well as individual's perceptions to understand how and why coaches interact differentially with teachers.

Results – While the coaches did not differentiate their coaching process for teachers, they met teachers at different frequencies. Rather than determining their coaching frequency on teachers' instructional skills, the coaches met more regularly with teachers who had stronger relationships with the coach.

Conclusion – The study illustrates that coaches' dynamics with individual teachers vary, which can lead to some teachers being more receptive to the same coach than others. This study's results underscore the need to support coaches in learning how to systematically differentiate their coaching based on individual teacher's needs.

Keywords – coaching, coaching dosage, coaching perceptions, teacher differentiation

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1. INTRODUCTION

In the United States, and increasingly in other countries, school districts frequently use coaches to provide one-to-one support for teachers as a means to help improve their instruction (Denton & Hasbrouck, 2009; Domina et al., 2015; Liao et al., 2021), yet the effect of coaching on teacher practice is variable (Glover et al., 2023; Kraft et al., 2018). Blazar and Kraft (2015) reported that coaches differentially impact teacher practice, since coaching dosage and focus can vary across coach-teacher pairings. This comparative case study aims to address a gap in the prior quantitative studies by identifying factors that explain differences in coaching dosage, or the amount of time coaches spend with individual teachers, and subsequently heterogeneous coaching effects on teacher practice. I hypothesize that variations in coaching dosage may be as a result of the interaction between unique coach and teacher pairing characteristics as well as school contexts. Unpacking these dynamics aims to demonstrate how best to support coaches working with different teachers.

As school districts often employ a single coach to support multiple teachers (Attleberry & Bryk, 2011; Huguet et al., 2014), the field needs to understand how coaches work with different teachers. Coaching's impact on teachers' instruction is largely due to coaches' targeted feedback based on individual teacher's needs (Desimone & Pak, 2017). Yet, little research has been published on whether a coach purposefully differentiates for different teachers based on their needs (Liao et al., 2021; Stover et al., 2011), which the current study seeks to observe.

Since many coaches work with the same teachers over multiple years (Attleberry & Bryk, 2011; Biancarosa et al., 2010), we need to examine how coach-teacher interactions evolve over time. Several longitudinal coaching studies have reported that coaching effectiveness on teacher practice and student achievement improves after the first year (Biancarosa et al., 2010; Campbell & Malkus, 2011). However, Attleberry and Bryk (2011) revealed differing coaching effects can transpire for different teachers across time, due to variations in coaching frequency within and across schools over a 3-year period. They measured coaching frequency by the number of coach-teacher meetings held, the length of those meetings, and the types of activities that occurred during the meetings. The current study will contribute to the existing literature by qualitatively analyzing coaches' and teachers' perceptions, or the individual's interpretation, of coaching over time. I hypothesize that perceptions of each other illuminate why coaches vary in their coaching dosage per teacher, which is important since coaching frequency positively correlates with changes in teachers' instruction (Elish-Piper & L'Allier, 2011; Piper & Zuilkowski, 2015).

The goal of the current study is to explore the factors of coaching dynamics in order to understand the mechanisms underlying the mixed, or heterogeneous, effects of coaching on teacher practice. The study's sample consisted of two coaches and four teachers from elementary schools in one school district, the District of Columbia Public Schools (DCPS), in the United States. Using videorecorded coaching sessions and interview data from both coaches and teachers, I tracked shifting perceptions of these coaching dynamics over a 2-year period for two coaches who each oversaw two teachers. The study aims to address the following research questions:

1. To what extent do coaches differentiate coaching content or process with teachers?

2. What are coaches' and teachers' perceptions of each other over a 2-year period? How might these perceptions be associated with an individual's teaching backgrounds and school context?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The same coach's dynamic can vary with different teachers. Coaches and teachers each possess characteristics, such as their prior teaching experiences, personalities, and teaching beliefs (Collet, 2012; Haneda et al., 2019; Liao et al., 2021), that shape their unique coach-teacher dynamic (Attleberry & Bryk, 2011; Opfer & Pedder, 2011). Each person's characteristics contribute to their perception of the other person (Huguet et al., 2014; Obara, 2010), and this perception influences their behavior (Bean et al., 2010). To help all teachers improve in their instruction, coaches should consider individual teacher's needs and differentiate their coaching accordingly (Desimone & Pak, 2017; Joyce & Showers, 1982; Knight, 2007). In the current study, the variation between coach-teacher pairings are observed across two major factors, differential treatment and perceptions of coaching, in order to understand what contributes to the heterogeneous effects of coaching.

Differential Treatment

In the late 1990s, differentiation was introduced to shift teachers' mindsets towards helping students learn better by accounting for individual students' background knowledge, skills, and interests in their instruction (Bondie et al., 2019). Tomlinson and McTighe (2006) discussed differentiation based on three aspects: content—what students learn; process—how students learn; and product—how students demonstrate their learning. Stover et al. (2011) drew on Tomlinson and McTighe's (2006) work and proposed that coaches need to differentiate what each teacher learns (i.e., content), how that learning occurs, such as through modeling instruction or co-planning (i.e., process), and how teachers demonstrate their learning in their instruction (i.e., product). They argued that teacher reflection time during coaching sessions is the key to coach differentiation, since it allows teachers to shape their learning and be more receptive to being coached (Zimmer & Matthews, 2022).

Yet, recent coaching models highlight specific content and processes that instructional coaches should follow during their coaching sessions with teachers (Gregory et al., 2017; Reddy et al., 2017; Russell et al., 2020). For example, Glover (2017) proposed a five-step coaching model that guides teachers on how to use student data. While models are useful in supporting coaches with their coaching (Gallucci et al., 2010; Kuijpers et al., 2010), school districts should encourage their coaches to tailor these coaching models based on the teachers' background experiences and classroom context, as this is central to how coaching is effective (Desimone & Pak, 2017).

Coaches can also differentiate the coaching process by varying the time they spend with each teacher they coach. More coaching sessions are associated with changes seen in teachers' instruction and student achievement (Elish-Piper & L'Allier, 2011; Piper & Zuilkowski, 2015). However, coaching dosage by teacher varies significantly (Attleberry & Bryk, 2011; Blazar & Kraft, 2015; Weber-Mayrer et al., 2018). Unfortunately, the field has yet to systematically examine the factors contributing to differences in coaching frequency. The current study therefore aims to explore the reasons behind variations in coaching frequency based on coaches' and teachers' perceptions of each other.

Perceptions of Coaching

Teachers' and coaches' perceptions of coaching point to the need to support coaches in order to build positive dynamics with teachers being coached. Teachers' perceptions of their coach's advice can indicate their receptiveness towards learning, which correlates strongly as to whether or not they actually apply any changes to their instruction (Kennedy, 2016; Opfer & Pedder, 2011). Adults need to *want* to learn new concepts in order to apply the knowledge they have acquired (Knowles, 1990). Coaches' perceptions of their coaching reveal the difficulties that coaches face with coaching, thereby identifying useful training opportunities to help prepare coaches for their work with teachers.

To unpack how teachers' and coaches' perceptions of coaching develop, we first need to analyze the factors associated with these perceptions. Teachers positively perceive coaches if they share experiences in the same subject area (Huguet et al., 2014; Obara, 2010). Jones and Rainville (2014) found that when a coach lacks same-area expertise, they leverage a respected teacher's buy-in in order to gain the approval of other teachers. This example highlights the potential of peer coaching, as teachers may be more receptive to colleagues they already respect.

In contrast, teachers perceive coaches negatively when coaches spend most of their time focused on administrative tasks (Bean et al., 2010). Teachers are more receptive to coaches that function as a peer whose focus is to support teachers in their development, as opposed to coaches that act like administrators and whose role is considered evaluative (Jones & Rainville, 2014; Vanderburg & Stephens, 2010). Likewise, qualitative research has underscored how coaches positioning themselves as someone of power can hinder teachers' receptiveness to coaching (Hunt, 2016; Robertson et al., 2020).

Coaching perceptions are also shaped by the school context. Teachers become more invested in their professional learning when their administration is actively supportive of coaching (Hopkins et al., 2017; Matsumura et al., 2009). School leaders can support coaching by preserving time for coaches to meet with teachers or even just by emphasizing the importance of coaching (Woulfin & Jones, 2018). Teachers may negatively perceive coaches when they help districts communicate new policies that the teachers themselves disagree with (Coburn & Woulfin, 2012). Teachers' negative reactions towards coaches may not reflect a negative stance towards coaching as a whole, but rather towards district initiatives that mandate changes to their instruction.

Research on coaching perceptions have focused on what teachers, administrators, and coaches believe a coach's role should be (Mraz et al., 2008; Walpole & Blamey, 2008). However, the current study seeks to explore coaches' and teachers' perceptions of each other, since these perceptions may illuminate why coaching does not always lead to changes in teachers' instruction. While coaches' and teachers' perceptions of each other likely vary due to the unique dynamic of each coach-teacher pairing, I hope to draw on these case studies as a means to identifying ways to help coaches support different teachers in improving their instruction.

3. METHODOLOGY

This comparative case study drew on two data sources, observations and interviews. The research team videorecorded debrief sessions between coaches and individual teachers, as well as conducted one-on-one interviews with both coaches and teachers. I drew mainly on the debrief data to answer the first research question about whether or not coaches

differentiated their coaching by content or process, and then used the interview data to address the second research question about how individual perceptions of the coaching relationship may have evolved over time and whether or not those perceptions relate to individual's characteristics or contexts.

Participants

The current study drew on data collected in a larger study conducted from 2016 to 2018 on the implementation and effects of a content-focused professional learning curriculum called Learning Together to Advance our Practice, or LEAP, in DCPS. Approval for the current study was secured from the university's ethics committee as well as the school district's research board. One main goal of LEAP was to align teachers' instruction to the newly defined national standards of that time. All teachers were required to participate in LEAP. They learned content through weekly subject-specific seminars facilitated by a coach, and received personalized support through bi-weekly coaching sessions, which included observation of their teaching followed by a debrief with their coach.

All coaches were required to pass subject-specific tests in order to qualify as a coach for that content area. These tests involved analyzing lesson plans and student works as a means to examining if individual coaches could identify gaps in teacher instruction and trends in student understanding. There were full- and partial-release coaches, who dedicated 50% of their time to coaching.

Coaches were asked to participate in 2 weeks of training prior to LEAP implementation. The training taught them about adult learning theories in order to facilitate their interactions with teachers and to provide them with the opportunity to discuss with their school's leadership about creating an environment that better supported teacher learning. DCPS provided coaches with curricular materials and a research-based "5P Debrief" facilitation structure (Bambrick-Santoyo, 2012).

The research team of the larger study, of which the current study's author was a member, worked with district-selected school principals to identify coach-teacher pairs in grades three through five. The team attempted to sample participants, so that there was variation in student demographics, school and teacher characteristics. Ultimately, the sample was a convenience sample based on voluntary participation, and was not representative of teachers in the district, as sample teachers had fewer years of teaching experience. All collected data were deidentified prior to analysis so as to maintain anonymity of the participants.

The study was undertaken by the author. Since I was interested in how coaches' interactions with different teachers evolved over time, I identified coaches that were paired with the same two teachers who participated in both years of the study. While school districts assign coaches to oversee the same teachers throughout the entirety of the LEAP program, teachers were given the option to participate in the current research and were able to opt out at any point. The final sample consisted of two English Language Arts, or ELA, teams with each team having one coach overseeing two teachers.

All the school and participant names reported in this study are pseudonyms assigned to protect their anonymity and the confidentiality of the collected data. The coaches came from two different schools, Woolf Elementary and Milton Elementary. Both schools had comparable student ethnracial demographics, with 50-60% Hispanic, 35-45% Black, and 3-5% White, and with approximately 10% of students registered as having some form of

disability. About 35% of students in both schools were English learners. While the average class size was similar, Woolf Elementary school's student population was 30% larger.

Table 1. Sample demographics

Participant	Race	Education	Years teaching	Grade level	Years in DCPS
Woolf Elementary					
Coach Thomas	Black	Bachelor's	^a	9-12	5-10
Ms. Little	Black	Bachelor's	5-10	1-3	5-10
Ms. Riley	Black	Master's	>10	3-8	>10
Milton Elementary					
Coach Snell	White	Bachelor's	5-10	3-5	5-10
Ms. Santiago	Hispanic	Bachelor's	<1	3-5	<1
Ms. Wrigley	White	Bachelor's	5-10	3-5	<1

^aDCPS is missing data on this participant's prior teaching experience.

Table 1 describes the sample's demographics. In order to maintain participant anonymity, years of teaching experience and years working in the district are reported in 5-year windows. Coach Thomas worked at Woolf Elementary, and coached Ms. Little and Ms. Riley. Coach Thomas' prior teaching experience was at the high school level, which differed from the teachers being coached. Prior to LEAP, Ms. Little and Ms. Riley had already been working as teachers in the same school district for several years. On the other hand, Coach Snell worked at Milton Elementary and coached two teachers, Ms. Santiago and Ms. Wrigley, both of whom were new to the school district at the beginning of LEAP. Coach Snell taught similar grade levels to both the teachers being coached.

Instruments & Procedures

Debriefs

In the first year, the research team collected audio-recorded debriefs from December to April. The team asked coaches to send one debrief per month for each teacher they coached, for a total of five debriefs per teacher. According to the guidelines of LEAP, coaches were required to have at least two debriefs per month. Debriefs varied in length. Coach Thomas typically led official debrief meetings lasting about 5-7 minutes, irrespective of the teacher, while Coach Snell's debriefs lasted around 20 minutes per teacher.

Interviews

In both years, the research team interviewed teachers and coaches over the phone. During the 2016-2017 school year, the participants were interviewed at the end of each semester, whilst during the 2017-2018 school year, they were interviewed once at the end of the school year. To summarize, three interviews took place per case study participant, representing a study total of 18 interviews. We chose to interview individuals at this frequency in order that the participant teachers and coaches had sufficient time to first develop a working relationship, which we could then seek to understand how these dynamics evolved.

On average, each interview lasted about 35-45 minutes. The research team followed a semi-structured interview protocol (Patton, 2002), meaning that while the interviewers had prepared questions to ask, they were also free to ask probing questions based on what was being shared by the interviewees. The teachers and coaches were asked similar questions about their experiences working with each other (e.g., “How has your relationship changed over the year?”) and the professional learning curriculum (e.g., “To what extent has your school’s administration been supportive of LEAP?”).

Data Analysis

Debriefs

All debriefs were coded. Since the school district sought to understand how coaches utilized the debrief structure, the research team drew on fidelity literature in order to develop the coding scheme (Roberts et al., 2017). Table 2 provides a description of the five debrief steps. The coders then observed whether each step was considered to be 1 - *absent*, 2 - *present*, or 3 - *present in-depth*.

Table 2. District-provided debrief structure

Indicator	Description
Step 1: Clear opening	Coach noted positive teacher/student actions that highlight growth or are connected to the teacher’s goal.
Step 2a: Evidence	Coach and/or teacher asked for low-inference evidence.
Step 2b: Self-reflection	Coach and/or teacher used questions to promote teacher self-reflection.
Step 3: Prioritize	Coach and teacher identified a bite-sized, high-leverage action step for the next week.
Step 4a: Plan	Coach and teacher engaged in planning related to how the teacher would apply the action step to improve instruction.
Step 4b: Practice	Coach and teacher engaged in practice to support the teacher in applying the action step.
Step 5: Close out	Coach and teacher discussed next steps with a clear understanding of how the action step would be implemented in the teacher’s classroom.

A subset of debriefs were double coded, and the two coders regularly met to discuss their scores, coming to consensus where any discrepancies were found (Hill et al., 2005). I examined the level of depth that coaches engaged in for each step by averaging results for each step across debriefs per teacher. These statistics revealed whether or not the coaches varied their debrief format by teacher.

Interviews

All interviews were coded thematically (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Table 3 lists the codes used to analyze the interviews along with a description for each code.

Table 3. Interview codebook

Code	Definition
Implementation	Discusses how and/or why the school followed or deviated from the guidelines for any LEAP component.
Impact	Extent to which LEAP has changed the school's culture, teaching practices, or student outcomes.
Buy-in	Focus on the satisfaction of participants with the LEAP process.
Focus	Describes any content from LEAP.
Quality	How LEAP was delivered by the coach, nature of the relationships between coaches and teachers.

Before individually coding the interview transcripts, the raters first had to agree on all codes 80% of the time. Random excerpts were selected from the dataset, and the raters individually applied codes. They then met to discuss any differences and come to a consensus. In total, 15% of the interviews were double-coded.

Using multiple passes through the coded data, I observed trends about each coaching pair and generated memos to capture themes within and across cases (Creswell & Poth, 2018). At each stage, I examined for confirming and disconfirming evidence (Miles & Huberman, 1994). I also engaged in peer debriefing with an experienced qualitative researcher so as to assess the validity of my findings and analysis (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Limitations

Despite efforts to ensure consistency in the timing of data collection across both years of the study, there was some variability and missing data. I had at least one interview per year for each participant, so I observed changes in individual's perceptions of coaching over 2 years. I also had at least two debriefs for each coach-teacher pair to observe differences in coaching process across teachers. Due to this small sample of coaching sessions, I made limited inferences about coaches' overall interactions with teachers. Nevertheless, the goal of the study was to explore whether coaches' approach to different teachers varied and to identify any reasons for these variations.

Due to DCPS' goals for LEAP, the debrief coding protocol focused on a particular aspect of coaching practice; specifically, whether or not coaches adhered to the district-provided debrief structure. Some of the reliabilities, particularly steps 2a and 2b, were on the lower end due to lack of variation in the raters' scores. Thus, the debrief findings needed to be interpreted cautiously. In the second year, coaches had the option of other coaching touchpoints, such as co-planning and modeling. Therefore, due to data limitations, I did not make any claims about the most effective type of coaching practice for changing teachers' instruction. Instead, I examined if coaches tailored the provided structure for teachers to unpack how these interactions were associated with individual teachers' perceptions of coaches. Although I could not observe coach-teacher interactions in year two of the study, I had data on individual teacher's coaching perceptions after their second year of coaching.

4. RESULTS

Consistent with case study reporting (Marshall & Rossman, 2016), this section uses thick description drawn from multiple data sources to demonstrate how the unique characteristics of individual teachers and teaching contexts contribute to coaching dynamics.

RQ#1: Coach Differentiation for Individual Teachers

I examined coaches' differentiation for teachers in two ways: content and process. While Coach Snell tailored content based on teachers' needs, Coach Thomas strictly adhered to the LEAP curriculum. As for process, neither coach differentiated the debrief structure with their teachers, but their meeting frequency with each teacher varied.

Content

Coach Thomas. It was unclear if Coach Thomas differentiated content for teachers. However, the teachers' interviews revealed whether or not they considered the coaching advice they received to be useful. In year one, Ms. Little felt "like there have been times where [Coach Thomas] had told [her] to do things that just did not work, and [she] be[came] very frustrated...[so she went] to the next person." In contrast, in year two, Ms. Riley explained how one seminar focused on teaching students how to analyze text features. She thought her students did not need this instruction, but "[when she] taught [text features] the way [Coach Thomas] explained it, [her] kids were able to better understand complex text because they leaned on those text features to help them understand the text better." Ms. Riley had a positive experience integrating Coach Thomas' advice. This example highlighted how Coach Thomas focused on delivering LEAP content to the teachers coached.

Coach Snell. Coach Snell clearly differentiated the teachers' coaching, despite the requirements of LEAP. In her year one interview, Ms. Santiago stated that, "If I mention to my LEAP coach that I can't get through content because I'm having issues with behavior...she's always open to troubleshooting...but I know it's not incorporated into the LEAP curriculum to talk about behavior." Ms. Santiago appreciated how her coach met her instructional needs, since those needs did not match the intended purpose of LEAP.

Similarly, in year two, Ms. Wrigley mentioned, "[A] big question for me...was making sure that the rigor was there for all my students...so [Coach Snell] was incredibly helpful...[by] checking in during observations to make sure that those plans were actually being implemented well." Ms. Wrigley appreciated how Coach Snell allowed her to set the focus of their coaching conversations. Coach Snell tailored the coaching given to teachers, which resulted in receiving praise for this approach.

Process

Coach Thomas. With both teachers, Coach Thomas engaged in the same debrief steps with similar levels of depth (see Table 4). Each debrief began with a clear focus about the lesson and asked teachers to support their thoughts with lesson-based evidence. As seen in step 3, Coach Thomas often pinpointed a manageable next step for the teacher to try in their next class.

Table 4. Coaches' adherence to debrief structure

Debrief Step	Coach Thomas		Coach Snell	
	Ms. Little	Ms. Riley	Ms. Santiago	Ms. Wrigley
	<i>M (SD)</i>	<i>M (SD)</i>	<i>M (SD)</i>	<i>M (SD)</i>
#1: Clear opening	2.92 (0.20)	3.00 (0.00)	3.00 (0.00)	2.69 (0.70)
#2a: Evidence	2.36 (0.43)	2.25 (0.29)	2.87 (0.18)	2.56 (0.73)
#2b: Self-reflection	2.53 (0.45)	2.00 (0.00)	2.87 (0.18)	2.81 (0.37)
#3: Prioritize	2.61 (0.38)	2.63 (0.48)	2.27 (0.37)	1.94 (0.42)
#4a: Plan	1.97 (0.27)	1.63 (0.25)	2.01 (0.57)	1.95 (0.40)
#4b: Practice	1.00 (0.00)	1.00 (0.00)	1.00 (0.00)	1.00 (0.00)
#5: Close out	1.47 (0.45)	1.75 (0.50)	1.49 (0.29)	1.34 (0.34)

Note. Possible scores range from 1 to 3.

Although Coach Thomas did not vary the debrief structure used for each teacher, different amounts of time were spent with each teacher. Coaching sessions were held less frequently with Ms. Little in the second year. In year two, Coach Thomas “would see [Ms. Little] based on [Ms. Little’s] availability. So [Coach Thomas wound up] actually seeing [Ms. Little] only once a month.” Likewise, in the second-year interview, Ms. Little only “remember[ed] seeing Coach Thomas two times [that] year.” On the other hand, Coach Thomas met frequently with Ms. Riley for one-on-one coaching, particularly in the second year. In year two, Coach Thomas noted that “instead of once a week, [visits were made] to [Ms. Riley’s] room twice a week.” Similarly, Ms. Riley admitted that “it seemed like everyday I would check in with [Coach Thomas]” in her second-year interview.

Coach Snell. Coach Snell also engaged in each step of the district-provided debrief structure with similar levels of depth for both teachers (see Table 4). The conversation would be opened with a clear focus, followed by discussion of whether or not students had achieved the learning objective. Unlike Coach Thomas, Coach Snell encouraged teachers to reflect and generate their own next steps for their teaching.

Coach Snell similarly varied the frequency of coaching meetings with the teachers. Ms. Santiago noted in her year-two interview that she saw her coach less that year: “Some months, it was once a month; other months, it was twice.” However, she justified the decreasing frequency, “because [Coach Snell] was pregnant, [we], of course, understood.” Unlike Ms. Santiago, Ms. Wrigley reported meeting frequently with Coach Snell in the second year: “for formal observations and check-ins at least once a week but informally, like constantly.”

RQ#2: Coach and Teacher Perceptions Over Time

Both coaches' and teachers' perceptions of each other did not change over the 2 years of the study. Positive perceptions remained positive and negative perceptions stayed negative. Teachers' prior teaching experiences, their observations of their coach's availability to coach, and their beliefs about the professional learning curriculum contributed to their perceptions of their coaches.

Coach Thomas

Ms. Little. Coach Thomas and Ms. Little perceived their interactions to be strained in both years. In year one, Coach Thomas described how Ms. Little “gives pushback [because] she’s fearful of the result.” In the second-year interview, Ms. Little perceived this

disagreement as negatively impacting the coaching dynamic: “I don’t think that the support is as consistent as it used to be...because my own views about some teaching has changed and sometimes can [not be] in agreement with what [Coach Thomas] believes.”

Teaching Background. Ms. Little was the department chair and received effective evaluation scores prior to LEAP. She acknowledged that because she had taught the same grade for multiple years, she felt like “she [knew] what [she was] doing.” Ms. Little’s belief that she was instructionally competent could have led her to be more critical of the coaches’ advice.

School Context. In the first year, Ms. Little described Coach Thomas’ main weakness as not “being present and being available.” Her rationale for Coach Thomas’ unavailability was that “we have a large school and she has a lot to do within the school.” Ms. Little noticed that Coach Thomas struggled to concentrate on coaching due to other administrative roles. Likewise, Coach Thomas emphasized being unable to “meet [all the] responsibilities [of LEAP]” due to being “on the RTI committee, the testing committee, the scheduling committee, lunch duties, [and] the academic leadership team,” responsibilities that had all been assigned by the school’s leadership.

Ms. Little’s tense interactions with Coach Thomas could be as a byproduct of her frustrations with LEAP. During the first year, Ms. Little expressed that, “LEAP doesn’t cater to the specific type of teacher. Even though it’s supposed to support you as an individual...everybody is...getting the exact same thing.” Ms. Little continued to say that the least helpful part of LEAP were the 15-minute observations. She did not think that coaches gathered enough useful information in that short timeframe. Ms. Little’s negativity towards LEAP may have transferred to her perceptions of her coach, as Coach Thomas strongly adhered to LEAP’s requirements.

Ms. Riley. In contrast, Coach Thomas’ and Ms. Riley’s perceptions of each other stayed positive over time. In the first year, Coach Thomas underscored Ms. Riley’s intent to improve. By the end of the school year, “[Ms. Riley] was a little more willing to try things that I suggest[ed].” Likewise, Ms. Riley praised her relationship with Coach Thomas in year one: “We pretty much had a good relationship to begin with...I was able to access [Coach Thomas] throughout the year.” From the first year, Ms. Riley found frequent interactions with Coach Thomas to be valuable. In year two, Coach Thomas revealed that the relationship with Ms. Riley “[had] become even stronger where [they] do a lot of co-planning and co-teaching.” Coach Thomas attributed the closer relationship to the frequent coaching sessions with Ms. Riley.

Teaching Background. Although Ms. Riley had taught almost twice as long as Ms. Little, Ms. Riley had received poor evaluation scores before LEAP. Her poor evaluations came from the middle school where she had previously worked. Ms. Riley revealed her reasons for moving schools: “I came from another school [about] 3 years ago...because it didn’t cultivate their teachers to grow...[S]ince I’ve been under LEAP with [Coach Thomas], my practices and my knowledge of content...have grown tremendously.”

School Context. In both years, Ms. Riley noted that the main area of growth for Coach Thomas was “maybe start the meetings on time.” In the second-year interview, Ms. Riley explained that “[she understood] why some of [their] meetings [didn’t] start on time, because [Coach Thomas was] pulled in a lot of directions.” Despite her general commendation of her coach, Ms. Riley, like Ms. Little, recognized that Coach Thomas had many school responsibilities, which prohibited a singular focus on coaching.

Ms. Riley frequently praised LEAP. In year one, her “teaching ha[d] become better” because of participating in LEAP. Likewise, in year two, when asked about whether she would change the content or structure of LEAP, Ms. Riley stated, “I think they’re all valuable...I wouldn’t mess with any of that.” Her positive perceptions of LEAP may have contributed towards her positive feelings towards Coach Thomas, and vice versa.

Coach Snell

Ms. Santiago. Coach Snell and Ms. Santiago positively perceived each other in both years. In the first year, Coach Snell acknowledged that Ms. Santiago was “really really receptive to feedback, which [made] it really really easy to coach her.” Similarly, Ms. Santiago lauded Coach Snell in year one: “[Coach Snell is] very approachable, always willing to help...you can trust that [Coach Snell is] doing a great job because you can see [the coach] teaching [and] it’s wonderful.” In the second year, Ms. Santiago continued her admiration of Coach Snell, despite meeting less frequently. She expressed, “[Coach Snell] always made themselves available for anything that the teachers need...[Coach Snell is] really good at establishing relationships with students, so is really good at giving advice on behavior or engagement.” Similar to the first year, Ms. Santiago highlighted Coach Snell’s availability as a coach and the coach’s commendable classroom practices.

Teaching Background. Ms. Santiago was a first-year teacher and acknowledged her need for instructional support: “[O]bservations and debriefs are really useful...as a first-year teacher, it’s a really good way of getting another set of eyes on what you’re doing.” Ms. Santiago’s perceived need for feedback explained her appreciation for frequent observations and subsequently, positive perceptions of her coach.

School Context. Ms. Santiago emphasized in her interviews that she felt well supported by Coach Snell due to her coach’s willingness to address her needs. She described: “I am a first-year teacher...Behavior is always [a] struggle...during my debrief [I could] talk with my coach...we could think of instructional strategies that could target specific behaviors of disengagement.” Although the content of LEAP did not focus on behavior management, Coach Snell brainstormed with Ms. Santiago about instructional strategies that helped with student engagement, and subsequently behavior management. Coach Snell tailored Ms. Santiago’s coaching sessions, a practice endorsed by the school’s leadership: “We’re allowed to...use a lot of flexibility and a lot of autonomy in what we think our teachers need.”

Ms. Santiago enjoyed the structure of LEAP. In year two, when asked about which aspects of LEAP she appreciated, she mentioned enjoying collaboration with teachers during seminars and to having planning time within her working day. Ms. Santiago’s positive perception of LEAP could explain her positive perceptions towards the coaching she received.

Ms. Wrigley. Similarly, Coach Snell’s and Ms. Wrigley’s positive perceptions of each other persisted over time. In the first-year interview, Coach Snell described Ms. Wrigley as “very receptive to feedback and [had] a really strong practice.” Likewise, Ms. Wrigley positively perceived Coach Snell’s instructional practice: “[I]t’s nice to have the opportunity to talk to someone who...is definitely playing at a high level. I love that [Coach Snell is] still in the classroom...I think of [Coach Snell] more like a colleague and less as my boss.” Since Coach Snell also continued to teach, this made Ms. Wrigley feel more comfortable. In year two, Ms. Wrigley continued to emphasize her collegial relationship with Coach Snell: “[Coach Snell and] I have just become much more comfortable with each other...[and] become great working friends.”

Teaching Background. In year one, Ms. Wrigley emphasized how Coach Snell helped her adjust to DCPS: “[Coach Snell] knows DCPS so much better, so it’s been really helpful to bounce ideas off of her.” Despite having the same amount of teaching experience, Ms. Wrigley needed to learn the district culture. Coach Snell helped her transition to this school, hence, why she appreciated regular conversations with Coach Snell.

School Context. Ms. Wrigley discussed how Coach Snell’s flexibility in observations supported her. Ms. Wrigley found observations challenging, because their intended focus did not always “coincide with what was happening in our classrooms.” Yet, Coach Snell was “amazing” and told Ms. Wrigley to “do what you need to do because this is creating more stress.” Coach Snell could provide flexibility around observations, because she had the support of the school leadership, who encouraged the coaches to differentiate for each teacher’s needs.

Similar to Ms. Santiago, Ms. Wrigley highlighted the value of LEAP, particularly the teacher collaboration time. Ms. Wrigley explained, “[A]ll of us have sort of shifted grade levels this year, and so it was incredibly helpful to have experts in the room who could address what they had done with their students.” However, she mentioned how LEAP content did not always align with the school’s schedule, since the school operated on an extended school year timeline. Yet Ms. Wrigley attributed this problem to the district. It did not affect her perceptions of her coach, whom she found to be helpful in navigating LEAP’s requirements.

5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Coaching has variable effects on teachers’ instruction (Kraft et al., 2018), since its effectiveness is dependent on how coaches differentiate for teachers (Desimone & Pak, 2017; Knight, 2007; Liao et al., 2021; Showers et al., 1987). To date, no systematic studies have been published that have analyzed the degree to which a single coach differentiates for different teachers (Stover et al., 2011). Thus, I used case study analysis in the current research to explore the coaching dynamics between two coaches and the two teachers they each coached. From this knowledge, I was able to uncover factors contributing to the differential impact of coaching and as such recommend coaching supports for districts.

I first examined the extent to which coaches differentiate content and process for teachers. Coach Snell differentiated content for teachers’ needs, whilst Coach Thomas more closely adhered to LEAP’s content focus. Coach Snell’s teachers highlighted the value of Coach Snell’s differentiation for their needs, such as addressing Ms. Santiago’s desire for advice on behavior management, which contributed to her positive perception of Coach Snell.

In terms of differences in the coaching process, Coach Snell encouraged teachers to reflect on their instruction in order to help generate next steps, whereas Coach Thomas opted to provide concrete next steps. Though Coach Thomas’ advice was seen to be tailored based on the teacher’s debrief, Coach Snell’s approach allowed for more teacher autonomy. Stover et al. (2011) emphasized that involving teachers in setting their own goals helps them to become more invested in improving their instruction. Likewise, Zimmer and Matthews (2022) found teachers to be more invested in coaching when they can set their own learning pace. My findings in the current study not only reiterate the importance of teacher reflection during coaching sessions, but also suggest that when coaches involve teachers in their professional learning, the teachers have more positive perceptions of their coach and are therefore more receptive to their advice.

Both coaches enacted the same steps in the district-provided debrief structure for their teachers. For example, the coaches did not engage in role-playing with the teachers for the skill they wanted them to attempt or practice in the subsequent lesson (Step 4b), despite the teachers each having a different amount of teaching experience. While DCPS encourages coaches to tailor their debriefs, particularly in year two, it is unclear if coaches are prepared to differentiate for teachers' needs. Future research therefore needs to identify additional means of teacher differentiation, so that school districts can train their coaches on how to tailor their interactions with teachers.

The first set of findings also point to differences in coaching frequency across teachers, particularly in the second year of coaching, which can be said to present similar results to the study of Attleberry and Bryk (2011). Prior studies have found that more coaching sessions lead to improved teacher outcomes (Blazar & Kraft, 2015; Elish-Piper & L'Allier, 2011; Weber-Mayrer et al., 2018). However, there has been minimal research published that has analyzed the reasons behind these differences in coaching dosage. The current study highlighted that coach and teacher perceptions can help explain changes in coaching dosage over time.

While DCPS stated that coaching frequency could be differentiated for teachers, coaches determine dosage not by teachers' prior instructional experiences or their assessment of teachers' needs, but rather by their perception of individual teacher's receptiveness to coaching. The current study's findings confirmed how teachers are more receptive to coaches who have relevant content expertise (Huguet et al., 2014; Obara, 2010). Both Ms. Santiago and Ms. Wrigley lauded Coach Snell's instructional practice, which they were able to observe since the coach was still actively teaching, and were subsequently more receptive to their coaching as a result. In contrast, Coach Thomas had noticeably more administrative duties, which impacted on the time available to coach the teachers, and was viewed more as an evaluator than a peer. Being perceived as a supervisor or administrator created an imbalance of power in Coach Thomas' interactions with the teachers being coaches, which could lead to the working relationships being more tense than they ought (Hunt, 2016; Jones & Rainville, 2014). The current study therefore emphasizes that teachers are likely to be more receptive to coaches whose main responsibility is being supportive rather than evaluative (Vanderburg & Stephens, 2010). Thus, districts and schools may consider positioning coaches more as peers if they perceive the goal of coaching to be one where coaches actively help teachers to improve their instruction. Administrators may also consider how to match coaches' prior work experience to the target teachers' subject area. If resources are sparse, districts may opt to provide coaching for less qualified teachers, such as those with less teaching experience or lower evaluation scores.

The current study underscored how district initiatives contribute to teachers' perceptions of coaches. Ms. Little expressed her dissatisfaction with the lack of differentiation in LEAP and experienced tense interactions with her coach. In contrast, the other participant teachers praised the format of LEAP and perceived their coaches positively. It is unclear, however, whether the teachers' perceptions of LEAP led to their perceptions of the coach, or vice versa. Nevertheless, these results point to how district mandates can impact upon coaching relationships. Future research could therefore examine how best to support coaches in navigating district policy while maintaining positive interactions with teachers (Coburn & Woulfin, 2012).

Finally, I was able to observe the extent to which coaches' and teachers' perceptions of each other changed over the study's 2-year period. Since many school districts assign coaches to work with the same teachers over multiple years (Biancarosa et al., 2010; Campbell & Malkus, 2011), we first need to understand whether or not the dynamics can shift over time. The current study suggests that coaches' and teachers' coaching perceptions remain relatively constant over time. Positive coaching perceptions tend to stay positive. Negative perceptions were not found to improve and may be associated with decreases in the number of individual coaching sessions. Future research could therefore explore how to help coaches identify teachers' needs in order to tailor their interactions for more positive dynamics.

All in all, the current study pinpoints a need to focus more attention on the one-on-one interactions between coaches and teachers in order to help support coaches' effectiveness with each teacher they are assigned to coach. Differentiation for individual needs is not only appropriate for students, but also for teachers. Coaches also need to be appropriately equipped to assess and tailor their coaching to the differing needs of various teachers. Further, they need to understand how to establish, build, and maintain a positive working relationship with teachers, as strong relationships in coaching can lead to teachers being more receptive to feedback. As the field continues to identify coaching practices correlated with teachers' instructional improvement, we also need to remember to examine the contexts in which these practices work best for teachers depending on their coaching dynamics and individual characteristics.

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