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Teacher Empowerment Through Instructional Coaching: A Qualitative Study on the Theory and Application of Partnership Principles

Aviva Goelman Rice

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TEACHER EMPOWERMENT THROUGH INSTRUCTIONAL COACHING: A
QUALITATIVE STUDY ON THE THEORY AND APPLICATION OF PARTNERSHIP
PRINCIPLES

by

AVIVA GOELMAN RICE

(Under the Direction of Sabrina N. Ross)

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this research was to understand how instructional coaching in schools affects teachers and, specifically, whether increased teacher empowerment was associated with instructional coaching based on the framework of the Partnership Principles (Knight, 2007). A goal of the research was to find out whether, and to what extent, teachers identified themselves as empowered. Using Critical Theory (Freire, 2012) as the theoretical framework for this analysis, the study also sought to develop an understanding of how teacher empowerment may develop as a result of working with instructional coaches who utilize the Partnership Principles. Six teachers in a rural district in the U.S. Southeast participated in a semi-structured interview in order to understand more about how coaching that uses Partnership Principles affects teachers in ways that support or increase empowerment. The survey findings indicate that instructional coaching can contribute to empowerment, but that it can also lead to teachers feeling disempowered. Analysis of the interviews revealed important themes about teacher-coach relationships, teacher engagement with the coaching process, how coaching improves instruction, and how addressing teachers' professional learning needs supports their empowerment, all of which can inform the work of instructional coaches.

INDEX WORDS: Teacher Empowerment, Instructional Coaching, Partnership Principles

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A QUALITATIVE STUDY ON THE THEORY AND APPLICATION OF
PARTNERSHIP PRINCIPLES

by

AVIVA GOELMAN RICE

B.S., Wayne State University, 1988

M.Ed., Wayne State University, 1998

A Dissertation Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of Georgia Southern University in Partial

Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree

DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

STATESBORO, GEORGIA

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by

AVIVA GOELMAN RICE

Major Professor: Sabrina N. Ross

Committee: Marlynn Griffin

Ming Fang He

Meca Williams-Johnson

Electronic Version Approved:

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DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to two different, though not mutually exclusive, groups of people.

“A leader is powerful to the extent that he empowers others.” I Ching

First, this study is dedicated to educators—classroom teachers, instructional (or otherwise named) coaches, and administrators. The hearts of all true educators beat with the desire to make a difference in the lives of those they touch. Because I believe in the power of all educators to become leaders, not only of their own classrooms or schools, but of the profession itself, this work is dedicated to you in the hopes that it will bring refreshing validation to a teacher weary of the load of blame often heaped on her shoulders, that it will bring needed encouragement to coaches who are trying their best to support teachers, and that it will bring insight to administrators who want to use coaching programs to build capacity in their staff. Our collaboration is so much more important than we can know on any given day in the messy work of preparing students for a world none of us has yet seen.

~~~~~

*“It always seems impossible, until it’s done.” Nelson Mandela*

Second, this work is dedicated to my fellow foster care alumni and those who are now growing up apart from their families. Pursuing the highest levels of education is not something often associated with those of us who grow up in institutionalized care, but this work is a testament to the truth that apples do indeed fall far from the trees on which they grew and that the potential of a child is much more than the sum of his or her experiences. To my brothers and sisters from care: find your passion, stake your claim, and take your rightful place in making this world a better one than you found it.

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I so appreciate the six teachers who were brave and forthright enough to share with me the good, the bad, and the ugly of their experiences with coaching in order that we might all be enlightened about its potential and risk as a school improvement strategy. Additionally, my colleagues gave sound advice and communicated belief in me from the beginning of my program all the way through to the day of graduation. Teachers, coaches, and my professional learning teammates regularly checked on my progress (even when it seemed that I hadn't made any) and made sure that I did not stop pursuing this goal.

Lastly, I am so grateful to my family for their unflagging enthusiasm for the completion of this work. My grown children—Beth, Teresa, Jack, and Charles—have listened to my confused ramblings, lamented with me in times of frustration, and communicated, nonetheless, their pride in my work. I met my husband, Charlie, the year before I began my doctoral program and he has somehow remained my biggest cheerleader in regards to this pursuit, even when it meant I was unavailable for shared meals or to help with household chores. Knowing that he has been rooting for me through this whole process makes the completion of it that much sweeter—thanks for loving me.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

Increasingly, research documents the crucial role that teachers play in school improvement (Dean, Hubbell, Pitler, & Stone, 2013; Marzano, 2003) and student achievement (Sass, Hannaway, Xu, Figlio, & Feng, 2013). Teacher effectiveness is positively associated with student learning (Chetty, Friedman, & Rockoff, 2013; Sass et al., 2013), even when student backgrounds, such as socio-economic status, are controlled for (Slater, Davies, and Burgess, 2009). In fact, out of all factors positively associated with student learning, teachers have the greatest impact according to Hattie's meta-analytic research (Hattie, 2012); this was the same finding identified by Marzano's earlier meta-analysis (2003): teachers are the most significant school-level factor in student achievement. It is perhaps no wonder, then, that school reform efforts are heavily focused on teachers as both the subject and object of improvement in schools (Villegas-Reimers as cited in Fandino, 2010). Unfortunately, the focus on teachers in school reform efforts has too often been characterized by top-down remediation approaches to fixing teachers (Thornburg & Mungai, 2011) rather than collaborative approaches to empowering them. There is a world of difference between remediating teacher practice and providing teachers with the levels of support and sense of professional agency that could contribute to their empowerment. Given the important role teachers play in student achievement, it behooves the education community to continue to study—not how to fix teachers—but how to empower them to effectively do the immeasurably important work of preparing our youth for a future that impacts us all. This study explores relationships between professional development and teacher empowerment through a specific focus on the professional development and perceptions of

empowerment that teachers gain through instructional coaching. A discussion of relationships between teacher empowerment, professional development, and instructional coaching follows.

### **Teacher Empowerment**

Teacher empowerment is a relevant and potent aspect of school improvement. Teacher empowerment is comprised of structural factors such as access to crucial resources and working conditions that allow teachers to maintain control over decision-making critical to student learning, as well as individual factors such as an internal sense of self-efficacy and confidence in the importance of their daily work (Arneson & Ekbert, 2006; Schermuly, Meyer, & Dämmer, 2013; Spreitzer, 2008) which support (or fail to support) teachers' perceptions of their own growth and effectiveness (Klecker & Loadman, 1996a; Short & Rinehart, 1992a; Spreitzer, 1995).

Researchers have found evidence linking aspects of teacher empowerment to student achievement and instructional improvement (Avidov-Ungar & Shamir-Inbal, 2013; Squire-Kelly, 2012). For example, teacher empowerment is associated with teachers' receptiveness to school improvement initiatives (Lee, Yin, Zhang, & Jinn, 2011), successful school functioning (Ingersoll, 1996), and successful school reform (Thornburg & Mungai, 2011). Teacher empowerment is also associated with job satisfaction (Coble, 2011) and morale (Coble, 2011; Sagnak, 2012). The positive relationship between teacher empowerment and school improvement underscores the importance of exploring factors that contribute to teacher empowerment.

### **Professional Development through Instructional Coaching**

The goal of professional development is teacher learning and it has long been thought that teacher learning stimulates improvement in student learning, with good reason. Hattie



(2012) demonstrated that teachers' professional learning has a significant impact on student achievement, with a robust effect size of 0.62. There are multiple models of professional development in use in schools today and these models all strive to support teacher learning that impacts instructional practice. The model of instructional coaching shows unique promise in supporting teacher professional development (Cornett & Knight, 2009) and may also support teacher empowerment. Features unique to coaching as a means of professional development include collaboration, knowledge development, and reflection on practice (Reid, 2005; Shidler, 2009). Interestingly, these features have also been associated with teacher empowerment; for example, Kreisberg (1992) found relationships of co-agency to be an important facet of teacher empowerment and the development of competence and efficacy have been associated with teacher empowerment by other scholars in the field (Short & Rinehart, 1992a; Spreitzer, 1995; Klecker & Loadman, 1996a). Coaching can be considered a high-impact form of professional learning because it includes a strict focus on student learning that pays attention to adult decision-making and teacher practices, rather than programs (Reeves, 2012). Moreover, coaching contains the elements of successful professional development noted by many scholars in the field, including a focus on the needs of the adult learners, setting and monitoring goals for growth, and providing the resources that sustain growth and change in practice (Bellanca, 2009; Zepeda, 2008).

### **Instructional Coaching: Support or Surveillance?**

Despite the conceivable benefits of instructional coaching, the results of research on the effectiveness of this form of professional development as a school improvement measure are mixed (Horne, 2012). This is perhaps not surprising, given the aforementioned tendency toward top-down approaches to school improvement aimed at fixing teachers. Methods of instructional

coaching can promote teacher empowerment, but they can also promote teacher disempowerment, particularly if the instructional coach is perceived to represent interests other than those of teachers and students.

When all is said and done, empowerment cannot be far dissociated from its etymological root, power. Power is an ever-present dynamic in education, as it is in all social institutions (Foucault, 1977, 1980). Foucault (1977) wrote that power, effectively asserted, was invisible and normalized itself. The current era of accountability in education, with its concomitant walk-throughs, evaluation rubrics, and ongoing surveillance of teachers by administrators has become the norm in American schools (Smith & Kovacs, 2011) and representative of the power of the nameless and faceless, hence invisible, regulatory forces that micro-manage down to the classroom level. Methods of instructional coaching are, therefore, necessarily implicated in power dynamics. This relationship necessitates careful examination of the ways in which power can operate through the teacher-instructional coach relationship in positive and negative ways.

Power is important because it creates knowledge, truth, and the range of acceptable and appropriate behaviors in a given context (Foucault, 1980; Kreisberg, 1992). In a variety of contexts, both academic and cultural, the amassing of power is both coveted and admired and the usage of power to serve self-interests is normalized (Kreisberg, 1992). Thus, for instructional coaches, being in charge of others and having the authority to compel them to act could encourage acts of self-interest instead of actions that support teacher empowerment. An examination of power relations between teachers and instructional coaches is critical to this study because instructional coaches can easily be perceived by teachers as representing and aligned with the overall hegemony of public education inasmuch as they are charged with supporting instructional effectiveness via the implementation of school improvement initiatives.

Furthermore, power relations impact the control of important resources while being the mediators of transformative learning (Contu & Willmott, 2003), both of which come into play in the daily work of coaches. In other words, coaches can actually be (or be seen by teachers as) instruments of oppression and discipline on behalf of the larger bureaucracy or as co-conspirators in navigating the complex, unwieldy world of mandates and non-negotiables from forces within and outside of the school building that seek to boil all evidence of learning down into acceptable state achievement scores, the currency of the education system's "regime of truth" (Foucault, 1977).

The convoluted power relations between teachers and instructional coaches play themselves out in myriad ways, starting with how the teacher-instructional coach relationship is initiated and whether the collaboration is optional or mandatory. Additional examples of issues of power that play out in the teacher-instructional coach relationship include the surveillance of teacher instructional practices by coaches and the types and frequency of information about teachers, if any, that instructional coaches share with school administrators. In these examples, instructional coaching could be seen by teachers as an intrusion on their autonomy or a surveillance of their practice that could negatively impact the evaluation of their work. Inasmuch as teachers might view coaching as an infringement on their empowerment, alienation and powerlessness could be the result (Brooks, 2003).

Research on coaching in general is still in its preliminary stages as coaching is a relatively new development in education (Cornett & Knight, 2009). Much remains to be learned about the preparation and role of coaches, teachers' perceptions of empowerment resulting from the teacher-instructional coach relationship, and the ramifications of the work of instructional coaches on teachers and students. Few studies have examined teachers' perceptions of how

coaching programs affect their perceived empowerment. In order to ascertain the efficacy of instructional coaching as a way to support teacher empowerment and/or student learning, more study of relationships between teacher empowerment and instructional coaching is needed.

### **Purpose of the Study**

This study explores teachers' perceptions of empowerment gained through their work with instructional coaches. The aim is to capture the critical events and dialogue that signify teachers growing in their own sense of professional agency to uncover teacher empowerment, an understandably complex phenomenon. The data collected provides insight necessary to improve understanding of factors related to teacher empowerment through the professional development of instructional coaching. Through analysis of teachers' lived experiences with instructional coaching and of instructional coaches' work and experiences with teachers, the process of how teachers move towards empowerment through the instructional coaching relationship is highlighted. Information collected for this research also sheds light on the thinking of coaches and the mindset with which they approach the important work of supporting teachers whose actions in the classroom are intended to instigate student learning. This work contributes to ongoing scholarly inquiry on the topic of teacher empowerment as it is experienced in 21st century standards-based schools in which instructional coaching is a common structural feature.

### **Key Areas of Inquiry**

This study sheds light on a number of important questions pertinent to contemporary education in the United States. First, I am interested in knowing whether, and to what extent, teachers identify themselves as empowered. Given the present circumstances of American education in which the work of teachers is continually scrutinized and critiqued by those outside of the classroom, an understanding of how teachers develop their own sense of empowerment is

imperative. Secondly, I am interested in learning if professional learning in the form of instructional coaching has any bearing on the empowerment teachers perceive.

In question form, these are the critical queries this research endeavors to answer:

1. How are teachers' perceptions of empowerment influenced by their experiences with instructional coaches?
2. To what extent do coaches subscribe to the Partnership Principles in their work?
3. In what ways do the Partnership Principles help to support teachers' sense of empowerment?

### **Personal Justification**

I am interested in studying these ideas because they are ideas I have wrestled with my whole career. As a classroom teacher for 17 years, I have attended my fair share of workshops, trainings, and in-services. I often dreaded these sessions, either because the learning I was supposed to get was not practical for my classroom setting, because the facilitators were themselves not very capable of communicating the ideas or skills I was supposed to be acquiring, or because the provider of the professional learning was condescending and critical of classroom teachers. There were many times I brought other work to do or in other ways communicated my disdain for professional learning that I considered a waste of my time.

Fortunately, though, even from very early in my career, I found that some professional learning experiences were very meaningful, useful, and even transformative of my practice. These experiences all seemed to have some common elements: collaborative work with teacher peers, facilitators who demonstrated their practitioner-selves rather than their scholar-selves or expert-selves, and topics that had direct relevance to my work in the classroom. Knowing how positive professional learning could be to refresh and refine my practice only made sitting through the useless professional development sessions that much harder. The quality of

professional learning always seemed to be a gamble, justifying my trepidation about any type of in-service to which I was assigned.

My own sense of empowerment as a teacher came to me through the process of qualifying for National Board Certification. Several facets of this experience helped to shape my ongoing interest in the topic of teacher empowerment. I was fortunate to be able to participate in a cohort program provided by the Georgia State Department of Education which enabled me to have the support of colleagues who were also going through the National Board process and a facilitator who was herself certified in the same area in which I was working to become accredited. The intellectual and practical challenge of analyzing my own teaching was exciting for me; the fact that I had a collaborative cohort with which to share my insights and struggles as well as a facilitator who probed my thinking and described her own process made this the greatest professional learning experience I have ever personally had. Interestingly, the same components of collaborative learning, a facilitator who shared her experiences as a practitioner, and the direct relevance to my daily classroom teaching cemented my mindset about what high quality professional learning was all about. An additional feature of this professional learning experience was that I was not assigned to it; I chose to pursue National Board Certification because I really wanted the experience of better understanding the quality of my own practice.

After becoming National Board Certified, I discovered a sense of confidence in my capacity as a classroom teacher and as a supporter of other classroom teachers that I had not previously experienced even though I had more than a decade of teaching experience by this time. Becoming an NBCT did not make me an expert in teaching, but it did make me an expert on my own instructional practice and how to continually improve it, and I found that this sense of knowing and agency which fueled my own confidence as a teacher was appealing to other

teachers as well. Increasingly, I was asked by colleagues and administrators to provide support, training, demonstrations, mentoring, leadership and problem solving in various aspects of classroom practice. The informal influence I had in my building translated to a formal position as an instructional coach for our school, which was a 4th Year Needs Improvement School at that point. Being the only instructional coach in the school system meant that I did not have a collaborative support structure readily available to me, but my own inquiry and various resources brought me into contact fairly quickly with the most current scholarly work in the field of coaching at that time, which happened to be the Partnership Principles model of instructional coaching developed by Knight (2007).

In my three years as a site-based instructional coach, and the subsequent eight years I have worked as a district-level professional learning coach, I have found that those same components of professional learning that served my needs as a teacher also seemed to bring out the best response in the teachers for whose learning I have become responsible. The kind of professional learning provider I have committed to be is one who does professional learning with teachers rather than to them, which echoes the description of empowerment-as-transcendence put forth by Kreisberg (1992).

### **Study Significance for the Field of Curriculum Studies**

After experiencing the courses in the Curriculum Studies doctoral program at Georgia Southern University, I am perplexed about why such profound influences as Ayers (2004), Freire (2012), Giroux (1988), Kincheloe (2009) and many others were never shared with me in earlier training nor are these theorists common knowledge among educators, although their ideas about the purpose and meaning of public education as a means of developing a more just and democratic society resonate so strongly for me and would, I suspect, do the same for many other

teachers if they had the opportunity to learn about them. I believe that American education is still climbing out of the pit of the factory model of school organization and that these theorists are shining a beacon of light and hope for weary teachers to follow. But if the ideas of empowerment and social justice for all stakeholders in education, especially for students and teachers, are not shared with educators in some form or fashion, they are largely useless.

I believe this investigation is a wonderful opportunity to better understand how to bridge the gap between the set of theories which is Curriculum Studies and the actual daily practice of real-life teachers embroiled in all of the messiness of today's public schools. Because this study examines the Partnership Principles which are, according to the author, based upon the work of some of the giants in Curriculum Theory, including Freire and Giroux (Knight, 2007) in the context of coaching practices, it has the potential to be the type of bridge between theory and practice that can benefit all educators and bring them into contact with ways of thinking about public education that they may not have previously experienced. This study of the empowerment of teachers connects well to the goals of Curriculum Studies as described by Pinar, Reynolds, Slattery, and Taubman (1996); that is, to understand the theoretical and institutional bases of curriculum in order to better apprehend the political role of power in public education. The empowerment of teachers, whose unique position as the direct deliverers of curriculum to students places them in the nexus of all school reform, is the best site in which to continue to develop an appreciation of "the relationship between the curriculum and the world" (Pinar et al., 1996, p. 6).

This research is also intended to further the knowledge base of curriculum as political text (Pinar et al, 1996) in education settings. This inquiry seeks to uncover ways that instructional coaching impacts teachers, especially in terms of power and oppression.



Instructional coaching has the potential to serve as a pathway enabling individual teachers to claim their professional voices or it can be a tool used to de-professionalize educators and force them into a mold of compliance with ever increasing hegemonic mandates and accountability structures. Coaches are neither classroom teachers nor administrators and occupy a role in the hierarchy of influence in schools that is largely uninvestigated. There is a danger in reproducing more levels of social stratification in schools (Pinar et al, 1996), especially if teachers who do the main work of educating students, are pushed to lower levels of control and influence in schools as new roles, such as instructional coaches, are introduced.

Another way this work contributes to curriculum studies is its potential to better understand instructional coaching as a facet of schools that represents an emerging hidden curriculum (Jackson, 1968) that can have serious implications for student learning. The work of coaches serves to construct knowledge and practice for and with teachers; as such, the norms and values of coaching must be examined in order to understand how these impact teachers who, in turn, are expected to use what is gleaned from their interactions with coaches in their classrooms. Giroux (1988) affirms the importance of identifying the structures in schools that support teachers in developing instructional methods that preserve opportunities for students to be active subjects in their own learning; because coaching is primarily concerned with the teaching and learning process, a better understanding of how coaching affects teachers serves to enable this hidden curriculum to be revealed and potentially negative effects to be circumvented.

The results of this study are also be significant to a number of stakeholders in contemporary public education. The knowledge generated by this inquiry is of interest to policy makers and all those who are charged with improving the effectiveness of schools. Teachers are experiencing burnout in record numbers (U.S. Department of Education, 2010) and attrition is

hemorrhaging the available supply of experienced, talented, and committed educators, especially in the highest need schools (U.S. Department of Education, 2010). Teacher empowerment is a viable pathway to pursue for those interested in changing this trend, such as policymakers. Teachers themselves can use the information presented here to understand how they can create their own empowerment and increase their resiliency in the highly stressful endeavor that is American education in the age of accountability (Nichols & Parsons, 2011). Administrators, both site-based and district-based, have evidence of methods which can be used to increase teacher empowerment, thereby increasing support for schools' goals (U.S. Department of Education, 2010). Instructional coaches can better understand the impact of their work and, in particular, the significance of the philosophical framework with which they approach their work.

### **Structure of Dissertation**

Chapter One provides an introduction to the importance of studying teacher empowerment and also discusses relationships between teacher empowerment, instructional coaching, and school improvement. Chapter Two provides a description and critique of the body of scholarly knowledge available on the topics of teacher empowerment and instructional coaching. Chapter Three presents the qualitative research design of semi-structured interviewing used in this study. Chapter Four presents an analysis of data collected in this study and Chapter Five discusses the research findings and implications for further study.

## **CHAPTER 2**

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

The first section of this chapter provides a review of literature related to the theoretical framework of this study: critical theory; the concept of transformative learning; self-determination theory; and pragmatism. The second section of this chapter reviews six interrelated bodies of literature: (a) psychological and structural empowerment; (b) general features of teacher empowerment; (c) opportunities for teacher empowerment; (d) professional learning; (e) instructional coaching; and (f) relationship between teacher empowerment and professional learning.

#### **Theoretical Framework**

Theoretical frameworks are essential in scholarly inquiry in order to provide a frame of context and structure for the new knowledge generated by research (Crotty, 1998). The focus of this study is on the commodity of power as it is wielded and distributed in schools and especially as it plays out in the relationships between teachers and instructional coaches. Because coaches are not formal supervisors of teachers, they don't have official power over teachers. However, the overt ways that coaching work influences teachers and the unofficial ways coaches might exert power over the work of teachers is unknown and ripe for exploration as the popularity of instructional coaching increases in schools. The role of instructional coaches positions them as potential sources for the psychological and structural empowerment (Schermully et al, 2013) of teachers. Since understanding more about the transformative power enacted in coaching relationships and its potential for empowering teachers and improving schools is the focus of this research, a suitable theoretical framework is one which views power as a concept central to understanding education as a social and relational institution.

## **Critical Theory**

The study of power—how it is created, used, shared, and obstructed—rests securely in the tradition of critical theory (Crotty, 1998). If the empowerment of teachers matters at all, it is because of a worldview which suggests that humans organize our lives around our own self-interests (Crotty, 1998) and, to the extent that teachers are micro-managed by others with oppressive power resulting in limitations preventing them from pursuing their own self-interests, teachers are oppressed (Freire, 2012). The search for teacher empowerment is predicated on a belief that power can be found, created, and used for the common good, another tenet of Critical Theory (Kreisberg, 1992). Those who are empowered possess the capacity to pursue social justice for themselves and others (Pinar et al., 1996).

Critical theory, well-suited as a theoretical framework upon which scholarly inquiry can be based, is sometimes seen negatively in public education because it refuses to cast a blind eye to the injustice inherent in the world as a result of misuses of power (Pinar et al., 1996). Critical theory seeks to pull back the curtain on our assumptions to examine the political machinations that drive policymaking in contemporary education (Berbules & Berk, 1996). Critical theorists understand that those with power use it to author a master narrative, which privileges them and perpetuates cultural norms that lull the oppressed into acceptance of the status quo through hegemony (Pinar et al., 1996).

Since schools participate in perpetuating societal inequities (Pinar et al., 1996), and the goal of all work based on critical theory is to work towards a more socially just world, situating this inquiry on power relations in the public school setting is logical. The goal for critical theorists is to raise critical consciousness as a precursor to social activism (Crotty, 1998). The research proposed here is to be conducted in that vein; namely, to contribute to the knowledge

base about how coaching philosophies may be useful in arousing critical consciousness in coaches and teachers who share the goal of empowerment and emancipatory learning of practicing teachers.

The choice of Critical Theory as the theoretical framework for this inquiry is particularly significant. Instructional coaches are a new breed of educator in public schools today; they don't have the power over teachers that administrators do, which begs the question of what their purpose is, since schools have so long been organized around power structures. I posit that instructional coaches who use sound coaching practices have power with, rather than power over, teachers, an empowerment paradigm espoused by Kreisberg (1992).

Coaches are uniquely situated in the organizational structure of schools to cultivate teachers' voices and to support them in self-advocating and creating power of their own (Kreisberg, 1992). The questions Critical Theory asks about whom a policy privileges and whom it disenfranchises are questions that this research addresses and the results from this inquiry contribute to the discussion on the rationale of coaching as a viable, and empowering, professional learning paradigm. Ultimately, the results reveal information about the potential for instructional coaching to be a method of transmitting transformative power to teachers through the use of coaching strategies (Kreisberg, 1992) and serve as a bellwether of caution for coaches against the incorporation of dominance-submission power dichotomies in their practice.

The methods proposed for this inquiry are based upon a theoretical framework that is skeptical of a singular truth (Crotty, 1998); hence the desire to interview both teachers and coaches to better understand how these perspectives might relate to, and be informed by, one another. The goal of inquiry which has Critical Theory as its theoretical framework is to enable an increase in our critical capacity of the ways in which power is unequally wielded in the hopes

of increasing the power of those currently disenfranchised (Berbules & Berk, 1999). Through the use of Critical Theory, an exploration of empowerment-as-transcendence is possible.

Transformation of thinking and being, as espoused by scholars from Freire (2012) to Kreisberg (1992) to Mezirow (2000) to Knight (2007), is a sound foundation upon which inquiry into increasing the empowerment of teachers in today's educational climate can be built.

### **Transformative Learning Theory**

Critical Theory is not the only lens through which I analyzed the data collected about the phenomena of coaching beliefs and subsequent teacher perceptions of empowerment. Mezirow (1991) is a critical theorist whose work promotes the realization of abstract concepts such as emancipation, rationality, education, and democracy in adult learning. Mezirow, like Kreisberg, is interested in transformation; the transformation Mezirow is looking for is a transformation in the thinking of teachers as a result of the professional learning afforded to them. Like Knight, Mezirow attributes much of his theory to the influence of Freire as reflected in this quote, "The broader purpose...of adult education is to help adults realize their potential for becoming more liberated, socially responsible, and autonomous learners—that is, to make more informed choices by becoming more critically reflective as dialogic thinkers" (2000, page 30).

Mezirow (2000) sees professional learning providers as cultural activists who help the adults with whom they work realize their personal or professional learning goals through reflective discourse. Furthermore, Mezirow (1991) cites coaching as a valid method of bringing about the transformation of thinking that has the potential to empower adult learners. Those who are adherents of Transformative Learning Theory (Mezirow & Taylor, 2009) value adult education based on democratic principles and arousing the conscientization that has the potential to emancipate those who are oppressed (Freire, 2012). Appropriate uses of Transformative

Learning Theory include the use of communities of learners, facilitated by knowledgeable peers, who together reflect on problems posed in their actual work contexts in order to develop deeper understanding and develop innovative ways of approaching these problems (Mezirow & Taylor, 2009). The inclusion of Transformative Learning Theory as a theoretical framework keeps this inquiry grounded in and well-aligned to literature on ways of conducting professional learning as well as anticipated outcomes for the specific way of doing professional learning that is known as instructional coaching.

### **Self-Determination Theory**

While both Critical Theory and Transformative Learning Theory help to situate this inquiry in the context of a study of power in schools, this study does not just focus on the systemic, institutional uses of power dynamics, but also on the interpersonal, individual relationships between actual coaches and teachers. For this reason, Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000) is another helpful theoretical lens through which to view the results of this study. The inclusion of Self-Determination Theory (SDT) allows an interpretation of the data that requires examination of potential influences instructional coaching has on classroom teachers in areas that are key to empowerment.

SDT posits that the psychological needs for competence, autonomy, and relatedness must be met in order for optimal performance in the workplace (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Having healthy social support for competence, autonomy, and relatedness releases the intrinsic motivation necessary to move towards growth and improved performance (Ryan & Deci, 2000); goals of growth and improved performance are highly complementary to the objectives coaches have for their own work with teachers. Coaching from the framework of the Partnership Principles has

great potential when situated within the theoretical framework of SDT because it provides autonomy support for, rather than control of, teacher practice.

Effective coaching supports teachers in improving their instructional competence, while providing teachers with control (autonomy) over their own professional learning destiny, in the context of relatedness with the coach and other colleagues, all of the requirements SDT adherents maintain is necessary for growth and psychological need-fulfillment (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Furthermore, the Partnership Principles can be understood as an operationalized framework for SDT since the confluence of the practices of equality, choice, voice, dialogue, praxis, reciprocity, and reflection all serve to support teachers in the internalization of external motivators for action, an essential understanding of SDT (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Because of the stance on motivation SDT allows, actions towards a goal can be taken, even when the goal itself is not internally motivated, which is significant when applied to school improvement contexts that are most frequently not initiated by teachers.

SDT views individuals working through a change process to pass through a continuum of motivation factors which will, if followed to their logical conclusion result in the individual owning the new behavior and choosing it of their own volition, even though the new behavior was at first foreign. Coaches, as symbols of external regulators, work with teachers to explore a new teaching behavior; according to SDT, teachers, as they grapple with the new teaching behavior, psychologically move from external motivation for the behavior to internal, integrated motivation for the instructional practice (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Ideally, coaching would facilitate this process for teachers so that implementation of sound school improvement initiatives could be less burdensome and would ultimately be practices the teacher would be interested in pursuing on their own, regardless of external mandates to do so.



In other words, the nature of coaches' work requires them to regularly bring ideas about ways to improve instruction to teachers, asking them to consider incorporating these into their practice; in the current power structure of schools, it is to a teacher's political benefit to embrace the many options for improved instructional practice proposed by coaches, although it may not be particularly feasible or easy to do so. The value of SDT as a theoretical framework within which to interpret this research is that it offers a continuum for teachers (as the object of the work of coaches) to progress through the process of instructional improvement without threatening that teacher's sense of competence, autonomy, or relatedness or de-skilling the teacher. For example, say a coach is mandated by the district to introduce and implement a specific rubric for scoring student writing to math teachers.

This scenario sounds like the antithesis of choice and destined to quash any hopes for teacher empowerment, despite its very realistic representation of the types of challenges facing teachers and coaches in their work together. An understanding of the application of SDT, opens up possibilities for the productive use of power with (Kreisberg, 1992) and support for teachers immersed in the often-messy process of instructional improvement because action on behalf of instructional improvement doesn't have to be internally motivated (Deci & Ryan, 2000). In the milieu of their shared collegial relationship, both teacher and coach can acknowledge that the new writing rubric may be cumbersome or challenging to incorporate, without compromising the work of acclimating to it and without requiring the teacher to accept being controlled by the initiative but instead be supported in their autonomy of how, when and why to use the rubric. SDT provides a pathway for embracing change and integrating it into an empowered self and, furthermore, values social context support (Deci & Ryan, 2000) such as that provided by an

instructional coach who exerts power with teachers by providing social interactions that support autonomy, competence, and relatedness on the implementation of the new rubric.

Through dialogue, teachers reflect with coaches on previous choice made with the rubric, how those choices worked out in terms of student learning and other options are worthy of exploration in terms of the rubric. When teachers have the social support to make their own choices, they experience empowerment to pursue their own well-being (Deci & Ryan, 2000). It is not accident that features of SDT, including dialogue, reflection, and choice, also happen to be features identified as Partnership Principles (Knight, 2007). By incorporating SDT as a theoretical framework for this study, the outcomes of the inquiry have relevance and usefulness to coaches pursuing their own professional learning; conclusions derived can help them understand the importance of their beliefs about coaching and how those beliefs may impact their interactions with teachers and, in turn, the overall effectiveness of their practice in supporting teachers in instructional improvement.

### **Pragmatism**

A final theoretical consideration is the understanding that this inquiry is also situated in the tradition of pragmatism (Crotty, 1998; Morgan, 2007). Pragmatism was originally conceived of as critical in nature and that, as a result of application in research become known as opposing Critical Theory (Crotty, 1998). This study leans on pragmatism as a theoretical framework in that it dares to look into the “first things,” namely the philosophical underpinnings of instructional coaches to determine the relationship between these first things and teacher empowerment, the “last things” (Crotty, 1998). Pragmatism values the idea that meaning is individually constructed while concomitantly valuing the need to question assumptions handed to us via enculturation (Crotty, 1998).

Inasmuch as school reforms, accountability measures, and instructional coaches are part of the contemporary culture of schools, pragmatism demands that research examine these features of school culture to determine their influence. Indeed, the idea that the research questions themselves are intricately related to both the theoretical framework and the research methods chosen is asserted by Morgan (2007). The questions put forth for this research in the next section attempt to capture the thrust of this inquiry by working together to distill connections between the values held by coaches about their work and the outcomes for teachers of coaching values as they are translated into coaching practices. Pragmatism captures the disparate threads of the complex interactions between coach beliefs and teacher experiences of empowerment and pulls these threads into a coherent whole.

### **Empowerment: Psychological and Structural**

A careful look at psychology, the domain from which empowerment comes, reveals more about this complex phenomenon. For example, Spreitzer (2008), identified features of empowerment that are global and social-structural as well as those that are experienced by individuals who self-empower through the integration of their beliefs and perceptions with the work environment. Similarly, Schermuly et al. (2013) disclosed that there are actually two constructs that contribute to empowerment: psychological empowerment and structural empowerment.

Psychological empowerment is a perception or belief an employee has about their relationship to their work. Psychological empowerment is a mindset that involves potent meanings attached to identity, competence, self-determination, and impact (Schermuly et al., 2013; Spreitzer, 2008). This type of empowerment comes from within and is not dependent on the approval or permission of one's supervisors. A person who can be said to possess this form

of empowerment has a sense of him- or herself as a capable, respected member of the organization whose ideas and actions matter; in education, this translates to a teacher with a sense of critical agency in their daily work with students (Giroux, 1988). Psychological empowerment seems to hold greater potential for teachers who wish to experience their work as liberatory and is less dependent on factors outside of teachers' control. Psychological empowerment embodies factors necessary for transcendent change that can improve the lives of teachers and students alike as teachers develop a greater sense of their own competence and ability to take instructional risks.

The second type of empowerment includes structural factors such as policies and rules within the work environment made by those with formal authority and power; an example of structural empowerment in schools can be seen in efforts to decentralize decision-making, much as distributed leadership models purport to do (Crawford, 2012). This type of empowerment is contextual and dependent on the will of those with formal authority; as such, it is only pseudo-empowerment, from teachers' perspectives, because a new leader or change in authority structure erases whatever autonomy was previously held by those who were the beneficiaries of that structure. Structural empowerment lacks authenticity for another reason: the power to create structures in schools (including those that might theoretically be empowering to teachers) is held by multiple stakeholders, none of whom are the teachers in an actual school.

Indeed, these stakeholders, whether they are school board members, site-based administrators, district administrators, parents, or legislators acting from a great distance, create the most important structure in a school: the knowledge/power structure (Foucault, 1977) by which teachers are judged. Each of these stakeholders collectively, though not collaboratively, determines what is acceptable in the classroom; the array of policy decisions controlled by non-

teachers is vast and discouraging to all who perceive teacher empowerment as a co-requisite to improving instruction. For example, students complete perception surveys about their teachers, parents complete climate surveys about their schools, and administrators are charged with school improvement based on the results of these opinion surveys (Georgia Department of Education, 2015).

The data from such exercises become the “knowledge” that is privileged about a school and drives decisions about school policies and structures, thus investing a great deal of power in voices not directly involved in teaching and learning. Instructional coaches subsequently become part of the structure of schools as they work with administrators to achieve desired school improvement goals. Because privileged knowledge is synonymous with bureaucratic power (Foucault, 1980), the omission of teachers from the process of generating privileged knowledge calls into serious question the ability for teacher empowerment to arise in any reliable way from structures embedded in the operations of contemporary schools. Structural empowerment alone is lacking as a model for meaningful empowerment for teachers because of its transient nature based on the decision making authority of others and its lack of relationship to teachers’ voices as well as their own sense of efficacy, ability, autonomy, or importance within their role as educators.

### **General Features of Teacher Empowerment**

Many of the identified features of empowerment are structural in nature (Spreitzer, 2008) and external to any individual teacher. For example, empowerment in the education setting can mean formal power such as that invested in a grade chair or it can refer to the kind of informal and intangible influence a well-respected teacher has among his or her professional peers (Webster in Walling, 1999). For Futrell (1994), empowered teachers are simply educators who

are leaders and learners in their own schools, but Webster (in Walling, 1999) felt that a component of authority, or site-based decision-making ability, was necessary to qualify one as empowered. Other defining characteristics of teacher empowerment include collegiality and acknowledgement, personal growth, involvement in the design and planning process of schools, and the autonomy to make decisions concomitant with the opportunity to participate in professional learning (Duhon, 1999). Moye, Henkin, and Egle (2005) found that trust in the building principal was positively associated with teacher empowerment, further removing empowerment from the realm of teacher agency and placing responsibility for it in the hands of those outside the classroom. Similarly, Lee and Nie (2014) found that teacher perceptions of empowering behavior of administrators predicted the teachers' own self-report of empowerment, leading these researchers to conclude that teachers' psychological empowerment was the outcome of structural empowerment factors. Short and Rinehart (1992b) have been widely recognized for their identification of six dimensions of empowerment: decision-making, professional growth, status, self-efficacy, autonomy, and impact. Of these facets only one, self-efficacy, emanates from the individual teacher's own sense of empowerment; the others are dependent upon actors external to the teacher. Overall, many of the features identified as aspects of teacher empowerment seem structural in nature and echo the idea that empowerment comes only with formal authority or approval.

### **Authority and Decision-Making**

Digging deeper into structural empowerment reveals common vocabulary used in an attempt to capture its nature. Some refer to authority (Lee & Nie, 2014; Seibert, Silver, & Randolph, 2004; Spreitzer, 2008), which is described as having power in the school building. Usually, authority is simply a substitution for the word decision-making (Short & Rinehart,

1992b; Spreitzer, 1995). Since teachers carry out the actual implementation of curriculum, instruction, assessment, and school reform initiatives, it is logical that their role in decision-making would be commensurate with these responsibilities (Hicks & DeWalt, 2006). Enderlin-Lampe (2002) found that shared decision making as a function of teacher empowerment was often executed in a haphazard and confusing way in schools, leaving teachers uncertain of what exactly they were empowered to do; since teacher decision making was dependent on the site-based administration at the time, it fluctuated widely and could not be a reliable source of teacher empowerment. Unfortunately, as Davis (1997) noted, site-based decision making in which all stakeholders have a voice could count as empowerment, except that these structures usually offer little actual power to change the direction of the school, its policies, procedures, calendar, or curriculum. Pearson and Moomaw (2005) supported this conclusion when they found that decision-making decreased teachers' sense of empowerment and Lee et al. (2011) confirmed that decision-making was negatively associated with teachers' expectations of the outcomes of reform initiatives.

### **Autonomy**

A related term used to clarify important aspects of structural empowerment is autonomy (Moye et al., 2005; Short & Rinehart, 1992b; Usma Wilches, 2007). Ingersoll (1996) validated that increases in teacher autonomy are related to decreases in school conflict but that the types of issues over which teachers are given autonomy rarely have to do with the critical aspects of teaching and learning over which teachers should ideally have autonomy. Teacher autonomy has been defined as the freedom to determine the best instructional pathway for student learning (Pearson & Moomaw, 2005); these researchers demonstrated that empowerment and professionalism were shown to increase as curricular autonomy increased, which could mean

that autonomy would be one supportive structural factor for empowerment. However, it has not been chosen as a feature for this study for some important reasons. Autonomy in limited decision making roles allowed by this year's principal or central office staff is simply not enough to free teachers from the oppressive structures of accountability within which they are enmeshed, nor does it hold promise for lasting professionalization of educators, since it is dependent on the will and whim of those who hold formal power. In fact, Hand (2006) identified autonomy as a freedom-limiting construct in that it only exists in the relationship between the one with power who bestows limited authority on the one receiving the autonomy; authentic freedom to choose a course of action independent of those in power is actually prohibited. Teachers typically do not have authority over which students they teach, who their colleagues or administrators are, curriculum standards, teaching materials available, district policy or scheduling (Webster in Walling, 1999); the entrenched nature of the institution of American education suggests that wholesale autonomy is not available, nor even helpful, as a standalone strategy for increasing teacher empowerment.

### **Features of Teacher Empowerment Aligned with this Study**

The words used to describe structural empowerment thus far have something in common—they each fall short of creating a meaningful pathway out of the all-too-common experience of disempowerment which plagues teachers in the contemporary educational climate (Fullan & Hargreaves, 1996; Milner, 2013). Other words have been applied to the understanding of empowerment as a psychological construct, words that are unwed to the external work environment and instead are a feature of individuals and the beliefs held about themselves and their role in the organization (Spreitzer, 2008). Vincenz (1990) identified these beliefs as potency, independence, relatedness, motivation, values, and joy of life and used them as



subscales to measure general empowerment. Spreitzer (1995) asserted that there are four features of empowerment at work: meaning (value or importance of the work), competence (self-efficacy), self-determination (choice), and impact (influence on the outcomes of the organization). These psychological aspects of empowerment are more aligned to the focus of the research being proposed and are reviewed below.

### **Self-Efficacy**

The facet of self-efficacy (Schermyly et al., 2013; Short & Rinehart, 1992b) as a function of psychological empowerment is important to highlight; Muijs and Reynolds (2015) affirm that teacher self-efficacy has been repeatedly associated with positive student learning outcomes. Teacher self-efficacy comes from the belief that all students can learn and that one is able to teach in such a way that students do learn (Enderlin-Lampe, 2002).

Despite the apparent individual nature of teacher self-efficacy, multiple researchers have demonstrated that teacher self-efficacy is actually improved by collegial work rather than any specific sense of individual empowerment (Clarke, 2012; Edwards & Newton, 1995; Ghani, Hussin, & Jusoff, 2009; Henson, 2001). An important insight shared by Sprague (1992) helps to shed light on the elusive nature of empowerment in education: teaching is a collective profession in that teachers act on behalf of the common good of their students; the work of teachers is collectively shared between the teacher and his or her class as well as across teachers in terms of collaborative work. As such, the work of teachers is actually counterintuitive to American sensibilities of empowerment because of prized ideals of our individualistic, capitalist market economy and its accompanying norms. To be empowered in other professions means to get ahead somehow, either financially or in terms of status or authoritative power; with education, however, these are not the pathway to empowerment. This idea helps to explain why

Vincenz (1990) concluded that participation in community is associated with higher levels of empowerment because collegiality taps into both an increased sense of personal power at the same time as a greater than average relatedness is experienced, which boosts self-confidence in one's ability to increase skills and influence policy. It is logical, then, to consider that a salient feature of teacher empowerment may be the affirmation of self-efficacy via the freedom to refine instructional practices in the context of community.

### **Self-Determination**

Another facet of psychological empowerment that bears closer scrutiny is self-determination. Self-determination (Spreitzer, 1995) and autonomy (Short & Rinehart, 1992b) seem to be synonymous, yet the former is considered a psychological feature of empowerment and the latter, structural. Today's teachers, in this era of accountability, sanctions, and evaluations tied to teacher pay and student performance, would benefit from a personal sense of the ability to make a difference in the conditions and outcomes of their own work. Empowered teachers emerge from the role of technician and deliverer of someone else's ideas of how to best promote learning for students, thrust on them by those outside the classroom, to embrace their status as true professionals who exist in a state of being able to determine and act on what is pedagogically sound. Therein lies the difference between autonomy and self-determination.

For teachers, greater empowerment is experienced as they manifest agency in their work environments (Priestley, Edwards, Priestley, & Miller, 2012); thus, teachers' primary opportunities for agency, and empowerment, come about via the design of instruction in the classroom. Relevant autonomy in curriculum and instruction, rather than the managerial tasks of running a school, is both a doable and realistic outcome of increases in teacher empowerment (Spreitzer, 2008). Simply put, voting on a choice of school calendars (autonomy) is a lot less

satisfying than making the choices necessary to develop meaningful instruction that supports student learning in one's own classroom (self-determination).

Usma Wilches (2007) recognized the importance of discriminating between domains of autonomy such as curriculum development, instruction, assessment, professional learning, and school functioning, intimating that teachers' sense of empowerment would differ if explorations of the way autonomy relates to empowerment were that fine-grained. As Pearson and Moomaw put it, "If teachers are to be empowered and regarded as professionals, then, like other professionals, they must have the freedom to prescribe the best treatment for their students" (2006, p. 44). When outside forces strip teachers of this primary function of designing instruction to meet students' needs and instead expect teachers to deliver prepackaged curricula (Smith & Kovacs, 2011), progress monitor at mandated intervals, and use only the district-approved instructional interventions, teachers can then be said to be disempowered. It is not surprising to find that perceptions of empowerment are highly correlative with perceived professionalism (Pearson & Moomaw, 2005). Without direct accessibility to empowerment by teachers themselves, it is difficult to ameliorate the unfortunate dynamic between teachers and all those who continue to have dominating power over them and their work, which in fact creates and perpetuates powerlessness (Kreisberg, 1992).

Schmoker and Wilson (1994) defined teacher empowerment as authentic teacher leadership, suggesting that these are teachers who know where to go, how to get there, and have the authority to do so. Their idea has been borne out by the research: teacher empowerment consists of both structural and psychological features. Seibert et al. (2004) propose analyzing empowerment using a multiple-level model that incorporates both structural and psychological features and others (Haikin & Duncombe, 2013; Moye et al., 2005) demonstrated meaningful

progress in understanding empowerment by studying structural and psychological empowerment together. Furthermore, the two aspects of empowerment appear to be related as catalysts of change in that environmental structures can serve to empower or disempower teachers and, as a result, teachers may change their behaviors such that they impact the structure of the school (often via teacher leadership pathways) in ways that either exercise their empowerment or open up space for teacher empowerment to grow (Haikin & Duncombe, 2013; Moye et al., 2005; Seibert et al., 2004; Shetty, 1991; Spreitzer, 2008).

Although the research proposed here focuses on the psychological features of teacher empowerment, it would be remiss to neglect acknowledging that the presence of an instructional coach in a school is part of the structure of that work environment. The subject of this inquiry is the nature of the coaching and the relationship built between coaches and teachers, which explains the focus on factors of psychological empowerment without denying the validity and importance of structure factors of empowerment which are beyond the scope of this work.

### **Empowerment as Transcendence**

Our understanding of power relations doesn't preclude the possibility for power to be used productively in social contexts (Gore, 1995); the common narrative of dominance and submission in power relations, however, warrants deeper exploration into relationships between teachers and coaches as unique contexts of the struggle for productive uses of power.

Empowerment in this work includes the awareness of teachers that they are indeed involved with the implementation of education policy, which, in and of itself, is a powerful role (Naidu, 2011); teachers with this awareness will act in ways that maximize this power for the benefit of their students. This awareness is bolstered by an understanding of how power works; indeed, empowerment is preceded by developing a critical awareness of one's social condition and

health of the social condition of one's setting (Kreisberg, 1992). He maintained that despite the pervasiveness of oppression in schools, the ability to instigate change on an individual level cannot be squelched by anyone in a dominative position; thus, teacher beliefs come heavily into play as teachers create their own empowerment. As a result, the working definition of empowerment-as-transcendence, described above, captures the active, process-oriented dimension of empowerment that occurs when teachers create, and re-create, a sense of control over the possibilities for agency in their work environments.

Foucault's line of thinking on power relations has been juxtaposed with an alternative construct for understanding power in schools (Kreisberg, 1992). Kreisberg differentiated between "power over"—the kind of power which dominates and oppresses—and "power with," a kind of power which transcends restrictions and conflicts. Power with, as Kreisberg (1992) referred to it, is a productive sense of co-agency among colleagues (Riveros, Newton, & Burgess, 2012); it is nurtured in the context of relationships which generate "response-ability," or the ability to respond and grow. This meaning of teacher empowerment is far richer and far more likely to result in true school reform that improves the lives of both students and teachers. Empowerment-as-transcendence or psychological empowerment (Schermuly et al., 2013) is the definition intended for the study which is the focus of this work. This connotation is preferable because it is well-suited for teachers locked in a system in which most major decisions affecting their everyday lives in the classroom are made by faceless governmental and policymaking bodies. Furthermore, empowerment-as-transcendence is both realistic and hopeful; it acknowledges that the massive machination which is the institution of public education in contemporary America is not simply going to dissolve as a result of teachers rising up to take

hold of their own power. If teachers are not allowed decision-making capability, does this then preclude empowerment for them?

As Freire's model of liberatory education demonstrates (2012), changing the structures of an institution is not a necessary pathway for empowerment of its subjects. Instead, working with teachers to support them, as this empowerment-as-transcendence method would suggest, embraces the process of empowerment as an ongoing experience of growing awareness which gives rise to an ability to see the possibilities for action on one's behalf and in one's own current context (Shetty, 1991). It is well-aligned to views of conscientization (Freire, 2012), in which both teacher consciousness and conscience are linked together in ways that enlighten them to the power of their own knowledge and actions. The focus for this work is on how teachers can be supported to empower themselves given the confining structures of contemporary education. This view of empowerment-as-transcendence goes beyond the dimensions of empowerment suggested by Short and Rinehart (1992b) because it is not dependent on those with official authority to grant the empowerment to teachers; rather it is a way for teachers to grow in their own ability to self-empower.

Other authors have come to similar conclusions as Kreisberg about salient aspects of empowerment that are correlative with the meaning of liberatory education espoused by Freire (2012). For example, Fandiño (2010) sees teacher empowerment as a generative theme for democratic and emancipatory change for schools, teachers, students, and the larger society. Indeed, he delineates three types of empowerment—individual, collective, and social (Fandiño, 2010)—because empowerment is a process which builds the capacity for power in all who participate in activities which are empowering. Duhon (1999) asserted that power is created and used by teachers when they become knowledgeable about the tools and practices which give

school stakeholders a voice and can be described as a kind of political diplomacy. Furthermore, Davis (1997, p. 189) confirms that “[I]ndividuals and institutions empower themselves. Power is not given; it is asserted.” The nurturance of empowerment as transcendence is the operationalized definition of teacher empowerment intended for this inquiry.

### **Opportunities for Teacher Empowerment**

There are numerous sources of teacher power that can be tapped into at will. Duhon (1999) identifies seven such sources of power: legitimate power which is given by those in authority; positional power which relates to status such as a job title; referent power which describes one’s personal attractiveness and charisma; informational power is the influence gained from reputation of being able to find information; expert power is the result of the reputation of the teacher based on their competence and is given by students, parents, colleagues, administrators; connective power describes teacher’s political finesse; and coercive power denotes the ability a teacher has to reward and punish. Pearson and Moomaw (2005) explained that a valid source of teacher power is being seen as an authority, both over the operations of the classroom and as an expert in the field. Despite the many ways teachers have of regularly accessing power, it is undeniable that they are still dominated by their administrators and in turn are expected to dominate their students (Sprague, 1992; Smith & Kovacs, 2011); in this atmosphere, the exercise of authentic personal power is nearly impossible.

A number of authors have taken the acquisition of teacher empowerment in a different direction. For example, Clarke (2012) conducted case study research in which teachers were given the opportunity to pursue personally meaningful inquiry about their work. Repeatedly, teachers who were given this opportunity reflected on the emancipatory nature of being able to pursue that which was important to them, to find their own path, and to pursue questions which

had relevance for their own classroom. Henson (2001) also found that teacher-conducted research had a positive impact on experiences of empowerment; personal empowerment and self-efficacy were improved for teachers as they sought interventions for real student needs in their own classrooms and experienced success in ways that proved their work makes a difference in student learning. Likewise, Sprague (1992) recommended teacher-directed research, whether conducted as action research or direct inquiry. Teacher-centered research is empowering because it allows teachers to determine the most pressing needs in terms of research and development of curriculum and pedagogy. Instead of indoctrinating teachers with research-based best practices developed in other contexts, teachers who are empowered to exercise their intellectual selves will be the producers of new knowledge in the field, rather than the objects of it (Sprague, 1992). Dialogical methods, advocated decades ago by Freire (2012), allow teachers to utilize their voices for their own emancipatory learning.

There are some methods of exercising teacher empowerment that can have deleterious effects, but may be used, nonetheless, by teachers who feel their options are limited in terms of being respected enough to exercise their empowerment at work. Priestley et al. (2012) contended that there is room in teaching, even in traditional top-down models of schooling in which the primary value seems to be accountability, for teacher agency. Naidu (2011) suggested that teachers first acknowledge that they are more than policy implementers and that they actively resist reform measures deemed detrimental to students' best interests. Knight (2009b) affirmed that it is not the responsibility of teachers to simply yield their wills to every next initiative, but that it is actually incumbent upon professional learning providers, administrators, or others who seek change in teachers to make these changes meaningful and doable for teachers. Additionally, Reeves (2010) argued that a simple compliance mindset on the part of teachers



undermines instructional innovation and the growth that comes from applying new strategies in atypical ways. Similarly, Wohlgend (2009) encouraged teachers to move beyond the frustration and intense pressure of classroom life in the “Age of Accountability” into a psychological safe space in which they can acknowledge that it can’t all get done because the myriad tasks associated with standards-based education put before teachers is unrealistic. Kreisberg (1992) agreed, citing multiple methods of resistance and asserting that resistance is a healthy response to oppression and is thus an important concept for professional learning providers to understand.

Methods of resistance can sometimes backfire on teachers and unions are not legal in all states, so resistance as a form of empowerment has important limitations. Webster (in Walling, 1999) cautioned that many teachers will seek to empower themselves, regardless of administrator support or complicity, but that, unfortunately, the empowerment teachers gain when working without a schoolwide support structure of empowerment can be quite negative for themselves and for the overall health and direction of the school. Indeed, the amount of risk perceived is likely to impact teachers’ choices of ways they might exercise their agency (Priestley et al., 2012).

Sprague (1992) offered two more intriguing pathways by which teachers might ascertain greater levels of empowerment. She asserted that teachers, through the development of professional relationships with their colleagues, can identify and grab hold of both individual and collective empowerment. Professional learning communities are mutually reinforcing as teachers raise their self-efficacy by becoming valuable sources to one another of professional wisdom and problem-solving capacity. Under these circumstances, it is no longer necessary to depend on outside experts and teachers gain in their experience of themselves as efficacious in dealing with problematic aspects of their work. Although the potential for collegial work to be

empowering for teachers is high (Clarke, 2012; Edwards & Newton, 1995; Ghani et al., 2009; Henson, 2001), its very existence depends on the willingness of administrators to provide structural supports to enable such collaboration to happen during the workday, which has the potential to dampen the effect of empowerment for teachers.

Another pathway for empowerment is to restructure the way school personnel are organized; the traditional dichotomous structure of administrators who supervise teachers leaves very little room for empowerment. Teacher leadership opens the door for elevation of the status and respect for classroom teachers and a way to organize the sharing of power more justly. Teacher leadership, distributed leadership, and instructional coaching are all ways to break the dichotomous mold of administrators vs. teachers so that decision making is shared across levels of authority and the knowledge of teachers is valued. Reeves (2012) affirmed that teacher leadership in self-assessment of practice is a valid pathway to empowerment; teachers who lead in documenting their own practice, setting goals for improved effectiveness, and pursuing avenues for refining their skills experience not only greater teacher effectiveness but also greater empowerment; accountability is no longer imposed upon teachers but is instead generated from them.

Teacher empowerment exists in a state of duality difficult to ignore that includes a power over one's own actions as well as effective influence on one's environment (Vincenz, 1990). Kreisberg (1992) emphasizes that empowerment is something that happens both within and outside of the teacher moving towards it. First, empowerment is a psychological process that brings out a teacher's feelings of personal and professional value, self-confidence, and self-efficacy. Secondly, empowerment in the individual teacher impacts the social and political conditions of his or her setting, enabling the access to and control of valued resources typically

kept from the general teaching population. Individual and community empowerment are inextricably tied together; empowerment rarely happens for teachers who practice in isolation; it is fed by the interpersonal interactions and reflections of a learning community (Kreisberg, 1992). Moreover, teacher empowerment is not synonymous with professional privacy; empowered teachers are more than willing to open up their practice to their own and others' analysis because they are both confident in their ability to learn from the feedback of other educators and competent enough to withstand the critique of their peers (Schmoker and Wilson, 1994).

Considering empowerment in this way helps to establish promising and creative strategies for increasing teacher empowerment. It is imperative to avoid overlooking the consideration of methods teachers use to create power. Priestley et al. (2012) demonstrated through case study research that teachers are capable of manifesting their agency in environments hostile to teacher leadership.

Teachers who ask questions and are critical of policy change will be profoundly transformed through their deepened understanding of the connections between theory, knowledge, and practice (Naidu, 2011). When teachers possess and can effectively use knowledge about the instruments and processes through which one gains a voice in an institution, they have the key needed to create power in their setting (Duhon, 1999); she further asserted that the primary source of teacher power is in teachers' abilities to guide the achievements of others, namely their students. The value of creative power, Sprague (1992) claimed, is its capacity to allow teachers to be transformed and to transcend their circumstances in ways that radically change their work.

Creating power in the classroom requires teachers to bring their whole selves to the school setting, recognizing that teaching is a moral act which requires the one doing the teaching to be empowered to use judgment about how to proceed in the best interests of children; if the setting is not willing to give the empowerment necessary to act morally just, it is the obligation of teachers to create that power themselves. To develop a pedagogy of empowerment, a critical understanding of domination is essential, including the most opportune situations for exerting agency and change (Kreisberg, 1992). Ultimately, teachers who use this pathway are seen as advocates or activists, transcending their role as mere teachers and existing in a state of professional empowerment as agents of change (Schmoker & Wilson, 1994).

Table 2.1 Provides a summary of the attributes of teacher empowerment from the viewpoints of various researchers who have studied this phenomenon over the past twenty-five years. The views presented by these researchers have all contributed to current understandings of teacher empowerment. Although each paradigm of teacher empowerment has unique features and perspectives, there is considerable overlap in the varied definitions of teacher empowerment as our understanding of it has evolved over time.

In some cases, what appear to be different attributes may be more a matter of language differences rather than theoretical discrepancies on the nature of teacher empowerment. For example, all of the authors highlighted here connect teacher empowerment to some form of control, although they may call it by different names: Independence (Vincenz, 1990); Capacity to Implement (Kreisberg, 1992); Decision Making and Autonomy (Short & Rinehart, 1992a); Self-Determination (Spreitzer, 1995); Decision-Making (Klecker & Loadman, 1996a) and Autonomy (Pearson & Moomaw, 2006). Although these terms may not be synonymous with one

another, they reveal the centrality of control as one aspect of any viable definition of teacher empowerment.

| Table 2.1. Dimensions of Teacher Empowerment                                                                                                                                            |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Vincenz, 1990 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Potency</li> <li>• Independence</li> <li>• Relatedness</li> <li>• Motivation</li> <li>• Values</li> <li>• Joy of Life</li> </ul> | Kreisberg, 1992 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Relationships of Co-Agency and Equality</li> <li>• Language of Assertive Mutuality</li> <li>• Synergistic Interaction/Community</li> <li>• Capacity to Implement</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 | Short & Rinehart, 1992a <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Decision Making</li> <li>• Professional Growth</li> <li>• Status</li> <li>• Self-Efficacy</li> <li>• Autonomy</li> <li>• Impact</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                                                                       |
| Spreitzer, 1995 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Meaning</li> <li>• Self-Determination</li> <li>• Competence</li> <li>• Impact</li> </ul>                                       | Klecker & Loadman, 1996a <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Accountability</li> <li>• Authority/Leadership</li> <li>• Curriculum Planning/Design</li> <li>• Collegiality/Collaboration</li> <li>• Decision-Making</li> <li>• Impact/Causal Importance</li> <li>• Professional Growth</li> <li>• Professional Knowledge</li> <li>• Responsibility</li> <li>• Self-Efficacy</li> <li>• Self-Esteem</li> <li>• Status</li> <li>• Training New Teachers</li> </ul> | Pearson & Moomaw, 2006 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Curriculum Autonomy               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Teacher control of content, procedures, and materials</li> </ul> </li> <li>• General Teaching Autonomy               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Teacher control of scheduling, instructional approaches, and classroom management</li> </ul> </li> </ul> |

## Professional Learning

Support for teachers as they develop and refine their instructional practice often comes in the form of professional learning. Professional learning is commonly understood as an ongoing experience among educators that provides them with the opportunity to engage in activities that support a constant progression of professional improvement (Diaz-Maggioli, 2004; Holloway, 2006; Learning Forward, 2015; U.S. Department of Education, 2015; Westheimer, 1998). At the core of all professional learning experiences, regardless of the format, should be the needs of teachers. In the parlance of professional learning, the term for this is “job-embedded” in that effective professional learning is practical and meets teachers where they are, rather than simply providing more theoretical training (Defise, 2013; Learning Forward, 2015; Morgan, 2010). Indeed, even the federal Department of Education recognizes the value of high-quality professional learning, allocating over \$2 billion in 2013 singularly designated for this purpose (U.S. Department of Education, 2014a).

According to Learning Forward (2015), “[professional learning] is the leverage point with the greatest potential for strengthening and refining the day-to-day performance of educators.” Why is ongoing learning a necessary feature in the professional life of an educator? One answer to this question can be gleaned from the work Harris and Sass (2011) who found that teacher effectiveness improves with experience, but only up to a point. New teachers grow in their effectiveness quite rapidly and predictably, but veteran teachers do not as easily and naturally improve in their effectiveness (Harris & Sass, 2011); thus the relevance of professional learning emerges. “[T]he greatest effects on student learning occur when teachers become learners of their own teaching,” powerfully affirms the value and necessity of professional learning (Hattie, 2012, p. 14). Because of the immense importance of professional learning, it is

nearly always a component of school reforms, although it often doesn't come in a manner that promotes teacher empowerment (Defise, 2013; Levine & Marcus, 2008). Moreover, researchers have found that the methods and types of professional learning commonly provided to teachers are not compatible with the goals of education reforms (Futrell, 1994; Smith & Kovacs, 2013). It is unfortunate, but true, that professional learning can be experienced as oppressive to teachers when it critiques their practice, evaluates and compares their skills to other teachers, or is used to de-skill them (Nichols & Parsons, 2010; Smith & Kovacs, 2011). An example of this happened during professional learning I experienced with the onset of the Georgia Performance Standards and standards-based education in Georgia. As part of the professional learning to help teachers better understand the new curriculum, we were taught to "unpack" the standards. The directions for this task were literally to find the nouns and verbs in the standard. No instruction was provided on the value of doing this or how teachers could use the results of such an exercise in their work. Consequently, college graduates who were forced to sit through multiple sessions in which they validated that they could identify two of the simplest parts of speech in sentences grew understandably disenchanted with the new curriculum before they even began to explore it. This type of professional learning does nothing to empower teachers or intrinsically motivate them to pursue increasingly more effective instructional practices.

Professional learning is a growth process propelled forward by a set of experiences among teachers which engages them in collaboratively examining aspects of their instructional practice. Successful professional learning for teachers is directly tied to efforts to improve student learning (Colbert, Brown, Choi, & Thomas, 2008). This type of professional learning is by necessity non-evaluative, as the analysis of the teaching and learning process is what has value, rather than a specific outcome. Professional learning that does not support the

development of teacher empowerment (and thus would not be included for consideration in this inquiry) is any type of activity that results in an evaluation or judgment of teacher practice by those outside the collaborative teaching circle. This could include walk-throughs by district level staff, reviews of lesson or unit plans submitted for approval by an instructional coach, or formal observations by supervisors of teachers, even though there may be reflective or analytic components to these activities.

### **Types of Professional Learning**

Professional learning has a long history in education, with “in-services” for practicing teachers becoming popular in the 1970s (Futrell, 1994). Synonyms for this include training, professional development, and staff development, although in the past decade Learning Forward preferentially refers to all such endeavors as professional learning. Learning Forward is currently the premier professional organization which tends to the needs of professional learning in the education community, both nationally and internationally (Learning Forward, 2015). This organization literally sets the standard for what is deemed effective in professional learning. Their comprehensive definition helps to delineate not only what is and is not legitimately called professional learning, but also assists in evaluating the effectiveness of such activities.

Several facets of the definition put forth by Learning Forward (2015) for professional learning merit closer scrutiny as they come to bear on the empowerment that is the focus of this research. Any given professional learning experience deemed valuable are correlated to the four dimensions of Learning Forward’s (2015) definition of professional learning: alignment with student learning standards, conducted among educators by well-prepared teacher leaders, occurring multiple times weekly on-site at the school and based on teacher-selected goals for instructional improvement. These features, when used to develop professional learning lend



themselves well to the facets of teacher empowerment espoused by Spreitzer (1995). Diaz-Maggioli (2004) confirmed that the ultimate aim of professional learning is change and, more specifically, teacher change; she further contends that professional learning is the best milieu for transforming, or changing from within, the teachers who participate in it. Characteristics of effective professional learning include comprehensiveness, sustained focus, intensive, and ongoing activity. Authentic professional learning has as its goal improved student achievement through increased educator effectiveness.

In addition to these features, Diaz-Maggioli (2004) suggested that meaningful professional learning be sustained over time, involve feedback and reflection, and be undergirded by evidence-based research strategies in a philosophical framework consistent with Adult Learning Theory (Mezirow, 1991). Drive-by or spray-and-pray versions of professional development are now passé and understood as ineffective and a disrespectful waste of teachers' precious time (Karp, 2003; Tate, 2005). Furthermore, professional learning is context-sensitive; that is, it only makes sense if it ties directly to the contexts in which teachers find themselves—their own home schools—and, as a result, teachers who work in individual schools are the best persons to direct and set goals for professional development (Defise, 2013; Diaz-Maggioli, 2004).

Professional learning takes many forms (Diaz-Maggioli, 2004), including professional learning communities (PLCs), mentoring, induction activities, peer coaching, data teams, book studies, action research, inquiry projects, peer observation, micro-teaching, horizontal and vertical curriculum articulation teams, networking, reflective activities, consultation, and lesson studies, along with more traditional methods, such as workshops, conferences, seminars, trainings, and courses. Engagement in self-directed models in which teachers are both leader and

learner are also effective, including Professional Development Schools, Teacher Leadership Corps, and the pursuit of National Board Certification (Futrell, 1994). The format is less important than the substance, for professional learning requires teachers to sacrifice of instructional time with their students; the quality of the professional learning must be worthwhile enough to justify it. Ideally, professional learning would support teachers in developing a deeper understanding of their craft while enabling them to realize the true limitations for power that exist in their context; as Chant, Moes and Ross (2009) demonstrated in their research, teachers can develop a realization from effective professional learning that they have more power than they previously had assumed.

### **Opportunities for Professional Learning**

Opportunities for professional learning can vary widely; in some cases, structural obstructions complicate teachers' ability to engage in regular, meaningful, and collaborative professional learning. If, as research suggests, the most effective professional learning is done communally (Boatright & Gallucci, 2008; Defise, 2013; Diaz-Maggioli, 2004; Futrell, 1994; Riveros et al., 2012), then scheduling is often revealed as one of the most immediately pragmatic obstacles. Many teachers do not have common or sufficient planning time with their peers and most of the daily schedule is taken up with responsibilities for supervising, managing, and teaching students. The available times for meeting are often used for administrative tasks, leaving little room to apply one's mental energy to increasing intellectual and practical aspects of teaching. Professional development days planned before the commencement of the school year or after the conclusion of it are often designated for training and redelivery of important reform initiatives.

As if the time constraints were not prohibitive enough to prevent teachers from pursuing professional learning, funding for professional literature, books, conference fees, or courses is often limited and must fit into the scope of the school improvement plan developed by administrators at the school and district levels, which further disempowers teachers. The reforms schools adopt generally come with packaged professional learning programs of their own (Thornburg & Mungai, 2011), referred to as 1st tier reforms because of the top-down, mandated approach used to implement them, depriving teachers of agency and foisting outside experts upon them to learn from. This disempowering approach to professional learning makes many teachers skeptical of the value of this use of their time, for valid reasons (Levine & Marcus, 2008).

Despite these hurdles, professional learning is going through rapid transitions as a result of widespread Internet access and the development of multiple forms of online professional learning (Ross, 2011). Many options for integrating professional learning into school settings have opened up as a result and schools are developing unique configurations to maximize teacher time and financial resources for this important activity (U.S. Department of Education, 2014b). Even in such circumstances, school structures need to support collaboration and teacher choice, essential elements of high-quality professional learning that are also associated with empowerment (Defise, 2013; Learning Forward, 2015).

### **Instructional Coaching**

A mode of professional learning which seems particularly well-suited to increasing teachers' sense of their own empowerment is instructional coaching (Morgan, 2010). Instructional coaching is a professional learning affiliation that is directly tied to instructional improvement (Annenberg Institute for School Reform, 2004). Instructional coaching involves

relationships between practicing teachers and teacher leaders in which conversation and mutual investment form the foundation for teacher learning (Anderson, Feldman, & Minstrell, 2014; Knight, 2007). In such a context, teachers do not lose their professional voice, nor are they subject to de-skilling or de-professionalization. Instead, teachers' own goals, interests, and needs are put at the center of the professional learning, which is typically site-based, ongoing, and job-embedded. Instructional coaching affirms that instructional improvement is a process rather than an event and that partnerships between teachers and coaches can provide a milieu of respect for teachers' knowledge and skills as well as support in areas of teacher practice that have been identified, usually by teachers themselves, for improvement. If reform is to happen at all in American education, it must be with teachers' investment and involvement, and professional learning situated in the framework of instructional coaching shows promise for empowering, rather than oppressing, teachers.

An instructional coach is a teaching peer who intentionally builds relationships and partners with teachers in a teacher-directed collaboration based on teachers' goals for learning new practices and integrating these practices into their pedagogical repertoire (Knight, 2007). Although professional learning is the vehicle through which new teaching practices can be explored, it is instructional coaching which provides the dynamic complement teachers need to effectively integrate new strategies into their practice. The coaching role is not evaluative, nor is it directive; teachers are active participants and designers of this type of professional learning. Instructional coaching has been shown to be a viable strategy for increasing student achievement (Biancarosa, Bryk, & Dexter, 2010).

Instructional coaching can be seen as both a psychological and a structural factor related to teacher empowerment. Coaches are part of the structure of a school in that they are employed

for the specific purpose of providing training and support to teachers (Annenberg Institute for School Reform, 2004). By the very nature of their role, there is an implied authority over teachers (i.e., those hired to train teachers would logically have knowledge and skills sets beyond what teachers possess), even though coaches do not have supervisory authority over teachers. Furthermore, coaches work with the administrators of the school to develop processes for implementing school improvement initiatives (Arrington, 2010). Coaches are neither teachers nor administrators; they are nonetheless structural features of the schools in which they are employed. Concurrent to being situated as a structural feature who works with teachers to enact the policies of the school, coaches also have a potentially profound influence on the empowerment teachers experience because of the very close work coaches do with teachers in order to improve teaching and learning in classrooms. Research in motivation has determined that the interaction between an individual and his or her social context can either support or impede performance (Deci & Ryan, 2000); coaches have become an important part of the social context of school environments. It follows, then, that how coaches work with their teachers has potential for creating or improving the conditions needed for teacher empowerment and, conversely, for being an obstacle to the growth or maintenance of authentic teacher empowerment.

### **Roles, Types, and Tasks of Coaches**

An aspect of school reform that is often unexplored is the need for changing roles and responsibilities along with policy, curriculum, and pedagogy (Webster in Walling, 1999); the emergence of coaching has filled a void which exists somewhere between educational administration and classroom teaching. Coaching is a relatively new role among educators in America's public schools (Horne, 2012; Knight, 2007). Because of this, it is often

misunderstood and not utilized to its full potential. Some see coaches as pseudo-administrators, which can be reinforced by a site-based administrative team when it assigns chores such as discipline, bus duty, or evaluation of lesson plans. The intended role of a coach in schools, however, is to be a partner, a critical friend, and a colleague who supports the work of teachers by engaging in professional learning with teachers, rather than doing professional learning to them (Annenberg Institute for School Reform, 2004; Boatright & Gallucci, 2008; Knight, 2007). Arrington (2010) goes so far as to say that coaching is a specific type of transformational leadership, indicating the depth and breadth of impact that an effective coach can have on a school and its faculty. The potential for school improvement through the use of coaching is high, but only when effective coaching principles and practices are adhered to (Biancarosa et al., 2010; Poglinco & Bach, 2004). For example, Thornburg and Mungai (2011) caution schools to avoid introducing an instructional coaching program as a 1st tier reform; the real value of coaches is in supporting teachers with instructional improvement goals, rather than asking a coach to assume the role of single-handedly developing, implementing, or monitoring reform in the building.

The varying titles and focus areas of coaches reveal the complexity of their roles as well as the ambiguity with which their work can sometimes be perceived in educational settings. Cognitive coaches use a specific reflection process with teachers to challenge their assumptions and beliefs; questioning methods are among the most significant skills for these coaches to learn. Coactive coaches work as consultants with individual teachers to collaborate on ways to meet goals set by the teacher (Knight, 2007). Mentor coaches (Zepeda, 2008) work exclusively with teachers new to the field in induction activities designed to help novices acclimate quickly and successfully to their work as educators. Peer coaches are classroom teachers with differing areas of expertise who agree to work together for a time for the purpose of mutual professional

edification (Diaz-Maggioli, 2004). Content or academic coaches focus on supporting and training teachers in specific areas of the traditional curriculum, such as literacy or math. These coaches focus on developing teachers' content knowledge and instructional strategies specific to that subject area in ways that research has shown increase student achievement. Instructional coaches are full time, site-based professional learning providers (Knight, 2007). Their work in schools is much broader than that of any of the other specific types of coaching articulated here in that they by necessity remain prepared to work with individuals or groups of teachers to address any area of instructional improvement that is of interest to the teacher(s). A teacher leader working in the role of instructional coach is ideally a generalist, flexibly competent in multiple aspects of the teaching and learning process, and having a wide field of knowledge about current issues and evidence-based practices in curriculum, assessment, and instruction. Regardless of their job title, all coaches work to support teacher and student learning as their primary role in the school (Zepeda, 2008).

Coaches are teacher leaders who are, first and foremost, effective and enthusiastic classroom teachers (Knight, 2007). Because coaches navigate complex professional relationships in order to do their jobs well, specific skills beyond those expected of classroom teachers are necessary (Boatright & Gallucci, 2008). Effective coaches, according to Whitney (2009) perceive themselves to be in symbiotic relationship with teachers and act as partners with a common goal of activating student learning. Additional skill sets coaches possess include nonjudgmental communication methods, conflict resolution, organizational problem-solving, the ability to collaborate well and to build supportive relationships with peers, data-focused observation methods, and both short-term and long-term planning strategies (Colbert et al., 2008). A coach is a teacher leader who is a self-directed, lifelong learner who takes risks and is

willing to share learning with others, and who nurtures collegiality (Groves, 2009). Other attributes of effective coaches that help them build supportive relationships within which teacher learning can happen include compassion, empathy, respect, patience, and honesty (Knight, 2011). In short, coaches are teacher leaders who lead teacher learning (Thornburg & Mungai, 2011).

Coaching requires a significant capacity for flexibility because the daily work of coaches is often complex, multi-faceted, and differentiated according to the needs of teachers (Anderson et al., 2014). Instructional coaching takes various forms. It can include the facilitation of professional learning communities as well individual coaching, which often includes goal-setting, observation of teacher practice and reporting on the data of the observation to the teacher for his or her own reflection. Coaches host data team meetings where they lead teachers in selecting and analyzing data gleaned from student work samples that indicate the quality of the student learning and provide insight into additional strategies to use instructionally. Coaches model and demonstrate specific instructional strategies and engage in action research that benefits all teachers in the building. Knight (2007) suggests that the work of an instructional coach focuses on topics he refers to as The Big Four: classroom management, content knowledge, instructional strategies, and formative assessment. In a nutshell, coaches work with teachers, individually and collectively, to improve their practice and this work can take myriad forms (Morgan, 2010; Poglinco & Bach, 2004). A review of the literature on instructional coaching led Poglinco and Bach (2004) to conclude that effective coaches are invaluable in helping teachers to adjust their practices in ways that make significant learning differences for students.



### **Relationship between Teacher Empowerment and Professional Learning**

There exists a clear connection between empowerment and professional learning.

Klecker and Loadman (1996b), in their study of empowerment found professional growth as the most highly rated attribute associated with empowerment. Similarly, opportunity for meaningful professional learning has been confirmed as the primary structural factor antecedent to teacher empowerment (Ghani et al., 2009). According to Diaz-Maggioli (2004), empowerment includes teacher ownership of professional learning through teachers' structuring and evaluation of the types and goals for the professional learning in which they engage.

Whitney (2009) asserted that the format of professional learning either lends itself to great empowerment or disempowerment, associating lesson study and action research with teacher empowerment. Chant et al. (2009) found that professional learning which is empowering supports teachers in developing a deeper understanding of the actual limitations, both legal and policy-wise, and supports them in discarding misconceptions about the limitations for teacher power that exist in their context. Implementing reforms at the school level depends upon the quality of professional learning and, when done well, can have the added benefit of increasing teacher empowerment (Avidov-Ungar & Shamir-Inbal, 2013). When teachers are viewed as the true experts instead of recipients to whom training must be redelivered, opportunities for empowerment through professional learning exist (Whitney, 2009). Additionally, Spreitzer (2008) described a positive association between empowered individuals and empowered teams, as well favorable outcomes of the work accomplished by empowered teams.

Colbert et al. (2008) affirmed the value of professional learning as a means for improving teacher quality, but questioned the typical absence of teachers as designers of their own professional learning. Hicks and Dewalt (2006) found a significant disconnect between the

perspectives of administrators and the teachers who served under them in terms of professional learning; the principals in these settings felt that teachers were sufficiently involved in designing staff development activities and school goals, but teachers refuted this. This example helps to emphasize that discrepancies between perceptions of administrators and teachers suggests that caution is merited when those outside of the classroom determine what teachers' learning needs are. To realize the goals of professional learning, it is optimal to involve teachers in its design as a facet of their own empowerment. Indeed, empowered teachers gain control of their professional lives in the process of developing the competencies necessary to effectively participate in their school community while simultaneously fulfilling their own needs for success and control; thus professional learning provides a suitable vehicle for the pursuit of teacher empowerment (Kreisberg, 1992).

Two constructs that are mutually reinforcing in the relationship between teacher empowerment and professional learning are ideas of collegiality and collaboration. Wohlwend (2009, p. 15) maintained "[if] instead of closing our doors, we support each other, affirm our professional knowledge, and pool our collective resources, we might teach past contradictory institutional policies." Schmoker and Wilson (1994) concur, contending that all teachers could increase their empowerment by enthusiastically collaborating with colleagues and administrators in order to set goals for, monitor, and assess their own teaching practices. Likewise, the development of communities of practice where authentic dialogue among teachers is the ideal provides the milieu needed for empowered professional learning (Whitney, 2009).

Collegial collaboration is a profound method for dealing with disempowerment because the relationships in a Professional Learning Community are horizontally oriented and everyone's voice is heard and becomes part of the narrative, but when relationships are vertically oriented,

only the voice of those on top is heard and responded to. (Kreisberg, 1992). Thus, a collaborative community of learners is essential if the pursuit of professional learning is to be empowering. Unfortunately, all collaborative communities of learners are not created equal, as Hargreaves (2008) notes; he delineates seven different types of professional learning communities, four of which are disempowering to teachers and three that actually sustain teacher empowerment and self-advocacy. Working collegially towards professional learning goals is not, in and of itself, enough to empower teachers.

To summarize, professional learning, if it is to be both effective and empowering, has a number of critical features, all of which are endorsed by Learning Forward (2015):

- Teacher-designed and/or –directed (Clarke, 2012; Diaz-Maggioli, 2004; Futrell, 1994; Ghani et al., 2009; Groves, 2009; Henson, 2001; Holloway, 2006; Kreisberg, 1992; Schmoker & Wilson, 1994; Short & Rinehart, 1992a; Thornburg & Mungai, 2011; Webster in Walling, 1999; Whitney, 2009).
- Relevance to the classroom (Boatright & Gallucci, 2008; Clarke, 2012; Colbert et al., 2008; Diaz-Maggioli, 2004; Groves, 2009; Henson, 2001; Whitney, 2009).
- Focus on the improvement of instruction (Clarke, 2012; Colbert et al., 2008; Diaz-Maggioli, 2004; Knight, 2008; Vescio, Ross, & Adams, 2008).
- Use a problem-posing, research-driven, or inquiry-based paradigm for learning (Chant et al., 2009; Clarke, 2012; Futrell, 1994; Diaz-Maggioli, 2004; Henson, 2001; Knight, 2008; Short & Rinehart, 1992a; Webster in Walling, 1999).
- Be an ongoing, sustained experience of teacher action, reflection, and feedback (Boatright & Gallucci, 2008; Chant et al., 2009; Colbert et al., 2008; Diaz-Maggioli,

2004; Groves, 2009; Reeves, 2004; Riveros et al., 2012; Schmoker & Wilson, 1994; Shidler, 2009; Thornburg & Mungai, 2011).

- Conducted in the context of a collegial community of learners (Boatright & Gallucci, 2008; Diaz-Maggioli, 2004; Henson, 2001; Holloway, 2006; Kreisberg, 1992; Schmoker & Wilson, 1994; Short & Rinehart, 1992a; Thornburg & Mungai, 2011; Whitney, 2009).

## **CHAPTER 3**

### **METHODOLOGY**

This chapter presents the qualitative research methods used to explore teacher perceptions of empowerment gained through instructional coaching. A qualitative research methodology based on semi-structured interviews is utilized. Following a review of the key areas of inquiry for this study, presentations of the research design, participants, data collection and analysis methods, and criteria for trustworthiness and credibility follow.

The specific questions being subject to inquiry are:

1. How are teachers' perceptions of empowerment influenced by their experiences with instructional coaches?
2. To what extent do coaches subscribe to the Partnership Principles in their work?
3. In what ways do the Partnership Principles help to support teachers' sense of empowerment?

#### **Design of the Study**

This research examined the work of instructional coaches using the framework of the Partnership Principles (Knight, 2007) in order to understand how coaching was related to teacher empowerment. Because of the centrality of the Partnership Principles to this research, a brief discussion of these principles and their connection to the overall goals of this research is in order.

#### **The Partnership Principles**

Coaching is often referred to as a partnership, with good reason. Coaches who are effective in their work learn to stand with teachers, rather than assuming the role of an outside expert (Boatright & Gallucci, 2008); indeed, coaches who intentionally use relationship strategies are perceived as more trustworthy by teachers (Anderson et al., 2014). In fact, Knight (2008) insists that the complex interconnectedness of teachers, students, and learning requires the

support of professional, collegial relationships focused on teacher and student learning more than it requires intellect or skill on the part of teachers and coaches. Knight (2007) outlined major aspects of effective coaching relationships and termed these The Partnership Principles.

Partnership between teachers and coaches, according to Knight (2007) is guided by the principles of equality, choice, voice, reflection, dialogue, praxis, and reciprocity.

*Equality* between teachers and coaches is related to status (Knight, 2007). The teaching profession values egalitarianism among the rank-and-file, which is why the role of coaches can be problematic when introduced to a school (Zepeda, 2008). Coaches are often misperceived as just another type of administrator since they do not have teaching responsibilities. These perceptions become entrenched when coaches are assigned supervisory or evaluative duties, which precludes the ability to build a coaching relationship based on equality (Diaz-Maggioli, 2004). Kincheloe (2009) eschews the “Cult of the Expert” which privileges limited types of knowing and sets up systems of inequality, causing teachers to doubt their own abilities or ideas. These issues and perceptions notwithstanding, effective coaching can only happen in situations in which the teacher’s knowledge gained through their lived experience in the classroom is considered equal, and in no way deficient in comparison, to the coach’s knowledge and experience. Coaches who use the principle of equality to guide their work spend little time talking about what they did as teachers; instead they find ways to elevate the teachers’ insights and ask questions to probe teacher thinking (Knight, 2008).

*Choice* is a critical attribute of the coaching relationship which keeps it firmly grounded in the realm of equality. According to Knight (2007) teachers should be given the choice of whether to work with the coach; if coaches are seen as people who only work with deficient teachers, the resistance will be high to anything a coach suggests. Anderson et al (2014) found

that teachers' relationships with coaches influenced whether or not they voluntarily opted to work with coaches and the perceived trustworthiness of a coach was also shown to lead to longer-enduring coach relationships when teachers have choice about whether or not to work with coaches. In situations where teachers aren't given the choice of whether to work with a coach, coaching experts maintain that as much as possible about the coaching be differentiated so that individual teachers' goals and styles are honored (Zepeda, 2008). Proponents of cognitive coaching, a precursor to instructional coaching, emphasized the role of self-direction as foundational to the coaching relationship and following teachers' leads for the progress of their own professional learning is critical to that relationship (Costa & Garmston, 2002). In their work with teachers, coaches suggest, brainstorm, question, or hypothesize; they do not mandate, but any recommendation a coach might make can be vetoed by the teacher being coached. Barkley and Bianco (2010) also affirm that teacher choice should extend to setting their own goals about what learning they would like to engage in with their coach. The importance of choice cannot be underestimated by coaches; indeed, choice is a fundamental human need according to Deci and Ryan (2002) and, as such, must be tended to in the coaching relationship if positive outcomes are expected.

*Voice*, as a Partnership Principle, means to solicit, value, and honor the authentic voices of teachers (Knight, 2007; Knight, 2008). Britzman (2003) asserted that voice, or the lack of it, is directly related to the amount of political power one possesses. The stripping of teachers' voices from the debates of contemporary education has contributed to their de-professionalization (Hargreaves, 2008; Ingersoll & Merrill, 2011; Kincheloe, 2009; Smith & Kovacs, 2011). Coaches can't afford to continue this trend, if they hope to provide empowering support to teachers which positively impacts student achievement. The professional learning that

coaches do with teachers should be designed in ways that elicit teachers' beliefs, opinions, values, knowledge, and skills as these are brought to bear on the changes a teacher wants to make in their instruction. Knight (2008) maintains that teachers in coaching relationships should feel free to speak their minds and that their opinions must count. All teachers have knowledge gained from their teaching experience; when voice is encouraged in professional learning settings, everyone's contributions are valued and learning happens among all because knowledge is shared collectively (Barkley & Bianco, 2010).

*Dialogue*, like *Voice*, involves the sharing of words and ideas. Knight's intention for coaches' use of dialogue is a free exchange of ideas, agreements, disagreements, problem-solving, and decision making (Knight, 2007). Through authentic dialogue, teachers exercise their voices to discover new ways of looking at and analyzing the work they do in the classroom. Britzman (2003) asserted that limiting dichotomies applied in discussions of teacher practice precluded instructional improvement; her recommendations support Knight's position that dialogical practices open spaces for meaningful growth. Vescio et al. (2008) affirm the value of reflective dialogue that leads teachers into deeply and honestly contemplating the learning programs provided to students as a way of creating possibilities for improving those programs. Because dialogue requires community and collaboration, it is ideally suited to be a professional learning tool. Dialogue is valued by critical theorists as a means of pursuing social justice. For example, Giroux (1988) asserted that discourse is a primary means by which people are liberated. A learning community is a forum for dialogical exchange that exposes new views, fueling growth for all (Westheimer, 1998) and professional learning is connected to teachers' ability to maintain a critical dialogue with their colleagues in which they learn to clarify and cogently articulate insights about their growth as professionals (Fandiño, 2010). Costa and



Garmston (2002) posit that dialogue and reflection in the context of coaching relationships are the mediating factors which transform teacher practice. For Freire, dialogue is the heart and soul of the pursuit for emancipation; hence, “to speak a true word is to transform the world” (2012, p. 87).

*Reflection* is frequently recommended for teacher growth (Chant et al., 2009; Kreisberg, 1992; Vescio et al., 2008). Chant et al. (2009) emphasized that effective teacher support which engenders empowerment builds in structured time for reflection. According to Zepeda (2008), reflection is what makes the difference between sustainable instructional improvement and a one-shot attempt of a new instructional strategy. Conversely, Shidler (2008), found that student learning gains were lost when the focus of coaching sessions failed to include reflection on specific teaching and learning episodes. Moreover, Muijs and Reynolds (2015) showed that teacher beliefs significantly impacted student learning outcomes and noted that reflection on their experiences in the classroom was a strategy capable of challenging teacher beliefs. The power of reflection between coaches and teachers enables deeper thinking, risk-taking, and divergent possibilities to emerge, but it can only happen in settings where equality, voice, choice, and dialogue are already active and foundational to the relationship (Knight, 2008).

*Praxis*, the next Partnership Principle, is a word popularized by Freire’s classic *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* and follows from a thoughtful reflection on the state of things. For Freire (2012), praxis was action that resulted from deep reflection and consideration; praxis is meant to be productive and important work that increases the potential for social justice. For Knight (2007) and other contemporary scholars of professional learning, praxis refers to the interactions, activities, and learning which takes place between coach and teacher and tie directly to the work of the teacher in the classroom. Killion (2009) maintains that the more roles coaches are able to

fluidly move between as they differentiate their work with teachers increases their effectiveness at meeting the practical next steps for teachers in varied stages of pedagogical growth. Praxis allows teachers to find and apply their creative selves as opportunities are provided to apply new ideas to resolve classroom dilemmas through insights gleaned from reflection as a result of the coaching relationship (Knight, 2008). Praxis is a process of learning, thinking, and doing (Knight, 2008). Kincheloe (2009) observed that praxis was the result of the dual nature of informed practice, made up of theory and action at work together in the classroom. Coaches capitalize on this, ensuring that professional learning is a relevant and valuable use of teacher time, since what transpires when coaches work with teachers is all directly applicable to the classroom.

*Reciprocity*, the final Partnership Principle, insists that the professional learning which happens when coaches and teachers interact is a two-way street (Knight, 2007; Knight, 2008). Coaches aren't on pedestals labeled expert or guru, but work with teachers in authentic partnership, knowing that this work improves their own instructional skills as facilitators of adult learning while it supports teachers in the pursuit of their professional learning goals. Effective coaches have a teachable point of view (Tichy, 1999) and consider themselves lifelong learners in order to be able to receive the learning that their work with teachers generates in coaching relationships based on equality. Costa and Garmston (2002) assert that a relationship of interdependence between effective coaches and teachers is the natural result of keeping learning as the focus for their work together. From Knight's perspective (2008), mutual learning is inevitable when everyone's knowledge counts; knowledge shared makes everyone sharper. Competent coaches seek out deepened learning through their interaction with teachers in professional learning contexts.

These seven Partnership Principles: Equality, Choice, Voice, Dialogue, Reflection, Reciprocity, and Praxis form the backdrop against which coaching is examined in this study.

### **Data Collection**

Data originally collected for this study included qualitative information pertaining to teachers' perceptions of and experiences with instructional coaching and quantitative information on the interrelationships among the seven Partnership Principles. However, rigorous analysis and interpretation of all of the data collected was not feasible because the completion of the dissertation was time-sensitive. As such, the researcher, in consultation with her dissertation chair, chose to limit data analysis and interpretation to the qualitative data collected because it captures the thoughts and experiences of teachers that best illuminate connections between instructional coaching and teacher empowerment. The qualitative results garnered in this phase are the heart of the study in that the words of teachers and coaches themselves provide the depth of understanding necessary to gain a clearer understanding of ways teachers create their own empowerment and ways coaches can support them in this endeavor.

### **Sampling**

A survey was used to identify participants who agreed to participate in this study. Although teachers and instructional coaches were invited to participate in semi-structured interviews, no coaches elected to participate. Thus, the participants in the semi-structured interviews were six teachers from a rural public school system in the southeastern United States. There were 274 full-time certified classroom teachers and 13 coaches spread out among the eight schools educating 4,963 students in the district at the time of this study. Seven of the eight schools were designated as Title 1 schools. Approximately 86% of the student body were members of minority ethnic groups, primarily African American and Hispanic. All of the

teachers in this school district were rated as highly qualified in the school year prior to the commencement of this study, according to the definitions put forth by the federal Department of Education.

This school district was chosen because the practice of coaching has been continuously implemented in all schools since 2005. Thus, the school district was an ideal sample since site-based coaching was a firmly entrenched part of the culture in all of their schools. In this district they have implemented literacy coaching, math coaching, and instructional coaching for nearly a decade, so all teachers were exposed to coaches and the work they do on a daily basis. Their experiences provided this study with credible and knowledgeable voices from the perspectives of teachers and coaches. This type of sampling, known as expert sampling (Trochim & Donnelly, 2008) is recommended when examining a topic such as the relationship between coaches' work and teachers' experiences of empowerment because the participants must have knowledge and experience of the topic under study.

### **Interview Participants**

Six teachers from the district selected for this study participated in interviews using the protocol described above. Teachers were selected through the use of an anonymous online survey about instructional coaching; at the end of the survey, teachers could submit contact information if they were interested in participating in the interview. Eighty-two teachers answered the online survey, and eleven teachers offered to participate in the interview. Similarly, an anonymous online survey was provided for the Academic Coaches in the district. Ten of the thirteen coaches completed the online survey and two coaches made subsequent contact with the researcher expressing interest in the interview. However, both coaches ultimately chose not to participate in the interview and thus there was no data collected from coaches.

The teachers selected for participation represent a range of demographics, teaching assignments, and experience, providing diverse views on the impact of coaches on teachers' work. Four of the six teachers self-identified as white females, one teacher self-identified as a white male and one teacher self-identified as an African American female. These demographics are consistent with the overall demographics of this district; however, the district reports that more than one third of its teaching staff is African American, so it must be noted that the perspectives of African American teachers in this sample is underrepresented. The teachers' years of experience in the classroom ranged from less than one (a first year teacher) to twelve years, with a median of 11 years of experience overall in this group. Three of the teachers were general education teachers at elementary levels (Kindergarten through Grade 5) and two were special education teachers at elementary and middle grades levels (Kindergarten through Grade 8); the remaining two teachers were secondary teachers (Grades 6-12). Interestingly, both secondary teachers are second career teachers, meaning they came to classroom teaching after pursuing a career in another field. All teachers reported working with multiple coaches, ranging from a total of 3-6 coaches per teacher. This variety of backgrounds enable teachers to report on a range of experiences they have had and to compare and contrast how these experiences impacted their sense of empowerment in their work with coaching as a structural component of working in schools. The demographic profile for each teacher is summarized in Table 4.1. Additionally, each teacher was assigned a pseudonym for the purposes of describing their contributions to this work while maintaining their anonymity. A brief description of each teacher using his or her pseudonym follows in order to acquaint the reader with these individuals.

### *Tommy*

Tommy is a white female in her mid-thirties. She has taught for eleven years in three different school districts and has worked with instructional coaches throughout her career. Tommy reported working with six different instructional coaches. She has taught in elementary school, most frequently at the upper elementary grades and often in inclusion settings. The school year during which this interview took place found her in an alternative setting for struggling learners in middle grades, which she reported

was helping her to grow in patience and empathy. Tommie responded to the interview questions with direct and no-nonsense responses, indicating that she is all business when it comes to teaching and learning. She communicated an understanding of the intended role of coaches and brought her lived experiences to the interview to shed light on how instructional coaching had impacted her empowerment as a teacher. It is important to note that Tommie's interview was the first completed and unfamiliarity with the technology used to record the interviews prevented the full interview from being recorded. However, the notes taken during the interview were used immediately afterwards to re-construct the elements of the conversation and the added step of member checking ensured that Tommie's insights and contributions to the data were adequately captured.

### ***Barbara Jean***

Barbara Jean, a white female in her early forties, is a novice teacher who followed a unique pathway to her first teaching assignment, which she was about four months into at the time of her interview. She had a nineteen-year career in Adult Education and work with the Department of Education at the state level; she was provisionally certified to teach foreign language for one year in order to fill a vacancy at the high school. Although she had taught at the collegiate level, she hadn't previously taught or been certified in K-12 education. Her responses to the interview questions were clearly influenced by her experiences in education administration and higher education and provided insight that wouldn't have been possible for those with typical training and work experiences. Her answers revealed that she valued research and brought fresh insight to the table in regards to instructional coaches and how they influence the work of teachers. Barbara Jean was eager to participate in the interview, which lasted well over an hour, and gave rich descriptions of her experiences that were all very fresh in her mind as she was in the midst of her first semester of teaching; paired with her administrative experience, this provided qualitative data that held unique insight. Overall, she felt that coaching had tremendous potential for teacher empowerment; her experiences with the four instructional coaches in her building helped to reveal some reasons why that potential may not always be realized.

### *Amanda*

Amanda is a white female teacher in her late thirties whose career focus has been Special Education. She taught in two districts in the area for 10.5 years and at the time of her interview, she had moved into a role at the local university that enabled her to provide support for pre-service teachers and their field placements in the surrounding school districts. Amanda worked most often as an inclusion teacher who co-taught with general education teachers at the elementary level, so she was often exposed to and collaborated with coaches in her work. Her new role at the university, combined with her years of classroom experience enabled her to view instructional coaching through multiple lenses and she reflected several times on experiences she had had with coaches that she might not have fully understood or appreciated at the time, but, in the light of her experiences outside of the classroom, made more sense to her. Amanda, like some of the other participants, frequently likened the work of coaches to that of administrators; indeed, she sometimes equated the two. Her descriptions of coaching experiences she had revealed how much power a coach can have over the work of teachers and how that power can be oppressively used or can, conversely, empower teachers. The interview with Amanda took just over a half hour with little need for follow up or clarifying questions.

### *Heather*

Heather is also a Special Educator, with 6.5 years as a classroom teacher and 1.5 years as an Assistant Special Education Director who provides support for Special Education programs in the same district. She is a white female in her mid-thirties and she taught in elementary grades as an inclusion teacher. In her responses to the interview questions, Heather focused on how instructional coaching impacted her as a Special Educator; the insights she shared brought a unique perspective on how the background and training of an instructional coach can influence how effective that coach might be for teachers, especially when it comes to the empowerment of Special Education Teachers. The interview with Heather was the shortest of all the interviews conducted, coming in at about 25 minutes. Heather

communicated that she valued her experiences with coaches for the skills she was able to learn and implement that supported her as a teacher working to improve learning for her students with special needs.

### *William*

William, the sole male participant, was an enthusiastic interviewee, even before the interview session began. He sent via email several resources about instructional coaching and school improvement as a way to begin dialogue, revealing his passion for this topic. William was a mathematics teacher at the high school at the time of this interview. In his teaching career, he had worked with instructional coaches for about 6 years and described his experiences with five different coaches. William, a Caucasian male in his early fifties, had twelve years of public school experience and more than a year of teaching in an orphanage overseas. He had also had an earlier career in the military, from which he was retired. These diverse life experiences of autonomy and leadership seemed to put William on somewhat of a collision course when it came to collaborating with his instructional coaches as he often felt not only disempowered by them, but also as if they were a means of de-professionalizing him. Throughout the course of the interview, William revealed a number of experiences he had had with instructional coaches that contributed to his view that their presence in the building was akin to “a train wreck.” His language during the interview could be interpreted as inflammatory or negative in regards to instructional coaching, but analysis of his responses revealed a teacher who already saw himself as empowered and who was self-advocating to remain that way. Despite his strongly held views about many of the coaches with whom he had worked, he expressed a desire for the type of collaboration that instructional coaching could provide. His interview provided rich descriptions of his experiences with instructional coaching that helped to provide well-rounded qualitative data demonstrating how instructional coaching might detract from teacher empowerment. The interview with William was completed in a little more than 90 minutes, with a number of clarifying and follow up questions to be sure I was clearly understanding his complete thought as he often combined multiple ideas into the response to a single question and my intent was to



ascertain his specific perceptions and experiences using his authentic style of communication whenever possible.

### ***Becca***

Becca, a mid-career teacher at the elementary grades, had worked in two counties and with six different instructional coaches over the course of her twelve-year career. She was also the only African American teacher to volunteer for participation in this research. She responded to the interview questions very thoughtfully and brought up some important points that hadn't been broached by other participants. She was very interested in the topic because she took seriously the work that she had previously done with coaches, including some moments she described as pivotal in her teaching career. As a result, she was pursuing her own graduate work and hoped to focus on instructional coaching; participation in the interview was a way for her to further consider the aspects of coaching that she herself hoped to explore. Becca's interview proceeded with little deviation from the interview protocol, except in a couple of instances where she asked questions of me and my experiences with coaching. Her deliberate and thoughtful way of responding to the questions provided for qualitative data that contains productive insight to apply to our understanding of the potential for instructional coaching to affect teacher empowerment.

### **Instrumentation**

Two interview protocols were developed using design methods described by Kvale and Brinkmann (2009). Each interview protocol had three sections: establishing background, experiences with coaching, and wrap up. In the first section, teachers were asked demographic questions about themselves, their number of years teaching, and the number of coaches with whom they had worked. The second section asked specific questions about the experiences teachers had had with coaches. Additionally, teachers were asked directly in this section if they felt that coaches had contributed to their sense of empowerment as defined by this study. The

final section allowed teachers to discuss thoughts they had about coaching that had not been asked about in the previous questions. The semi-structured protocol attempted to ascertain insight about the role of coaches in schools as experienced by the interviewees and what makes coaching relationships effective for teachers. The questions of the protocol were open-ended and the semi-structured design of the protocols themselves allowed for the participants to discuss whatever aspects of coaching were most salient to them. Great care was taken to develop protocols that enabled teachers and coaches to talk about potentials for empowerment, rather than asking either group to critique coaching itself. The interview protocols can be found in Appendix A.

As mentioned previously in this chapter, no coaches elected to participate in the interviews so only the teacher protocol was used. The protocols were used to conduct personal interviews with the participants via the telephone from 3-6 weeks after the close of the survey. Interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim in order to capture the authenticity of the participants' thoughts and views. Transcribed interviews were sent to the participants for member checking (Saldaña, 2012) prior to analysis in order to validate the data obtained through interviews and to ensure that teacher and coach voices comprise the entirety of the qualitative data. The data provided by the participants provided insight into the complex inter-relationships between teachers and their coaches and shed light on the potential for empowering outcomes for teachers as a facet of these relationships.

### **Qualitative Data Analysis**

The interview transcript data was coded in three cycles. The data was initially analyzed twice for the a priori (Saldaña, 2012) goals of: a) determining which Partnership Principles teachers had observed coaches using in their work together and b) the features of empowerment

identified by teachers in their responses to the interview questions. In this way, the Partnership Principles (choice, voice, dialogue, reflection, praxis, and reciprocity) and the features of teacher empowerment previously identified in Chapter Two (growth, importance of role, catalyst for change, power, and resources) served as provisional themes through which to view the data. Data which confirmed a theme was coded separately from data which disconfirmed a theme. Using an a priori framework for analyzing the data initially enabled me to stay focused on my research questions and to mine the data for a thorough understanding of both the subtle and obvious ways that teachers were reporting on their experiences with coaches. In this first analysis of the data, I also set aside any data that couldn't be coded for a Partnership Principle or a feature of empowerment. The data was removed from this stage of the analysis in order to remain focused on the research questions, but it was preserved in its own section for subsequent examination.

In the second cycle of analysis, Pattern Coding (Saldaña, 2012) was used to help make inferences and tie together larger themes being revealed in the data. Using Pattern Coding enabled me to consider what all six of the participants had to say about a given Partnership Principle or feature of empowerment in order to identify the larger message. It was during this stage of the inquiry that I began to combine Partnership Principles as it was clear that teachers didn't necessarily separate their experiences with coaches into the seven categories proposed by Knight (2007), but combined attributes of the Partnership Principles frequently enough for themes to emerge. Similar discoveries were made when analyzing the data that had been coded for the features of empowerment. The themes which emerged from the second cycle of data analysis are explicated in Chapter Four.

Finally, the data that had been previously set aside was examined to understand the ideas teachers shared that had, upon initial examination, appeared unrelated to Partnership Principles or features of empowerment. It was this disconfirming (Cresswell & Plano Clark, 2007) data which helped to reveal additional themes about ways in which the work of coaches in schools can be disempowering for teachers. This final analysis of the data ensured that everything teachers had shared was put to good use in developing a thorough understanding of how coaching had affected the empowerment of teachers participating in this study.

### **Ethical Considerations**

This study was conducted within the parameters for ethical research as defined by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Georgia Southern University. Some specific consideration was given to ways to protect the participants in the study given the nature of the topic under study. In a school district this small and with this small number of coaches, anonymity was an important consideration in order to ensure that participants felt they could answer the survey questions openly and honestly without risk. Participants confirmed their informed consent to participate and were assured of confidentiality in their answers. The interviews were recorded and transcribed by the researcher and only the researcher had access to the identity of each interviewee.

Participants also had the opportunity to review their transcribed interviews to ensure that their words and ideas were accurately transcribed, a process known as member checking, which further served to protect the integrity of the data (Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009). When specific data was reported or participants were quoted, measures were taken to maintain confidentiality (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009); pseudonyms were used to conceal any identifying characteristics of

the participants. This was especially important in this inquiry since teachers and coaches were asked to report on their professional relationships and experiences with one another.

### **Criteria for Trustworthiness and Credibility**

Validity for the qualitative analysis was established in three ways. First, as previously mentioned, member checking was used and ensured the fidelity of the transcripts to the intended messages conveyed by the interview participants (Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009). The use of member checking helped to confirm that teachers would be accurately quoted and that their authentic voices would be heard in the reporting of the data.

Another important way validity was addressed was through the use of a priori (Saldaña, 2012) goals which ensured alignment of the data analysis to the stated purpose of this study of understanding potential relationships between the Partnership Principles and teacher empowerment. A priori coding also safeguarded against researcher bias, given my experience as an instructional coach. By remaining tied to the Partnership Principles and the features of empowerment in the first round of analyzing the data, I was prevented from using my own background knowledge on this topic to interpret the data and was instead obliged to let the data speak. The findings reported in Chapter Four thus have more credibility because the previously established criteria were the initial lenses through which the data was viewed. Validity was furthermore enhanced through the triangulation resulting from the development of codes for themes that crossed multiple interview participants (Cresswell & Plano Clark, 2007) in the second cycle of analysis. The interview data from multiple teachers was analyzed to find overarching themes about coaching that could transcend the criteria of the initial analysis to help reveal more about what makes coaching empowering and/or disempowering for teachers.

Lastly, the qualitative analysis included attempts to identify disconfirming evidence (Cresswell & Plano Clark, 2007); that is, information that presented a different view of teacher empowerment than that espoused here or supportive features of effective teacher and coach relationships that appeared unrelated to the Partnership Principles. In this way, all of the qualitative data was honored, not just data that fit the preconceived variables purposely under study. The methods described in this section enable readers to have confidence that the findings reported from this data have both validity and credibility.

### **Researcher Positionality**

According to Piantanida & Garman (2009), the researcher in any qualitative inquiry is as much a part of the study as any other feature. The phenomenon under study in this investigation was instructional coaching and, as a veteran instructional coach, I bring significant background knowledge to this research, which was an asset during interviews with teachers and coaches because I understand the terminology they were likely to use when discussing coaching work. However, there was also the likelihood that I also introduced bias to the research as a result of my experiences with coaching and my beliefs about its potential for supporting teacher empowerment.

Without awareness of these potential biases, I could succumb to the temptation to judge the experiences of teachers and coaches, rather than learn from the participants how their experiences could be understood in light of the research questions for this study. A challenge when I interview teachers was to avoid standing in the role of coach while I listened to their stories. My training as an instructional coach allowed me to use specific dialogic strategies to enhance and support the coaching process; however, those strategies were not appropriate for this endeavor, since my goal was to hear the authentic voices of teachers and to better understand

how experiences with coaching affected their sense of teacher empowerment. By remaining committed to the use of the semi-structured interview protocols constructed for this study and through the systematic analysis of the data gathered from all participants, I hope that I mitigated any undue influences of my own bias in the interpretation and discussion of the data generated from this inquiry.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### DATA ANALYSIS

The purpose of this study was to understand how the work of instructional coaches affects teachers, especially in regards to teacher empowerment. Specifically, this research has addressed the following questions:

1. How are teachers' perceptions of empowerment influenced by their experiences with instructional coaches?
2. To what extent do coaches subscribe to the Partnership Principles in their work?
3. In what ways do the Partnership Principles help to support teachers' sense of empowerment?

It was theorized that instructional coaching that follows the Partnership Principles (Knight, 2007) might contribute to teacher empowerment because of the high value the Partnership Principles place on the development of a supportive teacher-coach relationship in which teachers remain the drivers of professional and school improvement. Interviews were collected and analyzed to identify emergent themes related to coaching and teacher empowerment. The interviews consisted of questions to collect biographic and demographic data as well as questions designed to collect qualitative data by evoking the insight of teachers in regards to their work with coaches. In this chapter, profiles of the participants are presented followed by a discussion of major themes from the interviews.

#### **Interview Protocol**

Each of the interviews was conducted in the Fall of the 2015-2016 school year over the phone due to a significant geographic distance between the interviewer and the interview participants. In addition, during the interview, handwritten notes were taken of the main points and impressions of the participants while they were sharing their stories. These handwritten notes served as a backup and helped me to process ideas for possibly follow up or clarifying questions as the participants responded to the queries in the interview protocol. The interview protocol, which can be found in Appendix A, contained



four sections. In the first part, which was read to the participants, background of the study was provided and information for informed consent was shared. The second part of the protocol consisted of questions meant to establish the background experiences of the teachers, including how long they had taught, the subjects and levels at which they had taught, the number of coaches with whom they had worked, and the degree to which they had choices of whether or not to work with a coach. The third section asked more specific and in depth questions about teachers' experiences working with coaches, such as asking teachers to share examples of experiences of working with coaches that they found helpful and to describe the best working relationship they had had with a coach. In this section, teachers were also asked to make connections about how coaching had impacted their own sense of empowerment as a teacher whether it was in ways they considered positive or negative. The purpose behind the final section was to capture any thoughts teachers had about how coaching affected them that wasn't addressed by earlier questions. All of the teachers interviewed had additional thoughts that they shared at this time. Since the interview protocol was semi-structured, follow up and clarifying questions were asked by the interviewer when it was deemed appropriate. All interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed into electronic word processing files in order to facilitate analysis of the data. Additionally, each interviewee received his or her own transcript for review prior to analysis as a way to ensure validity of the interview data.

### **Interview Participants**

Chapter Three provided detailed information about the six teacher participants who provided data for this study through interviews. These six teachers were chosen because they represented diversity in the district in terms of number of years in education, experience working with coaches, grade level spans and subject areas taught, and race and gender. A summary of the pertinent demographic information about the study participants can be found in Table 4.1.

Table 4.1 Profiles of Teacher Interview Participants

| Teacher Pseudonym | Race             | Sex | Number of Coaches Worked With | Years of Teaching Experience | School Level                        |
|-------------------|------------------|-----|-------------------------------|------------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| Tommie            | Caucasian        | F   | 6                             | 11                           | General Education Elementary        |
| Barbara Jean      | Caucasian        | F   | 4                             | <1                           | Secondary Foreign Language          |
| Amanda            | Caucasian        | F   | 6                             | 11                           | Special Education Elementary/Middle |
| Heather           | Caucasian        | F   | 3                             | 8                            | Special Education Elementary/Middle |
| William           | Caucasian        | M   | 5                             | 12                           | Secondary Core Curriculum           |
| Becca             | African American | F   | 6                             | 12                           | General Education Elementary        |

### Data Organization and Presentation

The remainder of this chapter will be divided into two parts which describe the findings from the interview data using the research questions as the organizing framework. The first part will reflect the first research question which deals directly with the relationship between teacher perceptions of empowerment and instructional coaching. Themes that emerged from the data that address this question will be described and supported with data from the interviews. Following this, I will consider themes in the interview data that relate to the features of teacher empowerment described in Chapter 2: Resources, Growth, Power, Catalyst for Change, and Importance of Role. I will consider the pertinent themes brought forward by teachers that affected their understanding of how instructional coaching is related to these features of empowerment. Finally, I will use the data to introduce emergent themes suggested by teachers that explain how aspects of coaching were experienced by them as disempowering.

The following section will describe the data gleaned from the interviews in regard to the second and third research questions, both of which related to the use of Partnership Principles, will be considered

next. I will briefly review the Partnership Principles and then discuss the data from the interviews that correlate with the Partnership Principles. The themes which emerged from the data will be discussed and connected with one or more of the Partnership Principles as appropriate.

For each section, quotes representative of the thinking of teachers about that topic will be offered to illustrate each theme. Different teachers felt more strongly or provided more description about the various ways in which instructional coaches interacted with them; as a result, some sections may have more or less quotes from any individual teacher, but will reflect the most important ideas articulated by the respondents. The most important goal for this chapter is to accurately present the perceptions of the participants about their experiences of empowerment through instructional coaching. In this way, the data will be thoroughly examined in order to address the questions guiding this research.

### **Connecting Coaching to Teacher Empowerment**

When asked directly the ways in which teachers related coaching to their own empowerment, there were mixed responses. The discrepancies in how teachers discussed connections between their empowerment and experiences with coaching help to reveal the range of effects coaching can have on teachers. The interview question teachers responded to was, “In what ways has your experience with coaching contributed to your sense of empowerment and in what ways might your work with coaches have taken away from your sense of empowerment?” Teachers’ responses to this question clustered around three themes which will be discussed next.

#### ***“Yes, Generally”***

Two of the teachers, Heather and Becca, felt that coaching had, in general, been a significant contributor to their feelings of empowerment. Heather wholeheartedly endorsed the work of coaches and felt that there should be more of them in the schools, especially coaches with specific skill sets that could support the work of Special Educators or teachers of the Gifted. When answering this question, she enumerated the various skills she had acquired as a result of her work with coaches, summarizing that

work in this way, “I think they have tried to empower us in having us take ownership and active roles in doing those things.” Becca, too, felt that coaching had made her job better in numerous ways and could not find any examples in her experience of how coaching had diminished her empowerment. She saw coaches as a natural role between administrators and teachers, with a purpose for supporting teachers in the complex world of contemporary education. She remarked that, “When they give you directives that have been given to them, I felt like that [disempowered]. But then I realized they were just doing their job, too. They were telling me what the administrators wanted us to know.” Becca’s realization enabled her to reframe the actions of her coach as a feature of the context of working in a high needs school district, rather than viewing coaching itself as disempowering.

### ***“Yes, When”***

Both Barbara Jean and Amanda felt that coaching had made some important contributions to their empowerment, but that it simultaneously showed potential for diminishing their empowerment. Barbara Jean felt that her coaches had been invaluable in empowering her in her first year in the classroom, especially in how they affirmed and provided direction to her as she navigated classroom teaching for the first time. However, as a structural feature of the school, she felt that coaching is “theoretically...an excellent idea. Realistically, it’s not working.” She attributed this statement to the fact that neither she nor veteran teachers were very clear on the exact role of the coach, how to access their services, and what coaches could do for them besides bringing district initiatives to their attention. For Barbara Jean, coaching was empowering to her as a new teacher trying to navigate through her first year in the classroom uncertain of the most common policies and procedures in classroom teaching. Barbara Jean differentiated between what had been personally empowering for her in regards to coaching and the way she observed coaching affecting her colleagues and the school.

For her part, Amanda felt that the empowerment she experienced as a result of working with coaches was “a double-edged sword.” She enjoyed being able to pursue topics of interest and need for

her students, but was dismayed by the cookie-cutter way in which some coaches with whom she worked expected classroom teachers to function. Amanda stated that coaching was “very influential” in her growth as a teacher and that she had benefitted greatly from working with a coach, especially early in her career (like Barbara Jean), from the professional learning support given by her coaches. As she progressed in her career she felt less empowered by coaching that seemed to take away teacher creativity and substitute it with a plan in which “everyone has to do the same things.”

### ***“No, Because”***

Tommie and William asserted that coaching diminished their sense of empowerment for a variety of reasons. Tommie did not feel coaches had empowered her because she had experienced coaches who were very dominant and gave a lot of direction but few choices to teachers. For these coaches, Tommie said, “I kind of gave a rote performance of what I thought was expected for me, but, for me, I didn’t have a whole lot of power.” She also found that there were coaches who were inept as leaders so that teachers had a lot of choice, but little direction or assistance due to the coach’s lack of a plan, affecting her in this way: “There isn’t a whole lot of buy-in for a coach who doesn’t have a plan for how to help you keep improving.” According to Tommie, unless both coaches and teachers commit to the work with one another and mutually build a trust relationship, coaching has little effect on the empowerment of teachers.

William emphatically asserted that coaching diminished his empowerment because of specific negative experiences he had had with coaches, some of which will be described elsewhere in this work. He especially disagreed with a message which he felt was being communicated by most of the coaches with whom he had worked at the time of his interview, heard in this comment, “What we’re trying to do with the whole academic coach thing is to make everybody the same. We’re not all the same. We’ve gotten away from how can we help the student to how can we fix the teacher?” His perception that coaches were present to remediate teacher practice was the primary reason he cited for feelings of disempowerment associated with instructional coaching. Additionally, he questioned the criteria for selecting coaches because, from his observation, many of the coaches with whom he worked lacked the

skills to be considered effective teachers, let alone coaches. He stated, “Our academic coaches weren’t in the classroom very long or either weren’t successful in the classroom at all.” These two issues contributed to William’s conclusion that coaching was disempowering to him.

### **Instructional Coaching and the Features of Empowerment**

Despite differences of opinion of the generally empowering or disempowering effect of coaching on teachers, all teachers could cite specific features of coaching which formed their opinions, suggesting that there are important variations in coaching that contribute directly to empowerment for teachers. By considering the themes revealed in the interview data in conjunction with the characteristics of teacher empowerment articulated in Chapter 2, it is possible to discern how coaches’ work might result in empowering outcomes for teachers. The operationalized description of teacher empowerment included these five elements: Resources, Growth, Power, Catalyst for Change, and Importance of Role. Resources indicates that teachers feel that have or are able to acquire what they need in order to be effective teachers. Growth is the sense that teachers have of their ongoing improvement and refinement of their craft. Power is the perception that they have control over those elements most important to the effective execution of their immediate classroom. Catalyst for Change indicates that teachers see themselves as participants in the overarching goals of the school to improve education for students. Importance of Role is the belief teachers have that they are the primary influence in the learning gains of their students. These five features comprise the definition of teacher empowerment in this inquiry. The interview data was examined to determine ways in which coaching may have intersected with or contributed to any of these individual features of empowerment. The results of that examination will be discussed next.

#### **Importance of Role and Catalyst for Change**

The teachers participating in this study did not uniformly describe themselves as aware of the importance of their role in the schools as a catalyst for change, nor did they necessarily describe their coaches as connected to this concept. Nonetheless, each verbalized their primary mission as the supporter

of student learning, which shows that this feature of empowerment was present to some degree in this sample of teachers. One way this idea was expressed is exemplified by this comment from Tommie when discussing the idea of the best working relationship she had with a coach: “They didn’t have to have their way all the time...I could say, ‘Do we have to do it like that—I think it would work better for my kids to do it this way.’” This comment reveals the perception that Tommie was the driver of instruction in her classroom, that she worked with her coach as an equal, and that the goal of their partnership was the same: to provide the best classroom experience for students. This perspective was corroborated by Heather who described the value of working with coaches who took the time to disaggregate data by subgroups that ultimately “helped us see how we needed to help students with learning.” Like Becca, many of the teachers in this sample expressed the professional learning role coaches had played earlier in their career that enabled them to seek out coaching support less over time because they had the skills and confidence to address students’ learning needs without coach support as they grew in confidence and experience.

Another theme was revealed by talking to teachers about how their work with coaches impacted their sense of the importance of teaching. This idea revolves around the notion of how coaches present themselves to the teachers with whom they work and the data revealed that teachers described empowering outcomes when working with coaches who conducted themselves as peers, rather than authority figures. For example, Barbara Jean, a first year teacher, made a conscious choice to dismiss what she perceived as the “jaded” perspectives of many of her veteran colleagues in favor of interacting with her coaches *and* her students in ways that recognize everyone’s autonomy and decision-making capacity; that is, she proactively sought out her coach for her immediate concerns and kept talking to clarify issues of content with him, since he was not certified in her content area and she felt he didn’t understand the unique needs of students in her class. When he reviewed her lesson plans for rigor and high expectations, he didn’t understand how vocabulary identification could be a higher order thinking skill until she explained the complexity of thinking that occurs when students “have to translate it,

retranslate it, and then spit it back out [in the target language].” Ultimately, through dialogue and the teachable point of view (Tichy, 1999) of the coach, she was able to get the practical support she needed while sidestepping other strategies which would have been a distraction away from solving the dilemmas she faced in the classroom at the time. Similarly, Barbara Jean felt that she worked that way with students: “I shoot straight with them and I don’t try to sugar coat it or make it fancy and... because of that, it is amazing the results I am seeing.” Because her coach was willing to listen to her concerns past the standard answers given to a new teacher, she was able to self-advocate for her support needs and subsequently use the coach’s support to the benefit of her students.

Amanda described this apparent mindset of coaches a little differently than Barbara Jean, but her assertion that coaches with whom she had worked had been empowering to her echoed many of the same ideas. From Amanda’s perspective, coaches were teacher leaders whose relationship-building skills enabled them to unthreateningly critique teacher practice as peers and colleagues, rather than as evaluators. She described how, as a special education teacher, she was asked by her coach to work with teacher teams on unit writing and how this impacted her perception of herself as an educator:

They always pulled me in because I understood the background of reading and how to teach a kid to read, what we needed to do with the standards and activities and all that...but not just for my kids; I understood it for a lot of kids and how they all are different. So I was able to work on those teams and write those units. That empowered me.

This one detail—whether the coach offers their services as a fellow teacher to support classroom instruction or whether the coach communicates, directly or indirectly, that their primary role is to support the administrative needs of the school to produce improvement results—seems to be a linchpin impacting the empowerment of teachers. Whenever teachers described situations in which coaches acted as peers and colleagues whose consultative advice they could seek at will, teachers reported confidence in their abilities to be catalysts of change.



### **Growth: The Result of Adequate and Appropriate Resources**

Another feature of empowerment this study was designed to examine is how teachers experience growth in the process of working with coaches and using the resources provided by them. All teachers were able to identify specific areas of professional growth they had experienced, although there was not universal agreement that this growth was related to what coaches had to offer teachers. One way coaches were seen to support the growth of teachers is by the resources they provided, the most important being themselves as teaching colleagues with whom teachers could collaborate in their quest to improve learning for students. A surprising and remarkable understanding of the dynamic potential for empowerment in terms of growth and resources was revealed by Amanda when she linked seeking out the support of a coach with her own desire to improve her teaching craft. This teacher associated consultation with a coach as evidence that she was pursuing and capable of growth, rather than as evidence that she was deficient in pedagogical skills. This is an important distinction that can help to explain differences in perceptions about coaching and resulting teacher empowerment. Likewise, Tommie affirmed that growth was the result for her when coaches came in to observe her teaching and gave her feedback that she could use to fine tune her practice. Amanda and Becca both reported leaning more heavily on coaches for resources and advice earlier in their careers, but that at the time of the interview, they felt they had grown beyond the need of a coach to provide regular support with resources; this demonstrates that the coaching relationship, when effective, can empower teachers to the extent that they feel comfortable and competent in pursuing their own solutions for classroom needs while still welcoming what coaches have to offer. From these examples, it can be seen that the Partnership Principles of Choice and Reflection frequently intersected with descriptions of coaches who contributed to the professional growth of teachers in the sample.

These ideas can be contrasted with William's perception about coaching and the outcomes of that perception, "The premise [of coaching] is there's something wrong with you teachers. And they tighten the noose more and more and more...the last couple of years, I'm much more defensive." A contributing

factor for this perception mentioned by Barbara Jean and Heather was the limited resources provided that pertained specifically to their content areas or differentiated student population needs. These teachers frequently described coaches working with them to achieve district goals, such as unpacking standards, studying school improvement concepts, or analyzing common assessment data. The disconnect for these teachers seemed to be that the direct connection to day-to-day classroom application of these activities was missing, which suggests that coaches may not be leveraging the power of Praxis as often as would be helpful for their teachers. The idea that teachers associated positive growth for themselves when coaches could provide resources of content-specific materials, instructional strategies, and problem-solving ideas or that teacher growth was inhibited by coaching programs which didn't support teachers this way, was communicated by all teachers in this sample.

### **Power**

Power, as a feature of empowerment is an obviously critical piece and yet the data from these interviews demonstrates that it had not been a regular outcome of coaching for these teachers. More examples about ways in which coaches restricted teacher power were shared than ways coaches enlarged or supported teacher power. This finding notwithstanding, some teachers described ways that coaches helped them maintain power over their work. For example, Barbara Jean reported, "As far as the classroom, they are hands off in the sense that they want you to have the ability to be flexible in the classroom environment as long as you're meeting the standards." Likewise Tommie's comment about effective coaches not insisting on having "things done their way all the time" confirms that there were areas in which coaches supported teachers having power over their work. It appears, however, that teachers received conflicting messages from coaches regarding power, which is confirmed by Amanda's reflection, "At times, we would hear—it's your classroom-do what you need to do. But I feel like not everyone always heard that. I know that to be true. Because they would say to me 'We trust you. It's fine, your class is fine.'"

Some ways coaching programs restricted teacher power included the mandatory use of teacher time to work on initiatives that came from the district or school-level administration, paperwork or assignments that teachers were required to complete to comply with coach requests, and subjecting teachers to observations that were critical in nature without serving to support teacher growth or instructional improvement. Another facet of this limitation of teacher power expressed by several teachers was the limitation of teacher creativity or innovation in favor of the standardization of teaching practices in a grade level or subject. Tommie, Amanda, and Becca all expressed feelings of diminishing power over their work in the presence of coaching programs that emphasized synchronization of practice across classrooms, which can translate into teaching the same lessons using the same materials and methods in the same time frame without regard for differences in student background knowledge or learning needs or in teacher expertise that would develop concepts instructionally in a manner different than a given coach might recommend. Amanda's description echoes concerns voiced by Tommie: "It really created a lot of unease. Because no longer was it my classroom. It was what I'm being told to do." Over and over again the lack of connection between the work teachers were asked to do with coaches and the needs of students in the classroom became evident as an important way that teacher power was limited.

### **Emergent Themes: How Coaching Can Be Disempowering**

The analysis of the interview data also revealed that there are a number of ways that coaching programs were used to disempower teachers; this includes policies or actions that removed resources, limited teacher growth, dismissed the importance of the role of teachers or stripped power away from teachers. It is important to understand that in most cases, but not all, the examples of disempowerment shared by teachers dealt with aspects of coaching as a structural feature of the schools and district in which they worked, rather than as personality traits of or specific techniques used by individual coaches. Because this study focuses on how coaching as a structure of schools might affect teacher empowerment,

the data shared here will maintain the same area of focus, while acknowledging that there are, within any field, those who are more or less skilled practitioners of that craft.

### **Disempowerment Factor #1: Scheduling and Distribution of Coaches**

Many teachers referred to the lack of coach availability as a mitigating factor prohibiting them from growth as an outcome of their interactions with coaches. It is important to note that the teachers in this district had worked with coaches for many years, but that in the school year in which this study was conducted, a different structure for the coaching program had been initiated. As a result, many of the teachers talked about how it “used to be” when each school had a group of coaches assigned to their individual building and working with one school staff throughout the year. In the 2015-2016 school year, the district changed to a structure of district-level coaches who worked across buildings. In the coaching program structure for this school year, coaches travelled from building to building, thereby working with many more teachers but likely spending much less time with any given teacher than under the previous model.

The impact of these differences in structure were mentioned when discussing ways in which coaching did not support teacher empowerment because, as district-level personnel, any given coach was in any one building less time than would be a coach assigned exclusively to a school. For example, Barbara Jean described having to “hunt down” a coach outside of the designated weekly study group time who could give her individualized support for her needs as a new teacher. She mused, “It was refreshing to feel like I finally had someone’s ear that wasn’t in passing.” Considering how important relationship-building is to the efficacy of teacher-coach partnerships, this decreased time made establishing and maintaining such relationships difficult. Furthermore, teachers talked about being unable to schedule individual time with coaches because of how infrequently or irregularly they were present in the building. As Becca opined, “It [coaching] could be more of a help, but it’s not because of them being pulled in so many other directions...I don’t know where they are because they could be anywhere.” Time for

individual work with teachers was additionally limited because of the mandatory group sessions that were scheduled with teacher groups. Because teachers were not privy to what coaches' schedules were like and what work they were doing in between their visits with teachers, further distrust of the usefulness of coaches was communicated by a number of teachers, especially because this district had had to increase class sizes and call for furlough days due to the slowness of economic recovery in this region. Using district money to lower class sizes or eliminate furlough days instead of having coaches was seen by more than one teacher as a potential way to empower them. The scheduling of coaches' work with teachers was reported by multiple teachers as an aspect of coaching that was detrimental to their empowerment.

### **Disempowerment Factor #2: Coaching Role Confusion**

Complicating the value of Partnership Principles as a means for coaches to employ that supports teacher empowerment is the often-confused role of coaches in the building. The role of coaches from the teachers' perspective was complicated, to say the least. A common perception among the teachers associated with their disempowerment were ways that schools positioned coaches as an arm of the administration; teachers frequently identified their coaches as an extension of the school administration regardless of how the coach approached their work with teachers, which contradicts much of the professional literature on the role of coaches (Barkley & Bianco, 2005; Knight, 2008; Morel & Cushman, 2012) Teachers described times coaches came to deliver messages or directives from administrators, suggesting that coaches weren't developing a coaching program on behalf of the identified student learning needs at their school, but were the executors of initiatives developed by site-based or district-level administrators who were then assigned to get teachers to implement them. Teachers were concerned about coaches coming to do observations on behalf of administrators and described coaching reports being used in formal evaluations or being placed in their personnel files, which flies in the face of the supportive nature of coaching defined by scholars on this topic. Teachers described checklists used by coaches to monitor and evaluate their compliance with district initiatives, which is more of a supervisory task than coaches might typically be expected to do. When a coach uses such a checklist, it can serve to

limit the scope of ways to value the work of teachers and to differentiate that work, and it can lead to the deconstruction of instruction to a list of dos and don'ts that denies the organic nature of teaching and learning processes. Because multiple teachers identified coaches as members of the administrative team, it is likely that this perception was a contributing factor to some of the disempowerment teachers reported experiencing.

Another would-be role for coaches that teachers expressed was that of activist; teachers seemed to expect the coach to be an advocate on their behalf to the administrative team. Amanda explained that, "Teachers need a voice and to me an academic coach is that voice" and Becca asserted that coaches "act as the liaison between you and the administrators." Similarly, Tommie reported that coaches she had worked with "would fight your battles for you." Expectations such as these draw a thin tightrope for coaches to navigate across in their work, but it reveals how polarized relationships between teachers and their administrators can be in this era of ultra-accountability. Teachers simultaneously communicated feeling that they needed someone to defend and represent them and perceiving that administrators used coaches to do surveillance for them; it is likely that coaches could thus be pulled between these oppositional expectations and ultimately resented for the vague nature of their undefined role. These ideas reinforce the need for role clarification within this district and its schools. There are bound to be unmet expectations when it isn't made clear to all what the role of the coach is and the ambiguity of coaches' roles contributed to less effective teacher-coach relationships.

### **Disempowerment Factor #3: Lack of Coaching Program Goals**

Another aspect of coaching that was revealed to negatively influence these teachers' empowerment were perceptions on the goals of the coaching programs instituted in their schools. Teachers vacillated between identifying the goal of coaching as the improvement of student achievement and the use of coaching to correct teacher deficiencies; the former idea would be consistent with the academic literature on coaching, but the latter idea contradicts established expectations for coaching and

is obviously disempowering. How coaches critique teachers' work can contribute to the perception that teacher practice needs remediation and interconnects definitively with both the Equality and Choice Partnership Principles. The way coaches view and describe their work with teachers can reveal whether they see the goal of their work in student learning terms or teacher improvement terms. An example of how important it is to communicate an empowering goal for the existence of a coaching program can be demonstrated by the troubling experience described by William who claimed that a coach said that teachers needed to be treated like children in order for coaching to work; this perspective led him to conclude "We've gotten away from how can we help the student to how can we fix the teacher." Because of the sensitive nature of the coaching role, it's imperative that coaches and teachers operate from a perspective of partnership. Thus, in addition to clarifying the role of the coach at a school site, it's clear that some goals for the coaching program would be helpful in establishing parameters for teacher and coach interactions in pursuit of common professional objectives.

#### **Disempowerment Factor #4: Questions of Coach Expertise**

A final area of concern communicated by teachers that they associated with feelings of disempowerment was the idea that those selected to be coaches had limitations of their own that made it difficult for teachers to trust their guidance and advice. Both secondary teachers reported having to work with coaches who were not certified in the same subject areas as the teachers which produced difficulty in discussing actual issues of content instruction with them and resulted in coaches prescribing actions that would be inconsistent with best practice in the content area. Becca communicated concerns about the qualifications of coaches and how schools could ensure that coaches were actually producing results that helped teachers and led to student achievement gains. She further expressed concern about how coaches were selected: "It appears sometimes the coaches are given the position based on, in my opinion, who they are and who they know, not so much on whether you're qualified and really have the expertise." As teachers certified in Special Education, Amanda and Heather both expressed having worked with coaches who either didn't have expertise in working with students with disabilities, who left them out of important

teacher conversations that impacted their students, or who depended on them exclusively to provide support in necessary curriculum differentiation, rather than assume that responsibility as part of their coaching. Heather explained her concern like this: “It was an area I was struggling with and they were not able to break it down for children with special needs. Learning how to apply things to our students—it was left up to us.” Examples like these show that the technical skills of coaches were sometimes in question and that in these instances, teachers perceived conflicts with coaches, especially when this involved following directives coaches were giving them under circumstances in which they felt such directives were contradictory to what would be in their students’ best interests.

Teachers also felt that sometimes coaches didn’t have a disposition suitable for being a coach who empowers teachers. In some of the descriptions of disempowerment teachers communicated, they talked about coaches who were dogmatic, withdrawn, or inflexible. Amanda asserted that coaches simply had to have a personality that made teachers want to spend time with them and that communicated how much they valued teachers. Heather affirmed that a good coach, in her estimation, was someone “who is a people person that could easily work with anybody and didn’t show favoritism between their administrators and the teachers.” Teachers felt empowered by coaches who didn’t seem to disdain the task of teaching itself and who were willing to “get their hands dirty” in the messy work of learning in the classroom. Several teachers mentioned the importance of a coach having people skills that helped to put teachers at ease and invite them in to the coaching process. Becca asserted that coaches needed to be “friendly, approachable, patient, helpful...and they need to have a mentoring spirit...where even though you have all these other things [to do] you can put it to the side, because you know this person needs your help.” Tommie had notable advice for coaches who sought this route with their teachers,

The number one thing the coach has to do is to get the teachers to buy into you. The coach needs to create a memorable moment somehow. Come into the classroom. Offer to help, even if it’s with a mundane task. Show teachers you’re on their side and not just there to make everything harder. Coaching takes away from planning time or makes you have to stay after school. Unless



a coach communicates that they're on the side of teachers, not a whole lot of positive things are going to come out of having coaches in the building.

Coaches who lacked these soft skills that could have enabled them to build partnerships with teachers engendered distrust among their teachers; ultimately these coach limitations were identified by the participants as a reason for the belief that coaching programs were sometimes a detriment to teacher empowerment.

### **Partnership Principles and Teacher Empowerment**

We turn our attention next to the consideration of the second and third research questions, which seek to understand the extent to which the Partnership Principles were part of the framework of coaches in this setting and the ways in which the Partnership Principle supported or detracted from teacher empowerment. The Partnership Principles are a philosophical framework which is recommended for instructional coaches who want to develop highly effective working relationships with their teachers (Knight, 2007). The seven principles are considered “best practice” by many scholars in the field of instructional coaching (Cornett & Knight, 2009; Morel and Cushman, 2012; Deane-Williams, Nelms, & Robinson, 2015). Choice is the principle that indicates how much and to what extent teachers have options in their work with coaches. Voice is the idea that teachers are not simply receivers of advice or training from coaches, but that their thoughts and ideas have merit and must be a focal point of the work in which coaches and teachers collaboratively engage. Dialogue naturally follows, in that effective teacher-coach relationships involve both parties engaged in ongoing conversation at multiple levels around topics of instructional improvement and increased student learning. Reflection is the notion that both teacher and coach will invest themselves in considering how instructional practice and proposed strategies have or are likely to impact students in the context of classroom instruction. Reciprocity is the belief that coaches and teachers both teach each other about highly effective practices in the processes associated with coaching; it negates the view that coaches are sages or gurus to whom teachers must go in

order to be enlightened. Praxis is the quality that requires coaches to plan, in their work with teachers, only those activities and tasks that will directly translate and support teachers in the improvement of classroom instruction. The final Partnership Principle, Equality, is the value that teachers and coaches are on a level playing field with one another and that there are no hierarchical divisions between them; both are simply educators working collaboratively to provide the best instructional programs for students. This study was designed to explore whether the use of the Partnership Principles by instructional coaches supports empowerment for teachers.

### **Do Coaches Use Partnership Principles?**

Due to the fact that coaches in the district selected for this inquiry declined to be interviewed, it is impossible to answer this question definitively or support a conjecture directly with qualitative data. However, inasmuch as the data from the teacher interviews shows that teachers associated the use of Partnership Principles with aspects of their own empowerment, and relayed multiple examples of experiences of effective coaching that used terminology descriptive of the Partnership Principles, a conclusion can be drawn that the coaches in this district had applied the principles in their work, although the extent to which this is true is unknown. The ways in which teachers expressed key themes indicative of these principles in the work of the coaches who were their colleagues will be explored next.

### **How Partnership Principles Support Teacher Empowerment**

#### ***Theme 1: Relationship Matters***

The Partnership Principles of Reciprocity and Equality were described by teachers in a variety of ways that demonstrated their importance to teachers' interest in working with coaches and the outcomes of teachers' collaboration with instructional coaches. For these interview participants, the sum total of Reciprocity and Equality was a high-quality relationship with their coaches which served as a pre-requisite to the effectiveness of their work together. Relationship philosophies such as trust, respect, and joint ownership of the work were mentioned by all six teachers during the course of their interviews. The

converse was also true; in cases where trust, respect, joint ownership, and parity were lacking, teachers' perceptions of the value of coaching to their own empowerment were subsequently limited.

The unique role of coaches as consultants to and collaborators with teachers while simultaneously having no supervisory capacity over them requires trust as a foundational aspect of the teacher-coach relationship. Trust as it was described by these teachers included coaches who were dependable in using confidentiality along with open, honest feedback as norms in their work with teachers. Consider Tommie's observation: "I could voice my opinion and it wouldn't go anywhere else. There was trust." If, as Barkley and Bianco (2005) suggest, the collaborative work of teachers and coaches is instructional improvement through the assessment (rather than evaluation) of teaching practices, then trust is crucial. Barbara Jean put it this way: "I think if [coaches] have that non-authoritative type approach with the teacher, the teacher is more willing to admit, 'Hey, I don't know what I'm doing.'" An objective critique of the effectiveness of a given teaching practice is best done cooperatively with teachers to generate reflection and identification of strategies which promote learning and those which may impose limitations on learning. This ongoing work requires trust in order to spur continual improvement, which was emphasized by multiple teachers. Teachers expressed a desire to work with coaches who exemplified trust by being reliable, coming through with what they had promised, and intentionally prioritizing the coaching relationship. Becca summed up this idea in her comment about what makes a coaching relationship effective for her:

One of the things is that I knew the person personally...that helps a lot because...they are part of the administrative team. Sometimes people are scared to go to their boss and ask for certain things. But when it's friends—and not necessarily a close friend—but just a friend, you know someone on another level. I know this person knows me. I'm not going to be aggravating this person or sound crazy to the person. Just having a personal relationship with this person in particular has helped...It makes you feel like you've got somebody on your side.

Another way Reciprocity and Equality were repeatedly revealed in the interview data was in the need for a mutually respectful relationship between coaches and teachers. A feature of respect important to teachers interviewed for this work was the need for coaches to respect teachers' time. Barbara Jean gave an example of this when she talked about how her coaches used Google tools to provide virtual professional learning modules so that face-to-face time could be used more productively. Tommie said that she felt most supported by coaches who showed that they respected her time by planning for meaningful and useful collaboration which directly impacts the classroom and was worth her time; this demonstrates how the Partnership Principles work in conjunction with one another, since Praxis is the practical application of the topics coaches are intended to work on with teachers. By adhering to the principle of Praxis, this coach reinforced the principle of Equality with Tommie. Heather felt that a coach she considered especially effective was able "to be well-rounded with being able to work with all kinds of teachers." Reciprocity also included respect for diverse opinions and multiple avenues for problem solving and avoidance of favoritism among teachers, as exemplified by this comment from Amanda, "When we went to collaborative groups with the coach it helped me because I was able to see the coach's viewpoint and the teachers' viewpoints... [the coach] respected me as much as I respected them. It was...a mutually beneficial relationship." Communicating respect for teachers as peers in the pursuit of student achievement was a common theme expressed by all of the teachers in this sample. William, who had experienced very challenging relationships with some of his coaches, validated this conclusion by stating, "I respect her as a professional. In order for this type of thing to work, there has to be a mutual respect."

A third aspect of Reciprocity and Equality that emerged as a theme among the teachers interviewed was the way coaches communicated a joint ownership of the work on which they collaborated. In regards to this idea, Tommie observed that coaches "need to be willing to work just as much as you are; a good coach will sit down with you and work together with you... they won't just give it to you to do and leave you with it." Likewise, William described a coach he had worked with who

asked targeted questions about the progress of individual students and worked to find additional supports for struggling students beyond what he as the classroom teacher was providing; the laser-like focus on increasing student learning, rather than blaming him as a teacher for the student's current performance, encouraged this teacher to regularly seek out consultation with this coach. Barbara Jean, who is new to the field, linked the label of coach to an understanding that her coaches were working with her on her behalf; she imagined them thinking: "This person needs to be successful so we can win the game." As a result, she reported leaning heavily on their input and advice.

Another way coaches demonstrated a joint ownership of the work of improving student learning was by bringing information to teachers, such as common assessment data analysis or instructional tasks or activities for upcoming units that teachers might find useful; these strategies demonstrated to teachers that coaches valued their time, but, more importantly, that coaches were themselves teachers first and continued to be involved in the development of sound instructional practices on behalf of the teachers whom they served. Heather's description of this shows how important Reciprocity and Equality are to the teacher-coach relationship:

I've seen over the years, they [coaches] have directed how to write unit plans, how to write appropriate tests, teaching us how to evaluate whether our tests are valid or not as a form of measurement of the standards we are teaching, trying to look at the end in mind first before we begin to teach those different skills. I think they have tried to empower us in having us take ownership and an active role in doing those things by providing us a step-by-step process so that we can do that as a team and individually within our department. I've seen that a lot was accomplished and it was meaningful. I felt like it really made me stronger as a classroom teacher. It really helped me so to see those things differently than I would have if they [coaches] weren't there.

Teachers also communicated experiences of impacts of the absence of Reciprocity and Equality on the relationships they had with their coaches. According to William, “I had a very negative experience with a coach who came into my classroom earlier this year and basically tried to take over my classroom.” Subsequently, William heard from a parent that the coach had complained about his classroom. Furthermore, he felt that the coach would “snitch on him” to the principal by reporting rule infractions or student misbehaviors rather than focusing on instructional improvement; the result was that William felt he could learn nothing from working with this coach. Likewise, Amanda described a coach whom she felt disrespected her during a meeting by chastising her for having a side conversation when she made an observation about some data presented at the meeting. The relationship was impaired from that time forward, according to Amanda: “So the ideas just kept getting shot down. I was frustrated. From then on, I lost all respect... When I think of coaches, that’s the one thing I think—don’t shoot down somebody and make them feel little.” These stories of teacher experiences exemplify how Reciprocity and Equality are essential criteria that empower teachers to build and maintain collaborative working relationships that produce improvements in instructional practices.

### ***Theme 2: Engagement vs. Compliance***

The interview data reflects the importance of Choice, Voice and Dialogue for teachers as they interact with their coaches. Teachers made it clear that they expect these features to be a standard part of the teacher-coach working relationship. These teachers described engagement in and benefit from working with coaches who consistently implemented these features into their coaching program. Teachers felt so strongly about these aspects of coaching that they would prefer to choose minimal or non-compliance when faced with coaches who don’t offer other, more empowering, ways of working together.

All of the teachers interviewed stated that working with coaches was mandated by their building principals, making coaching a structural feature of the culture of the school not subject to teacher choice

which could have a negative impact on teacher empowerment. Typically, the required interaction with coaches came in the form of a weekly meeting known as study group. Most teachers talked about having to give up or waste their planning time in these meetings and the need to meet after school for this purpose was also mentioned. Although the required meetings were generally seen as a poor use of teacher time as shown by William's comment, "We are forced to give up our planning period once a week to go and listen to them tell us how great they are," even those teachers who found the time set aside for professional learning as productive, still felt that too much time was spent in required meetings. For example, Heather brought up the concern that, in addition to other scheduled meetings during teacher planning time during the week, the mandated professional learning session with coaches in which a new topic was provided each week left teachers with little time to implement new practices or refine them through a feedback or follow up session with their coach and teaching peers. The propensity of the school district to mandate the amount of time teachers spend in group professional learning with coaches may pre-emptively bias teachers against seeking out the services of a coach when it would be beneficial for them to do so.

The role of Choice as a Partnership Principle that could empower teachers seems to have more frequently related to individual work teachers did with coaches, rather than working in groups with a coach. No teacher indicated that they had been required to work with a coach for one-on-one help, but all of the teachers indicated times they sought out coaches for their own support needs. The purposes for individual pursuit of consultation with a coach varied from needing questions answered about upcoming tasks, bouncing ideas off of the coach for addressing issues in the classroom, developing new strategies for instruction, asking for advice and insight from the coach and getting moral or emotional support. Amanda helped to elucidate this last idea by describing her work with a coach when she was a new teacher, "If I needed to go cry—because teachers cry—I could cry and I wouldn't be judged on it. They [coaches] could help with emotional support." Similarly, Becca described negative feelings she had about a school improvement initiative, noting that it made her feel like a robot with little teacher autonomy; a

discussion about this concern with her coach enabled her to clarify the situations in which she was able to use her own professional judgment in instructional decisions while implementing the features of the school improvement initiative that were mandated. Barbara Jean saw coaches as part counselor and part teacher, able to provide both support and technical advice. Having a person on site whom teachers could go to at will for technical expertise, curriculum and instruction collaboration, and general support was described as an empowering experience by the teachers interviewed.

Choice as a feature of teacher empowerment, even for individual consultative needs, was shown to be limited for a number of reasons. Teachers described that coaches' schedules were exceptionally tight, limiting their availability for teachers to seek them out for consultation, thereby mitigating the empowering influence of choice. Some teachers expressed concerns about the lack of coach expertise, which influenced these teachers to avoid seeking out the coach for support since the coach was not seen as someone with the ability to provide assistance. Teachers also described that some of the coaches they had worked with had a propensity for avoiding responding to teacher questions or concerns, which contributed to teachers choosing not to consult coaches. In general, the degree of authoritarianism a coach exhibited greatly influenced whether teachers were willing to seek out coaches for individual support, demonstrating again the importance of relationship building to establish an effective coaching program.

Teachers repeatedly identified that honoring their voices through ongoing, open dialogue was influential in perceiving their work with coaches as empowering. Teachers described effective coaches as those who prioritized non-judgmental listening and valued teacher perspectives; indeed, all six teachers mentioned listening with an open mind as a feature of the coaches with whom they felt they had had a high quality relationship. Heather explained, "She was willing to find out what we needed...There was an open-door policy. She made herself very available...[and] got back with us when we had questions. It was never just 'Yes' or put under the rug for later." When William had an experience like this with a coach he respected, he described it this way: "She didn't bring it [information] to us in a confrontational



manner. She'd say, 'What do you think about this?' And we could talk about things...She operated as a peer." Teachers who felt they were free to share opinions openly and say what they really thought about a topic frequently viewed coaching as an empowering experience for themselves. The synergy of dialogue was most often described with euphemisms such as "bouncing ideas around" (Tommie) and was associated with the idea that effective coaches established a community of thought where problem solving and the creation of new knowledge and application could happen. Conversely, when coaches' voices seemed to be the priority, as had happened with both Amanda and William, teachers described themselves as retreating from the activity and feeling that the time spent with their coach was less useful.

Coaches who valued teacher voice and solicited dialogue were described by teachers as being friendly, approachable, patient, helpful, flexible, and willing to prioritize actively listening to teacher concerns. Many teachers used phrases like "took the time," "set other things aside," and "coaches being pulled in so many other directions" to describe obstacles coaches overcame in order to affirm teacher voice and engage in productive dialogue with them. These phrases further reinforce that coach schedules influence their effectiveness in being able to provide the "just-in-time" professional learning (Guskey and Yoon, 2009) that teachers find so valuable. Teachers reported that they were more engaged in the process when coaches prioritized their time so that teacher's voices could be heard, making authentic dialogue possible.

In terms of Dialogue, teachers communicated that they were more engaged in the coaching process when the conversation was balanced, with both teacher and coach participating. The input of coaches who insist that they have the prescription to solve every classroom dilemma was often eschewed by teachers because it they saw it as dismissive of the teacher's competence, experience, and knowledge of students. Tommie's comment sheds light on how teachers might perceive such a coach:

Now I'll tell you something that really doesn't work. It's the worst thing; the worst thing is when they say, 'When I was in the classroom...' When we hear them say something like that, the first

thing is, ‘Well, you haven’t been in your own classroom for one or two years, so how do you know this still works?’ and [this approach] just doesn’t work. Teachers tune out a coach who talks like that.

When coaches come across as experts operating on a plane above teachers, they dismiss the teachers’ contributions and expertise. This type of verbiage closes down dialogue and makes the relationship one-sided, with the coach as a giver of knowledge and the teacher as a passive receiver of it. William’s experience with this makes obvious why teachers might not limit their compliance when working with coaches in this context: “We are forced to give up our planning period once a week to listen to them tell us how great they are.” A message like this coming from a coach doesn’t empower teachers to tap into their own sense of agency to address the challenges they face in supporting student learning. Teachers made it clear that they want to talk to coaches about student learning as long as those conversations focus on troubleshooting and brainstorming as opposed to blaming or over prescription by coaches.

The intersectionality of Partnership Principles was potent in terms of the ways teachers described coaching that they felt was empowering or disempowering. Teachers appreciated that coaches have the time to seek out new ideas and resources due to the fact that they don’t have responsibility for providing instruction to students directly, but they wanted to receive this information in ways that are non-confrontational and non-binding. Barbara Jean stated that effective coaches she has worked with have an open, responsive personality, but that the inflexibility of their schedules and the inability of coaches to deviate from the district path for coaching limited the amount of growth she was able to attain. Most teachers talked about empowering experiences they had that involved taking ideas given by their coaches and tweaking them in ways that best met the needs of their students without compromising relationship with the coach. Having the option to say no to advice given by the coach or having the ability to come with the strategy and asking the coach for help in tweaking the strategy to meet student needs were various ways teachers described how Choice, Voice, and Dialogue work most effectively in a context of Reciprocity and Equality. Even compliance with coaching programs can suffer in the absence of one or

more of these principles, as William's assertion reveals, "I saw the entire staff at the high school turn over. And a lot of it had to do with the academic coaches." These comments reflect the important role of coaches in schools today as well as the influence that coaches can have for empowering, or limiting the empowerment of, teachers.

### ***Theme 3: How Instructional Improvement Blossoms***

The Partnership Principle of Reflection was mentioned less frequently in the teacher responses to the interview questions relative to the other principles. Nonetheless, teachers in this sample communicated that reflection with a coach was a powerful experience that was highly valued by them. Two different kinds of reflective experiences were described by teachers: reflection on practice and reflection of practice. Some teachers described empowering experiences they had with coaches in which they found opportunities to reflect on their own teaching practices and grow from them. Additionally, teachers described experiences where they felt that working with coaches had opened their eyes to new instructional methods or opportunities of improving student learning that they hadn't previously considered or been aware of. Both types of reflective activities were seen as empowering by teachers.

The teachers interviewed for this work shared multiple examples of how coaches had used reflection to support them in their goals for improvement of instruction and outcomes for students. For example, multiple teachers expressed positive experiences with coaches providing feedback on lessons observed. Tommie noted about this type of experience: "The best thing a coach can do for me is to help me think of new strategies and then just come in and watch me teach...it's the feedback that can help." The coaching cycle, in which a coach meets with a teacher prior to a teaching segment to set goals, then observes the planned lesson, and meets with the teacher in a post-conference to discuss insights is a staple among the many techniques available to coaches (citation needed) and these teachers seemed to look forward to and appreciate these opportunities to work with coaches. Barbara Jean, as a first year teacher, described the importance of reflective feedback from her coach that affirmed her strengths and assets,

since she didn't have years of experience to back up her decision-making in the classroom, "The interaction I've had with them...made me feel empowered because they're letting me know I am doing something right and I am on the right track." However, this desire for feedback and insight sharing with coaches wasn't limited to what teachers perceived to be their best lessons. William demonstrated this when he said "If I saw the wheels had come off of something, I'd say, 'Hey, come see what we're doing down here.' And she gave me honest feedback, not the feedback that she thought the central office wanted her to give me." Through comments such as these, teachers upheld the value of coaches in coming alongside them as observers in the classroom in order to maximize instructional outcomes.

Another aspect of how teachers perceived coaches to use reflection in ways that empowered them came in the form of reflection of teaching practices that might be new or different than those in standard use in the school environment. All teachers interviewed reported the expectation that their coach would be a person who could bring new ideas to the table to address classroom dilemmas and obstacles to learning that students experienced. Teachers expressed appreciation that there was a professional available with whom they could consult about issues related to instruction and student learning. Amanda described the value of being able to work with a coach to develop new strategies which deepened her understanding of pedagogical possibilities available to her to support increased student learning. Furthermore, Becca explained the crucial role her coach had played in challenging her to improve her content knowledge:

The coaches open your eyes to certain things. I think that experience is going to be the best thing that helps teachers to change and blossom into the teachers that they are supposed to be. There was one incident when we were teaching 5<sup>th</sup> grade...we had a question that came up about...social studies and we didn't know the answer. [The coach] kind of fussed at us and...said, 'If you don't know—that's the problem. How can we expect the children [to know] when we don't even know the material ourselves?' That was eye-opening for me because it was

like—she’s right! We do need to be experts in our field. That was one of the most—coming from a coach—kind of a push...because you can’t teach the children if you don’t know.

Ideas such as these shared by the teachers in this sample show how valuable a coach can be to teachers when coaches use reflective practices to support ongoing growth. The interdependence between Reflection and Reciprocity and Equality as Partnership Principles are clearly evident. A coach who challenges teachers in ways described by Becca in the last example isn’t likely to have the same response from his or her audience if the groundwork of an equitable relationship hasn’t been previously built. Teachers aren’t likely to receive such messages with openness if they feel that their expertise has been diminished or their voice dismissed. However, in the context of relationships built on respect and trust, messages of critique can produce growth and renewed collegial effort toward improving teaching and learning for students.

#### ***Theme 4: Meeting Teacher Needs***

The interview data suggests that a norm teachers have for coaches is that their work together will be practical and applicable to classroom use in the short term. The teachers in this sample described a plethora of concrete ways that coaches had supported them in their work, including providing disaggregated data, ready-made lessons and instructional materials, new ideas and helpful suggestions for teaching a concept differently, and obtaining clarification and information on initiatives happening in the district or at the school site. Comments made by the teachers in this sample show how important the Partnership Principle of Praxis is to them. For example, Barbara Jean valued the helpful suggestions of how to handle specific classroom situations as much as she valued being asked if she understood terminology and procedures used in directives from the administration. By using Praxis as a foundation for their support, coaches demonstrate an important idea that serves to empower teachers: there is no more important work than that which happens in the classroom with students.

Additionally, multiple teachers spoke to the ways that coaches supported their professional learning needs by demonstrating instructional techniques with students, by using protocols for analyzing data or building common assessments, or by working with teachers to collaboratively plan standards-based units of instruction. Tommie asserted that coaches “made me look at data more and be more strategic about what I do;” she attributed this type of support as key to her improvement as a teacher. Amanda described the value of the coach leading professional learning with a team of teachers in which the goal was to learn to plan together for the needs of all learners, especially since it enabled her to ultimately decrease dependency for coach support in this area and to operate autonomously with the skills learned in those development sessions. Likewise, Heather described how the coach leading her team in the breakdown of new curriculum standards enabled she and her colleagues to target their support of students in learning the new content. Becca appreciated the opportunity to have coaches provide support in the way of demonstration lessons when she began teaching concepts new to her, saying, “It’s almost like they’re teaching me at the same time.” Overall, the teachers in this study generally expressed confidence with the practices of coaches working side by side with them on tasks directly impacting student achievement as a means to empower them to meet their professional goals of increasing student learning.

Coaches who ignored Praxis in their work did so to the detriment of their relationship with teachers as well as the efficacy of their own work. An area in which this theme emerged from the data was in regard to the mandated weekly Study Groups which were often viewed negatively and associated with inconsequential professional learning goals for teachers; Barbara Jean’s comment about using study groups to check off task boxes for administrative purposes, Heather’s assertion that study groups consisting of sitting in a meeting reading an article with the coach had been “beat to death,” and William’s contention that group sessions with the coach were used to criticize and demoralize teachers all confirm this perception. Conversely, when teachers described specific classroom issues about which they sought out consultation with their coaches, they more frequently described these experiences as helpful,

growth-oriented, and empowering. This further reinforces Knight's (2007) contention that choice is foundational and prerequisite to high quality coaching programs present in schools.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### INTERPRETATIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

The purpose of this study was to examine how teachers were affected by their work with instructional coaches in public schools. The study collected information on the experiences of teachers who had worked with coaches and their perceptions on how this work impacted their sense of empowerment. The purpose of this chapter is to interpret the results of the study and elucidate some of the major implications of this research as well as to situate this study in the broader contexts of teacher empowerment, professional learning, and instructional coaching. This chapter will provide a brief summary of the study, the major findings of the study, the significance and implications of the study for theory, practice, and policy, the study strengths and limitations, and recommendations for future research.

#### **Study Summary**

##### **Research Questions**

Instructional coaches have emerged as a relatively new role present in many public schools (citation). This study sought to understand the influence instructional coaches can have on teachers, particularly in the area of empowerment. Using the framework of the Partnership Principles (Knight, 2007) to understand teacher-coach relationships, the research conducted addressed these questions:

1. How are teachers' perceptions of empowerment influenced by their experiences with instructional coaches?
2. To what extent do coaches subscribe to the Partnership Principles in their work?
3. In what ways do the Partnership Principles help to support teachers' sense of empowerment?

##### **Study Participants**

Six teachers participated in interviews in order to collect data which could assist in answering the research questions. The teachers varied in terms of race, gender, teaching assignments and years of



experience. Both elementary and secondary education teachers were represented and teachers who focused on general education as well as teachers who were special educators also participated in the interviews. All teachers had experience working with at least three different instructional coaches. The diversity in study participants enabled a range of experiences with instructional coaches to be revealed and examined, especially as it pertained to teacher empowerment. Although the study initially intended to interview coaches as well as teachers, since no coaches committed to participation in the study, the perspective of coaches was not able to be obtained for this research.

### **Methods and Instruments**

Teachers who participated in this research were identified through an online survey and subsequently agreed to be interviewed on the phone using the semi-structured interview protocol found in Appendix A. The protocol contained questions which integrated opportunities for teachers to discuss experiences they had with coaches in terms of how the Partnership Principles were apparent in their interactions and the subsequent perceptions of empowerment they experienced in regard to their work with instructional coaches.

### **Data Analysis**

The data collected from the interviews was transcribed and analyzed for emergent themes associated with Partnership Principles and existing literature on empowerment. Data was coded for each Partnership Principle: Choice, Voice, Dialogue, Reflection, Reciprocity, Praxis and Equality and then analyzed for themes that arose from this coding strategy across multiple teachers. Likewise, the data was separately coded for each of the aspects of empowerment presented in the review of literature in Chapter 2: Resources, Growth, Power, Catalyst for Change, and Importance of Role. Themes were discovered through this analysis that reveal possible relationships between instructional coaching and teacher empowerment.

## Major Findings

Chapter Four described the results of the study. A number of important findings were revealed through the analysis of this data. In terms of the major question of this study—the influence of instructional coaches on teacher empowerment— coaching was shown to have both empowering and disempowering aspects for the teachers in this sample. In terms of teacher empowerment, there was agreement that teachers found aspects of coaching to have contributed to their empowerment. Teachers associated coaching with their own empowerment in direct and indirect ways. For example, Barbara Jean found all four of her coaches provided the support she needed as a new teacher to becoming acclimated to the processes and procedures of being a faculty member at her new school and Becca credited the ongoing interpersonal and technical support of her coaches with the comfort level she had attained as a mid-career educator. Teachers gave numerous examples of ways the Partnership Principles, as evident in their experiences with coaches, contributed to their empowerment. Heather cited the trust relationship she was able to develop with her coach as a result of ongoing Dialogue that was part of the coaching relationship she experienced. Even though Tommie did not generally feel that instructional coaching had empowered her, nonetheless she described the importance of Choice and flexibility in the interactions with coaches that she believed contributed to her growth as a teacher. In terms of teacher disempowerment, the data from these interviews showed that the absence of individual Partnership Principles, particularly Choice and Praxis, was perceived as diminishing teachers' sense of empowerment. Both Tommie and William described how coaching that lacked choice and applicability to their classroom practice had disempowered them; as a result, these teachers felt that coaching in general acted as a prohibitive factor to their empowerment.

There was also a diversity of thought revealed in the interview data on how the work of coaches contributed to the specific features of empowerment identified in Chapter 2: Resources, Growth, Power, Catalyst for Change, and Importance of Role. For four out of five of the features, teachers reported experiencing their collaboration with coaches as supports to their empowerment. Multiple teachers

reported on ways they benefitted from the resources shared by coaches and tied their own growth to their work with instructional coaches. All of the teachers interviewed described ways they saw themselves as catalysts for change and verified that their role as classroom teachers was important to students and the school community, even when they did not link these beliefs to their work with coaches.

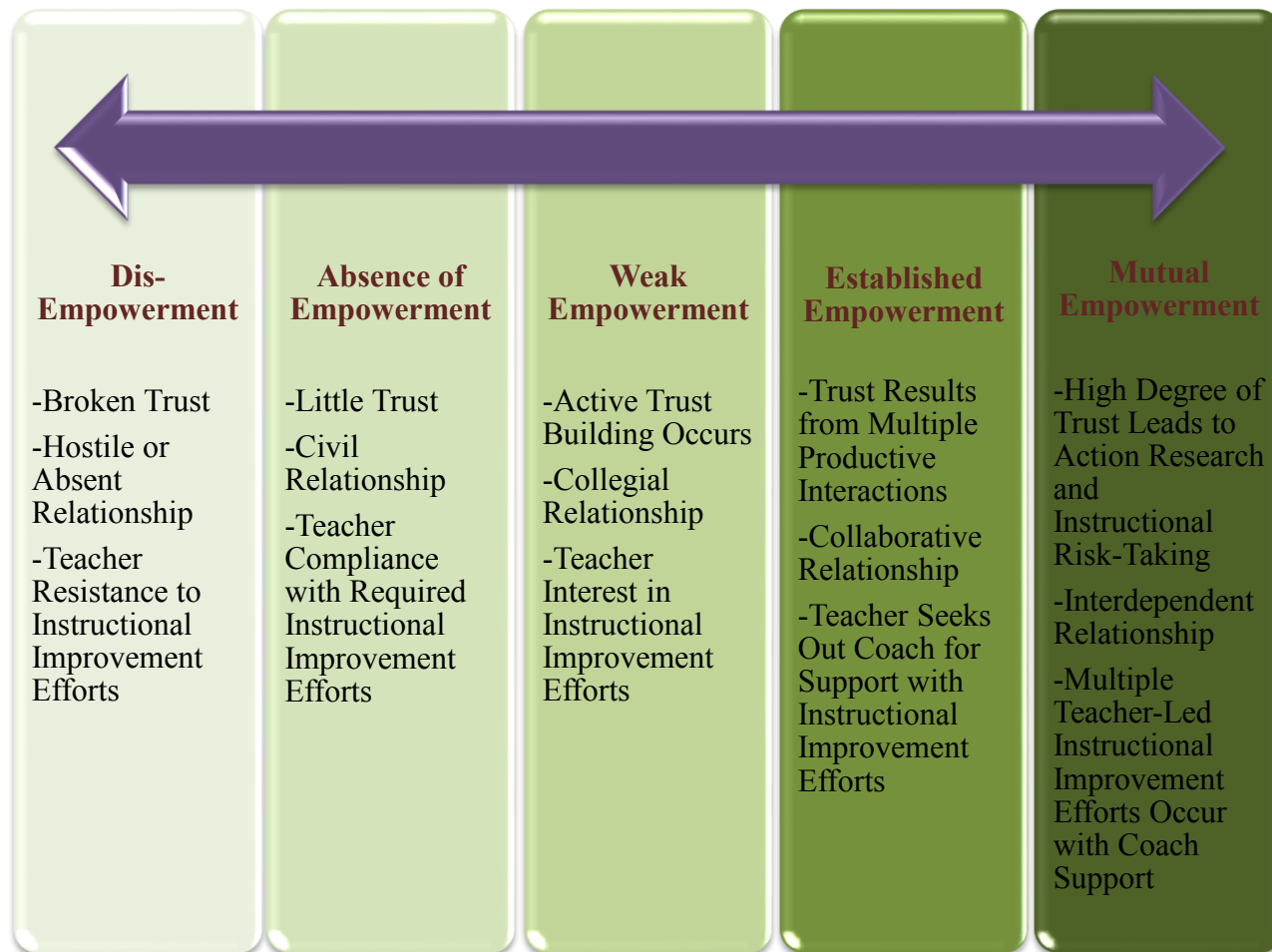
The remaining feature of empowerment, Power, was not seen to be associated with coaching by any of the teachers. Keeping in mind that the meaning of power as a contributing factor to teacher empowerment was articulated in Chapter 2 as “power with” instead of “power over” (Kreisberg, 1992), the analyzed data revealed that this feature of empowerment was absent in the context of teacher-coach relationships. Rather, teachers described a lack of power in their work with coaches, especially in relation to the topics chosen for their collaborative work with coaches and forced group meetings with coaches, but also in being able to secure individual coaching support. In some cases, this lack of power also extended to the classroom as evidenced by examples teachers gave of coaches insisting that all teachers teach a topic the same way or at the same time. Teachers also gave examples of ways coaches were used as instruments of “power over” to convey the mandates of the district or the principal in standardizing teacher practice, which also contributed to teacher perception that coaching was used at times to disempower them. To summarize, the major findings of this study in terms of teacher empowerment for these participants is that they generally acknowledged feeling empowered on four of the five features of empowerment and often connected these perceptions of their empowerment to experiences they had had with instructional coaches. The one feature of empowerment that teachers did not ascribe to their experience relative to instructional coaching was the feature of power.

Data analysis also exposed a number of specific disempowerment factors of working with coaches. These themes emerged when multiple teachers disclosed concerns they had about the scheduling and distribution of coaching, confusion over the role of coaches, the lack of district-level goals for the coaching program across schools, and questions of coach expertise to support instructional improvement. These concerns caused numerous obstacles to empowerment, both conceptually and

pragmatically; for example, some teachers expressed uncertainty of how working with coaches could be to their and their students' benefits and other teachers were unclear about how to even access coaching services. These concerns evidenced that work with coaches had the potential to result in disempowering outcomes for teachers.

When weighing the effects of instructional coaching revealed by the experiences of the teachers interviewed for this research, it becomes obvious that it is impossible to dichotomize instructional coaching as either an empowering and disempowering structural feature of contemporary education. As was shown by the testimony of teachers like Tommie and William, coaching can, in fact, be disempowering to teachers in the absence of teacher-coach relationships founded on a philosophical framework of Partnership Principles. Yet this conclusion does not tell the whole story for either of these teachers as each could recount empowering aspects of specific coaching relationships they had had. Similarly, though Becca and Heather made ardent claims for the empowering effects of coaching, both also admitted that they had experienced disempowering incidents with individual coaches. What becomes clear from the diverse experiences of these teachers is that the quality of relationship constructed between a coach and his or her teaching staff is of primary consideration in determining whether teacher empowerment is a viable outcome of their collaboration. Thus, a construct that more closely fits the data generated by this inquiry is that of a continuum. Figure 5.1 synthesizes the data from this study into a graphic that captures the range of features that describe potential levels of empowerment that can be experienced by teachers who work with instructional coaches.

Figure 5.1. Continuum of Teacher Empowerment Associated with Instructional Coaching



In relation to the third research question – the ways the Partnership Principles support teacher empowerment—four major themes emerged from the analysis of the individual principles. The first theme showed that the establishment and maintenance of professional relationships based on Reciprocity and Equality between coaches and teachers were significant in determining whether teachers experienced empowering outcomes from their work with coaches. Teachers like Amanda and Becca who felt that they were able to build solid collegial relationships with coaches also identified coaching as an empowering structure of their work environments. Secondly, the use of the Partnership Principles, especially Choice, Voice, and Dialogue, were found to impact whether teachers were authentically engaged in meaningful professional learning during their work with coaches or whether they simply complied with coach

demands. The third theme revealed that the blossoming of instructional improvement was shown to be directly related to the specific Partnership Principle of Reflection. The final theme that was revealed through the data analysis showed that Praxis was an important Partnership Principle that connected instructional coaching to teachers' sense of empowerment because of the way in which it served to meet of the practical and professional learning needs of teachers.

### **Significance and Implications**

In Chapter One of this work, I posited the ways in which this research might bring about beneficial new understandings to the field of Curriculum Studies, to those interested in the policies governing public education, and to the administrators, instructional coaches, and teachers who daily practice the art and science of public schooling. At this time, we will examine the significance and relevance of this study's findings to the theory, policy and practice of contemporary American education.

### **Theory**

In Chapter Two, it was asserted that the theoretical framework of this study included four unique, though interrelated, theories applicable to an investigation of instructional coaching: Critical Theory (Kreisberg, 1991; Pinar et al., 1996), Transformative Learning Theory (Mezirow, 1991), Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000), and Pragmatism (Crotty, 1998; Morgan, 2007). This section seeks to revisit each of the streams of theoretical thinking to understand the implications and significance of this research for each of these contexts.

Critical Theory was applied as a primary lens through which to investigate this topic since the focus has been on power relations between instructional coaches and the teachers who receive their services. The data analysis demonstrates that the use of Critical Theory was productive for this inquiry. As it turns out, coaches can be either instruments of power or oppression for teachers. Keeping in mind that the teachers interviewed for this research all came from the same school system which had consistently implemented instructional coaching for a decade, giving it ample opportunity to develop a

culture for coaching in the district, it was surprising to see the variance in how teachers experienced their work with coaches in terms of power dynamics. This research demonstrates that the role of coaches in the structure of contemporary education has shifted traditional power relations in schools as evidenced by the multiple comments made by all teachers about coaches delivering messages, directives, and training mandates initiated by site-based or district-level administrators. For teachers like Tommie and William, this top-down method of policing the work of teachers combined with the lack of choice in their work with coaches disenfranchised them from the process altogether and led them to conclude that coaching was overall a detriment to their empowerment. William's experience with the coach who surveilled him and reported him to the principal is exactly the kind of oppressive power relations warned about by Foucault (1977). William's comment in regards to coaching, "It's one of those things where they come in and tell us how wrong we are and then they go and take an hour lunch," is indicative of the way that power in the hands of coaches was used as a way to oppress teachers.

It is troubling that of the five facets of empowerment this study investigated, that the construct of Power, as a standalone aspect of empowerment, was the feature least associated with instructional coaching in the qualitative analysis of the interview data. Teachers gave multiple examples of how instructional coaching limited their experience of power over their work, including mandated meetings, paperwork, professional learning, and teaching methods. Especially pernicious were examples, given by more than one teacher, of coaches who directed groups of teachers to standardize their practice across classrooms. This is just the type of de-professionalizing of teachers that has been critiqued by multiple authors (Hargreaves, 2008; Ingersoll & Merrill, 2011; Kincheloe, 2009; Smith & Kovacs, 2011). Because coaches had the authority to control teacher time and teacher activity, it is understandable why the facet of power as a fundamental part of teacher empowerment was rarely associated with instructional coaching. While it may be disquieting, the comprehensive analysis of the data conclusively demonstrated that coaches sometimes acted as a systemic force that oppressed teachers.

Given this context, it's surprising how valuable and empowering some of the relationships were that other teachers had with their coaches. The reason most frequently cited by those teachers who acknowledged that coaching contributed to their empowerment could be boiled down to just one of the Partnership Principles: Choice. When teachers described interactions they had with coaches that were empowering to them, they invariably cited instances of seeking out the coach for a problem-solving consultation or brainstorming ideas to address a student learning need. This "power with" rather than "power over" (Kreisberg, 1992) approach to coaching gave teachers like Heather and Becca the impression that they truly were in partnership with their coaches, that their opinions and professionalism mattered, and that, ultimately, the coach's role was to support them in decision-making, not to usurp their authority to do so. These examples show that instructional coaching has the potential to exercise the creation, use, and sharing of power in ways that are just and fair for teachers. The use of Critical Theory as a lens through which to examine the results of this research enabled the development of an understanding of some of the ways in which instructional coaching is used to empower or prohibit the empowerment of teachers.

Transformative Learning Theory (Mezirow, 1991), a framework in the tradition of Critical Theory, was also used to understand how the thinking and practice of teachers might be transformed by their work with instructional coaches. All of the teachers interviewed identified areas of growth and all were able to connect at least some of their growth as professional educators with the work they did with coaches, including William in his description of a coach with whom he had worked in a previous school system. Both Heather and Amanda voiced similar thoughts which may get to the essence of how transformation occurs when working with instructional coaches; both teachers asserted their own interest in learning how to improve their skills. Amanda put it this way, "I went and asked questions if I needed to get a different person's input. It's because I think I wanted to do better," and this is how Heather articulated a similar sentiment, "I went to see the coach because I wanted to know more about something." Teachers who see coaches as available assets to their own professional learning described



the transformative effects of their interactions. This example confirms Mezirow's assertion (2000) that professional learning providers serve as activists who help adults to achieve their own professional goals. In this way, the findings of this study support the idea that instructional coaching is highly compatible with and supports the tenets of the theoretical framework of Transformative Learning Theory.

Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000) was a very helpful theoretical approach for this research in that it leveraged the power of interpersonal relationships to examine the data collected in this inquiry. Because competence, autonomy, and relatedness are foundational (Deci & Ryan, 2000) to Self-Determination Theory (SDT), it is possible to view the findings obtained in this research in the context of SDT to better understand the ways in which instructional coaching supports empowerment. In the analysis of the interview data, one of the major themes that emerged was that relationships between coaches and teachers are incredibly important in supporting the work of instruction improvement. Relatedness, as defined by SDT, was most often associated with the Partnership Principles of Reciprocity and Equality as teachers gave examples of ways that coaches supported them professionally and personally as they grew in capacity as educators. Furthermore, the mutual respect and joint ownership of their collaboration were ways that teachers communicated the importance of building collegial relationships with their coaches that ultimately supported teacher empowerment. Similarly, teachers who described choices and options they had in their work with coaches and how this contributed to their empowerment demonstrated the importance of autonomy and engaging in the coaching relationship as a peer, rather than a subordinate. The ability of teachers to direct their own professional learning through the use of instructional coaches who supported them without being overly prescriptive allowed these teachers to tap into fruitful and satisfying growth opportunities, demonstrating that instructional coaching can be seen as a viable method reflective of SDT. Moreover, as suggested in Chapter 2, the Partnership Principles, because of their strong correlation to the concepts undergirding SDT, can reliably be viewed as a working construct for realizing the goals of Self-Determination Theory.

The remaining theoretical construct that this work informs is Pragmatism (Crotty, 1998; Morgan, 2007). This study sought to pull back the curtain on coaching practices to reveal the philosophical framework of instructional coaches. The “first things,” as this is referred to in the tradition of Pragmatism would be the beliefs and values of coaches made apparent through their words and actions and as reported by the teachers who worked with them. In regards to this theoretical framework, this research cannot be seen as complete since there are no coach voices to help illuminate the philosophical frameworks by which the coaches in this district do their daily work. Although there is no data available directly from the coaches whose work this study examines, there is sufficient teacher data to ascertain that any number or combination of the Partnership Principles is in general use among the coaches of this school system. In sheer volume alone, teacher comments on Praxis and Dialogue were the most prolific; conversely, Choice and Reciprocity were the least commented upon of the Partnership Principles. The use of Pragmatism as a theoretical construct for this research enabled the development of a research design that could reveal the philosophical views of coaches by focusing the data through the prism of the Partnership Principles. What these findings show is that while the Partnership Principles do inform the work of coaches, other factors, such as district initiatives and training mandates, superseded coaching philosophy at times and subsequently contributed to teachers’ feelings of disempowerment.

### **Policy**

Inasmuch as Instructional Coaching has become a structure of contemporary schools, it is imperative that policies guided by sound research be implemented to utilize instructional coaching programs that serve both student and teacher interests. This research can only reassure district administrators and building principals that there is ongoing evidence, supported by previous research, and confirmed by the data in this inquiry, that instructional coaching programs do show evidence of increasing teacher empowerment and supporting school improvement goals.

A number of resources exist to build sound coaching programs that improve academic outcomes and the data from this study confirms that recommendations already available in the literature could also serve to sustain and improve teacher empowerment. For example, Morel and Cushman (2012), recommend the creation and communication of coaching program goals as well as carefully setting the criteria for the hiring of coaches. Emergent themes that the teachers in this study revealed as sources of disempowerment included the lack of coaching program goals, confusion about the role of the coach, and skepticism that coaches had the optimal skill sets for their roles. When the school community is uncertain of the role of the coach, this is likely to diminish coach effectiveness as well as teachers' abilities to benefit from collaborative work with their coaches.

Similarly, the way the teachers participating in this research experienced the work of their coaches was often disempowering when it was undifferentiated and imposed by district mandates rather than needs assessments collaboratively conducted by teachers and their coaches. All teachers in this sample spoke about required study group attendance that had pre-selected topics that teachers felt had little relevance to their daily work; it is reasonable that this practice would feel disempowering to teachers as it contradicts the Partnership Principles of Choice and Praxis which were shown to support teacher empowerment. It isn't surprising that when coaching of teacher groups is mandated, with topics undifferentiated by teachers' professional learning goals, that the outcomes are perceived by teachers as a waste of their time and a detraction from their empowerment. Moreover, teachers reported that the most empowering experiences they had with coaches was often associated with individual coaching sessions, but that coaches' schedules were so restrictive that time for individual coaching didn't happen nearly as often as teachers would have found helpful. Thus, important policy implications of this work are the careful consideration of the content of professional learning plans that districts expect coaches to impose upon teachers as well as attempts to implement flexibility and responsiveness to teachers' expressed needs for professional growth.

A final and related implication for policy is consideration of the empowerment of coaches themselves. While it is impossible to know why coaches ultimately chose not to be interviewed for this research, it is plausible to suggest that a lack of coach empowerment could have contributed to the hesitation to discuss the role of their work in the empowerment of teachers. In all of the teacher interviews, words like “mandated” and “required” were used repeatedly to describe their most recent experiences with coaches. If these sessions were mandated by persons other than coaches themselves, then this indicates that coaches also have limited authority over their own work. Coaches may, in fact, be experiencing some of the same feelings of disempowerment as their teacher colleagues. Those who develop policy related to the use of instructional coaching in schools would benefit from soliciting the views of coaches in order to strengthen coaching programs into powerful vehicles of professional learning for teachers.

### **Practice**

The findings from this study have several important implications for the practice of instructional coaches who look to research to provide new knowledge for their field. One of the most important findings applicable to coaches in their work is that coaching can contribute to teacher empowerment or take away from it and that coaches, in large part, have control over which outcome teachers experience. An understanding of the literature reviewed in Chapter 2 that affirms that teacher empowerment is a component of school improvement along with the findings from this research will help coaches to see the relevance of teacher empowerment to their work as well as some important access points they can leverage in order to support teacher empowerment among school staff.

Instructional coaches can use the knowledge generated from this study to better understand the impact of their work and especially the significance of their philosophical framework. One access point for supporting teacher empowerment is the knowledge and intentional use of the Partnership Principles because teachers frequently related these principles to their own experiences of empowerment in the

context of coaching relationships, in particular Choice and Praxis. Coaches who design their work with teachers in ways that allows teachers flexibility and choice to meet their own professional learning goals will be more likely to have teachers who are engaged in their collaborative work. In as much as is possible for coaches in their work, allowing teachers to direct the professional learning they do together was highlighted as a critical feature of effective professional learning in Chapter 2 and verified in the data in this study as being a top priority for teachers in their work with coaches. Furthermore, when coaches work with teachers on professional learning that has direct practical application to classroom teaching, that is, Praxis, they do so with a wealth of research to support this decision, both from the professional learning standpoint that was also corroborated by the findings from this study.

Instructional coaches would do well to heed the voices of Tommie, Barbara Jean, Heather, Amanda, William, and Becca when they describe how dialogue with instructional coaches has impacted them and use these examples to examine their own relationships with their school faculties. How much of the coach's voice is helpful in dialogues between teachers and coaches isn't known exactly, but the perspectives of the teachers who participated in this research suggest that less is better. Rather than trying to give pat answers to teacher questions, these educators ascribed value to coaches who were willing to sit with them as peers in order to sift through the complex dynamics of classroom teaching so that instructional improvement issues that directly benefit students could be addressed. The findings from this data clearly showed that when teachers feel that coaches don't value their voices and instead expect to dictate directives to them, the teachers respond by giving minimal compliance to that which is required by coaches. Teacher-coach relationships are thus stunted and little growth or improvement in instructional practice can be expected.

Another important implication for instructional coach practice that was made clear by the findings in this study is the need for coach communication with teachers. All of the emergent themes associated with disempowerment for teachers were functions of their lack of information. The concerns described by Becca and Barbara Jean about the scheduling and distribution of coaches could have been

addressed by clear communication from coaches about their availability and how to access their services. That the one new teacher and several of the veteran teachers all expressed the same concern indicates that insufficient communication was occurring. Similarly, confusion over coaches' roles and lack of understanding of the goals for the coaching program itself were also conceivably the result of communication breakdowns. In setting up instructional coaching programs, multiple resources are available for introducing coaching programs to teachers and sharing the goals and procedures for these programs (see Knight, 2009a; Morel & Cushman, 2012, etc.). Even though this district had used coaches in the schools for many years, it is evident that more needed to be done to help teachers get the most out of their work with coaches. Because concerns over coach scheduling and distribution, confusion about coach roles, lack of understanding of the goals for the coaching program, and even questions about coach expertise were themes of disempowerment which emerged from the analysis of the teacher interviews, these factors merit attention for all coaches who seek for their work to be a contributing factor of teacher empowerment at their schools.

A final factor the coaches can glean as important to their work is the idea of differentiated coaching (Kise, 2006). The teachers in this study all affirmed that the times when they grew the most from their work with coaches was when that work was tailored to their individual professional learning needs. While collaborative group work has an important role in professional learning (Boatright & Gallucci, 2008; Diaz-Maggioli, 2004; Thornburg & Mungai, 2011), the work itself must be pertinent to the professional learning goals of teachers. Although this research has confirmed that the Partnership Principles are a sound foundation for instructional coaching that supports teacher empowerment, these principles must be understood as the basics of instructional coaching, rather than the goal. Differentiated coaching goes beyond the basics and offers teachers a menu from which to choose the direction and extent of their professional learning. This feature was frequently absent for teachers in this sample, especially Tommie and William, and was directly cited as their reasons for eschewing the value of instructional coaching to their empowerment. Similarly, when teachers described high degrees of

satisfaction with instructional coaching as a contributor to their empowerment, some aspect of differentiated coaching was apparent in their example. Coaches who see themselves as supporters of instructional improvement in their buildings would do well to consider ways to incorporate collaboration that is teacher-directed and relevant to the classroom.

### **Study Strengths and Limitations**

#### **Strengths**

This study was conducted with a number of notable strengths. One of the advantages of how this study was designed is the way that the voices of teachers and their experiences with instructional coaching were kept central to the research process throughout all steps. In order to uncover potential relationships between instructional coaching and teacher empowerment, the actual words, ideas, and stories of teacher experiences with instructional coaches was the sole source of data. Additionally, sound research practices were used, such as member checking, and effective ethics procedures were maintained throughout. The use trustworthy data analysis methods such as Structural Coding (Saldaña, 2012) and Sequential Data Analysis (Cresswell & Plano Clark, 2007) ensured that the qualitative data was handled thoroughly and efficiently in order to ascertain the themes which emerged from the teachers' responses to the interview questions.

Another important strength of this study was its dependence on a well-known and foundational framework for coaching practice—the Partnership Principles (Knight, 2007). This philosophical construct is well documented and accepted as an integral set of understandings for all coaches by foremost experts in the field of instructional coaching (Hanover Research, 2014; Killion, Harrison, Bryan, & Clifton, 2012). The Partnership Principles are also the core of the endorsement program course for coaches in the state in which this research was conducted. By using the Partnership Principles as the philosophical construct against which teacher empowerment was juxtaposed, this study was able to

examine these foundational ideas in ways that had not been previously studied and effectively adds to the knowledge base of scholarly research on the effects of instructional coaching in schools.

### **Limitations**

There were a number of important limitations to this research that must be acknowledged in order to wisely interpret the results obtained from this study. The sample size of teachers was very small and, even though an attempt was made to include the diversity of teachers in the district in the sample, African American teachers were underrepresented as was discussed in Chapter 4. It is unknown whether the results obtained in this sample are typical or atypical of teachers' experiences with coaching in other districts or geographic regions.

Another important limitation to this research was in the way that empowerment for teachers was measured. The construct used in this study was synthesized from a variety of theorists from many backgrounds, including psychology, education, and business administration, among others. This particular operationalization of empowerment to include Resources, Growth, Power, Catalyst for Change and Importance of Role needs to be verified as a salient description of teacher empowerment by other research in this area. The literature review conducted for Chapter 2 revealed that there are too few instruments with which to effectively measure teacher empowerment. Likewise, the interview protocol developed for this study has not been validated elsewhere and needs to be examined in light of other instruments used to measure teacher empowerment in order to refine it.

A further limitation of this study is the inability to corroborate the findings from the qualitative data with other reliable methods of data analysis. A survey was provided to all teachers in the district and the results of that survey could have also shed light on the central questions of this study; however, for this work, the sole purpose of the survey was in order to make contact with participants for the interviews which were then analyzed using quantitative methods. As a result, the knowledge generated in this



research about how instructional coaching influences teacher empowerment is not transferable to other settings or educators.

The most significant limitation of the study is the absence of coaches' voices to inform our analysis of potential ways to adequately address the research questions. The goal of this work was to shed light on the ways in which instructional coaching could influence teacher empowerment; hearing from coaches themselves about how they perceive their work would have been invaluable data in order to more fully understand the dynamics of the ways in which coaching affects teacher empowerment. The perspective of coaches about how they intend for their work to affect teachers can only be conjectured since we have no data to help us understand this half of the teacher-coach relationship.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

It is hoped that other scholars in this field will be able to extend this research, especially in regards to coaches themselves. Studies that include or focus on instructional coaches, the philosophical frameworks which guide their practice, and the ways in which they perceive their work to impact teachers would go far in revealing the dynamics of this unique collegial relationship in contemporary schools. How coaches perceive their unique position as neither administrator or teacher and how coaches leverage this role in order to support school improvement goals are topics worthy of further examination, especially as these ideas apply to the study of teacher empowerment.

Other scholars of teacher empowerment also recommend using mixed methods to study this phenomena (citation) and the theoretical framework of Pragmatism, one of the constructs upon which this work is based asserts that both theory and practice should be studied in tandem to fully comprehend the topic under study (Morgan, 2007). In order to have a more robust understanding of how coaching practices affect the empowerment of teachers, it is recommended that further inquiry using mixed methods designs be applied to the study of instructional coaching as it relates to teacher empowerment.

Another important line of inquiry would be to develop a clearer understanding of how power for teachers, as a function of their overall empowerment, can be preserved and enlarged, especially in the context of instructional coaching as a structural feature of contemporary schools. In this small sample of teachers, examples were shared of the misuses of power by coaches which supports the idea that more work needs to be done to help coaches navigate their unique role that rests somewhere between classroom teachers and building administrators, but holds little to no concurrent authority over persons or policies. Since power was the feature of empowerment least associated with instructional coaching by the teachers in this sample, it is an area that could be considered the proverbial “black box” for coaches who would like for their work to be an instrument of empowerment for teachers.

A final recommendation for researchers in this field to consider is a focused analysis on the role of the Partnership Principle of Choice in teacher empowerment. Of all of the ways teachers in this sample described their experiences of empowerment in relation to instructional coaching, Choice was always a feature of their example. Conversely, in each of the examples teachers used to describe ways they felt disempowered, the lack of choice also featured strongly. In order for coaches to benefit from the fruits of scholarly inquiry, the role of choice as it relates to teacher empowerment in the context of instructional coaching relationships would be an important extension of the research presented here.

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## APPENDIX A: TEACHER SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

### Part I: Introductory Briefing:

Thank you for agreeing to this interview today. I am a doctoral student at Georgia Southern University and I am interested in learning more about how instructional coaching affects teachers. I'm going to be recording your answers to the interview questions today and I will be transcribing them to help me better understand your experiences working with instructional coaches. Everything you share with me will be confidential and your name and school will not be disclosed in any way. Do you have any questions before we begin the interview?

### Part II: Establishing Background

- How many years have you been a teacher?
- For how many of those years have you worked with a coach: instructional coach, academic coach, literacy coach, content coach, school improvement coach, professional learning coach, etc.
- Approximately how many different coaches do you think you have worked with?

### Part III: Experiences with coaching

- Tell me about an experience you have had with a coach that you felt was particularly helpful to you as a teacher.
- For this next question, think about all of the coaches you have previously worked with or with whom you currently work and focus on one coach who you feel you have had the best working relationship with. Talk about what you think makes or made the relationship work so well between you and that coach.
- What kinds of qualities do you think are most important for a coach to have in order for you to be excited about working with him or her?
- Coaches are a relatively new role in the schools today. How do you feel about having a coach in your building and how has having a coach impacted your day-to-day work?

### Part IV: Wrap-Up

- Those were the specific questions I had for you today on your experience working with coaches. Is there anything else you would like to share with me about how working with instructional coaches has affected you?
- I appreciate your time and your willingness to share your insights. I will email you a copy of the transcript I make from today's interview so that you can read it and check to be sure that I have captured your thoughts and ideas accurately. Thank you again for your assistance.

\*Follow-Up, Probing, or Interpreting questions may be used to clarify or elaborate on interviewees' responses to these questions (Kvale & Brinkman, 2009).