Comfort with Complexity: an Examination of Instructional Coaching in Three Suburban School Districts in Massachusetts

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COMFORT WITH COMPLEXITY:
An Examination of Instructional Coaching in Three Suburban School Districts in Massachusetts

by

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ABSTRACT

Despite its provision of sustained, targeted, job-embedded professional development to teachers, instructional coaching, which school districts across the United States have introduced in efforts to midwife instructional improvement, has occasionally suffered the same fate as countless other attempts at school reform. While programs of instructional coaching have endured and become institutionalized in many districts, they have been discontinued in others. Additionally, while the literature reports that instructional coaching in this country originated, and has remained popular, in urban school districts, it is all-but-silent about programs in suburban settings.

The present, qualitative research study examined three suburban school districts in efforts to answer the following research question: How do suburban school districts’ unique contexts impact the implementation, maintenance, and success of their instructional coaching programs?

Case studies of three suburban school districts in Massachusetts were assembled from data collected during semi-structured interviews with twenty-two educators from across the three districts. Resulting data were analyzed across cases through the lens of complexity science, in order that the three school districts, and their programs of instructional coaching, could be explored – if not completely understood – in all their complexity.

This investigation found that, while the roll-out of a district’s instructional coaching program need not have been a grand event, it was nevertheless essential for faculty members to understand the rationale for the establishment of the program and the role to be played by their schools’ coaches. It confirmed assertions in the existing
literature that trust is an essential ingredient in any instructional coaching program. It also served to confirm that administrators contribute to the success of instructional coaching programs when they are actively engaged in supporting them. This investigation found, further, that instructional coaching programs, and the schools in which they function, demonstrate key aspects of complex systems.
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## ABSTRACT

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My students at Alden School in Duxbury continue to teach me more, each and every day, than I could ever hope to teach them. Curious, kind-hearted, and candid, they keep me honest, and serve to remind me of what George Eliot writes in *Silas Marner*:

> In old days there were angels who came and took men by the hand and led them away from the city of destruction. We see no white-winged angels now. But yet men are led away from threatening destruction: a hand is put into theirs, which leads them forth gently towards a calm and bright land, so that they look no more backward; and the hand may be a little child’s.

I would be nothing – literally and figuratively, personally or professionally – without the ceaseless love and constant support of my parents, Hon. Charles W. (Jr.) and Mrs. Mary R. (Johannesen) Trombly.
Any given event in any part of the universe has as its determining conditions all previous and contemporary events in all parts of the universe. Those, however, who make it their business to investigate the causes of what goes on around them habitually ignore the overwhelming majority of contemporary and antecedent happenings. In each particular case, they insist, only a very few of the determining conditions are of practical significance. Where simple events are concerned this is true enough...In the case of simple events, we can ignore all but one or at most a very few of their determining conditions, and still have sufficient understanding of them to enable us to control them for our practical purposes.

This is not true, however, in the case of complex events. Here, the determining conditions which have a practical significance are much more numerous. The most complex events with which we have to deal are events of human history. If we wish to establish the determining condition, we are compelled, even for such purely practical purposes as the framing of future policies, to consider a great variety of ‘causes,’ past and contemporary, local and remote, psychological, sociological, political, economic. To determine the full list of these practically significant ‘causes,’ their relative importance, their mode of interaction – this is an exceedingly difficult task. So difficult, indeed, as to be quite beyond the capacity of the human mind in its present state of development. But, alas, the insolubility of a problem has never deterred men and women from confidently propounding solutions. The method adopted is always the same – that of over-simplification. Thus, all but the immediate antecedents of the event under consideration are ignored, and history is treated as though it began only yesterday. At the same time, all embarrassing complexities are mentally abolished.

To over-simplify is fatal, and it is impossible to determine fully and correctly all the practically significant causes of complex events. Are we then doomed never to understand our history and therefore never to profit by the experiences of the past? The answer is that, although understanding will probably never be complete, we can yet understand enough for some at least of our practical purposes. For example, we can probably find out enough about our recent catastrophes to be able (if we so desire) to frame policies at least a little less suicidal than those we have pursued in the past.

ALDOUS HUXLEY
CHAPTER 1

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

BACKGROUND OF THE PROBLEM

Teachers are seldom shy about pointing-out to anyone who proposes a new initiative – be they administrators, consultants, or fellow teachers – that this has been tried before. Seemingly all educational innovations have been attempted; been found wanting (long before they could reasonably be expected to have had the desired impact, and conspicuously lacking the kind, quality, and duration of training and support that teachers would have required in order to institute the reform effectively); been replaced by some other initiative; then, when the latter has likewise shown itself to be less successful than hoped, been revisited – with a fashionable new name and little or no official acknowledgement of its earlier incarnation.

The variability with which they are implemented by different schools and districts has provided policymakers with one possible explanation for the failure of reform efforts. Resulting mandates that curricula and instructional approaches be implemented ‘with fidelity,’ while unquestionably well-intended, are both simplistic and naïve – simplistic, because they presume that the variability of implementation stems from educators’ differing willingness to follow directives, rather than from the very different contexts within which they teach; naïve, because they suppose that successful implementation in one district or school guarantees the same in all others.
In fact, what has taken years to hone in one school or district cannot be expected to have immediate success in another. As Hargreaves and Shirley (2009) explain, “It’s the slowly built understanding of the development that makes much of the implementation effective.” Likewise, as Elmore (2004) describes, “Improvement is a developmental process, not an act of compliance with policy. Schools ‘get better’ by engaging collectively in the acquisition of new knowledge and skills, not by figuring out what policymakers want and doing it” (p. 227).

Not only must teachers understand the intricacies of the specific curricula or instructional approaches that they are to implement, they must also – if those curricula or approaches are to prove effective – genuinely understand and support the rationale behind their implementation, and be afforded sufficient opportunity to apply them in their own professional practice. Policymakers’ and administrators’ lip service to the importance of teacher ‘buy-in’ notwithstanding,

Teacher support for reform is not merely an issue of politics and pragmatism. Research on the characteristics of effective professional development indicates that teachers must be active agents in analyzing their own practice in light of professional standards, and their students’ progress in the light of standards for student learning…There should also be a strong commitment to sharing information, and to building trust and cooperation, as well as an explicit high-level commitment to the reform agenda from each partner…Teacher engagement also requires consistent, co-ordinate efforts to persuade those affected of the need for reform and, in particular, to communicate the costs of non-reform. (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2011, p. 54)

Despite its provision of sustained, targeted, job-embedded professional development to teachers – a key ingredient in any effective education reform measure, instructional coaching, which school districts across the United States have introduced in efforts to midwife instructional improvement, has occasionally suffered the same fate as countless other attempts at school reform – and for many of the same reasons. While
programs of instructional coaching have endured and become institutionalized in many districts, they have been discontinued in others.

Since instructional coaching programs, like all efforts at school improvement, are only as effective as the commitment and support that they receive, school and district leaders must be sure to invest in them sufficient human and material resources; provide teachers and coaches with ongoing opportunities to continue their professional learning, and ample occasions to work together; and allow programs time enough to become institutionalized (Annenberg Institute for School Reform, 2004).

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

In order for instructional coaching programs, and their successes or failures, to be genuinely understood, the unique contexts within which – and the manners in which – they are implemented need to be taken very much into account by researchers. At present, too few studies adequately attend to the contexts within which specific coaching programs have been attempted.

Matsumura et al. (2010) explain that very few studies directly link the variability with which instructional coaching programs are implemented, or the experiences that teachers have with coaching, to such preexisting contextual factors as principal leadership, the quality and quantity of professional collaboration in which the teachers within a given school engage, or the preparation and experience of a school’s teachers and coaches. Cornett & Knight (2009) also identify that these areas need to be included in any investigation of instructional coaching programs.
Reminding, “Research indicates that teachers can be hired to serve as coaches for reasons altogether different from professional acumen (e.g., to avoid a lay-off),” Matsumura et al. (2010) suggest, “instructional coaches may not possess the subject-matter content knowledge, pedagogical expertise, or coaching skills necessary to work effectively with teachers” (p. 2). Gallucci et al. (2010) likewise express interest in the content-area, pedagogical, and coaching expertise that individuals bring to their roles as coaches, as well as in how coaches further develop that expertise once on the job.

Describing instructional coaching as an “as yet under-researched” strategy for helping teachers think critically about the complex work in which they are engaged, Gallucci et al. (2010) specify, “Research is needed to help district and school leaders understand coaching as part of a system of support for professional learning” (p. 956). Toll (2009) and Schmoker (1999) share the view that a systems perspective should be employed when studying such complex phenomena as schools and their programs of instructional coaching.

Additionally, while the literature reports that instructional coaching in the United States originated, and has remained popular, in urban school districts such as Boston, New York, Philadelphia, and Dallas (Matsumura, 2010; Kowal & Steiner, 2007; Russo, 2004), it is all-but-silent about programs in suburban settings.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of the present, qualitative research study was to examine three suburban school districts in efforts to begin to understand how their unique contexts have impacted the implementation, maintenance, and success of their instructional coaching.
programs. As this study was exploratory in nature, it promised to identify more questions for investigation by possible subsequent studies than it would answer outright.

This comparative case study examined the processes by which the participating school systems each elected to implement a program of instructional coaching; the goals established for the coaching program; the selection of individuals to serve as coaches; the training provided to coaches; the structure of the specific program (e.g., whether coaches worked full- or part-time in that capacity; whether coaches are/were assigned by grade-level or by discipline); the supervision/evaluation of individual coaches; the assessment of the coaching program overall; how/why (if at all) the program had evolved since its implementation; and the nature and extent of organizational support for the instructional coaching program.

The semi-structured interviews in which educators from participating school districts participated addressed each of the following areas: the institutional and political support provided to instructional coaching programs (Cornett & Knight, 2009; AISR, 2004); the role of building principals in instructional coaching programs (Grant & Davenport, 2009; Knight, 2009; Keller, 2007; Steiner & Kowal, 2007); the focus of coaches on instruction, and their freedom from clerical or other responsibilities (Knight, 2009; AISR, 2004); the differentiation of instructional coaching to meet teachers’ differing needs (Kise, 2009; Knight, 2009); the provision of professional development for instructional coaches (Killion, 2009; Knight, 2009; Kowal & Steiner, 2007; Neufeld & Roper, 2002); and the impact of instructional coaching programs upon student achievement – both from participants’ own perspectives and as illustrated in reports of
local student achievement data that were available for review during these interviews (Shidler, 2009; Toll, 2009).

Resulting data – including transcripts from interviews with participating educators, and such artifacts as policy documents, organizational charts, job descriptions, budget summaries, and student assessment results – were examined through the lens of complexity science, in order that the three school districts, and their programs of instructional coaching, could be explored – if not completely understood – in all their complexity, and not reduced to over-simple explanations.

RESEARCH QUESTION

The present study sought to answer the following research question: How do suburban school districts’ unique contexts impact the implementation, maintenance, and success of their instructional coaching programs?

Contextual variables that emerged from semi-structured interviews with administrators, coaches, and teachers in participating school districts were examined. How, for example, did these districts structure teachers’ and coaches’ schedules to allow for coaching? Were coaches assigned by discipline or by grade-level(s)? What criteria were employed when selecting individuals to serve as coaches? In what professional development, if any, had districts engaged instructional coaches? For instance, had districts provided coaches with mentors to support them as they embarked upon these roles? Was it the personalities of individual coaches that allowed the programs to achieve success? Was it coaches’ expertise in one or another area that won the respect of teachers? What aspects of teachers’ instruction changed as a result of their work with
coaches? What political variables, if any, came to bear? Were there any changes of leadership during the period of implementation? How have political and/or fiscal circumstances impacted the program since its introduction?

**IMPORTANCE OF THE STUDY**

Identifying a ‘blank spot’ in the knowledge-base about how school leaders sustain conditions that foster successful schooling, Spillane et al. (2004) write, “We know relatively little about the how of school leadership, that is knowledge of the ways in which school leaders develop and sustain those conditions and processes believed necessary for innovation” (p. 4). The authors assert, “To study leadership activity, it is insufficient to generate thick descriptions based on observations of what school leaders do. *We need to observe from within a conceptual framework if we are to understand the internal dynamics of leadership practice*” (Spillane et al., 2004, p. 4 – emphasis in the original).

The contribution of the present study to the field is its rich descriptions of the participating districts and how their programs of instructional coaching were introduced and have been maintained – descriptions upon which other educators can draw when determining whether and how to introduce instructional coaching into their own suburban districts. Such narratives are of great benefit to any school or district that endeavors to “tackle the questions of how coaches do their work, how central offices support coaching, how evidence from coaching is gathered and analyzed, and what ongoing refinements must be made to the practice” (Annenberg Institute for School Reform, 2004, p. 12). Merriam (2009) explains,
Much can be learned from a particular case. Readers can learn vicariously from an encounter with the case through the researcher’s narrative description...It is the reader, not the researcher, who determines what can apply to his or her context. (p. 51).

As the vast majority of what has been written about instructional coaching addresses programs in urban, rather than rural or suburban, school districts, the current study aims to begin filling-in this gap in the knowledge base by exploring suburban school districts’ experiences with instructional coaching. Heeding Spillane et al.’s (2004) suggestion, this investigation employs a conceptual framework – in this case, complexity science – in efforts to understand the internal dynamics of the participating districts, and to identify the contextual features of those districts that have influenced the success of their coaching programs.

SCOPE OF THE STUDY

In April 2010, a link to an online questionnaire was emailed to all of the superintendents in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. This questionnaire asked superintendents to indicate whether their districts then had, or had ever had, programs of instructional coaching. Superintendents were next asked to provide information about their respective school districts’ programs. Completed questionnaires were submitted by thirty-eight school districts, of which thirty had ongoing instructional coaching programs; three had discontinued the instructional coaching programs that they had previously implemented; and five had never undertaken any such programs.

Only one of the three superintendents who had indicated that his district had discontinued instructional coaching expressed a willingness to participate in the current...
study. The superintendents of nineteen of the thirty responding districts whose programs were ongoing expressed a willingness to be interviewed, themselves, and/or to allow members of their faculties to be interviewed about their districts’ experiences with instructional coaching.

So that the current study would be as comprehensive as possible, the decision was made to include the one available district whose instructional coaching program was reported to have been discontinued, as well as at least one of the nineteen districts whose programs were ongoing. Ultimately, two of the latter school systems were selected for inclusion in the study because of a district-level leader that they have in common: The superintendent of one of the two districts had served, immediately before that, in another central-office capacity in the other. This circumstance promised to afford the researcher the opportunity to investigate how (if at all) this change in leadership had impacted the latter district’s program, and what (if any) insights gained from the latter district’s program the superintendent had brought to the former. As expressed above, all three of the school systems included in this study are suburban ones within the Commonwealth of Massachusetts.

No sooner had the data collection process begun than further information came to light about the participating district whose coaching program was reported to have been discontinued. The superintendent who had completed the questionnaire in 2010, and who had since left that district to assume a superintendency in another state, defined coaching more narrowly than the succeeding superintendent. Where the current superintendent defines instructional coaching as a task for which a number of educators, at various levels, are responsible, the preceding one viewed it as entirely role-specific. Essentially,
the former superintendent had regarded the district’s coaching program as having been discontinued, because of the elimination of a specific position whose primary duty was the modeling of lessons for teachers. (This misunderstanding is not-altogether-surprising, as the initial questionnaire had made no attempt to define instructional coaching. Its sole aim was to gather very preliminary information about which districts in Massachusetts then had – or had ever had experience with – instructional coaching programs of any size or scope, as the state’s Department of Elementary and Secondary Education maintained no such database.)

While this district was no longer distinguished by its having dismantled its program of coaching, it was nevertheless a valuable case to include. Indeed, it would serve as a fine case in isolation. It demonstrated that different approaches to the same work could be undertaken with differing degrees of success; it likewise demonstrated – à la complexity science, the theoretical framework for the current study – that isolated initiatives are less likely to become institutionalized than are those that are woven into schools and districts.

In each of the three participating school systems, in order to gather input from educators who populated the several layers of the organization, the following were interviewed: the superintendent, or – in one case – the assistant superintendent for curriculum and instruction, as well as a selection of principals, coaches, and teachers. In all, twenty-two educators were interviewed for this study.
DEFINITION OF TERMS

Cornett & Knight (2009) cite the “multiplicity of ways in which the term has been used” (p. 193) as a significant challenge to anyone who investigates instructional coaching. The very different structures of schools and school systems, and the vagaries of funding and leadership, result in schools and districts implementing instructional coaching programs and other initiatives in ways unique to themselves.

It was considered conceivable – indeed, likely – that each of the several districts selected to participate in this study would define coaching somewhat differently. Each district’s definition is articulated in the chapter on research findings, along with a rich description of each district’s program of instructional coaching. Indeed, the latter – the programs, themselves – are shown to differ far more significantly, from one district to the next, than are the districts’ definitions of instructional coaching.

As will be seen in the chapter in which the pertinent literature is reviewed, instructional coaching is a strategy that seeks to improve student achievement by enhancing teachers’ knowledge and skill, in both pedagogy and subject-area content, through job-embedded, ongoing professional development. Instructional coaches frequently provide practical suggestions and technical assistance; they often demonstrate lessons or data analysis; and, sometimes, they just listen as teachers work through their own problems of practice. They do not, however, engage in the formal evaluation of teachers.

Throughout this project, ‘model’ and ‘program’ are utilized in accordance with the following, enormously helpful statement in which Toll (2009) defines – and discriminates between – those two terms.
A model is a representation of theories and concepts…, not the enactment of a plan. Some programs of literacy coaching have been developed based on theories and concepts, and therefore one might be able to deduce a model from them. On the other hand, many programs of coaching have been developed because individuals or groups had funding available and needed to ‘do something’…Programs of literacy coaching cropped up suddenly all over the country. In their best efforts to put those programs into practice, many literacy coaches and their leaders acted quickly and in light of their existing understanding of coaching. Well-intentioned as these programs may be, and successful as some of them are, they are not models. When programs are mistaken for models, we assume theoretical conceptual bases that may not exist. (p. 66).

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

Comparative case studies are always limited by their context-specific nature: Lessons learned from the subjects included cannot be assumed to generalize to the larger population. In no way does this mean that comparative case studies are inapplicable to other individuals in other settings; it merely means that it is for the reader to decide whether (or not) the case study applies to her/his own context (Merriam, 2009, p. 51).

Another limitation of the present study, like other qualitative case studies, is its being entirely reliant upon the sensitivity and integrity of the researcher. Merriam (2009) reminds that the researcher is not only “the primary instrument of data collection and analysis,” (s)he is also “left to rely on his or her own instincts and abilities throughout most of the research effort” (p. 52). Such an arrangement, Merriam (2009) quotes Guba and Lincoln (1981) as explaining, poses an “‘unusual problem of ethics. An unethical case writer could so select from among the data that virtually anything he wished could be illustrated’ (p. 378)” (p. 52). Those who write case studies and those who read them must both be cognizant of the biases of the former. As Reeves (2010) explains, “We all
do have biases, so the choice is not the presence or absence of biases but rather the extent
to which we admit them forthrightly when the evidence fails to confirm our biases”
(p. 76).

Still another limitation of the present study is that, because of the time-intensive
nature of qualitative research methods, such as were employed throughout the project,
fewer classroom teachers than would be desirable were interviewed. In order to gather
information from educators in a breadth of roles, this investigator needed to include in his
research a relative few holders of each role. Given that – as will be discussed below –
participating educators all spoke about the success of their districts’ instructional
coaching programs in terms of teachers’ participation in/utilization of them, this study
would be of greater value if a larger number of classroom teachers had been included as
research participants.

The present study represents an initial exploration into the relationship between
suburban school districts’ contexts and the trajectories of their programs of instructional
coaching. As it raises many more questions than it answers, the contribution of this study
to the field is its isolation of issues and topics in need of closer scrutiny and greater
understanding.
CHAPTER 2
REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

The characteristics of effective professional development have been well understood for some time, now. *No Child Left Behind* presses for activities that “are high quality, sustained, intensive, and classroom-focused in order to have a positive and lasting impact on classroom instruction and the teacher’s performance in the classroom” (No Child Left Behind Act of 2001). Elmore (2004) characterizes successful professional development as “likely to occur in schools and classroom settings rather than off site, and…likely to involve work with individual teachers or small groups around the observation of actual teaching” (p. 97). Reflecting upon what he had observed when preparing *How the World’s Best-Performing School Systems Come Out on Top*, Michael Barber explains that off-site programs do not work, and that top-down, whole system programs – however impactful they may be in the short-run – are unsustainable, because they fail to embed themselves in the culture of schools and districts, and “the work doesn’t become owned by teachers themselves” (Crow, 2009, p. 14). Barber identifies, “When you get [to] see systems in the U.S. improving significantly, professional development close to the classrooms is very central to that improvement.”

The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (2011) reports that educators yearn for just these kinds of opportunities to learn and grow as professionals:

Teachers consider better and more targeted professional development as an important lever towards improvement. TALIS [Teaching And Learning International Survey] data show that teachers’ participation in professional development goes hand-in-hand
with their mastery of a wider array of methods to use in the classroom, even if it is not clear to what extent professional development triggers or responds to the adoption of new techniques. TALIS data also identify close associations between professional development and a positive school climate, teaching beliefs, cooperation between teachers and teacher job satisfaction. (p. 20)

Although the numerous models under which it is practiced and the various appellations by which it is known preclude its having a single uniform definition (Cornett & Knight, 2009; Kowal & Steiner, 2007; Steiner & Kowal, 2007; Russo, 2004; Poglinco et al., 2003), instructional coaching satisfies the criteria for high-quality professional development: It is job-embedded and ongoing (Matsumura et al., 2010; Killion, 2009; Knight, 2009b; Toll, 2009; Brown et al., 2008; Steiner & Kowal, 2007; Annenberg Institute for School Reform, 2004; Joyce & Showers, 2002), differentiated and collaborative (Ellison & Hayes, 2009; Kise, 2009; Knight, 2009; Shidler, 2009; Toll, 2009; Steiner & Kowal, 2007; AISR, 2004; Lyons & Pinnell, 2001), attentive to content as well as pedagogy (Knight, 2009; Toll, 2009; West, 2009; Steiner & Kowal, 2007; Neufeld & Roper, 2002), and undertaken with the aim of enhancing student achievement through improving the quality of instruction (Hadebegger & Hodanbosit, 2011; Yopp et al., 2011; Killion, 2009; Brown et al., 2008; Hall & Simeral, 2008; Kowal & Steiner, 2007; Russo, 2004; Poglinco et al., 2003). Designed genuinely to be engaged in by teachers, instructional coaching requires trusting relationships, not only between coaches and the individual educators with whom they work, but throughout the schools/districts within which coaching occurs (Habegger & Hodanbosit, 2011; Yopp et al., 2011; Matsumura et al., 2010; Knight, 2009; Hall & Simeral, 2008; AISR, 2004; Lyons & Pinnell, 2001).
Instructional coaching demonstrates a respect for teachers’ intellects and professionalism, such as is increasingly encouraged in the literature on school improvement. Not as technicians who need only to be trained in the use of specific programs or materials, the literature acknowledges teachers more and more as professionals who should be afforded the support necessary to enhance their professional judgment, to further their instructional expertise, and to cultivate what MacDonald & Shirley (2010) term ‘mindfulness.’ Instructional coaching also provides a means by which to affect school improvement that can accommodate and adapt to the complex systems that schools and school districts are increasingly recognized as being.

The following review of the literature is organized into two sections. The first surveys the literature describing the growing appreciation of school improvement efforts as complex phenomena, and of schools and districts as complex systems. The latter section reviews the literature on instructional coaching, one approach to school improvement that respects the inherent complexity of schools and of the work in which those who inhabit them are engaged.

SCHOOLS AND COMPLEXITY SCIENCE

Identifying that philosophers as separated by space and time as Confucius, Plato, and John Stuart Mill had all appreciated and written in their own days about the complex nature of education, MacDonald & Shirley (2010) lament that only rarely is that complexity acknowledged, still less allowed to emerge, in schools. They join a growing number of scholars and practitioners who have come to understand – in many cases, after repeated false starts with prescriptive approaches to leadership and instruction, and still
smarting from inflexible metrics ostensibly designed to enhance accountability – that there are no quick fixes for endeavors as multifaceted as education or for organizations so uniquely intricate as schools and school districts (Harris & Rutledge, 2010; Fullan & Miles, 1992).

Writing, “I used to think that policy was the solution. And now I think that policy is the problem,” Elmore (2010) candidly discloses how his views about how to affect school reform have evolved over time. Coming to realize that policymakers would approve seemingly any proposal on the weight of its political support, and without regard for its educational merits or for how it did or did not square with previously approved initiatives, Elmore explains how he learned that changes from the top – no matter how well-conceived – are far less likely to impact schools for the better than are those that emerge from practicing educators, themselves. “For the future,” Elmore proclaims, “I am putting my energy into building a stronger profession, not into trying to repair a desperately dysfunctional political system” (p. 8).

Another, still more public, conversion was that of education historian Diane Ravitch, who moved from being a No Child Left Behind devotee to serving as one of that policy’s most ardent critics. Ravitch (2010) now acknowledges that – as schools are complex systems, not clockworks – effective school reform is far more difficult to achieve – and even more challenging to sustain – than it would appear.

Reformers imagine that it is easy to create a successful school, but it is not. They imagine that the lessons of a successful school are obvious and can be easily transferred to other schools, just as one might take an industrial process or a piece of new machinery and install it in a new plant without error. But a school is successful for many reasons, including the personalities of its leader and teachers; the social interactions among them; the culture of the school; the students and their
families; the way the school implements policies and programs dictated by the district, the state, and the federal government; the quality of the school’s curriculum and instruction; the resources of the school and community; and many other factors. When a school is successful, it is hard to know which factor was the most important or if it was a combination of factors. Even the principal and teachers may not know for sure…Certainly schools can improve and learn from one another, but school improvements – if they are real – occur incrementally, as a result of sustained effort over years. (p. 137)

Writing specifically about the role of professional development in school improvement efforts, Guskey (2009) highlights “the powerful and unique influence of context.” He argues that, as school contexts vary widely, it is unrealistic to expect what works in one locale to work equally well in another without adaptations specific to the latter setting. “The particular educators involved, the characteristics of students with whom they work, and aspects of the community can all affect results…The most powerful content will make no difference if shared in a context unprepared to receive it and use it. Similarly, a powerful professional development activity poorly suited to a particular context will likely fail miserably” (p. 229). The importance of local contexts reflects a key concept in complexity science, ‘sensitive dependence on initial conditions,’ about which McQuillan (2008) explains, “Similar reform initiatives can produce different outcomes in different contexts, dependent on the history and nature of those contexts, the initial conditions” (p. 1784).

By the nature of how they are organized, of the work in which they are engaged, and by the fact that they are populated by, and exist to serve, human beings, schools are complex systems (Drago-Severson, 2012; Lareau & Walters, 2010; MacDonald & Shirley, 2010; McQuillan, 2008; Clarke & Collins, 2007; Fullan & Miles, 1992; Lortie, 1975). Consequently, those who make education policy, and anyone who is interested in
genuine school improvement, would do well to recognize that “Knowledge is born in chaotic processes that take time” (Wheatley, 2005, p. 153).

The irony of this principle is that it demands two things we don’t have: a tolerance for messy, nonlinear processes, and time. But creativity is only available when we become confused and overwhelmed, when we get so frustrated that we admit we don’t know. And then, miraculously, a perfect insight appears, suddenly. This is how great scientists achieve breakthrough discoveries, how teams of individuals discover transforming solutions. Great insights appear at the end of incremental steps. Nor can they be commanded to appear on schedule, no matter how desperately we need them. They present themselves only after a lot of work that culminates in so much frustration that we surrender. Only then are we humble enough and tired enough to open ourselves to entirely new solutions. They leap into view suddenly (the ‘aha’ experience), always born in messy processes that take time…

We have to face the difficult fact that until we claim time for reflection, until we make space for thinking, we won’t be able to generate knowledge, or to know what knowledge we already possess. We can’t argue with the clear demands of knowledge creation – it requires time to develop. It matures inside human relationships. (p. 154)

Too few school reform efforts are afforded anywhere near the kind of time required for them to take hold or yield results, let alone to foster breakthroughs. “It takes time for…new practices to mature and become part of the working repertoire of teachers and administrators. Schools that are improving recognize and allow for this time and don’t switch gears if they don’t see immediate results on state tests” (Elmore & City, 2007, p. 2). Regrettably, rather than thoughtfully selecting and painstakingly implementing contextually appropriate programs and reforms, policymakers at all levels lurch from one initiative to the next, impatient for results, and quick to move-on to some other initiative when improvement is slow in coming. In their haste, they fail genuinely to comprehend – let alone to promote teachers’ understanding of – what the programs or
approaches actually do or do not promise. The zeal with which school reform measures are undertaken is, too often, their very undoing.

Much of the urgency for school improvement felt in the United States can be traced to the publication in 1983 of *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform*. Ironically, while the release of this report from a presidential commission on excellence in education served to launch an enduring succession of school reform initiatives, the document, itself, has been read too superficially and interpreted too broadly (Ravitch, 2010).

Calling *A Nation at Risk* “a precursor of the standards movement,” Ravitch (2010) emphasizes that that report made no mention of school restructuring, state takeovers of schools and districts, or other such mechanisms by which to promote accountability. Rather, Ravitch (2010) explains, *A Nation at Risk* identified the need for improvements in the quality of curriculum, materials, and teacher preparation, and “recognized that what students learn is of great importance in education and cannot be left to chance” (p. 29). Ravitch (2010) recounts how, following a long, unsuccessful attempt at the creation of national history standards, the movement to establish such nationwide standards fell apart, only to be superseded by *No Child Left Behind*, legislation that was “not closely related” to the ideas set forth in *A Nation at Risk*. Rather than satisfying *A Nation at Risk*’s call for improving education largely through enhancing the quality of the curriculum in which all students were engaged, *No Child Left Behind* “sidestepped the need for any standards,” instead mandating test-based accountability (p. 30).

The misreading and oversimplification of policies and programs occurs at the local level, as well as at the national one, with results that are fed back into – and felt
throughout – the entire education system. When local educators’ understanding of instructional approaches and materials are not attended to, through ongoing or even preliminary professional development, those educators are left to implement those approaches and materials – if at all – according to their own existing beliefs and prior experiences. Such half-hearted implementation, which has been found to be of greater detriment than minimal or even no implementation (Reeves, 2010), not only fails to yield the intended results, but also perpetuates such falsely dichotomous debates as the math wars and the contests between partisans of phonics instruction and proponents of a whole language approach to teaching literacy (West, 2009).

The consequences of policymakers’ failure fully to appreciate what they are mandating – and of practitioners’ incomplete understanding of what they are being directed to implement – are far-reaching. Lagemann (2000) writes compellingly, for example, about the use that was made of the Equality of Educational Opportunity Study (1966), commonly referred to as the ‘Coleman Study’:

Coming at a time when the courts were seeking to define remedies for segregation, judge after judge referred to the study in mandating the busing of children. Although Coleman had found that the achievement of black children improved if they were enrolled in a majority white school, the study was taken as supporting desegregation generally. This dismayed Coleman, who claimed in a 1972 interview that ‘judges have…used the results more strongly than the results warrant.’ Three years later he published a study indicating that busing contributed to so-called white flight. Sorry that the study had been misused in this way, Coleman was also disappointed that it had been ‘underutilized’ by legislators. (p. 199)

Not simply a cautionary tale about what can happen when matters of enormous public import are decided according to decision makers’ superficial understandings of social science research, Lagemann’s (2000) narrative also illustrates that the impact of social policy is anything but linear:
As Coleman became increasingly aware, it is difficult to control the trajectory of ideas, and it is especially difficult to do so in a domain of policy like education, where the authority to make decisions and implement policy is extremely diffuse. (Lagemann, 2000, p. 199)

The evolution and communication of ideas, the de facto implementation of policies and programs, and the fallout from decisions in such fields as education, government, and economics are difficult to predict, precisely because of the complexity that characterizes those disciplines. Byrne (1998) points out that, in this, the social sciences share a great deal in common with the life sciences:

In the social world, and in much of reality including biological reality, causation is complex. Outcomes are determined not by single causes but by multiple causes, and these causes may, and usually do, interact in a non-additive fashion. In other words, the combined effect is not necessarily the sum of the separate effects. It may be greater or less, because factors can reinforce or cancel out each other in non-linear ways. (p. 20)

The notion of a field of science that would attend specifically to such complex systems and phenomena was introduced by scientist-mathematician Warren Weaver in the late 1940s. In an article titled “Science and Complexity,” Weaver (1948) surveys the range of problems that science has endeavored to understand since the seventeenth century, and establishes three categories according to which those problems could be classified: problems of simplicity, problems of disorganized complexity, and problems of organized complexity.

The seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries, according to Weaver (1948), were a period during which the physical sciences “learned variables,” and developed quantitative methods with which to predict and analyze the impact of adjusting one or another variable in problems involving very small numbers of variables. Weaver
explains that many of the innovations that begat the industrial revolution were themselves conceived at this time, when science learned to understand such ‘problems of simplicity.’

Toward the latter part of this same period, Weaver (1948) continues, physical scientists and mathematicians began to devise statistical methods by which to understand situations involving tremendously large numbers of variables, each of which “has a behavior which is individually erratic, or perhaps totally unknown.” Although he terms these problems ones of ‘disorganized complexity,’ Weaver (1948) makes clear, “in spite of this helter-skelter, or unknown, behavior of all of the individual variables, the system as a whole possesses certain orderly and analyzable average properties” (p. 4). The insurance industry, as Weaver (1948) points out, capitalizes on the science of disorganized complexity by basing policies, not on perfect information about the trajectory of an individual policyholder’s health or life, but on reliable statistical knowledge about the average health histories and life spans of groups of similarly situated individuals. Problems of disorganized complexity, Weaver (1948) summarizes, are ones “to which statistical methods hold the key” (p. 5).

The third class of scientific problems, the category for whose better understanding Weaver (1948) advocates, and which he calls ‘problems of organized complexity,’ are distinguished from the other two classes, not so much by the quantity of variables involved, but by the fact that the relationships between those variables “show the essential feature of organization” (p. 4). While the number of variables in problems of organized complexity – the kinds of problems studied in the life sciences and many of the social sciences – more closely approximates those found in problems of disorganized complexity than in ones of simplicity, those variables are recognized as forming “a most
complexly organized whole” (p. 4), and, therefore, cannot be understood using the statistical techniques that have proven so helpful in understanding problems of disorganized complexity.

Weaver’s (1948) call for science to make “a third great advance,” and to learn how to investigate the problems of organized complexity that are encountered in biology, medicine, psychology, ecology, government, economics, and – it is increasingly acknowledged – education, contributed to the creation of complexity science, also referred to as complexity theory.

Complexity science “offers the possibility of an engaged science not founded in pride, in the assertion of an absolute knowledge as the basis for social programmes, but rather in a humility about the complexity of the world coupled with a hopeful belief in the potential of human beings for doing something about it” (Byrne, 1998, p. 45). Not assuming “predictable and linear interactions among discrete elements,” complexity science instead “draws attention to the evolving interrelationships among system elements at various levels of the system” (McQuillan, 2008, p. 1773). In keeping with its etymology (‘complex’ stems from the Latin for ‘that which is interwoven’), complexity science “offers a means to analyze emerging patterns and trends to illuminate how the disparate system parts are, or are not, working together” (McQuillan, 2008, p. 1773). Complexity science, in short, defies the criticism that Goethe – through the voice of Mephistopheles – levels against what passed for scientific scholarship at the time he penned *Faust*:
Yet the web of thought has no such creases
And is more like a weaver’s masterpieces:
One step, a thousand threads arise,
Hither and thither shoots each shuttle,
The threads flow on, unseen and subtle,
Each blow effects a thousand ties.
The philosopher comes with analysis
And proves it had to be like this:
The first was so, the second so,
And hence the third and fourth was so,
And were not the first and the second here,
Then the third and fourth could never appear.
That is what all the students believe,
But they have never learned to weave.
Who would study and describe the living, starts
By driving the spirit out of the parts:
In the palm of his hand he holds all the sections,
Lacks nothing, except the spirit’s connections.
Encheirisis naturae the chemists baptize it,
Mock themselves and don’t realize it. (1832/1961, p. 199)

Complexity science emphasizes that complex systems should be regarded, not as
the sums of their constituent parts, but as networked wholes wherein cause and effect
relationships – the “spirit’s connections” about which Goethe (1832/1961) writes – are
neither linear nor random; are intangible, but far from inconsequential. Complexity
science also teaches that, rather than remaining at equilibrium, complex systems
continually co-evolve with their environments (Reigeluth, 2004). Whereas closed
systems take strength from stability, complex systems are sustained by – and derive
systems’ “propensity to amplify tiny changes” – their aforementioned sensitive
dependence upon initial conditions – provide elements of instability that are countered by
the constraints provided by negative feedback, and by complex systems’ own abilities to
self-organize (Stacey, 1996, p. 67). Neither static, nor entirely disordered, complex
systems exist at the edge of chaos. “Here, the behavior of a system is paradoxically stable and unstable at the same time; the bounded instability is the ground from which novel forms of behavior emerge” (Stacey, 1996, p. 64).

While one cannot control the process of emergence within complex systems, complexity science explains that one can influence it (McQuillan, 2008; Reigeluth, 2004). By distributing authority throughout complex systems, rather than centralizing it, one can foster – and can capitalize on – novelty at the points where it is likely to emerge. Similarly, by attending to, and – where necessary/appropriate – adjusting, control parameters, one can “shape interactions so identifiable patterns and routines emerge and lend a measure of predictability to an ultimately unpredictable system” (McQuillan, 2008, p. 1778). Complexity science reminds anyone seeking to influence emergence within the complex systems of schools or school districts that the task is an ongoing one; that (s)he “must constantly adjust and adapt the process to the emerging, ever-changing reality of a particular educational system and its environment” (Reigeluth, 2004, p. 8).

McQuillan (2008) provides an explanation as to why reform does not result inexorably from a school or district’s introduction of one or another initiative:

To change the outcomes produced by any system, complex or otherwise, you must alter the interaction among system elements…Some perturbation must unsettle the system so it does not return to its prior state…Although this may seem self-evident, piecemeal reforms often occur in isolation from other elements of the school ‘system’…So even though reforms are implemented, no one does anything of significance differently. (p. 1781)

The change efforts that schools and districts undertake seldom engage faculty members in anything more than superficial ways. These initiatives, which are usually selected by administrators in isolation from, and with very little consultation with,
teachers, do cause some disruption to – and quite a bit of grumbling amongst – faculty members (for example, by requiring them to attend lectures or to participate in workshops), but they seldom impact those faculty members’ day-to-day instructional practices. Consequently, after only short amounts of time, these initiatives are abandoned for having failed to achieve their goals, and their respective schools or districts return to their prior states, where they remain until such time as some other initiatives are introduced – a pattern described by Stacey (1996) as ‘punctuated equilibrium.’

Sustained change in complex systems, by contrast, is iterative: Perturbations cause system elements to change their behavior, and are in turn sustained by the changed behavior of those elements. Genuine change in schools requires that educators – administrators and teachers, alike – are prompted by reform efforts to work ever more closely with one another around issues of improved instruction, constantly learning from and continually providing feedback to one another, until ongoing reflection upon and refinement of new instructional practices replace the systems’ former patterns of behavior. Stacey (1996) cautions would-be reformers,

The new pattern that emerges is a dissipative structure: it easily dissolves if the system moves away from critical points in its control parameters…These dissipative structures use positive feedback to amplify fluctuations in their environment in order to disrupt existing patterns of behavior, break symmetries, and create differentiation across time and space. (pp. 62-65)

The control parameters about which Stacey writes serve to delimit the range of behaviors that a complex system will demonstrate. While weather can never be predicted with absolute accuracy, for instance, the weather in a given region can be expected to fall
within certain bounds, subject as it is to that region’s prevailing conditions, its control parameters (McQuillan, 2008; Stacey, 1996).

Three control parameters are at work in every complex system: ‘the rate of information flow through the system,’ ‘the richness of connectivity between agents in the system,’ and ‘the level of diversity within and between the schemas of the agents’ (Stacey, 1996). Two additional control parameters are involved in any complex system with which humans are associated: ‘power differentials’ and ‘levels of anxiety containment’ (Stacey, 1996).

The nonlinear, networked nature of complex systems allows for information and energy, not only to flow from one part of the network to another, but also to be fed back to its origin, and to foster collective learning. The greater the rate of information flow through a system, the more readily that system will adapt to changing conditions, and the more likely it is to remain healthy.

The amount and quality of connections between system elements likewise impact a system’s ability to adapt and remain healthy. Complex systems whose elements are overly specialized or otherwise isolated from one another are both slower to adapt and less likely to achieve genuine learning; those whose elements interact and remain engaged are far more apt to learn and thrive. The human brain, the quintessential complex system, provides a fine example of this phenomenon.

Neuronal pathways are activated through relational, emotional, personally relevant, learner-participatory, and experiential stimuli. The repeated activation of these new circuits by the variety of access stimuli will strengthen the new pathways, limit their susceptibility to pruning (a process of eliminating inactive brain cells), and increase the efficiency of memory retrieval. Repeated multisensory stimulation brings new memories from the brain’s data storage areas to its executive function processing centers.
When the brain’s highest cognitive levels use the facts, processes, sequences, and routines that it has acquired as memory, all learning comes together. (Willis, 2007, p. 20)

Diversity amongst and between the autonomous agents that populate complex systems further contributes to the health of those systems, especially when the power differentials between those agents are kept at a critical level. This arrangement does render complex systems – not least, those in which humans are involved – harder to govern from the top-down, but it also permits new order to be generated within them from the bottom-up in ways not possible in more centralized, mechanistic systems. While such distributed control can give complex systems the appearance of being rather less disciplined or efficient than hierarchical systems, without it, the former would be as devoid of novelty as the latter very often are.

This idea is well illustrated in Timothy Ferris’ (2010) *The Science of Liberty* in which that author explains how scientific advancements have emerged with far greater frequency in countries with democratic governments than in those under totalitarian rule.

The communist ideology espoused by Stalin and Mao talked a great deal about science – indeed it portrayed itself as a scientific form of government, its universal triumph as inevitable as the outcome of a demonstrative experiment in a high-school physics class – but was unable to adapt when social experiments failed. Instead, each was proclaimed a great success by another Five Year Plan or Great Leap Forward based on faith rather than empirical evidence. The Nazis imagined that science could be put to work generating technical advancements while substantiating their weird biological and cosmological notions. All three regimes tried to exploit their most talented scientists, but wound up silencing, imprisoning, or murdering many of them.

The technological advancements of these totalitarian regimes – such as Germany’s rocket program and the Soviet space effort – impressed and alarmed many in the liberal nations, but were based on little more than the momentum of earlier science plus the short-term torque of intense government spending. (p. 8)
Writing not about scientific advancement, but about education reform, Ravitch (2010) likewise makes the case for diversity of thought and distribution of control. Explaining that schools and districts, being collective goods, ought by right to be subject to public oversight and scrutiny, Ravitch (2010) writes, “Removing all checks and balances may promote speed, but it undermines the credibility and legitimacy of decisions, and it eliminates the kind of review that catches major mistakes before it is too late” (p. 77).

Recommending that power differentials should be allowed to grow neither too great nor too small, Stacey (1996) describes the interplay between that control parameter and the final one at work in complex systems, anxiety containment.

Large power differentials and high levels of anxiety avoidance produce stable human systems, whereas small power differentials and high levels of uncontained anxiety all produce explosively unstable human systems… When these control parameters operate at intermediate levels, human systems move to the edge of chaos where they are capable of novelty. (p. 114)

Demonstrating the ‘fractal’ quality of complex systems – the idea that a system’s features are repeated again and again across its multiple levels, Willis (2007) explains how anxiety containment plays out in classrooms, and – by extension – at the other levels of the education system:

It has been said that when we relieve students of their struggles, we rob them of opportunities to build self-confidence, along with knowledge. But when we value mistakes as learning opportunities and allow students to experience puzzlement, learning can increase…When teachers foster disequilibrium-prompted curiosity, they will achieve the ideal brain state to engage the interest and focus of all students. (Willis, 2007, p. 25)
Complexity science acknowledges “that society unfolds from and is enfolded in individuals”; that the members of any social collective “might cohere into a unit of cognition whose capacities exceed those of the individuals on their own” (Davis & Sumara, 2005, p. 317). Classrooms and schools, then, are more than mere collections of learners; they are learners, themselves. Educational practice is not a policy to be enacted or a series of procedures to be followed, but an emergent phenomenon in which “someone acts or makes a move in relation to someone or something else” (Spillane, 2009, p. 204). For precisely these reasons, Steckel (2009) asserts, “It is essential to consider coaching in the context in which it occurs” (p. 14). McQuillan (2008) elaborates,

Complex systems should be understood at their points of emergence, when system elements self-organize into discernible patterns – when the system is doing what the system does (Davis, 2003)…In the complex adaptive system of schools and schooling, complexity theory focuses one’s attention onto the relationships among students, teachers, and administrators to see what emerges from their collective interaction. (McQuillan, 2008, p. 1780)

Recalling Ferris’ (2010) and Ravitch’s (2010) advocacy of openness and inclusion, and seeming to agree with complexity science’s appreciation of whole systems as learners, Reeves (2010) cautions against unnecessary centralization – or, as he calls it, “toxic hierarchy” – in education. Acknowledging their necessity in schools and other organizations, Reeves does not call for hierarchies to be dismantled, but to be “supplemented with effective networks” (p. 77). Reminding that complex systems exist at the ‘edge of chaos,’ which he describes as a “‘just right’ balance.” McQuillan (2008), likewise, calls for the careful formulation of freedom and control within schools:

“Distributed control…should promote individual autonomy and enrich communication
while not being so centralized that the system stagnates for lack of common direction” (p. 1792). Describing what they had actually encountered during their studies of big city high schools engaged in multi-year improvement efforts, Miles & Louis (1990) acknowledge the hesitancy of some school leaders to distribute leadership, while illustrating the practical utility of just that approach: “Central office people often worry that empowering schools will just lead to chaos (read ‘central office powerlessness’). There is often a zero-sum view (more for them means less for us), but real empowerment usually expands the pie, with more coherent control on everyone’s part” (p. 57).

Elmore (2004) succinctly summarizes the central tenets of the distributed leadership espoused by Reeves (2010), McQuillan (2008), and Miles & Louis (1990):

Distributed leadership does not mean that no one is responsible for the overall performance of the organization. It means, rather, that the job of administrative leaders is primarily about enhancing the skills and knowledge of people in the organization, creating a common culture of expectations around the use of those skills and knowledge, holding the various pieces of the organization together in a productive relationship with each other, and holding individuals accountable for their contributions to the collective result. (p. 59)

Given the interrelationships between the actions of the multiple individuals across whom school leadership is distributed, and consonant with the priority that complexity science places on the whole, rather than on the component parts, Spillane, Halverson, & Diamond (2001, 2004) posit that the school – not the bearer of any one title – should be the unit of analysis in examinations of school leadership.

Those who hold formal positions of authority within their schools, and who seek to lead them to sustainable improvement, are advised not to stop at allowing leadership to be distributed amongst multiple individuals, but also to refrain from imposing needless
homogeny or inflexible plans upon their faculties. Drawing from their investigation of large urban high schools engaged in years-long reform initiatives, Miles & Louis (1990) report, “We saw repeatedly that the leadership and management of change was a matter of dealing with uncertainty, complexity, turbulence, and the cussedness of many different people. Narrow blueprints or ‘rules for change’ did not work” (p. 57). Hargreaves & Fink (2004) add, “Standardization is the enemy of sustainability. Sustainable leadership recognizes and cultivates many kinds of excellence in learning, teaching, and leading, and it provides the networks for sharing these different kinds of excellence in cross-fertilizing processes of improvements” (p. 12). Reeves (2008) summarizes,

Leaders who want to create effective and sustainable change initiatives can either continue to engage in the fantasy that their colleagues will conform to hierarchical expectations, or find their islands of excellence and leverage the enormous potential that they hold (p. 65).

Faulting the education system for being largely insensitive to the fact that people “work best in a climate that creates high expectations but mitigates against personal threat,” Schmoker (1999) argues, “If we want better results, we need to look beyond the isolated point or moment or result and into the system that affects the impact we can have” (p. 33). Fullan (2005), similarly, calls for all who work in schools to engage in ‘systems thinking,’ a habit of mind that requires people to consider the entire system when making choices about their individual parts of it, in order that the whole system may be changed sustainably and for the better.

Nearly half a century ago – almost two decades before the release of A Nation at Risk, and forty years in advance of the passage of No Child Left Behind, Miles (1965) appreciated the importance to school improvement of focusing upon the education system
as a whole. “Any particular planned change effort is deeply conditioned by the state of
the system in which it takes place…To use an image from Gestalt psychology, specific
planned change attempts have most typically been ‘in figure,’ occupying the focus of
attention, while the organization itself has remained the ‘ground’” (p. 11). Taking issue
with the approach by which organizational change had long been conceived, Miles
(1965) asserts, “It is time for us to recognize that successful efforts at planned change
must take as a primary target the improvement of organizational health – the school
system’s ability not only to function effectively, but to develop and grow into a more
fully-functioning system” (p. 11). Miles (1965) continues by explaining that, in much of
the literature on innovation, the individual innovator and the innovation itself are
emphasized, but the organizational setting into which the innovation is introduced is
largely ignored; “the local system itself [is treated] as a kind of unmodifiable ground
against which the innovation shows up in stark figure” (p. 12). In the language of
complexity science, by underestimating their schools’ and districts’ sensitive dependence
upon initial conditions, many who have sought to reform or otherwise improve their
schools have undermined their own efforts.

None who work in schools – least of all, those who seek to contribute to their
sustainable improvement – do those schools (or, indeed, the education system overall)
any great service by attending only to those parts for which they have titular
responsibility. Rather, they need to maintain a dual focus on – or, more accurately, to
shift their focus regularly between – the organization as a whole, and the portion of it
within which they function. This is not merely to forestall any linear breakdowns or to
reinforce the proverbial ‘weak links,’ but to acknowledge that, in complex systems, the constituent parts are best understood as microcosms or fractals.

As explained above, similar patterns repeat themselves at both higher and lower scales within complex systems; “they do not get simpler as you zoom in or zoom out” (Davis & Sumara, 2005, p. 313). ‘Scale independence’ and ‘self-similarity’ are often described, in complexity science, using the now clichéd example of measuring the coast of England: Each magnification of any one feature of the coastline reveals that same feature repeated many more times in miniature; as smaller and smaller units of measurement are employed, one is able to measure with still greater precision, thereby obtaining a greater length. Johnson (2008) explains, “This is a standard pattern in the history of science: when tools for measuring increase their precision by orders of magnitude, new paradigms often emerge, because the new-found accuracy reveals anomalies that had gone undetected” (p. 76).

Gleick (1987) explains how the creation of fractal geometry – so called, because of its introduction of fractional, or noninteger, dimensions with which to measure objects with irregular shapes – both permitted scientists to measure natural objects and phenomena in finer and finer detail, and – in the process – to recognize the recursive quality of the patterns that they saw:

It is hard to break the habit of thinking of things in terms of how big they are and how long they last. But the claim of fractal geometry is that, for some elements of nature, looking for a characteristic scale becomes a distraction. *Hurricane*. By definition, it is a storm of a certain size. But the definition is imposed by people on nature. In reality, atmospheric scientists are realizing that tumult in the air forms a continuum, from the gusty swirling of litter on a city street corner to the vast cyclonic systems visible from space. Categories mislead. *The ends of the continuum are of a piece with the middle* (Gleick, 1987, p. 107 – emphasis added).
The notion that information about the whole system may be gleaned by looking at one component of it is in no way new to education. Making the case for deep-reaching education reform, Elmore (2004) explains, “The problems of the education system are the problems of the smallest units in that system, and each unit faces a different version of the overall problem of the system. If the overall problem of the system is student performance on higher order cognitive tasks…this problem will be present in very different forms in every classroom where it occurs” (p. 56).

Likewise, and even more poignant, students in teacher- and administrator-preparation programs during the past decade have been assigned to read Mano Singham’s (1998) insightful article “The Canary in the Coal Mine,” which takes its title from coal miners’ historic practice of bringing with them into each mine a canary to serve as a means of detecting the presence of noxious gases. If the canary – whose much smaller size rendered it more susceptible – died, the coal miners knew that the area of the mine in which they were working posed a threat, and that they needed to take protective action. Singham offers this simile: “The educational performance of the black community is like the canary, and the coal mine is the education system.” He explains, “What the academic achievement gap may really be telling us is that, while the symptoms of the education system’s ills are more clearly visible in the black community than in the white, there are fundamental problems with the way education is delivered to all students” (Singham, 1998, p. 15).

It is not insignificant that the very aspects of professional development about which teachers express dissatisfaction – that it is decided for them without their input; that it is undifferentiated for those with greater or lesser experience or expertise; that it is
presented through formats, such as lectures, which afford them little if any opportunity to engage with the material; that it is seldom clear how what is being presented applies to their day-to-day lives – are the very complaints that students quite rightly voice about their own school experiences. Neither is it purely coincidental that the very complaints that building-level administrators voice about district-level ones – that, lacking day-to-day exposure to and responsibility for students, the bureaucratic demands that they impose are unreasonable; that they are inadequately supportive when conflicts or controversies with families and/or the wider community arise – sound strikingly like the charges that teachers occasionally level against building-level administrators.

This phenomenon brings to mind a bit of doggerel by Jonathan Swift, which is said to have been enjoyed, and regularly quoted, by Benoît Mandelbrot, the founder of fractal geometry:

\[
\begin{align*}
  \text{So, Nat’ralists observe, a Flea} \\
  \text{Hath smaller Fleas that on him prey,} \\
  \text{And these have smaller Fleas to bite ‘em,} \\
  \text{And so proceed ad infinitum.} \\
\end{align*}
\]

(Gleick, 1987, p. 103)

A brilliant mathematician, who, in addition to coining the term ‘fractal,’ popularized the very notions of scale independence and self-similarity about which Swift versified, Mandelbrot admits, “‘Intuition is not something that is given. I’ve trained my intuition to accept as obvious shapes which were initially rejected as absurd, and I find everyone else can do the same’” (Gleick, 1987, p. 102). Were educators at all levels of the education system to bear self-similarity and scale independence in mind; were they to appreciate that the demands on, and decisions made by, those at other levels of the system are roughly analogous to those that they themselves experience each day, they
would likely engage with each other more harmoniously and sympathetically, and – still more important – provide better service to the students who are their collective charge.

MacDonald & Shirley (2010) provide an example of just this sort of thing. They explain that, after hearing two former administrators voice their own job-related frustrations, teachers participating in a seminar grew less critical of administrators.

They came to appreciate that administrators, too, were exasperated at working in an underfunded school system with many bureaucratic guidelines in place that were a disservice to pupils. The duality of ‘us against them’ began to be replaced by a more complex understanding of a whole range of forces that lead to depersonalization and dehumanization, with no obvious single force or factor available to play the role of villain (p. 43).

The kinds of inter-role discourse and understanding that MacDonald & Shirley (2010) describe, and the ‘systems thinking’ in which Fullan (2005) recommends that all members of the school community engage, will seem foreign to those who inhabit the education system – not because teachers are incapable of such activity, but because, across the years, they have grown accustomed to being managed, and to being required to implement programs prescriptively and ‘with fidelity.’ Additionally, ignoring Miles’ (1965) characteristically prescient counsel against “a recrudescence of the unfortunate enthusiasm of schoolmen for Taylorism and ‘scientific management’” (p. 22), schools and districts have constructed ever larger and increasingly hierarchical structures by which to govern the work of educators. While on paper they appear orderly, even sophisticated, such organizational structures ignore the humanity of the individuals who people them, as Pink (2009) cogently explains:

We forget sometimes that ‘management’ does not emanate from nature. It’s not like a tree or a river. It’s like a television or a bicycle. It’s something that humans invented…Its central ethic remains control; its chief tools remain extrinsic motivators. That leaves it largely out of sync with the nonroutine,
right-brain abilities on which many of the world’s economies now depend. But could its most glaring weakness run deeper? Is management, as it’s currently constituted, out of sync with human nature itself?...The idea of management...is built on certain assumptions about the basic natures of those being managed. It presumes that to take action or move forward, we need a prod – that absent a reward or punishment, we’d remain happily and inertly in place. It also presumes that once people do get moving, they need direction – that without a firm and reliable guide, they’d wander...But is that really our fundamental nature? Or, to use [a] computer metaphor, is that our ‘default setting’? When we enter the world, are we wired to be passive and inert? Or are we wired to be active and engaged? I am convinced it’s the latter – that our basic nature is to be curious and self-directed...That’s how we are out of the box. If, at age fourteen or forty-three, we’re passive and inert, that’s not because it’s our nature. It’s because something flipped our default setting...That something could well be management – not merely how bosses treat us at work, but also how the broader ethos has leeched into schools, families, and many other aspects of our lives. Perhaps management isn’t responding to our supposedly natural state of passive inertia. Perhaps management is one of the forces that’s switching our default setting and producing that state. (p. 89)

Gleick (1987) expresses a similar sentiment when describing structures in general, and people’s visceral responses to them:

Simple shapes are inhuman. They fail to resonate with the way nature organizes itself or with the way human perception sees the world. In the words of Gert Eilenberger, a German physicist who took up nonlinear science after specializing in superconductivity: ‘Why is it that the silhouette of a storm-bent leafless tree against an evening sky in winter is perceived as beautiful, but the corresponding silhouette of any multi-purpose university building is not, in spite of all efforts of the architect? The answer seems to me, even if somewhat speculative, to follow from the new insights into dynamical systems. Our feeling for beauty is inspired by the harmonious arrangement of order and disorder as it occurs in natural objects – in clouds, trees, mountain ranges, or snow crystals. The shapes of all these are dynamical processes jelled into physical forms, and particular combinations of order and disorder are typical for them.’ (p. 118)

While seldom permitted – still less, invited – to do so as part of their work lives, human beings are entirely capable of recognizing, appreciating, and responding to patterns that emerge organically within such complex systems as their back yards, their families, or their chosen fields of employment. While such patterns invariably fail to
comport with organizational flowcharts, and while they certainly present as far-less-tidy than procedures outlined in official protocols, they are accurate representations of real life.

Leonardo da Vinci’s appreciation of nature’s recurring patterns is famous. Conceiving of the Earth and all life upon it as an organism, Leonardo identified that nature followed ‘laws of necessity’ – laws that, while simple, are adhered to and repeated time and again, at scales both large and small (Capra, 2007). No less affected by nature’s organized complexity, Osbert Sitwell (1946) writes reverentially of the recursive beauty that he encountered during childhood strolls through the greenhouses of his ancestral home:

Orchids brought with them for me every sort of hothouse enchantment. I liked, whenever an opportunity offered, to walk in those tents of crystal, that exist in their own odorous climate, winter and summer. These fragments, broken off, as it were, from the Spice Islands or from some continent covered with tropical forests, and protected after this fashion with so brittle and glittering a shelter, are always beautiful to me; albeit never more lovely than after those bitter winter nights, when, in the mornings, you find frozen on the panes the shapes of the foliage they shelter, the intricate pattern of leaves of fern and sensitive plant, mysteriously etched by the moisture they exhale…Indeed, this process is still a wonder to me, seeming to offer its own guarantee, however often that may be denied by the folly of men and mocked by wars, hunger and aimless persecution, that life possesses a meaning. Why else should water, freezing as it runs down a sheet of glass, assume these forms of Nature, tracing in misty white the ghosts of many leaves, designs of the Creator; what laws, as yet unknown, what immense and majestic poetry of life, with deep, internal rhythm, some of it only to be perceived in the central core of this earth, some at the very edge of the universe, ordains and governs such echoes, such paraphrases, such facts as that an empty shell for as long as it shall last seems to have gathered in its opaline cavities the sounds of all the breakers that have passed over it, or that a butterfly’s wings should mirror the flowers over which they hover (protective colouring is too dull an answer and places the Creator in battle-dress – at most, it can only be a particle of the whole vast truth), or that a snow-flake, transient reproduction of a crystal, should so delicately present an identical structure? (Sitwell, 1946, p. 137)
Randal Keynes (2001) – the scion of families that have long appreciated the emergent qualities of complex systems (he is the great, great grandson of Charles Darwin and the great nephew of John Maynard Keynes) – cites the work of John Herschel, nineteenth century polymath and author of the *Preliminary Discourse on the Study of Natural Philosophy.*

Herschel wrote of man as a ‘speculative being’ who ‘walks in the midst of wonders,’ intrigued by the hints of underlying patterns in the infinite variety of the living world and searching for grand principles to explain them…Herschel claimed that the laws of nature were ‘not only permanent, but consistent, intelligible and discoverable.’ The way forward was to embark on an inductive inquiry into natural phenomena, searching for the underlying patterns and inferring the grand causes. (Keynes, 2001, p. 25)

Observing, recognizing the patterns inherent in, and responding to, circumstances are increasingly understood as essential in the modern workplace, and have also come to be appreciated as indicators of professional expertise – in both the private and the public sectors; in industry and in education. There is more-than-a-little irony in the fact that the habits that business and industry now exhort schools to cultivate in students are the very ones whose suppression they had for so long sought in the names of consistency and efficiency…and which, as a consequence, had come to be regarded as the exclusive province of Renaissance men (literal and figurative) and men of letters.

Hall & Simeral (2008) write of the significance of teachers’ engagement in such activities as “diagnosing problems, researching solutions, and creating action plans to develop competence and discernment” (p. 87). Reeves (2010), likewise, advises that teachers be encouraged to pursue “disciplines related to expertise” – namely, “focus, repetition, and effective practice” (p. 51). Fullan (2005) explains how teachers’ pursuit of such activities contributes to the improvement of the education system overall: “We
know…that experts expend less energy in dealing with complex matters because they more easily and subconsciously recognize patterns and intuit effective responses…They become more efficient and more effective because of their…experiences” (p. 34).

Where countless approaches to school improvement have sought to train teachers in the faithful utilization of prescriptive materials and instructional approaches, Elmore (2010, 2004), MacDonald & Shirley (2010), Reeves (2010), and Hall & Simeral (2008) promote teachers’ thoughtful education about appropriate instructional practices, and their active engagement with ideas. Explaining, “The word education is built of the Latin prefix ex plus the verb ducere (‘to lead’) and suggests a ‘leading out from’,” Kegan (1994) asserts, “While training increases the fund of knowledge, education leads us out of or liberates us from one construction or organization of mind in favor of a larger one” (p. 164).

Professional development, then, should do more than train teachers in the application of particular approaches or programs. If it is to contribute to education’s sustained improvement, it must invite teachers to consider the entire education system as they thoughtfully, mindfully experiment in the parts of the system that they occupy.

We are working explicitly with an understanding of teaching that acknowledges (and yes, even cherishes) its tentative, experimental, iterative nature…Accepting this open-endedness of education allows us to view teachers’ professional decision making not as a problem to be avoided through impulsive overreaction to test scores or uncritical compliance with mandates, but rather as an intellectual field in and of itself. (MacDonald & Shirley, 2010, p. 27)

Teachers would be glad to be relieved of the ‘alienated teaching’ under which so many of them have labored during the now decades-old era of school reform. “Alienated teaching,” which MacDonald & Shirley (2010) describe as endemic in schools across the
United States, “is a kind of teaching that teachers perform when they feel that they must comply with external conditions that they have not chosen and from which they inwardly dissent because they feel that new reforms do not serve their children well” (p. 2).

With greater liberty to think about, plan for, and implement their own professional practice, though, teachers would likely also experience new tensions. In addition to feeling still greater accountability for student outcomes, now that their instructional practice would be based more on their own professional judgments than on administrative dicta, teachers would also increasingly recognize their responsibility for the education system as a whole, not just for their individual classroom or even school.

Teachers could be expected to approach their work more mindfully and confidently if policymakers, administrators, and they, themselves, felt greater comfort with complexity. Acknowledging that life is colored by the full spectrum, not just by the black and white used to render organizational charts and statistical tables, teachers would discern hitherto unrecognized patterns, and appreciate analogous phenomena in seemingly dissimilar contexts. Reading across the social and life sciences, rather than limiting themselves to the education literature, is one way by which teachers could get into the habit of thinking differently about complex systems. Likewise, as “the specific order of complexity demanded in the workplace is precisely that which is demanded in the home and family,” teachers and others would do well “to violate the existing custom and bring the literatures of love and work together” (Kegan, 1994, p. 152); to recognize the similarities between the relationships and negotiations that they enjoy at home and those in which they engage at school. Above all, teachers would be more likely to embrace uncertainty and to take the risks necessary to improve the quality of their
practices if they trusted that administrators not only permitted, but would support them through, such professional experimentation, and if they observed, were observed by, and engaged in candid, ongoing conversations about practice with, such knowledgeable fellow educators as instructional coaches.

Summary: Schools as Complex Systems

As schools and districts – indeed, the entire education system – are complex entities, the approaches taken to improve them – and the methods used to study them – must be similarly complex. Simple solutions imposed with no regard for schools’ or districts’ unique contexts hold little promise, while seemingly insignificant differences between those contexts – that is, in schools’ and districts’ initial conditions – affect in seemingly disproportionate ways the quality and success with which they implement the same programs. Context must be taken very much into account when policymakers and practitioners plan and implement initiatives, as well as when they or researchers study whether and why initiatives have or have not worked as planned.

INSTRUCTIONAL COACHING

Coaching as Professional Development

*The Imperative for High-Quality Professional Development*

Evoking Lortie’s (1975) characterization of schoolteachers as conservative, individualist, and presentist, the National Research Council (2000) posits an explanation as to why teachers historically have been slow to change their instructional practices, and offers suggestions for how they can be supported through such efforts.
Learning involves making oneself vulnerable and taking risks, and this is not how teachers often see their role. Particularly in areas like mathematics and science, elementary teachers often lack confidence, and they worry about admitting that they don’t know or understand for fear of colleagues’ or administrators’ reactions...Helping teachers to become comfortable with the role of learner is very important. Providing them with access to subject-matter expertise is also extremely important. (NRC, 2000, p. 195)

School and district instructional coaching programs seek to improve teaching and learning, and to achieve better outcomes for students, by providing job-embedded, ongoing support to teachers (Marsh et al., 2010; Gallucci et al., 2010; Kowal & Steiner, 2007). Such programs should, therefore, reflect the needs of adult learners (L’Allier et al., 2010; Shidler, 2009; Annenberg Institute for School Reform, 2004; Neufeld & Roper, 2002), and be designed according to the specifications of effective professional development. They should focus on subject-matter content, and on how students learn such material; be aligned with whatever other reform initiatives the school or district is undertaking; be ongoing, rather than short-term; and should afford teachers opportunities to reflect upon – and, still more important, to receive candid feedback about – the quality of the instruction in which they engage their students (Gallucci et al., 2010; Marsh et al., 2010; Steiner & Kowal, 2007).

Russo (2004) attributes schools’ and districts’ growing interest in instructional coaching programs to their disappointment in, and recognition of the ineffectiveness of, more traditional approaches to professional development. He cites increasing accountability pressures as likewise contributing to districts’ decisions to pursue this method of instructional improvement. Russo (2004) explains, “More conventional forms of professional development – such as conferences, lectures, and mass teacher-institute days – are unpopular with educators because they are often led by outside experts who
tell teachers what to do, then are never heard from again” (p. 2). He argues that one of the single biggest jobs of instructional coaches is to ensure that the theories and practices presented during professional development episodes are actually given an opportunity to improve student learning by being implemented by teachers in the classroom.

Reporting findings from their study of instructional coaching in America’s Choice schools, Poglinco and her colleagues (2003) explain that ongoing contact with coaches allowed teachers to feel comfortable about, and to feel supported as they attempted, the readers’ and writers’ workshops about which they learned in America’s Choice trainings. “Of those teachers who specifically mentioned coach feedback,” they continue, “most found it positive and helpful” (Poglinco et al., 2003, p. 27).

Individuals of all ages require timely assessments of their performance, so that they will know which behaviors to repeat, which to alter or adjust, and which to abandon altogether. The indispensability of feedback is just one way in which the scale independence and self-similarity that characterize complex systems are manifested in schools. Just as teachers’ ongoing assessment of, and comments about, students’ work affect the latter’s levels of performance, so, too, does feedback about an observed lesson impact the quality of a teacher’s subsequent instruction (Reeves, 2010). Without actionable feedback, and absent short-term successes, individuals (like the schools and districts within which they work) may – and, very often, do – discontinue change efforts prematurely, forsaking the possibility of genuine improvement for the comfortable certainty of how they have hitherto functioned.

Our doubts are traitors,
and make us lose the good we oft might win,
by fearing to attempt.

(Shakespeare, Measure for Measure: Act I; scene iv)
Instructional coaching supports teachers as they undertake new, or seek to improve existing, instructional practices. It deepens teachers’ content matter knowledge, and furthers their understanding of how students learn, so that, in time, they will come regularly to reflect upon and refine their own teaching (Lyons & Pinnell, 2001, p. 139). By affording teachers such ongoing, personalized support while providing them with real-time assessments of their performance, instructional coaching comports with Kegan’s (1994) description of what individuals require in order to meet the mental demands of modern life:

People grow best where they continuously experience an ingenious blend of support and challenge…Environments that are weighed too heavily in the direction of challenge without adequate support are toxic; they promote defensiveness and constriction. Those weighed too heavily toward support without adequate challenge are ultimately boring; they promote devitalization. Both kinds of imbalance lead to withdrawal or dissociation from the context. In contrast, the balance of support and challenge leads to vital engagement. (p. 42)

Establishing and supporting instructional coaching programs is one powerful way by which administrators and other education leaders maintain the ‘anxiety containment’ control parameter at a critical level in their schools and districts. This is vitally important, as teachers – if they are to attempt new practices in efforts to improve student learning – must feel confident that those who lead their schools recognize educational change as labor-intensive, emotion-fraught, and time-consuming. As Lortie (1975) explains, “Education is a tenuous, uncertain affair. It is necessary to keep such uncertainty in mind if we are to understand the psychic world of teachers, for uncertainty is the lot of those who teach” (p. 133).
In order to improve their classroom practices, teachers require opportunities to work collaboratively to deepen their understanding of the content around which they engage students, and – even more important – to observe, be observed by, and reflect upon instruction with, their fellow educators. Reeves (2008) explains, “The single greatest influence on the professional practices of teachers is the direct observation of other teachers. With systemic support, that network of direct observation can transform a large and complex system with dramatic effect” (p. 70). Instructional coaching programs are intended to establish and maintain just this sort of systemic support in schools and districts, providing a practical response to Elmore’s (2004) critique that “the existence of exemplars, without some way of capitalizing on their talents, only reinforces the notion that ambitious teaching is an individual trait, not a professional expectation” (p. 25). As Taylor (2008) explains:

Instructional coaching extends, embeds, particularizes, brings expertise to, dedicates time for, deprivatizes, connects, and professionalizes professional development…It treats teaching as nonroutine and complex, bringing technical expertise directly into the teacher’s classroom…Coaching develops trust, instills collective responsibility, imparts an innovative orientation, and provides an example of professionalism around instructional practice. (p. 22)

From the perspective of complexity science, instructional coaching programs serve to keep schools’ and districts’ control parameters – ‘the rate of information flow through the system’ and ‘the richness of connectivity between agents in the system’ – at critical levels.

*Variability of Coaching Programs*

Much of the literature about instructional coaching describes coaching in one or another content area – typically, reading or mathematics; coaching in support of a
specific reform initiative, such as ‘Reading First’, ‘America’s Choice’, or the ‘Boston Plan for Excellence’; or a particular model of coaching – for example, differentiated coaching or cognitive coaching. This variability in how they are described in the literature reflects the lack of uniformity in how coaching programs are structured from one school district to the next (Gallucci et al., 2010; Killion & Harrison, 2005), even in districts subscribing to the same reform initiative (Brown et al., 2008; Poglinco et al., 2003).

Toll (2009) cites schools’ and systems’ differing access to resources as one explanation for the varying shapes that coaching programs take from one district to another. Likewise acknowledging the unique contexts of individual school systems, Kowal & Steiner (2007) write, “It is clear that instructional coaching is not a program that simply can be adopted and ‘stamped’ on a school” (p. 2). Learning – for both children and adults; for individuals as well as for organizations – takes time, repeated exposures using multiple modalities, and no small amount of trial and error. Shaped as it is by prior experience and background knowledge, learning – for individuals or organizations – can be said to demonstrate, in the language of complexity science, a sensitive dependence upon initial conditions – a quality that behooves policy makers and educators to attend to schools’ and districts’ specific contexts when introducing, and then as they thoughtfully implement, school improvement efforts, including programs of instructional coaching.

Identifying haste as one factor that significantly and frequently compromises the success of reform efforts, Jay (2009) explains that the positive results of any initiative take time to materialize. She warns, “The implementation of a brief time-line to institute
a change may cause added stress for teachers who are uncomfortable with change in the first place” (Jay, 2009, p. 57).

In her book *The Death and Life of the Great American School System*, education historian Diane Ravitch (2010) cites one instructional coaching model that, despite its tremendous success in one school district, New York City’s District 2, failed in another, San Diego, precisely because of the top-down, heavy-handed, and hasty manner in which it was imposed in the latter district. In the words of one administrator who served as a principal in San Diego at the time of the reform effort, assigning coaches to every school was “‘a great idea, badly implemented’” (p. 62). Unlike in New York’s District 2, where the coaching program had been painstakingly introduced, implemented, and eventually institutionalized as part of that district’s ‘Balanced Literacy’ initiative, coaching was rather indelicately – and, ultimately, un成功fully – imposed upon San Diego as part of that district’s closely related literacy ‘Blueprint.’

Keller (2007) reports an interview with Harvard University professor of education policy Richard Elmore, a self-described “‘big fan of coaching as a professional development strategy,’ especially when it is combined with ‘learning communities’ among teachers.” Elmore cautions, “School boards don’t tend to understand the importance of having enough talented people doing the work or of supporting them properly in the school and from the central office. So as a coaching program moves out of a pilot phase and costs go way up, it is hard to keep the money flowing” (p. 22).

Even in those school systems for which resources are less of a concern, instructional coaching programs require appropriate adaptation (Neufeld & Roper, 2002). “Effective coaching recognizes and adapts to the structural, cultural, and instructional
differences of different school levels. Key differences such as size, departmentalization, student load, and planning time affect the ways in which a coaching model can be implemented, supported, and assessed” (AISR, 2004, p. 5).

In his study of the Alabama Reading Initiative, Norton (2007) describes both how training for coaches was differentiated according to their degrees of experience and how the program, itself, evolved over time. Explaining that first-year coaches engaged in training specifically designed to enhance their expertise in reading instruction, Norton (2007) writes that more experienced coaches received support in such areas as making effective use of the coaching cycle. He likewise outlines how, each year since its establishment, the Alabama Reading Initiative’s professional development components had been redesigned and improved upon. Where, for example, the program had once only provided summer training for school faculties, ARI’s leaders – having “learned quickly that intensive, ongoing professional development is the heart and soul of lasting change” (Norton, 2007, p. 24) – had since made the decision to embed more staff development during the school year,

Another instructional coaching scheme, the Pennsylvania High School Coaching Initiative (PAHSCI), was designed specifically to allow for customization by individual schools and districts. Despite making it rather more difficult for researchers to link outcomes to coaching, this flexibility of design has also afforded participating schools and districts opportunities to tailor their coaching programs to suit their specific contexts, and expanded individual coaches’ perspectives about educational improvement. “One coach explained how she now sees the school as a whole as well as the interrelationship among different aspects of work in the school” (Brown et al., 2008, p. 16).
The variability of instructional coaching programs across the education system, and the adaptation of individual programs to the specific schools and districts in which they are implemented, are necessary in order for instructional coaching to be impactful. Complexity science reminds us that diversity is what allows innovation to emerge within complex adaptive systems (Goldstein et al., 2011). The notions of scale independence and self-similarity provide still more reason to consider diversity within coaching as positive: Effective instructional coaching programs are tailored to suit the schools whose improvement they are implemented to support, just as successful principals and teacher leaders fine-tune their approaches to meet the needs of the individual teachers with whom they work, and skillful teachers differentiate the instruction and assessment in which they engage their students according to the learning profiles of those youngsters.

**Differentiation of Coaching Practices**

Recommending that teachers take a balanced, thoughtful approach to their work, Kise (2009) endorses a brand of instructional coaching, ‘differentiated coaching,’ that supports just such a stance. Explaining, “Differentiated coaching provides teachers with the best kind of freedom – not freedom to do as they please, but the freedom to recognize, embrace, and move toward their full potential as educators” (p. 164), Kise (2009) describes coaches as basing their interventions, not on standardized procedures or protocols, but on the unique presentation of each individual teacher.

Modeling the very kinds of adaptations that teachers should be making for students, providers of differentiated coaching attend to the varying types of information that individual teachers require during the change process. They take into account, and adapt their approaches in accordance with, each teacher’s personality type – that is,
her/his leaning toward extroversion or introversion; sensing or intuition; thinking or feeling; judging or perceiving, understanding that it “influences the teacher’s teaching style, beliefs about education, and main concerns during change” (Kise, 2009, p. 148).

Arguing that administrators and teachers too often implement instructional materials and programs – including models of instructional coaching – superficially, particularly when those programs and materials are associated with policy mandates, West (2009) proposes ‘content coaching,’ which she describes as designed to support teachers as they replace unquestioning adherence to program designers’ specifications with “mindful engagement with programs and materials” (p. 121). West (2009) contends that, by working with coaches to examine the aims of specific programs and materials in light of their own schools’ and districts’ relative strengths and weaknesses, teachers and administrators are far more likely to experience success with those programs and materials; “Fidelity then becomes something to explore and investigate rather than a dictum to follow a script” (p. 121).

Describing content coaching as “evolving in tandem with the standards movement, the trend toward professionalization of teaching…, growing research findings on the nature of learning…, and complexity or systems theories of change” (p. 115), West (2009) writes that content coaches need to recognize organizations, such as schools, as dynamic systems, and to hold complex, rather than mechanistic, views of teaching and learning.

We are not saying that every teacher should ‘do his own thing’ or ignore the materials that may be ‘mandated for use’ by the district. We are saying that there is a mindful way of using materials and a mechanistic way of using materials and that how one uses materials is as important as which materials are selected. (p. 123)
In stark contrast with West’s (2009) recommendation for how coaches ought to function, Hartnett-Edwards (2011) recounts that early literacy coaches – many of whose positions were established pursuant to, and funded through, No Child Left Behind – were frequently used in schools and districts to police the fidelity with which teachers implemented specific reading programs, betraying too many school administrators’ greater confidence in policy-makers’ mandates and publisher-generated materials than in their faculties’ professional judgment. Hartnett-Edwards (2011) adds optimistically that, “As it has become clear that teachers – not scripted programs – teach, the reading coach’s evaluative role has been replaced with one of supporting and advancing teachers’ development” (p. 60).

Whether demonstrated by fellow teachers or by administrators, teachers appreciate the value of purposefully differentiated practice. Lortie (1975) writes that, when teachers are asked to describe colleagues whom they consider exemplary, “Respondents do not express doctrinaire or simplistic conceptions of outstanding teachers” (p. 133). Likewise, Blase & Blase (1999) express that principals whom teachers identify as effective instructional leaders tend to use a range of strategies with teachers to promote the latter’s reflection and professional growth. Drago-Severson (2012) explains,

Leadership supportive of adult development requires attending to teachers’ current and emerging capacities to handle the complexities of their work. Supportive leadership also underscores the importance of caring for one’s own development to support other adults. This learning-oriented framework emphasizes creating opportunities based on the principle that learning is a developmental process. (p. 18)
Echoing countless classroom teachers’ experiences teaching specific courses or at particular grade levels, L’Allier et al. (2010) write that coaches participating in their study were not fully comfortable until their third year in coaching roles. The authors explain that, whether coaches arrived in these positions having had extensive experience in the classroom, or whether they assumed these roles after having taught for only brief periods of time, all of the coaches in their study continued, with each additional year in that position, to hone their understanding of content and pedagogy, to cultivate positive relationships with teachers, and to modify their coaching practices. Citing their findings from one district, L’Allier et al. (2010) write, “Coaches seemed to allocate more time to working directly to support teachers during the third year than in the first year on the job” (p. 552). The authors add that the teachers with whom the coaches worked looked increasingly forward to these opportunities to discuss students’ learning needs and how to address them.

In their study of coaching in America’s Choice schools, Poglinco et al. (2003) also describe teachers’ appreciation of access to coaches. Writing that coaching looked different in practice than they had expected, given America’s Choice’s otherwise prescriptive approach to school reform, the authors explain,

One of the surprises we found in looking at coaching was how much informal and out-of-class individual coaching seemed to be occurring, and how important that was for teachers. Particularly because formal coach time was perceived to be quite limited, the ability to catch the coach at a spare moment and raise a question or concern was often given as an example of ongoing ‘support’ to teachers…Most often, this type of contact was teacher-initiated. (Poglinco et al., 2003, p. 25)
The authors’ finding reinforces the importance – and demonstrates’ teachers own appreciation – of ‘the richness of connectivity between agents in the system,’ one of the control parameters that Stacey (1996) identifies as critical in any complex system.

Reporting findings from their study of coaching in numerous Reading First schools, Bean et al. (2010) write that nearly all of the coaches in their study worked with individual teachers, but that each approached the work differently; that coaches’ rationales for their varied methods provided “strong evidence that coaching is indeed situational” (p. 109). The authors go on to explain that the contexts of specific schools and districts, the particularities of the teaching faculties within those schools and districts, and coaches’ own beliefs about their roles, impacted the manner in which coaching was provided to teachers.

Demonstrating the scale independence and self-similarity that are found throughout the education system, Bean et al. (2010) identify that the varied interactions between the coaches and teachers in their study revolved around the differentiation of instructional approaches and materials to meet the needs of individual students. The authors suggest, “This focus on the students (rather than squarely on the teachers) may be an important key to changing/improving teacher classroom practices…In fact, teacher learning may be facilitated when there is a focus on students” (Bean et al., 2010, p. 111).

Likewise displaying education’s scale independence and self-similarity, Killion (2009) writes how the relationships and interactions between coach and teacher mirror those between teacher and student. Advocating ‘coaching heavy’ (as opposed to ‘coaching light’), Killion (2009) describes the need for coaches to engage in “high-stakes interactions” with teachers – interactions that include thorough analyses of teachers’
professional beliefs, their instructional practices, and their students’ assessment data, and which are “driven by a coach’s deep commitment to improve teaching and learning, even if that commitment means risking being liked” (p. 26).

Describing the balance that literacy coaches must achieve between directing teachers toward specific practices and responding to the needs that teachers themselves disclose, Ippolito (2010) reports the results of a study through which he sought to understand how coaches maintain this balance between being ‘directive’ and ‘responsive’ in their work with teachers. Drawing on data from focus groups, interviews, and observations, Ippolito (2010) explains that coaches negotiate this tension by demonstrating both responsive and directive behaviors within single coaching sessions; by referencing such artifacts as agendas, planning guides, and observation protocols during meetings with teachers; and by sharing with teachers leadership toward achieving goals identified by administrators, coaches, and the teachers, themselves.

Coaching and Leadership

“Coaching aims to distribute responsibility for school leadership across a broad set of individuals, thereby augmenting the overall capacity for instructional improvement” (Taylor, 2008, p. 15). In addition to promoting teachers’ reflection about their own instructional practices, effective coaching programs also foster teachers’ participation in efforts to change school culture for the better, and their involvement in the “collective, interconnected leadership” of their respective schools and systems (AISR, 2004, p. 6). Instructional coaching programs, then, contribute to the maintenance of the various control parameters at work in schools and districts.
Ellison & Hayes (2009) write of ‘cognitive coaching,’ central to whose mission is the appreciation and promotion of “the duality of human existence” (p. 75). Identifying that it is the coach’s role to help teachers recognize – and to prepare them to fulfill – their responsibility for leading not only their own classrooms, but all levels of the education system, Ellison & Hayes (2009) explain:

Each of us lives an autonomous life with our own thoughts and emotions, unique talents and skills, and a personality unlike anyone else’s. Simultaneously, we live as members of systems, be those family systems or organizational systems. We are influenced by the systems in which we live and concurrently, as individuals, influence the systems. The self and system are interconnected, interdependent, and inseparable. (p. 75)

The skills required for leadership at the school or district level mirror those that typify effectiveness in the classroom. Tomlinson (2011) likens these latter skills to the practices and attitudes demonstrated by successful athletic coaches.

*Great coaches know their sport*…They read about it, observe it, and study it incessantly. (p. 92)

*Great coaches develop players’ skills*…They know how to transmit their own knowledge and skill to those not yet proficient…They build both individual and team skills, they continually attend to the growth patterns of each team member as well as the group. (p. 92)

*Great coaches are great motivators*…Strong coaches understand and appreciate human variance. Not only do they tailor practice drills to the individual, but they also know that individuals are motivated in different ways. (p. 93)

*Great coaches are team builders*. In competition, the coach is removed from the real action. The players have to function as a unit on the field…Therefore, highly effective coaches orient everyone to a common vision…And they strengthen team members’ bonds by learning from loss as much as by celebrating victory. (p. 93)

As demonstrated by ASCD’s devotion of an entire edition of *Educational Leadership* to “Coaching: The New Leadership Skill” (Association for Supervision and
Curriculum Development, 2011), many articles from which are addressed in this review of the literature, coaching and leadership are appropriately recognized as complementary endeavors. Those who hold positions of titular authority are increasingly advised to include coaching behaviors in their leadership repertoires, while those serving as coaches are genuinely understood to lead. Whatever their role, those who provide coaching to others are encouraged to seek out the same for themselves (Aguilar et al., 2011).

Numerous models of coaching exist specifically to support administrators and others holding formal positions of school leadership (Reiss, 2009). Similarly, at least two large-scale education reform efforts that include coaching for teachers – Boston’s Collaborative Coaching and Learning initiative (Kowal & Steiner, 2007; Neufeld & Roper, 2002), and the Pennsylvania High School Coaching Initiative (Brown et al., 2008) – also provide mentors for coaches.

In their work on elementary-level literacy coaching, L’Allier et al. (2010) identify three essential leadership practices in which coaches regularly engage: “setting goals or directions in a school, developing people, and redesigning the organization to facilitate accomplishment of goals” (p. 550). Consonant with what has been written elsewhere about distributed leadership (Spillane, 2009; Spillane et al., 2001, 2004; Elmore, 2000, 2004), L’Allier et al. (2010) explain that administrators require the support of others – including coaches – to do the work of designing, implementing, and evaluating their schools’ literacy programs. Reeves (2010) elaborates,

School and system-level leaders are preoccupied with many other demands...These exigencies cannot be ignored, but they render all the more important the choices in how leaders invest their time. Moreover, the multiple demands on leaders make clear that they must keep the focus on teaching and learning. Because administrators cannot do this alone, they must make maximum use of teacher leaders. (p. 71)
Summary: Instructional Coaching as Professional Development

For too long, professional development has been provided to teachers in ways contrary to how people are understood to learn. Despite the fact that no one size could possibly fit all adult learners, professional development schemes have taken forms that are well-known to be ineffective – namely, large-group, one-shot presentations with no follow-up (certainly, none that occurs in actual classrooms), and which, as a consequence, have little if any impact on subsequent instruction.

Instructional coaching, by contrast, is ongoing, classroom-imbedded professional development that recognizes teachers as thoughtful professionals who require and deserve opportunities to understand, implement, reflect upon, and discuss the materials and approaches that they are to employ, not as instruments that need only to be programmed. It reflects the fractal – or scale independent and self-similar – quality of schooling by affording teachers the same timely, personalized support that they are expected to provide to their students.

Skills Necessary in Instructional Coaches

While at least one study has found that no significant relationship exists between the formal qualifications with which coaches come to their positions and the behavior in which they engage once on the job (Bean, 2010) – a finding reminiscent of Joyce & Showers’ (2002) conclusion that teachers’ acquisition of new strategies in no way guarantees their transfer of those strategies to their actual classroom practices, the literature on instructional coaching is quite consistent in identifying the skills, attitudes, and behaviors that effective coaches demonstrate in their work with teachers.
Effective instructional coaches are knowledgeable about content and pedagogy, and are well-versed in the principles of adult learning. They engender teachers’ trust, and approach their work with them with interpersonal sophistication and skill. They are keenly observant about, and shamelessly opportunistic when it comes to improving, teaching and learning.

**Knowledge of Content and Pedagogy**

Effective instructional coaches are well-versed in the subject-area content around which they help teachers engage students (Bean et al., 2010; L’Allier et al., 2010; Kowal & Steiner, 2007). They are possessed of pedagogical expertise (Knight, 2009; Kowal & Steiner, 2007), and are skilled at using assessment data to select and refine appropriate instructional strategies for students (Bean et al., 2010; Marsh et al, 2010; Knight, 2009; IRA, 2006).

West’s (2009) description of the work of content coaches nicely encapsulates the degree of knowledge and skill that effective instructional coaches possess in the realms of curriculum and instruction:

Content coaches possess knowledge and understanding of the content of their discipline, awareness of which concepts within that discipline are appropriate for students at various stages, knowledge of content learning theories, a varied repertoire of instructional strategies aligned with those theories, and an understanding of organizations as living, dynamic systems. The goal of content coaching is to cultivate teachers’ academic habits of reasoning and discourse associated with their particular discipline and to help them develop a specific skill set that will enable them to cultivate those same habits in their students. (p. 115)

**Application of the Principles of Adult Learning**

Effective instructional coaches apply in their work with teachers the principles of adult learning (Gallucci et al., 2010; L’Allier et al., 2010). They recognize that adults
feel vulnerable when placed in the role of learner; when they find themselves in the position of not quite understanding, or not yet being able to do, something (NRC, 2000). They appreciate that adopting new approaches is inherently challenging; that “Changing one’s own behavior is difficult, especially when one has fairly dependable strategies already fully developed” (Joyce & Showers, 2002, p. 80). Effective instructional coaches help the faculties in their schools and districts to arrive at commonly held views of effective teaching by facilitating demonstrations of best instructional practices. Knowing that, too often, “teachers have assumed that they need only to see something to use it skillfully and appropriately” (Joyce & Showers, 2002, p. 80), these coaches work to help teachers genuinely grasp the cognitive demands of implementing such new strategies or practices. They ensure that the purposes of demonstration lessons are made clear, and that the educators doing the modeling – be they coaches or teachers – ‘think aloud’ as they teach, so that observing teachers will fully understand the theoretical rationales behind those practices, and can begin to anticipate the types of issues that may arise when those practices are applied in the specific contexts of their own classrooms (Casey, 2011).

Tailoring their coaching to suit the diverse needs, and the varied problems of practice, of the teachers whom they work to support, effective instructional coaches meet teachers where they are (NRTAC, 2010). They help educators to assess what they presently know or are able to do, then assist them in identifying and taking appropriate next steps (Knight, 2009; Lyons & Pinnell, 2001).

**Trustworthiness**

Effective instructional coaches labor to establish and maintain teachers’ trust, recognizing that, without it, their other efforts will come to naught (Hall & Simeral,
2008; Lyons & Pinnell, 2001). Indeed, as Tschannen-Moran & Tschannen-Moran (2011) explain, “Only high-trust connections can inspire greatness. Such connections free up teachers to take on new challenges by virtue of the safety net they create” (p. 13).

Enumerating the behaviors in which teachers must engage if they are to be effective consumers of coaching – behaviors that assume teachers’ trust toward their coaches, Yopp et al. (2011) explain that teachers should ask their coaches for specific feedback; that they should be open to, and actively participate in, reflection; that they should communicate honestly with coaches about what they need from the coaching experience; and that they should be honest with themselves about, and should willingly take steps to deepen, their content-area knowledge.

Certainly uncomfortable at the time, the dissonance that teachers, like all people, invariably experience when they set out to learn something new is needful. When it materializes within the trusting context of instructional coaching, “Dissonance sharpens your thinking and brings comparisons to mind that clarify understanding” (Lyons & Pinnell, 2001, p. 141). When teachers trust, and feel secure in their relationships with, their coaches, they will not only discuss their classroom successes, they will also disclose – and position themselves to learn immeasurably from – their experiences with instructional experiments gone bad (Habegger & Hodanbosit, 2011).

Interpersonal Skill

Understanding that “Building and sustaining relationships takes time, effort and self-reflection” (Jay, 2009, p. 122), effective instructional coaches approach their work with interpersonal skill and sophistication.
Effective coaches ask thoughtful questions and listen carefully, both to teachers’ words and to their thoughts (National Reading Technical Assistance Center, 2010; Ellison & Hayes, 2009). “As they listen, they are not only hearing the content of the words being delivered, but, at a deeper level, they are listening for what the words say about the person’s States of Mind” – that is, their ‘efficacy’; their ‘consciousness’ about classroom goings on and their role in them; their ‘craftsmanship,’ or drive to achieve excellence; their ‘flexibility,’ or ability to see others’ points of view; and their ‘interdependence,’ or ability to work in conjunction with others (Ellison & Hayes, 2009).

In addition to being attentive listeners, effective instructional coaches are skilled communicators. “Truth in human affairs is more ambiguous and dynamic than we are sometimes accustomed to imagining it…Knowing how to articulate it so as to facilitate movement in a progressive direction is a central feature of the good therapist’s skills” (Wachtel, 1993, p. 165). The same is no less true of the effective instructional coach, whose observations are expressed in such a way as to be “energizing, encouraging, practical, and honest” (Knight, 2009b, p. 19). “A good coach communicates a belief in people’s potentials and an expectation that they can do their best. The tacit message is, ‘I believe in you, I’m invested in you, and I expect your best efforts’” (Goleman et al., 2002, p. 62).

Just as therapists strive to help patients get better, rather than merely feel better (Ellis, 2003), and just as conventional wisdom expresses that it is preferable to teach a man to fish, thereby feeding him for a lifetime, rather than to give a man a fish and feed him for only a single day, effective instructional coaches weigh teachers’ long-term growth against their short-term comfort. Stopping well short of providing teachers with
quick fixes or readymade solutions, effective instructional coaches work to help teachers solve their own problems of practice. By “asking rather than telling,” coaches help the teachers with whom they work to “find their own best way forward” (Tschannen-Moran & Tschannen-Moran, 2011, p.16). Bearwald (2011) explains,

Mentees are often looking for answers, and coaches are primed to oblige. But offering answers to every question can lead to a dysfunctional dance that short-circuits higher-level thinking. Unless the mentor is committed to questioning and listening, collaborative work often remains mundane. When a mentor provides a solution or makes a decision for the mentee, the mentor unwittingly inhibits the reflection needed to identify desirable courses of action. (p. 74)

Instructional coaches, in short, work to maintain the ‘power differentials’ and ‘levels of anxiety containment’ control parameters at critical levels for teachers.

The feedback that effective instructional coaches provide to teachers is candid and thoughtful. “We all know, on some level, that others watch and judge what we do – so most of us would rather have the full story, not the watered down version. When others try to keep us comfortable by sanitizing feedback, or ‘being nice,’ they do us a disservice: We’re deprived of crucial information we need to improve” (Goleman et al., 2002, p. 132). Knight (2009) counsels instructional coaches continuously to hone their skills at delivering feedback that is “direct,” “specific,” and “nonattributive” (p. 49).

Keen Observation & Instructional Opportunism

Like good teachers, ever on the lookout for teachable moments, effective instructional coaches are keenly observant and shamelessly opportunistic. Appreciating teaching and learning as complex phenomena – that is, as being neither perfectly linear nor entirely random (West, 2009; Ellison & Hayes, 2009), instructional coaches
understand that, by attending to all facets of classroom practice, they increase “the likelihood for results and capacity for forward momentum” (Ellison & Hayes, 2009, p. 82).

Effective instructional coaches “look for the positive” in their every interaction with teachers (NRTAC, 2010, p. 7), so that they may recognize and reinforce the strengths with which those teachers present. Knight (2009) explains,

Too often the challenges of being an educator, and the emotional exhaustion that comes with trying to reach every child every day, make it difficult for teachers to fully comprehend the good they are doing. (p. 46)

By pointing-out to teachers what they are doing well – that is, by ensuring that this positive information flows through the system, effective instructional coaches help those teachers to develop senses of efficacy (Tschannen-Moran & Tschannen-Moran, 2011).

Just as they encourage the teachers with whom they work to be, effective instructional coaches are at once ‘intentional’ and ‘opportunistic’ (L’Allier et al., 2010) when it comes to teaching and learning. In addition to planning how they intend to achieve – and to monitor their progress toward – identified goals and objectives, they are prepared to deviate from those plans where indicated (Ippolito, 2010), and to capitalize on the unscheduled but nevertheless enormously valuable opportunities for genuine teaching and learning that invariably materialize when one is working to support the development of others. Likewise, just as they ask teachers to do, effective instructional coaches regularly challenge themselves in efforts to improve instruction and enhance student achievement.
When coaches decide to stay in their comfort zone, their practice conveys the belief that the primary goal of coaching is to help teachers feel good or to make coaches feel valued. It is by operating outside their comfort zone…that coaches improve teaching and student learning. (Killion, 2009, p. 26)

Effective instructional coaches not only maintain appropriate ‘levels of anxiety containment’ for the teachers with whom they work; they model how they do the same for themselves.

Summary: Skills Necessary in Instructional Coaches

Possessed of these skills, attitudes, and behaviors – knowledge of content and pedagogy, application of the principles of adult learning, trustworthiness, real interpersonal skill, keen powers of observation, and opportunism about teaching and learning, effective instructional coaches enter into genuine partnerships with the teachers whom they serve. They work “alongside them as coequals who first listen and learn from teachers, then assist them in goal setting and planning for action” (Toll, 2009, p. 59).

Knight (2011) explains that such a partnership approach to instructional coaching incorporates seven principles: equality (“Both partners share ideas and make decisions together as equals”); choice (Teachers are the “final decision makers,” who “choose their coaching goals and decide which practices to adopt and how to interpret data”); voice (“When coaches follow the principle of voice, teachers feel free to express their enthusiasms and concerns”); reflection (coaches engage teachers in reflective conversations that elicit the enthusiasm and energy of both the coach and the teacher); dialogue (genuine discussion, not imposition of the coach’s will/opinion); praxis (application of – or decision to refrain from applying – new knowledge and skills); and reciprocity (“When one teaches, two learn”).
The principles that Knight (2011) enumerates reinforce how instructional coaches maintain the various control parameters at levels necessary for school improvement efforts – including coaching programs, themselves – to be sustained, and further illustrates how schools – and instructional coaching’s place in them – may be understood through the lens of complexity science. First and foremost, by engaging teachers in professional conversations that transcend their individual classrooms and schools, instructional coaching communicates the premium that it places on the richness of connectivity between agents in the education system. The principle of equality highlights the difference between where instructional coaches set the power differentials control parameter in their work with teachers and where administrators set it. The principle of choice recalls that teachers are autonomous agents within the complex system of schools, and that they are capable of independent action – of following administrators’ directives, or of ignoring them; of implementing materials and methods in a canting fashion, or with mindfulness. Voice demonstrates that instructional coaches maintain the anxiety containment parameter at a setting that invites teachers to speak openly about the emotions associated with challenging work. In so doing, it conveys instructional coaches’ recognition of the need for such information to flow through the system in order that it can inform future decisions and shape the emergence of school improvement. The principle of reflection makes plain the fractal – the scale independent and self-similar – nature of the work of educators, no matter their place or their role in the education system. Dialogue communicates instructional coaching’s appreciation for diversity within and between the schemas of the education system’s various, autonomous agents. Praxis, likewise, reflects instructional coaching’s recognition of teachers’ ability to
determine whether, when, and how to deploy knowledge and skills learned during professional development opportunities. Finally, the principle of reciprocity reemphasizes that, in instructional coaching, the power differentials control parameter is maintained at an equal level, in order that coaches and teachers can both teach and learn from one another, and that the resulting information may flow through the system via the rich connections that coaching fosters.

Conditions for Effective Coaching Programs

According to Hall & Simeral (2008), instructional coaching, when implemented effectively, “can facilitate professional learning, instigate growth, strengthen relationships, and unite learning communities” (p. 31). Likewise explaining, “Good coaching gets results – and gets them fairly quickly” (p. 50), Fullan & Knight (2011) offer the caveat, “‘Good coaching’ is not the reality for many coaches who operate in systems that are not organized to create, develop, and sustain the conditions for instructional improvement” (p. 50).

Several conditions are mentioned repeatedly in the literature as being necessary for instructional coaching programs to be successful: role clarity; administrative support; and trusting relationships. The tasks that coaches are or are not expected to undertake, and the areas for which they do or do not have responsibility, must be abundantly clear to teachers, coaches, and administrators, alike. Administrators must actively support the coaching programs in their schools and districts by participating in the very activities in which they and coaches ask staff members to participate; by demonstrating their support for coaches’ authority by including them in decision-making and other leadership functions, and by refraining from asking them to complete clerical or
managerial tasks; and by ensuring coaches’ ongoing professional development. Finally, in order for instructional coaching programs to achieve the desired effect of improving the quality of instruction, teachers must trust that coaches are there, not to judge their worth as people, but to help enhance their ability to help students learn.

Just as instructional coaches work to maintain control parameters at critical levels in their work with individual teachers, school and district administrators work to manage control parameters in efforts to support instructional coaching programs. Indeed, these programs’ very existence underscores administrators’ desire to establish and maintain rich connections between the educators in their schools. Likewise, through their delineation and communication of the responsibilities of individuals in various roles, administrators demonstrate where they set the power differentials control parameter—both in terms of administrators’ power differentials with coaches and with teachers, and in terms of coaches’ standing relative to teachers. By actively supporting their schools’ and districts’ coaching programs, administrators both highlight the scale independent and self-similar quality of schools (in that much of their work at the school/district scale mirrors what coaches do with individual teachers), and express their support for the timely flow of information through their schools and districts. Finally, by ensuring that trust characterizes how educators perceive instructional coaching programs and individual coaches, administrators serve to contain anxiety at appropriate levels.

Role Clarity

If administrators and instructional coaches are effectively to share responsibility for school improvement, their respective roles need to made clear, not only to the administrators and coaches, themselves, but also to the teachers whose work they both
strive to support (Tschannen-Moran & Tschannen-Moran, 2011; Steiner & Kowal, 2007).

Absent clear direction and role definition, coaches struggle to maintain a singular focus on doing what is necessary to help teachers improve instruction (Killion, 2009; Hall & Simeral, 2008). Fullan & Knight (2011) identify that too many districts have squandered their coaching programs’ potential by assigning to coaches tasks unrelated to coaching, and by being less-than-explicit about the roles and responsibilities that coaches are to fulfill. “Many coaches explained that because their roles and responsibilities were poorly defined – and because their principals weren’t clear about how best to employ them – they ended up doing quasi-administrative or clerical work rather than improving instruction. Instead of helping teachers reach out to more students, they photocopied papers, filed documents, or ordered supplies” (p. 52).

While empirical data directly linking instructional coaching to improved student performance remain limited (Toll, 2009), the literature does support the idea that more coaching is far preferable to less. In their study of Reading First schools, Bean et al. (2010) “did find a significant relationship between the amount of coaching performed in schools and student achievement” (p. 106). Similarly, L’Allier et al. (2010) cite the Valley District Study whose results “indicated that the highest average student reading gains occurred in classrooms supported by a literacy coach who engaged in the most interactions with teachers; conversely, the lowest average student gains occurred in classrooms supported by a literacy coach who spent the lowest percentage of time with teachers” (p. 547). Writing that the single best way to enhance the effectiveness of instructional coaches is to ensure that they have sufficient time to coach, Knight (2009b)
adds, “Principals and other district leaders need to ensure that they do not ask coaches to do so many noncoaching tasks that they rarely have the opportunity for sustained coaching” (p. 19).

Not only is their time to support classroom instruction eroded when coaches engage in clerical tasks; so, too, is teachers’ appreciation of the professional expertise that coaches have to offer them. Indeed, as Bean et al. (2010) write of what they found in their study of Reading First schools: “Spending time on school management or administrative tasks seemed to diminish the value of the coach in the eyes of the teachers. The more time coaches spent on management, the more negative were the perceptions teachers held about their coaches” (p. 111).

While still too few schools and districts maintain job descriptions for coaches (Killion, 2009), some are quite explicit, identifying both the functions in which coaches are expected serve, and the activities from which they are required to refrain. Keller (2007) enumerates several jobs that coaches are specifically barred from undertaking in the Colorado school district that she describes: “having your own students”; “acting as a teacher’s aide”; “doing individual student assessments”; “working as a substitute teacher”; or “evaluating teachers” (p. 22).

The importance of coaches’ not engaging in the formal evaluation of teachers appears repeatedly in the literature on instructional coaching. Lyons & Pinnell (2001) explain that the coach – or, to use their preferred term, the ‘staff developer’ – “is not there to evaluate, except in the sense that all of us make analytical assessments all the time. He is there to help, sometimes providing practical and useful suggestions, sometimes demonstrating, and sometimes just listening as a teacher works through her
own analysis” (p. 140). Substantiating the imperative for such role discrimination, Knight (2009b) writes, “If teachers perceive their coach as an administrator rather than a peer, they may hesitate to open up about their needs to take risks” (p. 19).

**Administrative Support**

The literature is clear in describing the enormous impact of school administrators, especially principals, in the success or failure of their respective schools’ coaching programs (Keller, 2007). From their study of America’s Choice schools, Poglinco et al. (2003) found that the quality and quantity of support that principals provided to coaches significantly impacted the degree to which coaches were effective. They explain that most of the principals in their study understood the importance of engaging in ongoing communication and maintaining strong collaborative relationships with their coaches, and of coordinating with them their respective responsibilities for improving the quality of the teaching and learning taking place in their schools.

Neufeld & Roper (2002) write of principals’ active participation in Boston’s Collaborative Coaching and Learning initiative, explaining how each aspect of their involvement contributed to the effectiveness of that coaching program. For example, by completing the same readings that coaches and teachers were asked to read, principals modeled the value of ongoing professional learning. Likewise, by allowing themselves to be observed demonstrating lessons and conferencing with students, they showed themselves to be taking the same risks that were asked of the teachers, assuring teachers that there would indeed be no penalty for demonstrating recently learned practices in a less-than-expert manner. Sharing that, in the first year of CCL’s existence, principals in participating schools were involved to quite varied degrees, Neufeld & Roper (2002)
explain that, when – at the urging of coaches – principals did become more involved, “the tenor of the lab site changed and teachers began engaging in the work” (p. 34).

Consistent with Neufeld & Roper’s (2002) findings, Kral (2007) asserts, “Teachers need to know that the principal is learning along with them, or is at least very involved in their learning” (p. 1). Describing teachers as alert to their principals’ interactions with, and attitudes toward, the coaches in their schools, Kral (2007) warns that if principals and coaches appear out of sync, teachers will regard any practices or procedures that the coaches promote as being of very low priority.

Killion (2009) describes the messages that principals send to coaches as being every bit as important as those that they transmit about them.

When principals view themselves as the sole instructional leader in the school, coaches may assume roles that have less impact on teaching and student learning because they are respectfully deferring to principals. If principals abdicate their responsibility for instructional leadership to coaches, coaches have little hope of making a difference because teachers will believe that continuous improvement is unimportant. When principals engage coaches as instructional leaders, coaches will approach their work with heightened responsibility for students’ academic success. (p. 17)

Principals of schools that have instructional coaching programs cannot afford for coaches to be perceived as only ancillary to enhancing the quality of teaching and learning within those schools – for example, by allowing them to become associated exclusively, in teachers’ minds, with clerical or managerial tasks (Fullan & Knight, 2011; Bean, 2010). Neither can they afford for coaches to be seen as shouldering the full burden of leading school improvement efforts (Killion, 2009; Kral, 2007). Rather, principals must work to ensure that coaches are recognized by all members of the school community as principals’ partners in marshalling instructional improvement (Grant &
Davenport, 2009), while establishing themselves as their schools’ instructional leaders (Knight, 2009).

Steiner & Kowal (2007) suggest that school leaders, such as principals, demonstrate their instructional leadership by serving as their buildings’ “chief coaches” – that is, by directing the instructional coaching programs in their schools. Hall & Simeral (2008) – a principal and coach, respectively – write that it is important for administrators and coaches to coordinate their efforts, explaining that such coordination yields “more consistent professional growth among staff, and more dependable advancement in student achievement” (p. 106).

The literature makes plain that principals are less likely to affect instructional improvement by issuing, then laboring to enforce, mandates, than by approaching the work with the knowledge that change is messy, that it requires educators to take risks, and that it does not occur overnight (Kral, 2007). The literature counsels principals not to regard coaches as entirely instrumental; as unquestioningly imposing principals’ directives upon teachers. Rather, principals are encouraged to recognize coaches as serious professionals capable of partnering with administrators in bringing about school improvement by supporting teachers through the difficult work of examining and enhancing their instruction (Steiner & Kowal, 2007).

Principals and other administrators are advised, in the literature, to be actively involved in the selection of educators to serve as instructional coaches; in the design of instructional coaching programs for their schools; in regularly assessing the effectiveness of those programs; in the supervision and evaluation of individual coaches; and in the provision of appropriate training to coaches (Knight, 2009b; Steiner & Kowal, 2007).
Successful instructional coaching programs acknowledge that, in order for coaches to support teachers’ professional development, coaches’ own growth must also be supported. Kowal & Steiner (2007), who studied Boston’s Collaborative Coaching and Learning initiative, explain:

Districts with longstanding programs have found that coaches require professional development of their own to improve their knowledge and skills and to keep up with the needs of their teachers and schools. In Boston, where the use of coaches has been a crucial school improvement strategy since 2001, coaches’ professional development was built into the program from the start. Each week, coaches attend a training session that typically begins with a whole-group conversation about recent successes and challenges, followed by small-group opportunities to share experiences and discuss topics that have arisen in their work. (p. 5)

Professional development offerings for coaches should include training in content-specific pedagogy and in how to work effectively with adult learners (L’Allier et al., 2010; Norton, 2007; Killion & Harrison, 2005; AISR, 2004). Especially “given the complex, adaptive challenges schools and all who serve in them face today” (Drago-Severson, 2012, p. 17), they should support coaches’ development as change agents at both the instructional and the organizational level (Fullan and Knight, 2011, p. 53; AISR, 2004). As Norton (2007) explains,

New coaches fresh from the classroom often need help just working with adult learners. Sometimes it’s difficult for them to get perspective. They’ve been teaching in isolation, and now they have a responsibility for whole-school change. (p. 23).

Like the principals alongside whom they work, coaches must learn how to cultivate teamwork, build capacity, and lead systemic reform efforts, in addition to being possessed of deep understandings of pedagogy and content. Serving on their school’s leadership teams, coaches in the Pennsylvania High School Coaching Initiative, about
which Brown et al. (2008) write, share responsibility for their buildings’ improvement efforts. “Successful coaches combine instructional expertise with knowledge about schoolwide and districtwide strategies. The small and the big picture merge for these coaches. They’re equally comfortable on the dance floor and the balcony” (Fullan & Knight, 2001, p. 51).

Citing three years’ worth of work in which the Kansas Coaching Program engaged with coaches and other educators in schools, districts, and state-level agencies across thirty-five states, Knight (2009b) explains that instructional coaching programs that succeed and are sustained are characterized by focus and continuity. Hall & Simeral (2008), similarly, explain that coaching success is rooted in coaches’ “having a clear vision and the desire and wisdom to guide others toward a common goal” (p. 34). They continue, “Effective coaches should think of themselves as servant first: supporting teachers behind the scenes and seeking to make everyone else an expert rather than touting themselves as the only sources of expertise” (Hall & Simeral, 2008, p. 35).

**Trusting Relationships**

Replacing long-established teaching practices with those identified by instructional leaders as better-suited to satisfying school and district objectives frequently arouses in teachers feelings of insecurity and tension (Ellison & Hayes, 2009; Joyce & Showers, 2002; National Research Council, 2000). Fullan (2005) maps-out the emotional trajectory that faculty members too often follow when school improvement efforts are launched in their schools or districts:

Under stressful conditions, individuals and groups are more likely to revert to regressive behavior. Some stress is…essential as part and parcel of
pushing into new frontiers, but too much stress can cause us to seize up, get angry, and get even more frustrated with the complexities of group deliberations and thus to withdraw from the fray.

It takes less skill to resist than to learn. Resistance comes naturally; learning complicated things in a group setting does not. It is easy for people to avoid or fail to persist in the deep, cognitive, emotional, and political learning cycles that will be needed to sustain the group’s focus on complex new challenges. (p. 101)

The efforts required of teachers to change their instructional practices are not unlike the exertions needed by any human beings who seek to improve themselves by learning more adaptive attitudes and habits. Wachtel (1993) – a psychotherapist – explains that it is necessary for those in helping professions to bear in mind that, despite occasional halting or backward-seeming behaviors during the change process, individuals genuinely wish to improve their situations. “Behavior which, from one perspective, can be seen as an instance of resistance can from another be recognized simply as a sign of conflict. [The individual] is not intransigent, stubborn, or uncooperative; he is afraid, uncertain, and torn between competing visions and inclinations” (Wachtel, 1993, p. 138). The helping professional’s role is to provide ongoing support to the individual as (s)he makes the transition to new practices and mindsets.

When teachers understand the rationale behind new practices, and recognize how those practices relate to – and promise to enhance – the work in which they are already engaged, they are much more likely to incorporate them into their instructional repertoires (Joyce & Showers, 2002). Such understanding and recognition take time, but are furthered by teachers’ regular practice of, and reflection upon, the target behaviors – especially when supported by school principals and instructional coaches. Reflecting the scale independence and self-similarity that pervade the education system, teacher
learning mirrors, albeit in miniature, the processes that schools and districts undergo when they embark upon efforts at organizational change.

Change is generally thought to include three subprocesses. “Initiation involves the proposal of new ideas, mobilization of energy, and the choice to begin a change. Implementation means putting new ideas, activities, or programs into practice. Institutionalization...means stabilizing and continuing the newly implemented change” (Miles & Ekholm, 1991, p. 7 – emphases added). While these three subprocesses are commonly assumed to occur sequentially, Miles & Ekholm (1991) aver that overlap does occur; that some of the activities necessary for institutionalization actually take place earlier on in the process.

Many implementation activities are in effect ‘preconditions’ for institutionalization. For example, good implementation requires strong and sustained technical assistance, along with the development of ownership. Both make for better implementation. But both also make for institutionalization: skillful, committed use helps to stabilize and continue the change. (p. 7)

The strong and sustained technical assistance afforded through instructional coaching is most effective when trust characterizes the relationships between teachers and coaches. Indeed, according to numerous authors, trusting relationships are the sine qua nons of successful coaching programs (Habegger & Hodanbosit, 2011; AISR, 2004; Lyons & Pinnell, 2001).

Explaining that the trust that teachers feel toward them is the foundation on which coaching is based, Lyons & Pinnell (2001) offer coaches – or, in their parlance, ‘staff developers’ – the following counsel:

With trust, you have a much better chance of clear communication; if you misspeak, you can clarify what you meant. People give one another second chances. Never interacting with a teacher and then suddenly
appearing at her door won’t work, no matter how skilled you are... Within a trusting context, dissonance works for you. Criticism can be shared in a constructive and positive way through nonthreatening conversation. (p. 141)

L’Allier et al. (2010) explain that coaches elicit trust by communicating effectively with teachers. They recommend, as Bean et al. (2010) also had, that coaches focus their conversations with teachers on strategies by which to improve student performance, rather than on teachers’ own relative strengths or weaknesses. They likewise exhort coaches to employ ‘facilitative communication,’ by demonstrating their “willingness to answer questions and to offer suggestions, not absolute solutions” (p. 548). By so doing, L’Allier et al. (2010) explain, coaches demonstrate that the purpose of instructional coaching is not to impugn the work of teachers but genuinely to improve outcomes for students.

**Summary: Conditions for Effective Coaching Programs**

Several conditions have been identified in the literature as contributing to the effectiveness of instructional coaching programs. The first such condition is *role clarity*, the understanding of all involved – administrators, coaches, and teachers – of what tasks coaches do or do not undertake, including – especially – the understanding that coaches are in no way involved in formally evaluating the work of teachers or otherwise making decisions about their continued employment. Another condition that has been identified as contributing significantly to the effectiveness of instructional coaching programs is *administrative support*, which consists of administrators’ – especially principals’ – active leadership of the teaching and learning life of the school, generally, and of the coaching program, specifically; their regular engagement with the coaches, themselves; their
unambiguous endorsement of coaches as fellow instructional leaders; and their provision to coaches of ongoing professional development that addresses content and pedagogy, helping adults learn, working in and leading systems, and establishing and maintaining trusting, purposeful interpersonal relationships with teachers. The last, but far-from-the least, of the conditions necessary for effective instructional coaching programs is the presence of *trusting relationships* in a school. Not only must teachers trust that the coaches with whom they work genuinely seek to help them improve their instruction, they, as well as coaches, must also trust that administrators will honor the confidentiality of coaching relationships, and will not attempt to use information gained through coaching for purposes other than that for which it is intended.

**IMPLICATIONS FOR THE PRESENT STUDY**

The above review of the literature has numerous implications, both conceptual and practical, for the present study. The literature on complexity science and on education reform make plain that the complexity of schools, of school districts, and of education itself must be taken into account when efforts at improvement are undertaken or studied. When policymakers fail to appreciate this complexity, they develop unrealistic expectations – both about the results that they will achieve, and about the speed with which they will achieve them, and make policies whose intended outcomes are only as realistic as the information on which they are based. When investigators do not account for this complexity, their understandings and explanations of the phenomena under study are certainly incomplete, and very likely inaccurate.
The methods used for the current study, then, were qualitative ones well-suited to illuminating the many facets of education reform, and to examining the far-from-linear relationships between decisions about education policy, educators’ actual instructional practices, and students’ academic achievement.

In response to the literature’s enumeration of the several skills required in effective instructional coaches, the degree to which those selected to serve as coaches in the three suburban school districts included in the current study possess knowledge of content and pedagogy, familiarity with the principles of adult learning, trustworthiness, interpersonal skill, instructional opportunism, and keen powers of observation were investigated, as were the methods by which those individuals were selected to serve as coaches; the processes and criteria according to which they have been evaluated in those roles; the professional development opportunities with which they have been provided; and the degree to which each has succeeded in maintaining the five control parameters at critical levels by demonstrating the principles of partnership that Knight (2011) describes.

In addition to the skills of the individuals serving as instructional coaches, the contextual variables investigated in each of the three school districts participating in the current study also include the extent to which the conditions identified in the literature as supporting instructional coaching programs were present: role clarity; administrative support; and trusting relationships. Appreciating complex systems’ sensitive dependence on initial conditions, particular attention was placed on the states of the variables in each of the three districts at the time of instructional coaching’s introduction.
CHAPTER 3

RESEARCH METHODS

The present study was inspired by statements in the literature that instructional coaching remains ‘under-researched’ (Gallucci et al., 2010); that what published research does exist describes instructional coaching programs in urban schools and districts, rather than in suburban ones (Matsumura, 2010; Kowal & Steiner, 2007; Russo, 2004); and that, in order genuinely to be understood, instructional coaching programs ought to be studied from a systems perspective that takes into account such variable contextual factors as principal leadership, school culture, and coaches’ and teachers’ experience and expertise (Gallucci, 2010; Matsumura, 2010; Cornett & Knight, 2009; Toll, 2009).

Appreciating that “Schools are complex social environments in which it is impossible to ‘control’ for the wide range of conditions that influence the delivery of services” (Lareau, 2010, p. 2), this study is qualitative in nature. More specifically, this investigation is a comparative case study of three suburban school districts in Massachusetts and their experiences with instructional coaching programs.

THE QUALITATIVE PARADIGM

While research characterized by quantitative methods and experimental designs certainly remains necessary in education, it is far from sufficient. Qualitative research methods – such as the comparative case study approach employed in the present study – are also required. Reeves (2010) explains,

Too often there is a false dichotomy in the research literature between ‘real’ research (that is, double-blind experimental studies with random
assignment of students to control and treatment groups) and the rest of the field – case studies, qualitative descriptions, and action research. …Of course we need rigorous quantitative research in order to draw inferences that can be generalized to large populations. We also need the stories behind the numbers, the qualitative lens through which we can better understand quantitative information. And educators in particular need to see a demonstration of practical application in a local environment, because they have seen too many programs that claimed to be ‘research-based’ and that were colossal wastes of money and time. (Reeves, 2010, p. 72)

Likewise citing the false dichotomy of quantitative versus qualitative research, Schmoker (1999) writes of educators’ hunger for both kinds of details; for “evidence of exactly how well a method works, as well as concrete descriptions of how to make it work” (p. 53). Guskey (2009) provides still more justification for a qualitative approach to studying education reform when he points-out that, since schools and districts tend to undertake multiple improvement efforts simultaneously, it is challenging to isolate the effects of any single initiative.

Qualitative research studies are, by design, “emergent,” “flexible,” and “responsive to changing conditions” (Merriam, 2009, p. 16). Attentiveness to emergent phenomena and concepts, and responsiveness to changing conditions, are necessary and appropriate when one undertakes to study a field as complex as instructional leadership. They are all the more so when that leadership is distributed amongst school administrators and such teacher leaders as instructional coaches (Spillane et al., 2004).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Heeding Spillane et al.’s (2001) assertion that “Theory can have very practical application because it can offer new perspectives on familiar activity, thereby enabling
reflection and informing action” (p. 27), a theoretical framework – complexity science – has been employed throughout the present study.

Education research that is oriented by complexity science would be interested in attending to the dynamic elements and conditions that enable the emergence of certain sorts of engagement and insight. Contrary to what one might expect, this sort of research can lead to generalizable results, although such results will not come with the promise of replicability. Complex systems and events cannot be duplicated. (Davis & Sumara, 2005, p. 318)

Complexity science provides a lens through which “to analyze emerging patterns and trends” and by which to examine “how the disparate system parts are, or are not, working together” (McQuillan, 2008, p. 1773). It answers Fullan’s (2005) call for those who are employed in, or who investigate, schools to engage in ‘systems thinking,’ and satisfies Schmoker’s (1999) argument that, if we want to improve education, “we need to look beyond the isolated point or moment or result and into the system that affects the impact we can have” (p. 33). More specific to the present study, it complies with Steckel’s (2009) assertion that “It is essential to consider coaching in the context in which it occurs” (p. 14), and heeds Toll’s (2009) suggestion that coaching be studied “from the perspective of systems thinking” (p. 67).

Since, as Spillane (2009) reminds us, even the best-laid plans for school improvement can have unexpected results when implemented, practitioners and researchers must attend to both the ‘intended’ and the ‘actual’ outcomes of initiatives (p. 207). Fullan and Miles (1992) explain,

Education is a complex system, and its reform is even more complex… We must remember that it is folly to act as if we know how to solve complex problems in short order. We must have an approach to reform that acknowledges that we don’t necessarily know all the answers, that is
conducive to developing solutions as we go along, and that sustains our commitment and persistence to stay with the problem until we get somewhere. (p. 746)

The preparedness of a school or district’s faculty to implement a reform; the actual priorities of a school or district’s leaders; and the political, cultural, and economic circumstances within a community vary considerably from one locale to the next, and contribute in ways large and small, immediately obvious and not-readily-apparent, to the success or failure of efforts at educational improvement. “In a simple sense, almost everything interacts with everything else. A key in theory formation for both analytic and clinical purposes is to figure out how to ‘carve the complexity’ at the joints” (Bryk, Sebring, Allensworth, Luppescu, and Easton, 2010, p. 45). Examining schools, districts, and reform efforts through the lens of complexity science allows practitioners and researchers to do just that.

QUALITATIVE METHODS

Case studies are rich, in-depth descriptions and analyses of systems and phenomena (Reeves, 2010; Merriam, 2009). Well-suited to examinations of such applied disciplines as social work, administration, and health care, case studies are “particularly useful for studying educational innovations, evaluating programs, and informing policy” (Merriam, 2009, p. 51), because they allow researchers to investigate situations in great detail, and to report their findings through narratives that not only identify the multiple variables involved, but also describe the interactions among and between those variables.
Analysis of the context within which an initiative is being undertaken is essential if an evaluation of that program is to be considered in any way accurate or complete. “A program is embedded in and intertwined with its context in ways difficult to disentangle. An understanding of context is necessary if the evaluation is to be realistic and responsive to the conditions within which the program is found. Contextual information is also needed to help audiences interpret the evaluation” (Joint Committee on Standards for Educational Evaluation, 1994, p. 133).

The present study, which examines instructional coaching programs in three suburban school systems in Massachusetts, is what Merriam (2009) terms a ‘comparative case study’ (p. 49). Including multiple cases in a study, especially when variations exist across those cases, renders interpretations more compelling. It increases the likelihood that practitioners reading the study will identify with at least some of the educators or circumstances described therein.

‘By looking at a range of similar and contrasting cases, we can understand a single-case finding, grounding it by specifying how, where and, if possible, why it carries on as it does. We can strengthen the precision, the validity, and the stability of the findings’ (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 29). The inclusion of multiple cases is, in fact, a common strategy for enhancing the external validity or generalizability of your findings. (Merriam, 2009, p. 50)

Since “educational events are much less predictable and far less under the control of particular elements, e.g., practitioners’ specific interventions” (p. 263), than many policymakers, practitioners, or researchers acknowledge, Radford (2007) asserts that educational researchers should focus their energies on analyzing and describing situations.
Cautioning that complex systems are not easily understood, Radford (2007) identifies that research efforts will “focus on many issues simultaneously,” and that they will not be “amenable to the neat research spiral of plan, act, observe, and reflect” (p. 276). Highlighting the absence of “clear lines of evidence” (p. 276), Radford (2007) reminds, “We realize that very minor remarks or behaviors can have major impacts on others, that events can come together in quite unpredictable ways and foil our best attempts to plan or organize for particular outcomes” (p. 274).

THE SAMPLE

Far from being random, the selection of participants for the present study was quite purposeful. Whereas, in quantitative research, the aim is to include samples that are both representative and of sufficiently significant size, the key factor in qualitative research is “the potential of each person to contribute to the development of insight and understanding of the phenomenon” (Merriam, 2009, p. 105).

Because most of the school systems cited in the literature on instructional coaching are urban ones (Russo, 2004), this researcher elected to focus the current investigation on suburban school systems, a category about which the literature on instructional coaching is practically silent.

As explained in Chapter 1, the three districts included in this study represent a convenience sample, having been selected from among the twenty districts whose superintendents had expressed a willingness for their faculties to participate, when responding to a questionnaire that was distributed electronically to all Massachusetts school superintendents in April 2010.
One of the three districts selected to participate in the study had been chosen, initially, because its former superintendent had indicated that the district had discontinued its instructional coaching program. Far from disqualifying this district from inclusion, the subsequent discovery that – while one position had certainly been eliminated – the district’s program of instructional coaching is very much intact, along with the differing perspectives of the district’s current superintendent and those of his predecessor, make this district a particularly fascinating case.

The other two participating districts were chosen because of a critical feature that they happen to have in common: The current superintendent in one of the two districts had previously served as an administrator in the other – an arrangement that promised to lend greater insight about the latter district’s program, as well as a deeper sense of the views that this educational leader brought to the former.

Heeding McQuillan’s (2008) suggestion, “Research should…assess interactions at multiple levels of the system as a means to identify salient variables that reproduce at varied system levels” (p. 1794), included in this study’s twenty-two participants were the superintendent of the participating districts (or, in one case, the assistant superintendent for curriculum and instruction); principals of schools within those districts; instructional coaches who provide support in those schools; and classroom teachers who teach in those schools, and with whom those coaches work.

DATA COLLECTION

The preponderance of the data gathered for the present study resulted from semi-structured interviews that were conducted with educators in the three participating school
districts. Merriam (2009) supports the use of semi-structured interviews, as opposed to highly structured ones, explaining that, while the former allow respondents to speak about their experiences using terms that are familiar and comfortable for them, the latter assume that all respondents share a common vocabulary and will interpret questions, not only in the way that the interviewer intended, but also in precisely the same way as every other respondent.

The interview protocols that were designed for the present study include questions suggested by the literature on school reform and instructional coaching, and are influenced heavily by the work of Merriam (2009), who enumerates, and describes the value of, several types of questions that may be included in semi-structured interviews: “Ideal position questions elicit both information and opinion; these can be used with virtually any phenomenon under study. They are good to use in evaluation studies because they reveal both the positives and the negatives or shortcomings of a program” (p. 98). Asking, for example, what the ideal program would be like would reveal aspects of a program that participants liked and would not want changed, as well as things that could make it still better. “Interpretive questions provide a check on what you think you are understanding, as well as offer an opportunity for yet more information, opinions, and feelings to be revealed.” For instance, asking whether the experience was or was not what participants had expected, and why, would allow the investigator to confirm her/his tentative interpretation of participants’ responses.

The one omnibus interview protocol that had originally been designed for the present study was piloted – again, at the suggestion of Merriam (2009). Two practicing administrators from two different school districts – one, a first-year building-level
administrator; the other, a district-level administrator in her second year on the job – sat for pilot interviews. Both asked clarifying questions that prompted the revision of some of the language of the interview questions; both also suggested important follow-up questions to ask future respondents. Subsequently, at the suggestion of the researcher’s dissertation committee members, the protocol was subdivided into three smaller instruments, each tailored to the position of the educator at whose interview the protocol would be used (administrator, coach, or teacher).

Such artifacts as policy statements, collective bargaining agreements, job descriptions, budget summaries, and aggregate results of student assessments were also discussed during, and reviewed in light of, participants’ interviews, as were the initial questionnaires that superintendents (or their designees) had completed in April 2010.

TREATMENT OF THE DATA

Each of the semi-structured interviews was audio-recorded. Following each interview, the digital recording was reviewed, transcribed, and – in keeping with the informed consent document that the participant had signed – labeled both with the individual participant’s job title (not her/his name) and with the pseudonym assigned to her/his school district to protect it from identification. Only the researcher knows from whom the information shared during each interview came.

In addition to transcripts from the various interviews, the data analyzed in the current study included such district-specific artifacts as policy statements, collective bargaining agreements, job descriptions, budget summaries, and aggregate results of
student assessments, as well as the initial questionnaires that the districts’ superintendents (or their designees) had completed in April 2010.

While a traditional ‘triangulation’ of data to test for consistency between observations, interviews, and documentary evidence is not a feature of the present study, the researcher continually referenced district-specific artifacts, both when interviewing participants and reporting their responses, in order that both sources of data would be as illuminating as possible. Consistencies and/or inconsistencies are addressed in subsequent chapters – both that in which research findings are reported, and that in which conclusions are offered and discussed. These chapters also identify the similarities and differences between the three participating districts – for example, in student body, in per pupil expenditure, in political climate, as well as the impacts of those differences on the districts’ respective programs of instructional coaching.

As Merriam (2009) explains, data analysis is, quite simply, “the process used to answer your research question(s)” (p. 176). For the current study, the researcher analyzed, first, the raw data associated with each participating school district, then, the totality of the data from across the three school districts, in light of the following research question: *How do suburban school districts’ unique contexts impact the implementation, maintenance, and success of their instructional coaching programs?*

Merriam (2009) explains that, in comparative case studies, ‘within-case’ analyses precede ‘cross-case’ analyses. “For the within-case analysis, each case is first treated as a comprehensive case in and of itself…Once the analysis of each case is completed, cross-case analysis begins. A qualitative, inductive, multicase study seeks to build
abstractions across cases. Although the particular details of specific cases may vary, the research attempts to build a general explanation that fits the individual cases” (p. 204).

Kilbourn (2006) explains the importance in qualitative studies of employing theoretical perspectives when interpreting data:

It is assumed that there is no such thing as a value-free or unbiased or correct interpretation of an event. Interpretations are always filtered through one or more lenses or theoretical perspectives that we have for ‘seeing’; reality is not something that we find under a rock…The reason that the theoretical perspective is important…is that it is yet another way in which a researcher makes his or her findings intelligible to an academic audience and open to scrutiny. (p. 545)

Data collected in the present study were examined through the lens of complexity science, in order that the three districts and their programs of instructional coaching could be understood in all their complexity, and not reduced to over-simple explanations.

Wheatley (2005) reminds us that the “messy tangle of relationships” that characterize complex systems make it impossible to find single causes or simple explanations. She points to nature, to “life and its living systems,” for guidance: “One gift of living systems is that these processes apply to individuals, to systems, to any size system. The dynamics of life are ‘scale-independent’ – they are useful to explain what we see no matter how small or large the living system” (p. 77).
CHAPTER 4
RESEARCH FINDINGS

The findings from this comparative case study of three suburban school districts’ programs of instructional coaching are organized into three sections, each of which outlines the experience, and describes the unique composition, of a single district. Each section includes a profile of the participating district; a description of that district’s program of instructional coaching; an articulation of the role of the instructional coach within that district’s program; a description of how, if at all, the coaching program had been rolled-out to the faculty of the school district; an accounting of the work that coaches in the district have done to gain, and then to maintain, the trust of the teachers whom they are intended to support; an articulation of the role played by administrators in the instructional coaching program; a discussion of how and by whom coaches are evaluated and/or supported within their districts; and, finally, a statement about how each of the three districts measures the success of its program of instructional coaching.

The names of the three communities have been changed to protect the confidentiality of the participants, who are themselves referred to throughout, not by name, but by title. In all, twenty-two people, including central office administrators, building principals, instructional coaches, and classroom teachers, were interviewed for this study. With the exception of the information collected through the preliminary questionnaire in spring 2010, all data were collected during the spring semester of the 2011/2012 academic year.
SPRINGWOOD, MASSACHUSETTS

District Profile

Four schools constitute the Springwood Public Schools: one elementary school serving students in Pre-Kindergarten, Kindergarten, 3rd Grade, and 4th Grade; a second elementary school, which serves students in Grades 1 and 2; one middle school that serves youngsters in Grades 5, 6, 7, and 8; and one high school, which serves students in Grades 9-12.

Springwood’s superintendent, who has served in that capacity for four school years, describes theirs as “a small, suburban district with favorable demographics.” The superintendent explains, “We have only about five percent free and reduced-price lunch students. We’re primarily white, middle-class families, many of whom have lived in Springwood for a long time. We don’t have a large turnover in our population. We don’t have a lot of diversity. We have fewer than ten students who are English language learners.” A review of data obtained from the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education bears out the superintendent’s assessment: Nineteen out of every twenty students in Springwood are white. The remaining five percent of students are evenly drawn from several other racial categories: African American; of Asian descent; Hispanic; or multi-race, non-Hispanic. Less than one percent of the students in the district are identified as limited English proficient, and only about five percent of students are identified as haling from families with low incomes.

The administrative structure of the Springwood Public Schools can only be described as flat. In addition to the superintendent, the district-level administrative staff consists of a business manager who has the title ‘assistant superintendent,’ and a director
of special education. At the building level, all four schools have their own principals, but – unlike the district’s other three schools – the smaller of the two elementary schools has no assistant principal. Indeed, the superintendent cites this flatness when explaining the decision to introduce instructional coaching into the district: “We didn’t have a lot of layers.”

Springwood’s Program of Instructional Coaching

The superintendent; the principal of one of the elementary schools; both elementary-level coaches; the middle school coach; and a middle school math teacher were interviewed about their district’s program of instructional coaching.

Springwood has three coaches in total: one at each of the two elementary schools; one at the middle school. Until last year, this latter coach had been joined by a second coach at the middle school. In the two-year period during which there were two coaches at the middle school, there was a clear delineation of who provided coaching in which domains: the existing coach provided support in science and math; the other coach, in literacy and social studies. When the latter position was eliminated, the remaining coach began to provide coaching to teachers regardless of their subject areas.

The superintendent – who had previously served as a central office administrator in another district that employed instructional coaches – is a self-described “strong proponent of instructional coaching,” and takes credit for having “brought it here to Springwood about three years ago.” Explaining that, for many years prior to her arrival in the district, “there wasn’t a lot of impetus” in Springwood for improvements to curriculum or instruction, the superintendent posits that the complacency resulted from “the favorable demographics, and the stable teaching population.” As a consequence, the
superintendent continues, she discovered upon her arrival to Springwood that “We didn’t have a good program here for professional development; no one had really looked at the curriculum for a long time; and so you had teachers who really cared about their students but who…weren’t up-to-date on their skills.”

The superintendent’s second year on the job saw the introduction of instructional coaching to the district, the establishment of Professional Learning Communities whose work the coaches would facilitate, and the implementation of new materials for both literacy and math.

The middle school coach – who had originally been hired to support math and science instruction, and who, for the first two years of the program’s existence, had a counterpart who supported instruction in literacy and social studies – describes the imperative for instructional improvement in her school: “We were in the position of having not made AYP [Adequate Yearly Progress, a provision of the federal No Child Left Behind legislation]. So, the DOE’s saying, ‘You gotta do something…with your subgroups in math and language arts,’ and this was our response…We needed to do something to kick it up a notch in terms of our instruction.” Of the resulting instructional coaching program, she says confidently, “Here’s something; here’s boots on the ground to put into classrooms, to improve instructional practice. I know that [the superintendent] knows that this kind of instructional coaching works, because I was in a similar kind of position in [the superintendent’s previous district].”

When asked how teachers have cottoned to coaching and the other changes that have been instituted, the superintendent explains candidly, “The teachers, on the whole, feel that they’re cooked; they’re done; they’re pros; they don’t need anyone to tell them
what to do, and so they don’t really see the need – they didn’t really see the need – for coaches, and some of them still don’t…Some didn’t see the need for collaboration or professional learning communities, either.”

One of the district’s two elementary-level coaches – who has served in that role since the program’s inception, and who had been a classroom teacher in the district prior to that – confirms the superintendent’s take on faculty members’ attitudes: “I think there were some people, and there still are some people, who resent me, and who resent my desire to always be looking for better ways or to improve yourself.” Adding that her principal, “Calls it the syndrome of ‘good is good enough,’” this coach explains that, since her school serves grades that are not tested by MCAS [the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System], teachers have received no evidence to disprove their opinion: “So, ‘good is good enough’ sticks a lot longer and harder in our building.” Her fellow elementary coach, whose school does include grades that participate in MCAS, agrees that teachers have been dismissive of the need for coaching, “‘Why would we need that if good is good enough?’ There is that sentiment in this building, too – like, ‘Our scores have been good.’”

This latter coach, who is new both to the role and to Springwood, explains precisely why, in her view, the district requires such job-embedded professional development as the coaching program provides: “I find that we’re a really program-dependent district…at least, at the elementary level. The missing component of our P.D., truthfully, is just the instructional practices, and the deep understanding of ‘what does good reading instruction look like?’” This coach likewise cites the related need “for teachers to truly have a deep understanding of mathematics to begin with, and the
developmental progression of how kids learn math, and where that goes.” Pointing out, “You didn’t get it in college; it wasn’t in ‘Intro to Teaching Math,’” the coach concludes, “Unless the teacher takes it upon themselves, the schools have to.”

Echoing the superintendent and the two elementary instructional coaches, the participating elementary principal agrees that the teachers in her building were anything but receptive to the district’s efforts at curricular and instructional improvement. Notwithstanding the instructional coach’s having been a classroom teacher in that very building until her appointment as coach, “It was a struggle for her to get into classrooms. People came to PLCs kind of grumpily: ‘Don’t know why we really need this.’”

The instructional coach, herself, recalls how she was received in her new role: “That first year, I was told that I ‘went over to the dark side.’ That was fun.” Reflecting upon the relationships that she had always enjoyed with them until that point, the coach identifies why she had not anticipated this response from her colleagues: “I believe I was a valued member, and somebody that people went to anyway, and I was a team player.”

Role of the Instructional Coach

The newer of the two elementary coaches, who joined Springwood just this year, recalls how the position was described to her when she applied for it: “Data analysis was a huge component of that position; to support the teachers with the curriculum, but also looking at new ways to approach the curriculum – best teaching practices. That was the initial description of it.” She identifies how the position has evolved in her short time in the district: “But I see, you know, shifts – particularly in this building – with the new Common Core standards, what we’re currently teaching, and how we’re teaching that, and how does it meet or not meet where the students [need] education to go.”
Her more senior colleague adds that instructional coaches have responsibility for facilitating the professional learning communities that had been established at the same time as the instructional coaching program, as well as for preparing and providing professional development “whether it was embedded in the PLCs or whether it was on our professional development days.” Pointing-out that the district lacks a curriculum supervisor, this coach adds, “We’re also seen as the deliverer of the curriculum, and the ‘verbalizer’ of the curriculum.” She emphasizes, “We don’t do any evaluation.”

The middle school coach – knowing that this investigator serves as a principal in another Massachusetts school district – asserts, “There are aspects of this work, or my work for example as an instructional coach, that I think it’s impossible for someone in your position to do, because you’re not a peer.” Referring to the teachers with whom she works, this coach explains, “They know I’m not an evaluator. They know I’m just another teacher, and that’s the power of it.”

Roll-Out of Springwood’s Program of Coaching

The educators who participated in this study portray Springwood’s program of instructional coaching as unassailably well-intended, but as having been presented to the faculty inadequately.

The superintendent explains how the decision to institute instructional coaching was made: “Because of our concerns with curriculum; because there wasn’t a lot of collaboration between and among teachers; because professional development had been neglected for a long time, we really needed to bring in some building-based support for our teachers. And so I introduced the model of instructional coaching.” She adds, “We did it as part of our budget process.”
The participating elementary principal recalls, “We talked about it at the administrative team level – about the need for instructional coaches to, um, just help teachers gain new practices, document our curriculum, those kinds of things. And we introduced the idea of doing PLCs in a more formal manner, and – in order to have professional learning communities – we determined that we wanted instructional coaches to facilitate those PLCs.” Revealing exactly how and when the creation of these positions was explained and introduced to the teaching faculty, this principal explains, “We really kind of rolled it out when we already had the coaches. Beyond them knowing that we were hiring coaches, we didn’t really roll-out the use of a coach until a little later on, or maybe right at the same time. We talked about the value of coaches – what the coaches were going to be for, but we really got into the value of coaching and PLCs simultaneously, starting in the September that we hired the coaches.”

Asked her recollections of how the instructional coaching program had been introduced to the faculty of Springwood and to the wider school community, the woman who has served as a coach in that same principal’s school, and who had been a teacher in that very building until assuming her current position, recalls with audible regret, “It was sold to the community through a posting in the teachers’ room.” Elaborating, “It was an administrative decision…It was never rolled-out by the administrators, or – in my opinion – ever really explained fully,” this coach recalls that this lack of clarity extended to herself and her fellow coaches, even after their appointments: “While we came-in, in the beginning of the year, not really understanding the role ourselves, we tried to explain what our jobs would be.”
The coach at the middle school, who has likewise held her position since the program’s inception, explains, “With all due respect for the principal who was here when I was initially hired, I don’t think they [i.e., the faculty] were prepared remarkably well. I think it could have been done a lot more effectively.” This coach indicates that the then-principal, herself, had only a limited appreciation for the role: “I don’t know that the woman who was principal when I was hired really understood exactly what an instructional coach could be.” She suggests that, as a consequence, “I don’t think that the teachers understood what kind of a resource the instructional coaches were meant to be: I don’t think that was well-explained to them; I don’t think they were well-prepared for it.”

Uncertainty about the coach’s role surfaces time and again in participating educators’ descriptions of Springwood’s program. The superintendent, for example, attributes much of the faculty’s initial resistance to instructional coaching as stemming from their “concern that these positions would be evaluative.” While this assessment is not without merit, the superintendent’s later discussion of how the district initially had paid for the instructional coaching positions provides a still more plausible explanation for the program’s chilly reception: “We’ve had declining enrollment. So, as we’ve reduced teaching positions, I replaced them with instructional coaching positions.”

The more senior of the two elementary coaches recalls that, once it had become clear that instructional coaches were to be hired, funding for the program was the one aspect on which faculty members focused their attentions: “It was more talked about like, ‘Oh, they’re getting rid of teachers, but they’re hiring another administrative-type person.’” The one remaining instructional coach at Springwood’s middle school likewise
cites the fact that instructional coaching positions were funded with monies made available through the elimination of teaching positions as having caused “a fair amount of resentment.”

The middle school teacher whom I interviewed agrees: “Obviously there was an emotional element there.” Citing examples of the comments and questions that her colleagues had voiced at the time (“‘You’re losing teachers, yet you’re hiring these coaches.’ ‘Why are you hiring the coaches? We know what we’re doing, we don’t need the coaches, and yet we now lost three or four teachers.’”), this teacher continues, “I forget how many FTEs [full-time equivalencies] we lost, but I think it was three in this building; don’t hold me to it, but I think it was three. And that obviously left some degree of negativity to these two positions that were added because teachers lost their jobs, and yet we were hiring these positions.”

Stopping well short of attributing all of the faculty’s ‘hesitancy’ to the funding source, this teacher explains that she and her colleagues were unsure of how and why they were to interact with the two instructional coaches who were hired for their school: “We’d always had the department head who would come to our school every now and then, and would talk to us – and basically, because the department head was over at the high school, we really had our own, you know, we ran ourselves. And so this was now new, uncharted territory for the teaching staff.”

**Work of Coaches to Gain/Maintain Teachers’ Trust**

That coaches have labored to establish and maintain trust with the teachers in their schools emerges time and again during the interviews.
The elementary principal whom I interviewed explains how the coach in her school undertook to demonstrate her worth to the classroom teachers: “Every opportunity she had, she would share a new idea that they could use; offered to go into classrooms for any purpose: to set up the computer cart, to do a lesson, model lessons. Then, eventually, they opened up a little more, a little more, a little more. This is year three…In year three, more and more people are going to her for the purpose of seeking ideas.” This principal also acknowledges having mandated that all newly hired staff members work with the coach: “I have a lot of new staff this year, and I required them to have the instructional coach be a part of their classroom at least once a week…So that helped. And as she rolled out more good ideas, people became more interested in having her come into their classroom and share ideas…but it’s been a long haul.”

Likewise describing the length of time that it has taken for teachers to recognize what a coach might have to offer, the middle school coach explains the trajectory of her own work: “It’s been a kind of odd dynamic…For the first two years of relationship-building, that being a purveyor of resources – you know, ‘Here’s your Everyday Math cards,’ ‘Here’s your pattern blocks’ – was a way that I could build a little trust, but, getting beyond that…and building from the initial ‘This is how I get into your classroom to show you that I have something to offer’ to, you know, broadening the role has been something that’s taken a lot of careful planning to do…and a lot of time. But it’s getting there; it’s honest to God getting there; and I’m encouraged by the progress that I see. I really am.”

A scientist by training and experience (she holds a PhD in geology, and had formerly worked as a researcher), this coach explains that she routinely collects and
analyzes data to gauge her progress: “I do these inventories, every once in a while. I go through my lists of teachers, and I’ll look at the teachers that I really want to be supporting, the teachers that I’m really concerned about particular instructional practices or equity issues or differentiation or whatever, and I’ll look and I’ll say ‘Where am I with this teacher compared with where I was with them a year ago/two years ago?’ And I do feel like there’s definitely progress being made, but the progress is based on personal investment of time and effort on my part to build a relationship with that teacher.” She speaks of the real need – “especially in this climate of accountability” – for “always being respectful of the teacher’s perspective: ‘I need to hit the ground running with this with the kids in front of me.’”

Reminiscent of the experiences of the middle school coach, the longer-serving of the two elementary coaches speaks of how the new math program, which was implemented at the elementary level at the same time as at the middle school, and in the same year as the coaching model was introduced, afforded an entrée for coaches to work with teachers. She points, as a cautionary tale, to how the other individual who had been hired to serve as an elementary-level coach at that time was invited into teachers’ classrooms, not so he could model lessons for teachers, but so that he could teach while they completed other tasks. “It was a trap for this coach; it was a trap, and he knew it.” The latter coach’s successor explains how she managed not to fall into the same trap when she assumed the role: “My prepared statement was ‘That is not the vision that [the new principal] has for the coaching role.’”

The longer-serving of the two elementary coaches explains some of what she has done to change her approach over time: “Last year, I made a little bit of a switch, and
tried to make my office area a little bit more of a resource area…I set up bookcases with literature, and I did a sign-out, and if I heard somebody saying, ‘Oh, I want to teach this,’ I’d go down to their room and I’d say, ‘Hey, I’ve got this really great story book that I used, and this is what I did, and I even have these little things to go with it. If you’d like, I can pull it out if you’d like a copy of it.’ That helped a little bit.” Of her principal’s mandate that the new members of the faculty meet with her, this same coach says, “They’re not resentful of it; they’ve been really wonderful with it.”

The less senior elementary-level coach explains, “I immediately came in with absolutely no airs…Especially having PLCs with the kindergarten [teachers]. I’m a grade four, five teacher; I was a math specialist for one year, and went as lows as 3rd Grade. So, I am no expert on early elementary. And I tried to honor their expertise as kindergarten teachers…I try to gain most of my professional trust through PLC. A lot of people have come to me and said, ‘Just tell me what to do.’ And I won’t, you know? If somebody asks me a question about what they should do, I immediately turn around and ask, ‘Well, what does the group think?’ It’s a hard balance, sometimes, of trying to show, perhaps, another way of doing things, or another way of looking at things, while at the same time trying to create that relationship, like, ‘I’m one of you.’…I’ve actually said that many times: ‘Don’t forget. I’m one of you…even though I have one foot out of the trench of being day-to-day with the instruction stuff.”

Her more senior colleague recalls an important realization at which she had arrived after having spent some time in her current role: “The first year…, I thought I had to be the expert on everything. That was my perception: that people were going to come to me, because the coach is supposed to know all. Then, all of a sudden, I realized,
‘You know, it’s kind of like being a teacher: You’re never going to know all, and the best thing you can do for your kids is say, ‘I don’t know. Let’s think about this. Let’s work on this together. Where can we find the answer?’”

This coach continues, “I think, in my head and in my heart, I think I kind of knew that the first year, but, it was…I wanted…I wanted to be successful at the role…I found myself, like, ‘Oh, you’re doing a unit on this. I have this!’ And that turned some people off, because that’s like, ‘Oh, [the coach] knows the way to do it, and that’s the right way.’ So, I’ve backed-off on doing that, unless they’ve asked, ‘Do you have anything for…?’”

She explains that, rather than giving the impression that she has the answers, she has engaged in what she refers to as ‘hiding behind research’: “I bury myself in finding video-clips about comprehension, research strategies for teaching comprehension, and fluency, and what’s best practice; hiding behind, ‘Hey, here’s an article I found. Let’s take some time and read it. What do you guys think? What was your reaction to this?’ So, I have done that more, this year.”

Echoing the approach now taken by her counterparts at the elementary level, the middle school coach explains, “I certainly don’t pretend to be an expert. But what I can do, and what this position frees me up to do, is be a resource, which is what classroom teachers don’t have time to do, for the most part. And I can also – I have a perspective that, frequently, classroom teachers don’t have the luxury of, because they’re in the thick of it.” She expresses that she maintains the trust of the teachers with whom she works “mostly by respecting their confidentiality above all else…and I trust that the administrators that I work with will do the same. I mean, the administrators in this building and I have confidential conversations about teachers, obviously; we have to;
it’s part of my job; and teachers and I have confidential conversations that I will not share with them. Probably the most difficult thing about this role is that I bridge those two worlds, and I have to respect everybody’s confidentiality. And that sometimes puts you in a very difficult position. But there’s no two ways about it; it just has to be that way, otherwise, the coaching role doesn’t work.”

Role of Administrators in the Instructional Coaching Program

The impact of building-level administrators on the effectiveness of schools’ instructional coaching programs emerges frequently in interviews with educators in Springwood. The middle school coach, for example, speaks candidly about her very different experiences with the two principals with whom she has worked in her three years on the job.

Recalling with regret her working relationship with the individual whose last year as principal of the middle school coincided with her own first year in the district, the coach explains, “There were a lot…of trust issues with her and me that year…There were grade level meetings that she asked the instructional coaches not to come to. Initially, we were going to them, then she, like, uninvited us. I think that she wanted to have conversations with teachers that we weren’t privy to. I mean, it was almost like playing one group against the other.” In the coach’s estimation, not only did this arrangement cause awkwardness for her and the other instructional coach in her building, it also served to undermine the coaching program’s intended utility: “I don’t think it was good for the teachers, in terms of using us as a resource.” Rather than assuming ill will on the principal’s part, though, the coach indicates that the roll-out of the coaching program had been no less inadequate for administrators than for the rest of the faculty: “It started out,
really, with this sort of environment of mistrust that was a little bit created by, I think, the leadership – maybe not deliberately, but just from a lack of clear articulation of our role.”

Citing the change of building-level administrators after her first year in Springwood, the middle school coach explains how her school’s current principal has approached the coaching position, and how that approach has affected teachers’ receptiveness to instructional coaching: “While I think that, in general, he’s supportive of the idea of instructional coaches – I think that at the time he started, I think he was incredibly nervous about having instructional coaches, because I think he felt – and he actually articulated this – that this group of teachers, you know, this faculty was not really ready to use an instructional coach, or a program of instructional coaching. But, be that as it may, you know, I was here; the other coach was here. So, I think we tried to make the best of it…And I think his attitude was, ‘O.K. I’m going to put some pressure on people to change their instructional practice, to ramp it up, and if I do that people are going to say “Wow. I’m not – I’m not giving the kids what they need. So, how can I improve? Oh, look. I have some coaches that I could go to.’” And that did happen, to some extent. That definitely happened – maybe not as much as he or I…or me and the other instructional coach at that time…would have liked, but, um, I think people began to say, ‘Well, gee, you know, there are ways that I could improve my practice.’ I mean, I think that was his overall strategy, and I think it was partially successful.

“And now – this is his second year, here – I think things are, you know…I don’t think he’s taking quite the same approach; I think there’s more, you know, community building going on with the faculty. I think the bar has been raised in terms of expectations for all faculty members. I see a lot of really exciting changes going on in
terms of conversations in PLC meetings…I think that the shift from last year, which was [the principal’s] first year, to this year we’re seeing a lot more focus on...You know, teachers are a lot less freaked out about, ‘Oh, it’s all about me!’ to ‘It’s all about the kids,’ which I think is a really positive thing.”

The newer of the two elementary coaches describes how her own school’s coaching program seems also to have been impacted by a change in building-level administration. Presently completing her first year in Springwood, as her principal also is, this coach suggests that the change in leadership has made her own reception somewhat easier than it otherwise might have been: “We have a new administrator and a new coach at the same time. So, I think it might make my job a little bit easier, where there’s change happening anyways, and new expectations, and new instructional practices.” This coach posits that the resistance that she has encountered since coming on board would be still greater, if not for the new principal’s expectations for instructional improvement: “There are people that do come to me for support; there are people that really show an openness to, not only things that I share, but to things that other people share in PLC. And then you have those that, when I ask ‘Oh, we’ve had such great ideas, I’d like to come to your classroom and watch some of these great ideas in action,’ and…they say, ‘No.’” Acknowledging, “It’s been a challenge,” the coach is nevertheless grateful that the new principal has put an end to some of the practices of the former coach: “He would run remedial groups, or he would actually go in, and he would teach math instead of the teacher. And that is not the vision of this current administrator. I’m there to model and support, but inevitably turn the reins over.”
Raising expectations has not been the exclusive province of administrators new to Springwood; sitting administrators have also adjusted their requirements since the program’s introduction. Beginning this year, for example, the long-serving elementary principal who was interviewed for this study has mandated coaching for faculty members new to her school, of whom there is a sizeable number. This principal expresses, and her coach corroborates, that this requirement has not only provided an entrée for the coach to work with the new teachers, but has also opened a window for more senior faculty members to witness the coach working with their more junior colleagues, and to recognize the utility of that work.

Evaluation and Support of Coaches

The three instructional coaches indicate that they are formally evaluated by the principals of their respective schools. No less than classroom teachers typically do, the coaches voice concern about judgments being made based on too-brief observations of their work. The newer of the two elementary coaches, for example, expresses reservations about being observed modeling lessons in classes of students with whom she is unfamiliar and with whom she has not, therefore, established relationships. Notwithstanding the fact that such observations are better-aligned with their current roles, and therefore promise to yield more accurate assessments, this same coach is joined by her more senior elementary-level colleague in expressing that it still feels somewhat foreign to be observed leading professional development sessions or facilitating meetings of PLCs, rather than teaching their own classes of students.

While both elementary-level coaches speak favorably of the monthly meetings that they and their counterpart at the middle school attend with the district’s
superintendent and the principals of the four schools, the newer of the two elementary coaches discloses, “It is a very lonely position within your building, because – even though you do have rapport with some of the people in your building – at the end of the day, you just have that debrief…As much as possible, you don’t want to have that with your principal or vice principal, because obviously that’s a breach in the position.” This coach expresses gratitude, both at having another elementary-level coach to approach (“It’s great to have a counterpart”), and at belonging to a support group that is led by her counterpart, and which includes coaches from her own district and from several surrounding ones.

Evidence of Success

After only the second year of Springwood’s coaching program, one of the two coaches at the middle school – the one who provided support in literacy and social studies – was non-renewed. “To be frank,” the superintendent explains, “the coach wasn’t very effective.” Rather than hiring a replacement for this coach, the superintendent eliminated the position, intending to use the monies thus made available to add a central office administrator to oversee curriculum, assessment, and instruction. Seeing their own opportunity to reduce class size in grades five through eight, the district’s school committee ultimately funded neither of those positions, instead adding FTEs at the middle school.

“Still strongly committed to instructional coaching,” as she describes herself, the superintendent aims to “empower teachers to take leadership roles with their peers.” Identifying, “The next step is to grow people internally who can coach,” the superintendent explains that, rather than having traditional departments, each with its
own head, and all existing “within their own silos,” she would much prefer that
Springwood’s high school followed a coaching model of curriculum leadership. Under
such a model, coaches would have responsibilities, not for individual subjects, but for
such realms as ‘the humanities’ or ‘math and science,’ and “could be involved in goal
setting, but not be involved in the evaluation process.”

Saying that coaching has contributed to Springwood’s having “made considerable
progress in math and ELA,” the superintendent acknowledges both “the newness of the
program” and the fact that “coaching is only one piece of the puzzle.” She cites
“retention of new teachers” and the fact that “PLCs are accomplishing goals” as also
having contributed to recent gains in the district’s MCAS scores.

The middle school coach, who has been involved in the program since its
inception, speaks optimistically about the progress that she has observed to date: “I think
that there is a significant group of teachers in this school, right now, who would have no
trouble at all asking me for help with a content issue, with a pedagogy issue, with a ‘Help
me write this assessment,’ with a ‘My F-block is driving me absolutely insane. Could you
help?’ I think there’s a significant number.” Asked about residual resistance amongst
certain teachers, the middle school coach replies candidly, “They’re less dysfunctional
than they used to be – in part, because they’re working so hard, and I think that’s great.
You know? They’re working so hard to make things better for kids; it almost takes the
wind out of their sails, so, great!” She offers an example of a recent success: “I had one
of those teachers…who I was really concerned about, who I found a sneaky way to get
into his classroom, because it was a common grade-level learning experience. And he’s
like, ‘Oh, well, do you want to come co-teach this with me?’ I was, like, ‘Yeah, I’d love
to!’ And so it was a stealth way of getting into his classroom and modeling things that I really wanted this teacher to see…Ideally, I would co-teach one class, and then he would take the ball and run with it, but I co-taught three out of four classes with him, because that’s what made him feel the most comfortable. But, fine, if that’s what I need to do. And then he taught the last class by himself and he was so [makes a gesture of self-satisfaction]. I wish I could have [observed the teacher teaching the lesson to the one remaining class], because – oh, that would have been great – BUT he came right to me afterwards and told me how it went, and what he was so excited about, and I was, like, ‘Yes! Yes! Yes!’”

The newer of the two elementary coaches – who is also the least senior of the district’s three coaches – explains her belief that, while the amount of conversation has certainly increased, too few teachers have made the transition from seeing only student performance to reflecting upon their own: “I really think that there’s a disconnect between how the students perform and what the teacher is doing, and how they’re teaching. It’s typically the students’ lack of performance or demonstrating their understanding, and I don’t think that most in this building reflect upon their own teaching and say, ‘Well, could I have done something differently?’

Explaining that too many teachers “still go reluctantly” to PLCs, “as a sort of ‘One more think I have to do,’” the elementary principal is nevertheless excited at the quality of conversations that now do take place within those bodies. She cautions, “It’s facilitated by having a coach…I don’t really think they’re self-sustaining.” Asked how teachers in her school would respond to the hypothetical choice between keeping the instructional coach and having each class increase in size by one or two students, or of
maintaining current class size by eliminating the coaching position, this principal answers candidly, “I think that they would always go for losing the coach, because, as much as some see [the coach] as very valuable and helpful to them – the new people, the old people still see it as adding more to their burden. They have to go to this PLC and work with [the coach], and look at that data, and analyze that data, and look at kids’ work, and they still don’t see a huge need for that…After three years, not everyone is convinced of the value of that work.”

The two elementary-level coaches share the principal’s assessment of how the faculties of their two schools would respond if that same hypothetical were put to them: “Without a doubt they’d say the classroom…That’s not to say that there aren’t a few people that have come to me and tell me that they value the time in PLC; that these are things that they struggled with for years, and it’s nice to collaborate. So, I’ve heard a lot of comments about that. But I do think that, when it comes to it, they’d rather have the 1.5 less child in their classroom.” “Yup. Isn’t it sad? Yup…The class size lower.”

When asked what choice her fellow teachers would make if confronted with such a hypothetical, the participating middle school teacher replies, “I think there’s really polarized viewpoints. My personal feeling is I see the value of a math coach. I see the value of the math coach. So I – me personally – I would go with that added student, student and a half.” Indicating that some of her colleagues are less-than-fond of the present coach, this teacher explains that some people would base their decision, not on the merits of the position, but on their feelings toward the incumbent. “You know, I feel so uncomfortable saying this, but because there are personality issues, whether people would be saying that as far as the person or the position would be pretty hard to gauge –
whether people would want to get rid of the position because they feel a personality issue is there versus the performance issue.”

The middle school coach herself, who is now the sole coach in her building, explains, “Honestly, those who are seeking my services are coming to look for me regardless of what their content area is…Some of the best conversations that I have about teaching and learning are with teachers in social studies and language arts.” Sharing her personal assessment of teachers’ utilization of her services, she suggests, “I really think it has to do with the extent to which people are reflective practitioners…There are people that are going to want to say, ‘It’s 2:10. I’m going to go get in my car and leave. I’ve fulfilled my contract hours and that’s it.’ And then there are people who’ve been teaching twenty-five years and who are always looking for ways to improve their practice or constantly looking for ways to improve their practice.”

**PEACEFIELD, MASSACHUSETTS**

**District Profile**

The most diverse of the three districts in this study, Peacefield’s demographics are as follows: Three quarters of the students are white; two percent are black; over fifteen percent are of Asian descent; five percent are of Hispanic heritage; and the remaining students are multi-race, non-Hispanic. About fifteen percent of students in Peacefield come from families classified as having low incomes. One out of every twenty students in Peacefield is limited English proficient.

The Peacefield Public Schools include five elementary schools, two middle schools, and one high school. The sitting superintendent of another of the districts in this
study (Springwood), who had held another administrative role in Peacefield until four years ago, characterizes the district as “known as pretty innovative.” Lauding the faculty in Peacefield, this educator continues, “The bar is much higher. People worked really hard and had high expectations.”

Peacefield’s Program of Instructional Coaching

Peacefield’s current assistant superintendent; the principals of two of the district’s five elementary schools (the largest school, which has its own full-time coach; and one of the four smaller schools that shares its coach with one other school); the district’s three instructional coaches, all of whom work at the elementary level; and five teachers from the largest of the district’s elementary schools were interviewed.

The instructional coaching program in Peacefield exists only in the district’s five elementary schools, and dates back about six years – to a time when budgetary constraints necessitated the elimination of a large number of other positions of instructional support. One of the two principals interviewed explains, “My understanding is that [the superintendent] proposed it as part of his work at B.C. in thinking about how to capitalize on embedded professional development and teacher leadership, while also trying to save money from the budget.” She and the other principal interviewed describe how librarians were laid off in four of the schools, and replaced with media aides whose work was overseen by the remaining librarian; that the curriculum coordinator in each of the five schools was eliminated, as was each school’s instructional technology integration specialist, and each school’s reading specialist. “The argument was that having a reading specialist didn’t necessarily result in a higher level of literacy – in my building, for example. So, could we change that curriculum support model or perspective and realize
better gains for kids or focus more on results for kids in making that shift? All those positions went away, and were replaced by a half-time instructional coach in each building.” The principals add that, to account for its having twice the enrollment of any of the other four, the largest of the five elementary schools was assigned its own, full-time instructional coach.

Instructional leadership at Peacefield’s middle school is provided by subject supervisors; at its high school, by department heads. The assistant superintendent indicates that she and her fellow administrators have occasionally contemplated changing this: “We actually – internally, at the administrative level – kind of pondered the question about, you know, ‘The coaches are so well-received at the elementary level…’ I think that the curriculum coordinators have gone into a middle school program and provided some supervision in content areas that perhaps was not there before, and there are some teachers who are more comfortable with that than others; but there does seem to be something to this non-evaluative role that does something to make this feel more supportive to teachers than when you’re a curriculum coordinator with supervisory responsibilities.”

In addition to examining Peacefield’s coaching program through a lens of instructional utility, the assistant superintendent describes the district’s administrative team as considering it from a perspective of political expediency. “Historically,” she explains, “these positions have come up for conversation around budget, but they’ve been able to be preserved to date…I think that that has a lot to do with the value in what people see that this role brings. One other point around that that may have some helpful insight, when looking at budgets: If you eliminate the coaching position, the community
doesn’t really understand that role, and so from a community perspective, if you lose that, it’s really, really hard to get that back, because the community isn’t going to say, ‘Oh, we really, really need those coaches.’ It’s more of an internal structure piece, whereas something with class size, that’s something more that people in the community, who aren’t really integrally involved in running the district, can see is a big issue; and you’re much more likely to get community support to bring down class size, than you are to bring back a coaching position, so I think that’s another reason why we’re very, very cautious about even thinking about cutting them.”

Role of the Instructional Coach

The three individuals who provide instructional coaching in Peacefield’s five elementary schools describe themselves, only half in jest, as “five coaches in three bodies.” They describe each school’s needs – and the vision of each school’s principal – as shaping their work as coaches.

Peacefield’s assistant superintendent explains, “Our coaches here are non-evaluative; they are purely there as a support for teachers. And we contrast that with curriculum coordinators at the middle school level – there are curriculum coordinators for math, science, social studies, and English/language arts; but their role is evaluative. They do evaluations, they do curriculum coordination, and they do coaching, all together. We have found much greater reception – in terms of teachers – to the pure coaching model, as opposed to the coaching/evaluative model.”

While citing as a benefit the fact that instructional coaches are not involved in the formal evaluation of teachers, the assistant superintendent says that the current structure of those positions also does not allow for the completion of such other critical endeavors
as curriculum coordination. She explains that, in her one year as assistant superintendent, she has made the conscious decision not to undertake certain projects as soon as she would like, in order to preserve instructional coaches’ time for their work with teachers: “Let’s not use them for curriculum coordination. In fact, if we can’t get that done this year, then it’s just not going to get done.” The assistant superintendent concludes, “that seems to be where folks are really feeling the most value: that personal coaching with teachers.”

The instructional coach at the largest elementary school in the district describes how, since being appointed to her current position, she has worked with her school’s principal to redefine the role. Having seen how the school’s inaugural instructional coach, who resigned the position in October of the program’s second year (in the principal’s words, “rather dramatically”), had alienated staff members with her brusqueness, and repeatedly butted heads with the building principal, the current coach – who had served as a classroom teacher in the building at that time – explains: “We definitely worked on it together, because I wanted to be successful in it; I really wanted to learn more about the position and what it should entail.” Pointing out that, as a result of having been displeased with how the role had been enacted under the original coach, the principal had a “new vision” for the position, the coach describes the principal’s having arranged for her building to have two “coaching subs” one day per week. “On that day, I do small group coaching, and that’s directed – mandated, I guess – by the school. So, this week I’ll work with all grade two teachers in three small group sessions – three sessions for an hour, because we have coverage to cover multiple classrooms at
once. That was a new addition; that was the principal’s initiative with the coaching model…as a way to mix it up a little bit, and as a way to incorporate everybody.”

Another of the coaches, presently in her second year in the role, explains, “I feel that this position is a flux position, just the way it’s designed. Every year, it’s a little bit different…It’s taken quite a while to get up and running. I think that teachers are understanding more, now, that we are here to model lessons; we are here for professional development, but the position is still in flux, depending on the needs of the school each year.”

Likewise describing the ongoing evolution of the coaching role in Peacefield, both principals interviewed for this study attribute this phenomenon to the succession of individuals who have held these positions. Explaining, “One of the things that’s really interesting is…the role growing based on the person and that person’s strengths,” the principal of one of the smaller schools cites the current coach in her own building: “She’s a former technology integration specialist, so she comes with a perspective about integration; and she comes with a perspective and a savvy about using technology tools; and she comes with experience with collaboration [all of which] have helped me to translate what those things look like for teachers, and to build their capacity to do that; and have enabled her to support people who are technology-reluctant when that change would help them look at their kids’ data better, and things like that. If she didn’t have that skill-set, some of those things would have been a harder sell in terms of capacity-building with teachers and teacher teams.”

Reflecting upon her school’s current coach, as well as upon that coach’s predecessor, this principal describes the impact of an incumbent upon the overall
program as “a blessing, as well as a curse.” She continues, “Finding the right skill-set in that person is really key, both in somebody’s ability to kind of flex with a different vision, and also to hold the line on ‘Nope. I know you’d really love it if I did that, and I would get lots of points with you if I did that, but I’m not going to do that. I’m going to hold the line on what capacity-building for everybody is going to look like.” This principal explains, in short, that the right person for the coaching position is someone whose help teachers will welcome, but who will not permit him- or herself ever to become their doormat in the process.

Roll-Out of Peacefield’s Program of Coaching

While none of the participants recall a formal roll-out of Peacefield’s instructional coaching program, all describe having fully understood that the instructional coach positions were being established to mitigate the elimination of various other supports. As one participating principal explains, the introduction of the coaching program “followed a pretty big change for elementary…It was a transition from losing several key curriculum positions.”

Work of Coaches to Gain/Maintain Teachers’ Trust

Peacefield’s assistant superintendent lauds the work that the coaches have done to earn the confidence of the faculties of their respective schools. “I think that, for the most part, they’ve done a really good job of building that trust. Part of it is who they are as people. They’re great colleagues; I think teachers have seen that. I think that they’re very conscientious. They have it in their [collective] schema that they ‘have to pay attention to my connections with teachers, because that’s going to help me to be effective in my work.’” Acknowledging the hard-won nature of teachers’ trust, the assistant
superintendent suggests that the instructional coaches would say “that there are still pockets where those relationships maybe aren’t as fully developed as they would like.”

The principal of one of the four small elementary schools describes having learned, only after the fact, that her building’s original coach had sought to curry favor with the school’s faculty by teaching lessons in their stead, rather than modeling lessons for them in their presence so that they would be able to teach subsequent ones on their own. “She wanted to get into classrooms, and she was willing to make that trade.”

The principal of the largest elementary school, which has its own instructional coach explains, “The coach has to, over time, build trust and invite people in.” He argues that this notion “and the fact that, at least in this building, we made it mandatory for people, are not mutually exclusive.” This principal asserts, “I think that’s been a tremendous key to making that collaboration happen is to make it an expectation; it’s not a choice. And that doesn’t mean that there isn’t some work for the coach to do on an individual basis, but – at the building level – you can’t opt out of collaborating with the coach.”

The teachers in this same school explain that they value that their coach “always listens and takes your concerns, ideas, feedback”; that she is “always willing to support wherever a need arises,” and is “current in all curriculum areas”; that she “always has a positive attitude,” and an enviable “willingness to share and try new things.”

The participating second grade teacher from this school describes the coach as “someone that everyone I think in this building would feel one hundred percent comfortable sitting down and talking about any issue in their classroom. We know that it would be dealt with appropriately; we know that it wouldn’t be going all over the
building; we know that she would come up with a solution, and we know that she would make us feel a part of coming up with the solution. It’s not like she’s talking down to us, or she knows everything. She has a way of pulling information out of us, as well, and involving us in whatever the situation is. So we come out of there feeling like, ‘Wow. O.K. I know what to do, and I really feel like I was a part of this.’ It’s just a very positive experience working with her.”

The participating third grade teacher identifies what has made the current coach more successful at working with teachers than the school’s first coach had been. “I think the fact of coming into the classrooms and tackling the problems with us: ‘You need a lesson taught? You don’t understand that? All right. I’m going to come in and model it. We’re going to hash it out, and figure out what it is.’ She always takes her lead from us…She looks at our class, and she’s prescriptive: ‘What does your classroom need? What does that student need?’”

The teachers in this school appreciate their coach’s not presuming to know the answers; they value her openness about the experiences that she has not yet had and the knowledge that she does not yet possess. The participating first grade teacher, for example, explains, “She was a third and fourth grade teacher…She’s come to me and been like, ‘Can I teach a lesson in your class? I have no idea what first grade would be like.’ And that’s like…She makes me feel like I’m the one who has the knowledge, and she’s getting it from me, which is nice. She’s come in…just because she wants to experience reading groups in first grade or experience teaching math. She loves that—the challenge of also going into something that’s out of her comfort zone—feeding off something, ‘Oh, this is how I would do it.’ I think that’s just such a nice quality.”
Valuing her generosity with resources and expertise, and particularly appreciating her being someone who, when she doesn’t have a ready answer, will do the necessary research and report back to them, all of the participating teachers acknowledge having changed their practices because of their work with the instructional coach.

Role of Administrators in the Instructional Coaching Program

The principal of Peacefield’s largest elementary school, which has its own full-time instructional coach, has required that all teachers participate in regular group coaching for one semester, each year. Having been dissatisfied that, under the school’s original instructional coach, teacher participation in coaching was entirely voluntary, the principal issued this mandate once the current coach was installed. He explains, “What’s now the core of the coaching program here is small-group coaching sessions that we have once a month, where teachers go in groups of three for a session, and our coach gets a lot of follow-up business out of those small group-sessions. She facilitates learning walks through the building that tie back into, and those small-group sessions all tie back into, a building focus; they tie back into the focus of what the faculty meeting is, in that given month. And that’s been much more successful – in part, because of the model, but in part, because of the person.”

The coach, herself, explains, “It’s funny. I remember the first year, where people were told ‘here’s your coaching time.’ Everybody came – some people had never even been into that office, and you could tell just from their body language. It’s just like, ‘Why am I here?’ I’ve seen that let go; and sometimes we’ll talk about things, and, from there, somebody that I would never have worked with will ask, ‘Will you try this lesson in my class?’ or, you know, something like that. So I feel like there might have been a
little bit of anxiety around the small group coaching in the beginning, but now they come,
and they can choose to do something with it, or work further with the coach on it, or they
can just serve their hour.”

Another of the coaches points out that, in each of the two schools between which
she divides her time, “the principal usually drives the overarching school goal.”
Explaining that neither of the principals with whom she works has been nearly as
involved with the coaching program in their schools as the principal of Peacefield’s
largest school has been, she adds, “We don’t have mandated coaching time at the two
schools that I work at, so teachers could have very different individual professional goals
that they’re working toward…In the schools that I work at, we only have one coaching
sub. So we don’t have the opportunity for small group coaching; it’s really more
individual coaching, or in-classroom modeling of lessons with other teachers observing.”

The third coach, whose two schools are very different from one another, not least
in their grade configurations (one serves students from Kindergarten through 4th Grade;
the other, only from pre-Kindergarten through 1st Grade), explains, “Both of those
schools are almost polar opposites in what I do as a coach…So, it depends on where I am
as to what my role as the coach is.” She describes the impact of the principals on the
work that she does in each school: “One of my principals wants change in her school;
she wants there to be a movement forward; she wants people constantly to be reflecting
upon their practice and improving. In my other school, the principal is pretty happy with
the way things are going; doesn’t really want to see a huge amount of change, and is fine
if people choose to look at their practice when they want. So my roles are very different
in both places.” Indicating that the latter principal is due to retire at the end of the current
academic year, this coach adds with a hint of optimism, “There’s going to be a new principal…Change is in the air, and that’s where I see coaching is probably going to be changing at that school, too, because you have a new person in charge. And, you know, that’s really what decides where the school’s going is who’s in charge.” She quips, “I think if you look at the three of us who represent coaching in five schools, you’ll see probably five different coaches.”

**Evaluation and Support of Coaches**

Peacefield’s three instructional coaches are evaluated by the principals of their respective buildings. Asked how this work is accomplished for each of the two coaches who divide their time between schools and who therefore report to two principals, one such principal explains quite candidly, “I think it’s tricky because…we ask the coach to do different things; and frankly, sometimes, we disagree about what a coach should do…We don’t really do inter-rater reliability about evaluations, either, so I’m not sure we would evaluate teachers the same way. I think that I’ve tried to solve that problem by doing the bulk of…‘Look, I’ll do the bulk of the observations; I certainly want you to do an observation, but I’ll do the summative, and I’ll do the write-up.’ And that’s been fine with the other person, so…I guess I’ve solved it by taking on more of the work, and getting more of the control, if I’m being completely honest.”

While formally evaluated on their performance, Peacefield’s three instructional coaches are provided by the district with very little in the way of professional development. The assistant superintendent explains, “My sense is they have done a remarkable job with very little coaching training. My experience in having worked in other districts that have put this role in, is that that’s a big leap for somebody to make:
from a classroom teacher to a coach; there’s a skill-set – and a way of processing – that really needs some training, I think.” She continues, “They have collectively done a great job of taking on these roles without that support. I am not aware of any specific training that they’ve received around *How do you be a coach?*, and *How do you work with teachers that might be reluctant?*, and *Where’s the line?*, and *How do you bring up areas of difficulty in a way that feels supportive?* There’s a whole bunch of pieces, there, that are tricky to manage; and, again, my understanding is that they have not received any of that.”

What support Peacefield’s three instructional coaches have received seems limited to their monthly meetings with the assistant superintendent, and their own weekly get-togethers. According to the assistant superintendent, “They clearly are a great support system to one another. I see that, in some ways, as professional development for them, because they’re constantly back-and-forth talking.” She admits, “They give a lot, in terms of professional development; I don’t feel like we do as good a job of filling their tank, and getting them out there, and getting them professional development. They are far more often the deliverers than the receivers, and that’s been feedback that I’ve gotten from them: ‘We’re always teaching, but where’s our professional development?’ I think that’s a fair concern that they have.”

The coaches appreciate having one another to consult. Picking-up on a theme from earlier, one of the coaches volunteers, “The nice thing about having five different coaches in three different bodies is I feel like the three of us really enrich each other’s practice, because we do meet weekly, and share struggles, successes; share what’s going on in the buildings; find out that, ‘Oh, we had a similar situation in my school, and this is
how it was handled.’” Another of the coaches explains that the three colleagues seek each other out to discuss what she terms “coaching questions.” She explains, “We work with so many people, but we also work in isolation, because we only see each other for a few hours once a week; a third grade teacher can go and talk to many other third grade teachers during the week. There are some things that we can’t necessarily go and ask the teachers about, or the principals. It’s a coaching question, you know? I feel like we’re there; it’s nice to have a team of us to support each other.”

The third coach addresses the imperative of feeling comfortable with one’s counterparts, “What’s been nice for us is that we are a cohesive team that really feels like…I really feel like I can ask both of them anything. I don’t have to worry about ‘How am I phrasing this in the email so that I don’t offend someone?’”

This coach recalls a time when principals did attend the weekly meetings of the coaches; “And it was more their agendas than it was about coaching, because I certainly wasn’t going to talk about anything that came up as an issue, or whatever, with every principal sitting there and the assistant superintendent. So it’s slowly through the years been where we really need time to debrief with each other and have that safe place to talk. And so, every year, the principals have kind of let us have that time more and more to ourselves. They had to make sure that we weren’t coming up with and creating district rules or things that impacted their schools in a way that they didn’t agree with.”

Referring to the one meeting a month for which the assistant superintendent joins them, the coach explains, “She’ll ask our opinion, and we have to be really careful that ‘This is our opinion, but you need to check with the principals.’”
Again and again, when asked to describe their own work with the coaches, the two participating principals speak with pride of the instructional improvement to which the coaches have contributed in their respective schools. They hasten to add, though, that their fellow elementary principals are not necessarily so enthusiastic: “From the get go, we have been like ‘We want our coach above everything else,’ but I think other principals would answer that differently.”

Evidence of Success

The principal of Peacefield’s largest elementary school explains, “If you went and asked the teachers at different buildings, right now, ‘Would you rather keep your coach, but have a slightly higher class size, or would you rather cut the coach in order not to experience class size at one place or another?’, the teachers in this building would say, ‘Raise the class size; let me keep the coach.’ You could go to another building, and they would say, ‘Let go of the coach, let me keep my class size down.’”

He asserts, “I couldn’t be more convinced that the building-based nature of it is a great strength…The more a person is split, the less it’s coaching.” He suggests, “if we had a half-time coach, but the person was in the building all the time, it would be better than, I think, having to split between buildings. Just being able to go to every grade level meeting, and to be at every faculty meeting, your continuity of understanding of what’s going on in that building instructionally is not interrupted, and not confused with other things. So, it’s a tremendous benefit.”

The principal attributes the success of his school’s coaching program, not only to the fact that its coach works there full-time, but also to two other factors: the requirement that teachers participate in coaching, and the fact that coaching in those compulsory
sessions is provided to teachers, not singly, but in groups. Of coaching under the original coach, the principal says, “Not only was it voluntary, but it was individual.” He contrasts this with the approach that he and the school’s current coach have since instituted: “The part that is mandatory is also in a group setting, so it’s group-based. That helps a lot.”

His colleague, whose school’s instructional coach is shared with yet another school and principal, explains that, while she and the colleague with whom she shares the coach agree “about the strength of the person in the role,” it is her belief that “we value different things about the role.” This principal describes as “tricky” the fact that “that building-based piece, and that culture piece, are really intertwined.”

She cites Peacefield’s ongoing budget challenges as having continued to stymie their aspirations for the coaching program: “We were hopeful, in the beginning, that we would grow it relatively quickly to full-time coaches or content-area support.” She recalls wistfully that each coach who was to divide her time between two schools was told early on, “Don’t assume that you’re always going to be based between these two schools that you’re at, now.”

As their own principal correctly anticipated, the participating teachers – all of whom work in the largest elementary school, which has its own full-time instructional coach – were unanimous in their response to the hypothetical scenario. The first grade teacher asserts, “Give me two more kids, because what she does for [grades] one through four is align us all, which is something…She brings you ideas, and makes you go in your zone of proximal development as a teacher, if you will, and to better yourself as an educator…I think, if you were going to tell me that I was going to have ten more first graders, I might think differently. But, for a little wiggle room, for what she does as a
whole for our building, keeping us all in line…We couldn’t do it without her, being a sole
person on each grade level…I think she’s just so valuable.” The second grade teacher
agrees: “If you’ve got a support person that’s providing so much to you, that’s more
valuable to me than having four empty chairs in my room.”

This same second grade teacher, who serves on a committee with teachers from
across the district, indicates that the faculties of Peacefield’s other four elementary
schools do not express such universally favorable views about instructional coaching.
She attributes this to the model that has been created and employed in their school.
Pointing to the success of “the one we have here,” this teacher admits, “I don’t know that
a different model would be as effective.” Adding that she is never short of impressed by
the obvious talent and seeming tirelessness of her own school’s coach, this teacher
suggests a formula for effective instructional coaching. “You have to do two things:
You have to have a successful coaching model, and you have to find an angel to fill that
space.”

CHARTWELL, MASSACHUSETTS

District Profile

Chartwell has five elementary schools, one middle school, and one high school.
Approximately ninety-five percent of its students are white; the remaining students are
more-or-less evenly divided amongst the several other racial designations: black; of
Asian descent; Hispanic; or multi-race, non-Hispanic. About fifteen percent of students
in Chartwell are from families identified as having low incomes; less than one percent of
students in Chartwell are limited English proficient.
Chartwell’s Program of Instructional Coaching

Interviewed for the present study were the district’s superintendent; the principal of one of the elementary schools; the consulting teacher of reading at that elementary school; the math coach at the middle school; and one of the middle school math teachers.

Having evolved over time, both in response to the district’s needs and according to the availability of always-limited resources, Chartwell’s program of instructional coaching presently consists of one full-time math coach at its middle school, and one and one-half consulting teachers of reading in each of its five elementary schools.

The middle school math coach position was created, seven years ago, in efforts to address the district’s failure to help certain subgroups of students make adequate yearly progress in mathematics as measured by MCAS. An elementary-level math coach position was established at the same time, but was eliminated after only the first year. Chartwell’s superintendent – who, as assistant superintendent, was involved first in the decision to establish both math coach positions, then in the subsequent decision to eliminate the one at the elementary level – explains that the latter decision was made for reasons both financial and programmatic. Because Chartwell would no longer be receiving the federal grant monies with which it had funded the creation of the two coaching positions, and because the district’s operating budget could only absorb the cost of one of them, the other position would need to be eliminated. Next, because her position required her to support all five of the district’s schools at that level, the elementary-level coach was felt, at the end of the first year, to have had far less of an impact than had her counterpart at the middle school. Lastly, and most importantly, the
middle school coach was far better positioned than the elementary-level one to address the district’s issue with AYP in the short term. The subsequent “evolution of the math coach at the middle school,” the superintendent continues, “really has evolved with the talent of the person in it. It has grown in responsibility as the person has grown in the position.”

Not new creations, the consulting teacher of reading positions represent an update to an existing program. The superintendent explains that the elementary schools “had reading teachers, but I would say to you that their role, six years ago, was much more traditional than it is, now. In some cases, in some buildings, they really didn’t have much to do with classroom assessment. They identified kids, and they worked with kids in a pull-out setting, but it really wasn’t a coaching model. And now, they’re consulting teachers of reading.” Identifying that those roles have been redefined to include the provision of support to classroom teachers as they endeavor to improve the literacy instruction in which they engage students, the superintendent suggests, “I think all the right ingredients were here: quality reading specialists with a passion and desire to take a teacher-leader role. They just needed someone to enable them. So I began meeting with reading specialists every five or six weeks, and it just sort of germinated.” Impressed at the impact that these reconfigured positions have had in a period of just a few years, the district added an additional half-time consulting teacher of reading to each of the five elementary schools at the start of the current academic year.

The superintendent describes the consulting teacher of reading positions as integral to the district’s elementary literacy plan, which mandates a daily, ninety-minute literacy block; regular small group instruction for all students; and multiple tiers of
intervention, according to students’ needs. “In the seven years I’ve been in the district, other than last year, we’ve reduced our budget every year. And we’ve worked really hard to protect the literacy...We’ve actually added a half-time reading specialist to each building. That should send you a very strong message as to how, in this district, the reading specialists are valued.”

Acknowledging, “There’s been some frustration [amongst] classroom teachers, because they see their numbers going up, but yet we’re keeping some of the support positions,” the superintendent avers, “but I think that, if you talk to elementary classroom teachers, they now see the value of the consulting teachers of reading, because they play such a critical role.” The superintendent adds that the five elementary principals are “committed to making reductions in other areas, if they have to, to maintain the one-point-five consulting teachers of reading at the elementary level.”

One such consulting teacher of reading is described by her principal as someone who believes in “things that are data-driven; things that are research-based. She gets it, and she can deliver it to staff. Sometimes when your principal tells you, you think of it as a top-down thing; when [the consulting teacher of reading] presents it, it’s more of a ‘It’s what’s working today in reading,’ because it’s her specialty; and she shares it with staff.”

This principal contrasts the current model with the previous one; the qualifications sought in newly hired consulting teachers of reading as opposed to those required of their predecessors: “Our reading specialists used to be classroom teachers that were certified ‘K through 8.’ They could be a ‘reading teacher.’ The person did a wonderful job – as best they could, but they didn’t have a masters in reading. They had a ‘K through 8’ certification in teaching.” She says of the change, “It’s just worked so well
to turn things around, here…Before, it was not a position of leadership, because the people in the building were not as qualified to be leaders. They didn’t have the knowledge base of the reading specialist.”

The consulting teacher of reading in that principal’s school cites the district’s literacy plan as having played a large role in helping to implement the change. She explains, “There was a culture change because of that – going from wherever we were to definitely more of a clinical model…Now, I mean, it is data everything. And so you’re taking that, and you’re trying to formulate what’s best for kids based on where you’re at numerically and quantitatively, and then move forward from there. I think, now, teachers are starting to get on board with that. That culture, that way of thinking – I think they have it; I think they’ve got it.”

The middle school math coach describes the teachers with whom she works as having been eager to participate in, and appreciative of, coaching “right from the start; right from the beginning.” She enthuses, “I’ve gotten so many unsolicited ‘Thank you’ and ‘Can’t wait ‘til you come back again’; ‘When will you come back again?’; ‘What will we be doing next?’; ‘Can we do such-and-such?’”

The middle school math teacher who was interviewed explains that she is grateful for the time that working with the coach affords her, not only to benefit from the coach’s expertise, but also to confer with other math teachers: “It gives us a chance to talk and collaborate on different strategies, on different things that we use in our classrooms.”

Role of the Coach

Coincidentally, both Chartwell coaches participating in this study – the middle school math coach, and the full-time consulting teacher of reading in one of the five
elementary schools – hold other positions in their schools, for which they receive stipends. The former is her school’s math coordinator, which requires her to prepare and manage her department’s budget, as well as to order and distribute all necessary materials and equipment; the latter is her school’s ‘teaching assistant principal,’ a position that gives her responsibility for maintaining student discipline in her school. While both roles imbue their holders with authority beyond that associated with their jobs as coaches, neither role includes the evaluation of staff.

The consulting teacher of reading suggests, “I think teachers – if it’s not evaluative – and we can work together, and we can sometimes fail forward and stop and say ‘What did go well?’ ‘What didn’t go well?’ ‘What would we do differently?’ ‘How could we make this more successful?’ Teachers welcome that kind of response.” She contrasts, “In evaluations, when you have someone come in and evaluate you on that one lesson, the feedback you get generally isn’t something that’s going to move you forward in your profession at all. Whereas this is on an ongoing basis, especially with some of the new teachers.”

Expressing gladness that her additional role does not require her to engage in such activity, this consulting teacher of reading explains how she believes having to evaluate teachers would alter things: “I think that changes the dynamic of the collegiality that goes on with being a consulting teacher of reading. Once you start getting into the evaluation stage, I think that that collegiality – that dynamic – completely changes…I’m on a par with these teachers, here, so I’m there to support on that same par. You change that up a little bit and say, ‘Now I’m going to evaluate you on how you are using the reading series that we use, or dealing with your reading issues with your students in your
classrooms,’ I see that being very tricky; I see that needing to look very differently than it does right now.” Reiterating her satisfaction with the current arrangement – that is, with her principal acting as formal evaluator, and herself serving as coach, she says, “I think that we get a lot of wonderful things done for children when we’re working together that way. You know, I’m sort of the advice giver; the sort of ‘What can I do to help you out with this?’ person.”

Not only do the consulting teachers of reading provide job-embedded professional development, they also facilitate trainings offered during the district’s weekly early release days. The participating consulting teacher of reading explains how, shortly after the district’s literacy plan had been introduced, several years ago, she and her counterparts in the other four elementary schools worked to provide training to the entire elementary-level faculty over the course of a five-week timeframe: “Each of us took a topic. Mine was on the tiered interventions, or even just the tiered instruction – the general concept of that. Another person’s was on differentiating within your classroom. Another reading specialist put together assessment – fluency assessment and something else in reading. So, there were five hot topics at the time, and pretty much still are, so these five teachers rotated from building to building and we were the presenters.”

When asked what, if any, direction the five elementary schools had been given about how to utilize the additional half-time consulting teacher of reading that each gained, this year, the superintendent explains, “Not every school has done it the same way. We gave them the freedom, based on their literacy program, to manage how they want to use that [combined] one point five. So, most buildings, the full-time is doing more the early intervention, and the K-3, and the half-time may be doing 4-5. In some
cases, the half-time is doing more of the assessment piece, progress monitoring. So it varies from building to building, depending upon what the needs were in the building, and depending upon the holes in the model that they wanted to fill.”

The superintendent likewise describes the freedom that had been given, seven years prior, to the principal and the then-new math coach at the middle school to determine how best to structure the latter position. The only predetermined parameters, the superintendent explains, were that “That person has no direct caseload. That person’s not a part-time math teacher; she’s a full-time math coach.”

While acknowledging that her role “was very undefined” when she assumed it, the middle school math coach emphasizes, “I wouldn’t have any evaluation piece, though, so that people would be more comfortable working with me.” She continues, “Knowing what I can do in this role, it’s different than a principal coming in and watching a lesson. It’s totally different. Totally.” She admits that being in such a unique position is not without its challenges, however: “I’m in a different role. I’m not part of the administration; I’m not part of the teachers; I’m in this limbo-land, here, especially when it comes to those difficult conversations. That’s the only time I don’t like this, because ‘Where am I?’ and ‘Can I follow-up on it?’ and ‘Is it big enough to follow-up on?’”

The middle school coach speaks of her role in compiling data and working with her department members to analyze it. She speaks of the work that she’s done to streamline the texts used in the various courses at the middle school – indeed, to significantly reduce the number of levels in the middle school’s math program; and to ensure the vertical alignment of her own school’s math program with that at Chartwell’s
high school. She describes having worked to incorporate the district’s ‘writing across the curriculum’ initiative, and to infuse appropriate technology, into day-to-day mathematics instruction at the middle school. She speaks with pride of having participated in the hiring of a sizeable number of her department members, and in the provision of ongoing support to these new colleagues.

Describing how the first several years in her current role have involved laying much groundwork and providing leadership to a department that has historically required it, and speaking as one who feels ready to take-on a building-level administrative position, the coach identifies how the position she presently holds needs to continue to evolve: “The next step would be to be someone who is working more closely with teachers to make that transition instructionally, of how to present math so that it is more hands-on, more interactive, more of the practices of math that are being presented, more differentiation; a coach who, with all these other things in place now, could come in and work specifically on classroom procedures and instructional models would be a real positive move for us.” She explains, “I would like to see the job switch from all these other things to truly helping in a classroom on an ongoing basis. Now, as we move forward, the teachers have been asking for professional development in the area of differentiating instruction, and providing for the most advanced and the most struggling [students] within the same classroom; some individualized work, some self-paced work for students that they haven’t had in the past when it’s [been] so teacher-directed.” She concludes, “It’s time for a transition with that.”

While explaining, “Personally, I just need suggestions sometimes for different lessons,” the participating middle school math teacher cites the work that the math coach
has done to support another member of her department: “We have one particular teacher in the building who is not very organized, so she has brought him down to come see other math classes and how different teachers organize different things, just to kind of help him.” Obviously considering the math coach a terrific resource, this teacher continues: “She’s pretty much visible every, single day. You know where you can find her if you need something, and she gives you any of the resources that you need.”

Roll-Out of Coaching

Participating educators explain that, aside from being discussed within the contexts of the large-scale initiatives in which they were included, neither aspect of Chartwell’s program of instructional coaching was explicitly rolled-out to the faculty.

The middle school math coach position – like the elementary math coach position that was established at the same time, but which has since been eliminated – was the brain-child of a committee that had been empanelled by the previous superintendent to create a plan by which to address Chartwell’s failure to help students with special needs and those from families with low incomes make adequate yearly progress on MCAS. The participating middle school math coach recalls, “We were identified as lacking with our SPED population and our low income population; so we were devising methods and procedures that we’d put in place, and changes we’d make to our program.”

The participating consulting teacher of reading remembers how, just a year or two later, she and the reading specialist from another of Chartwell’s elementary schools had attended a conference on Response to Intervention, and how – excited by the possibilities for increased student learning presented by that approach to tiered instruction – she had subsequently approached the superintendent and assistant superintendent about
incorporating RtI into the district’s literacy program. She explains, “I kind of got their ear one day, shortly after that seminar…Then, after that, it was like lightning. Then, it was the next year that it was an initiative.” The superintendent describes how, through helping to implement this literacy plan in their respective buildings, and helping the other educators in those schools to understand the differentiated approaches to literacy instruction in which they would now be required to engage students, the reading specialists grew from being providers of direct services exclusively to also being coaches of their classroom counterparts: “We set clear outcomes; then, we let it evolve based on the needs of a building. And then, what’s interesting is, once the consulting teachers started talking to each other, it became more similar from building to building, and they began to share resources with each other, and ideas with each other, and that’s where the consulting teachers of reading are now.”

Work of Coaches to Gain/Maintain Teachers’ Trust

The participating principal identifies that, while the district’s elementary literacy plan certainly served as a catalyst for change, that plan’s success has depended upon the skill of the consulting teachers of reading. “People were fearful…And it wasn’t because they didn’t want to; it’s because they didn’t know how…You see your teachers working hard every single day to just teach; we’re throwing all of these new things at them. And you’d have them in evaluation; we’d be reflecting on the lesson: ‘Are there any concerns? What is it that you see yourself doing well?’ It was always, ‘I don’t really know what to do with the Tier III kids in my classroom during Scott Foresman.’” This principal goes on to explain how the consulting teacher of reading in her building set about to address these teacher concerns: “She did a presentation on it. She showed them
how, and gave them ideas, and people felt better…She’s not attacking anyone; she’s showing.”

The consulting teacher of reading, herself, speaks of the kinds of activities in which coaches must engage the faculties of their schools, and of the skill sets – and mind sets – with which they must approach that work: “If you value literacy in your buildings, you want to have someone who can really exude that value, and pass it on to the staff, and have it become a culture of value. Everyone values that because you’re always talking about it, or you’re always bringing new things to the table, or you’re always there to support a teacher that needs help. You’re not afraid to get up and speak in front of a group of people. And, trust me, there are a lot of reading specialists out there that – that’s not their comfort zone. They don’t want to do that, and I’m always baffled by that. I’m like, ‘You’re kidding me! Don’t you want to share the latest and greatest thing; what’s going to work best for kids; what’s going to help out the kids that really struggle with reading?’”

Conspicuously fervent about literacy instruction, the consulting teacher of reading admits that, in her first year in her current school, she underestimated the anxiety that many teachers felt about the kinds of instructional changes required by the district’s still-new literacy plan: “I didn’t get that, at first. I was kind of like a bull in a china shop.” Her principal agrees: “When she first arrived, I really think they were intimidated. This was new. This was a little scary for them, and she was so knowledgeable, and so passionate; there was an intensity.” The principal adds that – after the consulting teacher of reading took her advice to “Tone it down” for a period of time – the faculty came to appreciate what she had to offer: “They love her…and it happened so naturally, once she
took a step back and waited and looked.” Referring to the number of classroom teachers who have come to share the passion about literacy instruction felt by the consulting teacher of reading, the principal enthuses, “It’s wonderful stuff.”

Similarly, the district’s superintendent attributes the middle school math teachers’ genuine appreciation and ongoing utilization of the math coach, not to any stress that they felt as a result of their school’s AYP issue, but to the skills and experience of the individual who had been appointed to that position. “I think…that the credibility came from the talent of the coach.”

The middle school math coach, herself, describes the work that she has done to keep classroom teachers’ perspectives in mind as she has promoted instructional improvement: “I think all of us feel so isolated – in your own little room – that, if somebody else is in there working with you and celebrating what’s good, ideas/suggestions/thoughts about where it might improve, they’ve been welcome to it; they really have been. But, I can’t tell you what that has taken on my part, though, in being discrete. It is monumental not to share things; not to discuss things; to really keep it confidential, because they wouldn’t share a struggle or what they needed help with if I was going off and reporting it all to somebody. So, I think that’s been a major component: building that trust.”

Role of Administrators in the Instructional Coaching Program

The participating elementary school principal speaks of the active role that she and others in her position must play if coaching is to be successful within their schools. She describes the need for a school’s principal and coach to coordinate their efforts, while respecting the different roles that each must play. With audible regret, she
acknowledges that most teachers are more receptive to guidance from their coach than from their principal. “You know, as principal, you walk in and you’re the evaluator.” She contrasts this with the kind of relationship that a principal must work to help a coach cultivate with a school’s teachers – a relationship wherein the latter view the former as “A consultant to all teachers within the building.”

The principal explains that principals are wise to approach their work with instructional coaches as they do their work with teachers: “As a leader, what I’ve learned is we’re going to work with the strengths. Like, if [the consulting teacher of reading] was the wonderful reading teacher that she was, but she was not comfortable in front of people, I could present as principal and I would constantly turn to her,” not only to draw upon the consulting teacher’s expertise, but also to demonstrate to teachers the coach’s worth as a resource.

The middle school math coach describes how building-level administrators in her school have encouraged and sanctioned her work. “We’ve just turned math around here so much, and I’ve gotten so much credit for all sorts of good things. How much of that really lands on my shoulders? Pieces of it. Really, it’s been a huge joint effort.” She explains why her endeavors have been so well supported: “Because math was having difficulty, because the students were having difficulty, I got all the money I wanted for everything…Everyone was saying math was golden around here, and it’s true. Anything I asked for: I got the projectors; when other departments were just becoming aware of how it could be used in their discipline, and wanting one also, we were getting the next Smart Board or whatever. You know? So we have gotten a lot. We’ve gotten a lot of textbook funding. We got the extra courses added in. We got the seventh grade ‘Math
Applications’ course added. We got the ‘MCAS Prep’ classes for a semester added in. Pulling-in more people: The special education teachers were directed to have a math component to their support time.” Pointing out that those educators have been “generally most comfortable with the ELA,” the coach explains that her school’s administrators arranged for her to provide special education teachers with professional development in mathematics so that they would be better-equipped to assist those youngsters who struggle the most.

Evaluation and Support of Coaches

When asked by whom the various coaches in the district are evaluated, Chartwell’s superintendent explains, “Formally, they’re evaluated by their building principals. So, the middle school principal or one of the two assistants evaluates the math coach, and the consulting teachers of reading are evaluated by their building principal.”

About her experiences being evaluated in her current role, the middle school math coach politely, but rather embarrassedly, discloses, “It’s been very open. It’s been very open.” She adds that, while the principal is officially responsible for evaluating her, she has been in the position of writing-up her own work, and “having the principal sign-off on it.” When pressed, “Who sort of ‘fills your tank’ in terms of supervision and helping you grow in this role?”, the middle school coach does not hesitate before answering: “That would have been [the current superintendent], as the assistant superintendent in charge of curriculum – helping me to identify some of the needs in the department; what needed to be attended to.”

The middle school math coach speaks with gratitude of the wealth of professional development in which she has been allowed – even encouraged – to participate, and of
the latitude that she has been given to provide leadership to the school’s math
derpartment. “I’ve done work with NELMS [the New England League of Middle
Schools] for the past five years; I’ve been on the visiting teams with NELMS. They’ve
allowed me that time every year; every time that I’ve put in. They’ve allowed me to go
to the math initiative (a program offered through the Massachusetts Department of
Elementary and Secondary Education); I’ve gone to the DOE summits; I’ve gone to the
PARCC [Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Career] workshops
that were done. I’m sent to everything – everything good. Every time the assistant
superintendent, or principals, or any math thing comes up that anyone’s going to, I’m
always invited or allowed to go, or it’s sent to me specifically to attend. It’s constant,
too. It’s just constant.”

She describes having formerly met with coaches from a neighboring community,
before that school district’s coaching program was eliminated. “As coaches, we’d get
together about once a month – every other month – and talk about some of these things
like ‘What are we trying to address?’ There’s so many needs in this school that, sort of,
we’re in this land of ‘Where do you start if you’re the coach?’”

Formally evaluated annually by the principals of their respective schools, the
consulting teachers of reading continue to meet every five weeks with the district’s
assistant superintendent to discuss their schools’ progress with Response to Intervention
and other aspects of Chartwell’s elementary literacy plan. They also meet informally
with one another on a more frequent basis for discussions of their problems of practice
and of their shared experience.
Evidence of Success

To a person, participating educators in Chartwell cite teachers’ active utilization and regular solicitation of instructional coaches as evidence of the program’s success. Only seldom is the topic of improved student performance raised in such discussions.

The superintendent explains the approach that has been taken to assess the district’s elementary literacy initiative, including, not least, the redefined role of the reading specialists at that level: “With our literacy initiative, we made no assumptions for the first three and a half, almost four, years. We’re just now, in the past year or two, starting to have collegial conversations across the district about DIBELS [Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills] data. We’ve had those conversations at building-level data teams all along, but we’ve wanted to fully implement the initiative, and fully implement the reading plan – the tiered reading plan, and then, after those things were in place, we wanted to then have those conversations. The assistant superintendent is beginning to have those conversations across the elementary [level]. And then, next year, it is our plan to formally assess the effectiveness of the literacy initiative.”

The superintendent continues, “You can ask any one of the five school committee members, and say to them, ‘What [has the current superintendent, or the previous one, said] to you, over the last seven to ten years, about data?’ And I bet you any one of them could tell you, ‘Don’t look at anything as a trend until it’s three years.’ So, we’ve hammered that home over, and over, and over again. The other thing, if you go on our website, there’s a presentation that we do every year. We’ve identified points of data that we use to measure our successes, our strengths, and our weaknesses, and DIBELS has not
yet been presented as part of that, because we want to evaluate the initiative before we do it. And there’s been absolutely no political pressure from the school committee to do that. We just did our presentation two months ago; and it’s pretty extensive, if you look on the website…It’s right there: *District Data Presentation*. It’s a PowerPoint. And we identify data points that we use, both formal and informal, and we’ve not yet included DIBELS in there. But we will; it’s coming.”

The elimination of the elementary-level math coach position after only one year in existence appears to have had more to do with the scarcity of resources with which to sustain it than with the limited results that the position yielded. While having earlier cited the fact that it had produced no identifiable gains in student achievement (“That was teacher perception, which was really interesting”), the superintendent’s subsequent acknowledgement that Chartwell had not received the federal grant monies with which it was to have funded that position for a second year more accurately explains the decision to dismantle it so soon after its creation. The superintendent sheds light on the low relative priority of the elementary math coach position when describing how the district’s administrative labored to piece-together funding with which to sustain the equivalent position at the district’s middle school: “Our middle school had been identified as being in *Needs Improvement* – ‘Not Making AYP – Year 1,’ so we needed to keep that position to provide the support.”

The middle school math coach volunteers that, had decisions about math coaching been based on such outcomes as improved student performance rather than on the availability of inputs, the elementary-level position would need to have been given more
time to prove its worth, since its occupant was required to provide support to the faculties of five separate elementary schools.

The participating middle school teacher likewise addresses the time-intensiveness of the instructional coach’s role, when describing the work in which she has seen her school’s math coach engaged: “She can focus on it, all day long, and not have to teach also. She’s able to go so in-depth with looking up information, or going and seeking-out kids to make sure they’re in the right placement, or the kids who are in free or reduced lunch in setting up the ‘MCAS Prep’ classes that we have.” She explains, “Her door’s always available for you if you need her…If you want to go and observe another teacher, she’s happy to cover your class, if you want to go watch someone and how they teach. That’s one of the reasons why she’s here is to watch us grow.”

This teacher continues, “She takes care of everything. If we ever have questions, like, ‘I don’t really get this,’ she’ll explain it all; or if we have suggestions, she’ll take that into consideration and talk to other people about it. We all work well together, and it’s because she leads us well. I am very comfortable approaching her, and I think that most of the math teachers are…She’s always been someone that you could trust and that you could approach; that you could talk confidentially to about a situation that happened.” This teacher describes her school’s math coach as someone who is “always so careful about how she words things, because she doesn’t want to hurt people’s feelings. I can’t even imagine the conversation that she had to have with the other teacher about the fact that he’s just not organized; that must have been difficult to go up and be like, ‘I don’t agree with how you did this’ or ‘I think you need to come downstairs
and take a look at some of the other teachers and how they do this.’ I don’t know if I could do her job. She’s a good person for it, though.”

The participating consulting teacher of reading explains, “Every morning, I have somebody coming in, but would I see that at the beginning of this year or even when I started last year? Absolutely not.” She shares the mindset that she works to instill in teachers during her time with them: “You do this because you’re always going to be thinking in terms of what’s best for kids. And there’s not one person out there that would ever argue back with you on that one, and that’s food for thought. That’s why they’re getting up and they’re thinking, ‘First, I wanted to buck that, but I don’t now because – you know what? – that is what’s best for kids.’ Even though what was working was ‘fine,’ changing it up means that’s going to be even better for kids, and we’re always going to be striving for that.”

SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS

The instructional coaching programs of the three districts described in this study – indeed, of the individual schools within those districts – varied considerably, both in their shapes and in their levels of perceived success. Notwithstanding this variability – or, more likely, because of it, numerous generalizations can be drawn from this comparative examination of instructional coaching.

The most obvious finding is that the purposes of the coaching programs, and the roles of the instructional coaches within them, were blurry to educators in all three districts. While administrators, coaches, and teachers expressed – even stressed – that it was not the coaches’ role to formally evaluate the work of teachers, it was evident that
large numbers of educators in all three communities were both unsure of why coaching had been introduced into their schools and districts, and unclear about the tasks in which coaches were actually intended to engage.

This leads to the next key finding – that administrators in the three communities played decisive roles in determining the degrees to which their respective coaching programs succeeded, beginning with helping their faculties to understand the very rationale for instructional coaching. This was especially stark in Springwood, where two principals’ own ambivalence about instructional coaching contributed to teachers’ – even coaches’ – lack of clarity about it.

Having previously worked in another community that employed instructional coaching, the superintendent simply installed a similar program in Springwood without first having worked to ensure that the educators in her district understood, let alone supported, the approach. As one coach put it, the faculties of the district’s several schools were introduced to the concept of instructional coaching when job postings for instructional coaches appeared on bulletin boards in the schools’ faculty dining rooms. Only after individuals had been selected to serve as coaches, and were already on the job, were any proper efforts made to explain instructional coaching to Springwood’s educators. Unfortunately, by that point, many of them had developed their own less-than-favorable impressions (“Oh, they’re getting rid of teachers, but they’re hiring another administrative-type person.”).

Closely related to this is the third finding – that, no matter how well central office administrators had laid the groundwork at the district level, principals shaped the emergence of the instructional coaching programs in their individual schools. When
actively supported by their schools’ principals, instructional coaching programs were felt to be more successful. This was evident in Springwood, where a new middle school principal who was more open to coaching than his predecessor gave a much-needed boost to his school’s program, and in Peacefield, where one elementary principal’s decision to require teachers’ participation in group coaching served to demonstrate his own commitment to instructional coaching and to convince teachers of the program’s utility. Absent such support from their own principals, other coaches were left to their own devices to establish working relationships with the teachers whose instructional practices they had been engaged to help develop.

Numerous coaches, in well-intended but short-sighted efforts to win teachers’ acceptance and engagement, became overly solicitous of teachers. This is the fourth finding from this examination. Whereas the coach in Peacefield’s largest elementary school, who enjoyed the full-throated support of her principal, was able to earn teachers’ respect through her demonstration of good coaching practices and modeling of good instruction, another of the coaches in Peacefield and one of the two elementary coaches in Springwood – both of whom have since moved-on to different roles in other districts – resorted to teaching lessons in teachers’ stead, rather than helping teachers to learn about, apply, and reflect upon new approaches or strategies. As a result, the teachers with whom these coaches worked came to regard the instructional coaches as glorified substitutes, rather than as valuable resources for professional development – an outcome reminiscent of Bean et al.’s (2010) finding that, when teachers perceive coaches as largely occupied with managerial or clerical tasks, they regard them as having little instructional expertise to offer.
The fifth finding from the current investigation – and a far more uplifting one – is that participating teachers genuinely appreciated the work of their coaches. Grateful for coaches’ readiness, willingness, and ability to investigate materials or strategies about which they wanted to learn more, the teachers were even more appreciative of the attitudes with which their coaches approached their work with them. Participating teachers described their coaches as having presented themselves, not as experts whose recommendations should be accepted unquestioningly or whose classroom practices should be emulated without modification, but as colleagues who were eager to learn alongside – and all-too-happy to learn from – the teachers with whom they worked. As one of the teachers said of her instructional coach, “She makes me feel like I’m the one who has the knowledge, and she’s getting it from me, which is nice.”

Closely related to this is the sixth finding from the investigation – that, through discussing their schools’ instructional coaching programs, several participating educators came to recognize the parallels between coaching and teaching. One teacher in Peacefield, for example, explained that, just as she tries to do with her own students, her coach had kept her and her colleagues in their respective zones of proximal development. Likewise, one of the coaches in Springwood described having suddenly realized that being a coach is “kind of like being a teacher.”

No less important than the parallels between coaching and teaching were those identified between leadership and both of these endeavors. Just as participating teachers described their coaches’ having modeled appropriate practices and attitudes, so too did participating coaches identify that their respective principals had demonstrated how (or how not) to achieve the requisite balance between being exacting and supportive. The
decision of the principal of Peacefield’s largest elementary school to require teachers’ participation in coaching, and the insistence upon improved instruction voiced by the current principal at Springwood’s middle school – both of which mandates were issued with the full knowledge that coaches were available to support teachers in meeting them – are good examples of this.

This finding – that teachers, coaches, and administrators similarly strive to be at once demanding and supportive of others – both highlights the scale independent and self-similar quality of schools, and demonstrates how individuals in various roles within those complex systems work to keep the ‘anxiety containment’ control parameter at appropriate levels.

The seventh finding from this investigation is that coaches whose time was divided amongst buildings were perceived – by others, as well as by themselves – to be far less impactful than those who worked in single buildings, even when the total numbers of teachers with whom the various coaches worked were essentially the same. In Peacefield, for example, two of the three coaches work in two schools each; the third coach works in only one school, whose enrollment is twice the size of that in any of the district’s other four schools. Despite the fact that they work with almost exactly the same number of teachers, the two coaches who divide their time between schools articulate that they do not feel fully connected to the faculties of any of them. This sentiment was reinforced by the principal of Peacefield’s largest elementary school, who expressed that he would much rather have a coach who worked part-time in that capacity, but who was in his building full-time (perhaps, providing direct service to students), than a full-time coach whom he shared with another school.
This finding demonstrates the ‘richness of connectivity between agents in the system’ control parameter, and recalls the finding from Poglinco et al. (2003) that “out-of-class individual coaching” and “the ability to catch the coach at a spare moment and raise a question or concern” were important to teachers. Coaches who divide their time between buildings have far fewer occasions to catch, or to be caught by, teachers on the fly; their opportunities to contribute to the flow of information, and to share what diversity exists, are likewise greatly reduced.

The eighth and final finding from this investigation – that teachers found participation in group coaching to be surprisingly gratifying – likewise relates to the ‘richness of connectivity between agents’, the ‘rate of information flow through the system’, and the ‘level of diversity’ control parameters. Both at the middle school in Chartwell and in the largest of the elementary schools in Peacefield, participating teachers acknowledged benefiting from – even enjoying – coaching sessions that they attended alongside other teachers. They were glad to learn about innovative strategies that their colleagues were using in their own classrooms, as well as those introduced by their coaches; since all were expected to participate in the discussions, none feared being perceived as self-promoting when they offered suggestions or described instructional approaches that they had employed with their own students. In addition to the three control parameters listed above, the provision of coaching in the group setting also served effectively to maintain ‘power differentials’ and ‘levels of anxiety containment.’
CHAPTER 5
ANALYSIS, DISCUSSION, AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

The present study was undertaken as an initial exploration into the relationship between suburban school districts’ individual contexts and the trajectories of their respective programs of instructional coaching. The following research question guided the investigation: How do suburban districts’ unique contexts impact the implementation, maintenance, and success of their instructional coaching programs?

Case studies of three suburban school districts in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts were assembled from data collected during semi-structured interviews with twenty-two educators from across the three districts, including three central office administrators (two superintendents and one assistant superintendent); four school principals; eight instructional coaches; and seven classroom teachers. Pertinent documents – for example, one district’s literacy plan; another district’s job description for the instructional coach position; DESE-generated reports on each district’s demographic profile and levels of student achievement – were consulted both before and during interviews to ensure the investigator’s understanding of the programs and populations described by research participants.

Beginning with a cross-case analysis of the findings presented in the previous chapter, the current chapter also includes a discussion of those findings in light of complexity science, the theoretical framework employed throughout this investigation; an articulation of the limitations of the study; conclusions drawn by the investigator; practical implications of the study; and suggestions for future research.
CROSS-CASE ANALYSIS

Each section of the research findings chapter includes a brief profile of one participating district – Springwood, Peacefield, or Chartwell; a description of that district’s program of instructional coaching; a delineation of the role of the instructional coach within that district’s program; a description of how, if at all, the coaching program had been rolled-out to the teachers, coaches, and administrators of that district; an accounting of the work that coaches in that district have done to gain and maintain the trust of the teachers whom their positions exist to support; an articulation of the role played by administrators in that district’s instructional coaching program; a discussion of how and by whom coaches are evaluated and supported within that district; and, finally, a statement about how each district had assessed its program’s success.

The following analysis – which utilizes those same eight headings (each of which had been suggested by the literature on instructional coaching or had emerged in the data as a theme common to all three districts) – “seeks to build abstractions” across the three particular cases (Merriam, 2009).

Comparison of District Profiles

The three suburban Massachusetts communities participating in this study differ in size and demographic make-up. From one district to the next, the grade configurations of the constituent schools, and the administrative structures at both the district and building levels, likewise vary.

While the populations of all three communities can be described with accuracy as predominantly white and middle-class, the exact composition of each is unique:
• Ninety-five percent of the students in Springwood are white; only five percent are from racial minority backgrounds. Less than one percent of the students in Springwood are described as limited English proficient. Five percent of the students in the district qualify for free or reduced-price lunch.

• Three quarters of Peacefield’s students are white; one quarter are from racial minority backgrounds. Five percent of Peacefield’s students have been identified as limited English proficient. Fifteen percent of the students in Peacefield qualify for free or reduced-price lunch.

• Only about five percent of Chartwell’s students are from racial minority backgrounds; the vast preponderance of the students – ninety-five percent – are white. As was the case in Springwood, less than one percent of the students in Chartwell have been found to be limited English proficient. The proportion of students in Chartwell qualifying for free or reduced-price lunch (fifteen percent) is the same as that found in Peacefield.

All three school systems have flat organizational structures – not least, at the elementary building level: Each of the five elementary schools in Chartwell has a ‘teaching assistant principal’ who serves full-time in some other capacity, and receives a stipend to assist the principal in maintaining student discipline; in Peacefield, only the largest school, which has twice the enrollment of any of the other four, has an assistant principal; in Springwood, only the larger of the two elementary schools has an assistant principal.
The administrative structures at the central office level, while similarly flat, also vary from one district to the next:

- In Springwood, the only central-office administrator with any involvement in matters of curriculum and instruction is the superintendent, herself. Having previously tried and failed to add a central-office administrator to oversee curriculum, instruction, and assessment, the superintendent has finally succeeded in securing funding to add such a position in the 2012/2013 academic year.

- Peacefield – a district whose enrollment is twice as large as Springwood’s – does have an assistant superintendent who oversees curriculum and instruction. That individual acknowledges, though, that her district’s administrative flatness limits the amount of curriculum coordination and other important efforts that can be undertaken with any degree of frequency.

- With a student population whose size falls between those of Springwood and Peacefield, and a full-time assistant superintendent for curriculum and instruction, Chartwell appears most comfortably situated vis à vis district-level leadership in those important areas.

While all three participating school systems have experienced tight budgets, in recent years, the larger two districts – which also happen to be more racially, socio-economically, and linguistically diverse than the smallest – have been especially hard-hit by sizeable reductions in certain federal grants. Whereas Peacefield and Chartwell have both had to reduce FTEs and increase class size, Springwood has been in the comparatively enviable position of still being able to add new roles (e.g., the incoming
‘director of curriculum, instruction, and assessment’), but only when decreases in enrollment have reduced the number of classroom teachers required.

Coaching Programs

The coaching programs in Springwood, Peacefield, and Chartwell are all described as having been introduced to ensure that instructional change efforts no longer ceased as soon as the professional development sessions at which they were presented were adjourned; to counter what educators in all three districts describe as faculty members’ complacency about the quality of instruction in which they engaged their students.

Recalling Lortie’s (1975) characterization of schoolteachers as conservative, individualist, and presentist, and Elmore’s (2004) assertion that “The problem…lies not in the supply of new ideas but in [teachers’] demand for them” (p. 11), the faculties of the three participating districts are described as having seen no need to change their practices, given their students’ generally good performance on such measures as MCAS. Educators in Springwood, Peacefield, and Chartwell are by no means alone; the faculties – administrators as well as teachers – of countless other high-achieving, suburban districts have consistently behaved as though the need for education reform has not applied to them.

Chartwell’s superintendent recalls: “When we started the literacy initiative back in 2007, I remember one of the principals asked me to come over to his building. And he took out his MCAS data, and he said to me, ‘If it ain’t broke, why fix it?’ …So I said to him, ‘Sure, eighty-five percent of your kids are doing real well. Let’s talk about the fifteen percent down here, where it looks like it’s broken. So, yeah, you can be proud
that eighty-five percent of your kids are doing really well, but don’t you ever make one of those fifteen percent be my kid, because you’re selling the fifteen percent short. That’s the fifteen percent that the literacy plan that we put into place is supposed to address.””

Suggesting, “presumably, many nominally high-performing schools and districts do well because of the backgrounds of their students and may be just as lacking in organizational resources for learning as low-performing schools,” Elmore (2004) explains why educators in high-achieving districts would also benefit from being actively engaged in instructional improvement initiatives: “The purpose of focus is not just to improve practice and performance but to teach people in the organization how to think and act around learning for continuous improvement” (p.80). He continues, “School systems that improve are those that have succeeded in getting people to internalize the expectations of standards-based accountability systems, and that…have managed this internalization largely through modeling commitment and focus using face-to-face relationships, not bureaucratic controls” (p. 80).

As explained above, instructional coaching is a strategy that seeks to enhance teachers’ knowledge and skill through ongoing, job-embedded – indeed, face-to-face – professional development. While each of the participating communities has established a program of instructional coaching, each district’s program – and each program’s history – is unique unto itself.

Springwood’s program was introduced fully-formed by the superintendent, who had been impressed by the program in Peacefield, where she had previously worked. Having found coaching to work effectively in her previous district, the superintendent brought coaching to Springwood, but without first having prepared the faculty to receive
it. Likely because teachers – and at least one principal – had been so inadequately briefed about coaching’s whys and wherefores, they were slow to utilize it or to recognize its potential as a vehicle for instructional improvement.

When introduced, Springwood’s program included four coaches – one for each of the two elementary schools; two for the middle school (one of whom would provide coaching to teachers of literacy and social studies; the other, to teachers of math and science). After two years, the middle school literacy and social studies coach was not rehired, and her position was eliminated.

Peacefield’s instructional coaching program was established to compensate (at least, in part) for the simultaneous elimination of a number of support positions in the district’s five elementary schools. One coach provides support, full-time, to the faculty of the largest of the five schools, whose student body is twice the size of that of any of the other four schools; each of the other two coaches works half-time in two of the remaining four schools. Despite each coach’s being assigned to support the same overall number of teachers, it is unanimous that the coaching program has been most successful in the one school to which a coach has been assigned full-time.

This phenomenon – that a coach’s assignment to provide support in multiple buildings would render her/his services less effective (or, at the very least, cause them to be so perceived) – had also manifested itself in Chartwell. After only one year in existence, the elementary-level math coach position, which had been created at the same time as the still extant math coach position in the middle school, was eliminated. Although the district’s superintendent explains (no doubt, accurately) that teachers at the elementary level were far less receptive to such support than were their colleagues at the
middle school, the middle school math coach, who has held her position since its creation, points out that – precisely because the elementary-level position was spread across five separate buildings – it would only have taken longer for that position’s value to be appreciated by teachers whose instructional responsibilities included more than mathematics.

The elementary-level math coach position in Chartwell and the middle school literacy/social studies coach position in Springwood were eliminated for reasons both budgetary and programmatic. In Springwood, since the literacy/social studies coach was non-renewed because she “wasn’t very effective,” the superintendent determined not to fill the vacancy, intending to use the money saved to subsidized the establishment of a central office position. In Chartwell, because federal funds were being sharply reduced, the district’s current superintendent (as assistant superintendent) and his predecessor decided that, since there would only be enough funds in the operating budget to maintain one of the two math coach positions, they should retain the one at that district’s middle school, both because it was well-received by the faculty and because it was one way by which to address that school’s failure to achieve AYP in mathematics.

As will be discussed in the next section, the elimination of these positions on programmatic grounds alone would have been premature, given how little time they had been afforded to have an impact. The districts’ concomitant monetary concerns lend far greater justification for the decisions to have discontinued these positions.

In contrast with Springwood’s coaches, Peacefield’s coaches, and, indeed, Chartwell’s own math coaches, which had been introduced to the faculties of their respective district’s fully-formed, Chartwell’s consulting teachers of reading evolved
from previously existing positions. At the same time as leaders in that district designed its literacy plan, they redefined the elementary-level ‘reading specialist’ positions, requiring those serving in them not only to provide services directly to students, but also to coach teachers in reading instruction.

Roles of the Coaches

The research literature on instructional coaching cautions against allowing coaches to be viewed as administrators. Knight (2009b) explains, “If teachers perceive their coach as an administrator rather than a peer, they may hesitate to open up about their needs to take risks” (p. 19). This notion emerges time and again in the interviews with educators in the participating districts, all of whom tout the non-evaluative aspect of the instructional coach position. Springwood’s middle school coach explains, “They know I’m just another teacher, and that’s the power of it.” The assistant superintendent in Peacefield likewise expresses, “There does seem to be something to this non-evaluative role that does something to make this feel more supportive to teachers than when you’re a curriculum coordinator with supervisory responsibilities.” Describing the teachers in her building as being far more comfortable working with her than with the building’s principal or assistant principals, the middle school math coach in Chartwell is grateful not to be an administrator: “Knowing what I can do in this role, it’s different than a principal coming in and watching a lesson. It’s totally different.”

Not only must they not be allowed to be perceived by teachers as administrators, instructional coaches, according to the literature, must also not be seen as engaging to any great degree in clerical tasks. Where the former would undermine the comfort that teachers might feel in making mistakes or admitting confusion in their presence, the latter
would threaten to undercut teachers’ confidence in the instructional expertise that they have to offer (Bean et al., 2010). To their great credit, administrators in all three participating districts have indeed refrained from assigning to instructional coaches tasks not directly associated with coaching.

One condition not mentioned in the literature, but which emerges repeatedly in participants’ discussions about the work of coaches, is the importance of the amount of time that instructional coaches spend in their respective buildings. While most of the coaches associated with the participating districts’ programs perform no other function beyond instructional coaching, several of them have been assigned to provide coaching to teachers in multiple buildings within their districts. Being so divided has caused these coaches to regard themselves – and to be considered by the faculties whom they are intended to serve – as less valuable (because less available) than their counterparts who coach full-time in a single building.

The two elementary coaches in Peacefield who divide their time between two schools each express that they have had less of an impact on any of their buildings than their colleague who serves full-time in one building has had on hers. Their beliefs are corroborated by the fact that the faculties in their four schools would, if given the choice, exchange having access to the coaches’ services in order to have one or two fewer students in their classrooms – a choice that is contrary to the one that teachers working in the school with the full-time coach say they would make.

The middle school math coach in Chartwell describes the frustration that her former elementary counterpart experienced throughout the one year of that position’s existence – frustration that seems not to have been without justification: According to
Chartwell’s superintendent, the teachers in the district’s five elementary schools saw no need for – or value in – the position.

The consensus among participants in this study was that it would be far preferable – even if it required her/him to serve in an additional capacity – for the instructional coach to work full-time in the school in which (s)he coaches. In the words of the principal of the one elementary school in Peacefield that has its own full-time coach, “The more a person is split, the less it’s coaching. If we had a half-time coach, but the person was in the building all the time, it would be better than, I think, having to split between buildings.”

In fact, the participating instructional coaches whose roles do require them to do more than coach – Chartwell’s consulting teachers of reading, who provide direct service to students in addition to coaching classroom teachers in the use of instructional strategies – are considered to have been enormously effective.

Roll-Outs of the Programs

The three districts participating in this study rolled-out their respective instructional coaching programs with various degrees of formality, and with mixed results.

According to the educators interviewed, Springwood’s program was introduced – and, thereafter, was only ever discussed – in the context of that district’s budget preparation process. As the middle school math coach in Springwood explains, the resulting lack of clarity about the role of the coaches, and about the intent of the program, extended to her own and at least one other of the district’s principals.
While there was no formal roll-out of the coaching program in Peacefield, either, participating educators in that district articulate that it had been made clear to all involved that the coaching positions were intended to mitigate the impact on classroom teachers of the elimination of such other support positions as reading specialists, school librarians, and technology integration specialists.

The instructional coaching positions in Chartwell were established at two different times. Seven years ago, when the math coach positions were introduced at the middle and elementary levels, there was no fanfare, but it was explained that those roles were being established to address the AYP issue that the district then faced in the middle school grades. While the members of the middle school math department seem fairly early on to have recognized the utility of a coach, the teachers at the elementary level did not. Not only did teachers in each of the five elementary schools have just one day per week in which (potentially) to interact with the coach, their attentions were also divided amongst the several other subjects for which they were responsible (unlike their middle school counterparts, who continue to teach only a single subject). Further, because AYP had not been identified as an issue at the elementary schools, teachers at that level did not feel especially compelled by that rationale.

The redefinition of the consulting teacher of reading positions in Chartwell was rolled-out when that district’s elementary literacy plan was introduced six years ago. While, again, there was no fanfare, faculty members understood that changes were being made to how they would need to plan and deliver reading instruction, and that the reading specialists would now be serving as resources to guide them in that important work.
From these three cases, it is clear that, while the roll-out of an instructional coaching program – or, for that matter, any other effort at instructional improvement – need not be ostentatious, it must adequately inform stakeholders about the initiative’s logistics and rationale if those educators are to avail themselves of it.

Work of Coaches to Build/Maintain Teachers’ Trust

As anticipated by the literature, which identifies trust as instructional coaching’s coin of the realm, educators in Springwood, Peacefield, and Chartwell speak repeatedly of the relationship between coaches’ ability to engender teachers’ trust and their effectiveness at promoting improved instructional practices.

Peacefield’s assistant superintendent explains, “I see clearly, and I speak about this both from working here and working in previous districts, that the personality of the coach really matters, and that capacity to build relationships with teachers is just essential. And if the person going into that role doesn’t have that strength, you often don’t see the same kind of connectedness, and support for the role that you would see otherwise; they don’t seem to be as effective.”

The principal of Peacefield’s largest elementary school supports this assertion when he describes how the strained working relationship that he had shared with his school’s first coach – and how the faculty’s view of that individual as less-than-trustworthy – compromised that individual’s effectiveness during her abortive tenure: “She and I didn’t see eye to eye, I think, about what the model should look like, so it was a good thing, in the end [that she resigned her position in October of her second year in that role].” Pointing-out that that individual had served in another support capacity at the school prior to her appointment as coach, the principal continues, “There were a lot of
people on the faculty who didn’t trust her. Some of it had nothing to do with the role; it was just personal history. She was a bit of a bulldog.”

In marked contrast to that coach’s harsh approach toward teachers, educators in two of the participating districts describe how several other coaches had adopted an opposite attitude, seeking to curry favor with teachers by teaching lessons in their stead, rather than modeling strategies while teachers observed. While acknowledging that these latter coaches’ intentions were good, participants point-out that their actions prevented the teachers in their schools from ever recognizing the value of the supports that the coaches were really there to offer.

Several of the coaches interviewed for this study describe having taken a more moderate – and, ultimately, more successful – approach to influencing teachers’ practices. Understanding that earning teachers’ trust is a time-intensive enterprise, they tell of availing themselves of any and every opportunity to visit teachers’ classrooms. In the process of delivering instructional materials or of helping to set-up classroom computers and other equipment, coaches got to know teachers and to observe their work with children. These interactions also afforded teachers a casual, unintimidating opportunity to become acquainted with the coaches.

A number of the participating coaches also explain having found it successful to be candid with teachers about what they as coaches do not know, or – as one coach put it – to go in “with absolutely no airs.” Admitting that, at first, they felt as if they ought to know everything about everything, these coaches tell of having come to the realization that teachers respected and appreciated coaches’ candor more than they would have their virtuosity. These coaches describe how, with time, they came to recognize the
importance of modeling reflective practice; of showing teachers that it is expected that people will not have all of the answers all of the time, or implement strategies flawlessly the first time (or even the first few times).

One of the elementary coaches in Springwood acknowledges having found it effective to ‘hide behind’ research, so that classroom teachers will give the different ideas that she presents full consideration: “I bury myself in finding video-clips about comprehension, research strategies for teaching comprehension and fluency, and what’s best practice; hiding behind, ‘Hey, here’s an article I found. Let’s take some time and read it. What do you guys think? What was your reaction to this?” This coach expresses that teachers have appreciated her willingness to solicit their opinions, to listen to them, and to discuss ideas in a collegial manner with all members of the group.

Acknowledging that such activities as these represented large investments of the coaches’ time, participants from all three districts articulate that – without them – the trust necessary for instructional improvement would not have been established between coaches and the teachers whose work they seek to support.

Roles of Administrators in the Instructional Coaching Programs

The literature on instructional coaching describes the importance of administrators’ active support to the success of instructional coaching programs. Hall & Simeral (2008) assert, “Coordinating the administrator’s efforts and approaches with those of the coach yields more durable relationships, more consistent professional growth among staff, and more dependable advancement in student achievement” (p. 106).

The very different experiences that the middle school coach in Springwood has had with the two principals with whom she has worked since assuming her current
position are illustrative of the impact of administrators on a school’s coaching program. Where the first principal with whom she worked appeared not to support her efforts (indeed, in some ways, to undermine them), the current principal’s emphasis on the need for faculty members to enhance their instructional practices has impelled teachers to seek-out the coach to discuss new strategies or how to refine existing ones.

That the three coaches in Peacefield describe themselves as “five coaches in three bodies” likewise demonstrates how the expectations and requirements of individual building principals impacts the structure and outcomes of their respective schools’ instructional coaching programs.

At the largest school in Peacefield, where the principal has provided his official sanction to the coaching program by mandating that all teachers participate in small-group coaching for one term per year, the coach reports that teachers have seemed to cotton to the experience. Similarly, the principal of the smaller elementary school in Springwood, who has required that all newly hired faculty members work with the coach, reports that that directive has not only given the coach the opportunity to work with those specific teachers, and afforded those teachers the opportunity to recognize the benefit of working with the coach; it has also given the other teachers in the building a chance to experience (albeit vicariously) the value of having an instructional coach to consult about classroom practice.

Evaluation and Support of Coaches

In all three participating districts, instructional coaches are formally evaluated by the principals of their respective schools. Regrettably, as can too often be said of the
evaluation of teachers, the evaluation of coaches in these three school systems has been largely pro forma.

In Peacefield, where two of the three coaches each divides her time between two schools, the responsibility for evaluating those coaches is, ostensibly, shared by the two principals to whose schools each coach is assigned. As is made evident in the remarks of one such principal, this arrangement can look far different in practice than on paper. She explains that, as the colleague with whom she shares responsibility for evaluating one coach is not invested in the coaching program, she has taken-on most of the work of evaluating the coach.

Describing her own principal as similarly unengaged – at least, insofar as evaluating her work goes, the middle school math coach in Chartwell characterizes the process as “very open,” and explains that the practice has been for her to write-up her own evaluation, and for the principal to sign-off on it. The research literature, itself, characterizes the evaluation of coaches as seldom receiving the attention that it merits: “Many school districts with coaches attempt to use teacher performance standards when evaluating coaches. This does a disservice to coaches” (Killion, 2009, p. 15).

Ironically, given that their own roles exist because of the prevailing belief that supportive feedback is more readily received when provided in a non-evaluative context, participating instructional coaches express that they, too, find the evaluation process more-than-a-little stress-inducing. In Springwood, for example, the elementary-level coaches acknowledge that they have not yet grown comfortable with being assessed on the performance of tasks peculiar to their positions – for example, the leadership of
professional development sessions, or the facilitation of meetings of professional learning communities.

Several of these participating coaches speak with gratitude of the ongoing support that they otherwise receive from their schools’ principals. Even with this support, though, coaches describe theirs as a lonely position in any school; for, as much as they appreciate their principals’ assistance and value their judgments, coaches recognize that they are duty bound to protect the confidentiality of the teachers whose work they support.

Coaches in two of the districts investigated describe having established regular meetings at which they consult with one another about problems of practice. Coaches in all three districts explain that they routinely, comfortably telephone or email counterparts in the other schools in their districts for advice, to ask each other what one coach in Peacefield refers to as “coaching questions,” or simply to vent.

Evidence of Success

Much of the literature on instructional coaching recommends the ongoing assessment of coaching programs, as well as the evaluation of individual coaches (Steiner & Kowal, 2007; Keller, 2007; Kowal & Steiner, 2007; AISR, 2004). That same literature acknowledges that schools and districts “often lack assessment indicators and systematic documentation of impact” for such programs (AISR, 2004, p. 6).

None of the three districts participating in this study have yet explicitly assessed the success of their instructional coaching programs. Of the three, Chartwell comes the closest, informally assessing the relative merits of all cost centers, annually, as it prepares its budget for the subsequent academic year.
Chartwell’s superintendent explains that, because his district’s program of instructional coaching, like the larger literacy plan of which it is a part, is still somewhat new, it makes sense that no formal evaluation has yet been undertaken. He adds that he reminds the members of his district’s school committee that determinations of a program’s success or failure ought not to be made until enough data have been collected over a sufficient number of years, and until trends – good or bad – have had a chance to emerge. That both of the other districts have also refrained from undertaking explicit examinations of their instructional coaching programs makes sense, then, given that Peacefield’s program is the same age as Chartwell’s, and that Springwood’s program is newer still.

When the time does come for each of their coaching programs to be evaluated, leaders in Springwood, Peacefield, and Chartwell would do well to add data about student learning to the kinds of information that participants shared during interviews for the present study – namely, teachers’ perceptions about instructional coaching, and examples of how instructional practice has changed as a result of that coaching (Kowal & Steiner, 2007, p. 6). As complexity science teaches us, the ongoing health and emergence of complex systems rely upon the existence of steady streams of feedback.

**DISCUSSION: FINDINGS EXAMINED THROUGH THE LENS OF COMPLEXITY SCIENCE**

Having for too long been regarded as clockworks whose parts (e.g., personnel, materials, instructional programs) – while certainly interlocking – are nevertheless interchangeable, schools and school districts are better understood as complex systems, networked wholes
that continually co-evolve with their environments and whose constituent parts continually co-evolve with each other.

Examined through the lens of complexity science, the three participating school districts and their programs of instructional coaching may be understood in their complexity, rather than being reduced to simplistic explanations. In the section that follows, the findings from this investigation are examined in the light of several aspects of complex systems: their sensitive dependence upon initial conditions; their identification as dissipative structures; the impact upon them of five control parameters; and their fractal, or scale independent and self-similar, quality.

Sensitive Dependence Upon Initial Conditions

Complex systems are characterized by a sensitive dependence upon initial conditions. In education, the backgrounds and make-ups of individual schools and school districts – for example, the training and experience of a faculty; history with other programs and initiatives; the level of financial and political commitment – impact the degree to which school reform efforts achieve their desired ends. Likewise, innovations that are well-suited to their local contexts are far more likely to be institutionalized than those that are not (Miles & Ekholm, 1991).

Examples of this phenomenon played-out in two of the three participating districts. The superintendent in Springwood attempted with less immediate success than she had anticipated to transplant the instructional coaching program from her previous district (Peacefield) into her new one. As the district had never before had any such support positions, and as the faculty received no preparation in the purposes or procedures of instructional coaching, that program has been slow to take root.
The different experiences of Chartwell’s two math coaching positions likewise
demonstrates complex systems’ sensitive dependence upon initial conditions. Where the
middle school faculty were better-positioned to work with a coach, that school’s program
has been successful. At the elementary level, by contrast, where teachers were in no way
prepared to work with a math coach, the position has been eliminated.

Perturbations/Dissipative Structures

Because complex systems are naturally self-organizing, any perturbations
designed to influence them must be of sufficient size and duration to prevent those
systems from returning to their original states. Absent feedback “to amplify fluctuations
in their environment in order to disrupt existing patterns of behavior, break symmetries,
and create differentiation across time and space” (Stacey, 1996, p. 65), complex systems
will return to what they had been doing previously. In schools, as McQuillan (2008)
explains, it is insufficient for instructional reform efforts merely to be presented to
teachers; if they are to improve the teaching and learning in which students are engaged,
those efforts must actually change teachers’ behavior. Failing this, the all-too-familiar
succession of short-lived improvement efforts – the “punctuated equilibrium” about
which Stacey (1996) writes – will continue to plague educators and students.

Chartwell’s decision to eliminate the elementary math coach position after only a
year would indeed have been premature, then, if that decision had been made purely on
the grounds that the position had had no impact upon student achievement, rather than
also being impacted by financial considerations.

Positive examples of the impact of perturbations on complex systems, from the
current investigation, include the mandate of one principal in Peacefield that all teachers
participate in coaching, and the historical failure of the middle schools in Springwood and Chartwell to make AYP with certain of their subgroups. In the former instance, requiring teachers to attend regular group coaching sessions for one semester per year was all that was required to convince teachers of the utility of collegial discussions of professional practice – discussions that, once begun, most teachers in the school have been happy to continue voluntarily. In the latter cases, the public knowledge that what they were doing was not measuring-up to state standards compelled educators, however grudgingly, to acknowledge that their practices left some room for improvement. The importance of the disaggregation of MCAS data, and of the requirement under No Child Left Behind that all subgroups of students must also make AYP, cannot be understated, here: Without them, educators in these and too many other districts would continue to rest comfortably in the knowledge that the vast majority of their students were already doing well (“If it ain’t broke, why fix it?”).

Control Parameters

Emergence within complex systems, such as schools or school improvement efforts, cannot be entirely controlled, but can be influenced through the regulation of certain control parameters. Five control parameters are at work in any complex system that includes human actors. These are: the rate of information flow through the system; the richness of connectivity between agents in the system; the level of diversity within and between the schemas of the agents; power differentials; and levels of anxiety containment (Stacey, 1996).

Instructional coaching programs enhance the effectiveness of other reform efforts by increasing the rate of information flow through the system. Teachers in the several
districts participating in this study describe how their instructional coaches do this by undertaking necessary/pertinent research on their behalf, and sharing their findings with them. The middle school coach in Springwood acknowledges that her role gives her a broader perspective than most teachers are able to have. She explains, “I certainly don’t pretend to be an expert; but what I can do, and what this position frees me up to do, is be a resource, which is what classroom teachers don’t have time to do for the most part.”

The importance of the richness of connectivity between agents in the system was made plain during discussions of the relative merits of coaches working full- or part-time in their respective schools. Describing coaches’ physical absence from their schools – even for such justifiable reasons as having to provide coaching in other schools – as compromising the effectiveness of those coaches, participants indicate that they would prefer a coach who only served part-time in that role but who worked full-time in a single school, to a full-time coach whose time was divided between buildings. This is understandable, given educators’ need for abundant opportunities – some scheduled, some more casual and spontaneous – to chat with one another about the important work in which they are engaged.

The level of diversity within and between the schemas of the agents was likewise evident in the three districts in this study. Davis & Sumara (2005) write, “In order for complex co-activity to arise, there must be a certain level of diversity among agents. Such variation is the source of novel responses. When a complex system is faced with a problem, an adequate solution might be found in these pools of diversity” (p. 316). In the natural world, these ideas can be seen in evolutionary adaptations. In organizations, this
diversity is represented by ‘out of the box’ thinking introduced by newcomers or by longtime organization members who have sought insight from without the organization.

The decision in Chartwell to allow each elementary school to determine how it would structure the work of its one and one-half consulting teachers of reading is consonant with this feature of complexity science. By not requiring all five schools to do precisely the same thing, the district creates the possibility of novelty, thereby affording itself the opportunity to learn from – and to base future decisions upon – the unique experience of each school.

Stacey (1996) reminds us that when the remaining two control parameters, power differentials and levels of anxiety containment, “operate at intermediate levels, human systems move to the edge of chaos where they are capable of novelty” (p. 114). The decision made by the principal of the largest elementary school in Peacefield serves as a good example of this: While mandating that every teacher participate annually in short-term group coaching, he issued no further directive. He regulated the control parameters so as to ensure that all teachers had the opportunity to work with one another and with the coach, but not so much as to cause anxiety or resentment.

Self-Similarity and Scale-Independence

Complex systems exhibit the characteristics of fractal geometry. With features that are scale independent and self-similar, what is seen at one scale is likewise seen at another; the same pattern is repeated at multiple levels of a single system. In education, this sometimes manifests itself through the phenomenon of teachers experiencing the same concerns and complaints as their students and as building- and district-level administrators. In the current study, the Springwood middle school principal had no
better understanding of the intended role of the coach than any of her teachers did. This proved problematic, since administrators, no less than teachers, need to understand the role of the instructional coach if a school’s coaching program is to be effective.

The similarity of the coach’s role to that of teachers also demonstrates the fractal nature of instructional coaching. The coach’s job with teachers – like the teachers’ job with students – is to attend to the anxiety that her/his respective clients experience. Modeling the behavior that teachers should demonstrate with their own students, coaches do not seek to prevent missteps entirely, for by so doing they would eliminate valuable opportunities for learning/growth.

The comments of one coach in Springwood highlight the scale independent, self-similar aspect of her work: “All of a sudden, I realized, ‘You know, it’s kind of like being a teacher: You’re never going to know all, and the best thing you can do for your kids is say, ‘I don’t know. Let’s think about this. Let’s work on this together. Where can we find the answer?’” In a similar vein, one classroom teacher in Peacefield describes her school’s coach as keeping every educator with whom she works in her/his “zone of proximal development as a teacher.”

LIMITATIONS

The present examination of instructional coaching is limited by its near-total reliance upon the skill and character of the researcher, and by the small number of at least one subgroup of research participants.

Like other qualitative case studies, the present study relies almost entirely upon the sensitivity and integrity of the investigator, “the primary instrument of data collection
and analysis” (Merriam, 2009, p. 52). No less than any other researcher, this investigator approached this project already possessed of certain biases. In order that those who read this study are cognizant of those biases, I disclose them, now:

A counselor-turned-school administrator, I approached this project from the perspective of one who has never cottoned to the notion that one cannot be both evaluative and supportive at the same time. In my professional role as a school principal, I have long strived to convince the educators with whom I work that supervision and evaluation are neither bureaucratic procedures merely to be endured, nor opportunities for administrators to take isolated instructional episodes – good or bad – out of their proper contexts. In my own direct interactions with teachers, and through my work with other building-level administrators, I emphasize that helping teachers to improve their instructional practice is akin to that of helping students further their levels of understanding or skill: Missteps and mistakes are expected and, so long as they are rectified and learned from, not causes for penalty.

I was disheartened, then, by the literature’s repeated and over-simplistic emphasis on the importance of coaches’ not engaging in the formal evaluation of teachers. My disheartenment notwithstanding, I endeavored to review the literature on instructional coaching both accurately and completely.

I was likewise disappointed that, in practically every interview that I conducted, participants in this study – however unclear they were about the functions in which coaches were intended to engage – emphatically voiced that coaches do not formally evaluate teachers. As with my review of the literature, I strove to report my findings from Springwood, Peacefield, and Chartwell honestly and fully.
As already mentioned above, this study is further limited by the small number of classroom teachers who participated. While time constraints and the desire also to obtain input from such other educators as central office administrators, building level administrators, and instructional coaches made including greater numbers of classroom teachers untenable, there is no question that including the experiences and perspectives of greater numbers of classroom teachers would only have made the present study richer.

CONCLUSIONS

Leadership – not least, the leadership of schools or of efforts at instructional improvement – requires, not prescriptions or formulas, but the ability to recognize and to make use of an organization’s own qualities. The leader’s success is dependent upon her/his ability to learn from and with the organization as it emerges. Acknowledging, “There are those who wish to use complexity theory to promote the idea that leaders can control emergence within organizations,” Simpson (2007) suggests that complexity science instead “challenges us to work with awareness closer to that of Socrates, who famously claimed: ‘I know nothing except the fact of my ignorance.’” He asserts that, even or especially during times of crisis, organizations and their leaders need to be able to think clearly. Simpson (2007) advances the idea that the knowledge that there is always uncertainty, rather than inviting paralyzing fear, ought to liberate those within organizations to attend to “what is emerging in the present moment…, and to do the best that they can” (p. 480).

The evolution of the redefined consulting teacher of reading positions in Chartwell is a good example of this. So, too, is the instructional coaching program at the
largest of Peacefield’s three elementary schools. In both cases, school leaders established guidelines, but then allowed the programs to evolve as they would. They were able to guide the emergence through thoughtful regulation of associated control parameters. Such an approach requires greater patience and effort from administrators in the short term, but the returns of these investments promise to be far greater in the long run.

Too often in education, the demands of the work and the dearth of resources with which to do it cause teachers and administrators to focus upon present exigencies to the exclusion of future eventualities. Novelist E.M. Forster portrays one schoolteacher who follows the trajectory of too many educators, evolving in short order from the kind of idealist who says, “If I’m wrong over a point, or don’t know, I mean to tell them at once…I know much more than the boys, but I know very little. Surely the honest thing is to be myself to them. Let them accept or refuse me as that. That’s the only attitude we shall any of us profit by in the end” (p. 174), to one who demands his charges’ unquestioning compliance (“Oddly enough, he became a martinet. It is so much simpler to be severe,” p. 178).

While Forster’s characterization of Rickie Elliot in The Longest Journey remains applicable to too great a number of educators (administrators and classroom teachers, alike), the roles, functions, and activities of educators are more helpfully understood as comporting with what has been written about complex systems: they are nonlinear, complex, and unpredictable; they serve to provide feedback to educators about themselves and about the schools in which they work.

Finding from her own study of schools in three districts, “School principals claimed that after they experience chaotic situations they try to be as thoughtful as they
can for the next chaotic situation,” Akbaba (1999) recommends that principals be taught about complexity science, and helped to understand the dynamics involved therein. Were they to perceive schools as organic systems that are complex, and ever in flux, principals “would accept that having disorder and turbulence is normal,” and – as a consequence – would demonstrate flexibility “while they handle these chaotic situations” (Akbaba, 1999, p. 3). Akbaba (1999) recommends, further, that principals be helped to see the whole picture, to understand the relationships between events, and, importantly, to view themselves as mechanisms that receive feedback from and about the system, and that provide feedback to it.

Findings from the present study confirm the wisdom of Akbaba’s (1999) recommendation, and expand upon it: Given that schools and school districts are correctly understood as complex systems, replete with scale independence and self-similarity, it makes sense that not only principals, but all educators within a system – teachers, coaches, and district- as well as building-level administrators – should learn about complexity science.

If principals and other school leaders – including coaches and teachers – were more familiar with how complex systems actually function, rather than how publishers and professional planners depict them in flowcharts, they would be more likely to make decisions with the long term in mind. They would, for example, take the time to build the requisite foundation on which to build an instructional coaching program; they would acknowledge ahead of time, as the educators in Chartwell have done with their literacy plan, that change takes time and cannot be regarded either as a success or a failure too
soon after its introduction; they would appreciate, as the superintendent in Springwood
does, that many factors contribute to any program’s success.

The section that follows contains more immediately practical implications from
the present study for those specifically interested in implementing instructional coaching
in their schools or school districts.

**IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE**

Certainly no less – and, perhaps, even more – than with other school improvement
efforts, the purposes of instructional coaching programs, and the roles to be played by the
instructional coaches who staff them, must be made abundantly clear to educators at all
levels of the school systems into which they are introduced. Conversations about why
instructional coaching is even being investigated, about the shape that instructional
coaching programs would take, and about the roles in which instructional coaches would
and would not serve ought to be frequent in number and open to all, lest confusion or
suspicion compromise the success of what has been shown in many schools and districts
to be a powerful approach to instructional improvement.

The paths that such complex systems as schools, school districts, and efforts at
school reform follow are sensitively dependent upon the conditions under which they
make their starts. In the case of instructional coaching, the programs that emerge in
schools and systems are profoundly impacted by how they are introduced, and by
educators’ understanding and acceptance of the rationale for instructional coaching.

Complexity science teaches that, in order for complex systems to change
sustainably, the various levels of those systems must interact with each other, and control
over them must be distributed in such a way as to “promote individual autonomy and enrich communication” amongst the systems’ various levels (McQuillan, 2008, p. 1792). The practical implication of this is that each school system implementing an instructional coaching program, or any other effort at instructional improvement for that matter, must establish and maintain a common direction while also allowing individual actors – principals, coaches, and teachers – to make decisions that are appropriate for them and their local constituencies.

Ravitch’s (2010) discussion of the role of common curriculum frameworks in her book *The Death and Life of the Great American School System*, provides one, larger-scale example of such a balance:

The curriculum is a starting point for other reforms. It informs teachers, students, parents, teacher educators, assessment developers, textbook publishers, technology providers, and others about the goals of instruction. It provides direction, clarity, and focus around worthy ends, without interfering with teachers’ decisions about how to teach. (p. 231)

Writing, “Teaching would be enhanced if schools of education stopped insisting on pedagogical conformity and recognized that there are many ways to be a successful teacher” (p. 191), Ravitch (2010) echoes the worldview of Jane Jacobs, to whom she pays homage by appropriating the title of her book. Jacobs (1961) – who employed Weaver’s (1948) then-novel notion of ‘problems of organized complexity’ to investigate cities and city planning – points-out in *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* that, while certain domains of city governance ought by right to be structured horizontally (“The importance of locality coordination is little recognized or acknowledged in city administrative theory,” p. 418), other functions are better-managed centrally (“Doctrinaire reorganization of government into pure horizontal administration would be
as fatally simple and as chaotically unworkable as the present messes,” p. 421). The implication for educational leaders – at both the district and the school level – is that the design and oversight of instructional coaching programs and other reform efforts must be approached thoughtfully, not formulaically.

One example of such an approach from the current study was the decision of the superintendent in Chartwell to permit each of the elementary schools to determine how it would structure the delivery of reading services to students and literacy coaching to teachers. Each principal and the two individuals who served as consulting teachers of reading in her/his school (one full-time; the other, half-time) determined, based on the needs of that school’s students and the relative strengths/weaknesses of its faculty, how to divide the labor. While no two schools have structured their programs in exactly the same way, the results in all five buildings are reported to be both effective and well-received.

As was certainly the case with Chartwell’s approach to literacy coaching, principals must be well-versed in the purposes of instructional coaching, and be actively engaged both in establishing and in supporting their schools’ coaching programs. The practical implication of this is that district-level administrators must enlist principals early-on when considering introducing instructional coaching to their districts, and actively solicit and weigh principals’ views about how such programs should be structured within each building. Principals’ attitudes and actions with regard to instructional coaching determine to an enormous extent how such programs emerge in their schools.
One way by which principals shape the emergence of their schools’ instructional coaching programs is through their ability to instigate the kinds of perturbations required to trigger sustainable change. In Springwood, the middle school’s new principal articulated unprecedentedly demanding expectations of the teachers in his building. According to the school’s coach, the principal’s attitude was, “O.K. I’m going to put some pressure on people to change their instructional practice, to ramp it up, and if I do that people are going to say ‘Wow…I’m not giving the kids what they need. So, how can I improve? Oh, look. I have some coaches that I could go to.’” The principal’s gambit, in the coach’s estimation, has had the desired result.

Principals can also shape the emergence of instructional coaching in their buildings by fine-tuning their schools’ various control parameters in such a way as to cause teachers to create their own perturbations, by observing, and being observed employing, innovative strategies and approaches; by working with groups of colleagues – there being safety in numbers – who all agree to undertake something new and different with their own, respective students.

Finally, and perhaps most powerfully from the perspective of complexity science, principals can influence the emergence of instructional coaching in their schools by capitalizing on schools’ scale independence and self-similarity: By demonstrating coaching behaviors, themselves, in their own work with coaches, teachers, and students, principals can – to borrow an expression – be the change they hope to see in their schools.

The attitude and behaviors demonstrated by the instructional coach at the largest elementary school in Peacefield provide a fine example for educators to follow, and one
that was more-than-appreciated by the teachers whose instruction she worked to support. Sure of her role, this coach gladly supported teachers but refrained from doing for them things that they should have been doing for themselves. She worked with teachers to identify the needs of their students, and to select approaches and materials by which to address them. She candidly assessed teachers’ practices, and provided them with honest, practicable feedback. She modeled for teachers what it means to be a lifelong learner by acknowledging her own knowledge gaps, and enlisting teachers to help her fill them. She remained accessible and approachable to teachers, appreciating their need for just-in-time support, and understanding that successful casual encounters in the short term would almost certainly lead to deeper working relationships in the long term.

This leads to the next implication for those seeking to establish successful instructional coaching programs in their schools and school districts: In order for teachers to be conscious of the existence of coaching, and to avail themselves of coaches’ support, coaches must be physically present in schools on a full-time basis. As was found in two of the three districts investigated, coaches whose time was divided amongst multiple buildings were perceived – not least, by themselves – to be far less impactful than those who worked in only one school each. Chartwell’s use of consulting teachers of reading who provide both direct reading services to students and instructional coaching to teachers may be a good model for districts whose resources prevent them from hiring full-time coaches, but who wish to house each coach in a single school.

A final practical implication of this study is that leaders of districts seeking to inspire instructional improvement, whether through the establishment of instructional coaching programs or otherwise, must commence candid, ongoing conversations with
individuals and groups at all levels of the system about the purpose of evaluation in education. That the very term ‘evaluation’ summons negative associations for people was evident throughout the present study: While few were able to clearly articulate the roles in which coaches were expected to serve, all participants hastened to emphasize that coaches did not engage in the evaluation of teachers.

Ironically, given that ongoing assessment of students’ understanding is a hallmark of good teaching, educators are greatly intimidated at the prospect of having their own work evaluated. No doubt, this anxiety has something to do with the slipshod manner in which the supervision and evaluation of teachers have historically been undertaken (Ponticell & Zepeda, 2004). It is not beyond the realm of possibility, however, for the field of education – or, at least, for individual schools or districts – to “put the heart back into” evaluation; to remember “the core function or task of supervision,” as well as to approach it with “an ethic of caring”; and “to take an inquisitive, rather than inquisitorial stance, one of problem solving as opposed to problem finding” (Waite, 2002, p. 286).

When seeking to remember the purpose and to realize the positive potential of evaluation, educators must also be mindful of the various power and dependence relationships involved; of the various social influences at play; and of the fact that different people respond to conflict differently (Johnson, 2000). In short, educators must attend to the control parameters associated with any complex system that involves people: the flow of information through the system, the richness of connectivity between agents within the system, the diversity of schemas amongst those agents, levels of anxiety containment, and power differentials (Stacey, 1996). To successfully accomplish all of this, educators at all levels would need to develop their interpersonal skills such that they
could effectively deliver evaluative feedback to, and graciously receive it from, colleagues, students, and others.

As schools, school systems, and efforts at school improvement are fractal in nature – that is, as they are characterized by scale independence and self-similarity, educators at all levels must come to appreciate that evaluation, rightly understood and skillfully undertaken, satisfies the need of complex systems for feedback if they are to survive and thrive.

**SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH**

This investigation was an initial exploration into the implementation of instructional coaching programs in suburban districts. As is often the case with such studies, many important questions were raised, and few were answered with any degree of completeness. Much remains to be learned.

The coaching programs in all three districts included in this study are of relatively recent origin. Consequently, assessments of their impacts – beyond what teachers, coaches, and administrators report about teachers’ lessened resistance and increased openness to collaborating with the coach and with other teachers – are all-but-absent. Further, since instructional coaching programs were not the only initiatives undertaken in their districts in the recent past, it will be a challenge to determine from what data do exist – for example, the increased math scores cited in both Springwood and Chartwell – how much of the improvement is attributable to the coaching program, and how much, say, to new instructional materials that were implemented at the same time. Similarly, when the time comes for leaders in Chartwell to examine the impact of the instructional
coaching provided by that district’s elementary-level consulting teachers of reading, it will need to be remembered that the coaching initiative was only one part of a larger plan that also ushered-in ninety-minute literacy blocks and daily small-group reading instruction, both of which have no doubt also contributed to the improvement of students’ literacy skills.

Another question that the research findings inspires relates to the fact that, time and again during the semi-structured interviews, participants speak of coaches who had gone on to become administrators in their own or other school districts. It would be interesting to learn what kind of administrators these individuals have gone on to become. Does having had the school-wide perspective that comes with being a coach make an individual a more effective administrator than one whose only previous experience had been as a classroom teacher with a much more circumscribed purview? Does having served in a supportive role render one better able to deliver evaluative feedback in a supportive way?

Along those same lines, while the notion that teacher evaluation and instructional coaching are best kept separate is raised again and again by participants in this study, departments in every one of the participating districts’ high schools are led by traditional department heads whose responsibilities indeed include both coaching and evaluation. While it was beyond the scope of the present study, it would be interesting to investigate the attitudes of those department heads, and of the teachers with whom they work, to ascertain whether – or how much – this dual function impacts the effectiveness of the evaluation and coaching in which the teachers are engaged by their department heads.
Lastly, if only to answer my own suspicion that the assertions – made both in the instructional coaching literature, and by the numerous participants in this study – that principals cannot at once evaluate and support teachers are based on over-simplistic conceptions of instructional improvement, not upon empirically supported truths, this investigator suggests that studies be undertaken to identify how principals who have managed to bridge that gap have accomplished what so many others have long considered impossible.
REFERENCES


Appendix A

Interview Protocol - Administrators:

• Please, describe your district’s decision to introduce instructional coaching. (When was the decision made? Who was involved? Did the impetus come from administrators or from teachers?)

• Was your district’s program of instructional coaching rooted in a specific model? If so, what was it? If not, what criteria did your district consider when structuring its own program?

• What adaptations did you make to the model as you prepared to implement it in your district? What changes, large or small, have been made to your district’s program since its implementation? What changes still need to be made?

• How did the district identify, and plan to sustain, funding for its instructional coaching program?

• How did the district define the work of instructional coaches? How were their roles structured? (Did coaches work full- or part-time as coaches? Were they assigned by grade-level or by discipline?)

• What was the stated goal of the instructional coaching program overall? (Did these evolve from one year to the next?) (Were there any unstated/publicized goals?)

• What was the district’s plan to evaluate the work of individual coaches? (How would coaches be evaluated? By whom?)

• What was the district’s plan to evaluate the overall instructional coaching program? [What were the stated indicators of success for year one, year two, and so on? What examples of evidence-based documentation were felt would help limit the wide variance of coaching practice across the schools?]

• How were coaches selected?

• How was it decided in which schools, and with teachers, coaches would work?

• What was the district’s plan to provide support to the instructional coaching program? (Were any existing policies changed, or any new policies enacted? What professional development was planned for coaches vis-à-vis content, pedagogy, leadership, conflict…?)

• How were principals and other administrators prepared to support instructional coaches?

• Do teachers value their coaches? [Evidence?] 

• Are teachers changing their practices as a result of their work with coaches? [Evidence?]

• Has student achievement improved since the implementation of instructional coaching? [Evidence?]

• How do coaches create opportunities/desire for collaboration amongst teachers?

• How do coaches in your school/district engender teachers’ trust?
Interview Protocol - Coaches:

• How has the district defined the work of instructional coaches? How has your role been structured? (Did coaches work full- or part-time as coaches? Were they assigned by grade-level or by discipline?)

• What is the stated goal of the instructional coaching program overall? (Did these evolve from one year to the next?) (Were there any unstated/-publicized goals?)

• How and by whom is your work as a coach evaluated?

• How is the overall coaching program evaluated?

• Could you describe the process that the school/district used to select you as a coach?

• How do principals and other administrators support your work and that of other coaches?

• Do teachers value their work with you? With other coaches? [Evidence?]

• Are teachers changing their practices as a result of their work with you? [Evidence?]

• Has student achievement improved since the implementation of instructional coaching? [Evidence?]

• How do you, as a coach, create opportunities / desire for collaboration amongst teachers; between teachers and administrators?

• How do you, as a coach, engender the trust of the teachers with whom you work?

• Would you characterize your relationships with teachers more as equal partnerships, or more as a hierarchy with you at a higher level and the teacher at a lesser one, or in some other way?

• How comfortable are teachers at speaking their mind to you? At being candid about their strengths, weaknesses, and concerns?

• How do you manage to contain teachers’ anxiety about working with you? About trying new methods/approaches?
Interview Protocol – Teachers:

* Describe your work with your instructional coach(es)? How long have you worked with him/her/them? How often do you meet?

* Describe the approach that your coach(es) take to teaching you new approaches/methods.

* Have you changed your instructional practices as a result of your work with your instructional coach(es)? [Evidence?]

* Has your students’ academic achievement improved since you began working with your instructional coach(es)? [Evidence?]

* Have there been greater opportunities for collaboration amongst teachers, since instructional coaching was introduced in your school? [Examples?]

* How has/have your coach(es) undertaken to earn your trust?

* Would you characterize your coach(es) as trustworthy?

* Do you feel comfortable speaking openly with your coach(es)?

* Would you characterize your relationship with your coach(es) more as an equal partnership, or more as a hierarchy with the coach at a higher level and you at a lesser one, or in some other way?

* How has your coach contributed to your knowledge of content and pedagogy?

* How greatly do you value your work with your coach(es)?
Appendix B

Questionnaire Distributed to Massachusetts Superintendents in Spring, 2010:

District Name:

Name of Person Completing the Questionnaire:

Title of Person Completing the Questionnaire:

Does your school district presently employ a program of instructional coaching?

Yes

No

Has your district employed a program of instructional coaching at any time in the past?

Yes

No

Please, indicate for how many years instructional coaching has been employed in your school district:

<1  1  2  3  4  5  6  7  8  9  10  >10

In what grades do instructional coaches in your district provide support?

K  1  2  3  4  5  6  7  8  9  10  11  12

Please, indicate how your district’s instructional coaches are organized:

○ By grade level

○ By discipline

○ Other
Please, indicate how many teachers are supported by each instructional coach:

- 1-5
- 6-10
- 11-15
- 16-20
- 20-25
- Other

Please, indicate the full-time equivalency of the instructional coaches in your district:

- Instructional coaches work full-time as instructional coaches.
- Instructional coaches work part-time as coaches, and part-time in some other capacity.
- Instructional coaches work full-time as teachers, and receive a stipend and/or reassignment time to undertake coaching responsibilities.
- Other

Please, list the criteria that are used in your district to select instructional coaches:

Please, identify who supervises instructional coaches in your district:

- Building principal
- Central office administrator
- Lead Teacher/Department Head
- Other

Please, identify who evaluates instructional coaches in your district:

- Building Principal
- Central office administrator
- Lead Teacher/Department Head
- Other
Please, indicate how frequently instructional coaches in your district are evaluated:

- [ ] Twice Yearly
- [ ] Yearly
- [ ] Every Other Year
- [ ] Other [ ]

In which of the following activities do instructional coaches in your district participate? (Check all that apply.)

- [ ] Observing teachers and providing feedback
- [ ] Co-teaching and co-planning with teachers
- [ ] Facilitating professional development workshops
- [ ] Covering classes so one teacher may observe another teacher
- [ ] Helping teachers use data to improve their own instruction
- [ ] Evaluating teachers
- [ ] Other [ ]

What other information would you like to share about your district’s program of instructional coaching?

[ ]

Would administrators, teachers, and coaches in your district be willing to be interviewed about your district’s program of instructional coaching?

[ ] Yes
[ ] No

If you answered “yes” to the previous question, please, provide the email address and/or telephone number of the person in your district whom I should contact.

[ ]