How Does an Instructional Coach Support Elementary Teachers Who Have Students Struggling to Read with Characteristics Similar to Dyslexia?

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HOW DOES AN INSTRUCTIONAL COACH SUPPORT ELEMENTARY TEACHERS WHO HAVE STUDENTS STRUGGLING TO READ WITH CHARACTERISTICS SIMILAR TO DYSLEXIA?

by

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A capstone project submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Masters of Arts in Teaching.

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Abstract

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The role of an Instructional Coach in an elementary school is one that requires a person to be adept at a variety of skills. The main focus of an Instructional Coach is to improve the highly effective practices of teachers to ensure student growth. Drawing on Adult Learning Theory, this capstone discusses ways teachers are active participants in helping to solve a problem while providing opportunities to collaborate with peers, engage in meaningful activities and reflect on their own learning experiences. The capstone project incorporates methods of professional development or professional learning in creating literacy professional development training for elementary teachers to improve literacy instruction for all students but especially for struggling students and those with characteristics similar to dyslexia. The broader goal of the capstone project would be to take the literacy professional development training to more elementary buildings in our district and beyond.
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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

One aspect of teaching I had not considered was that of a detective. It never occurred to me that I would have to really drill down, pick apart, and search for clues as to what was getting in the way of learning to read for my students. Much like detective work, I tried to eliminate and uncover as many barriers to learning as possible. I never really felt equipped or knowledgeable enough to deal with all of the challenges that came my way. I knew there had to be answers, I just did not quite know where to look. My deep desire to find answers for struggling students led to my research question: How does an Instructional Coach support elementary teachers who have students struggling to read with characteristics similar to dyslexia?

Professional Experience

In my first year of teaching I went to our Assistant Principal, relayed my concerns about a student and after listening to me she handed me a very thick book and told me that I needed to conduct an intervention. Leaving her office with the book clutched in my arms, I remember having absolutely no idea what she was talking about. At the time I was swamped at work and even more underwater at home with four children, the youngest only a few months old. The book made no sense to me and I did not have the time nor energy to figure it out. I felt inadequate as a teacher and wondered where my training, or lack thereof, had gone wrong. My students were suffering because of my shortcomings.

I switched districts and was fortunate enough to join the Child Study Committee, whose job was to provide teachers with insight and recommendations for students who were struggling. Aha! I finally figured out what that book was all about. Over the next few years I discovered
many different learning disabilities students may have that can cause difficulty in a variety of ways in school. I learned about students with a variety of different kinds of learning, behavioral, and emotional disorders. One parent brought to my attention Irlen Syndrome and Convergence Insufficiency Disorder. One area that was never touched on or actually said out loud was dyslexia. Even though a student may have many characteristics similar to dyslexia it seemed as though it was taboo to say the word. Although I was learning a lot I still did not feel as though I had much in the way of concrete answers or solutions to help our most struggling students.

I was most grateful for the opportunity to get out of the classroom and work on the Intervention team. We serviced students who were below grade level in reading from kindergarten through fifth grade. In some cases where sufficient gains were not made, those students were referred to the Special Education Department (SPED), for further assessments to see if they would qualify for more help in their area of need. Talk about a rude awakening after teaching the upper grades for so long! I had no idea about teaching early literacy strategies. I did not know how to make the kindergarten letter sounds appropriately nor had I ever had to teach the proper way to form letters when writing. This was so exciting yet challenging at the same time. It was not long after working in the Intervention department servicing our low and struggling students that I realized I needed to continue my detective work. I was searching for answers for what was getting in the way of my students' progress. I discovered what I thought to be very basic at the time because I did not fully understand the root cause. I deduced by making anecdotal notes of common mistakes that many of my students could not see up-close to read. When I checked with our nursing staff I was told eyes are only checked for distance and that we do not have the equipment for up-close reading. Ironically, I had seven students get glasses that
year. They may have had glasses, but that did not solve all of their learning obstacles. The search for answers continued.

A light at the end of the tunnel finally came when I was fortunate enough to attend a week-long, Institute for Multi-Sensory Education (IMSE) Orton-Gillingham Training in October of 2019. Orton-Gillingham (OG) is a scientific, research-based approach to reading instruction, developed in the 1930’s by neurologist Dr. Orton and educator, psychologist Gillingham. Orton-Gillingham is a systematic and explicit phonics-based multi-sensory approach and utilizes: visual, auditory and kinesthetic strategies that are helpful for all students but especially with students who are dyslexic or have characteristics of dyslexia (Institute for Multi-Sensory Education, 2019). During the training, many of us in the room were commenting on how shocked we collectively were at what we did not know. A handful of teachers had twenty-plus years of teaching and specialized reading licenses and they were stunned at what we were learning for the first time. Some examples, of what I was unaware of, were that learning to read is not a natural process, and it has to be explicitly, systematically taught (Institute for Multi-Sensory Education, 2019). I also did not have a grasp on the plethora of nuances the english language has such as when to double f, s, l, z or that there are 44 phonemic sounds (Institute for Multi-Sensory Education, 2019). I had heard of Orton-Gillingham before but really did not understand what it all entailed. After the training, I finally felt like I had a fighting chance to help students with the new knowledge I had gained.

I took on a new position as an Instructional Coach and one of the main components of my job was student success. To help guide this work our Instructional Coach cohort was using research based Student-Centered Coaching: The Moves (Sweeney & Harris, 2017). First, in
order to help students, I had to get in touch with teachers. Then, I facilitated grade level collaboration team meetings each week. At these meetings we look at student data to help us drive instruction. We look at multiple sources of data which is helpful as it does give us a generalized breakdown of students in order to group for needs based instruction. The downfall is the data provides only a limited amount of information along with limited recommendations of resources from which to work with. During this collaboration time I realized teachers were continually asking me about how to best screen and assess students for literacy benchmark levels in alignment with district and state standards. I knew why they were asking because although we did have systems in place for screening and assessments which provided a broad overview it did not offer specific enough data and lacked clear identification as to how to identify a particular need the student was struggling with. The current assessments also left teachers asking what materials should be used to help reach these struggling students. We were looking in many directions and trying different approaches that we all felt fragmented and unsuccessful. Part of the problem was also a lack of knowledge as to what the difficulty or need for the student really was and how to fill that need.

Another challenge, I discovered after teaching intervention for grades kindergarten through fifth for two years, was not all classroom teachers were on the same page. It became apparent when working with small groups of students from several different grade level teacher’s classrooms. For example, each grade level classroom teacher had a different way to express letter sounds and letter names. There was not a common language I could use with these intervention students without having to teach them yet another strategy or method by which to learn letter sounds and letter names. Another example was each teacher had a different name for a list of
grade level words, some called them sight words, red words, or heart words and used these labels interchangeably. These early reading students were very confused. We needed clarity, focus, consistency, and more knowledge in order to best support these struggling students.

At this time our district had an early literacy focus on what was called, The Big 5 of Reading as identified by Shriver (2000) in the National Reading Panel (NRP) Report. It included phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension. This focus supported what I had just learned at OG training. Things were starting to come together but the challenge was trying to keep all of this new information straight. It was also around this time that a parent and activist for dyslexia began questioning me about what we were doing as a school and district to help students, like her daughter, with dyslexia. I did not know exactly what the district was doing in addition to the Big 5 literacy professional development, but the Orton-Gillingham training I attended was designed to help students with dyslexia.

**Field Experience**

There were a few key experiences in my past that proved to me, being able to read is one of the most important skills in life. About 10 years ago, I had a 5th grader who was reading at around a first grade level. Part of her defense system was to compensate by showing up daily carrying a very thick, college textbook under her arm. She was a tough nut to crack and I adored her immensely for her fierceness. She was what I would call street smart, had good verbal communication and oral comprehension. Together we figured out a way to build a strong relationship and we were just beginning to make gains in reading when she abruptly left our school and entered foster care. I only saw her once after that and I think of her often, hoping that she was able to continue to learn to read.
Another situation that really moved me was a few years ago. I was asked by the Principal to touch base with a 3rd grade student who was new to our school. When I entered her classroom I found her with a chapter book in her hands that was turned upside down. When I asked her if she liked to read it upside down, as I know some children can and do read books this way, she immediately flipped it around and proceeded to open it to the copyright page. She made it appear as though she were reading it intently. It was at this point where I assumed she did not know how to read. When I was able to build trust and rapport with her she confided in me that her greatest wish was to be able to read. It was hard for me to believe that a child could be in the 3rd grade and not know any kindergarten sight words. I proceeded to ask her questions and found out how many previous schools she had attended, and we were number 5. This child required an intense group effort. Between her teacher, myself and an unbelievable Grandma volunteer who showed up early, three days a week for one on one time, we were able to help her learn to read. It was not easy on anyone's part but we were all so determined to grant her this wish. We only had her for 3 months before she was granted into someone else's custody and moved. I tracked down her 6th school and located her new teacher and made certain he understood what she needed and how hard she had worked and how far she had come. I still think about her and wonder how she is doing.

More recently I became aware of an adult situation where the parent does not know how to read. In addition, not only does she struggle with life in general and her inability to read but her children also have huge literacy challenges ahead. I cannot imagine going through life without really knowing what anything is for sure since you cannot read the words on the paper you must rely on others to tell you and you hope what you are being told is the truth. This mother
is not able to help her children with anything in life that deals with reading words.

**Rationale**

Sometimes all you need is one good idea. It became clear our teachers did not have the training and materials they needed to support their students literacy growth and neither did I their Instructional Coach. To fill this need, I started thinking about the idea of a professional development literacy workshop for our teachers back in the fall of 2019, before I had even considered completing the masters capstone. Upon further investigation at Hamline University I learned about the capstone project which was a new addition to completing a masters. The capstone project would be perfect for my literacy professional development workshop idea and it would fulfill my masters at the same time. The research and literature review required for chapter 2 would help me gain content knowledge that I so desperately needed.

Additionally, at this same time I began thinking about equity, literacy and the ability to read at grade level as one of the biggest opportunity and achievement gaps facing our students. I believe all students have the right to high quality, core literacy instruction, and every child has the inalienable right to be taught to read. Furthermore every child needs to be able to know how to write their own name. Upon reflecting on my time as a classroom and intervention teacher, I feel most passionate about children being able to read. My inability to find reasonable solutions to help struggling readers or even fully understand the why behind their difficulty in becoming fluent readers, much less catch up to their peers, further ignited my desire to dig deeper. I wanted to find a way to help students by helping their teachers gain the training and knowledge they were asking for and needed. Coordinating and creating professional development training for elementary teachers emerged as one way I could help.
Summary

My research question, *How does an Instructional Coach support elementary teachers who have students struggling to read with characteristics similar to dyslexia?* comes from years of experience of not meeting the needs of students, not having the answers for myself or having appropriate resources for what teachers need. The more degrees I have completed, along with additional professional development and training received, the more I have realized just how much there is yet to learn. It truly is a journey to be a lifelong learner. Every step of the way builds my capacity and yearning for more knowledge and increases my desire to be of service to others and to always do my best.

In chapter 2, the literature is reviewed on the role of an Instructional Coach and how to design professional development with the best way to train adult learners. I will review what dyslexia is along with the Minnesota State Statute on screening students who are not reading at grade level and describe characteristics of children with dyslexia and what they may look like in an elementary classroom. I will research the science of reading and discuss the difference of structured literacy versus balanced literacy. Finally, what strategies we have to support struggling readers. In chapter 3, I will outline my project of the coordination and co-creation of a literacy professional development training for elementary teachers. Chapter 4 is the reflection and conclusion of the research project.
Chapter Overview

The research question is: *How does an Instructional Coach support elementary teachers who have students struggling to read with characteristics similar to dyslexia?* This chapter will review expert research on the role of an Instructional Coach in supporting teachers and engaging in student centered coaching with the ultimate goal of student growth and achievement. It will then turn to a look into adult learning theory and how best to engage teachers in professional development. Next it will consider the latest research on the science of reading and how the brain works. It will conclude with a discussion on the characteristics of dyslexia and what is recommended to support struggling readers.

Instructional Coach

Many districts are looking for ways to raise student test scores and achievement, improve teacher instruction and best practices, while changing building culture and climate. They are looking to the role of an instructional coach (IC) to help facilitate this type of change. At times the IC finds themselves everywhere doing everything but at its core instructional coaching is a job-embedded approach to instructional intervention (Knight, 2007). The main focus of an Instructional Coach is to improve the highly effective practices of teachers to ensure student growth. To gain clarity and be effective, an IC needs to focus their attention on student-centered coaching which is in partnership with the teacher, looking at student data and goal setting, within a coaching cycle to positively impact student learning (Sweeney & Harris, 2017). Instructional coaching is that of a partnership based on seven partnership principles described by Knight.
(2011) as equality, choice, voice, reflection, dialogue, praxis, and reciprocity. To put it in very simple terms, “Identify, Learn, Improve,” as pictured on the cover and described in his book, *The Impact cycle: What instructional coaches should do to foster powerful improvements in teaching* (Knight, 2018) has coaches working with teachers to help identify an area of student need, what does either the teacher or the student need to learn, in order improve. Characteristics and important qualities of an instructional coach is their propensity to be a visionary, communicate skillfully with a variety of different individuals, their positive attitude, courageousness, with the ability to be autonomous and collegial at the same time (Morel & Cushman, 2012). Instructional coaches bring out the very best in themselves and everyone around them daily by being positive mentors in the building with the ability to be clear headed and flexible in difficult situations. The IC’s desire to continue to improve not only themselves but also the teachers with whom they work with leads them to dig deeper into the theory of adult learning and how best to communicate and motivate adult learners.

**Adult Learning Theory**

There is a difference between how children learn called pedagogy and how adults learn called andragogy. This term andragogy was first coined by German educator Kapp in 1833, today it is associated with American educator Knowles (Knowles, 1980). There are 5 key concepts or characteristics of adult learners, first the need for adults to be self directed, second their background knowledge and experience becomes a resource for learning, third their willingness or readiness to learn, fourth more problem centered and immediate, fifth a motivation to learn (Graham, 2017; Knowles, 1980). Teachers are also learners and they become integral in guiding the direction of the curriculum (Knowles et al., 2015). Learning together and
fostering collaboration is best practice in gaining knowledge. According to Zepeda (2012), “Adults want authentic learning with immediate application in their worlds of teaching” (p. 60). Adults also want to be sure that their time is being valued and they are able to use whatever it is being learned or taught. One method for learning is called professional development or professional learning and can be in the form of a presentation, a training or a workshop (Moir, 2013).

**Professional Development.** The National Comprehensive Center for Teacher Quality (as cited in Archibald et al., 2011) listed five characteristics of high-quality professional development:

1. Alignment with school goals, state and district standards and assessments, and other professional learning activities including formative teacher evaluation
2. Focus on core content and modeling of teaching strategies for the content
3. Inclusion of opportunities for active learning of new teaching strategies
4. Provision of opportunities for collaboration among teachers
5. Inclusion of embedded follow-up and continuous feedback

(p. 3)

Another component of successful professional development is teacher buy-in or willingness to participate as well as current mental capacity at the time of the training to be able to take in more information. Furthermore the ability of the leader or instructor to actively engage participants by matching the learning environment (Gore et al., 2017). Furthermore successful professional development depends on the career stages and corresponding developmental needs for teachers poses some thought provoking questions about how to provide professional development with a
varied level of staff (Zepeda, 2012).

The capstone project utilizes both adult learning theory and professional development in the form of a presentation to deliver a high quality literacy training that will incorporate the science of reading and the brain to teach the latest in early literacy information and strategies to elementary teachers.

**The Science of Reading and the Brain**

We as humans were not born to read, it is something we invented and it reflects how the brain rearranges itself to learn something new. When reading first occurs there is a physiological and intellectual permanent change based on the brain's plasticity (Wolf, 2007).

(Wolf, 2007). Learning to read is a complex process and uses many different parts of the brain in order to accomplish this task. In addition, children vary in their ability to develop phonemic awareness or the relationship between printed symbols or letters and the corresponding sounds they make with the teaching of that relationship called phonics (Shaywitz & Shaywitz, 2020). One aspect that facilitates phonemic awareness is exposure to rich language and hearing rhymes and singing rhyming songs. Additionally, children need to be able to decode or word identification, followed by fluency which is the ability to read a text accurately and quickly, they need to know the vocabulary or understand what the written words on a page mean and finally comprehension which is the creation of a personal mental representation of the text (McKenna & Walpole, 2013).

According to cognitive scientist Dehaene (2009), author of *Reading and the brain*, the brain essentially utilizes your vision system and your spoken language system, and then two parallel processing routes emerge the phonological route which takes letters and converts them to
speech sounds, and the lexical route which is like a mental dictionary in your brain of word meanings. The brain is wired to be able to determine that a cow is a cow no matter how we see it. If we see it facing left, it's a cow. If we see it facing right, it's still a cow (Sandman-Hurley, 2014). The difficulty comes in when we introduce letters like b, d or p, q to the preschooler, they have to unlearn this mirror image ability that is built into the brain. This would also account for early readers who mistake reading was for saw, as they are in the process of unlearning the mirror image. This unlearning process should have happened before they enter third grade and if not then they may be showing characteristics of dyslexia (Sandman-Hurley, 2014).

**Characteristics of Dyslexia**

As many as one out of every five children has a significant reading disability (Shaywitz & Shaywitz, 2020). Even though multiple reasons can lead to reading issues, dyslexia is hard to identify. A definition of dyslexia on the Learning Disabilities Association of America’s website (2013) states that,

Dyslexia is characterized by deficits in accurate and fluent word recognition.

Individuals with dyslexia struggle with word recognition, decoding, and spelling.

Reading comprehension is sometimes impaired due to very poor word reading skills.

Individuals with dyslexia often have deficits in phonemic and phonological awareness, which refer to the ability to hear, identify and manipulate the sound structure of a spoken word, including its phonemes, syllables, onsets and rimes.

Individuals with dyslexia may also have impaired orthographic processing, which interferes with connecting letters and letter combinations with sounds accurately and fluently. (para. ?)
Dyslexia can also be defined as an unexpected difficulty in learning to read (Shaywitz & Shaywitz, 2020). Dyslexia is not a visual disorder as it is commonly misdiagnosed but rather a problem accessing the sound of spoken language (Wolf, 2007). In order to help students with dyslexia, it is important for individuals to have early screening, early diagnosis, and then be put into an early evidence-based reading intervention with appropriate accommodations (Shaywitz & Shaywitz, 2020). Furthermore the earlier dyslexia is diagnosed, the earlier new brain pathways are formed and strengthened by evidence-based reading interventions (Wolf, 2007). Shaywitz (as cited in The Yale Center for Dyslexia & Creativity, n.d.) lists the following warning signs:

- Trouble learning common nursery rhymes, such as “Jack and Jill”
- Difficulty learning (and remembering) the names of letters in the alphabet
- Seems unable to recognize letters in his/her own name
- Mispronounces familiar words; persistent “baby talk”
- Doesn’t recognize rhyming patterns like cat, bat, rat
- A family history of reading and/or spelling difficulties (dyslexia often runs in families) (para. ?)

Oftentimes because dyslexia is a disability it automatically is seen in a negative light with the focus being more on what a child cannot do versus what they can do and what they excel at. On a more positive note, according to Davis and Braun’s (2010) The gift of dyslexia: Why some of the smartest people can’t read and how they can learn, there are some basic abilities that all dyslexics share, such as:

- They can utilize the brain’s ability to alter and create perceptions
- They are highly aware of their environment
- They are extremely curious
They think mainly in pictures instead of words

They are highly intuitive and insightful

They think and perceive multi-dimensionally (using all senses)

They have vivid imaginations (p. 5)

Dyslexia takes away an individual’s ability to read quickly and automatically, and to retrieve spoken words easily, but it does not dampen their creativity and ingenuity (The Yale Center for Dyslexia & Creativity, n.d.). Many students who have characteristics of dyslexia may never be officially identified as dyslexic. However, we have many additional students in our classrooms who are struggling to learn how to read, therefore, teachers need strategies, support to help these struggling readers. Furthermore, the need for teacher support while working with struggling students is through the Instructional Coach and the coaching cycles.

A strategy that works not only for students with dyslexia but is effective for all readers is Structured Literacy, which is explicit direct teaching that is systematic in which materials follow the logical order of language (Shaywitz & Shaywitz, 2020). For example, it requires the teaching of decoding words, along with elements such as phonology- sound units/phonemes, phonics- sound symbols of reading and spelling, syllable instruction, morphology- base words with prefixes and suffixes, syntax- grammar and sentence variation, and semantics- word meaning (Lorimor-Easley & Reed, 2019).

Summary

This chapter addressed the research question of: How does an Instructional Coach support elementary teachers who have students struggling to read with characteristics similar to dyslexia? and began with research on the role of an Instructional coach. The Instructional Coach
plays an integral part of the elementary school community as a whole and in particular as a partner with teachers in a student-coaching cycle that serves to identify a need, provide high quality instruction to ensure student success and achievement. Next came the research into adult learning theory on how adults need to find value in solving a problem, are collaborative and actively engaged in their learning. Understanding the method of professional development and the opportunities it provides in enhancing the knowledge and effectiveness of teachers who in turn are able to support student growth and achievement.

A review into the science of reading and dyslexia and how complex and unnatural the process is for the brain to learn to read. Everyone learns to speak but many have difficulty in learning to read. There are key literacy components of phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension. Dyslexics have many areas where they are able to excel in and are highly creative. There are strategies to support struggling readers as some children are able to read easily but others need those key components to be explicitly and systematically taught in order to be able to read and those components are fundamental in structured literacy.

Chapter 3 will give a detailed description of the capstone project in creating literacy professional development training for elementary teachers using methods of adult learning theory and combining them with key components of professional development or professional learning to lead a training. The chapter also includes a description of a new directive by our district in which Instructional coaches and teachers partner together in what is called a student-centered coaching cycle. The chapter will describe the setting, timeline, audience and give the rationale for the project.
CHAPTER THREE

Project Description

Overview of the Project

The research question driving this project was: How does an Instructional Coach support elementary teachers who have students struggling to read with characteristics similar to dyslexia? Being able to read, is by itself an equitable statement. This chapter describes the capstone project of the coordination and creation of a professional development training presentation for elementary teachers focused on structured literacy. The professional development project was based on the latest research of highly effective practices of adult learning theory and the method of professional development in an elementary setting. This chapter focuses on the science of reading, and structured literacy, along with recognizing the characteristics of dyslexia and those of struggling readers.

The goal of the project was to support teachers, in providing them with information and ideas that they would be able to bring back into the classroom to support students in meeting reading benchmarks and closing the literacy achievement gap. A key component in the professional development training was the definition of the role of an Instructional Coach as a partner in a teacher learning through a coaching cycle. In order to help teachers identify a need, it was vital to utilize teachers prior literacy knowledge while embedding new knowledge and continue to build strategies and tools to ultimately impact student achievement and growth.

Research Theory

Adult learning theory was a method demonstrated to our elementary staff for the first time at the start of the school year by one of our elementary principals as she led our district’s
professional development on structured literacy training. For many of us the information was new. In an article, *Applying principles of adult learning in conference presentations* (Knowles, 1992) discusses the foundations of learners being active participants along with understanding the needs and backgrounds of participants as a way to encourage self-directed learners. Our district professional development followed this method by having the teachers write down what we already knew about structured literacy and what we wanted to know. Next the Principal modeled a literacy lesson using a Gradual Release Method as though she were presenting to a classroom of elementary students, I do it, we do it, you do it together, you do it alone (Fisher & Frey, 2013). Staff commented that they found these methods of training to be very helpful in understanding what they already knew, where they wanted to go, while actively practicing, and collaborating with peers, with the end result of solidifying new knowledge.

Given the district’s positive feedback from teachers and my own personal experience as an adult participant in the professional development training process, it made sense to continue using this foundation and incorporate both the adult learning theory and the gradual release method in my project’s literacy professional development training.

**Choice of Method/Rationale**

The choice of method for the project was professional development presentation. Some definitions state professional development to be more of a “one time” or “sit and get” where the presenter stands and delivers information versus professional learning where the specific teacher needs or those of their students are addressed and the training is collaborative and interactive (Archibald et al., 2011; Moir, 2013). The rationale for using a professional development presentation method was based on the research in chapter 2 on adult learning theory and
professional development. Furthermore when inquiring about preferred methods of learning, teachers were requesting professional development that offered them both the ability to be actively involved while collaborating with grade level teams and other participants. According to Darling-Hammond (2017), “we define effective professional development as structured professional learning that results in changes in teacher practices and improvements in student learning outcomes” (p. 2). For the professional development literacy training Google slides was created to be used as a visual guide and for later reference with resources included. This professional development presentation was created with content, specific to the needs of the participants, was job embedded, with modeling and gradual release allowing for collaboration and conversation, working towards a greater effect size with teacher efficacy in building early literacy, highly effective practices.

**Audience/Timeline**

All elementary teachers in our building participated in a literacy professional development training, conducted over a three year, consecutive period of time. This rotation decision was made due to a large staff size, budget constraints, and available funding options. Year one included kindergarten, 1st, intervention, and special education teachers, 15 teachers in all. Subsequent years included 2nd, 3rd, 4th, and 5th grades with two grade levels per year. Having been so successful the larger goal was to be able to roll this literacy professional development out to the 8 other elementary schools in the district using this current model and rotation timeline.

The literacy professional development training consisted of a 4 day, paid training from 8:30 am-12:30 pm with an optional hour from 12:30 pm-1:30 pm where teachers had the ability
to stay after and receive one on one help from curriculum content experts. This additional extra hour of time each day was creatively added as an optional, non-paid, working lunch idea, to gain training time for teachers while only incurring a curriculum content expert cost. Teachers received 16 hours of paid training with the option of 4 additional free hours for a total of 20 hours of literacy training. The training was held in the school media center.

**Project Description**

The project was a 4 day, 4 hours per day elementary literacy professional development training. The presentation format created for this PD was a Google slides deck of 51 slides. Teachers came four consecutive days at 4 hours per day. Following concepts of adult learning theory framework of background knowledge and experience (Knowles et al., 2015). Teachers were asked to share what they had previously created for early literacy spelling and phonics. This information along with new research on spelling and phonics was added to the training. Another concept of adult learning theory was being problem centered and immediate, teachers were asked ahead of time what they felt were current literacy problems, and needs. The professional development training had elements of grade level team collaboration and engagement which is a best practice in gaining knowledge (Temperley, 2020)

The professional development literacy training included the current research on the science of reading and a form of evidence of the effectiveness of the training was teachers implementing a sound wall in their classrooms. Another piece of evidence was teachers actively partnering with the Instructional Coach in a student-coaching cycle. The framework for student centered coaching was explained on the fourth and final day of the training with details on what the role of the coach looks like, the steps in the student-centered coaching cycle and how
teachers own the process. The framework used *Student-centered coaching: The Moves* (Sweeney & Harris, 2017) in coaching cycles with teachers to build collective teacher efficacy:

1. Organize Coaching through Cycles
2. Set Goals for Coaching Cycles
3. Use Standards-Based Learning Targets
4. Use Student Evidence to Co-Plan Instruction
5. Co-Teach with a Focus on Effective Instructional Practices
6. Measure the Impact of Coaching on Student and Teacher Learning
7. Partner with the School Leader (pp. 3-4)

Essentially, the coach partners with the teacher to design learning that is based on a specific objective or observation by the teacher to enhance student learning outcomes. The cycles would be grade level specific and run quarterly. The support was already in place in having an Instructional Coach as a partner to work with both grade level teams and individual teachers thus further solidifying the success of the professional development training.

The learning outcomes for each day of the professional development training are listed below:

**Day 1 Learning outcomes**

- Literacy Big 5 Review: phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, comprehension
- I can use the Heggerty book to support whole class and small group instruction 
  (Heggerty & Vanhekken, 2020)
- Assessment of participant learning - KWL chart- What I Know, What I Want to know, What I Learned (see Appendix A)
Day 2 Learning Outcomes

- I understand the International Dyslexic Association’s Knowledge & Practice Standard for Teachers of Reading, especially Standard 4: Structured Literacy. These standards are now a MN requirement for pre-service teacher college and university programs.
  Knowledge and Practice Standards for Teachers of Reading
  https://app.box.com/s/21gdk2k1p3bnagdfz1xy0v98j5yt1lwk
  (McCombes-Tolis & Moats, 2018)
- I understand the characteristics of effective literacy instruction for students who are struggling with reading. Jess Surles, National Center on Improving Literacy on Effective Instruction
  https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZO5tsmIp138
  (National Center on Improving Literacy & Surles, 2018)
- I understand that phonics is the connection between phonemes and graphemes and that both must be directly, explicitly, systematically and cumulatively taught
- I understand why we begin teaching consonant walls and vowel valleys
  Sound Walls  https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vxV4Rq1F00M
  (Ohio Department of Education & Dahlgren, 2019)
- Assessment of participant learning - Exit Ticket

Day 3 Learning Outcomes

- I can use the Alphabet Arc mat for instant letter recognition
• I understand the difference between Balanced Literacy and Structured Literacy

• Dr. Susan Nolan demonstrates multisensory instruction
  [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uGr-N7A4ZQI](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uGr-N7A4ZQI) (Nolan, 2013)

• Assessment of participant learning - Exit Ticket

Day 4 Outcome Hybrid to school start

• I can add/take away from grade level team spring distance learning board to make it ready for a fall start

• I can develop a grade level team scope & sequence for literacy instruction for in person learning using the Heggerty curriculum

• I understand the role of an Instructional Coach as a partner is a student-coaching cycle to ensure student success

• I understand the steps in the student-centered coaching cycle

• I understand how teachers own the process in a student-centered coaching cycle

• Exit Survey rating the presentation and what teachers need for more support - [google forms](https://forms.google.com)

Summary

The research question for this project was: *How does an Instructional Coach support elementary teachers who have students struggling to read with characteristics similar to dyslexia?* This chapter described the role of an Instructional Coach in coordinating and creating literacy professional development training for the audience of kindergarten, 1st, intervention, and
special education teachers, 15 teachers in all, with subsequent years including grades 2nd, 3rd, year two with 4th, and 5th, in year three. The professional development training takes place in August before the start of a new school year. The broader goal of the capstone project was to be able to take the literacy professional development training district wide to the 8 other elementary schools in our district using this model.

From the literacy professional development training teachers were able to reflect on and use prior literacy knowledge while identifying a current need or problem. They were able to participate in meaningful activities using new knowledge from the latest research and were given additional resources to refer back to ensure equity, student growth and achievement. The role of an Instructional Coach as a partner in a coaching cycle to positively impact student learning was defined and explained to teachers as a measurement and follow up to the training.

The research theory of adult learning concepts and best practices were shown to pair well with the method of professional development training along with the follow up by the Instructional Coach with the teacher as a partner in a student-centered coaching cycle. The 4 day, 4 hour per day, professional development schedule was included with daily learning outcomes and exit feedback, participant learning, and overall participant feedback at the end of the training in a Google form.

Chapter 4 will be the conclusion to the capstone project and will explain what was learned through the process as a result of the research and writing. It will detail new learnings that were unexpected and could potentially prove to be beneficial as we move forward in the changing times of the coming school year.
CHAPTER FOUR

Conclusion

Chapter Overview

*How does an Instructional Coach support elementary teachers who have students struggling to read with characteristics similar to dyslexia?* This is the question I strove to research to be able to coordinate and create high quality literacy professional development training that would serve to enhance the effective practices of teachers to be able to close the opportunity and achievement gap for students in being able to read. Any implications and or limitations of the project will be discussed as well as opportunities for future research projects. Finally, results of the project as well as how the project potentially will be used to benefit the profession.

Reflection

In reflecting on the capstone project process as a whole, I am grateful for the experience despite all the challenges and difficulties. Perseverance wins the day. The writing component was by far the most difficult as it takes me so long to compose a paragraph with clear and salient information. The overall amount of time required to complete everything was substantial and took away quite a bit of valuable family time. In general it would have been better for me had it been in person and not required to be online only.

The literature review and research from chapter 2 really impacted decisions I made and drove the project. I used the adult learning theory and tried to pay attention to what the needs of the teachers were on a daily basis and then would read over the exit tickets to change or add to
what was taught on the following day. Furthermore, the research helped make the decision to ensure the training was interactive, engaging and collaborative. Had I not done the research I do not know if I would have paid as much attention to these details. And I think the training was made more interesting or more impactful because I knew what the research had said.

In reflecting on the research component it helped answer some of the burning questions I had, while quite unexpectedly offering answers to questions I did not even know I had. I would find myself completely engrossed in the research. In the past year as an Instructional Coach there were many meetings that contained new concepts and ideas about teaching and learning that I was not familiar with such as the gradual release of responsibility method (Fisher & Frey, 2013) or distinguishing between professional learning and professional development (Scherff, 2018). In conducting research for the project, I again, unexpectedly came across many of these same sources but being able to read them in their entirety gave me more clarity, knowledge, confidence and solidified my passion and direction in ultimately helping struggling students by supporting their teachers. As a learner, I could have kept on going because one source led to another and it became difficult to know when or where to stop. As an educator I needed to know information such as the difference between balanced literacy and structured literacy (Lorimor-Easley & Reed, 2019). In working with the rubrics and design outcomes of the capstone project it forced me to do the work, dig deeper and understand more fully so I am better able to lead and support teachers and students (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017).

Implications/Limitations

The overall possible implications for the project is student growth in literacy and being able to read at grade level. During these challenging times of starting the school year in a hybrid
learning environment, it is critical to be able to provide teachers with clarity of purpose with the literacy professional development training. In addition to fulfilling our building commitment of literacy professional development for grades 2-5 the future goal would be to provide this professional development training district wide and beyond.

The limitations of the project is that it is currently only being offered at one elementary school and could be cost prohibitive to others. The ever changing landscape to the beginning of the school year has caused this professional development training to be a very fluid process as I try to be receptive to both teachers and students needs while trying to provide the best possible outcomes. Another limitation is in literacy there are so many directions and avenues one can take that at times it is difficult to know what to choose or which of the latest research to follow when presented with so many choices. Another possibility is that you can offer the training but teachers have free will and they may choose to not attend and or not use any of the new information and resources.

**Future Research**

Moving forward with future research projects, I could continue with some aspects of literacy, based on information received from coaching cycles and teacher feedback along with results from student data to see where we might want to focus next. I did spend quite a bit of time in early literacy with kindergarten and 1st grade using the Heggerty (Heggerty & Vanhekken, 2020) program and book versus later elementary grades 3rd, 4th, 5th and would want to learn more about the Kilpatrick (2018) program and book. In addition, it may be beneficial to switch to another subject area altogether again based on students needs, data, teacher feedback and district initiatives.
Now that I am re-connected to how research is conducted the options really seem endless as to what I might want to learn more about. One thought is after taking a cognitive coaching course I would like to research more on teams and collaboration as our instructor authored a book *Transforming Teamwork* (Zimmerman et al., 2020) and I could start at least there. I also have several other books I have not read yet on coaching, one with the focus on building the relationship between Principals and Instructional Coaches (Sweeney & Mausbach, 2018) which could be the beginning of more research or perhaps a book study with my Principal. Overall I am most fascinated by dyslexia and will continue to read and research more about it. I think there is much work to be done to help students who struggle with so many aspects of school in which dyslexia is the culprit.

**Results/Benefit**

The professional development training is the catalyst in opening up doors to allow me the opportunity as an Instructional Coach to facilitate coaching cycles where I will partner with teachers weekly in grade level team meetings and additionally if they request on an individual basis. From the training, teachers will have more knowledge and together we will be better able to decipher student data as related to the state standards and grade level benchmarks. Together coach and teacher will know what to look for in developing formative assessments that lead to highly effective practices of instruction in gaining student results.

The capstone project of professional development is benefitting over 30 teachers in our building alone as it increases teacher knowledge and effectiveness with the end result of increased student equity, growth and achievement. The broader goal of bringing this training to 8 other elementary schools in our district equates to over 200 more teachers.
Summary

In reflecting on the capstone process it is positive in nature and important to embark on a project of this magnitude probably more often than not. Being able to dive deeper into the research was so satisfying and enlightening with the added benefit of being able to understand what my job title actually entailed. The greatest implication is the far reaching ability of the capstone project of literacy professional development training because in our district alone this equates to thousands of students. At this point the limitations seem to be minimal and the implications far out way any potential limitation. Future research is very exciting and could continue on with literacy and or venture into other elementary subject areas as well. The idea of researching more on cognitive coaching and student-centered coaching to help facilitate the results component in the coaching cycles will be beneficial to all.

In the end, we are talking about equity, literacy and the ability to read at grade level as one of the biggest opportunity and achievement gaps that students face today. All students have the right to high quality core literacy instruction. As Districts, Principals, and Instructional Coaches, we all need to ensure teachers are qualified, knowledgeable, and able to provide high quality literacy instruction so that every child who leaves elementary school is able to read.
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