

## They Felt Like Real Teachers

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Instructional coaches collaborate with in-service and pre-service teachers through dialogue and reflection in order to improve instruction for their students. In this qualitative study we learned from three exemplar coaches who used elements of coaching in their supervision of pre-service teachers. The coaches reflected on how they navigated the coaching process with PSTs, sharing how they targeted specific areas of focus and tailored each step of the coaching cycle to meet the individual needs of their PSTs. Coaches shared some evidence that PSTs became more reflective practitioners who took ownership of their own learning and development through inquiry.

Teaching is a complex art and teachers often engage in professional development to refine their skills. Traditionally, professional development comes in the form of a sit and get, one shot session, where teachers are expected to consume information and produce results (Desimone, 2009). This model of professional development assumes a one size fits all approach to teaching and learning and ignores the complexities of the classroom. All too often, these sessions lead to frustration and resentment and do not result in positive change for teachers and their students. Instructional coaching offers an alternative to traditional professional development. Instructional coaches collaborate with teachers in one-on-one dialogue to apply research-based practices to their teaching and individual context with the goal to improve instruction for their students (Knight, 2007).

Although less prevalent, similar models of coaching are also used with preservice teachers (PSTs) as a form of supervision throughout their field experiences (Hoffman et al., 2015; Scalzo Wilson, 2018; Schroeder, & Currin, 2019; Smith et al., 2016). At the University of Florida, the elementary education program uses an instructional coaching framework with an added emphasis on reflection to facilitate growth with their PSTs. In this study we

interviewed three exemplar university supervisors who used coaching with their PSTs to learn more about their techniques and approaches. In particular, we wondered how these three coaches worked to remove traditional hierarchies of top-down supervision in order to empower their PSTs to take charge of their own learning and development through an inquiry approach. Through our study, we hoped to learn specific instructional moves the coaches found to be effective in guiding their PSTs through the coaching process. With the discovery of these effective coaching moves, we will continue to refine our coaching model to better serve PSTs who can, in turn, improve their instruction to better serve their students.

### Background and Literature

Teachers are faced with a multitude of complexities. Each classroom comes with its own

unique challenges, and teachers are expected to meet the demanding needs of all of their students on a daily basis. While traditional professional development and scripted curriculum applies a one size fits all approach to teaching and learning, teacher inquiry, also known as practitioner research, offers teachers a way to approach their practice through

“systematic and intentional inquiry” (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1990, p. 3). Dana and Yendol-Hoppey (2014) describe teacher inquiry as a “vehicle that can be used by teachers to untangle some of the complexities that occur in the profession” resulting in transformation of the profession (p. 6). Teacher inquiry mirrors the qualitative research process as teachers design a study, collect data and analyze data around a question related to their own practice and classroom. This type of research situates the teacher as “expert” and encourages teachers to assume ownership of their practice. As teachers learn to engage in professional development through teacher inquiry, they begin to refine their practice and improve their teaching and learning for themselves, their students, school and community in ways that traditional professional development does not always support.

One inquiry-driven, alternative approach to traditional professional development is Knight’s Instructional Coaching. In this model, the instructional coach (IC) collaborates with teachers who identify areas for growth, with the ultimate goal of improving student learning. The relationship between the IC and the teacher is built around partnership principles; equality, choice, voice, reflection, mutual learning, dialogue and praxis (Knight, 2011) that situate the two participants as co-learners. Together the two generate questions around the teacher’s practice, plan instruction, observe one other and engage in back-and-forth dialogue (Knight, 2007).

From research and scholarship on coaching, we know that coaching should be separate from formal evaluation if teachers are going to learn from the process (Nolan & Hoover, 2010; Tschannen-Moran & Tschannen-Moran, 2009). Coaches also need to walk the balance between being directive, and being responsive (Ippolito, 2010) so that teachers are partners in the learning process,

and coaches are able to simultaneously “push teachers in a particular direction” and also “respond to their immediate needs” (p. 169). This requires coaches to move between a directive stance and a responsive stance, sometimes in a single coaching conversation as they push, encourage and challenge their teachers.

While coaching is used extensively for teacher professional learning, we have some evidence that preservice teachers can also benefit from this form of inquiry-driven coaching (Hoffman et al., 2015; Scalzo Wilson, 2018; Schroeder, & Currin, 2019; Smith et al., 2016;). The National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) calls for PSTs to develop an “inquiry stance on teaching” (2010, p.11) in order to have a greater impact on student learning. Cochran-Smith and Lytle (2009) explained that inquiry as stance is a “habit of mind” (p. vii) by which teachers are able to blend “theory and practice, knowing and doing, conceptualizing and studying, analyzing and acting” (p. 3). PSTs in a field experience have an opportunity to engage with new situations by generating questions, or inquiries around their practice. Doing so cultivates inquiry as stance as PSTs simultaneously learn to teach while also inquiring into their teaching (Dana & Yendol-Hoppey, 2014). A blended model that incorporates both instructional coaching and teacher inquiry may help to push PSTs toward becoming reflective practitioners and adopting an inquiry stance toward their teaching.

## Study Methods

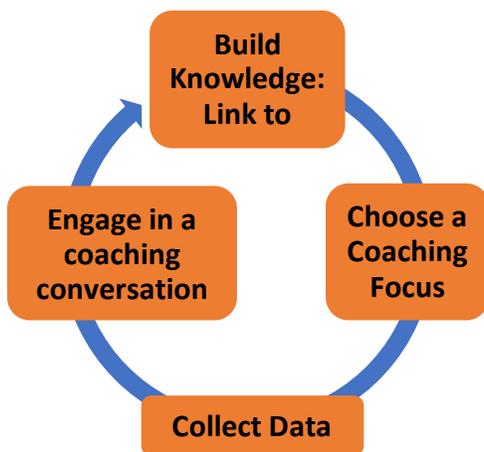
This paper reports findings from a small constructivist qualitative study around coaching tools and facilitation strategies used by three exemplar instructional coaches when working with PSTs. In this section, we describe the coaching model used by the

coaches with the PSTs and then share the study methods and design.

### Description of the Coaching Model

Knight's Instructional coaching has been a successful tool to encourage in-service teachers to develop a reflective stance toward their instructional practice. Teacher education programs can apply these same elements to PSTs during their field experience. Since PSTs lack the teaching experience that veteran teachers have, necessary adaptations to the instructional coaching model were necessary. These adaptations included more support, resources, guidance and scaffolding. The model used in this study is an adapted version of Knight's instructional coaching model, tailored to meet the needs of PSTs undergoing their year long, elementary field experience.

A typical coaching cycle (see Figure 1) begins with the supervisor and PST identifying an area of focus around the PST's practice. The supervisor and PST work in partnership to form a question around the area



of focus. The PST then teaches a lesson, and the supervisor observes the

Figure 1: Coaching Cycle (University of Florida Lastinger Center for Learning, 2016) lesson and collects specific data around the question. After the observation, the supervisor presents the PST with a data display (Adams et al., 2015) and the two engage in dialogue around data. This

cycle occurs several times throughout each semester of the field experience, often with a new or refined focus each time.

### Methods, Participants, and Data Collection

The question driving this research was "What strategies and approaches do experienced coaches use as they supervise PSTs using a coaching model?" We designed an interview-based basic qualitative study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) with a framework of constructivism to understand how these coaches made sense of their work with their PSTs.

Because we wanted to understand how the model worked, when it worked well, we invited experienced coaches/supervisors who were recommended by program administration as exemplary based on at least one year of evaluations and direct observation. Three former instructional coaches agreed to participate. All three of the participants were certified as Instructional Coaches by the University of Florida's Lastinger Center and had more than a year of experience coaching both teachers and PSTs using the Center's model. The participants self-identified as white females who had P-12 classroom and leadership experience. All three obtained doctorates in Curriculum and Instruction from the University, with their supervision assignment as a teaching assistant and/or as an adjunct after graduation.

Each participant engaged in a one-hour semi-structured interview with the first author, Amanda Pate, a doctoral student working with the second author, Alyson Adams. Interviews were approximately one hour in length, and included questions that asked participants to explain how they facilitated each step of the coaching model, describing successes and challenges as they worked with interns. The interviews took place in a virtual setting through a video conferencing platform. The

interviews were audio and video recorded and transcribed. Each of us independently coded the transcripts using an inductive approach. We each created an analytic memo for each participant by organizing the excerpts from the transcripts into emerging categories. We then met to share our analytic memos, focusing on one participant at a time, and then looking across participants. Finally, we identified themes based on our interpretations of the data (Irving, 2013). While we were not able to conduct member checks with the original participants, we did discuss our preliminary findings with two current coach/supervisors who were using the same coaching model.

### Findings

We learned that our exemplary coaches began each coaching cycle by teaching their PSTs the coaching model, providing frameworks and modeling reflection. As PSTs engaged in the coaching model with their supervisors, they began to develop a more reflective approach toward their practice; however, this was not always a linear process and it was also not the case with every PST. Coaches discovered that there was no one-size-fits-all coaching strategy they could use with all of their PSTs, and that they had to a) target specific areas of focus with each coaching cycle and then b) tailor their coaching practices to the needs of each of their students. This level of variation depended on the PST's prior experience, willingness to reflect, and demonstrated teaching ability (as measured by the Florida Educator Accomplished Practices). The coaches shared their experiences of teaching the model and teaching the art of reflection to their PSTs and tailoring their coaching practices to meet the needs of each of their students. Keeping in mind the goal of the coaching model, coaches also shared instances where PSTs demonstrated evidence of transformed

teaching practices and movement toward inquiry as stance. Not all PSTs were able to achieve inquiry as stance on their own by the end of the internship, although in all cases, the coaches were able to see growth in the PST's ability and willingness to reflect on their practice. The concepts of *targeting* and *tailoring* helped us understand how these coaches work with their PSTs, with the ultimate goal of *transforming* practice.

### Tools to *Target* the Coaching

All of the coaches in the study emphasized the importance of staying narrow with each coaching cycle and choosing to coach around the specific target area. The coaches had to remain true to the targeting focus during the coaching conversation. In this context, the coaches were also the PST's supervisor and felt the weight of the supervisor role during the coaching cycles. They found themselves having to compartmentalize their time with their PSTs, recognizing how to balance each of their roles, while staying true to the coaching cycle and maintaining the partnership principles with their PST. One coach described this tension between coach and evaluator, stating that she often felt like there was this "power piece" referring to the evaluative role. The coaches found that even with a focus on growth and progress, PSTs were still concerned about their grade and often complied with the coach's suggestions, rather than approaching the coaching model from a place of 'wondering'. Another coach described how she managed this tension by separating coaching from giving feedback:

I really tried to...stick to the coaching cycle and do the full coaching cycle. And then if there were [additional] things that I felt like were really pressing, to have a separate conversation about that. So you almost have to do more, a little more communication, but I

think their growth is so much more because of it.

This concept of a narrow focus helped the PST and coach dive deeply into one area of teaching, rather than to focus on every possible element of teaching at one time.

However, helping the PST choose that area of focus was also tricky for these coaches. At first the PSTs leaned heavily on their coaches to guide them toward choosing a focus for their coaching cycle. The coaches referred to coaching tools they used throughout different stages to assist the PST in engaging in targeted reflection. Tools used at the beginning of the coaching cycle were the school district's or the Center's instructional frameworks and holistic screeners used to identify a specific area of focus. For example, one coach shared that her PST wanted to think about questioning but could not identify what aspect of questioning she wanted to focus on. The coach shared the Center's instructional framework as a tool to help the PST narrow her focus and think about specific criteria around questioning that she wanted to develop. The two were then able to ask a measurable and specific coaching question around the PSTs area of concern, which in this case was "*Am I challenging all learners with higher order questions?*" During observations, the coaches used video and audio recording tools that they could later use as evidence during the coaching conversation. They also created data displays to represent and organize information around the targeted focus area. For example, in the earlier example on asking higher level questions of all students, the coach might scribe all the questions asked, coding them with a key based on the seating chart to indicate which student(s) responded.

During the coaching conversations, coaches relied on discussion protocols, coaching rubric question stems, and pre-planned probing questions to engage in dialogue with their PST around the focus

question. The coaches emphasized the importance of centering the target area and data display in the conversation to keep it evidence-based. One coach shared "I tried to begin the conversation with looking at the data and reminding us of what our focus is...If you start with what did you think or how do you feel...it totally takes people off course." Once the coach and PST engaged in a coaching conversation, the coaches found that one coaching cycle would often lead to the next coaching question, and they would begin the cycle again. This was described in one of the interviews: "As soon as a teacher had that aha moment about a specific strategy...they thought...I wonder, then, if I do this, how's that going to change this?" Over time, the PSTs begin to ask questions of their own that would often lead them into their next coaching cycle.

### **Tailoring the Coaching Process**

Another tension shared by the coaches was the ability to remain true to the reflective nature of the model. Coaches found themselves tailoring the coaching process, at times, having to provide direct and explicit feedback to their PSTs in ways that still allowed the PST to engage in reflection and gain confidence in their ability to inquiry around their practice. One coach described it this way:

When we started working with pre-service teachers there were times when I felt, as a coaching supervisor, that some of the novice pre-service teachers just really didn't have the capacity to understand how to be reflective yet...this is a very new paradigm shift for them in terms of learning.

As this coach explained, she often had to begin by explicitly modeling reflective thinking and then taper off her support as the PSTs developed that skill.

These tensions were felt at all stages of the coaching cycle and the coaches found

themselves tailoring the coaching process to meet the PSTs where they were. Two of the coaches used modeling as a means to demonstrate a concept to their PSTs. They described instances where they would go into the PST's field experience classroom and model a specific learning strategy for them prior to engaging in a coaching cycle around the strategy. The coaches would also incorporate video and audio recordings of the observation into the coaching conversation. In one instance, the coach and the PST were looking at the PST's wait time. The coach audio recorded the lesson and created a chart with the number of seconds between interactions. By looking at this data display, the PST was immediately and independently able to recognize the issue, and from there she began to incorporate different kinds of dialogue and strategies to increase her wait time.

In all three interviews, the coaches described the need to model and teach reflection skills to their PSTs, particularly those who were struggling a bit with mastering basic teaching skills. One of the coaches shared a story of a time when her PST was really struggling in the classroom and was unable to reflect because she was so anxious and unsure of herself. The coach decided to record a portion of the lesson via video. Then, during the coaching conversation, the coach played a portion of the video and the two of them collected data together. The coach was mindful about how much of the video to show saying that "if we had watched too much time...it would have been defeating" and that "a short period of time was what was beneficial because she got to see herself up there." For this PST, being put in the position of observer may have allowed her to step back a bit more objectively. It also allowed the coach to take on the role as co-learner, rather than evaluator or supervisor who points out what is going wrong in the lesson. The coach

reported to us that her PST was able see the issue and improve over time.

The coaches in our study also explained the need to scaffold their PSTs' thinking by providing questioning and feedback to point them back toward the data. While some PSTs craved being told what to fix, the coaches used probing questions and data to point them back toward finding the answer themselves. One coach described this experience in this way:

If you have a novice teacher or intern that doesn't have the capacity to understand some of the things that you're saying, then you do have to include a little bit more direction...you're teaching reflection, you're not directing them what to do. You're teaching them to reflect and almost become a coach themselves. And I think that's the goal...to have teachers literally be standing up there while they're teaching and going through this almost this mental model of coaching and realizing, oh my gosh. I didn't do that, I need to incorporate that now so that it becomes instantaneous and it becomes innate.

Just as the PSTs began to gain confidence in developing questions around their practice, they also began to learn the art of reflection with each new coaching cycle.

The coaches found that they had to tailor their coaching skills and level of support over time, depending on the readiness of each PST. Coaches initially had to provide some PSTs more support in choosing a coaching focus and engaging in a conversation around the data displays. This did not always come naturally for their students and some were more equipped than others to engage in this kind of thinking. One coach described it as "there's some that get it and some that don't and some that are more reflective than others...I think you have to be really flexible...and know when to push and when not to." The coaches found that the longer the PSTs engaged in the coaching process, the more equipped they were to engage in

reflection and dialogue around their coaching focus. As one coach shared in her interview, “the difference [between PSTs] would be in the complexity and sophistication of the conversations we engaged in...they became more self-aware as educators...and were able to drive the conversations.” This was true in all three of the interviews, where the coaches noted this increased ability to reflect with all of their PSTs over time.

### ***Transformed Teaching Through Coaching***

In all three interviews, the coaches attributed much of their PST’s growth to the coaching model. The coaching model allowed the PSTs to develop an inquiry stance toward their practice and empowered them to improve their teaching. One coach described this empowerment in this way:

I’ve never seen a change so quickly...They felt empowered. They felt they were in charge of their learning. They felt it was actually realistic classroom-based learning versus some pie in the sky theory that they’re learning in class and then trying to implement. They felt like real teachers. I think that was the biggest aha moment for me is that we took them from a place of feeling like a novice to a place of feeling like an actual practicing professional and it changed the viewpoint of their pre-service experience, like they really felt they were part of the school, they were part of the classroom...And they all said it, and they also said it was really hard. It was difficult to think in the moment and to really develop those reflective skills because they hadn’t done that before. It created a change and created impact. When I first would observe a pre-service teacher versus the end, it was night and day. It was incredible.

All three of the coaches felt that the coaching model was effective at pushing their PSTs toward becoming reflective practitioners, moving them closer toward developing an inquiry stance into their own teaching

practice. By learning how to ask their own questions, examine data, and reflect on future actions, these PSTs were building the confidence to improve their own teaching through inquiry.

### **Conclusions and Implications**

The coaching model is intended to guide PSTs toward becoming reflective practitioners through a partnership with an instructional coach. We learned that this is not always a linear process and that coaches must work to identify the level of need for each of their PSTs and tailor their coaching skills and the coaching process accordingly. When using this model with PSTs it is important to understand that students may not have the background knowledge to engage in reflection around their practice immediately and may need direct feedback from their coach in reaching conclusions about their practice. The coach must recognize the stages of development toward becoming a reflective practitioner and recognize how to toggle between being directive and facilitative (Ippolito, 2010).

The coaches in our study provided tips for targeting and tailoring the process with the goal of empowering their PSTs toward assuming an inquiry stance. We have learned from these coaches as we continue to refine our coaching model for supervision, and we believe that others in similar teacher preparation programs might benefit as well. Specifically, supervisors may consider stepping back from traditional provision of feedback on teaching to a model that invites the PST to develop questions and an improvement focus. This may require supervisors to explicitly teach reflection at first, building to more independent reflection over time. In addition, teacher education program leaders may want to consider narrowing the focus of most supervisor observations which would invite a deeper

examination of the complexity of teaching, rather than a broad, surface-level observation that attempts to assess all aspects of teaching in one lesson.

In this qualitative study, we did focus on a small number of participants in order to understand more about their experiences through qualitative methods. We selected our participants purposefully because we wanted to focus on the work of exemplary coaches. We also examined our own context so that we could learn and improve. While some researchers may find these decisions to be limitations, we embrace them because they helped us understand details about how our model works when it works well. Readers of qualitative research determine for themselves the transferability and trustworthiness of a study. Future researchers may want to design studies of larger numbers of supervisors, studies that capture input from the interns, or studies across contexts that use similar (or different) models. It might also be interesting to follow interns into their careers as teachers to understand whether they continue using inquiry to improve their own practice, and whether they continue to seek out colleagues for the kind of rich reflective conversations their coaches described to us. By working to develop PSTs as reflective practitioners who use inquiry to improve their own practice with the support of a coach, we have hope that they will develop the habit of mind (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009) to continue their inquiry stance as teachers in their own classrooms.

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