

The Effects of Teacher Mentoring and Coaching on Student Reading Achievement

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to determine if mentoring/coaching for teachers impacts student reading achievement data. The measurement tool was the Fountas and Pinnell Benchmark Assessment. This study involved use of a pretest/posttest design to compare data from September 2019 (before the mentoring/coaching was implemented) to data from January 2020 (after the mentoring/coaching was implemented). Achievement gains in the experimental group were significant as compared to achievement gains in the control group. Research in this area should continue with larger participant groups over longer periods of time.

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

This purpose of this study was to observe the effect of teacher mentoring and coaching on student reading achievement in an elementary school.

Overview

Over the past two decades, school reforms, such as No Child Left Behind (NCLB) and the Common Core State Standards (CCSS), have placed an increasingly high demand on teachers across the United States to improve student reading achievement (Onchwari & Keengwe, 2010). Along with this high demand comes a need for more professional development for teachers focused on improving their ability to provide sound reading instruction. Because of the increased need for professional development, job-embedded professional development has become a commonly used method for increasing teacher performance. Job-embedded professional development is learning that occurs within the classroom and during the school day in order for teachers to learn in real-time within the context of their work environment. Research has shown that mentoring and coaching as a form of job-embedded professional development has increased the use of new and effective teaching strategies (Walkowiak, 2016). With this knowledge, the question then becomes whether or not job-embedded professional development and the new teaching strategies implemented impact student achievement.

Statement of Problem

Working as a Staff Development Teacher (SDT) in an elementary school with low reading achievement and a large number of non-tenured teachers, the researcher took an interest in this topic to determine whether or not mentoring and coaching would have a positive impact on the

students with whom her teachers work. This study will assess whether or not mentoring and coaching are effective forms of job-embedded professional development that help improve student reading achievement within her school.

The problem for this study is determining the impact of teacher mentoring and coaching on student reading achievement as measured by the Fountas and Pinnell Benchmark Reading Assessment.

Hypothesis

The null hypothesis for this study is there will be no significant difference in student reading achievement between the two groups of teachers (those teachers who had a mentor/coach and teachers who did not have a mentor/coach) as measured by the Fountas and Pinnell Benchmark Reading Assessment.

The alternative hypothesis for this study is there will be a significant difference in student reading achievement between the two groups of teachers (those teachers who had a mentor/coach and teachers who did not have a mentor/coach) as measured by the Fountas and Pinnell Benchmark Reading Assessment.

Operational Definitions

Reading level: The dependent variable is the students' reading levels. Students' reading levels will be measured using the Fountas and Pinnell Benchmark Assessment. This assessment measures a student's ability to independently (without teacher support) decode and comprehend text. Scores for this assessment are assigned alphabetically from Pre-A to Z. This can be cross-referenced with grade level expectations as assigned by Fountas and Pinnell to determine if a student is achieving appropriately.

Mentoring/Coaching: The independent variable is mentoring and coaching teachers on their instruction. Mentoring and coaching refer to job-embedded professional development that occurs one-on-one between the mentor/coach and the teacher. Forms of mentoring and coaching are co-planning, co-teaching, modeling lessons, and engaging in researching new teaching strategies.

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

This literature review explores the topic of teacher mentoring and coaching in schools. Section one offers an overview of the relevance of and effective practices of teacher mentoring and coaching. Section two focuses on the principles of coaching for teaching literacy. Section three discusses the benefits of mentoring and coaching.

What is Teacher Mentoring and Coaching?

As the demand for increased student achievement rises, the need for improved teaching and learning practices also increases. The need for professional development is great and schools across the country are looking for effective methods of improving teacher and student performance. Teacher mentoring and coaching has become a popular method of professional development being used in schools, as it allows teachers to remain in their classrooms and it is cost effective (Hudson, 2013). The definition of instructional coaching used in this literature review comes from Walkowiak. Walkowiak (2016) states that coaching is “sustained class-based support from a qualified and knowledgeable individual who models research-based strategies and explores with teachers how to increase these practices using the teacher’s own students” (pg. 14).

Mentoring and coaching are job-embedded professional development strategies in which teachers are able to learn and implement new strategies in their classrooms with the support of a mentor or coach. Recent studies have shown “that coaching leads teachers to adopt new teaching strategies that are deemed more effective,” (Walkowiak, 2016, pg. 14). In order for student achievement to rise, teachers need to remain in the classroom as much as possible. Coaching allows teachers to remain in their classroom while also participating in professional

development. Coaches and mentors work side-by-side with teachers in their classrooms in order to help teachers learn and implement new strategies with their students.

In order for coaching to be most effective in increasing teacher performance, student achievement, and teacher satisfaction, the coach needs to understand effective practices of coaching and mentoring (Sowell, 2017). Two major components in the foundation of effective coaching are building relationships and communication.

One of the practices of effective coaching and mentoring is building relationships. The coaches in Sowell's study reported that coaching was more beneficial when the teacher trusted the coach and when the coach was working in service to the teacher. Teachers feel more comfortable working with the coach when they feel they can speak openly with the coach and rely on the coach to follow through. Sowell (2017) says, "Without this relationship, teachers will not be willing to allow observations or engage in thoughtful discussions of their work," (pg. 3). Walkowiak (2016) came to a similar conclusion in her work with middle school mathematics coaches. Trust is essential to having effective communication between the coach and the teacher in order for the teacher to feel safe opening their classroom to the coach and taking risks with the coach. Haas discusses the importance of the coach and the mentee establishing a relationship as equal professionals (2015). It is important that the coach not view his/her mentees as their friends or as "their peeps" (Haas, 2015) as this can be perceived as patronizing to the mentee. Being on an equal playing field as professionals allows the mentee to feel more comfortable working with the coach. This practice is also supported by Smith (2012) and his work with literacy coaches in high-needs middle schools. The coaches that Smith interviewed concluded that establishing relationships with teachers is one of the most important roles of a coach. It creates a successful working relationship.

Along with building relationships, effective communication is a key component of successful mentoring and coaching. This begins with clearly defining the role of the coach within the building (Walkowiak, 2016). The school's leadership, the coach, and the teachers should all understand the role and responsibilities of the coach. This will ensure that the work between the coach and the teacher is focused and that the teacher understands what the goals will be when working with the coach. Another component of effective communication involves listening. An effective coach listens to the teacher and values their thoughts and ideas (Sowell, 2017; Walkowiak, 2016). Listening to and valuing the teacher's thoughts allows the coach and the teacher to be partners in their work so that the teacher trusts the coach and feels safe working with the coach.

What Does Coaching for Literacy Look Like?

Participating in mentoring and coaching can be beneficial to any teacher in any subject area. While the foundational principles of coaching still stand true no matter the subject in which the coach and teacher are working, some principles of coaching vary, and some other considerations may need to be made depending on the subject area. This section of the literature review will discuss some considerations for coaching in the subject area of literacy. It will focus on coaches with specialized knowledge, collaboration between the teacher and the coach, and coaching to develop literacy leaders.

Coaches in any subject area are more effective when they have knowledge of general pedagogy and have been classified as a highly effective teacher. It is also beneficial for coaches in any subject area to understand adult learning theory. When focusing on literacy coaches specifically, having a knowledge base around literacy processes, acquisition, assessment, and instruction is also valuable (L'Ailler, Elish-Piper, & Bean, 2010). Literacy coaches work with

teachers in a variety of ways including as a curriculum resource to assist teachers in unpacking and implementing the curriculum (Smith, 2012), mentoring teachers to develop their literacy instruction (L'Ailler, et al, 2010), assisting teachers in administering and analyzing reading assessment data (Gillet and Ellingson, 2017), and more. Because of the variety of coaching activities that a literacy coach may engage in with teachers, it is important for coaches with a focus on literacy to have specialized knowledge in this subject area. According to L'Allier, et al, literacy coaches that have specialized knowledge in reading practices and/or an advanced teaching certificate are more effective coaches. The study these researchers conducted showed that students made more gains when their teacher worked with a coach that had advanced training in reading instruction as compared to students in a class whose teacher did not hold any advanced degree. Teachers also report that having a literacy coach to assist them in administering assessments and using this data along with the curriculum to plan for instruction is a helpful resource in their beginning years of teaching (Smith, 2012).

Establishing a collaborative relationship is a key component for most coaching situations, and that stays true for literacy coaches. Teachers are more willing to work openly with coaches when they have an established, trusting relationship with the coach. Coaches must be intentional in developing a collaborative relationship with teachers. This includes valuing the expertise of the teacher, following through on commitments, and maintaining confidentiality (L'Ailler, et al, 2010). According to this research, teachers noted that they could trust their coach when that felt that their coach was a “facilitator of learning rather than a dictator” (pg. 5). From a coach’s perspective, teachers were able to be more vulnerable when they knew the coach was not being judgmental or evaluative (Smith, 2012). The coaches in Smith’s study focused instead on providing positive and objective feedback as well as asking questions to provide subtle feedback

to promote change. Another important piece to developing a collaborative relationship as a literacy coach is to set goals (Walowiak, 2016) that are based on student growth (L'Ailler, et al, 2010). Focusing on student achievement rather than teacher actions is less evaluative and adds to the development of a trusting, collaborative relationship.

A specific role and responsibility of a literacy coach is to develop teachers as literacy leaders within their classrooms. According to the International Literacy Association's (ILA) Standard 6, the Professional Learning and Leadership Standard, it is expected that "teachers are personally and professionally committed to lifelong literacy learning" (Sharp, Piper, & Raymond, 2018, pg. 224). While teacher preparation programs are designed to develop a teacher's capacity to effectively teach literacy (Noll & Lenhart, 2013), the ILA expects teachers to continue learning about literacy in order to become a literacy leader in their classroom. A cost-effective and operative way to accomplish this task is to assign literacy coaches with a specialized knowledge base of literacy practices and adult learning theory to coach and mentor new teachers around their literacy instruction. A literacy coach should be a literacy leader within the school in order to be able to effectively develop teachers as literacy leaders (L'Ailler, et al, 2010). A literacy coach that is a literacy leader within the building spearheads many activities to develop the literacy initiatives within the building. One of these activities is to work directly with teachers in coaching. By working directly with teachers, the literacy coach is able to help develop the teachers as literacy leaders within their own classrooms. This develops their capacity to effectively teach literacy concepts to their students. Through coaching and mentoring, teachers are able to continue their lifelong literacy learning while never leaving the classroom.

Benefits of Coaching

After reviewing several studies and articles, the researcher has found strong evidence that students benefit from learning from teachers that participate in coaching and mentoring. Students are demonstrating an increase in all areas of literacy when learning from a teacher with a coach, including speaking, listening, reading, writing, and even in their enjoyment of reading (Onchwari & Keengwe, 2010). A study performed by Onchwari and Keengwe (2010) examined the difference between student achievement in a class in which the teacher received no mentoring and a class in which the teacher received coaching over a six-month period. They found that students' achievement scores increased significantly when their teacher participated in coaching. One of the most significant differences was in the students' ability to listen to and follow directions. This is a skill that not only affects literacy achievement but will affect students' ability to follow directions in other content areas. Overall, this study concluded that there is a need for "intensive, ongoing mentor-coach initiatives for greater lengths of time," (pg. 5).

Another study performed by Smith examined the benefits of coaching from the coaches' perspectives. The researcher in this study interviewed literacy coaches in a middle school about their perspectives of the benefits of coaching. While there was no concrete student achievement data analyzed during this study, it was still evident that coaching benefits student achievement. Each coach interviewed about their perspective of how the coaching impacted the students reported a positive impact on student achievement. One coach reported that students participated more and had a greater interest in reading while another coach explained that her evidence of student learning came from work samples she examined (Smith, 2012). This study highlights the importance of having a strong coaching foundation in order for the coaching to be beneficial. The researcher in this study discusses the need for strong relationships between the teacher and

the coach as well as the importance of the coach having a strong knowledge base around literacy (Smith, 2012).

Students are not the only people that benefit from a coaching relationship. In their study on the effects of mentoring and coaching, Onchwari and Keengwe noted that in addition to the student growth, there was also a difference in the literacy activities teachers chose (2010). After participating in mentoring and coaching, teachers were able to identify and plan better literacy activities for their students (Onchwari & Keengwe, 2010). In a study focused on effective professional development activities for special education teachers, it was found that teachers were better able to implement new special education strategies after receiving coaching in the form of observation with feedback (Brownell, et al, 2014). Smith found through his study of coaches' perspectives that coaches reported that teachers were better able to enact and sustain change in their classroom after a longer period of coaching, as well as, when coaching reaches the stage of collaborating with other teachers in addition to just the mentor and coach (2012). While there is not as much evidence to support the connection between coaching and teacher change as there is for student achievement, these studies do suggest that teachers generally do benefit from coaching.

Summary

This literature review explored various angles of teacher mentoring and coaching. The overall finding after reviewing these articles and studies is that, when there is a strong foundation of coaching principles in place and the coach is highly qualified and knowledgeable, coaching and mentoring is a cost-effective and operative method of providing professional development to teachers, as supported by student achievement data.

CHAPTER III

METHODS

Design

The purpose of this study was to analyze the impact of teacher coaching on the reading levels of students. This study will help determine if teacher coaching is an effective method of job-embedded professional development, with effectiveness measured by the reading achievement of students.

A quasi-experimental design employing a pretest and posttest was used for this study. This study consisted of a control group and an experimental group, neither of which were chosen randomly.

The independent variable is mentoring and coaching teachers on their instruction. Teachers in the study participated in mentoring/coaching with an instructional coach within the building centered around their English Language Arts (ELA) instruction. Mentoring and coaching can be operationally defined as job-embedded professional development that occurs one-on-one between the mentor/coach and the teacher. Forms of mentoring and coaching used in this study were model lessons taught by the coach and observed by the teacher, co-planning guided reading lessons, co-teaching the lessons planned together, and reflecting upon the teaching methods in order to adjust instruction.

The dependent variable was the students' reading levels. Students' reading levels were measured using the Fountas and Pinnell Benchmark Assessment. This assessment measures a student's ability to independently (without teacher support) decode and comprehend text. Scores for this assessment are assigned alphabetically from Pre-A to Z. The pretest occurred before treatment in September 2019. The posttest occurred after four months of treatment in January

2020. The data was analyzed to observe the number of students in each group who showed an increase of at least two reading levels, which is the anticipated amount of growth that second graders should make from September to January. The data was also analyzed to observe the average amount of growth in each group.

Participants

The participants consisted of two second grade classes with a total of 55 students and their respective teachers. Both teachers were non-tenured. In the experimental group, the teacher received individual coaching around ELA instruction from an instructional coach. The experimental class consisted of 23 second graders. In this group, there were 10 females and 13 males. Nine students received English as a Second Language (ESOL) services and four received Special Education services. In the control group, the teacher received no individual coaching around ELA instruction. The control group class consisted of 22 second graders. In this group, there were 10 females and 12 males. Six students received ESOL services and none received Special Education services. Table 1 below shows the demographics for each group.

Table 1

Test Group Demographics

Class	Total Number of Students	Females	Males	Students receiving ESOL services	Students receiving Special Education services
Experimental	23	10	13	9	4
Control	22	10	12	6	0

The sampling technique was purposive sampling because the groups were chosen with specific characteristics in mind. The experimental group was chosen because the teacher of that class was participating in instructional coaching. The control group was chosen because it had

similar demographics to the experimental group, but the teacher chose not to participate in individual instructional coaching.

Instrument

The Fountas and Pinnell Benchmark Assessment was used for the pretest and posttest. The Fountas and Pinnell Benchmark Assessment has been proven to be a reliable assessment (Clay, et al., 2019.) This assessment is used county-wide to assess students' independent and instructional levels. For this study, the researcher collected the students' instructional levels. The instructional level is determined as the level on which the student is reading with 90-94% decoding accuracy and demonstrating a moderate comprehension of the text. For each test in both sub-groups, the teachers were trained to assess by the Reading Specialist and administered the assessment to their own students individually. Students are asked to read a book while the teacher records any accuracy errors as the student reads aloud. The student then answers comprehension questions to demonstrate understanding of what was read. Based on the results of both components of the assessment, students are assigned a score to represent their instructional reading level as denoted by a letter (Pre-A to Z). For the pretest, students are considered to be reading on grade level standards at a level D. For the posttest, students are considered to be reading on grade level standards at a level F. The expectation is that students increase their reading level by at least two levels between September and January.

Procedure

The first step in the procedure was to administer the pretest to all students in both groups. In September, the teachers administered the Fountas and Pinnell Benchmark Assessment to each student individually to determine their instructional reading level.

The second step was for each teacher to plan and implement instruction based on the pretest

data. During this time, the experimental group's teacher participated in instructional coaching. Once a week, the teacher met with the instructional coach to co-plan, learn new teaching strategies, and reflect upon the effectiveness of their teaching. Additionally, the teacher and the instructional coach co-taught once a week. This typically consisted of parallel teaching (each teacher teaching the same lesson in small groups at the same time) or station teaching (each teacher teaching a different lesson in small groups). During this time, the control group's teacher did not participate in instructional coaching. This teacher planned and implemented lessons alone without any job-embedded professional development or individual support from a coach.

The final step in the procedure was to administer the posttest. In January, each teacher administered the Fountas and Pinnell Benchmark Assessment to each student again to observe growth. The researcher collected and analyzed the data to observe evidence of differences in the amount of growth between the two groups.

CHAPTER IV

RESULTS

The data displayed in this chapter provide information related to student progress as compared from the pre-assessment to the post-assessment. The data highlight the difference in results between the two test groups. The experimental group wherein the teacher received instructional coaching was compared to the control group wherein the teacher did not receive instructional coaching.

The data displayed below in Table 2 shows a descriptive analysis of student growth. For each test group, the mean, median, mode, and standard deviation were calculated for the amount of levels that students increased from the pre-assessment to the post-assessment. In the experimental group of 24 students, the mean was 2.417 levels of growth with a standard deviation of 1.037, whereas the mean for the control group of 22 students was 0.955 levels of growth, with a standard deviation of 0.637.

Table 2

Student Growth Descriptive Statistics for Experimental and Control Groups

	Mean	Median	Mode	Standard Deviation
Experimental	2.417	2	2	1.037
Control	0.955	1	1	0.637

The data displayed in Table 3 below highlights the amount of growth made and the percentage of students at each level. In the experimental group, the largest percentage of students made 2 levels of growth at 59%, which is the expected amount of growth to be made according to Fountas and Pinnell's Benchmark Assessment. In the control group, 18% of

students made 2 levels of growth, with the highest percentage of students being in the 1 level of growth range, which is below expectations. Also, no students in the control group exceeded expectations by making above 2 levels of growth, whereas 46% of students in the experimental group exceeded expectation.

Table 3

Percentage of Students at Each Level of Growth

	Level of Growth				
	+0	+1	+2	+3	+4
Experimental	4%	12.5%	37.5%	29%	17%
Control	23%	59%	18%	0%	0%

The results shown in the tables above show that the students in the experimental group made more growth on average than the students in the control group. Conclusions based on these findings will be discussed further in Chapter 5.

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to observe how instructional coaching for teachers impacts the reading levels of the students. The results from this study support the alternative hypothesis that there was an impact on student reading levels when teachers participated in instructional coaching. On average, students in the experimental group showed more growth than students in the control group. These findings suggest that mentor-coaching for teachers has a positive impact on student reading levels.

Implications of Results

The results of this study imply that instructional coaching for teachers has a positive impact on student reading levels. The average growth made from the pretest to the posttest in the experimental group was 2.417 as compared to an average of 0.955 in the control group. The expected amount of growth according to the F&P Benchmark Assessment guidelines is two levels of growth. The experimental group average exceeded this expectation, whereas the control group did not meet the expectation. In the experimental group, only 16.5% of students did not meet or exceed the expectation, whereas 82% of students in the control group did not meet or exceed the expectation. In the experimental group, 37.5% of students met the expectation of achieving two levels of growth, 29% achieved three levels of growth, and 17% achieved 4 levels of growth.

The results of this study imply that teachers and their students benefit from instructional coaching. The students in the experimental group outperformed the students in the control group on the posttest. On average, students in the experimental group showed greater growth in their reading abilities than the students in the control group. Based on the findings of this experiment,

schools should take mentoring/coaching into consideration when planning for professional development. Schools should prioritize instructional coaching as a premiere form of professional development and should hire instructional coaches to work with their teachers. Teachers should consider taking advantage of job-embedded professional development in the form of instructional coaching in order to make a larger impact on their students' academic progress.

Theoretical Consequences

The results of this study align with previous research. In 2010, researchers Onchwari and Keengwe studied the effects of literacy coaching on early childhood students in a Head Start program. The data from the study showed that students in the 22 classrooms that participated in literacy coaching improved their literacy skills more than students in the 22 classrooms that did not participate in literacy coaching. In the study discussed in this paper, the researcher also discovered that the students in the classroom that received coaching improved their reading level more than the students in the classroom with no coaching. Both studies support the notion and theory that coaching for teachers has a positive impact on student reading abilities.

Threats to Validity

One threat to the validity of this study is the time frame. This study began in September and ended in January. This only allows teachers four months to grow their instructional skills and only four months for those skills to have an impact on the students. The study could be generalized better if it had continued over the entire school year or multiple school years. This leads to another threat to the validity, which is the sample size, and this limits the generalizability of this study's findings. This study compares two groups of students. Had the study been

completed over multiple school years with more groups of students, the long-term effects of instructional coaching could be better analyzed.

Another threat to the validity of this study is the difference in the amount of students who received special services between the two groups. In the experimental group, four students received Special Education services, meaning that they have a documented learning disability and receive instruction from a Special Educator in addition to the instruction received from their homeroom teacher. In the Control Group, zero students had a documented disability; therefore, no students received additional instruction from another teacher. The results from the two groups could be more fairly compared had the participants in the groups been more similar.

Connections to Previous Studies

In a 2010 case study, researchers Onchwari and Keengwe examined a mentor-coach initiative impacting 44 Head Start classrooms. These classrooms were split into two groups. Half of the classrooms had teachers who participated in mentor-coaching (the experimental group) while the other half of the classrooms had teachers who did not participate in mentor-coaching (the control group). The mentor-coaches who participated in this study were trained in a literacy-based style of instructional coaching and worked with their clients in a job-embedded manner twice a week for four months. The effectiveness of mentor-coaching was assessed using a research-based classroom observation tool as well as an assessment of the student's literacy abilities. The results of the classroom observation tool showed that teachers who participated in mentor-coaching had a more developed literacy environment in their classroom and implemented more meaningful literacy activities with their students. The results from the student assessments showed that students in the experimental group outperformed the students in the control group in all assessed categories of literacy: speaking, listening, reading, and writing.

Onchwari and Keengwe's (2010) study is similar to the study discussed in this paper in several ways. Both studies were completed over a span of four months, included job-embedded professional development delivered by trained instructional coaches, had a literacy focus, and assessed students to determine if the mentor-coaching had an impact on students. Both studies also resulted in students in the experimental groups increasing their literacy skills more than their peers in the control group.

In a 2012 study, Smith observed the effects of instructional coaching from the coach's perspective. Smith studied three coaches who worked with literacy teachers working with middle school students. After the coaches worked with their teachers for five months, Smith conducted interviews, collected field notes from the coaches, and read reflections written by the coaches. From the coaches' perspectives, teacher change was more likely to occur after a coach/client relationship had been developed. Smith's study differs from the study discussed in this paper as it focuses on the coach's perspective. No student data was collected to quantify the impact that coaching had on student performance.

Implications for Future Research

In future research, the researcher could consider expanding the sample size. Analyzing data from multiple classes and teachers, as was done in Onchwari and Keenge's study, would increase the validity of the study. Increasing the sample size would allow the researcher to observe the impact of coaching in multiple settings with a larger range of participants. Also, in future research, the researcher could consider adding a teacher observation element to observe changes in teacher practices before and after coaching. This would allow the researcher to observe the impact of coaching on teacher practices. Finally, the researcher could consider collecting qualitative data from the coaches. By analyzing qualitative and quantitative data from

students, teachers, and coaches, the researcher would have a well-rounded view of the impact of coaching.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to determine the impact of mentor/coaching for teachers on student reading abilities. This study rejects the null hypothesis that there will be no impact on student reading achievement. It was observed that students of teachers who participate in mentor-coaching show greater growth in their reading abilities than students of teachers who do not participate in mentor-coaching. This study reflects the importance of job-embedded professional development in the form of mentor-coaching for teachers. When teachers participate in mentor-coaching, students benefit.

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