COACHING IN THE CREVICES: THE EXPERIENCES OF INSTRUCTIONAL COACHES SUPPORTING TEACHERS DURING COVID-19

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Abstract

In March of 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic swept K-12 public schools across the United States and placed much of the world abruptly into a period of prolonged crisis. As schools switched to remote learning and then later returned on-site amid rigid safety protocols, teachers everywhere needed to learn new skills and adapt their practices immediately in response. Instructional coaches, as providers of job-embedded professional development for teachers, offered a distinctive and important perspective on the impact of the COVID-19 crisis in schools.

Employing a hermeneutic phenomenological approach and Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems model integrated with van Manen's (1997) lifeworld reflections, the purpose of this qualitative study was to describe and interpret the experiences of instructional coaches as they worked supporting teachers in K-12 public schools in the Vermont throughout the first year of the COVID-19 crisis. The aim was to identify essential themes to determine what if any, commonalities across participants and unique perspectives could be documented and interpreted. Contextual factors that hindered and supported the work of coaches in their work facilitating coaching cycles with teachers during a time of unique and unprecedented crisis in schools were explored. Interviews with nine instructional coaches were analyzed to develop a composite narrative of what it meant to be a coach working in schools during this time of crisis. Additionally, a counternarrative was developed.

The results of this study revealed the mutable nature of the role of instructional coaches in schools. Additional responsibilities and diminished teacher interest drew coaches away from their deep coaching work, like facilitating coaching cycles. Yet, if they had a clear understanding of their role as instructional coach, they were able to do some in depth coaching under the most trying of circumstances – like plants finding purchase to grow in cracks among rocks. Recommendations are made for school, district, and state leaders looking to strengthen their coaching programs.

Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my father, John Clark Dorsey. He inspired me to be an educator and provided me with a constant example of the dogged determination that was needed to undertake and finish important work. He passed away in the final months of my work on this dissertation and is always with me.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Over the last two decades, federal education initiatives in the United States such as No Child Left Behind (NCLB), Race to the Top (RTTT), adoption of Common Core State Standards (CCSS) and Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) have put pressure on schools to improve instructional practices to meet the evolving needs of the students they serve (Galey, 2016). In response, school leaders across the country look to professional development (PD) for in-service teachers as the panacea spending more than $18 billion on professional learning initiatives each year (Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, 2014). Widespread agreement exists among researchers (Archibald et al., 2011; Darling-Hammond et al., 2017; Labone, & Long, 2016; Loucks-Horsley et al., 2010) on what constitutes highly quality PD to support and improve instruction, but even so, providing high quality PD opportunities remains a challenge when putting theory into practice in schools (Guskey, 2003; Loucks-Horsley et al., 2010).

In March of 2020, schools across the United States closed abruptly and moved instruction entirely online in response to the COVID-19 global pandemic. The change of modality turned the world of education sideways, forcing teachers to make substantial changes to teaching and learning practices immediately without adequate training or warning (Hough, 2020). This change represented a drastic departure from typical circumstances and created a professional learning crisis in schools. In their attempt to

create meaningful instructional opportunities for their students across the digital divide, teachers scrambled to learn new strategies and technologies (Herold, 2020).

For many teachers, the complexity of their situation intensified when they returned to school in fall of 2020. Although many schools remained fully online (Education Week Staff, 2020), schools in states like Vermont with low transmission rates were able to return to some form of in-person learning, but it was with significant constraints and many new safety protocols (CDC, 2020). Often schools adopted a "hybrid" schedule – where some students were in person while others attended online. This arrangement represented a completely novel situation for teachers, and they needed to adapt their instructional design to accommodate both online and in-person students (Spencer, 2020). Compounding the problem, many students were returning to school with heightened social emotional needs and regressed academic skills (Kuhfield & Tarasawa, 2020; Phelps & Sperry, 2020; Shafer, 2020). Teachers needed professional development more than ever to meet these unique challenges, and there were plenty of online workshops that became available (Impey, 2020). However, schools faced a diminished supply of substitute teachers that took away the opportunity for release time to access training (Reilly, 2021). This meant that for teachers returning to classrooms during the COVID-19 pandemic, professional learning became increasingly critical just as release time for professional development became increasingly scarce.

Job-embedded professional development refers to PD that is grounded in a teacher's day-to-day practice during the school day that is designed to improve their content-specific instructional practices with the aim of improving student learning (Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 1995; Hirsh, 2009). For the past two decades, the U.S. Department of Education has encouraged the implementation of job-embedded PD strategies in underperforming schools (Croft et al., 2010). Instructional coaching is a job-embedded PD strategy that connects classroom teachers with professional learning that is individualized and sustained over a period of weeks or months (Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 1995; Hirsh, 2009; Killion et al., 2012). Typically, an instructional coach is a certified and licensed educator with years of teaching experience who has demonstrated mastery of research-based instructional practices and evidence of leadership potential (Resilient Educator, 2022). Although instructional coaches may have many roles in schools (Deussen et al., 2007; Killion & Harrison, 2006; Woulfin, 2020), their primary purpose is to facilitate adult learning on the job through *coaching cycles*, where they work collaboratively with teachers to meet specific instructional improvement goals in a reflective, inquiry-based process (Knight et al., 2015).

Research literature suggests that effective instructional coaching positively influences instructional practices (Gawande, 2011; Knight, 2011, 2009, 2007; Showers & Joyce, 1996) and improves student outcomes (Kraft et al., 2018). Further, federal grant managers recommend initiatives that involve instructional coaching as a suggested use

for school improvement grant funds (Denton & Hasbrouck, 2009; U.S. Department of Education, 2016). As a result, the popularity of instructional coaching has increased significantly with staffing rates of coaches having more than doubled between 2000 and 2010 (Domina et al., 2015). In March of 2020, there were nearly 200,000 individuals employed as instructional coaches in the United States (NCES, 2022) distributed among approximately 13,000 public school districts (Research.com, 2021).

Poised as facilitators of adult learning within schools, instructional coaches may seem like an obvious solution to the problem of how to make PD accessible for teachers during a crisis. Yet, even before the COVID-19 pandemic, many teachers reported difficulty accessing coaching as a resource because coaches are often spread too thin and focused only on new and struggling teachers (Killion et al., 2012). Moreover, teachers who accessed coaching were often unsatisfied with the experience – citing coaches' lack of content expertise, weak relationships with the coach, unbalanced power dynamics between the coach and teacher, and a negative stigma associated with teachers who work with coaches (Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, 2014). Additionally, the coaching role in schools often lacks definition and clarity pulling coaches in too many directions at once to be effective (Deussen et al., 2007; Killion et al., 2012; Woulfin, 2020). This all suggests that simply injecting coaching resources into a school system, with the hope that improved teacher efficacy will follow, may not be enough, even under optimal circumstances.

As the pandemic continues to evolve, but not necessarily abate, new challenges emerge, and the crisis has become part of the new landscape in schools. Meanwhile, the need for professional development for teachers grows as the previously noted access problems persist. Instructional coaching has potential to improve the accessibility of high-quality PD for teachers, if we consider what supports and hinders the essential work of coaches during times of crisis.

Purpose

Using a hermeneutic phenomenological research design, the purpose of this dissertation study was to illuminate the experiences of instructional coaches during a time of prolonged crisis. By interviewing instructional coaches who were working in schools between March of 2020 and March of 2021, I describe the phenomenon that coaches' experienced working to support teachers in schools during the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic. Through examination of their lived experiences of this phenomenon, I sought to understand what hindered and supported instructional coaches in their work facilitating coaching cycles with teachers. The interview data was analyzed reflexively using techniques based on van Manen's (1997) hermeneutic phenomenological approach. Findings were identified and described, implications for practice were discussed, and future areas of research were considered.

Research Questions

The research questions addressed through this study, were the following:

1. What were the lived experiences of instructional coaches supporting teachers in public school systems during the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic?
2. What supported and hindered coaches in their work facilitating coaching cycles with teachers during a time of prolonged crisis?

Research Approach

For this dissertation research study, I applied a pragmatic constructivist approach. This approach is inherent in phenomenological studies and is inductive in nature where the researcher seeks to interpret the constructed reality of participants with understanding that their own interpretation is affected by their own experiences and background (Creswell, 2012). In keeping with this approach, I focused as much as possible on the participants' views of the situation to observe patterns and develop theory adapting the research design as needed to meet the research needs and purposes (Creswell, 2012).

Significance

Investigating the experiences of instructional coaches supporting teachers throughout the COVID-19 pandemic provided valuable insight into the coaching role in schools. In particular, it helped to identify factors that influence the work of instructional coaches in a time of crisis, but also generally. Findings from this study could inform district leadership and state departments of education working to develop and support instructional coaches and coaching programs. Findings may also help coaches as they reflect on their practice. Finally, insight into how to improve access to coaching may help

to improve instructional practices and learning environments for students during times of remote or blended instruction as well as in person instruction.

Researcher Identity

In research, it is necessary to examine one's goals, experiences, assumptions, feelings, and values as they relate to research interests (Lumsden, 2013). My identity and relationship to the phenomenon under study were central to my research and choice of method. Addressing researcher identity provides some necessary framing that I reference throughout this dissertation. I grew up in a white, middle-class home with parents who began their careers as teachers in the mid to late 1960s before moving on to other vocations in the early 1980's. After spending several years as an actuarial programmer, I was inspired to become an educator by my parents and my own lukewarm experiences as a student in public schools. I have spent the past two decades as an educator myself: first, as a middle and secondary math teacher and, most recently, as an instructional coach supporting teachers. For the past eight years, I have worked as a district-level instructional coach in six schools within one district. Through my work, I have had extensive training with Knight (2018) and Campbell and van Nieuwerburgh (2018). I also consult with districts developing coaching models and teach graduate-level courses on the topic.

Throughout the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic, I worked as an instructional coach in public schools and shared many of the same experiences that my

participants described. I am an insider in the field, intimately familiar with the jargon, shifts and pressures involved in instructional coaching during this time. I also experienced significant difficulties in my personal life – as a mother, partner, daughter, and friend – that were caused or exacerbated by the pandemic. My own experiences give me insight into the challenges and influences that instructional coaches faced. However, these personal experiences also leave me prone to certain biases and prejudices that I needed to mitigate using strategies like bridling, reflective journaling, member checking, and passive activity (further explained in Chapter 3).

I was drawn to this research topic because of my strong belief in the potential of instructional coaching as a lever for school improvement and my frustration that it often falls short of that potential when theory meets practice in schools. My passion for facilitating adult learning, creating safe spaces where teachers can learn without being judged, drew me to the work of coaching. My passion for improving school environments and student experiences – and not just instructional practices and student outcomes – drew me to coaching as a research topic.

Summary

This introductory chapter provided an outline of this dissertation research study, addressing the purpose, research questions, and significance. In Chapter 2, I provide a review of the current literature that relates to this research study. In Chapter 3, I describe the research methods used in this study including the data collection procedures and steps

of data analysis. In Chapter 4, I provide a description of the context and participants. In Chapter 5, I present findings that address the research questions. Finally, in Chapter 6, I discuss the themes from the research findings and suggest implications for future research.

Chapter 2: Review of Literature

In this chapter, I provide a review of literature that was used to guide to this study of the lived experiences of instructional coaches working in Vermont public schools throughout the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic. The purpose of a literature review is to present why the proposed study is needed against a backdrop of what is known and not known about a particular topic (Peoples, 2020). However, in a phenomenological study, there is a danger in reading too much literature about the topic under investigation ahead of time because it tends to compromise the openness of the researcher to the phenomenon as it reveals itself in the lived experiences of participants (Vagle, 2018). For this reason, I began with a partial literature review focusing on providing a "big picture" perspective of the major issues related to coaching in schools. I used this review to develop the conceptual framework for this study that informed my research questions and interview protocols without setting up an a priori explanation for what the phenomenon should be. During the final phase of data analysis, I expanded my review of the literature to provide more perspective on the essential themes and sub-themes, which informed my discussion in Chapter 6.

Knight and Cornett (2012) endeavored to summarize the research on instructional coaching in schools and noted that they faced two major challenges. One was the relative scarcity of rigorous research on instructional coaching in schools. Most studies were small in scale, using measures that were not tested in terms of reliability or validity and

methods that were not generalizable. The other challenge was the abundance (and variability) of definitions for the term *coach* in the existing research on schools. More recently, researchers in the field have noted that "despite widespread optimism about coaching and its potential to improve teaching and learning, the immense variability across coaching positions and the heterogeneity of state, district, and local school contexts pose conceptual and methodological challenges for researchers analyzing coaching and its effects" (Hannan & Russell, 2020, p. 2). Regardless of the challenges that persist at the time of this writing, existing research on instructional coaching provided a necessary context for this study.

This chapter begins with an overview of the origins of coaching as a form of PD and the theories from which it sprung. Next, I provide a description of how coaching has been applied in school settings outlining various instructional coaching models, approaches, systems, and skill sets that are unique to the work that coaches do in schools. I go on to summarize research relating to instructional coaching during the COVID-19 pandemic specifically. Next, I include a description of the theoretical foundation for the research methodology employed – describing Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory and van Manen's (1997) lifeworld reflections. Finally, I present a conceptual framework for this study that was informed by the existing research.

Coaching Foundations

In the most general sense, coaching is as a process for expanding the capacities of employees (Brown et al., 2005). Like most research-based forms of professional development, coaching is rooted in adult learning theory, which asserts that adult learners are self-directed, engaged by the relevance of what they are learning, and intrinsically motivated by a desire for results (Knowles, 2012; Mezirow, 1997; Vella, 2008). Coaching is perhaps most closely aligned with Mezirow's (1994) transformative learning theory. This theory suggested that adult learners should be guided in a process of interpreting experiences through critical reflection and rational discourse, which eventually changes their meaning-making structures and guides future actions. Based on interviews with women returning to college, Mezirow (1997) proposed ten phases that would lead to transformational adult learning. It is no coincidence that these ten phases are well aligned with the stages of instructional coaching cycles (described in the next section and outlined in Table 1).

Additionally, coaching is informed by Vygotsky's (1978) social development theory, which emphasized the fundamental role that collaboration – peer-to-peer learning that fosters deep thinking – plays in developing cognition. According to the theory, there is also the need to attend to each learner's zone of proximal development (ZPD), the sweet spot for learning that varies by the individual and suggests the need for individualized approaches. Indeed, collaboration is at the very heart of coaching (Knight, 2007) and can be defined as "a style for direct interaction between at least two parties

voluntarily engaged in shared decision making as they work towards a common goal" (Friend & Cook, 2017, p.5).

Coaching, as a form of professional development, first gained traction in the business world with performance and executive coaching in organizations. Therefore, much of the significant, early contributions to research on coaching as professional development have to do with coaching in business settings (Knight, 2007). Generally, these research studies were published within the field of coaching psychology and came out of Australia and the United Kingdom (Grant, 2016). Coaching psychology researchers noted the need to distinguish coaching from mentoring and consulting since the overlap in those roles tended to confound practice and research (Passmore, 2018). Researchers differentiated coaching as being more formal, sustained, and longer termed than consulting, but shorter termed than mentoring. Coaching focuses on building needed skills through a reflective process (Van Nieuwerburgh, 2017). Generally, these researchers (Grant, 2016; Passmore, 2018; Van Niewerburgh, 2017) defined coaching in terms of a solution-focused cognitive-behavioral (SFCB) approach sometimes called a problem-solving approach. According to this definition, the coach's role "is not to guide, direct or instruct, but to 'facilitate' the client or *coachee* towards their own discoveries, insights, and goals" (Passmore, 2018, p. 2).

Coaching in U.S. Schools

Application of coaching as a form of professional development for educators in the United States was first researched in the 1980s using the term *peer coaching* (Showers & Joyce, 1980). Since then, the term "coaching" has been applied to a variety of types of job-embedded staff development for educators (Edwards, 2008; Galey, 2016; Killion et al., 2012; Knight, 2007; Showers & Joyce, 1996). Beginning in the early 2000s, coaching was promoted through federal programs such as the Every Student Succeeds Act as a vehicle for school reform (U.S Department of Education, 2016). As a result, coaching became widespread before there was any consensus on a common definition of what it entailed (Denton & Hasbrouck, 2009; Woulfin, 2020). As coaching has proliferated across the field of education, its policies and practices have remained nebulous (Woulfin, 2020). The current research suggests that coaching can be effective in both influencing teacher practice and improving outcomes for students (Biancarosa et al., 2010; Kraft et al., 2018; Marsh et al., 2008). A recent large-scale meta-analysis analyzing 60 studies that measured the impact of elementary literacy coaching programs (Kraft et al., 2018) found that coaching had large positive effects on both instructional practice and student achievement. Yet, in this study, researchers also noted that the effects were substantially variable across programs and attributed this to inconsistencies in implementation that arose when coaching programs was scaled up (Kraft et al., 2018).

As the research base has grown around coaching in schools, most have agreed (Denton & Hasbrouck, 2009; Kurz et al., 2017) that coaching in schools is a job-

embedded, individualized, data-driven, and sustained practice that focuses on instructional skills and goal-driven plans. In educational settings in the United States, coaching generally falls into one of two large categories: *instructional coaching* to facilitate individualized professional learning in the classroom or s*ystems coaching*, which is focused on developing leadership to ensure implementation fidelity of evidence-based programs and whole school reform efforts (Brown et al., 2005). However, in practice there has been some overlap between the two which can make the role of a coach feel undefined (Woulfin, 2020). Indeed, ambiguity over the role of coaches in schools continues to be prevalent since many coaches have a variety of other teaching and instructional leadership duties in addition to their coaching role (Deussen et al, 2007; Gallucci et al., 2010; Killion, 2009). This can hamper the impact of coaching on teacher efficacy (Galey, 2016; Neufeld & Roper, 2003) in part because teachers are more willing to work with a coach when the coach's role is clear and not confounded by other leadership positions (Matsumura et al., 2009). Killion (2008; 2009; 2010) has written extensively about coaching roles noting that coaches with clearly defined role expectations devoted more time to those roles. To clarify role expectations for coaches, she distinguished between *heavy* and *light coaching* to describe the work of coaches in schools (Killion, 2008).

Deep vs. Surface-level Coaching

Killion (2009) used the terms *heavy* and *light* to describe the depth of various types of coaching interactions with teachers. *Heavy coaching* is intensive work that involves sustained reflection and analysis of the impact of instructional practices on student engagement and learning through dialogue that addresses a teacher's beliefs and goals rather than simply knowledge and skills (Killion, 2009). In contrast, *light coaching* occurs when a coach prioritizes relationships and increasing their perceived value with teachers by providing resources and shying away from challenging conversations about goals and beliefs (Killion, 2009; 2010). Heavy coaching requires that coaches say 'no' to "trivial requests for support" to carve out time for "high-leverage services that have the greatest potential for improving teaching and learning" (Killion, 2009, p. 23).

Since Killion introduced this terminology, researchers in the field (Talwar et al., 2018; Wilder, 2014) have borrowed it to differentiate between various coaching practices in schools. To better align with instructional coaching specifically, Knight (2017) adapted Killion's idea and terminology using the labels *deep* and *surface coaching*. Where Killion used intentions and results to make the distinction between the two types of coaching, Knight defined them in terms of what coaching activities they involved. A coach who was engaged in *surface coaching* could be doing various coaching activities – such as: providing resources and supportive comments, modeling lessons, and conducting observations and providing feedback – without a process of goal setting and reflective inquiry. D*eep coaching* may involve the same activities. However, they would occur as

part of a coaching cycle. To discuss my findings in Chapter 5, I borrow Knight's (2017) *surface* and *deep* terminology.

Coaching Cycles

Coaching cycles are an example of deep coaching and have been included in various studies on instructional coaching in recent years (Hanno, 2022; Knight & Skrtic, 2021; Kurz et al., 2017; L'Allier & Brown, 2021; Woulfin, 2020). They are also a common feature in research-based instructional coaching models described in the next section (Garmston, 1993; Knight, 2018; Sweeney, 2017). Although the specifics can vary, a coaching cycle is a process of inquiry and reflection that is focused on a specific goal. As noted earlier in this chapter, the design for coaching cycles aligns well with the ten phases of Mezirow's (1997) transformational learning theory (see Table 1).

Table 1

Alignment of Coaching Cycles with Mezirow's Transformational Learning Theory

Mezirow's (1997) Learning Phases	Sweeney's (2017) Student-Centered Cycle	Cognitive Coaching Cycle (Garmston, 1993)	Knight's (2018) Impact Cycle
• Experience a disorienting dilemma • Self-examination • Critical self-assessment • Recognition of a desired goal • Exploration of options • Planning a course of action	Stage 1: • Establish a goal for student learning Stage 2: • Assess student progress	Preconference: • Determine goal • Identify evidence that will show when it is reached	Identify: • Collect data • Identifying a goal • Choose a teaching strategy
• Acquisition of knowledge • Provisional trying out skills	Stage 3: • Implement instruction making modifications when needed	Observation: • Gather evidence • Document strategies	Learn: • Use checklists • Model strategies
• Building competence and confidence • Reintegration	Stage 4: • Determine if students have met the targets and plan instruction for those who have not.	Post-conference • Look at evidence • Facilitate self-reflection	Improve: • Reflect and monitor progress towards goal • Make changes Meet the goal

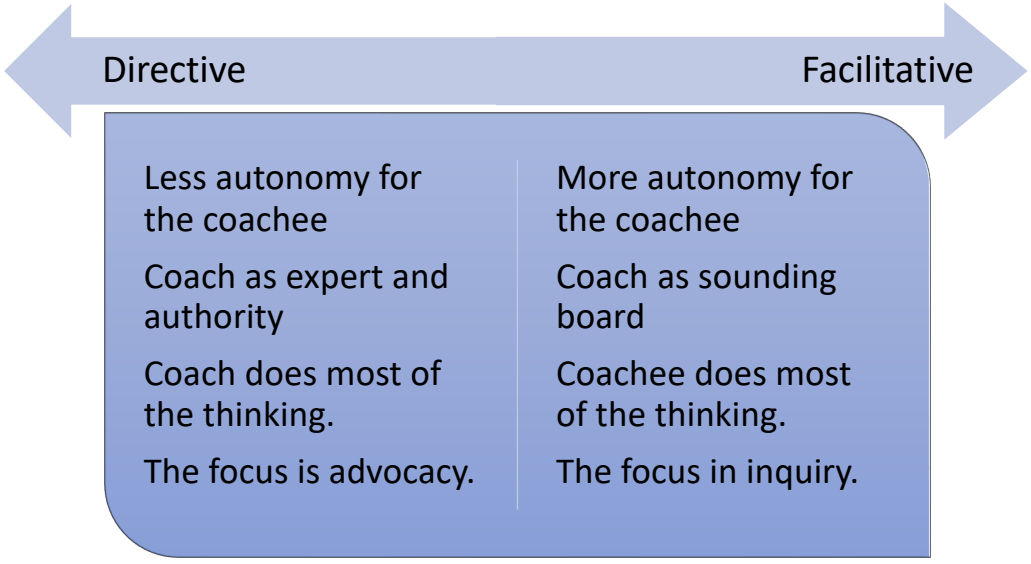
Coaching Approaches

Each instructional coaching model suggests a coaching approach that can be considered along a continuum from *directive* to *facilitative* depending on the amount of control ceded to the *coachee*, or person being coached (Brown et al., 2005; Knight,

2018). A coaching approach is discernible in the activities that the coach performs, the intent behind them, and how the coach and teacher relate to one another (Brown et al., 2005). Directive coaching more closely resembles consulting where the coach is seen as the expert or authority and works from the assumption that the teacher does not know what to do and needs direction. Facilitative coaching stems from the solution-focused cognitive-behavioral approach and involves acting as a sounding board and facilitating reflection. The underlying assumption is that the teacher already has the necessary skills but just needs to connect knowledge to practice through inquiry (see Figure 1).

Figure 1

Continuum of Coaching Approaches (Brown et al., 2005; Knight, 2018)



Instructional Coaching Models

Information from prior sections on coaching cycles and approaches provides background information that is necessary to understand the similarities and differences between the various coaching models that exist in educational settings. The four most prevalent coaching models in existing literature that relate to instructional coaching in classrooms are: (a) peer coaching, (b) cognitive coaching, (c) content-specific coaching, and (d) instructional coaching. Additionally, there are two other models that are not represented in scholarly literature but are common in practice and were explicitly mentioned by participants in this dissertation study: transformational coaching and student-centered coaching. I summarize each of these models in the following subsections in the order in which they emerged.

Peer coaching. *Peer coaching* was the prominent model in schools throughout the 1980's, 1990's, and early 2000's. This type of coaching leaned towards the facilitative approach and was defined as pairs of teachers collaborating on curriculum and instruction, observing one another, and reflecting in pursuit of shared goals (Gallucci et al., 2010; Showers & Joyce, 1980; 1996). The approach identified four functions of the coaching process, including providing companionship, providing feedback, reflecting on practical application, and adapting instruction for students (Showers & Joyce, 1996).

Peer coaching gained popularity in connection with *Professional Learning Communities* (PLCs). The model for PLCs was developed and popularized by Dufour

(2004) who defined them as groups of educators that met regularly to share their expertise and work collaboratively to improve instruction and the academic performance of students. Collaborative inquiry was the goal of PLC work through focus on four critical questions: (1) What do we want all students to know and be able to do? (2) How will we know if they learn it? (3) How will we respond when some students do not learn? (4) How will we extend the learning for students who are already proficient? (Dufour & Eaker, 2006). Using this process, teams of teachers can unpack instructional practices and reflect upon their impact on students to refine them.

Cognitive coaching. *Cognitive coaching* is a research-based coaching model that was developed by Costa and Garmston (1993). The model adopted a facilitative approach, which aligns with the field of coaching psychology and is based on cognitive processing theory. It was derived from the peer coaching model and is also rooted in the teacher supervision and evaluation theories promoted by Cogan (1973) and Goldhammer (1969). The main difference between cognitive coaching and evaluation is that the purpose of the cognitive coaching cycle is to help teachers improve instructional effectiveness by becoming more reflective about their teaching. The intent is to explore the thinking behind a teacher's practice.

The model involves a three-phase cycle (pre-conference, observation, and post-conference) that resembles teacher evaluation through clinical supervision. The purpose of the pre-conference is to decide on a goal and decide on evidence that would show that

the goal has been reached. During the observation, the coach collects evidence and documents teaching strategies used. The post-conference discussion involves facilitating teacher reflection on both the evidence and strategies used. The ultimate goal of cognitive coaching is to foster teacher autonomy which was defined as the ability to self-monitor, self-analyze, and self-evaluate (Costa & Garmston, 1993). There has been peer reviewed research that suggests that cognitive coaching programs have a significant impact on a teacher's sense of efficacy and their professional identity (Goker, 2020).

Content-specific coaching. *Content-specific coaching* emphasizes improving instruction and student outcomes in a particular content area by increasing teacher knowledge through work with a content specialist (Denton & Hasbrouck, 2009; Gibbons & Cobb, 2016). This type of coaching role has been somewhat ambiguously defined and can be combined with other coaching models as there is no set structure nor practices involved in the work of this type of coaching (Dole, 2004). However, certain coaching activities have been suggested for content-focused coaches to enact with teachers in their classrooms: (a) co-teaching, (b) modeling, and (c) debriefing the challenges of implementation (Gibbons & Cobb, 2016). Content-focused coaches are expert partners with accomplished instructional practices who support teachers' development of instructional practices in a particular discipline. Most often content-focused coaching has been applied to improve literacy or mathematics instruction. In 2016, data from the National Teacher and Principal Survey indicated that among public schools in the U.S.,

41.3% of them employed literacy coaches, 27.6% employed mathematics coaches, and 36.9% employed coaches who were not content specific (U.S. Department of Education National Center for Education Statistics, 2017).

Instructional coaching. *Instructional coaching* is a model that was developed by the Kansas Coaching Project at the University of Kansas Center for Research and Learning. Developed upon review of coaching literature from more than 200 publications, the model was later refined in a series of studies conducted over more than a decade (Cornett & Knight, 2009; Knight, 2018). This model recommends an approach that is *dialogical* where the coach balances between a facilitative and directive approach by balancing inquiry with some advocacy (Knight, 2018). According to Knight's framework, instructional coaching is defined as ongoing, embedded, non-evaluative, voluntary professional learning that involves working with educators to implement research-based practices and encourage reflective practice (Knight, 2007). Instructional coaches partner with teachers using a structured three-stage coaching cycle called an *impact cycle* that draws from the cognitive coaching cycle. An impact cycle involves: (1) Stage 1: Identify – the teacher sets a goal for students that is informed by data that shows the current reality; (2) Stage 2: Learn – the coach and teacher identify a strategy to meet goals and the coach supports the teacher in learning the strategy; and (3) Stage 3: Improve – the coach and teacher continue to collect data and reflect on and refine practice until the goal is met (Knight, 2018). Throughout this cycle and in every

interaction with teachers, coaches apply a *partnership philosophy* by adhering to the seven partnership principles that uphold the teacher's status and acknowledge their autonomy while maintaining confidentiality.

Transformational coaching. *Transformational coaching* is an approach that was developed by Aguilar (2013) derived from her experiences coaching in diverse schools in California. She noted that her own coaching which was centered on improving instructional practices did not seem to be producing a lasting effect. The model she developed leans towards the facilitative approach and is described as "holistic" with an emphasis on observations and facilitation of conversations that surface and deconstruct beliefs and dispositions that get in the way of lasting changes to instructional practices (Aguilar, 2013). Aguilar defined coaching as a "form of professional development with a person who willingly engages in reflection and learning" (Aguilar, 2019, p. 2).

Student-centered coaching. Similar to Aguilar, Sweeney (2017) was inspired by frustrations within her own coaching practice to develop the student-centered coaching approach. Unclear on the impact her work was having on students, she developed a framework that focused on achievement outcomes for students. Sweeney cited Knight's (2007) partnership principles as foundational to guide interactions between coaches and teachers as they work together in voluntary coaching cycles that last six weeks and involve four stages: Stage 1 – Teacher and coach set a goal for student learning; Stage 2 – Teacher and coach use data to determine where students are in relation to the goal; Stage

3 – Teacher and coach co-plan and teach to implement instruction; and Stage 4 – Teacher and coach look at data to determine if students have met the goal and plan instruction for those who have not (Sweeney & Harris, 2017).

Instructional Coaching Skills

As I was conducting interviews, there were instances in which participants identified themselves as having or lacking skills in various aspects of research-based coaching models as a part of their story. For example, one participant expressed her discomfort with facilitating coaching cycles and preferred surface coaching because she felt she lacked the skills. Since it seemed important to their stories, I briefly reviewed the literature on the skills that are needed to be effective as a coach in this section.

Despite the numerous peer reviewed articles suggesting the effectiveness of coaching as a policy lever in schools to increase teacher efficacy and student outcomes (Gawande, 2011; Knight, 2011, 2009, 2007; Kraft et al., 2018; Showers & Joyce, 1996), peer reviewed research regarding the characteristics of effective instructional coaches is still early in its development (Knight & Cornett, 2012). There are qualitative articles that include discussions that highlight the importance of instructional coaching skills in three key areas: using interpersonal skills to develop relationships (Anderson, Feldman, & Minstrell, 2014), effective communication skills (Walkowiak, 2016; White et al., 2015), and strong content-specific expertise and pedagogical knowledge (Garet, 2016; White et al., 2015). There are also dissertations and white papers proposing standards for content-

based coaches that have not been through peer review (McCrary, 2011; Yopp et al., 2010).

Experts in the field (e.g., Aguilar, 2019; Campbell & van Nieuwerburgh, 2018; Killion & Harrison, 2006) suggest the need for interpersonal communication skills; coaching process and management skills; and a disposition that promotes positive, productive relationships. For example, Killion and Harrison (2006) recommended six categories to assess coaches: beliefs, teaching expertise, coaching skills, relationship skills, content expertise, and leadership skills. Similarly, Campbell and van Nieuwerburgh (2018) identified eight key coaching skills: building trust, being present, listening actively, clarifying, empathizing, being succinct, asking the best questions, and giving feedback. Furthermore, they propose that coaches must develop a "coaching way of being" (p. 31) which consists of emotional intelligence skills like humility, self- and other awareness, and respectful curiosity. Knight (2016) noted that effective coaches need to "understand how to navigate the complexities of helping adults, have a deep understanding of a comprehensive, focused set of teaching practices, communicate effectively, lead effectively, and work in systems that foster meaningful professional learning" (p. 18). On the other hand, Aguilar (2019) asserted that social-emotional skills are the most important for a coach to have because recognizing and managing one's own emotions and the emotions of others is crucial for relationship building.

In contrast, the field of coaching psychology has made significant progress in articulating effective coaching skills and developing scales to measure them. Grant and Cavanaugh (2007) developed and tested the validity and reliability of a scale measuring goal-focused coaching skills in executive coaching settings and identified five key competencies. These are as follows: (a) goal setting skills, (b) development of a strong working alliance (with the coachee), (c) Solution-focus while helping the coachee to generate insights, (d) Management of the process and accountability, and (e) measurement of the outcomes of coaching – such as goal attainment and coachee satisfaction.

Systems of Support for Coaching

It is important to recognize that instructional coaching occurs within a system that impacts the work that coaches do with teachers (Aguilar, 2019; Hannan & Russell, 2020; Killion, 2012; Knight, 2021; Woulfin, 2014; 2020). Elements within their system influenced the experiences of the instructional coaches included in this study and impacted their coaching. There is scholarly literature based on both practice and research that provided necessary context and informed both the theoretical framework and conceptual model used in this dissertation study.

The term *coaching culture* migrated into the education sector after putting down roots in the business world following a similar trajectory to coaching generally. Clutterbuck and Megginson (2005) wrote a seminal book about coaching culture, what it

is, why it is important, and how to achieve it within an organization. They defined it as a culture where "coaching is the predominant style of managing and working together and where a commitment to grow the organization is embedded in a parallel commitment to grow the people in the organization" (Clutterbuck & Megginson, 2005, p. 19). A coaching culture is one where the work of coaches is supported and ubiquitous. To achieve it, they presented a model with six areas of focus that they derived from analysis of case studies. These areas included: (a) linking coaching to business drivers; (b) encouraging and supporting being a coachee; (c) providing coach training; (d) rewarding and recognizing coaching; (e) having a systemic perspective; and (f) managing the move to coaching.

Coaching experts in the field (Aguilar, 2019; Killion, 2012; Knight, 2021) have written about the need to create and attend to systems of support for coaching to create and sustain coaching culture in educational settings. Killion et al. (2012) noted that "despite efforts to support teachers with coaching, which began a culture shift in some schools, most teachers still do not get the support they need in their own classrooms" (p. 3). They proposed six pillars that must be built or strengthened to "realize the promise of coaching for all teachers and ultimately, their students" (p. 7). The six pillars included: (a) system vision and commitment; (b) recruitment and selectivity; (c) shared responsibility; (d) development and support; (e) role clarity time and culture; and (f)

compensation and sustainability. However, the framework is not specific to instructional coaching per se and is more focused on promoting teacher leadership generally.

Similarly, Aguilar (2019) noted that often coaching falls short of its potential because organizations lack certain structures that are needed to support coaching. Addressing instructional coaching specifically, she identified ten actions that could be used to develop a coaching program that would support development of a coaching culture. These included: (a) articulate a definition and vision; (b) consider the context; (c) choose a coaching model; (d) set program goals; (e) hire the right coaches; (f) build the coaching relationship; (g) understand how coaching works; (h) protect confidential communication; (i) evaluate your efforts; (j) establish PD for coaches. Anecdotally, this article was published in late 2019 and was referenced often in the instructional coaching groups with whom I interacted throughout early winter of 2020. The article was also mentioned by two participants of this study during interviews.

Most recently, in the last chapter of a book that was intended to be a definitive guide to instructional coaching, Knight (2021) highlighted nine issues that need to be addressed to create a system that will allow instructional coaches to succeed in their roles. These issues included: (a) understanding the stages of implementation; (b) hiring effective coaches; (c) establishing a district wide understanding of coaching; (d) ensuring theoretical alignment; (e) clarifying roles and time; (f) addressing confidentiality; (g) creating a learning culture; (h) building a learning architecture; and ensuring leadership

support. He asserted that "when coaches flourish, it is often because they work in settings where leaders are intentional and disciplined about providing the support necessary for coaching success" (p. 10). He believed that by addressing the nine issues, leaders could create a coaching culture.

Recent research in the field supports the assertion that contextual factors matter and that looking at which ones create systems of support for coaching is essential. Woulfin (2020) conducted a qualitative study of instructional coaching structures and enactment comparing charter management organizations with public-school districts. She was particularly interested in exploring organizational factors associated with the *institutionalization* of coaching as a practice, where it was a part of the culture to the extent that it was seen as both legitimate and taken for granted. She found that coaching varied across systems and identified organizational factors influencing its level of institutionalization. These included: organizational conditions – including structural factors and policy factors; clear definition of the coaching role; and documentation of coaching expectations and processes that was referenced by administrators, teachers, and coaches. Among other things, she recommended that district leaders focus on defining coaching and monitoring the extent to which it is perceived as appropriate and desirable by teachers. She noted that "if teachers are closing their doors to coaching, it is a signal that leaders need to reshape teachers' conceptions of coaching and dispositions toward instructional change (p. 27).

In a mixed methods study designed to investigate the systemic leadership practices of Digital Learning Coaches (DLCs), Hashim (2020) found that instructional coaching is dependent on the organizational context of schools and factors such as principal leadership, school structures for teacher collaboration, and school-reform readiness. Results showed that school coherence and instructional alignment are heavily dependent on "school context and the individual attributes of coaches" (p. 35).

In a case-focused mixed methods study, Hannan and Russell (2020) sought to "understand what contextual conditions facilitate and constrain coaching, and why" (p. 8). Specifically, they were interested in exploring how these conditions impact coaching rigor in rural, suburban, and urban settings. Confirming that supports and obstacles for coaches are context-specific, the researchers noted some differences between coaches in more and less populous areas. All coaches were supported in their work by opportunities for collaboration and access to professional development and hindered by "school-level distractions and time constraints" (p. 18). Urban and suburban coaches tended to be supported by district level coaching system structures and accountability combined with relative autonomy to negotiate school-level conditions that distracted them from coaching time. Rural and remote coaches tended to have less structure and support at the district-level and were less likely to be able to thwart school-level distractions. In conclusion, the researchers reemphasized the need to understand contextual factors for instructional coaches and recommended a "nested-systems perspective" in future research on

instructional coaching (p. 3). This is one of the reasons that I opted to use Bronfenbrenner's (1979) framework, which I describe later in this chapter, as a part of my theoretical framework.

Across the practical frameworks supplied by Killion et al. (2012), Aguilar (2019), and Knight (2021), there are areas of overlap, five of which are consistent with the recent research in the field. In Table 2, I present five components that represent a synthesis of the current research and practice literature on systems of support for coaching. I used this framework to add flesh to the various systems included in my conceptual model (detailed later in this chapter). I also used it as a lens for interpreting the meaning behind statements and stories made by the coaches in this study.

Table 2

Systems of Support for Instructional Coaching (Aguilar, 2019; Killion et al., 2012; Knight 2021)

Component	Indicators
System vision and commitment	There is a district wide definition of coaching and understanding of how it fits in with other forms of professional development. There is an articulated coaching model. Funds for coaching are sustainable within recurring resources.
Shared responsibility	Coaches and leaders feel responsible for the professional learning and improvement of the teachers they coach as well as the learning of students.
Development and support of coaches	The system provides coaches with professional development, feedback, and ongoing support. There is a system for evaluating coaches and coaching.

Role clarity, time, and culture	The roles of coaches are defined clearly; there is a deliberate enrollment process; coaches and the teachers they support are provided with adequate time during school hours to coach and be coached; and there is a culture that supports professional growth.
Leadership support for coaching	Leaders commit to providing access to coaching for all teachers, actively promote coaching and work with coaches to limit distractions from their coaching work.

Coaching During COVID-19

When I began this dissertation study and developed my research questions in October of 2020, there was almost no existing research that addressed instructional coaching during the COVID-19 pandemic. Since then, the research base has grown somewhat but remains scant. In this section, I summarize what research has been completed addressing instructional coaching during the COVID-19 pandemic as of this writing.

Much of the early literature on instructional coaching during COVID-19 came as briefs and recommendations for those in the field rather than research studies (Bouffard, 2020; Calais et al., 2020; Jackson & Keirstead, 2020; Kuhfield & Tarasawa, 2020). In late spring, as it became evident that students would finish the 2019-2020 school year remotely, Kuhfield and Tarasawa (2020) used a summer learning loss model to estimate the impact of school closures on elementary student learning. They predicted that students returning to school in fall of 2020 would end the year with 70% of their typical learning gain for literacy and 50% for mathematics. These predictions were then cited in

briefs that proposed instructional coaching practices that would support teacher development to address the learning loss (Calais et al., 2020; Jackson & Keirstead, 2020). Based on experience in the field as opposed to actual research, Calais et al. (2020) wrote a brief that provided recommendations for instructional coaches returning to school remotely or in a hybrid manner. Acknowledging that teachers needed additional support from instructional coaches in a virtual or hybrid learning environment, recommendations included a focus on understanding of evolving policies, instructional technology standards, and Knight's Impact Cycle to improve instructional practices. Jackson and Keirstead (2020) published a brief providing advice for state and district policymakers on how to use federal relief funds to support teacher development so that teachers would be equipped to "support continuity of learning for students" after disruptions in learning due to school closures (p. 1). They recommended that districts leverage instructional coaching and specifically highlighted the virtual coaching model MyTeachingPartner to support teachers. Other researchers (Wernick et al., 2021) explored using a combination of mixed reality simulations and virtual coaching to facilitate reflective conversations for pre-service and in-service teachers during the period that schools were closed in spring of 2020 with positive results.

Published in August, Ippolito et al. (2021) sought to summarize recent coaching research and practices and identify what questions remain. They also surveyed and conducted virtual focus groups with elementary literacy coaches across four states (FL,

MA, OH, and PA) during the pandemic. In justification of the timing of their review, the researchers explained that coaching was "fundamentally disrupted" by COVID-19, and therefore, coaching programs, roles, and routines must be reevaluated as schools strive to move beyond the pandemic (p. 179). They observed that "across the decades, in large-scale reviews of the professional development landscape, coaching has been consistently cited as one of the best forms of job-embedded professional learning" but noted that we still do not know under what conditions coaching is effective (p. 179). Key areas that were highlighted for discussion included the varied roles and responsibilities of coaches, the importance of coaching relationships, the change from in person to virtual coaching, and the need for clear pathways to licensure for coaches.

Prior to COVID-19, roles and responsibilities for coaches had already been varied and that variation increased significantly during the 2020-2021 school year as coaches described taking on new responsibilities regarding instructional technology; social and emotional needs of both teachers and students; equity and social justice coaching (Ippolito et al., 2021). The authors wondered whether these increased responsibilities "diluted the effectiveness" of coaching (p.182). Noting the focus on in-person relationships between teachers and coaches in the existing research base, they identified the impact of virtual collaboration on coaching relationships and the extent to which coach-principal relationships determine the "health and success of coaching programs" especially during the pandemic as areas that needed exploration (p. 181). Finally, they

appreciated that coaching standards were beginning to be developed that helped to differentiate between coaching and content specialist roles but stated that "clear pathways to licensing are more often missing" and suggested this as an area for future research (p. 183).

In fall of the 2021-2022 school year, Brown et al. (2021) presented their framework for ongoing virtual professional development for in-service teachers. They considered how professional development could be designed to "build and sustain equitable instructional practices through culturally responsive teaching while addressing inequities that exist in student technology use and access" (p. 7). They recommended four essential components: (a) virtual professional learning communities, (b) virtual personal coaching, (c) virtual classroom observation, and (d) virtual self-reflection.

Two years into the pandemic, Wells and Foster (2022) showcased the MyTeachingPartner virtual coaching model by interviewing four veteran coaches about their experiences using the strengths-based model with teachers during the COVID-19 pandemic. The researchers asserted that the model's flexibility and focus on relationships and positive reinforcement made it "especially relevant in the context of COVID-19" considering the toll the pandemic was taking on educators' morale and well-being (p. 36). Working with a coach, teachers watched video clips of themselves in their classrooms demonstrating effective teaching practices and engaged in reflective and dialogue with their coach virtually. The participants in Wells and Foster's study suggested that the

coaching model helped teachers through its structure, focus on student engagement, and strengths-based approach during a time of uncertainty" (p. 39). The authors observed that one of the key benefits of the model was the ability to be responsive to teachers' "varied and shifting needs" during the pandemic (p. 39).

Like many instructional coaches during the 2020-2021 school year, Skiffington (2022) found her role reassigned as she went from being a coach to becoming a virtual teacher. Reflecting on her own practice and experience, she offered suggestions for coaches. These included: taking a minimalist approach to coaching with clear goals and intentionality, embodying a coaching mindset and coaching culture by protecting time for coaching, and establishing an optimal learning environment by building collaborations schedules, routines and protocols. This study echoed some of the experiences and ideas that were expressed by participants in this research study.

Theoretical Framework

Since phenomenology is a philosophy as much as it is a methodology, that inherent philosophy becomes the theoretical framework for phenomenological research (Peoples, 2021). Chapter 3 includes a detailed description of phenomenological method generally and van Manen's (1997) hermeneutic, interpretive approach specifically. In this section, I present a brief overview of van Manen's (1997) lifeworld reflections. Together with Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory, this framework helped me to develop a lens to observe the lived experiences of instructional coaches during the first

year of the pandemic by allowing me to focus how they were experiencing the world and also how their experiences were influenced by their particular contexts. These ideas were key in developing my conceptual model.

Lifeworld Reflections

In broad terms, phenomenology is a theoretical point of view that promotes the study of individuals' experiences because human behavior is determined by the phenomena of experience rather than by objective, physically described reality that is external to the individual (Cohen et al., 2002; Sloan & Bowe, 2014). To help describe the world of lived experience, interpretive phenomenologist van Manen (1997) offered four lenses as guides for reflection in the research process: lived space (spatiality), lived body (corporeality), lived time (temporality), and lived human relation (relationality).

Lived body refers to our physical body or bodily presence in our everyday lives and includes all that we feel and experience through our body. In the context of instructional coaching in schools, this included feelings of fatigue and stress. *Lived time* is time as we experience it in our lives. This can influence the way we feel and likewise, our feelings can influence how we experience the passage of time. For example, some instructional coaches experienced time as moving more quickly or more slowly during the pandemic. *Lived space* can be understood as our experience of the spaces we find ourselves in. This included experiences like losing office space or working from home for the instructional coaches included in this study. Lastly, *lived human relations* refers to the

communications and relationships we experience with others through interactions. As an example, some instructional coaches found themselves working in close proximity to certain teachers while isolated from others as a result of protective measures due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The lifeworld reflections provide a guide for exploring the totality of an individual's lived experience by explicating meanings that are explicit in their actions rather than simply their conceptualizations (van Manen 1997). This means that the focus is on finding meaning in what people are doing. Rather than looking at these lenses as distinct, they are interconnected and interact within our lived experiences. For example, working remotely during the early months of the pandemic affected instructional coaches' lived space and human relations. These lenses allowed me to understand the lived experiences of instructional coaches working in schools and were used as codes in the first stage of data analysis. This theory has been applied in numerous phenomenological studies to investigate lived experiences in schools (Hyde, 2003; Rich et al., 2013; Van der Merwe & Habron; 2015) and among adult learners in the field of medical education (Gruendemann, 2011; Luong et al., 2022; Wilson, 2014).

Ecological Systems Theory

Ecological systems theory (later called the bioecological model) was developed by psychologist Urie Bronfenbrenner (1979) and describes human development and behavior as being shaped through interactions between an individual and their

environment. Bronfenbrenner identified five levels or systems that influence the individual: (a) microsystem – the most immediate, direct influences and most frequent contacts; (b) mesosystem – interconnections between microsystems; (c) exosystem – indirect influences; (d) macrosystem – cultural influences; and (e) chronosystem – environmental or historical influences.

These five systems provide a framework for considering how an individual changes or develops in conjunction with their context and how the systems within which an individual impacts development. In the context of this study, this was important because I wanted to consider what supported and hindered coaches in their work facilitating goal-centered reflective cycles with teachers. It is noteworthy that Bronfenbrenner's approach has been commonly used in research relating to teacher development (Admundsen et al., 2021; Gadella Kamstra, 2021; Price & McCallum, 2015), which supports its use in this study about the COVID-19 experiences of instructional coaches.

Conceptual Model

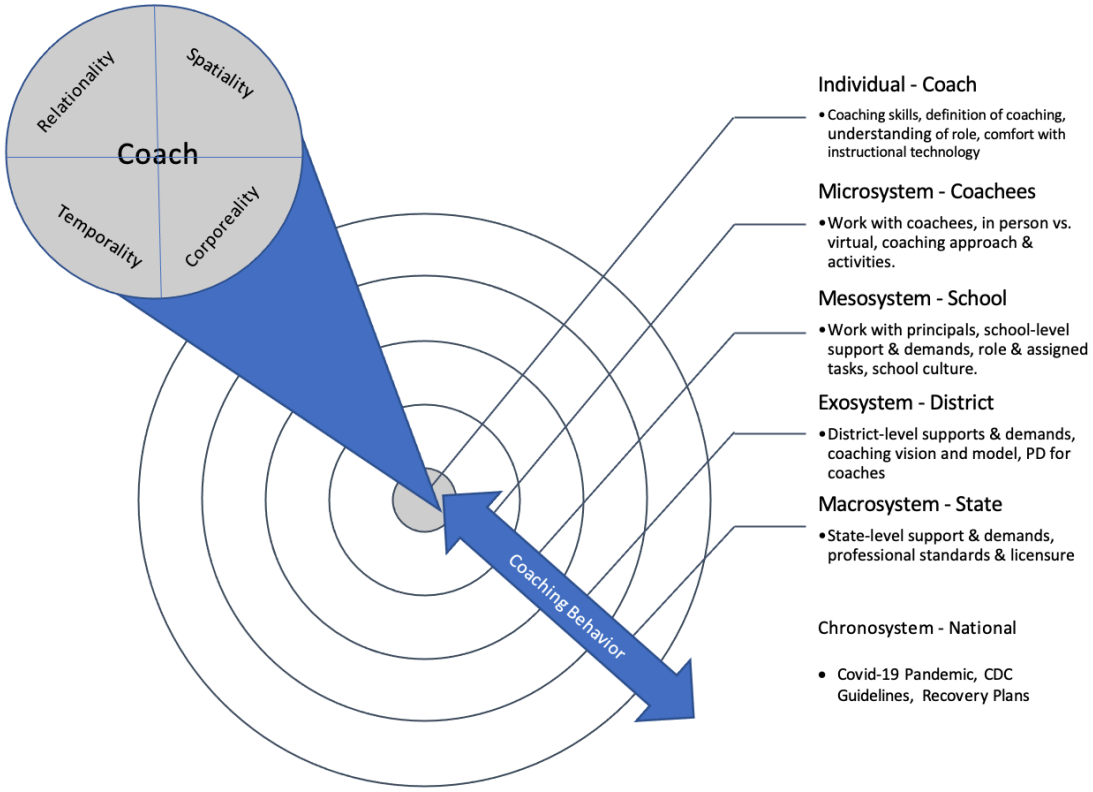
A conceptual model illustrates the main factors, concepts, and variables to be studied and the presumed relationships among them (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2013). Based on my review of the literature and theoretical orientation, Figure 2 depicts the conceptual model in which this study was situated. It represents an integration of van Manen's (1997) four lifeworld reflections with Bronfenbrenner's (1979) framework for

human development. Combining the two theories in my research allowed me to explore instructional coaches' lived experience as they interacted with the systems within which they existed. Elements from this literature review were used to describe and distinguish between the various systems within which the coaches existed. This model informed development of interview questions and preliminary data analysis (detailed in Chapter 3).

The concentric rings in Figure 2 represent Bronfenbrenner's five systems of influence with the individual instructional coach at the innermost gray circle. The circle in the upper right corner is a magnified view of the coach as an individual. The circle has been divided into quadrants representing van Manen's four lifeworld reflections, which were used to reflect upon the totality of the coach's experience within the various systems of influence. The two-sided arrow demonstrates reciprocity - that the systems were influencing the coach, and the coach was influencing the systems, too. My review of the literature helped to describe and clarify aspects of the five systems that relate to context of instructional coaching in schools.

Figure 2

Conceptual Model Integrating Lifeworld Reflections with Ecological Systems Theory



Summary

To explore the lived experiences of instructional coaches supporting teachers during the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic, I reviewed the literature in three key areas. These include: the origins and evolution of instructional coaching in schools; systems factors that impact the work that instructional coaches do; and instructional

coaching during the COVID-19 pandemic. I combined two theoretical frameworks – Bronfenbrenner's (1979, 2005) ecological systems theory and van Manen's (1997) lifeworld reflections – with the existing research on instructional coaching to develop a conceptual framework for this study that informed data collection and analysis.

Chapter 3: Research Methods

This research was a phenomenological study of the lived experiences of instructional coaches working in schools throughout the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic. The purpose was to identify themes that were common and essential across all participants – and to document and interpret unique perspectives that were important to the overall story. I was also interested to explore what contextual factors influenced instructional coaches in their work facilitating coaching cycles with teachers during a time of unique and unprecedented crisis in schools. In this chapter, I describe the study's design, context, and participant selection process. In addition, I provide a detailed outline of the data collection and analysis processes. Lastly, I address potential limitations in the study design and the steps that were taken to increase the trustworthiness of this study as well as other ethical issues that may arise throughout the course of the study.

The research questions addressed through this study are the following:

1. What were the lived experiences of instructional coaches supporting teachers in public school systems during the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic?
2. What supported and hindered coaches in their work facilitating coaching cycles with teachers during a time of prolonged crisis?

Through this research, I wanted to understand instructional coaches' experiences during the first year of the pandemic from coaches with varied roles considering the

complex context of the public schools where they worked. I needed to engage with their stories and look for patterns in their actions within the context of their constructed reality. This being the case, qualitative methods were appropriate to conduct this study (Creswell, 2012). Since I was interested in engaging in a process of inquiry by describing and interpreting participants' experiences of a particular phenomenon within their natural setting, the study followed a hermeneutic phenomenological approach.

Hermeneutic Phenomenology

Phenomenology is a philosophy as well as an approach to research that originated in 1900 with the German mathematician Edmund Husserl who conceived the idea of "transcendental phenomenology" (Creswell, 2012). Husserl developed his philosophy in direct opposition to the prevailing Cartesian positivist perspective that the world could be accurately perceived through pure reason (Vagle, 2018). Instead, phenomenology was based on a concept called *intentionality* where the mind and world are not considered to be separate entities and reality can be identified in the perceptions of others through a suspension of one's own personal experience (Creswell, 2012; Moustakas, 1994; Sloan & Bowe, 2014, Vagle, 2018). A phenomenological study seeks to describe the "common meaning for several individuals of their lived experiences of a phenomenon" and focuses on describing what all participants have in common as they experience it (Creswell, 2012, p. 76). The term "phenomenon" is used to describe the focus of inquiry across many methodologies. However, in phenomenological research, a phenomenon is

something concrete, but complex that manifests itself and appears in our experiences of the world (Vagle, 2018).

Transcendental vs. Hermeneutic Phenomenology

As a research approach, transcendental or *descriptive* phenomenology requires researchers to bracket one's own perceptions and seeks to describe the essence of a phenomenon by documenting commonalities in the lived experiences of a group of people who experienced it. Bracketing is a way of practicing phenomenological reduction or *epoch* which involves suspending judgement and presumptions. The *essence* was defined as the structures that make something what it is and not something else (Vagle, 2018; van Manen, 1997). The focus is on perceiving the *lifeworld* – or human experience as it is lived. In transcendental phenomenological research, the emphasis is on description rather than analysis and interpretation (Moustakas, 1994).

Many centuries ago, hermeneutics originated as a practice for interpretating biblical texts. The reader would derive the meaning by alternating between consideration of individual phrases and sentences and themes that were manifest in the overall text. Around the same time that phenomenology emerged in Europe, hermeneutics was evolving into a theory for understanding philosophical and ontological ideas through interpretation of texts. It involved processing possible meanings and presuppositions in a circular manner that would allow an idea to reveal itself through a process of reflection.

The focus was on developing a deeper, fuller, and richer understanding of the text (George, 2021).

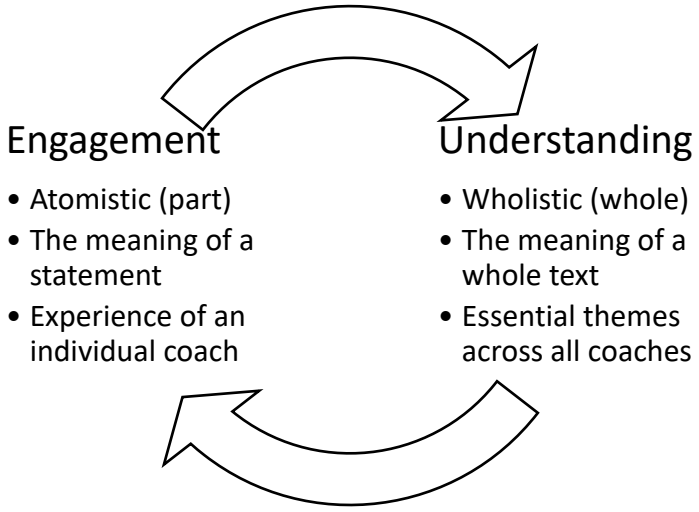
Hermeneutic phenomenology came into being as a separate branch of phenomenology when Heidegger (1927), a philosophy student of Husserl, rejected the assumption inherent in transcendental phenomenology that it was possible for a researcher to bracket personal experiences. Instead, he asserted that there is no way to separate oneself from one's *dasein* or *being in the world* and that interpretation in phenomenological research was inevitable. Like transcendental phenomenology, hermeneutic phenomenology is concerned with examination of lived experiences, but with a goal of illuminating details within the experience to achieve a sense of understanding. In hermeneutic phenomenology, there is a focus on reflexivity rather than reduction and the researcher makes interpretations that need to be checked through dialogue with the participants and ongoing individual reflection that promotes thought revision.

The concept of a hermeneutic circle or loop to guide inquiry is central to the approach in hermeneutic phenomenological research. The researcher analyzes the texts of transcribed interviews and journal entries to uncover essential themes as shared by the participants to gain new knowledge about living through a particular phenomenon or life experience. This involves the researcher in continually revising their understanding by toggling between the "atomistic" level – where the focus is on the parts, particular

statements or individuals – and the "holistic" level – where the focus is on what is essential to all participants' experiences of the phenomenon (Vagle, 2018). In my own study, I employed this circle of inquiry when analyzing data from an interview looking at how particular statements related to the whole text. I also used the hermeneutic circle when considering how statements and experiences of individual coaches related to essential themes that were evident across all of the coaches in the study (see Figure 3).

Figure 3

The Hermeneutic Circle of Inquiry (Heidegger, 1927)



A hermeneutic phenomenological approach was appropriate for this study in part because of my own identity as a researcher. As an instructional coach who worked supporting teachers throughout the pandemic, I approached this research as an insider in the field. Therefore, it was highly unlikely that I would have been able to adequately bracket my own experiences to the extent necessary to conduct a transcendental phenomenological study. Similarly, with my second research question, I sought to understand what supported and hindered the work of instructional coaches with teachers during the COVID-19 pandemic and learn something practical that would help to support coaching during times of crisis more generally. This required me to do some

interpretation which meant taking a more hermeneutic rather than transcendental approach (Sloan & Bowe, 2014; van Manen, 1997).

Six Research Activities

I was drawn to the van Manen's (1997) interpretive approach because of his focus on applying hermeneutic phenomenological methods to research in the field of education. Rather than proposing a set of rules or procedures for hermeneutic phenomenological research, van Manen (1997) suggested six research activities that happen concurrently and interplay throughout every phase of the research process: (a) turning to a phenomenon which seriously interests us and commits us to the world; (b) investigating experience as we live it rather than as we conceptualize it; (c) reflecting on the essential themes which characterize the experience; (d) describing the phenomenon through the art of writing and rewriting; (e) maintaining a strong and oriented pedagogical relation to the phenomenon; and (f) balancing the research context by considering parts and whole (pp. 30-34). Next, I describe what each of these activities entails and how they informed my overall research design.

Turning to the nature of a lived experience. This involves identifying a phenomenon that deeply interests the researcher to the extent that they have a sense that they are "being-given-over to some quest" (p. 31). The phenomenon must inspire a sense of commitment that will sustain the researcher's curiosity throughout the research process so that they can remain open as they are interpreting human experiences in relation to it.

In my own research design, my choice to study the experiences of instructional coaches arose out my commitment to instructional coaching and belief that it has to potential to transform educational practices in ways that could bring about powerful and positive outcomes for students.

Investigating experience as we live it. It is important for the researcher to distinguish between an experience as it is lived and an experience as it is conceptualized. To reveal essential themes, the aim is to stay focused on the concrete ways in which the phenomenon manifests itself. This means that throughout the study, the researcher must stay tuned into what participants are doing as opposed to how they are making sense of the phenomenon. van Manen (1997) suggested using the lifeworld reflections throughout inquiry to stay grounded in concrete experiences. This informed both data collection and analysis in my study design. Interviews were designed to elicit experiences and examples as opposed to causal explanations or generalizations. Initial data analysis involved looking through Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems using the four lifeworld existentials as a lens to stay focused on the coaches' experiences.

Reflecting on essential themes. Phenomenological research differentiates between *appearances* and *essences*. Appearances are the things we experience, and essences are the underlying structure that grounds the things that we experience. The goal of phenomenological study is to discover and elucidate essential themes. By reflecting on essential themes throughout a study, the researcher can "bring into nearness that which

tends to be obscure" (van Manen, 1997, p. 32) in everyday life. Phenomenological themes are not generalizations but are more like "knots in the webs of our experiences, around which certain lived experiences are spun" (van Manen, 1997, p. 90). The researcher discovers themes by isolating thematic statements. van Manen suggested using three possible approaches: (a) the wholistic approach; (b) the selective approach; and (c) the detailed approach. Once the phenomenological themes are evident, the researcher must determine which of them are *essential*, meaning that they define the phenomenon itself or make it what it is and not something else. My research design incorporated each of these approaches at different stages of the data analysis that I describe in a later section of this chapter.

The art of writing and rewriting. This activity involves the researcher in the analysis of language and use of writing to air presuppositions, make interpretations, reflect, and revise thinking. The researcher engages in reflective writing and revision throughout data analysis to seek meaning and identify essential themes. Writing is also a way to see and show our interpretations. To attend to this activity, I incorporated reflective journaling in my research design throughout data collection and analysis. In these journal entries, I took time to document my own feelings, ideas, and interpretations as they were evolving (Glesne, 2006). I also used summary narratives to see the experiences of the individual coaches participating in my study and to communicate my interpretations so that I could check my own biases. Additionally, an iterative cycle of

writing, pausing to reflect, and then rewriting was the central process that I used to write this dissertation.

Maintaining a strong and oriented relation. This involves maintaining a deep commitment to the phenomenon and question under investigation. The researcher must avoid becoming distracted or "scientifically disinterested" during data collection and analysis and retain a stance of openness. I was careful to stay oriented and took *passive activity* breaks throughout data analysis to reorient myself to the phenomenon. With these breaks, the researcher takes a step back from data analysis periodically with the aim of gaining further insight into the phenomenon by creating some distance (Peoples, 2021). They may also pause the research or work on areas outside of data analysis. I employed both strategies at various points in my research design.

Balancing the research context by considering parts and whole. This activity refers to the Hermeneutic Circle of Inquiry (see Figure 3) and asks that the researcher takes frequent opportunities to step back and consider the whole while analyzing the parts. This allows the researcher to consider how the parts relate to the whole and how the common, essential themes connect across participants. My research design included use of reflective journals throughout data collection and analysis to attend to this activity. To stay balanced in my perspective throughout data analysis, I continually toggled between analysis at the participant level and reflection on the essential themes. I set up

participant-level journals and one overarching "essential journal" to facilitate this work, as I describe in greater detail in the Data Collection section of this chapter.

Pragmatic Adaptations to van Manen's (2016) Approach

In keeping with my pragmatic orientation to this dissertation study, I made some adaptations to van Manen's (2016) phenomenological approach to serve my research aims. These involved the use of coding and software to facilitate qualitative data analysis and a practice called *bridling* to maintain an open stance. In this section, I describe and justify those adaptations.

Coding and qualitative data analysis software. In qualitative data analysis, a code is a word or phrase that assigns a "summative, salient, essence-capturing, and/or evocative attribute" to a portion of data (Saldaña, 2021). At the time of this writing, it is common, but not imperative, for qualitative researchers to use qualitative data analysis software to facilitate assigning codes to textual data (Sohn, 2017). However, van Manen (2016) opined that coding is unnecessary and that data analysis software is not an appropriate tool for phenomenological research because it could weaken the researcher's orientation to the phenomenon and hinder abductive reasoning. There can be a tendency with software and coding to fall into "the coding trap," where the researcher spends "too much time coding" and gets lost in the weeds preventing them from gaining a sense of the whole of a phenomenon (Sohn, 2017, p. 4). Instead, van Manen (2016) suggested the researcher should stay anchored in the text itself by reading and re-reading while making

notes and writing analytic memos of thoughts for each word, line, paragraph, and document.

With caution, I decided to use coding and qualitative data analysis software in my research for multiple reasons. First, as I was balancing data analysis with other demands for my time, I often found myself in a position where I needed to pause unexpectedly and return to the work. I needed a way to organize my notes and reflections to reorient myself and be able to re-enter the work efficiently. I also wanted to be systematic in my analysis so that I could check myself often. This seemed especially important as I was an insider in the field. NVivo software enabled me to make annotations as I analyzed texts using van Manen's (1997) wholistic, selective, and detailed approaches. I was able to use the program to document my progress and organize my reflective writing. Judicious coding helped me to keep track of patterns across participants, which I could then view across occurrences in the data using NVivo and check for alignment. To guard against the coding trap, I was spare in my coding and incorporated multiple opportunities to reread the interview and journal texts in their entirety throughout data analysis, as described in more detail later in this chapter. I also relistened to the audio of statements before coding them so that I could stay oriented to the experiences of the individual and her story while assigning codes.

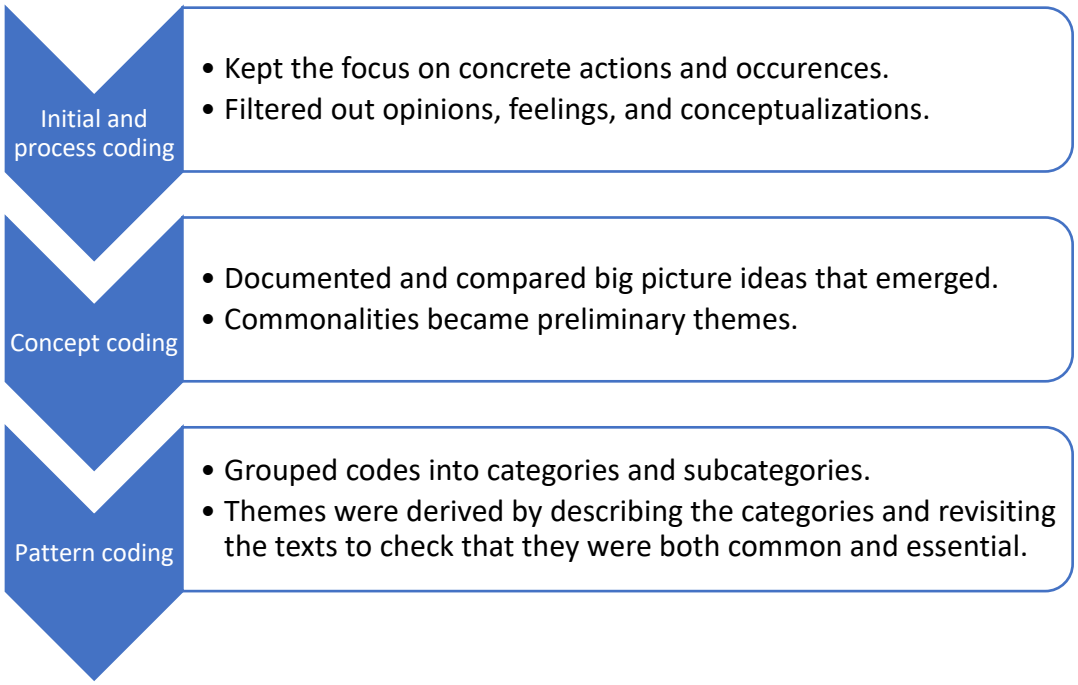
I included two cycles of coding in my data analysis for this study that I describe in greater detail in the Data Analysis section (see Figure 4). In the first cycle, I employed

the elemental coding methods *initial coding, process coding,* and *concept coding* to filter the data and provide a foundation for future coding and theme development (Saldaña, 2021). Initial coding was based on the lifeworld reflections and ecological systems as described in my conceptual model. These codes provided an initial lens that helped me to focus on occurrences and actions to stay true to the experience as it was lived as opposed to how it was conceptualized (van Manen, 1997). Next, I used process coding, which involves labeling specific actions in the data, to highlight observable activities that coaches experienced. After this was done, I used concept coding to describe and document the bigger picture ideas that emerged during wholistic and selective theme development.

In the second coding cycle, I moved from codes and preliminary common themes to essential themes that described the structures that were underlying the coaches' common experiences (Vagle, 2018; van Manen, 1997). During this cycle, I employed visual code mapping and pattern coding. First cycle coding was a way to summarize data segments. Pattern coding allowed me to group those summaries into categories and finally derive essential themes (Saldaña, 2021).

Figure 4

Coding Strategies Employed (Saldaña, 2021)



Bridling. Vagle (2009; 2018), a self-described "phenomenological craftsperson," sought to extend the work of van Manen (1997; 2016) and specifically addressed issues of researcher reflexivity and validity in phenomenological research. He acknowledged that validity in phenomenological research is a common concern and suggested that van Manen's stance of openness and sustained engagement with the phenomenon may not be enough. Additionally, he advocated for a practice called "bridling," which was developed by Dahlberg (2006) to support her reflective lifeworld approach to phenomenological research.

Bridling involves maintaining a constant dialogue with oneself about presuppositions and judgements being made and accepts that it may not be possible to set them aside completely. Unlike bracketing, the goal of bridling is not to suspend one's beliefs but rather to become intimately familiar with them so that they do not compromise the openness that van Manen (1997) envisioned. To this end, Vagle (2018) recommended using reflective journaling to air and unpack pre-conceptions throughout data collection and analysis to attend to the validity of a study.

As an insider in the field of instructional coaching, attending to the validity of this study was essential. For that reason, I incorporated bridling into my data collection and analysis plans proactively. Before and after collecting or analyzing my participants' lived stories, I built in time for reflection in a journal. I would always ask myself this question: *What are my preconceptions and how might they be influencing me right now?* Asking myself this question regularly and repeatedly helped me to stay in dialogue with myself about my own dasein – or *being in the world*. It helped me to remain skeptical about my own interpretations and open to the lived stories of my participants.

Participant and Site Selection

I conducted this study between February of 2021 and May of 2022 in Vermont, which is a mostly rural state in New England where many public-school districts employ instructional coaches. The population I drew from were adults who were employed as instructional coaches in public schools within the state during the first year of the

COVID-19 pandemic. (See Chapter 4 for further information about the context and participants). In a phenomenological study, the sample size must be large enough to gather sufficient data to adequately describe the phenomenon of interest and address the research questions. Creswell (2012) recommended having between 6 and 10 participants when conducting a phenomenological study, so I decided that a sample size of eight to ten participants would be ideal. Having a relatively small number of participants afforded me enough time and resources to conduct follow up interviews that were needed to check my interpretations of their experiences. In keeping with the hermeneutic phenomenology tradition, I used the follow up interviews and emails to clarify and revise my understanding and separate them from any preconceptions I held (Peoples, 2021).

I found a set of ten participants who were relatively homogenous in terms of their job title, but with some variation in terms of grade level, content focus, years of experience, and the number of assigned schools. Having some variation across these demographics made it possible for me to observe the phenomenon from multiple perspectives and across various applications of the coaching role, which is typical in the field (Woulfin, 2020). Given the difficult situation in schools during the first wave of COVD-19, I anticipated that it might be a challenge finding willing participants. Therefore, I decided to use convenience sampling with the plan to use a snowball technique (Biernacki & Waldorf, 1981) if I was unable to recruit enough participants or if my participants were not sufficiently diverse. To recruit participants, I sent out an email

on two distribution lists within the state: one that included all curriculum leaders within the state and another that included coaches participating in a coaching support group within the state. The coaching support group included twenty-five coaches who had participated in common training on facilitating coaching cycles together during the 2019-2020 school year and met virtually each month during fall of 2020 to discuss coaching problems of practice. I reasoned that these coaches would be more likely to be using a coaching model that involves a coaching cycle than the general population of coaches in the state. The email to prospective participants included my Research Information Sheet (see Appendix A) and asked for an affirmative response via email to set up a time for an initial 45-minute interview. As a result, I received ten affirmative responses – four were recruited participants in the coaching support group and six were not. Of the ten, one participant changed her mind before we were able to schedule the initial interview.

I included all the remaining nine instructional coaches in this study with the knowledge that even if I experienced some attrition, I would still have enough participants to complete the study. Overall, I was pleased with the relative diversity of the group in terms of setting and context (see Chapter 4 for more details about the context and participants).

Table 3

Summary of Participants and Data Collected

Participant	Background Information		Data Collected	
	Coaching Experience	Role	Interviews	Email
Elizabeth	Two years	Instructional Coach	Initial: 53 min. Follow up: 25 min.	Recruiting Member Check
Erin	One year	Literacy Coach/ Interventionist	Initial: 41 min.	Recruiting, Follow up
Maggie	Seven years	Literacy Coach	Initial: 61 min. Follow up: 28 min.	Recruiting Member check
Michelle	Six years	Instructional Coach (all content areas)	Initial: 40 min. Follow up: 20 min.	Recruiting
Penelope	Two years	Math Coach	Initial: 35 min. Follow up: 20 min.	Recruiting
Sherryl	Four years	Math Coach/ Interventionist	Initial: 43 min. Follow up: 23 min.* *Audio problem.	Recruiting Member check
Sierra	Three years	Math Coach/ Interventionist	Initial: 42 min. Follow up: 23 min.	Recruiting Follow up Member check
Susan	One year	Literacy Coach	Initial: 50 min. Follow up: 24 min.	Recruiting
Vicky	Four years	Instructional Coach	Initial: 40 min. Follow up: 16 min.	Recruiting

Identity Protection Measures

Keeping confidentiality was a concern in this study. There was a need to provide contextual information and refer to policies, initiatives, and documents that would make the state identifiable. However, the population of coaches within Vermont is small enough that providing background information on my participants could have made them identifiable. For this reason, I chose to be as general as possible with background details about my participants to protect their identities.

Each participant chose a pseudonym that I used consistently throughout all interviews and my analysis of the data. During transcription of interviews, I removed any identifying information – such as place and school names - to protect confidentiality. I also removed some references to specific roles and titles within their district that could be used to identify participants. Interviews were audio recorded locally on a secure device to facilitate transcription, then deleted once the study was complete. I notified participants of these protection measures during each initial interview.

Data Collection

In hermeneutic phenomenological studies, one underlying assumption is that language reveals the human experience which in turn reveals the object or phenomenon under investigation (Sloan & Bowe, 2014). Therefore, the primary methods of data collection for this study included semi-structured interviews and journaling. These strategies were chosen because they are well suited to the hermeneutic phenomenological

research tradition because they provided access to language that yielded rich details of participants' experiences. Additionally, email correspondence with participants provided a secondary source of data.

Interviews

As is typical in hermeneutic phenomenology, interviews were the primary source of data for this study. The first set of interviews served as a means for collecting participants' stories of lived experiences as instructional coaches working in schools during the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic. Follow up interviews provided an opportunity to facilitate retrospective reflection with participants and to engage in a dialogue with them about my analysis of their experiences to check and revise my own understanding (van Manen, 1997). I conducted first interviews in February of 2021 and created audio recordings of the interviews using Zoom, a video conferencing tool, and Temi, an audio-to-text transcription service, to create transcribed texts.

The interview design was informed by both literature in the field and the theoretical framework. I chose a semi-structured format for interviews to leverage the advantages of both structured and unstructured interviews (Cohen & Crabtree, 2006). The inclusion of some standard questions made it possible to compare interviews across participants. Additionally, providing participants with the freedom to narrate their stories at length provided an opportunity to collect rich data. This structure is recommended in phenomenological research because it strikes a balance between focus on the research

topic and allowing for natural elaboration (Peoples, 2021). I created a protocol for the initial interviews that yielded interviews that were approximately 45 minutes in length (see Appendix B).

The initial interviews began with two free association prompts – providing participants with an opportunity to free associate words with the terms "instructional coaching" and then with "COVID-19." This activity was designed to air feelings and opinions before the interview was underway to separate them from the participants' lived experiences. Closed questions relating to contextual factors were informed by the components that represent systems of support for instructional coaching that were evident in the literature. After that, the majority of the interview questions were open ended to encourage participants to reflect expansively (Peoples, 2021). With each question, I included follow up prompts that were derived from my initial review of the literature – (e. g., relating to roles, coaching approaches and definitions, and systems of support). Follow up questions also served as a reminder to apply van Manen's (1997) lifeworld reflections by keeping the focus on the coaches' actions as opposed to their beliefs or opinions. Because I was interested in learning about what impacted coaches in their work facilitating coaching cycles, most of the questions pertained to the work that they were doing. I needed to understand what coaches were doing in various time frames, how they were doing it, with whom, and why.

Follow up interviews were conducted between mid-February and March of 2022, which was approximately one year after the initial interviews were concluded. Initially, I planned to conduct these interviews at the beginning of the 2021-2022 school year assuming that would be enough time for the COVID-19 crisis in schools to have passed. I reasoned that this timing would provide participants with the opportunity to reflect retrospectively on their experiences since phenomenological reflection relies on recollection of experiences that have already passed (van Manen, 1997). However, in fall of 2021, schools were still in a state of evolving crisis, and circumstances were too demanding in schools for me to conduct my research. There were staffing shortages, increased behavioral concerns due to dysregulated students, and added stress that Delta-variant COVID-19 cases, testing, and contact tracing placed on school systems (Dougherty, 2021). Consequently, my participants and I were not able to devote time in the fall but were able to resume in late winter 2022. The delay provided an opportunity for what van Manen (2016) referred to as *passive activity*. When I returned to the research in December of 2021, I took the opportunity to reorient myself by listening to every interview and writing a bridling reflection before I began data analysis.

After analyzing the data from the first interviews, I scheduled follow up interviews. Follow up interviews were shorter in duration (15-30 minutes) and followed a protocol (see Appendix C) that involved having the participants read though a two-page summary narrative that I had prepared ahead of time for each of them individually. I

engaged them in a dialogue to correct any misconceptions and provide a chance for retrospective reflection. I also used the follow up interviews as an opportunity to get some clarification about the various tasks they had identified themselves as undertaking during the first year of the pandemic.

Journaling

Throughout the data collection and analysis process, I engaged in the practice of journaling to reflect on the meanings of situations to consider and gain distance from my own preconceptions. This writing was an effort to practice bridling and foster my own reflexivity in the research process – which van Manen (1997) defined as reflection upon a situation or experience. Before I began data collection, I created a "participant journal" for each coach included in the study. I used these journals to process and document their individual experiences and my own forethought and reactions. I scheduled time immediately following each first interview to record my observations and initial impressions in these journals. During data analysis, I revisited and added additional entries to these journals so that they represented my evolving understanding of each participant's experience. Additionally, I created another "essential journal" that became a place that I used unpack and document common patterns among all participants. This journal included a draft data matrix that I used to develop and compare themes across participants. In entries organized by date, I engaged in dialogue with the phenomenon by

addressing my personal biases, processed ideas, asked myself questions, and highlighted interesting items through stream-of-consciousness writing (Vagle, 2009).

Email Correspondence

At various times during the study, there was a need to correspond over email with the participants regarding logistics and to check for understanding. In these correspondences, participants sometimes revealed aspects of their experience that were relevant to the study. Although, interviews were the primary data collection strategy, relevant email interactions provided a secondary source helping to add richness and breadth to the participants' narratives.

Data Analysis

The data analysis methods developed for this study were derived from van Manen's (1997) hermeneutic phenomenological approach and also from relevant examples in the literature that provided systematic, useful steps for interpreting phenomenological research data (Ajjawi & Higgs, 2015; Sloan & Bowe, 2014). The data analysis for this study followed four stages (see Table 4). Throughout each stage, I applied van Manen's six activities as previously noted and used journaling to bridle my presuppositions and document my reflections.

Table 4

Four Stages of Data Analysis

Stage	Tasks

1. Immersion	• Listened to all nine interviews and wrote an "essential" reflection
	• Organized text and audio data using NVivo software.
	• Entered lifeworld and ecological system codes in NVivo for initial coding.
	• For each interview:
	  o Read and listened to it.
	  o Deleted irrelevant and/or identifying information.
	  o Isolated thematic statements (wholistic approach).
	  o Revisited and revised initial impressions.
	  o Wrote a participant reflection.

2. Extraction and interpretation	• For each participant/initial interview:
	  o Highlighted/interpreted phrases and made notes.
	  o Initial coding of lifeworld and ecological systems.
	  o Process coding of observable actions.
	  o Isolated thematic statements (selective approach).
	  o Concept coding of bigger picture ideas.
	  o Wrote a summary narrative.
	  o Essential Journal update - reflection and data matrix.
	  o Follow up interview to check understanding.

3. Synthesis and theme development	• Transcribed and cleaned follow up interviews. • Determined essential themes and identified sub-themes. • Revisited/revised codes • Isolated thematic statements (detailed approach) • Re-coded data using NVivo. • Compared themes across participants and looked for code drift. • Updated the essential journal - reflection and data matrix.
4. Integration	• Linked the literature to the themes identified. • Highlighted key findings, incongruities, and areas for future development.

Stage 1: Immersion

The purpose of the immersion stage was to start to get a sense of each interview and do some preliminary interpretation of the transcribed texts. I began this phase by listening to all nine initial interviews to reacquaint myself with the data because it had been nearly a year since I had conducted them. To organize the data and keep track of transcripts and audio recordings for each participant, I used NVivo software. Then, I listened to each interview while reading through the transcript – pausing to make any necessary corrections and notes on the transcript as I listened. While checking the transcript, I deleted any information that was irrelevant or unnecessary, repetitive or filler statements like "um," "like," and "you know."

Once the transcripts were cleaned and corrected, I read through the initial impressions that I had written in the participant journal immediately following the initial interview back in winter of 2021 to get a sense of my first impressions. Then, I read through the text in its entirety and created a thematic statement for each participant using a wholistic approach. This involved writing a sentence that captured the fundamental meaning of the interview text as a whole. For example, one participant, who described herself as "having pandemic fatigue," had responsibilities that included administering assessments, kindergarten dismissal, and delivering lunches. Twice she used the phrase "all hands on deck" to describe the current situation in her school. Therefore, the thematic statement that I wrote to capture her experience was: *I was tired, but someone had to do it*

because it was all hands on deck. I documented my thoughts and justification for these statements in each participant journal. Finally, I wrote a brief reflection in the essential journal noting similarities and differences among the participants' experiences and possible common themes. After analyzing all nine initial interviews wholistically, I added codes for the four lifeworld reflections and five ecological systems in NVivo to facilitate initial coding that would occur in the next stage of data analysis (see Table 5).

Table 5

Initial Codes in NVivo

Code	Description
Individual	Coaching skills, definition of coaching, understanding of role, comfort with instructional technology
Microsystem	Work with coaches, in person vs. virtual, coaching approach & activities.
Mesosystem	Work with principals, school-level support & demands, role & assigned tasks, school culture.
Exosystem	District-level supports & demands, coaching vision and model, PD for coaches
Macrosystem	State-level support & demands, professional standards & licensure
Chronosystem	COVID-19 Pandemic, CDC Guidelines, Recovery Plans
Corporeal Reflection	The ways people are bodily in the world
Spatial Reflection	The ways people experience space in daily existence
Temporal Reflection	How people experience time

Relational Reflection	How people experience relationships with others, sense of community

Stage 2: Extraction and Interpretation

The purpose of the extraction and interpretation stage was to get a richer and deeper understanding of the participants' experiences. In this stage, I navigated one participant at a time and took a closer look at the transcription of each participant's first interview. I used NVivo to highlight statements or phrases, write comments, and assign initial codes related to the lifeworld reflections and ecological systems. As, I mentioned in a prior section, I used initial coding to filter out thoughts, feelings, and perceptions. Once I had completed this process for an individual participant, I knew that coded statements represented occurrences and actions. At this point, I read through the coded statements as a whole to get a feel for the filtered text and made notes in the participant journal. Then, I employed process coding, which involved labeling specific actions in the data, to highlight observable activities that coaches experienced, for example, *substitute teaching* or *providing emotional support for teachers* (Saldaña, 2021). The initial coding and process codes kept the focus on what was concrete in the interview texts (Vagle, 2018).

Next, I isolated thematic statements using van Manen's (1997) selective approach. This involved reading through the interview text multiple times and highlighting statements or phrases that seemed particularly poignant or essential to the overall experience. To guide my interpretations, I continually asked myself, *what does this*

statement reveal about what it meant to be an instructional coach during the first year of COVID-19 pandemic? (van Manen, 1997). Throughout this process, I used concept coding to describe and document the bigger picture ideas that were emerging (Saldaña, 2021). For example, one participant, "Maggie," made the statement: "Everything is virtual… I can't just go in a room and meet someone because we must alert the maintenance staff, and then they have to go in and disinfect the surfaces and you just can't have that colleagueship and comradery anymore." Initial codes for this statement included: *relational* and *microsystem*. It was also process coded as *meeting virtually instead of in person* and concept coded as *Isolation due to COVID-19.*

When I discovered a thematic statement like the previous example, I listened to the audio recording again to check my interpretation before writing comments and assigning a new or existing code to it. After selectively isolating themes for a participant, I would reflect on the experiences across all participants in my Essential Journal. I began to identify some commonalities across participants. There were four preliminary common themes: (a) collective stress (b) being isolated from teachers, (c) lacking systems of support, and (d) experiencing role changes due to COVID-19. To document these preliminary common themes, I developed a matrix to clarify and compare them across participants that I continued to revisit and revise throughout the extraction and interpretation stage of data analysis (see Appendix E).

Throughout this process, I used NVivo to view all the references to sentences and phrases that I had assigned to a particular code and checked for alignment. Then, I wrote a summary paragraph to describe how the participant experienced that preliminary theme and updated the data display in the essential journal. Once I had done this with each of the codes, I combined all the summary paragraphs into one summary narrative that I added to the participant journal to share with the participant in the follow up interview.

As I was analyzing the data in this stage of my analysis, I noticed that *role change* was an important common theme that all coaches were experiencing. Since I was interested in considering what supported and hindered the work of instructional coaches during the pandemic, it became important to me to better understand these role changes and how they related to the COVID-19 crisis and to instructional coaching. The coaches identified a multitude of tasks that they performed during the pandemic. I needed to know which ones they considered to be part of their role as a coach and if they were unique to the COVID-19 crisis or not. I collected this information during follow up interviews.

Again, I used a semi-structured protocol to conduct the follow up interviews (see Appendix C). First, I focused on clarifying what role changes the coach experienced by presenting each participant with a list of the tasks they had described themselves as performing during the first interview. With each task, I asked them to what extent they considered it to be an example of "instructional coaching" and to what extent the task was attributable or unique to the COVID-19 pandemic. I followed up with a personal

check-in on how things were going for them generally. Then, I shared the summary narrative with the participant to solicit feedback and further reflection. This was an opportunity to engage in member checking to enhance the trustworthiness of the study (Peoples, 2021). I conducted follow up interviews with all but one participant who could not spare the time to meet and instead provided her feedback in writing over email. Based on the feedback from the follow up interviews, I edited the summary narratives and updated each participant journals with my reflections after the second interview.

Stage 3: Synthesis and Theme Development

The purpose of this stage was to identify and refine essential themes and sub-themes evident in the data and to encourage validity in the coding. After transcribing, cleaning, and coding the follow up interviews, I took a weeklong "passive activity' break following my last follow up interview to reset and gain further insight (Peoples, 2021; van Manen, 1997). When I returned to data analysis, I began by revisiting each participant journal as well as the essential journal to ground myself and reflect on the experiences of individual coaches and what it meant to be an instructional coach during the pandemic. During the extraction and interpretation stage of data analysis, I had accumulated about fifty different codes, and I needed to glean from them what was essential to the story. I began by removing the initial lifeworld and ecological systems codes. They had been a means through which I filtered coaches' reflections and developed codes and preliminary themes, and they were no longer needed.

The next step in data analysis was to move from preliminary codes and themes to discover and articulate *essential* themes. As previous described, the concept of an essential theme is specific to phenomenological research (Peoples, 2021). van Manen (1997) described essential themes as themes that embody the overall meaning of the lived experiences and recommended differentiating essential themes from *incidental themes*, which were not necessarily unique to the lived experience. An essential theme is that which makes the phenomenon "what it is and without which it could not be what it is" (van Manen, 1997, p. 177). Using this lens, I realized that the preliminary common themes that I had developed in the second stage of data analysis were *incidental*. Themes of being isolated, lacking systems of support, and experiencing role changes were experienced by all educators in school and were not unique to instructional coaches. I needed to discover what was essential to experiences of instructional coaches specifically as they were supporting teachers during the first year of the pandemic. What was common and also essential in their stories?

To find out, I used a visual mapping technique and pattern coding. As a visual processer, I wanted to tangibly experience the codes so that I could consider how they related and might be grouped. To this end, I used Jamboard, an online whiteboard tool to facilitate visual mapping (Saldaña, 2021). I created a virtual "post it" note for each code and viewed and manipulated them on multiple boards. Once I had created a note for each code, I went back and read through each interview text. In this stage, I engaged in

isolating thematic statements using a detailed or line-by-line approach by looking at every sentence or cluster of sentences and asking myself what it revealed about what it meant to be an instructional coach during the COVID-19 crisis. Throughout this analysis, I made note of new themes that I had missed in my previous analysis and added codes for each of them. Then I began to look for affinity among the codes and began to assemble them together in Jamboard.

Once I had created categories of codes, I analyzed their commonalities and created a pattern code to describe the underlying meaning. I began to see how they related structurally, and which ones seemed *incidental* as opposed to *essential*. After several days of re-reading texts and revising the organization on the Jamboard, I had created four different boards (see Figures 5-8 in Chapter 5). Each board represented an essential theme and identified subthemes. I followed an example from van Manen (1997) and used questions to orient and organize the patterns that emerged (see Table 6).

Table 6

Essential Themes and Orienting Questions

Orienting Question	Essential Theme
What were coaches doing?	Instructional coaches were doing less actually coaching and acquired more "non-coaching" responsibilities.
How were coaches coaching?	When they were able to coach, they were mostly surface coaching instead of goal-driven cycles.
Why was this happening?	There were factors relating to teachers, the coaches themselves, and the system within which they all worked that hindered coaching cycles.
So, what? How is this significant?	This was not new. The COVID-19 crisis only magnified preexisting patterns.

These essential themes and subthemes became the new codes and subcodes in NVivo that I used to re-code the data (see Appendix D). For this final analysis, I went participant by participant and line-by-line through each text collected coding statements and making comments. I engaged in bridling reflections on my presuppositions prior to and following coding. Once I finished coding the data for a participant, I created a row for that participant in a data matrix that displays commonalities across participants (see Appendix F). For each essential theme, I selected a few statements that demonstrated how that instructional coach experienced it and added it to the matrix. With each new participant, I read through the matrix before and after coding and looked for code drift, making and documenting coding changes as necessary. Throughout this stage, I reflected daily in my essential journal.

Stage 4: Integration

The purpose of the integration stage was to step back and link the essential themes and subthemes that I had identified with the research base. As mentioned in Chapter 2, in a phenomenological study, reading too much literature about the phenomenon under investigation in advance may make it more difficult to bridle presuppositions (Vagle, 2018). The idea is to review enough literature to ground the study, but not so much that the researcher cannot be open to seeing something new. It was for this reason that my initial review of the literature was conservative. During this final stage of my data analysis, I expanded my review of the literature to provide more perspective on the essential themes and sub-themes. I created a literature integration matrix to compare my essential themes and subthemes with the themes that were evident in my initial review of the literature. Through this process, I noted instances of agreement – where my findings were congruent with prevailing literature. I also noted themes and subthemes that I needed to better understand and carried out a more comprehensive review of the literature. At the end of this final phase of analysis, I highlighted key findings and noted some lingering questions and areas for future development.

Finally, I drafted a composite description of the common lived experiences of the nine instructional coaches included in this study. This description represented the essence of what it was to be an instructional coach supporting teachers during the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic. I shared the composite description with each of the participants

and solicited feedback from them over email before creating a finalized version, which I present in Chapter 6.

Trustworthiness and Limitations

In this section, I address the trustworthiness or validity of my study and note potential limitations. Miles and Huberman (1994) developed a set of five criteria to evaluate trustworthiness: (a) objectivity; (b) reliability; (c) credibility; (d) transferability; and (e) utility. The utility of a study has to do with the pragmatic value of the research, which I addressed when discussing potential significance in the Introduction. In this section, I will discuss the trustworthiness of my research using the other four criteria.

Objectivity relates to the absence of unacknowledged bias on the part of the researcher and requires that we disclose aspects of our identity that may bias the research. As a researcher, I had to work hard to guard my objectivity throughout this study. As noted, my own position as an instructional coaching throughout the pandemic gave me an inside perspective on this research. I was intimately familiar with instructional coaching generally. My experiences coaching throughout the COVID-19 pandemic also gave me insight into the work of coaches and the challenges and influences that they experienced. This helped me to be relatable and develop rapport with my participants and to understand the coaches' stories so that I could transcribe interviews accurately. However, my insider status in this field left me prone to certain biases and prejudices that come from my familiarity with and commitment to instructional coaching (Glesne, 2006).

As a researcher, I needed to keep my own my beliefs and experiences as an instructional coach separate from those of my participants as much as possible. I did this by reminding myself often that I was merely seeking to better understand the experience, such as it was. I was very careful not to share my own beliefs, anecdotes, successes, and failures when I was interacting with participants. Adherence to interview protocols helped me to limit my influence. Additionally, I used reflective journaling to practice bridling – to air and unpack my presuppositions – throughout data collection and analysis. Member checking during follow up interviews helped to ensure that my interpretations were anchored in my participants' stories and not my own. When it came time to articulate my findings, I had an unbiased colleague who is also a coach look at my analysis to get another viewpoint. These practices also promoted my credibility, which refers to how honest the research feels to the participants studied and other members of the research community (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

In qualitative research, reliability can be tested by looking at the process of the study and checking to be sure that methods remain consistent and stable over time (Miles & Huberman, 1994). During data collection, the use of interview protocols was one strategy that I used to maintain reliability. To attend to the reliability of my study during data analysis, I developed and followed a process and plan and carefully documented my methods and reasoning. This was essential as my research took place over the course of more than a year with multiple passive activity breaks. During coding and theme

development, I made annotations and checked for code drift frequently to ensure that I was being consistent.

To consider the transferability of a study, we need to ascertain whether the findings can be generalized to other contexts. The study and phenomenological studies in general have some limits in this area (Vagle, 2018). Since this study involved only nine instructional coaches working in a mostly rural state during the first year of COVID-19 pandemic, it has limited utility in developing a theory that might have implications for instructional coaching in other settings and during other times. A researcher in another state or who included only men might produce a different set of findings. However, I endeavor (in Chapter 4) to be thorough in my description of the research context and the assumptions so that a person wishing to transfer the results to a different context can make their own judgement of how much is transferable to another setting.

Summary

A rigorous human science is prepared to be 'soft' and reflective in its efforts to bring the range of meanings of life's phenomena to reflective awareness (Vagle, 2018; van Manen, 1997). By collecting and analyzing interview data from nine instructional coaches and addressing limitation concerns, I answered the research questions for this hermeneutic phenomenological study:

1. What were the lived experiences of instructional coaches supporting teachers in public school systems during the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic?
2. What supported and hindered coaches in their work facilitating coaching cycles with teachers during a time of prolonged crisis?

Chapter 4: Context and Participants

This study was situated in Vermont, a mostly rural state where public schools were engaged in *remote learning* from March of 2020 through the end of the school year by order of the governor as the COVID-19 pandemic gained traction in the United States. This meant that schools closed, and teachers were facilitating student learning offsite using technology and other remote means. Likewise, instructional coaches supported teachers remotely and relied heavily on video conferencing. Often, teachers and instructional coaches were working from their own homes while managing the care and education of their own children. The districts employing the participants in this study were all relatively small with fewer than 5,000 students spanning from pre-kindergarten through high school. Many areas of the state did not have reliable high speed internet access which created a barrier to learning and collaborating online (Wertlieb et al., 2021).

At the opening of the 2020-2021 school year, COVID-19 transmissions rates were sufficiently low within the state to allow K-12 schools to return to in person learning in some capacity. The state department of education worked with the health department to create safety guidelines and protocols for districts (Vermont Agency of Education, 2020). These guidelines were designed to minimize transmission of the virus in schools and included contact tracing, daily health screenings, wearing masks, sanitizing, and physical spacing. They recommended setting up *pods*, which were a way to group a small number of students and teachers together in shared spaces that would limit interactions and,

therefore, the spread of infections. To meet these guidelines, the schools associated with instructional coaches in this study all adopted various *hybrid* models where students did some learning in person and some remote learning throughout the school week. Every possible space in schools was being used to accommodate the pod structure and provide enough space to minimize the possibility of infections. Most often in person learning involved students sitting in single desks in evenly spaced rows facing forward. Students would stay in the same room for much of the day, even for lunch and allied arts. As an alternative, school districts also offered full time remote learning options so that students who had compromised immune systems or lived in a household with someone who was at risk could access school without having to attend in person.

Growing staffing shortages in the 2020-2021 school year put pressure on schools (U.S. Department of Education, 2020). There were many early retirements and departures that left schools with minimal human resources. Many substitute teachers, many of whom were retired teachers themselves, decided it was not worth the risk to continue to work in schools. Staff were asked to take their temperature and answer medical questions each day before going into work, and if they exhibited any COVID-like symptoms at all were asked to stay home. If they were out, their colleagues needed to scramble and give up planning time to cover for them.

Instructional Coaching within the State

The state department of education in Vermont had been actively promoting instructional coaching as a strategy for school improvement over the past decade. Districts were permitted to use federal grant funds under Title II A for instructional coaching. Title II A funds are intended to improve teacher and leader quality and increase student success by providing evidence-based professional development activities that are sustained, intensive, collaborative, job-embedded, data-driven, and classroom-focused (U.S. Department of Education, 2016). To promote and support coaching, the state department of education has provided some guidance around appropriate coaching roles and activities to grant managers – who were most often district curriculum leaders. The state department of education created a guidance document intended to promote methods for implementing and sustaining effective coaching systems and practices that are grounded in research on coaching in educational settings (Vermont Agency of Education, 2016). In it, the department acknowledged that there was a "wide variety of coaches… and interpretations of the coaching practice" within the state and took pains to define coaching and features of an effective coaching system (p. 2). One of the features that they highlighted was "effective coaching cycles" and cited Knight et al.'s (2015) three step coaching cycle. It is important to note that this document was referenced by the state department of education as a resource for recovery planning, which will be detailed later in this chapter.

In recent years, the state department of education has sponsored and facilitated some networked improvement communities for instructional coaches with the goal of defining the role of the instructional coach in schools within the state and creating resources to support instructional coaches in their practice (Vermont Agency of Education, 2019). Currently, there are no professional standards for instructional coaches in the state nor is there a license that is specifically for instructional coaches (Vermont Agency of Education, 2021a).

As of this writing, there is no data kept by the department of education on how many instructional coaches are employed throughout the state or how they are recruited or supervised. However, data from Schoolspring.com, which is an online job board for candidates and employers in schools, provided some perspective. A search on the term "coach" in the state, filtering out athletic coaches, yielded a host of job titles such as: Literacy/Math Interventionist, Social Emotional Learning Coordinator, Literacy Specialist, Behavior Coach, Proficiency-Based Learning Coach, and Mathematics Coach (Schoolspring.com, n.d.). One posting in particular for a "Math Instructional Coach & Curriculum Leader (K-8)" was illustrative of the duties and qualifications expected of coaches in the state. The position was a one-year position that was funded through federal recovery grant money. It was posted on June 17, 2022 and remained open on July 15, 2022.

Duties included: (a) working with the director of curriculum, instruction and assessment to review and analyze student assessment data to develop goals; (b) modeling high-quality first instruction in classrooms; (c) providing professional learning opportunities in Math instruction and progress monitoring; (d) co-facilitating the PreK-12 district math curriculum team; (e) Coordinating horizontal and vertical curricular alignment; (f) maintaining positive professional interactions; (g) creating collaborative culture and a team approach to meeting all students` needs; and (h) providing limited instructional intervention and assessment. Qualifications included: (a) experience in classroom math instruction and intervention at the K-8 level; (b) Knowledge of K-8 math progressions; (c) facilitation skills; (d) excellent communication skills; (d) attention to detail and a flexible approach to work; (e) strong organization and planning skills; (f) deep understanding of Multi-Tiered Systems of Supports; (g) experience using data to drive instructional decisions; and (h) understanding of equitable classroom practices.

School Improvement Initiatives

In Vermont, there were two school improvement initiatives that were underway statewide when the COVID-19 pandemic arose: Proficiency-Based Learning and Multi-Tiered Systems of Support. These two initiatives were interrelated and pertain to promoting student progress in relation to specific standards for learning using personalized instructional strategies and supports. It is important to note and understand them both because the work of the instructional coaches who participated in this study

was often linked to these initiatives, which was evident on Schoolspring, as noted previously.

Several years ago, the state passed legislation and education quality standards enacting Proficiency-Based Learning in all public schools within the state (Vermont Agency of Education, 2013a; 2013b). Proficiency-based learning – also known as competency-based learning – is a student-centered system of instruction, assessment, grading, and reporting where students demonstrate their progress towards standards for knowledge and skills that they are expected to learn. The goal of is to ensure that all students acquire the knowledge and skills that they need to be successful in school, higher education, careers, and adult life. For students who are in danger of being unsuccessful achieving the proficiency-based standards, the state envisions using MTSS to meet students' individual needs so that they can be successful (Great Schools Partnership, 2022).

Multi-Tiered Systems of Supports (MTSS) is a proactive, data-driven framework that employs a school-wide approach to meeting the academic and social emotional needs of all students. The goal is to identify individual needs early and provide supports – often referred to as *interventions* – that target those needs. The "tiers" correspond to different intensities of support in terms of content, frequency, and duration. Supports may be academic or behavioral. The MTSS framework grew out of two other intervention frameworks: Response to Intervention (RTI) and Positive Behavior Interventions and

Supports (PBIS). MTSS is a comprehensive approach that relies on five interrelated components: (a) a systemic and comprehensive approach, (b) effective collaboration, (c) high-quality instruction and interventions, (d) comprehensive and balanced assessment system, and (e) expertise. MTSS is meant to be integrated with the special education and Education Support Team (EST) systems to provide seamless support to students and create equitable outcomes (Vermont Agency of Education, 2019a).

ESSER Planning

On March 27, 2020, Congress signed the Coronavirus Aid Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act into law. Among other things, this law set aside money for an Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) Fund, which local educational agencies could use to address the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on schools. As the pandemic continued, additional legislation was passed to provide schools with relief. The Coronavirus Response and Relief Supplemental Appropriations (CRRSA) Act, 2021, was signed into law on December 27, 2020, and the American Rescue Plan (ARP) Act was signed into law on March 11, 2021 (U.S. Department of Education Office of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2022). With each of these relief acts, school districts needed to file extensive recovery plans with the state department of education to receive funds.

The instructional coaches who participated in this study were often drawn into this work both as members of recovery planning teams and as a recovery strategy. In the

state plan filed with the U.S. Department of Education and in technical guidance offered to school districts, the state department of education encouraged this by highlighting coaching specifically as a recovery strategy (Vermont Agency of Education, 2021b). As a result, districts within the state included instructional coaching in their recovery plans as a professional development strategy for recovering academic gains. Virtually all of the districts of coaches included in this study who had recovery plans available on their websites cited instructional coaching as a recovery strategy. For example, in one district's recovery plan filed in spring of 2021, providing instructional coaching was mentioned as a strategy for improving social-emotional learning, engagement, and academic achievement that would be financed using ESSER funds (CVSD, 2021). However, none of the instructional coaches who participated in this study were funded this way because all were employed as instructional coaches prior to passage of the CARES Act.

Participants

As previously noted in Chapter 3, the size of the coaching population in Vermont is quite small. Therefore, I was concerned that providing details about each participant could compromise the confidentiality of this study. In this section, I describe the nine participants in the study in general terms

All of nine of the instructional coaches who participated in this study were working as coaches in public-school districts in Vermont between March 18, 2020 and March 31, 2021. The participants had between one and seven years of experience

coaching. Three of the coaches were in their first year of coaching when the pandemic hit. Three had between three and four years of experience, and two had six or seven. All had received some training in instructional coaching. Six coaches had received training in Knight's (2018) impact cycle, three were trained in Sweeney's (2017) student-centered coaching model, one had been trained in Aguilar's (2013) transformative coaching approach, and one had been trained how to facilitate Garmston's (1993) cognitive coaching.

The instructional coaches varied somewhat regarding their context and focus. Four of the coaches worked at the *district level*, meaning that they worked among multiple schools within the same district and were supervised by a director of curriculum. The other five participants were *school-based*, meaning that they worked as coaches within one school and were supervised by a principal. Each coach had specialized expertise in a particular content area. Four of the participants coached with a literacy focus. Three of the coaches had content expertise in mathematics, and one of them had expertise in science as well. One coach was a social studies specialist but coached across content areas. Three other the participants coached across content areas, too. The participants also varied in what grade levels they supported. Three participants coached at the elementary level (grades K-6), three coached at the middle and/or high school level (grades 7-12), and three coaches across all grade levels.

It is noteworthy that all of the participants in this study were white women. The lack of racial and ethnic diversity was typical of schools in the state where the study was situated. According to the 2016-2017 National Teacher and Principal Survey, more than 95% of teachers are white in northern New England states and more than three quarters of public-school teachers nationally are women (National Center for Education Statistics, 2018). It is also unsurprising that all of the participants were women as Knight (2015a) noted, the majority of instructional coaches generally are women. This limits the generalizability of the study, as a researcher conducting a similar study with participants who are more diverse in terms of gender and race could have different findings.

Initial interviews were conducted in February and March of 2021 and follow up interviews took place one year later in February and March of 2022. One participant was unavailable for a follow up interview but provided feedback on the summary narrative over email. During the follow up interview with Sherryl, the audio was not working so I was not able to record it. Instead, I took notes during the interview and wrote them up in a journal entry immediately following.

Summary

This phenomenological study took place in Vermont, a rural northeastern state where the department of education was already making strides towards defining and promoting instructional coaching as a local policy lever prior to the pandemic. During the pandemic, coaching was highlighted as an effective strategy for improving instruction

and student outcomes in recovery planning. The nine instructional coaches who participated in this study were influenced by this context and represented a relatively diverse perspective of instructional coaches in the state.

Chapter 5: Findings

The purpose of this study was to understand what it meant to be an instructional coach supporting teachers in schools during the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic and to consider what contextual elements affected their work coaching teachers. In this chapter, I present, unpack, and discuss the research findings after analyzing data from multiple interviews with nine coaches across Vermont.

In a phenomenological study, essential themes describe common structures among lived experiences of a particular phenomenon (Vagle, 2018; van Manen, 1997). These themes are then used to develop a composite summary narrative of the phenomenon, which I present in Chapter 6 (Peoples, 2021). In this study, the four essential themes that emerged included: (1) Coaches were doing less coaching; (2) Coaching was mostly surface-level coaching; (3) Contextual factors hindered deeper coaching; and (4) This was not new – COVID-19 magnified pre-existing patterns. Table 7 provides a summary the distribution of essential themes and subthemes across participants. In the next sections, I describe these common, essential themes and illustrate the ways that individual coaches experienced them.

Table 7

Essential Themes and Subthemes Across Participants

Theme	Erin	Eliz	Mag	Mic	Pen	She	Sie	Sus	Vic
Essence #1: Less coaching overall (what?):	**X**	**X**	**X**	**X**	**X**	**X**	**X**	**X**	**X**
All hands on deck	X	X		X	X	X	X	X	X
Curriculum work	X	X	X	X	X			X	
Work w/students	X	X	X		X	X	X	X	X
MTSS/PBL	X	X	X		X	X	X	X	
Essence #2: Coaching depth (how?):	**X**	**X**	**X**	**X**	**X**	**X**	**X**	**X**	**X**
Surface	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Medium	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Deep							X		
Essence #3: Reasons (why?)	**X**	**X**	**X**	**X**	**X**	**X**	**X**	**X**	**X**
Coach preferred other	X			X		X	X	X	X
Coach experience or skills		X							X
Coach was isolated	X	X	X	X		X	X	X	
Teacher interest/capacity	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Coach was diverted		X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Admin support lacking	X		X	X	X			X	X
Coaching culture lacking	X	X	X	X			X	X	X
Essence #4: This is not new (so, what?)	**X**	**X**	**X**	**X**	**X**	**X**	**X**	**X**	**X**
Coach was diverted before COVID-19	X	X			X		X		X
Teachers were not interested before.	X			X		X			X
Lacking support before		X	X			X		X	

The first three essential themes tell the story of *what* instructional coaches were doing, *how* they were coaching, and *why* they were not doing much deep coaching. The fourth essential theme addresses the question: *So, what? What is significant about the shift away from deep coaching that was happening during the first year of the COVID-19?* This theme concerns why these findings matter and what implications the lived experiences of instructional coaches during a time of crisis might have for supporting coaches and coaching more generally. The first three themes demonstrate that the COVID-19 pandemic made it more difficult for instructional coaches to do their intended work for many reasons. However, the fourth essence uncovered a larger narrative, which was that this phenomenon was not necessarily new or unique to the COVID-19 crisis. Instead, the COVID-19 crisis served to exaggerate a pattern that was already in place prior to the outbreak.

In this chapter, I address each of the four essential themes in turn. First, I introduce the essential theme and subthemes. Then, I present and unpack the data for each subtheme. Finally, I provide a discussion of the essential theme and consider how my findings confirm, clarify, extend, or challenge prior research and contribute to theory.

Coaches Were Doing Less Coaching

This first essential theme cropped up before the study had even begun and became increasingly evident as I engaged with the stories of my participants throughout this study. It answers the question: *What were instructional coaches doing during the*

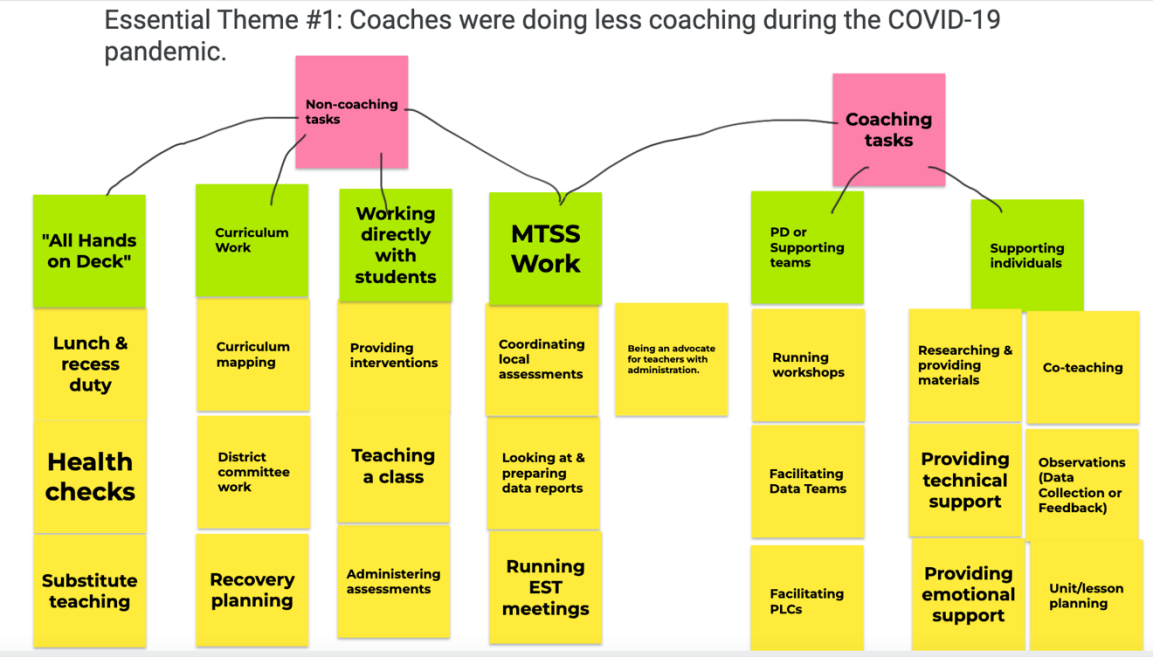
pandemic? In email exchanges with prospective participants during the recruiting stage of this study, coaches relayed that their roles had changed in such a way that they were doing very little coaching. They worried that what they had to say would not be valuable for my research. For example, Penelope responded to my recruitment email with a message saying that she was "happy to participate," but had held off from responding initially because she feel like coaching in a pandemic was "such a mess" that she worried, "I won't have anything helpful to add to the conversation." She speculated that her situation was "no different than that of others." Indeed, she was correct because I soon received eerily similar messages from four other participants.

During concept coding in the second stage of data analysis, I identified *role changes* as a preliminary common theme. However, as I employed the hermeneutic circle and explored more deeply what these role changes meant for the instructional coaches in this study, the label became too broad and needed refinement and specificity (see Figure 5). All nine of the instructional coaches in this study experienced significant changes to their roles during COVID-19 and reported that they were doing less coaching than they had been prior to the pandemic. At the same time, they all acquired responsibilities that they did not consider to be examples of coaching nor part of their role as a coach. There was some variation in how individual coaches experienced this theme, which was evident in differences in the distribution of the four subthemes that related to this essential theme. These subthemes are: (a) all hands on deck; (b) curriculum work; (c) working directly

with students; and (d) work on school reform initiatives. In this section, I unpack each of these subthemes in turn using quotes from instructional coaches to illustrate how they experienced this essential theme.

Figure 5

Jamboard of Essential Theme #1 and Subthemes



"All Hands on Deck"

The label for this theme came from Erin who used this phrase multiple times in her initial interview and explained, "Very quickly, I got pulled out (of coaching)… and almost became like a backup administrator." She added that "there were so many things that needed to be done, and it was an all hands on deck approach." *All hands on deck*

responsibilities were tasks that the coaches were doing that did not have any direct connection to instruction and took their focus away from instructional coaching. Eight coaches experienced this kind of role change in their setting to some extent with school-based coaches experiencing it most acutely.

New health protocols that accompanied a return to in-person learning in fall of 2020 required schools to take students' temperatures and do health screenings each morning before school. School-based coaches, who were in the school at all times and ordinarily have relatively flexible schedules to accommodate their coaching activities, were often called on by their administrators for those tasks. Sherryl noted, "as someone who didn't have things in my schedule, I had those things added to my responsibilities. I would go out and do screenings because that was part of my job. I would spend an hour outside asking questions and taking temperatures to let children into the building."

Like Sherryl, Sierra was a school-based coach who "lost 45 minutes every day in the morning with the staggered arrival… taking temperatures." She also had additional duties added to her schedule that were not related to health screenings but were added to alleviate pressure on teachers and administrators. She reflected that she was "on duty a lot" as she was doing both lunch and recess duty daily, which took her another 35 minutes every day. She lamented the loss of potential coaching time, but said, "There's nothing you can do to get around that. I mean, you just have to do it."

Similarly, Erin found herself responsible for additional duties that took her focus away from coaching, too. Her responsibilities included kindergarten dismissal and drop off as well as delivering lunches every day because lunch was in the classroom. She noted that "these are just logistical things that we're not staffed for."

Sometimes *all hands on deck* tasks included district-level responsibilities. District level coaches tended to be more likely to experience this. For example, Michelle found herself spending quite a bit of time doing computer data entry and database work, which she admitted was "really not my thing at all, but somebody had to do it." District level coaches in Elizabeth's district spent time large amounts of time working with their director of curriculum to articulate expectations for student attendance and create virtual schedules during the early days of the pandemic. This was work that had to be done, and it was perceived that coaches had time.

Curriculum Work

Curriculum work included tasks like creating curriculum maps, participating in district committee work, and working on state recovery planning to receive ESSER funds. Although instructional coaches need a strong understanding of curriculum to support teachers, the coaches did not define curriculum work for its own sake as a coaching activity unless it involved facilitating that work with teachers. Six coaches described additional curriculum work that they did without teachers. Sometimes they were working isolation. Other times they collaborated with other coaches or

administrators. Interestingly, all but one of the coaches who were drawn into more curriculum work during the COVID-19 crisis were coaching at the district level.

Coaches like Elizabeth were focused on "keeping the district on the right path with recovery planning" and wondered "who did that work in districts that didn't have coaches." When asked how she was spending her time in February of 2021, Susan remarked, "Honestly, I spend a lot of time in my office doing data reports and curriculum mapping. So, my work has turned into more office work than coaching work."

In her role as a district coach in a small district, curriculum work became Michelle's primary role. Describing how she had been spending time her time the 2020-2021 school year, she shared that she was mostly "doing curriculum work," which involved formatting language arts scales, gathering materials, and "making sure everything was linked together" to support proficiency-based learning initiatives in her district. She marveled at how much curriculum work she and the director of curriculum in her district were able to get done since Michelle had been spending her time on that instead of coaching. Similarly, Maggie mentioned that she was "working a lot with the curriculum director" in spring of 2020 to roll out a proficiency-based learning initiative in June. She described spending a good deal of time and energy "putting together a presentation to get ready for that." Penelope recalled that "the support we were giving was more of a curriculum coordinator would do - developing materials and curriculum and less of actual getting into classrooms and coaching."

Working Directly with Students

Eight coaches experienced role changes that involved working directly with students during the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic. This work came in many forms, such as: providing interventions, administering assessments, long and short-term substitute teaching, and managing remote students. Potentially, it could be a part of a coach's role to work with students in a situation where they were modeling instructional practices for a teacher. These instances described by coaches did not fit that description and were oriented towards filling an immediate need than building teacher capacity. It is worth noting that the coaches who were tasked with working directly with students were all school-based coaches.

Erin, Sherryl, Sierra, Penelope, and Susan were all responsible for providing instructional interventions for individuals or small groups of students. All of these coaches were content area specialists who were based in one school during the first year of COVID-19. Sierra, Susan, and Penelope began providing interventions virtually during the period when instruction was remote, in spring of 2020, and when teachers prompted them for help with students who were difficult to engage in remote learning. For Sierra, this mean that she was " meeting a lot with kids in two or three in a group or one-on-one as long as the parents were okay with that." During the 2020-2021 school year, Sherryl was providing math interventions outside of class for four groups of

elementary students and was also supporting students within another class each day. She noted that this work "really pulled (her) away from being a coach."

Erin, Elizabeth, Penelope, and Sherryl were all tasked with administering assessments with students. Sometimes this happened because teachers were "maxed out" and could not spare the time for the many interview-style screening and diagnostic assessments that were being used to gauge and monitor progress after the learning loss that accompanied remote learning for many students. Other times, coaches were asked to administer assessments for students who had opted to be remote for the 2020-2021 school year. Penelope shared, that after about a month of school in fall of 2020, her director of curriculum contacted her to have her administer assessments for remote students in the primary grades (Kindergarten through grade 2) "so we (coaches) took on that role of assessing of those virtual students."

Sherryl, Sierra, Susan, and Vicky spent a significant amount of time substitute teaching during the 2020-2021 school year. Typically, as school-based coaches, their principal asked them to cover for teachers who were out because they were close contacts. Vicky explained, "Something that I have been doing almost every day this semester is subbing during a block that I only had one data team that I met with." Additionally, Vicky was coordinating her district's remote learning option. Sierra and Vicky were also pulled to teach one or more classes. Sierra shared that staffing shortages meant that she "had to go back into the classroom" teaching a 70-minute class every

other day, and then a 35-minute class two days a week," both of which impacted her availability to support teachers.

The coaches acknowledged that their direct work with students took time away from their work with teachers, but some noticed that there were aspects of this work that aided their coaching. For example, Sherryl felt that facilitating interventions "enabled (her) to see more of the workings of an elementary school," which was valuable to her since her background was at the secondary level. Sierra and Vicky both posited that it was beneficial to them as coaches to teach a class during the pandemic because it allowed them to have a teacher's perspective.

Multi-tiered Systems of Support Work

The period of remote and hybrid learning created a situation where the achievement gap between vulnerable students and their better resourced counterparts widened significantly (Kuhfield & Tarasawa, 2020). As a result, the schools where coaches were working to bolster and tighten their support systems to improve outcomes for those students. Instructional coaches were often engaged in this work either at the district or school level. Seven participants reported that they were spending time supporting MTSS in their schools in some capacity. This work included activities like coordinating local screening assessments, preparing data reports, and facilitating educational support team (EST) meetings. Initially it was hard for me to discern whether this MTSS work was coaching related or not because coaches had various opinions about

whether supporting MTSS was a part of their role as coach or not. Eventually, I decided to include it as a non-coaching responsibility because it did not directly relate to any of the coaching models that coaches in the study were following.

District level coaches, like Maggie were instrumental in "leading the charge" and work with district-level team to envision and design a roll out for the initiative across all schools in the system. She noted that this work was difficult because it required a "culture shift" for educators as well as a procedural changes. The work also required intensive data collection and analysis which often fell to coaches who tended to have some expertise in data analysis. Susan related that her one of her responsibilities was to organize data reports to "figure out who's falling through the cracks" within her school. Likewise, Michelle was compiling data at the district level to support MTSS.

Discussion of Coaches Doing Less Coaching

The COVID-19 pandemic coupled with staffing shortages created a situation where the school systems in Vermont involved in this study were struggling to find human resources to meet needs. The ever-evolving safety guidelines and protocols placed new responsibilities on schools for health checks, lunch deliveries, hygiene and masking routines, and social distancing that they were not necessarily staffed to accommodate. During this time, students had heightened academic and social-emotional needs, and teachers and administrators were overwhelmed by their respective responsibilities. Meanwhile, the instructional coaches included in this study had schedules that were

intentionally flexible so that they could be available to meet with various teachers and attend classes as needed to make coaching possible.

Under these conditions, instructional coaches' roles changed considerably as they were assigned a host of tasks and responsibilities that were at best loosely related to coaching. School-based coaches were taking temperatures, performing health checks, delivering lunches, and overseeing dismissal, none of which leveraged their instructional expertise. They were also spending time working directly with students providing interventions, administering assessments, teaching unstaffed classes, and coordinating the remote school, none of which focused on building the capacity of other teachers. District level coaches were spending the bulk of their time working on curriculum work to support implementation of proficiency-based learning and coordination of new assessments in their district. Supporting MTSS initiatives became a focal point for both school and district level coaches to address the student needs that were identified and addressed in recovery planning. As a result, coaches reported that less of their time was devoted to directly supporting teachers than had been prior to COVID-19. They also had the sense that they were not doing much that was "really coaching" during the first year of the pandemic.

These results were consistent with many elements from published articles on instructional coaching during COVID-19. It confirms early projections of learning loss (Kuhfield & Tarasawa, 2020) and the identified need to provide teachers with support to

address it (Calais et al., 2020; Jackson & Keirstead, 2020). However, the recommendations for investments in instructional coaching as a remedy for the problem (Calais et al., 2020; Jackson & Keirstead, 2020) assume that instructional coaches would be able to devote enough time to coaching to address it. What happens when coaches are unable to devote time to coaching? Skiffington's (2022) observation that coaches need to protect time for coaching during the pandemic seems particularly poignant in light of the findings in this study, but she provided no guidance for how a coach would do that.

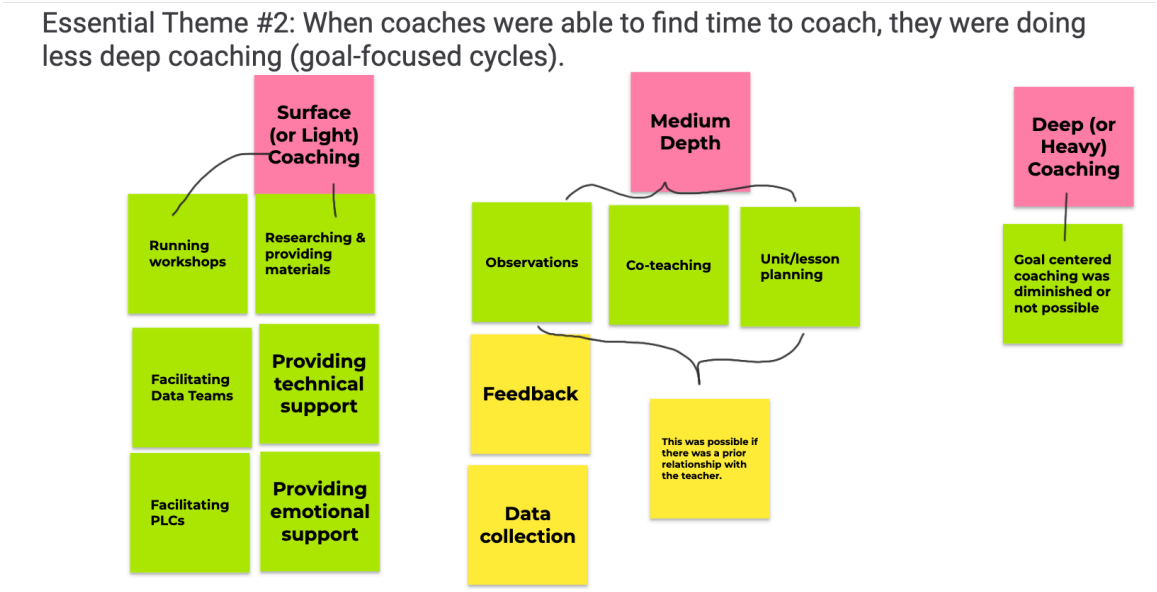
Ippolito et al.'s (2021) suggestion that coaching was fundamentally disrupted by COVID-19 and must be reexamined seems justified by these findings. Likewise, their emphasis on the need to redefine the roles and routines of coaches moving forward and assertion that the number of roles and responsibilities that coaches have has increased even further due to the pandemic is consistent with the findings from this study. Clearly, the instructional coaches in this study experienced role ambiguity that diluted their role as a coach which is consistent with the findings of other researchers (Deussen et al, 2007; Gallucci et al., 2010; Killion 2009; Woulfin, 2020). However, questions remain. In what ways does having dual roles – for example "instructional coach/literacy coordinator" – like many of the participants in this study impact their understanding of their role? How should the role of an instructional coach be defined and maintained to provide effective coaching during a prolonged crisis? Which types of coaching activities and responsibilities should be prioritized?

Coaching Was Mostly Surface-level

The second essential theme that emerged pertained to the question: *How were instructional coaches working with teachers when they were able to coach during the first year of the COVID-19 crisis?* Even though instructional coaches had added "non coaching" responsibilities during the first year of COVID-19, every coach reported that they were able to carve out some time for coaching activities, either supporting teams or individual teachers. These codes were included, but not explored in the Jamboard for the first essential theme (see Figure 5). I copied them to a new board and went back to the texts using pattern coding to develop this second essential theme (see Figure 6). In terms of depth, these instructional coaching activities fell on a continuum that ranged from surface-level to deep. I have used three categories to distinguish the depth of a coaching activity based on Killion (2008) and Knight's (2015b) definitions: surface-level, medium-depth, and deep coaching. This analysis revealed the second essential theme which was that coaches were doing mostly surface-level coaching activities and less deep coaching, like coaching cycles. In this section, I describe the theme and how instructional coaches experienced this essential theme across the three levels of coaching depth, which are subthemes.

Figure 6

Jamboard of Essential Theme #2 and Subthemes



Surface-Level Coaching

Most of the instructional coaching activities in which participants engaged during the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic were examples of surface-level coaching. There were forty-one references to surface-level coaching activities across all nine participants. Surface-level activities included providing resources, technical support, and emotional support for individual teachers. These activities tended to be fleeting and technically oriented rather than reflective and sustained. Vicky described this type of coaching as "providing a quick fix." Facilitation of workshops, data teams, and professional learning

communities were also considered surface-level activities unless they were sustained over a period of weeks and involved reflection and individualized goal setting.

Much of the coaching work that coaches in this study described themselves doing during the first year of the pandemic can be characterized as *resource provision.* All nine coaches spent a significant amount of their coaching time providing resources for teachers. Sometimes teachers solicited this kind of support from a coach. For example, Vicky explained, "I was a resource for teachers, you know, 'I need help with this...'" and then she would get them what they needed. Michelle shared that she was "obviously just a resource who provided resources," and noted that she was not running coaching cycles at all. She lamented that she didn't feel like she was helping teachers improve their practice as much as she was "helping them to just do the work" which was a "really different" focus.

Coaches with an aptitude for technological tools – like Susan, Sierra, Elizabeth, Michelle, and Penelope – found a niche for themselves by providing teachers with support around the use of instructional technology. For example, Penelope shared that when she returned to school in September of 2020 and was helping teachers prepare for hybrid instruction, she was mainly supporting teachers with "tech ideas and tech support." At one point, she found herself thinking, "Hey, maybe I should be a technology integrationist. I'm kind of good at this!"

During the first year of the pandemic, districts used workshops and PLCs within schools or districts as a vehicle for professional learning. Most coaches participating in this study were working in schools where release time within the school day was part of the schedule during the first year of the pandemic. Coaches described using this time to facilitate workshops or teams. Susan explained that "the coaching role we took on was providing a few workshops on social, emotional learning" during this release time. Meanwhile, Erin was doing data reviews with each grade-level teams at her school focusing on "talking about specific kids and coming up with plans." This work was largely focused on immediate needs and challenges instead of sustained reflection and analysis.

Regardless of the type of activity, all coaches observed that there was a need to attend to the emotional wellness of teachers who were incredibly stressed during this time. Sierra recalled that at collaborative team meetings, "we might not start our real agenda for 15 or 20 minutes because they just needed to dump and unload." Elizabeth reported that her role became closer to being a counselor than coach with the arrival of the pandemic. She explained that "when COVID-19 hit, it almost became more like supporting people with emotion regulation" and her "one-on-one relationships became a lot less about big picture instruction and student progress and much more about teacher survival."

Medium-Depth Coaching

Although most of their coaching interactions during the pandemic can be categorized as surface-level, all participants reported engaging in some medium-depth coaching activities with teachers as well. There were fourteen references to medium-depth activities across all participants. These were activities – like co-planning, co-teaching, collecting data, and conducting observations – that were focused on improving instruction as opposed to quick fixes. However, they were not carried out as part of a sustained, goal-driven coaching cycle, which would be considered deep coaching. Instead, they were shorter term and focused on learning specific strategies.

For the most part these interactions occurred between coaches and teachers who already had a strong coaching relationship prior to the onset of the pandemic. For instance, Penelope described meeting regularly with a particular teacher with whom she had a strong prior relationship to look at student work together, and she also visited that teacher's class once a week throughout fall of 2021. However, Penelope was careful to point out that it was not a coaching cycle, like the two have them had engaged in before the pandemic. Maggie shared that she, too, had been able leverage a prior relationship to engage in this type of work. She recollected coaching interactions with a teacher who "reminded (her) of one of (her) sons" who asked for her help implementing a certain balanced literacy structure. The two of them met over the summer in 2020 and worked together a few times throughout the fall implementing the strategy. She reflected that, "it

comes back to the big R word – *relationships*" that made these coaching interactions possible.

Sometimes coaches were able to leverage the work that they were facilitating with teams to accomplish medium depth coaching. Erin had been facilitating data teams in spring and fall of 2020. When teachers began to be "less stressed" towards the end of 2020, data teams started asking her, "Can we meet and think about how we're going to make our reading workshop more explicit?" As a result, by February of 2021, she was starting to do more coaching in the form of "side-by-side planning and providing resources, but definitely still no instructional coaching cycles at all."

Deep Coaching

All coaches reported that deep coaching, which involves facilitation of coaching cycles, was diminished or non-existent during the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic. As described in Chapter 2, coaching cycles vary somewhat depending on the model, but typically, they begin with one or more meetings between a teacher and coach to look at data to develop a student-oriented goal and plan. Then, the teacher carries out the plan while the coach observes before reflecting together on the progress made towards the goal and considering next steps. There were just four references to deep coaching activities in the initial interviews that were distributed among three participants – Sierra, Sherryl, and Susan.

Of all the coaches included in this study, Sierra reported the most success facilitating deep coaching with teachers. She recalled that, in spring 2020, the coaching cycles that were in progress between she and teachers "just stopped." Then, the first part of the 2020-2021 school year was focused on "just resources and how can I support teachers?" By the end of 2020, Sierra was resolved to get back on track with coaching cycles. Since she still wasn't allowed to be in classrooms, she had to get "a little bit creative." She developed a virtual coaching format that she used with a couple of teachers with whom she had facilitated coaching cycles prior to the pandemic. They videotaped their class, each watched the videotape separately, then met virtually to debrief. She was even able to set up some data collection either using video or by lingering just outside the doorway of a class.

Sherryl described a coaching relationship that she believed came very close to an example of deep coaching. It arose out of her proximity to a teacher with whom she was "podded," or sharing a classroom space for the 2020-2021 school year. She stated, "We've been doing one long coaching cycle," but then reconsidered and decided it was "almost" a cycle. She explained that "it was not formalized" with a goal, but the teacher would have an idea and the two of them would discuss it. He would "pick (her) brain" beforehand. Then, they would teach the class together and talk about it afterwards. Reflecting, they would say things like, 'What did you think about this piece? And how do you think this went? I'm thinking we'll do this differently'" It was close to a cycle since it

involved examining instructional practices. However, it lacked the articulation of a goal and data collection to monitor and guide the work.

In her initial interview, Susan, who had been trained in Sweeney's (2017) student-centered coaching model, shared that she had been "doing cycles" with the high school English teachers. She described this work as using data to set goals and "pick(ing) a standard or a place that they wanted to improve based on what (they) figured out when (they) looked at the data and in conjunction with what they were seeing in the class." However, during her follow up interview, Susan relayed that it was not possible for her to maintain the integrity of these cycles, which "mostly turned into unit planning and things like that, more like relational coaching."

Discussion of Mostly Surface Coaching

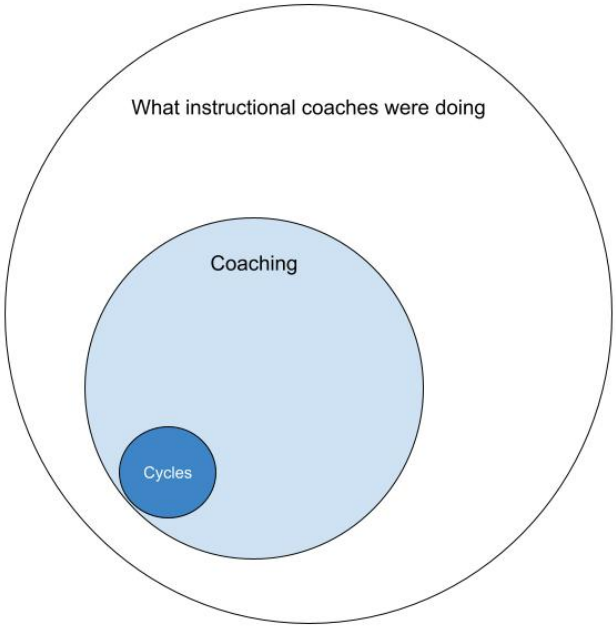
Even though the instructional coaches involved in this study were doing less coaching overall during the COVID-19 pandemic, all engaged in some coaching work involving direct support of teachers. Despite having training on how to facilitate coaching cycles, most of the support activities that instructional coaches engaged in with teachers during the first year of the pandemic were at the surface-level. These activities included resource provision, support with instructional technology, unsustained facilitation of workshops and teams, and emotional support for teachers. This work was meant to improve teachers' immediate circumstances, but it lacked the focus on improving instruction and sustained application that adult learning theory requires to achieve

transformative changes in practice. Transformative learning is the type of learning that Mezirow (1994) envisioned for teachers and is the andragogical aim inherent in deeper levels of coaching.

Instructional coaches were able to engage some teachers in medium depth coaching when there were strong preexisting relationships that were centered around instructional improvement. These activities were slightly longer term and usually involved learning specific instructional skills without systematically analyzing their impact on students. These activities included looking at student work and data, co-planning, learning specific strategies, and co-teaching without reflecting on a specific goal to drive decision making. Deep coaching, which involves goal-driven work that is sustained over a period of weeks, remained out of reach for coaches throughout the first year of the pandemic for all but one coach. Figure 7 provides a visual model to illustrate the work coaches were doing during the first year of the pandemic. It shows that cycle-oriented deep coaching was a small subset of their overall workload.

Figure 7

The Work of Coaches During COVID-19



As mentioned previously in Chapter 2, coaching models that include goal-driven coaching cycles have been prevalent in peer reviewed research on coaching in recent years (Hanno, 2022; Knight & Skrtic, 2021; Kurz et al., 2017; L'Allier & Brown, 2021; Woulfin, 2020). Likewise, coaching cycles have been promoted in research-based instructional coaching models (Garmston, 1993; Knight, 2018; Sweeney, 2017). More recently, researchers examining instructional coaching during the COVID-19 pandemic (Calais et al., 2020; Ippolito et al., 2021; Jackson & Keirstead, 2020; Wells & Foster, 2022) have recommended virtual coaching models that revolve around coaching cycles. All of this indicates that coaching cycles should be at the core of the work that

instructional coaches do with teachers, regardless of whether there is a pandemic. Yet, findings from this study suggest that coaching cycles were not happening during the first year of the pandemic. Why was this happening? Why was deep coaching the exception rather than the rule during the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic? This question is addressed with the next essential theme.

Contextual Factors Hindered Deeper Coaching

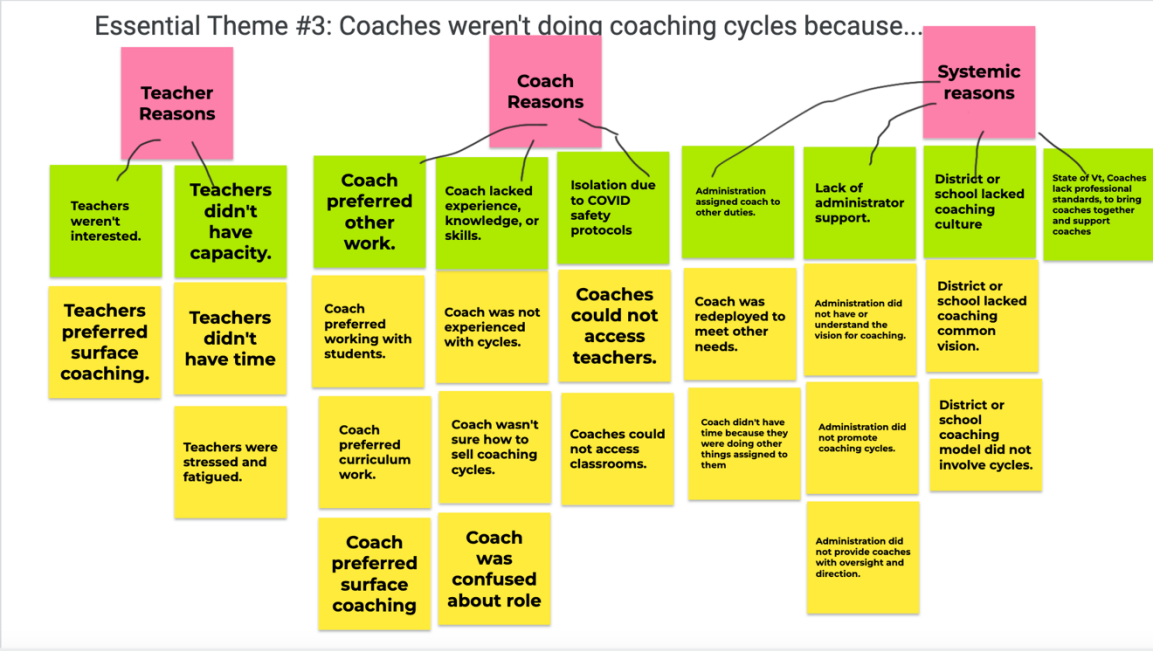
This third essential theme addresses the question: *Why was deep coaching the exception rather than the rule during the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic?* Hints of this theme initially became evident during concept coding in the second stage of data analysis. I had identified *being isolated from teachers*, *lacking systems of support*, and *role changes* as preliminary common themes. However, as I continued to engage in the whole-part-whole analysis that is characteristic of hermeneutic phenomenological methodology, I began to see a common structure underlying these themes. There was a common meaning behind them. The instructional coaches in my study were touching upon these themes to explain why they were not able to coach during the pandemic as they had been trained to. During pattern coding, I began to see other reasons emerge, too (see Figure 8). All addressed the question: *why was this happening?* Why were coaches not facilitating coaching cycles?

The instructional coaches' stories pointed to various reasons that fit into three general categories: coach-centered reasons, teacher stress and capacity, and system-

centered reasons, which had to do with the systems of support within which the teachers and coaches were operating. In this section, I use these categories, which align with Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems and are ordered from the inside (individual) level out, to describe how instructional coaches experienced this essential theme.

Figure 8

Jamboard of Essential Theme #3 and Subthemes



Coach Reasons – Individual

During my initial analysis of the first set of interviews, I noticed statements where the preliminary theme *role changes* coincided with the ecological systems code, *individual.* Looking back at these statements and re-listening to the audio, it seemed that there were some coach-centered reasons that contributed to the role changes they

experiences and the overall decline in deeper coaching activities. This subtheme was evident in the experiences of eight of nine instructional coaches. These reasons included: the coach's preference for other work, the coach's lack of experience and/or skills facilitating cycles, and the coach's isolation from teachers. In the following sections, I provide details about each one.

Coaches preferred other work. Six participants expressed their own preference for work that did not involve deep coaching during the COVID-19 pandemic. Some coaches were attracted to non-coaching activities like working with students and curriculum work. Michelle shared that the pandemic provided an opportunity to focus on data and assessment and stated that she "welcomed the change" even though it curbed her availability for coaching.

On the other hand, Susan became been frustrated "spinning her wheels" with coaching during the pandemic and found purpose and fulfillment doing intervention work with students who were "all over the place" because they had "disappeared during the period when schools were remote. She explained that she felt that being an interventionist was the best use of her time as opposed to coaching, which felt to her like "I'm not sure where I'm needed right now or what we can do."

Vicky expressed her own preference for surface coaching activities during the COVID-19 pandemic. She stated, "I really enjoy the (surface) coaching pieces" and explained that she liked being able to engage with people in brief interactions focused on

"quick wins" especially during the pandemic. She liked to be able to "walk around and, gauge what they need and help on the fly." As a result, she tended to gravitate towards surface-level coaching activities with teachers during the first year of COVID-19.

Coach lacked experience, knowledge, or skills. As I mentioned in Chapter 2, instructional coaches need a set of skills to be able to facilitate coaching cycles. All of the coaches participating in this study mentioned training that they had received on instructional coaching. Penelope and Susan had attended training on Student-Centered Coaching with Diane Sweeney. Elizabeth has completed some training on Transformational Coaching with Elena Aguilar. Erin, Vicky, Sherryl, and Sierra had received training on Jim Knight's Instructional Coaching model. Even so, two coaches indicated that their own inexperience with facilitating cycles might have been an obstacle for them.

Erin, who was in her first year of coaching in spring of 2020, shared that she was not doing any coaching cycles at all during the 2020-2021 school year. Since she was new to the job, she was just starting to "wrap her head round" instructional coaching in March of 2020. Likewise, Vicky hypothesized that her preference for surface coaching activities came from her own lack of experience. She expressed that she had "not done a lot of in-depth coaching cycles with teachers" and was "sure that part or most of that is (her) fault."

Coach was isolated from teachers. All coaches described isolation that they experienced during spring of 2020 when schools were remote and all staff were working remotely from home. Even after schools returned to in person learning in fall of 2020, safety precautions that were meant to protect staff and students from COVID-19 infections created a situation where teachers and classrooms were less accessible to coaches. During this time, eight instructional coaches experienced isolation that contributed to them doing less coaching or more surface level coaching.

Some coaches were entirely remote during the 2020-2021 school year which coincided with less actual coaching work. Both Susan and Michelle were spending much of their time working remotely from home and remarked on the isolation they experienced that was constraining their coaching. Working remotely, Susan's job became more about "desk work" than coaching. She remarked that she was "a little like a cave elf" in her office. Michelle remarked that "not being in the classroom is just a real disadvantage." As her job shifted from coaching to curriculum work, Michelle noted that some days she thought, "Oh, I haven't talked to anybody in the district in three days… I could be dead, and no one would know it."

For some coaches who were working in schools daily, being unable to visit classes or meet in person made collaboration more challenging. Maggie shared that she could no longer go into a room and meet with someone and that it was negatively affecting her coaching. She lamented that with virtual collaboration, she could not have

the same level of "colleagueship and comradery" anymore. Elizabeth shared a similar sentiment explaining that she was "a tactile person" and she had to rethink what collaboration looked like when she had to switch to virtual means. She was making do but was "grieving the lack of personal contact." In the first half of the 2020-2021 school year, Sierra spent most of her time "sitting in a room by herself not in contact with anybody," which made her realize how much she depended on her ability to "just open a door and pop in and have a conversation" to engage teachers in deeper levels of coaching prior to the pandemic. The level of formality and coordination that was needed to interact with teachers felt like a barrier for her in her coaching work. Michelle shared a similar story.

As schools were struggling to meet social distancing guidelines every available space in a school was being used. Often this left instructional coaches without a designated workspace. Elizabeth described how losing her office space constrained her coaching. Prior to the pandemic, teachers were drawn into her office because it "had the Keurig and the free coffee pods and box of chocolate on the table." Teachers would stop by to partake and chat, which often led "formal coaching sessions." Erin lost her office space, too, and instead had a desk set up for her to work in a kindergarten hallway. Losing office space made it difficult for these coaches to provide and maintain confidentiality, which was needed to engage in deeper levels of coaching.

Teacher Reasons – Micro- and Mesosystems

During the first immersion stage of data analysis, it became obvious that there were high levels of stress and fatigue in the schools where coaches were working. During concept coding, these statements seemed indicative of a preliminary theme *collective stress,* which became a code in NVivo during the second stage of data analysis. As I coded the data, I observed that the code, *collective stress,* tended to be accompanied by lifeworld codes for *corporeal*, *temporal*, and *relational reflections* and the ecological systems codes, *microsystem* and *mesosystem.* I noticed that most of these statements spoke of extraordinarily high teacher stress levels. Specifically, instructional coaches were citing teacher stress levels as a reason why deep coaching was not happening during the first year of the pandemic. Under the circumstances, teachers were either more unwilling to engage in coaching or preferred surface coaching activities. Since coaching was voluntary, this meant that fewer teachers were enrolling in coaching.

Initially, I had two subthemes in this category. I reasoned that the teachers' unwillingness could be attributable to not having interest or not having capacity. So, I created one code for each. One was *teachers' lack of interest* in deep coaching, meaning that they had the capacity but preferred not to work with a coach or preferred surface coaching. The other was *teachers' lack of capacity* which meant that they would access coaching if they could, but they lacked the necessary time. During the synthesis and theme development stage of data analysis, I began to re-code the data and noticed that it

was difficult to differentiate between these subthemes based on the coaches' secondhand reflections. Therefore, I combined theme into a single category.

Every instructional coach participating in this study described a decline in teacher interest in or capacity for instructional coaching that got in the way of deep coaching. In interviews, there were 35 references distributed across all participants. They described a situation where unprecedented work demands and stress levels for teachers effectively made teachers unavailable for coaching both literally and figuratively. Susan explained that teachers in her school had lost much of planning time they were accustomed to having which curbed their interest in coaching. Erin reflected that "it was all anyone could do to just show up and teach" because teachers were "so stressed" and "stretched so thin." Commenting on teacher stress levels, Elizabeth shared that she had become something of a "therapy dog" for teachers.

During the first spring and summer of the pandemic, high teacher stress levels and strictly remote communication meant that teachers often avoided coaches and coaching altogether when they could. For example, Maggie was a district level coach with plenty of availability for coaching teachers. However, when she reached out to teachers over email to offer help, she would "seldom… even get a response" from teachers. As a result, she became "very guarded" and avoided actively trying to enroll teachers after that. In situations where teachers were required to interact with coaches regularly in PLCs or data teams, coaches often got the message that they would prefer not to. Sherryl recalled,

“Often I could tell that they had something else they thought they should be doing that it wasn't necessarily going to be beneficial to have that meeting with me.”

Throughout the first half of the 2020-2021 school year, teachers remained reluctant to engage in more sustained coaching activities like coaching cycles. Speaking specifically about her attempts to enroll teachers in coaching cycles during the 2020-2021 school year, Sierra shared that teachers were saying, “No, I just don't have the time for that.” She would try to convince them by explaining that this type of coaching is about “work(ing) on something that you want to work on… not adding something to your plate.” However, even by the beginning of 2021, she was finding that teachers were “just so resistant to it still.” Erin explained that to be able to coach at deeper levels, she would need teachers “who are open to that” and observed that in winter of 2021, classroom teachers were still “just getting by… just getting through every day.”

When teachers did reach out to coaches for support, often they were interested in the kinds of quick fixes that accompany surface coaching. For instance, Vicky had teachers asking for her help setting up Google classroom and gathering electronic resources and noted that it was less like a health care plan and more like “doing triage” with teachers. Michelle recollected teachers contacting her wanting help with an online literacy assessment and wanted her to “talk them through the data.” Likewise, Penelope had teachers reaching out “wanting things” that were “not what (she) wanted to be doing

for coaching." She was hoping for deeper coaching interactions, but teachers were saying, "I need this resource. I need this video."

Systemic Reasons – Exo- and Macrosystems

This subtheme directly relates to my second research question regarding what supported and hindered coaches in their work facilitating coaching cycles with teachers during a time of prolonged crisis. I was continuously mindful of this research question throughout data collection and analysis. In the first immersion stage, I noticed that not only were coaches experiencing a multitude of role changes that were distancing them from coaching, but there was also an undercurrent of confusion among coaches about what they should be doing and what their coaching role should be. Multiple coaches described feeling "lost" and needing direction. In a journal entry at the time, I reflected on this and jotted down the question: "Are they lacking systems of support? Is there a coaching culture?" During the second stage of data analysis, I began to use the phrase *lacking systems of support* as a concept code to describe these types of statements. I noticed these statements were often clustered with the concept code, *role changes,* and ecological systems codes, *exosystem* and *macrosystem.* As this third essential theme began to take shape during the third stage of data analysis, it became apparent that coaches were using these statements in partial explanation for not being able to coach at deeper levels during the first year of COVID-19.

All nine participants described elements relating to the systems within which they were working that created obstacles for deeper coaching. In interviews, there were fifty-four references to systemic reasons including: being diverted or redeployed by administration, a lack of support for coaches, and a lack of coaching culture within the system. In the following sections, I describe each reason individually.

Administration diverted coach. This reason overlaps somewhat with the first essential theme relating to role changes that drew coaches away from coaching. However, in this subcategory describes specific situations where an administrator redeployed an instructional coach at the last minute to meet an immediate need during COVID-19 knowing that it would pull that coach away from their coaching role. Therefore, the administrator was choosing to divert resources away from coaching. As a result, coaches never knew what to they could plan for or expect in terms of their availability to work with teachers. Eight participants experienced this kind of reassignment regularly.

To illustrate how this worked, Penelope described a time when her administrator asked her to "drop everything" to administer common assessments with very little notice. She explained that this meant that she had to cancel coaching plans that she had made with teachers for two full weeks just as she was beginning to make traction with them. She reflected that "every time we take a step ahead, we then take two steps back."

Throughout the 2020-2021 school year, Sierra was asked by her administrator to cover classes and duties regularly at the last minute. She explained that every day she

would arrive thinking, “This is what I'm doing today” and then her principal would say, “Nope, this is what I need you to do instead.” She noted that she did not feel it was “part of her role as coach” and made it harder for her to do her job, which was already “very challenging” under the circumstances.

Lack of support from leaders. To facilitate deep coaching, coaches needed more than benign neglect from their administrators. They needed administrators with a vision for coaching that included deeper levels of coaching, like cycles (Killion et al., 2012). They needed administrators who would provide them with support and direction while actively promoting instructional coaching with teaching staff (Knight, 2021; Matsumura et al., 2009). Instructional coaches also needed supervision and evaluation that helped them to develop as coaches (Ippolito et al., 2021; Killion et al., 2012; Knight, 2021). Six participants shared that support for instructional coaching from administrators was lacking, which hampered their efforts to support teachers.

In some cases, administrators asked instructional coaches to stay out of their schools. Elizabeth was a district level coach who worked with a certain teacher in one of her schools each Thursday during the 2019-2020 school year prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. In fall of 2020, the school’s principal told Elizabeth that he did “not want her there at all” making it much more difficult for her to support the teacher. Maggie, who was also a district-level coach, was told by one principal, “we don’t need you here” because their test scores were relatively high in literacy, which was her area of

instructional expertise. At another school, the principal took away Maggie's workspace "with lots of apologies, but it just kind of sent a message, like, (coaching) wasn't that important."

Although some degree of autonomy is common for coaches in rural states like Vermont (Hannan & Russell, 2020), some instructional coaches participating in this study experienced extreme levels during COVID-19. Penelope shared, "I'm making up my job because nobody's really overseeing it," and found herself wondering daily, "what's the best use of my time?" Part of the reason for this was that administrators were so consumed by other responsibilities that they had no time to support coaches. Susan recalled a meeting with her principal where the principal noticed an old recurring meeting in their calendar that was left over from the 2019-2020 school year when they were meeting weekly. She recollected, "Then he laughed, and we moved on."

Instructional coaches who were hoping to partner with principals to promote coaching and support individual teachers were often disappointed. Michelle had a principal ask her to reach out to a certain teacher who was needing support. Then, when she pushed for more information and sought ways collaborate with the principal to meet the teacher's needs, they said they "didn't really want to get involved in it." Without the principal's support, she was unable to enroll the teacher in coaching.

Lack of coaching culture. When I use the term *coaching culture* to describe this part of the instructional coaching story, I am alluding to the definition supplied by

Clutterbuck and Megginson (2005) and expanded upon by Killion et al. (2012), Aguilar (2019), and Knight (2021) that I described in Chapter 2. I have heard Campbell and Van Nieuwerburgh (2018) say that having a coaching culture means that coaching is "just the way things are done." It means that coaching is so much a part of the culture that it is universal and taken for granted or institutionalized (Woulfin, 2020). Although, *lack of support from leaders* could certainly be an indication that coaching culture is lacking, I separated the two categories so that the administrator-coach relations could stand on their own. Seven participants described circumstances within their system that fit into this category. This meant that the district or school lacked a common definition, vision, model, and support for coaching that was understood by coaches, administrators, and teachers.

For some coaches, lack of district vision was an obstacle. During the 2020-2021 school year, Elizabeth's district expanded coaching as a part of their state recovery plan. However, Elizabeth shared that there was confusion among coaches and teachers because "it wasn't clear who people were supposed to ask… if they wanted a coach, who would they go to?" This was because the district expanded the number of coaches without a clear vision for what coaching was, with whom coaches would work, and how teachers would enroll. One of the reasons Michelle "welcomed the change" to do curriculum and data work instead of coaching during the pandemic was "because the coaching was so

undefined." She explained that she was the only coach in the district and there was "not a system for it." As a result, she felt constant pressure to "get people to buy into it."

Other coaches worked in district with a vision but seemed to lack follow-through during the crisis. Before the pandemic, both Sierra and Penelope's districts had all been working separately to develop a common definition of coaching, articulate a coaching model, and develop district level teams to support coaches' development. However, when COVID-19 arrived, these attempts to promote coaching culture were abandoned. In Sierra's school system, district wide coaching meetings were suspended because "people were just so busy and in different roles." Coaches, like Sierra, had all been redeployed in non-coaching roles. Still in winter of 2022, her district had not been able to return to its vision for coaching going forward.

Discussion of Contextual Factors

Over the course of the first year of the pandemic, there were contextual factors that influenced the behavior of the instructional coaches included in this study. Coaches encountered these factors at various levels in accordance with Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems model causing a shift in their practice. As a result, coaches' practices gravitated towards surface level coaching activities and non-coaching related tasks and away from deeper coaching work, like coaching cycles.

At the *individual* level, there were reasons for this shift away from deeper coaching that had to do with the instructional coaches' own preferences, understanding,

and immediate circumstances. Application of the COVID-19 safety guidelines created a situation where coaches were often physically isolated from teachers making it more difficult for them to connect with them and provide deeper coaching support. This made the job of coaching much more challenging. Instead, some coaches preferred to engage in other types of activities like curriculum and data work, which were novel and gratifying at a time when coaching had become more difficult and less popular with teachers. Others found supporting students directly by teaching a class or facilitating an intervention more compelling since many vulnerable students needed academic recovery. At times, coaches were held back from deeper coaching by their inexperience facilitating coaching cycles and preference for more ephemeral coaching activities that offered quick wins during such a difficult time.

There were reasons for this shift in coaching practice that occurred within coaches' *microsystem*, which included their interactions with teachers. The COVID-19 pandemic placed extraordinary pressure on teachers, who were often overwhelmed emotionally and professionally (Baker et al., 2021; Pressley & Ha, 2022; Trinidad, 2021). They were in uncharted territory that was constantly evolving and required new skills and long hours of work for them to navigate (Trinidad, 2021). Due to the new demands of the job, they were often left with less planning time just when it was most needed, which created elevated stress levels (Pressley & Ha, 2022). As a result, teachers had little to no interest in deeper coaching work that involved sustained analysis of their practice.

Instead, they were focused on getting just enough support to get through the day and week.

There were contextual factors within instructional coaches' *exo*- and *macrosystems* that caused a shift in coaching practices. Staffing needs and shortages due to the pandemic created pressures on administrators that impacted coaches. At the last minute, many coaches found themselves frequently redeployed by administration to meet an immediate pandemic-related staffing need requiring them to cancel or reschedule planned coaching activities. At the same time, administrators themselves were often too distracted by pandemic-related demands on them to provide coaches with the support and follow through that they needed which left coaches unsure of their role. Without adequate support from administrators, coaches often felt lost because the district had a weak coaching program. Many districts were lacking a district wide definition and vision for coaching that was understood by coaches, administrators, and teachers. Districts that had a vision lacked the follow-through that was necessary to promote and sustain coaching during the pandemic.

In short, the districts included in this study all had *coaching*, but lacked *coaching culture*. Coaching was not taken for granted or *institutionalized* as a practice, and therefore, it was unprotected within their systems (Woulfin, 2020). As a result, when resources were constrained by the pandemic, coaching was set aside time and again in favor of more pressing needs. Yet, in the same time frame, districts were filing recovery

plans with the state department of education that named instructional coaching specifically as a strategy for improving student outcomes.

These findings confirm existing research that acknowledges the impact that contextual factors have on instructional coaching (Aguilar, 2019; Hannan & Russell, 2020; Killion, 2012; Knight, 2021; Woulfin, 2014; 2020). Indeed, there is a need to approach research on instructional coaching using a nested-systems perspective (Hannan & Russell, 2020). Findings confirm that individual attributes of instructional coaches strongly influence coaching practices (Hashim, 2020), and suggest that these attributes are also shaped by organizational conditions (Woulfin, 2020). Additionally, the support of administrators does seem to be critical for a coaching program (Matsumura et al., 2009). All of this suggests the appropriateness of practical frameworks like the ones proposed by Aguilar (2019), Killion et al. (2012), and Knight (2021) to consider the strength of a system's coaching culture to meet the unique PD challenges that they faced during the pandemic.

However, it is noteworthy that none of these practical frameworks for developing coaching culture directly address teacher interest in coaching specifically as a part of coaching culture. Instructional coaching was voluntary in every district included in this study. Therefore, teachers' lack of interest in coaching was a real showstopper for instructional coaches. Woulfin's (2020) suggestion that district leaders monitor the extent to which coaching is perceived as appropriate and desirable by teachers is apt.

Based on the findings of this study, I would suggest a revision to these frameworks that is reorganized using a nested-systems approach based on Bronfenbrenner's (1979) model (see Table 8). This revised framework illustrates indicators of coaching culture across each system that influences coaching behavior and addresses how it is experienced and enacted among stakeholders at all levels. It represents a synthesis of prior frameworks with more recent research on coaching culture and my observations through this dissertation research. Work on this revised framework informed the suggestions for stakeholders that I present in the *Implications* section of Chapter 6. It also suggested a future research direction as it could potentially be developed into a tool for assessing coaching culture and tested.

There are many questions about contextual factors and their impact on instructional coaching that remain unanswered. Which contextual elements matter most? What kinds of support from administrators do coaches need to bolster their coaching during a crisis? Should instructional coaching be voluntary or mandatory? Moreover, how unique was this situation and to what extent did these patterns exist prior to the onset of COVID-19? This last question is addressed with the next essential theme.

Table 8

Revised Framework: Nested Systems of Support for Instructional Coaching (Aguilar, 2019; Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Killion et al., 2012; Knight 2021)

Level	Indicators
Coach (Individual)	• Coach is trained in a particular coaching model that is consistent with the district's vision. • Coach understands the district's common definition of instructional coaching and their own coaching role. • Coach feels responsible for the learning and improvement of teachers. • Coach monitors how they are spending their time and prioritizes deep coaching. • Coach monitors teacher learning and satisfaction with coaching. • Coach collaborates with other coaches. • Coach gets feedback, coaching, and ongoing development.
Coachees (Microsystem)	• Coachees feel responsible for their own professional learning. • Coachees understand what instructional coaching is and how to enroll. • Coachees perceive coaching as appropriate and desirable. • Coachees have time for coaching. • Coachees have access to a coach. • Coachees seek out and enroll in coaching. • Coachees provide coach with feedback.
School (Mesosystem)	• Administrator feels responsible for the learning and improvement of teachers and coaches. • Administrator understands the district's common definition of instructional coaching and the coaching model. • Administrator perceives coaching as appropriate and desirable. • Administrator understands the coaching enrollment process. • Administrator actively promotes professional growth and coaching specifically. • Administrator ensures that adequate time during school hours is provided for coaching. • Administrator meets with coach(es) regularly to address access issues. • Administrator limits distractions from coaching work. • Administrator provides coach(es) with feedback.
District (Exosystem)	• District leaders feel responsible for the learning and improvement of teachers and coaches.

	• District leaders understand and cultivate the district's common definition of instructional coaching and the coaching model. • District leaders perceive coaching as appropriate and desirable. • District leaders develop and revise a coaching enrollment process. • District leaders ensure that funds for coaching are sustainable within recurring resources. • District leaders develop and monitor supervision and evaluation for coaches. • District leaders develop and monitor specific measurable goals for the coaching program.
State/Federal (Macrosystem)	• State leaders understand and cultivate a research-based common definition of instructional coaching. • State leaders provide districts with guidance on coaching models, role configurations, and implementation of coaching programs. • State leaders promote professional standards and licensing for instructional coaches. • State leaders collect and monitor data on coaching program implementations. • Federal funds are used to support and sustain instructional coaching programs in schools.

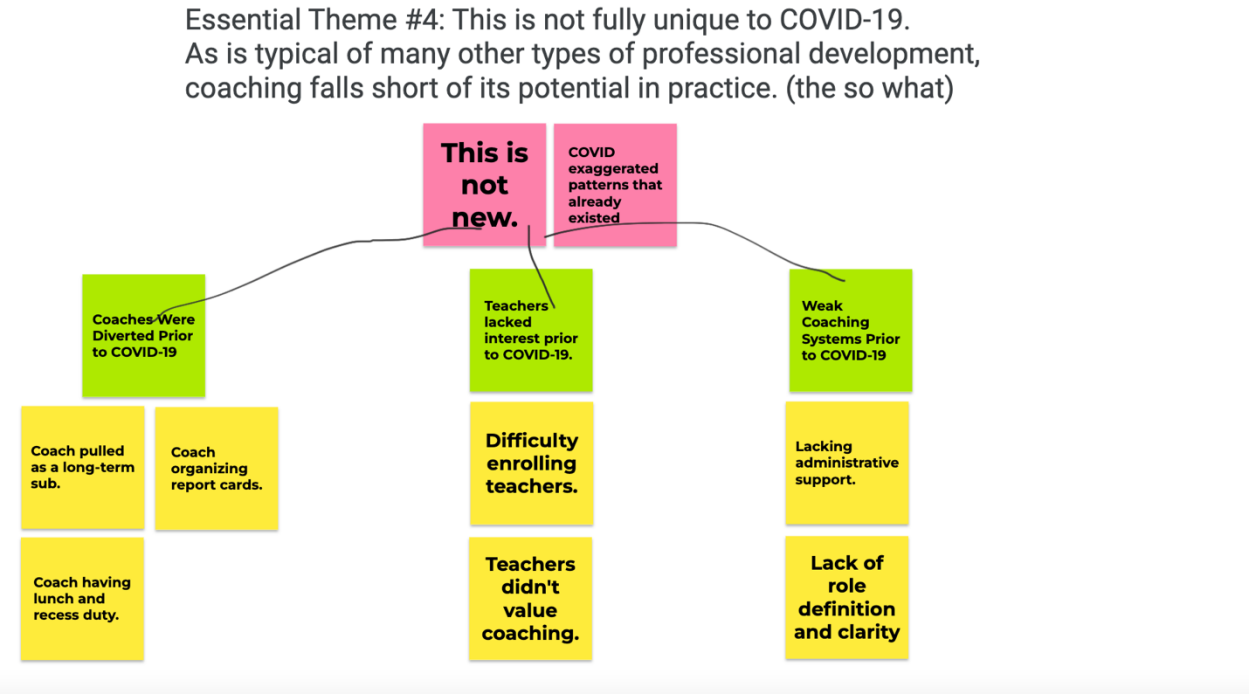
COVID-19 Magnified Pre-existing Patterns

The label for this final essential theme came from a follow up interview with Michelle, who was the first coach I interviewed in the second round. When I asked her to classify the tasks that she had performed during the first year of COVID-19 as coaching or not and whether they were unique to the COVID-19 situation or not, it was apparent to both of us that many of the non-coaching tasks that she was doing were not necessarily attributable to COVID-19 (see the interview protocol in Appendix C). Reflecting on this, she stated that it had been her experience that "generally in education, things that don't work in normal times – like communication with principals, like the role of the coach –

are just magnified when there's a crisis." As I continued to conduct follow up interviews with the rest of the instructional coaches, the pattern that Michelle and I noticed was repeated, and responses to the question – *Was that unique to the COVID-19 crisis?* – helped this essential theme emerge (see Figure 9).

Figure 9

Jamboard of Essential Theme #4 and Subthemes



All nine instructional coaches made statements indicating that they had encountered difficulties facilitating deeper coaching work prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. In interviews, there were 35 references indicating that the COVID-19 crisis in schools simply exaggerated patterns that already existed for the coaches in their

respective schools. In this section, I describe how instructional coaches experienced this essential theme, which consists of three subthemes: (a) coaches were diverted prior to COVID-19; (b) teachers lacked interest prior to COVID-19; and (c) there were weak coaching systems prior to COVID-19.

Coaches Were Diverted Prior to COVID-19

Five participants recounted times when they had been diverted from their coaching role or assigned non-coaching responsibilities prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. Sometimes this happened because coaching roles and responsibilities were not clear. Other times this happened because there was a pressing need that the coach was viewed as someone with the expertise and availability to fill.

Prior to COVID-19, Elizabeth already had many non-coaching responsibilities in her district that she did not consider part of her coaching role. For example, she was "the de facto district (grading software) guru" in the district, which meant that she was "always showing people the nitty gritty of how to enter things and how to make it work properly." She also spent a lot her time serving on "all these committees, designing lesson plan formats, and leading the MTSS work." Similarly, Erin, who was both an instructional coach and literacy coordinator shared that even before March of 2020, she found that her role was "always very busy" with "a pile of (literacy coordination) work that's never done" leaving her very little time for instructional coaching. She mused that, "that hasn't really changed with COVID-19" and added, "I do feel like in periods of high

stress this happens all the time with coaches." Penelope, too, was often expected to do curriculum coordination work that constrained her coaching time. She explained that "it wasn't unique to COVID because (her district) always used coaching positions for work like that."

Both Sierra and Vicky, who had been given teaching assignments during the first year of the pandemic, recalled times that this same thing had happened prior to COVID-19. Sierra relayed, "I have been pulled before," and explained that two years ago there was a teacher who left partway through the year leaving an unexpected vacancy. In response, her principal decided to have Sierra and another coach share the responsibility of teaching the class. She reflected, "So there is some precedent for me to be pulled from the coaching role to go back into the classroom… in this district, I have done that before." For Vicky, teaching a class has always accompanied her role as an instructional coach. She used her class as a "laboratory to try things out… for people to come and observe." However, she acknowledged that teaching the class also limited her flexibility and availability as a coach to work with teachers.

Teachers Lacked Interest Prior to COVID-19

Four instructional coaches described having cultures where teachers in their systems were uninterested in coaching or coaching cycles prior to COVID-19. The voluntary nature of coaching and generally high levels of teacher stress prior to COVID-19 already created a challenge for coaches. They sought to interest teachers in coaching

support without having them feel burdened by it. The pandemic only served to heighten this challenge that coaches had faced before.

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, Michelle, who was the only coach in her district, was busy "trying to get people to buy into" instructional coaching. She described walking into classrooms and saying, "how can I help you?" trying to drum up enough teacher interest to fill her days. Often, she could not garner enough interest and filled her time with curriculum work so that she could feel she was "working for her money." In winter of 2021, she shared her sense that lack of teacher interest in coaching would "already be happening anyway." She did not think that "teachers would be accessing (her) without being told to" because they already were not. She posited that "the only difference would be if I were able to be at school, I'd be in their face." Instead, her isolation from the pandemic made her avoidable.

In fall of 2019, Sherryl's position as a secondary coach was "getting very difficult for (her)" because she "knew the teachers too well." When her job changed so that she was working with elementary teachers in fall of 2020, teachers were expressing more relative interest in her coaching despite the pandemic. She noted, "Teachers were a little excited to see me because they didn't know me as well." Summarizing the impact that COVID-19 had on teacher interest in coaching, Sherryl stated that "teachers in general are always working very hard, but the crisis and COVID overwhelmed them and… (they)

really shut out a lot of people because they just couldn't take any more." Then she quickly added that "there are always teachers who were that way anyways."

Vicky described an "underlying current" within her school where teachers saw coaching as a "chore" and "something that is done to them rather than something that is worth investing time and energy to improve their practice." She observed that this preceded the arrival of COVID-19 noting, "We had that culture of, 'Yeah, I could work with (a coach) if I had to, but I'm okay.'" She perceived that many teachers are probably "really stressed" all the time, and the pandemic just "elevated normal emotions."

Weak Coaching Systems Prior to COVID-19

All participants worked in districts and schools where coaching was relatively new in March of 2020. Five participants explicitly suggested that the systems of support for coaching in their context needed bolstering prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. They described situations where coaching was not part of the culture, lacked definition and structure, or lacked administrative support from principals.

In Erin's district, there was very little in place in terms of systemic supports prior to the pandemic. She was just "starting to get into some instructional coaching, just introducing people to what that was and trying to start making it part of the culture" when the pandemic hit. When asked how it would become part of the culture, she stated that she was going to have to be the one to build the culture. She explained that her predecessor left her position because they "really didn't like (the instructional coaching)

part of (the job)," and stated that instructional coaching was "definitely not part of the culture" in her school.

Maggie, who decided to retire in June of 2021, shared that she had been frustrated in her coaching position because she never felt that she had the "real administrator support that (she) needed." She became emotional as she stated, "It's sad to me because I'm retiring this year and for seven years… I've been at this, and I've just been trying and trying and trying and getting the PD that I wanted or I thought would help… And I never quite got there." Likewise, Susan received plenty of training, but felt that "shallow support at the building level" was getting in the way even prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. She was supported by her superintendent, but coaching was "not necessarily something that (her) principal knew about or was fluent in," which made her job "tricky" as an instructional coach in that school.

Discussion of COVID-19 Magnifying Pre-existing Patterns

It became more difficult and rarer for the instructional coaches included in this study to facilitate deep coaching work with teachers during the first year of the pandemic, but this was not entirely novel for them. In fact, prior to the arrival of COVID-19, instructional coaches were already confronting some of the same obstacles and experiencing similar results. When schools weathered periods of crisis on a smaller scale prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, instructional coaching resources were often redeployed disrupting the work of coaches. Yes, the COVID-19 pandemic placed more pressure on

teachers and created new stresses for them (Baker et al., 2021; Pressley & Ha, 2022; Trinidad, 2021). However, prior to the pandemic, teachers already experienced high levels of job stress and burnout relative to other professions (Kyriacou, 1987: 2001; Richards, 2012). Additionally, lack of clarity around the coaching role during "normal" times often made teachers less inclined to seek out coaching prior to COVID-19. (Matsumura et al., 2009). Instructional coaches experienced a profound lack of role clarity and systems of support during COVID-19. Yet, many of their systems were already weak or fledgling preceding the pandemic. The extreme circumstances surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic simply exaggerated patterns with which instructional coaches were already coping prior to COVID-19. What seemed to change with COVID-19 was the scale.

Why does this matter? As previously noted, districts explicitly identified instructional coaching as a strategy in recovery plans filed with the state department of education to improve instruction and student outcomes. Yet, this assumed that teachers would be able and willing to access effective coaching. My findings suggest that both assumptions failed during the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic. Furthermore, they were endangered during lesser crises prior to COVID-19. As schools move forward, there are indications that a crisis state may be the "new normal" in educational settings (Dombo et al., 2021; Meckler, 2022). This suggests that rather than waiting for the crisis to abate, school systems need to find ways to develop, maintain, and strengthen coaching

programs during a crisis if they are to realize the potential of coaching to cushion its impact on students.

To the list of questions that remain, I add a few more. How are district leaders making decisions about instructional coaching programs? In what ways could the state department of education support districts to develop a robust coaching culture? To what extent does the phenomenon of being a coach who does not really coach happen independent of a crisis and why?

Summary

Finding for this study included four themes that were common to every instructional coach who participated in this study and essential to their lived experiences. The first theme was that coaches experienced role changes and were doing less coaching overall and more non-coaching related tasks. The second theme was that the work that coaches were doing with teachers during COVID-19 was more likely to involve surface coaching activities and that deeper levels of coaching diminished and were only happening when there was a strong relationship prior to COVID-19. The third theme was that there were contextual reasons for this shift away from coaching generally and deep coaching in particular that were evident at multiple levels within Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems model. The fourth theme was that this was not entirely unique to the COVID-19 situation. Coaches experienced similar influences during times of lesser crisis prior to March of 2020. What changed with COVID-19 was the magnitude of the

trend. These findings confirm existing research highlighting role ambiguity as a problem of practice in instructional coaching and the need to understand how contextual factors influence coaches. The findings also extend our understanding of how and why role ambiguity occurs and suggest implications and directions for future research. This is discussed in Chapter 6.

Chapter 6: Summary and Implications

The purpose of this research was to investigate the lived experiences of instructional coaches who were working in public schools in Vermont during the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic and consider what affected their work facilitating coaching cycles with teachers. Using Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems model and a hermeneutic phenomenological research design (Heidegger, 1927; van Manen, 1997), I sought to understand what was common and essential about their stories and interpret their meaning in the context of their systems. This helped to illuminate contextual factors that influenced the work of instructional coaches during the COVID-19 pandemic and during less extreme crises in schools, too.

In Chapter 5 of this dissertation, I described and discussed the four essential themes that emerged after using an interpretive, hermeneutic approach (Vagle, 2018; van Manen, 1997) to analyze data from two sets of retrospective interviews with nine instructional coaches between February of 2021 and March of 2022. These themes were then used to develop a composite narrative that synthesized the themes and was intended to represent the common essence of the instructional coaches' experiences. I solicited feedback on this composite narrative from the instructional coaches who participated in this study and several other neutral peers who were coaching in the state during the same timeframe. In this final chapter, I present and discuss this composite narrative and a counternarrative that I developed as an exercise in researcher reflexivity. I offer two

complementary conceptual models that I revised based on the results of this research. I also consider implications of the study and identify potential areas for future research.

Composite Narrative of Coaching During COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic heralded a period of unprecedented and prolonged stress in schools. During the first year of the pandemic, instructional coaches – who tended to have more flexibility built into their schedules than teachers – experienced significant role changes and found themselves taking on many tasks and responsibilities that were scarcely related to coaching at all. This meant that they were spending less time coaching teachers than they had been prior to COVID-19. The support that instructional coaches were providing teachers was more likely to be surface coaching activities like providing resources and emotional support instead of deeper, transformative work like facilitating goal-driven coaching cycles. There were several reasons for this shift. There were reasons relating to teachers' decline in interest and capacity as they struggled to adjust to new teaching methods and circumstances. Some reasons can be attributed to the instructional coaches who found themselves rejected, isolated from teachers, feeling unsure of their role and skills, and/or finding other work more compelling. Other reasons for this shift had to do with insufficient support for coaching among administrators and/or the systems within which the instructional coaches and teachers worked. Simply put, when resources were stretched thin, coaching was not the priority even though it was cited as a key strategy in COVID-19 recovery planning. Yet, this phenomenon was not

necessarily a new one since coaches often encountered difficulties facilitating deeper coaching work prior to COVID-19, too, for many of the same reasons. The pandemic seemed to exaggerate patterns that already existed. The real phenomenon is that of instructional coaches who were doing very little actual coaching in schools during a crisis.

Revised Conceptual Model

The composite summary narrative describes the essential structure that was underlying the experiences of the instructional coaches included in this study during the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic (van Manen, 1997). In Chapter 5, I have already discussed each of the four themes that comprise this summary in connection with the research base. In this section, I revisit my initial assumptions as represented by my conceptual model (see Figure 2) and discuss how I have revised my thinking because of this study.

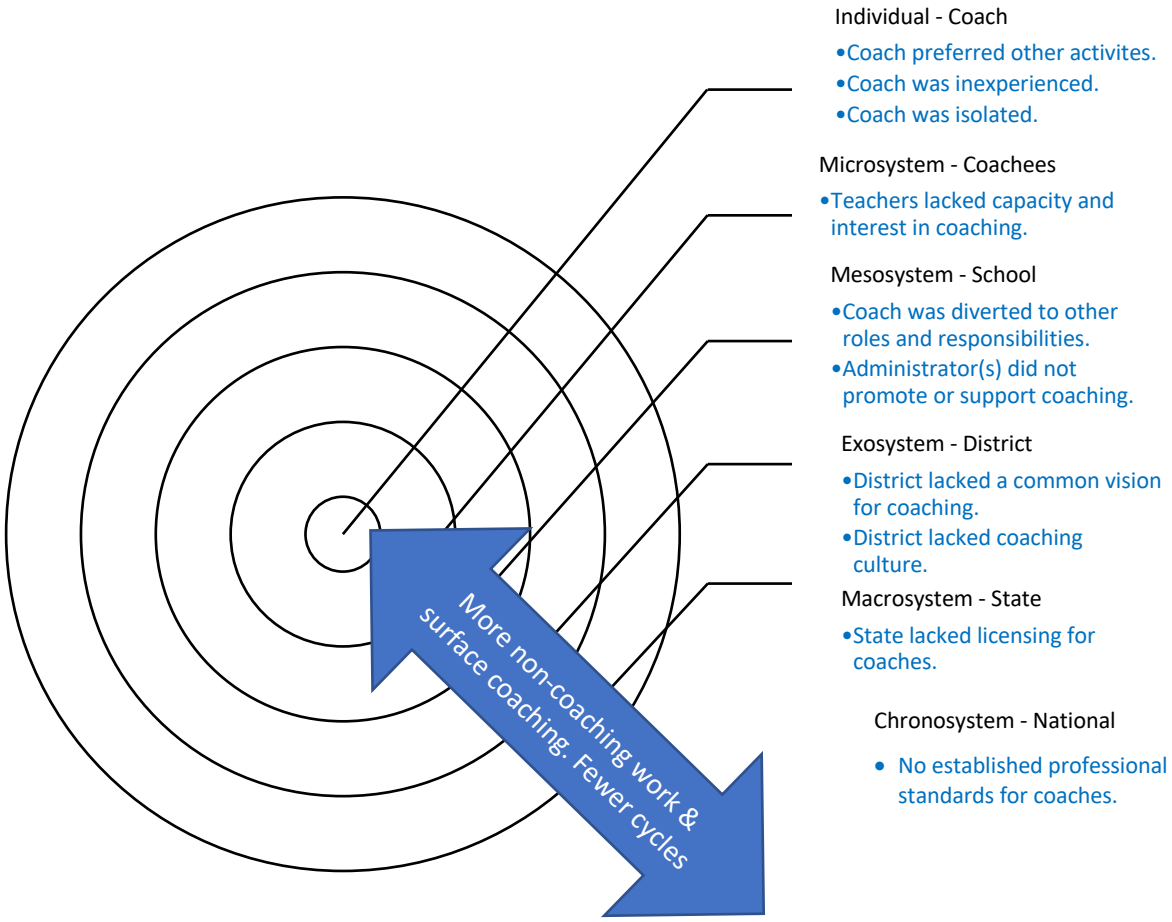
According to my findings, contextual experiences strongly influenced coaching behaviors. Therefore, Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems model is still appropriate as a nested-systems approach to conduct research on instructional coaching during the COVID-19 pandemic. Also, these findings suggest that there was reciprocity between the coach and the surrounding systems. Interactions between individual coaches and the systems within which they were operating influenced the behavior of coaches, and likewise the behavior of coaches influenced the systems to an extent. In my initial

conceptual model, I integrated van Manen's (1997) lifeworld reflections as lenses with which to analyze a coach's experiences within the various systems. Although this was helpful in initial coding, the reflections did little to explain the overall story since nearly every activity that had to do with coaching was coded as *relational.*

Figure 10 illustrates my revised conceptual model based on this dissertation research. The double-sided arrow indicates the overall change in coaching behavior, which was that coaches were doing more non-coaching and surface coaching tasks instead of deeper, more sustained coaching activities like cycles. The nested systems that influenced that behavior are represented in the concentric circles radiating out from the individual level at the center. Reasons derived from the third essential theme were used to fill in the details for each of the first four levels (from individual to exosystem) within the model. The outer two levels – the macro- and chronosystems – did not emerge in the common themes that came from interviews with coaches. However, like Ippolito et al. (2021), I hypothesize that guidance on professional standards and licensure is needed to address role ambiguity and wonder about the "role that state departments of education might play in promoting the work of coaches through licensure options and differentiated credentials" (p. 184).

Figure 10

Contextual Factors that Impacted Coaching Behavior During a Crisis



The revised conceptual model is based on the findings from this study that took place during the first year of COVID-19. However, I present it as a model for contextual factors that influence coaching behaviors during a period of crisis more generally. This revision was made in consideration of the fourth essential theme that I uncovered, which demonstrated that this phenomenon was not new. This was also based on indications that,

after more than two years of disruption, crises in educational settings are becoming the status quo (Dombo et al. 2021; Meckler, 2022).

Practicing Reflexivity

As I was closing in on finishing this final chapter, something about it did not feel right to me. I took a final passive activity break during the writing process and stepped back hoping to gain some perspective (Peoples, 2021; van Manen, 1997). When I returned to this dissertation and read it through, I had an epiphany that felt more like a sinking feeling and reflected in my bridling journal:

> I am struck by how negative it all feels. It's a deficit perspective, but the essence of coaching is in discovering and leveraging strengths. The two don't seem to mesh. Part of me wants to start over – to reanalyze all of my data and discover findings using a strengths-based perspective instead. I want to turn this whole study on its head. I want to invert it. That would be more appropriate for a study about coaching. That would feel more respectful to the coaches who generously gave their time for this research.

I realized that my own *dasein,* or *being in the world*, was affecting the research. Likewise, I believe that the dasein of my participants was having a similar effect. I had planned to investigate what supported and hindered the work of coaches during the pandemic. After two extraordinarily difficult years of working in schools, we had perceived what was getting in the way. Since bridling is intended to be a forward-looking

exercise (Vagle, 2018), I decided not to start over. Instead, I offer a strengths-based counternarrative that I am calling *Coaching in the Crevices*. To compose this narrative, I combed through the texts of interviews with the three coaches who had described facilitating some deeper coaching work with teachers. This counternarrative tells the combined story of their success despite the many challenges that COVID-19 wrought.

Coaching in the Crevices

It is true that instructional coaches were doing less coaching overall and almost no deep coaching. However, there were some notable exceptions. Three of the coaches that I interviewed were able to facilitate in depth coaching under the most trying of circumstances – like plants finding purchase to grow in crevices among rocks. These were coaches who had significant training in a particular coaching model that included coaching cycles. When asked to define instructional coaching, their definition was clear and included goal setting and cycles. When asked to decide whether a certain activity was part of their coaching role, they were decisive. They knew what coaching was and was not. When non-coaching tasks were added to their plates, their own clarity around their role became a point on the compass to which they were constantly striving to return because they felt responsible for teachers' learning. They were able to leverage strong professional relationships with teachers to engage them in deeper learning despite the elevated stress levels. Openness and creativity with technological tools for collaboration gave them a needed boost when COVID restrictions threatened to isolate them.

Additional responsibilities cut into their coaching time, but they still had enough autonomy and flexibility on a day-to-day basis to carve out time for deeper coaching. They had opportunities to meet with district-level coaching teams to share problems of practice related to coaching and strategize. Knowing that their job would continue to be funded and that coaching would expand in their district because it was featured in recovery plans, gave them a sense of commitment and purpose for their coaching work. They were tired and frustrated, but also hopeful.

Figure 11

Coaching in the Crevices - Contextual Factors that Supported Deep Coaching

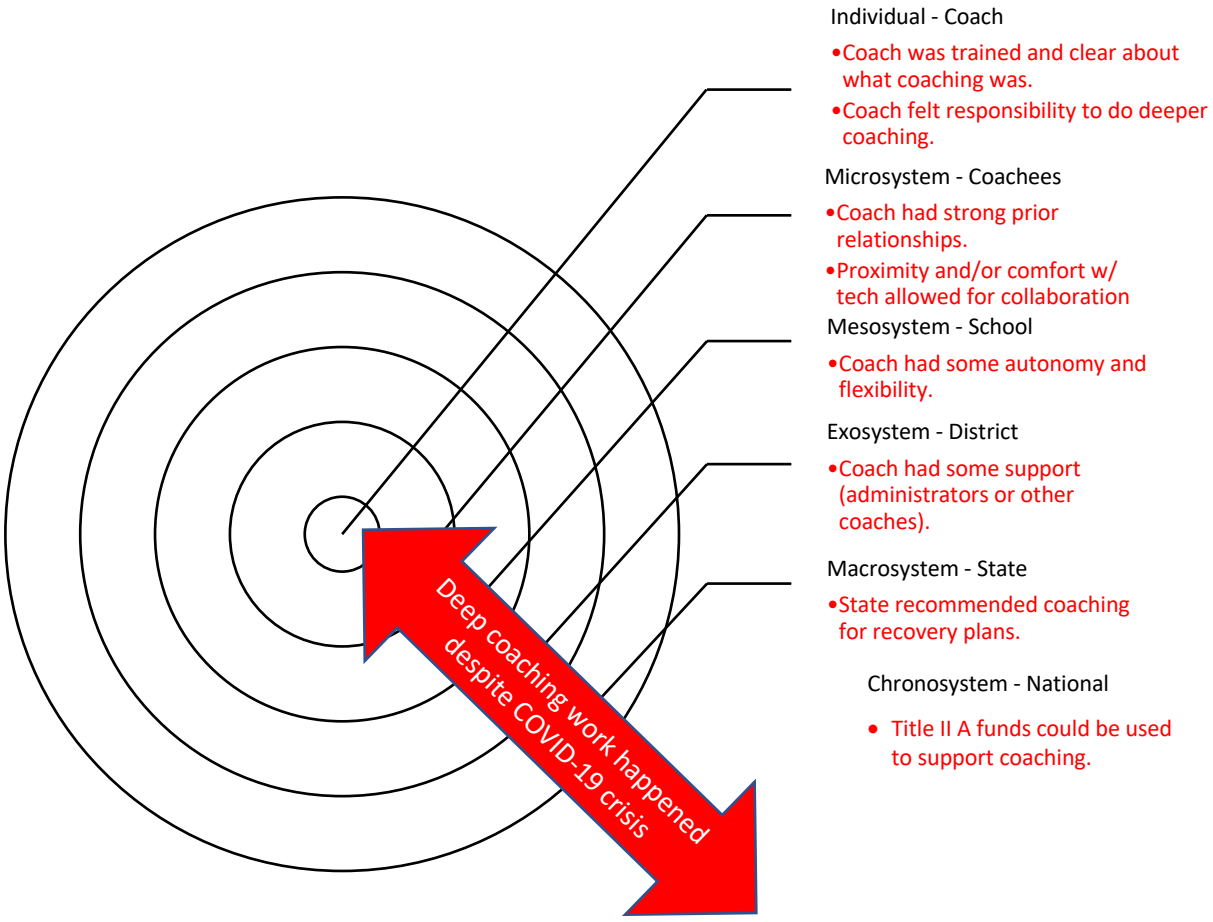


Figure 11 illustrates how this positive counternarrative could be injected into the same conceptual model. The red text and graphic highlight differences between this model and the one presented in Figure 10. This model is the converse of Figure 10 and represents the supports that existed at various ecological levels that contributed to an instructional coach's success facilitating deeper coaching against all odds during an

unprecedented crisis. I provide these two narratives as two sides of the same coin, and each provides a needed perspective. Together, they address the research questions and suggest implications and also areas for further research.

Implications

Although there is limited transferability due to this study's size and context, it revealed themes that could inform instructional coaches, school and district-level leaders, and state-level policy developers looking to bolster support for impactful instructional coaching. In this section, I share implications and make suggestions for various stakeholders based on this research.

Get Clear About Coaching

Good teachers make data-driven decisions always keeping their sights on the goal of deeper learning for students (Marzano, 2001). Similarly, instructional coaches must keep transformative learning for teachers as the focus of their work in schools (Killion et al., 2012). They must see that their fundamental purpose in schools is to build teacher capacity and that the coaching model they employ applies the principles of adult learning to make that possible. Whether there is a global crisis or not, instructional coaches can expect to experience some role ambiguity at times that threatens to distract them from their purpose (Ippolito et al., 2021). Yet, when coaches in this study had a clear understanding of what coaching was and how to do it, they were able to eke out deeper levels of coaching under incredibly trying circumstances.

This understanding seemed to come from common training and collaborative work at the district-level to define instructional coaching and articulate a coaching model. A clear, shared vision for coaching can indirectly provide support for instructional coaches during times when administrators are distracted, and coaches are pulled in new directions. My suggestion is that districts articulate a definition and vision for instructional coaching. What is coaching? How does it fit with other forms of professional development? What is the enrollment process? Is it voluntary or mandatory? Are coaches based in one school or do they work across the district? If that work has already been done, I suggest developing and monitoring the impact of a communication plan for the coaching program. To what extent has the vision been communicated to and understood by coaches, teachers, and leaders across the district? Take time to create specific, measurable goals for coaching. Consider how the vision connects with other strategic initiatives and how it could be included in new teacher and administrator induction efforts. To support districts, the state can continue and strengthen their current efforts to develop and promote a statewide definition of instructional coaching that is based on research and practice. They might also provide district leaders with support in their work articulating a vision for coaching.

Hold Space for Coaching

Even instructional coaches who were clear about coaching accumulated new responsibilities that were a departure from coaching. In a time of extreme crisis, it is not

always possible to say, “no, that’s not my role as a coach, and I won’t do it.” The fact of the matter is that emergencies arise and must be addressed. At times, administrators must ask for and instructional coaches must accept additional responsibilities. They must also be protective of coaching time because new responsibilities tend to erode it (Skiffington, 2022). Instructional coaches, like the ones in this study, who experience role ambiguity may not always be aware how these changes are impacting their time. Similarly, administrators may lack awareness of the impact. I recommend that coaches keep track of how they are spending their time and periodically summarize and reflect on what they see. This data can help a coach gain awareness of their own practice and how role ambiguity is impacting their work. A coach could use this information to communicate their needs and address access issues with administrators and district leaders. A coach might even work with a supervisor to set goals and consider strategies to help them carve out more time for coaching.

Instructional coaching was often paired with other roles – like interventionist, content specialist, or curriculum coordinator – that dominated their time and energy at times. Coaches needed a degree of flexibility and autonomy to carve out time and resources for deep coaching during the pandemic. School and district level leaders can help by holding space for coaching. District leaders can promote coaching by allowing hours spent working towards a goal with a coach to count towards relicensing. School administrators can meet with coaches regularly to talk about how they are spending their

time and address any issues that coaches are having balancing coaching with other responsibilities or enrolling teachers. Administrators need to be aware of distractions from coaching work and limit their impact.

At the state level, holding space for coaching means that the state continues to promote instructional coaching as a reform and recovery strategy. Additionally, it would also be helpful for the state to provide an exemplar job description that outlines the role and appropriate responsibilities and qualifications for instructional coaches. I also recommend that district and state leaders work together to ensure that funds for coaching are sustainable within recurring resources.

Evaluate Coaching and Coaches

Supervision and evaluation did not come up in interviews with instructional coaches, but several coaches mentioned their own inexperience with coaching and facilitating coaching cycles. This suggests that there is a need to strengthen supervision and evaluation for instructional coaches so that they can improve their practice. Instructional coaches need ongoing feedback, support, and development to be effective in their practices (Aguilar, 2019; Killion, 2012; Knight, 2021). They need to have opportunities to reflect on their coaching practices and skills. They also need professional standards that are specific to their role in schools to inform their development. Instructional coaches and the administrators who supervise them should have regularly scheduled conversations that are focused on the performance and development of the

coach in relation to professional standards for coaches. Unfortunately, during COVID-19, it was difficult for coaches in this study to access administrators, and there are currently no professional standards or licensing requirements for coaches in the state.

To support the development of instructional coaches, I recommend that the department of education in Vermont consider adopting professional standards and add a licensing process for instructional coaches. For example, Kurz et al. (2017) developed and validated as set of instructional coaching scales that might be worth exploring. This would help districts gain clarity about the instructional coaching role and support the development of coaches. I learned from email exchanges with the department of education in Vermont that currently the state has no way of tracking how many instructional coaches are employed in the state and what their background and qualifications are. Adding a licensure requirement for instructional coaches would make it possible for the state to collect and analyze data on instructional coaching and coaches within the state and begin to create and monitor statewide goals for coaching.

Districts should consider evaluating and developing goals for their coaching programs in ways that promote teacher voice to improve the desirability and accessibility of coaching for teachers. I suggest collecting and analyzing data from teachers about their professional learning needs and impressions of instructional coaching to determine coaching needs. Diminished teacher interest in coaching was a significant part of the story that I heard from instructional coaches. Even before the pandemic, most teachers

valued their own professional development, but many also felt unsatisfied with the options provided by their schools or districts (Quaglia & Lande, 2016). Since instructional coaching in typically voluntary, its success hinges on attracting teachers to it as a worthwhile professional development option. A better understanding of teacher perceptions and motivations related to coaching is needed to leverage coaching resources to greatest effect (Woulfin, 2020).

My final suggestion is that state and district leaders evaluate coaches and coaching using approaches that are true to the spirit of coaching itself. This could mean engaging coaches in their own process of reflective inquiry about their practice. Professional standards for coaches and goals for coaching programs can be used to ground this work for coaches in ways that they feel supported and challenged, rather than judged. Taking a coaching approach in this regard would model the skills and attitudes that are essential for successful coaches.

Future Research Directions

As a result of this dissertation research, questions arose that suggest possible directions to extend the research on instructional coaching in the future. First, I suggest the idea that I began to explore in the counternarrative that I presented could be extended. A future study could examine the lived experiences of instructional coaches who were successful facilitating coaching cycles during COVID-19. This would apply a strengths-

based lens that would complement this study and be philosophically aligned with the field of instructional coaching.

There are many lingering questions about the coaching role that need to be explored. Study participants included a mix of district-level and school-based coaches. A systematic comparison of these two configurations perhaps from the perspective of how they impact a coach's ability to preserve time for coaching. A similar investigation could look at coaches whose coaching role is combined with other leadership roles like interventionist, content specialist, or curriculum coordinator. In what ways do these configuration variations impact a coach's ability to hold space for coaching? Studies like these could help districts make configuration decisions. On another note, it would be interesting for a future study to examine a sample of the instructional coaching job listings within the state to explore and systematically summarize the duties and qualifications that are expected.

Future research could address teachers' resistance to enrolling in coaching cycles since this was such a prominent subtheme. What are their perceptions and motivations regarding instructional coaching? How do they make decisions about whether to enroll? It would also be helpful to explore the question of whether it should be voluntary or mandatory for teachers to enroll in coaching cycles. Does it make a difference for teacher efficacy?

Further research regarding systems that cultivate and sustain coaching culture are needed. It would be helpful to know which contextual elements have the greatest impact on a coach's ability to preserve time for coaching most so that districts can prioritize. Also, which contextual factors influence teacher enrollment and coaching effectiveness? Perhaps a tool like Table 8, in Chapter 5, could be developed and tested to measure and monitor progress developing coaching culture in a district or state. Finally, examination of supervision and evaluation practices to support the development of instructional coaches.

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Appendix A. Research Information Sheet

Title of Study: *Instructional coaching during Covid-19: An examination of the experiences of coaches supporting teachers during the pandemic*

Principal Investigator (PI): Ellen E. Dorsey

Faculty Sponsor: Maureen Neumann, Ph.D.

Funder: Department of Education, University of Vermont

Introduction

You are being invited to take part in this research study because you are working as an instructional coach during the 2020-2021 school year. This study is being conducted by Ellen E. Dorsey, a graduate student in the Department of Education at the University of Vermont.

Your participation is voluntary, and you may refuse to participate without penalty or discrimination at any time.

Purpose

Instructional coaching is a form of personalized, job-embedded professional development that has the potential to improve teacher skills and student outcomes when coaches are well-trained and supported.

The purpose of this study is to:

Gain insight into the experience of instructional coaches supporting teachers during the Covid-19 crisis.

Study Procedures

If you take part in the study, you will be asked to participate in a semi-structured interview that will be arranged at a time that is convenient to you. The interview will be conducted in using video conferencing technology at a time that is convenient for you. During the interview, you will be asked questions related to your experiences with instructional coaching during the Covid-19 pandemic. Interviews will be approximately 60 minutes in length and will be audio recorded to aid the transcription process. Responses will be coded for emergent themes. Questions will be related to your experiences as an instructional coach. You will have the option of requesting the audio recorder be turned off and/or not answering any of the questions.

You may be asked to take part in an optional follow up interview, The interview(s) will take place between November 2020 and April 2021.

Benefits
As a participant in this research study, there may not be any direct benefit for you. However, findings from this study may help inform coaches, administrators, and curriculum leaders as they develop models to support instructional coaching in schools.

Risks
Being involved in this study poses minimal risk to you if you choose to participate. There is always a potential risk of an accidental breach of confidentiality. However, professional measures will be taken to protect your confidentiality by safeguarding the information collected from you during this study.

Costs
There will be no costs to you for participation in this research study.

Compensation
You will not be paid for taking part in this study.

Confidentiality
All information collected about you during the course of this study will be stored under a pseudonym of your choosing to protect your identity. No one will be able to match you to your answers. After the interviews are transcribed and coded for themes and trends, the audio files will be deleted. Only coded electronic data will be kept and it will be stored in a password protected folder on a secure server. The coded data may be kept for up to 10 years.

The de-identified results of this study will be published in a UVM dissertation.

Voluntary Participation/Withdrawal
Taking part in this study is voluntary. You are free to not answer any questions or withdraw at any time. You may choose not to take part in this study, or if you decide to take part, you can change your mind later and withdraw from the study. At that time all data from your interviews will be deleted.

Questions

If you have any questions about this study now or in the future, you may contact me Ellen Dorsey at the following phone number 802-310-5486. If you have questions or concerns about your rights as a research participant, then you may contact the Director of the Research Protections Office at (802) 656-5040.

It is recommended you print this information sheet for your records before continuing.

Appendix B. First Interview Protocol and Questions

Time:	
Date:	
Interviewer:	
Interviewee (pseudonym):	
Position of interviewee:	
Verbal consent:	Information Sheet
Description:	Questions will be related to participants' experiences as instructional coaches throughout the Covid-19 crisis. Participants have the option of turning off the audio recorder and/or not answering any questions as they wish. The principal investigator may ask for a follow up interview that the participant may either grant or deny independent of the initial interview. Participants reserve the right to withdraw from the research at any time. In that case the principal researcher will delete all files and will not include the participant's data in the analysis or final report.

Questions	Notes observations
Free associate words with these phrases: "instructional coaching" (15 seconds) "Covid-19" (15 seconds)	
Take a moment to reflect on what you wrote. What did you notice? What did you experience?	

How would you define “coaching” in schools?	
Describe your role and context: What is your context (grade level, number of schools, focus)? How long have you been in this role? How is your role defined and supported? In what ways (if at all) has the COVID-19 crisis contributed to your current role?	
Describe your experiences instructional coaching prior to COVID-19: What did a typical day or week look like? What types of coaching interactions or activities? With whom? What was the working environment like?	
Describe your experiences instructional coaching during school closure in Spring 2020: What did a typical day or week look like? What types of coaching interactions or activities? With whom? What was the working environment like?	
Describe your experiences instructional coaching this fall: What did a typical day or week look like? What types of coaching interactions or activities? With whom? What was the working environment like?	
Describe what the instructional coaching role looks like in an ideal situation: What would it look like? What needs to be in place? What kind of support?	

What advice would you have for other instructional coach supporting teachers during a crisis? What have you learned? What experiences helped you learn?	
What advice would you have for administrators looking to support instructional coaching during a crisis?	
What else you would like to share about your experiences that my questions didn't allow you to express?	

Appendix C. Follow Up Interview Protocol and Questions

Time:	
Date:	
Interviewer:	
Interviewee (pseudonym):	

Questions/Activities	Notes observations
(Provide the participant with a list of their duties and responsibilities that changed because of the COVID-19 pandemic.) Is there anything missing? Which of these activities would you characterize as "coaching," and which are "not coaching?" Why?	
(Personal check in) How are things going with you now?	
(Provide the participant with several minutes to read and process the summary narrative of their experiences coaching during the COVID-19 pandemic. Then, check the investigators interpretation.) In what ways does the summary represent the experience as you recollect it? In what ways does it differ	

Appendix D. Finalized Essential Codes

Themes	Description
Essence #1. Coaches were doing less coaching during the COVID-19 pandemic.	
Non- coaching tasks:	
"All hands on deck"	Lunch and recess duty, dismissal, health checks, substitute teaching.
Curriculum work	Curriculum coordination and mapping, district committee work, working on state recovery planning.
Working directly with students	Providing interventions, teaching one or more classes, administering assessments.
Multi-tiered systems of support work	Coordinating local screening assessments, preparing data reports, and facilitating educational support team (EST) meetings.
Coaching tasks:	
Supporting teams or providing PD	Facilitating workshops, data teams, and professional learning communities.
Supporting individuals	Researching and providing materials, providing technical support, providing emotional support, co-teaching, assisting with unit/lesson planning, conducting observations.
Essence #2. When coaches were able to coach, they were less deep coaching involving goal-centered cycles.	
Surface coaching	Facilitating workshops, data teams, and/or professional learning communities. Providing resources, technical support, and emotional support.
Medium depth coaching	Co-planning, co-teaching, and/or conducting observations outside of a goal-centered cycle.
Deep coaching	Goal-centered coaching.

Essence #3. Coaching cycles did not happen due to circumstances regarding teachers, the coach, and the system within which they worked.

Teacher reasons		
	Teachers were not interested	Teachers who were willing to work with a coach preferred surface coaching activities.
	Teachers did not have capacity	Teachers lacked planning time, and/or were stressed or fatigued by the collective trauma they were experiencing.
Coach reasons		
	Coach preferred other work	Coach preferred working with students, curriculum work, and/or surface coaching activities.
	Coach lacked experience, knowledge and/or skills	Coach was confused about the coaching role, was not experienced with facilitating cycles, and/or was not confident trying to enroll teachers in coaching cycles.
	COVID safety measures isolated coaches	Coaches were not able to access teachers and/or their classrooms.
System reasons		
	Administration diverted coach	Coach was assigned non-coaching duties that left them with too little time and/or flexibility to facilitate cycles.
	Lack of support from administration	Administration did not have or understand a vision for coaching that included cycles, did not provide coach with support and direction, and/or did not promote coaching.
	Lack of coaching culture	The district or school lacked a coaching common vision and model that involved coaching cycles.

Essence #4. This is not new. COVID-19 exaggerated patterns that already existed.

Coach was too busy	Coach experienced diversion prior to the COVID-19 pandemic for substitute teaching, lunch and recess duty, creating report cards.

Teachers were not interested	Teachers were not interested in coaching and/or coaching cycles prior to COVID-19.
Lack of coaching culture/support	Prior to COVID-19, administration did not have or understand a vision for coaching that included cycles, did not provide coach with support and direction, and/or did not promote coaching.

Appendix E. Preliminary Common Themes

Participant	Collective stress	Being isolated from teachers	Lacking Systems of Support	Role Changes
Erin	Experienced fatigue and stress in both her professional life and private life with young children at home. Noted teachers were "just getting by."	Worked with fewer teachers and in fewer classrooms because of protocols. Meetings were remote. Lost her office space, was put in a Kindergarten hallway.	No clear district or school-wide definition or vision for instructional coaching role. School lacked the culture needed to support and sustain coaching.	More assessment coordination, interventions, Kindergarten drop off, assessment administration. Not able to do coaching as she defined it. No coaching cycles.
Sherryl	Noted that she was personally stressed having a child who was graduating. Described teacher being stressed.	Worked with fewer teachers and in fewer classrooms because of protocols. This isolated her from some teachers but brought her closer to one in her pod with whom she was able to have a coaching relationship.	Time and other responsibilities were a barrier to coaching.	Interventionist, health screening, and administering assessments for teachers. Only able to do coaching as she defined it with one individual – which looked like "one year-long cycle."
Sierra	Described teachers being stressed and needing social emotional support.	Not allowed to visit classrooms or meet in person because of protocols. This isolated her from some teachers.	The district has a district coaching team that did not meet during the pandemic. The director of curriculum supports coaching but has not communicated a vision or established a coaching culture..	Interventionist, health screening, daily recess, and lunch duty, coordinating assessments, facilitating PLCs, gathering resources, observing instruction and providing feedback (more directive approach than she would prefer).
Susan	No mention of her own stress but said coaches were stressed, teachers	Described herself as a "cave elf" that lived alone in her office during the	Turnover in administration (principals) and lack of coaching culture	Needed to be flexible. Coaching cycles stopped. Worked

Participant	Collective stress	Being isolated from teachers	Lacking Systems of Support	Role Changes
	were "maxed" and that there was a need to address student and teacher stress and trauma.	period when her school was remote. Was not invited into classrooms.	(teachers not interested) were noted.	directly with students doing literacy interventions. Curriculum coordination increased. Work with teachers became check ins focused on student performance.
Penelope	Was aware of stress that teachers and administrators were feeling. No mention of feeling stress herself, though. Said, "I was great."	Was at one school rather than two. No mention of pods, losing workspace, or feelings of isolation.	Penelope and the Curriculum Coordinator have a clear vision that may not be shared or supported by administration.	Curriculum coordination work increased. Providing resources and technical support. Delivering interventions. Scope and sequencing. Coordinating assessments. Administering assessments. Co-planning and co-teaching.
Vicky	Experienced fear, stress, and fatigue herself. Noted that teachers not available.	Had less time for coaching due to coordination of remote learning. Had trouble getting into classes.	There is a district coaching team that meets regularly but no common vision for coaching in the district.	Coordination of remote learners took up a lot of time especially in fall of 2020. Due to the high level of teacher stress, coaching became less about improving instruction and more about quick fixes.
Elizabeth	Experienced some fatigue and stress in both her professional life and private life especially during spring of 2020 at	Interacted with fewer people (both staff and students) in person and noted that this made her feel disconnected at	Director of curriculum was a support, while some principals were less supportive of coaching.	Curriculum leadership work increased (putting together resources and protocols and provide technical

Participant	Collective stress	Being isolated from teachers	Lacking Systems of Support	Role Changes
	home with her three school-age children. Coaching came to feel more like therapy.	times. Lost her office space. This was framed as a barrier to coaching.		support to teachers). Due to the high level of teacher stress, coaching became less about improving instruction and more about supporting teachers' emotional health.
Michelle	Experienced fatigue and stress herself and cited teacher stress as a reason people were not reaching out.	Worked remotely all year. "No one would notice if I died."	Works closely with director of curriculum. Only coach in the whole district. No common vision.	Significant increases in the amount of curriculum and assessment management work. Was a resource for teachers. No coaching cycles.
Maggie	Experienced some stress and anxiety in both her professional life and private life especially during spring of 2020 when a close neighbor died of COVID-19. Noted that teachers were too stressed to answer emails from her.	Worked with fewer teachers and in fewer schools and classrooms because of protocols. Meetings were remote. Had no designated space to work in schools.	Noted lack of administrator support. Coaching was not funded in 2021-2022. Not clear on the vision for coaching.	Curriculum leadership work increased. Led PLCs to roll out district initiatives. Worked with grade level teams at one school. Participated in MTSS targeted team.

Appendix F. Essential Themes Data Matrix

Essential Themes and Subthemes Across Participants

Participant	Essence #1: Coaches were doing less actual coaching.	Essence #2: The coaching they were doing was mostly surface level (coaching light).	Essence #3: Contextual Factors Hindered Deeper Coaching	Essence #4: This is n necessarily unique to the COVID-19 crisis.
School-level coaches:				
Erin	Literacy coordinator/ coach – was doing more coordination. Almost became "like a backup administrator" It was an "all hands on deck" approach. Did kindergarten dismissal and drop off, delivered lunches, administered assessments, did data entry, and attended all EST meetings for students with a literacy concern, and did direct intervention for a few students.	Majority of coaching was at the surface level: meeting with teams doing data reviews, talking about student concerns, and providing resources. Sometimes this led to conversations about "shifts in classroom instruction." and "side-by-side planning." "No instructional coaching cycles at all."	First year coach in 2020 – lacked experience and skills. Literacy coordinator/ coach – lacked definition" Was isolated from teachers. Teachers were not open to coaching. "Right now, classroom teachers are just getting by. They're just getting through every day."	• There was confusion about the coach/ coordinator role and it was not "part of the culture in (the) school." • "This happens in times of high stress" to coaches.
Sherryl	Coach/interventionist – was "much more of an interventionist this year." Only had 30 or 40 minutes per day for coaching. Did health screenings, was "kind of like a fourth-grade para," did substitute teaching, supported grade-level teams on Wednesdays (mandated).	Was mostly providing resources. Did work closely with pod-mate teacher in 2020-2021. Was having conversations about instruction, trying things out and debriefing. Not formalized or goal directed.	Teachers were not interested and did not find it beneficial to have to meet with her. Was podded with one teacher and isolated from many more. At times preferred intervention work.	Teachers were often not interested in coaching pre-COVID because she knew them too well." There were always teacher who shut everyone else out.

Essential Themes and Subthemes Across Participants

Participant	Essence #1: Coaches were doing less actual coaching.	Essence #2: The coaching they were doing was mostly surface level (coaching light).	Essence #3: Contextual Factors Hindered Deeper Coaching	Essence #4: This is n necessarily unique to the COVID-19 crisis.
Sierra	Coach/interventionist – was doing more intervention. Did health screenings, long term sub for two classes, interventions, and daily lunch and recess duties.	Coaching role was mostly "resource provider." Was providing emotional support for teachers. Provided some feedback on materials. Was able to start a couple cycles using virtual means in Winter 2021.	Teachers were resistant to deeper coaching. Felt "lost." Was physically isolated from teachers. District meetings and support had "fallen off the radar because people were busy"	Was "pulled" to substitute teach pre-COVID. Always had to do duties. "That's just the way it is." Teachers in the district "don't really understand what coaching is and what it looks like."
Susan	Coach/ interventionist – did more intervention and MTSS work. Coaching cycles "stopped completely." Did interventions, data analysis & reports, curriculum mapping, "office work."	Provided PD on social, emotional learning. Coaching looked more like "check ins,"unit planning and things like that, more like relational coaching."	Coaching was not a part of the culture at the school. Preferred doing intervention work, feeling useful. Teachers were "pretty maxed on their time."	There was shallow support at the building level. There was a lack of coaching culture pre-COVID.
District-level coaches:				
Penelope	Coach/ coordinator – did mostly coordination. Did interventions, administering assessments, curriculum mapping, developing materials. Less of "actual coaching."	Provided instructional tech support. Helped with planning and new program implementation Mostly provided resources. Was able to go a little deeper when there was a prior relationship.	Teachers didn't even know what kind of help to ask for. Leadership transition at the district level disrupted coaching vision. Felt "lost" and wondered what she should be doing.	Coaching positions were always used for curriculum work but it fell on her because "I'm the only person that there is now… that was unique to the position, not COVID.

Essential Themes and Subthemes Across Participants

Participant	Essence #1: Coaches were doing less actual coaching.	Essence #2: The coaching they were doing was mostly surface level (coaching light).	Essence #3: Contextual Factors Hindered Deeper Coaching	Essence #4: This is n necessarily unique to the COVID-19 crisis.
Vicky	Was teaching a class, virtual learning coordinator, substitute teaching, meeting with data teams, was not doing much coaching.	Provided resources and tech support. "It was more of a triage situation than a long-term health plan." Did not do any "deep coaching." no.	She and teachers both preferred "shallow coaching," which was doing "quick fixes." Attributed this to lacking experience with "in-depth coaching cycles." Administrator support in the building for coaching was "on a shallow level.".	Teacher's weren't interested pre-COVID - culture of, "Yeah, I could work with them if I had to, but, you know, but I'm okay." "The struggles and the challenges are the same. It's just in a different format and it comes with heightened stress everywhere else.".
Elizabeth	Did one-on-one support, writing up expectations for attendance, creating virtual schedules, recovery planning, curriculum work, etc.	Coaching became more about emotional support and less about instruction. Provided instructional tech support, doing research and providing resources for teachers.	Lacked administrator support. Was isolated from teachers physically. Did not find it easy to connect virtually. Had a preference for working on district committees.	Was diverted (for tech support) per-COVID. Was diverted for curriculum and committee work pre-COVID.
Michelle	Did data entry and making reports, database work which was "really not my thing at all, but somebody had to do it." Curriculum work – formatting scales, learning targets, etc.	"I'm obviously just a resource. I'm not running coaching cycles.". Was providing technical support with various programs	Had a preference for curriculum and data work. The coaching was undefined and she felt like she wasn't working. Was physically isolated from teachers which was "just a real disadvantage."	Her role didn't look that differenct from what it was pre-COVID because there was no coaching culture. "The things that don't work like communication with principals, like the role of the

Essential Themes and Subthemes Across Participants

Participant	Essence #1: Coaches were doing less actual coaching.	Essence #2: The coaching they were doing was mostly surface level (coaching light).	Essence #3: Contextual Factors Hindered Deeper Coaching	Essence #4: This is n necessarily unique to the COVID-19 crisis.
			Extra effort to communicate limited access.	coach - things that don't work in normal times are magnified when there's a crisis."
Maggie	Did mostly curriculum work for PBL, MTSS work, developed system to transition student work and data from one grade to the next, reading one-on-one with students.	Was providing quick support to teachers who reached out, supported primary PLC Supported a teacher to implement a literacy structure. This was possible because of a prior relationship.	Felt rejected by teachers…"It's seldom that I even get a response to an email, and I'm very guarded." Teachers "had a lot going on more than ever before." Was isolated from teachers physically and found virtual collaboration stilting. It felt good to take something off the director of curriculum's plate.	"I have been frustrated in this position because I never have felt that I had the real correct administrator support that I needed."