

# "It helps us remember our why"

## Instructional Coach Learning in a Self-Study Community of Practice

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Coaching

Self-Study

Teacher

Teacher Educator

Professional Development

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*Teacher leadership is increasingly present in schools. However, there are concerns that teacher often do not receive training or support as they transition into teacher leadership. To counter this conception, the authors – consisting of a teacher educator and five new teacher leaders – created and participated in a self-study community of practice. The five teacher leaders were transitioning into formal roles as instructional coaches and desired a supportive learning space in which we could develop as teacher leaders. Using self-study research methods, we investigated our enactment of the learning community as a leadership development program. In researching the learning community, we identified internal and external factors that influenced our developmental readiness. We also recognized developmental processes enacted in the learning community that facilitated our professional development as instructional coaches. And, we recognized the impact of the community on constructing new meanings of instructional coaching and taking action in our school settings. We conclude by highlighting the necessity of supportive developmental programs like our community of practice if novice teacher leaders are to effectively enact their roles and responsibilities, and point to the need for participatory research conducted by teacher leaders to generate new insights into teacher leadership and its associated roles.*

### Introduction

The transition from teacher-to-teacher leader can be viewed in much the same way as the transition from teacher-to-teacher education, in that it is often an individualized, accidental enterprise. Although teacher leadership is increasingly accepted in the United States, not all states have adopted professional standards or offered training programs for teacher leadership. In our state, Virginia, teacher leadership is under-supported, with attention paid to disciplinary forms of leadership and coaching (i.e., mathematics coaching, literacy coaching). For many teacher leaders in Virginia, “learning to lead occurs on the job through experience” (Carver, 2016, p. 159). This is particularly concerning given that many teachers are placed in teacher leadership roles without support or clear understanding of their responsibilities (Gerstenschlager & Barlow, 2019; Margolis & Huggins, 2012). In this self-study, we sought to counter these long-standing conceptions of how teachers transition into teacher leadership in our educational contexts by enacting and participating in a self-study community of practice (SSCoP). Brandon is a university professor who has provided formal learning experiences for emerging teacher educators as they develop their professional identities and practices. As he studied teacher educator professional learning, Brandon became invested in supporting teachers in their transition into teacher leadership through professional development and formal programs of study. We, the remaining authors –

Angela, Danielle, Kerstin, Rose, and Simone – were participants in a mentor training program co-facilitated by Brandon in 2020 and 2021. In July 2021, we were transitioning into formal teacher leadership as instructional coaches, which we saw as crossing a “threshold” that “represents both enduring and new challenges” (Berry, 2020, p. 4).

We felt that collaboratively inquiring into a specific practice of teacher leadership, and instructional coaching, as we transitioned into new roles would help us successfully develop as teacher leaders. Brandon recommended we participate in a developmental inquiry space framed as a self-study community of practice (Kitchen, 2022; Kitchen & Ciuffetelli Parker, 2009), so we could simultaneously support one another as we developed as instructional coaches while sharing our learning outcomes with the self-study community (Berry, 2020). In this piece, we investigate our collective experiences as members in the SSCoP, with specific attention paid to how we navigated the construction and enactment of the learning community. The research question framing this study is: How do educators develop as instructional coaches in a self-study community of practice?

### **Literature Review**

As a concept, teacher leadership has existed in some form since the 1980s (York-Barr & Duke, 2004). In that time, definitions and the associated actions of teacher leadership have shifted. For instance, Katzenmeyer and Moller (2009) defined teacher leaders as those who “lead within and beyond the classroom; identify with and contribute to a community of teacher leaders and leaders; influence others toward improved educational practice; and accept responsibility for achieving the outcomes of their leadership” (p. 6). More recently, Wenner and Campbell (2017) defined teacher leaders as “teachers who maintain K-12 classroom-based teaching responsibilities, while also taking on leadership responsibilities outside the classroom” (p. 140). Although there exists no agreed-upon definition of teacher leadership, there is general agreement on the types of roles and responsibilities often associated with teacher leadership (Bond, 2015; Harrison & Killion, 2007; Wenner & Campbell, 2017).

One role often associated with teacher leadership is instructional coaching. Teachers who serve as instructional coaches provide training that helps teachers “create a plan for realizing their professional goals” (Knight, 2007, p. 13). Chval et al. (2010) note that “Coaches take on many different roles and responsibilities, such as planning or providing interventions, working with teachers individually or in groups to provide PD, organizing resources and materials, demonstrating instruction inside and outside the classroom, conducting observations, and working with data” (p. 194). Instructional coaches may work explicitly with a specific discipline (i.e., mathematics coach, literacy coach), an instructional orientation (i.e., instructional technology coach), or school demographic (Title 1 coach). Instructional coaching may also be a stance one holds toward teacher support (Hunzicker, 2017), such as viewing the mentoring of novice teachers and teacher candidates through a coaching lens.

Although instructional coaching, and teacher leadership more broadly, are increasingly present in schools, there is limited research on the learning experiences that help teachers develop their professional identities and practices associated with teacher leadership (Berg et al., 2014; Carver, 2016). Research on teacher leadership has largely investigated the behaviors and actions of practicing teacher leaders and instructional coaches (e.g., Neumerski, 2012; Nguyen et al., 2019). The transition from teacher-to-teacher leader has been studied, if not extensively (e.g., Borko et al., 2021; Chval et al., 2010). For instance, Chval et al. (2010) found that when instructional coaches transition from classroom teaching, they often rely on their prior identities and practices as classroom teachers to guide their coaching actions and decisions, especially when lacking a formal induction experience. They noted that if coaches are to find success, “A support structure... must exist that includes opportunities to share challenges as well as strategies for addressing such challenges” (p. 212).

Similarly, teacher leadership development programs have been viewed as influential in supporting the transition from teacher-to-teacher leader (Carver, 2016; Huggins et al., 2017). Carver (2016), who studied a two-year teacher leadership academy, found that teachers enrolled in the program developed complex understandings of teacher leadership roles and dispositions while simultaneously transforming their identities as teachers and teacher leaders. In their study of a year-long professional learning community for teacher leaders, Huggins et al. (2017) found that collaborative learning with fellow teacher leaders at a similar development stage resulted in improved understandings of their identities as teacher leaders.

## Theoretical Perspective

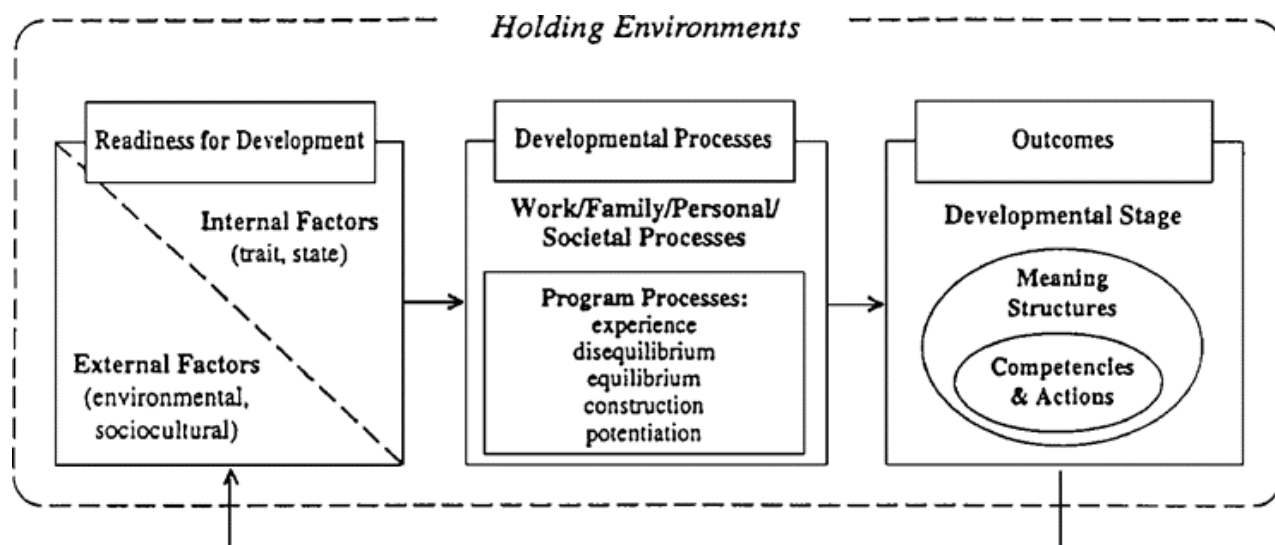
Learning about teacher leadership (and instructional coaching) in a community of practice has a positive impact on teacher leaders' professional learning and practice (e.g., Borko et al., 2021; Carver, 2016; Huggins et al., 2017). If (teacher) leadership is viewed as "meaning-making in a community of practice (Palus & Drath, 1995, p. 1), it is helpful to consider teacher leader development through a community of practice lens (e.g., Campbell et al., 2022; Wilson, 2016). Wenger et al. (2002) defined communities of practice as "groups of people share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis" (p. 4). The concept of self-study communities of practice builds on this definition and associated concepts of professional learning communities (DuFour & Eaker, 1998).

According to Kitchen and Ciuffetelli Parker (2009), "The term self-study communities of practice is intended to convey both the teaching and inquiry dimensions of such communities. Each community must also be adapted to the institutional culture in which it operates to sustain its members and overcome barriers to teacher education as a form of scholarship" (p. 108). Kitchen (2022) recently revisited the idea of SSCoPs, further highlighting the various characteristics that define the structure and enactment of SSCoPs. The eight characteristics of SSCoPs are that self-study community: (1) involvement is voluntary; (2) happens on common ground; (3) requires safety, trust, and care; (4) members share struggles through conversation; (5) members explore their teaching through collective dialogue; (6) critically examine their group processes and dynamics; (7) explore teacher education reform; and (8) move toward the future. We used these characteristics to set the stage for community development, to define the actions and outcomes of the learning community, and as a theoretical lens through which we investigated our collective development as teacher educator/leaders.

To further understand our work together, we turned to the Leadership Development Program Model (Figure 1). In this model, Palus and Drath (1995) perceive leadership development as a three-stage cyclic process of readiness for development, developmental processes, and outcomes. 'Readiness for development' refers to four factors – traits, state, environmental, and sociocultural – that determine the developmental readiness for those entering leadership development programs. 'Developmental processes' refers to those actions associated with one's development. These include five processes: (1) providing meaningful learning experiences; (2) creating a state of disequilibrium for participants; (3) providing timely support and balance (equilibrium); (4) constructing new knowledge, skills, and dispositions; and (5) seeing "the increased possibility of future sustained change in meaning structures" (potentiation). The final stage of 'Outcomes' requires the identification of expected competencies and actions learned, desired meaning structures, and providing support through one's developmental stages.

**Figure 1**

*Palus and Drath Model of Leadership Development*



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The Leadership Development Program Model has been used by some to gain insight into how teacher leaders learn in communities of practice (e.g., Gerstenschlager & Barlow, 2019; Howe & Stubbs, 2003). In their study on preparing Common Core Math teacher leaders, Gerstenschlager and Barlow (2019) found that unlike formal teacher leader training programs (ex., graduate programs), leadership development programs must be structured in a manner that is reflective of participants' developmental needs. Such an approach would help teacher leaders "build their abilities to foster and effectively participate in the processes of leadership in their communities" (Palus & Drath, 1995, p. 25). Howe and Stubbs (2003) likewise saw benefits in teacher leader learning in their study of a science teacher leader community of practice, noting that "the emphasis on working in small groups, the informality of their interaction with [other professionals], and the need to work together in order to get the tasks done fostered the development of community" (p. 295).

### Methods

Loughran (2006) argued that "*Developing* implies a sense of 'coming to be'... growing in understanding, moving forward, purposefully building on that which is already present" (p. 3, emphasis in original). As a group largely consisting of teachers transitioning into formal instructional coaching roles, this mindset helped us frame our collective development as teacher educator/leaders and the value self-study research would provide us in improving our teacher education practices (LaBoskey, 2004; Samaras, 2011). We organized our teaching-inquiry collaboration as a self-study community of practice (Kitchen, 2022; Kitchen & Ciuffetelli Parker, 2009), which consists of four or more members "committed to working together to study their teacher education practices" (p. 108). Brandon specifically recommended SSCoP as the lens for our collaboration because he felt it could "keep [the group] connected and on track ... creating spaces to talk, collecting, and analyzing data ... to document our pedagogical changes ... so that others might learn from our process" (Appelget et al., 2022, p. 240).

### Context

Our work together grew out of a professional development program that trains mentors of teacher candidates and novice teachers in instructional coaching (Knight, 2007). Brandon is an education professor at Old Dominion University and has co-facilitated the mentor teacher program since January 2020. Further funding allowed the program to offer additional, advanced training beyond the initial training provided to mentors during the student teaching semester. These advanced training sessions began in the summer of 2021.

We (Angela, Danielle, Kerstin, Rose, and Simone) served as mentor teachers for the university's teacher candidates and participated in the initial training program at various points between January 2020 and May 2021. We were in the first group of participants in the advanced training facilitated by Brandon. In that training in July 2021, we built connections with one another based on our shared transition from classroom teachers to instructional coaches. Although representing varied disciplines, grade levels, and years of teaching experience, we were united in our desire to further our development as instructional coaches. Angela, a secondary mathematics teacher, and Danielle, an elementary health/physical education teacher, remained in their positions as classroom teachers but were tasked by their schools to serve as lead mentors. In this role, they supported first-year teacher learning and supervised and coached first-year teachers' mentors. Kerstin, Rose, and Simone were leaving classroom teaching positions to become school-level instructional coaches. Kerstin and Rose were hired as discipline-focused instructional coaches, Kerstin for literacy, and Rose for mathematics. Kerstin's position was at the high school level while Rose was split between two elementary schools. Simone shifted from elementary teacher to instructional coach who provided direct support and coaching for one grade at an elementary school. An overview of our professional roles, years of teaching, and disciplines can be found in Table 1.

**Table 1**

*Teacher Leadership Self-Study Community of Practice Members*

	Professional Role	Years Teaching	Discipline
Brandon	Professor	18 years	Social Studies/Teacher Ed
Angela	Teacher/Lead Mentor	25 years	Secondary Mathematics
Danielle	Teacher/Lead Mentor	24 years	Health/PE
Kerstin	Literacy Coach	26 years	Secondary English
Rose	Mathematics Coach	21 years	Elementary/Mathematics
Simone	Instructional Coach	5 years	Elementary/Reading

Although ODU is at the heart of our metropolitan area, there is great distance that separates us as a group. For most, travel to a central meeting location would take a minimum of one hour one-way. As such, we agreed to hold all meetings virtually via Zoom. Meetings took place bi-weekly throughout the 2021-2022 school year, beginning in September and concluding in May, with some breaks for holidays. Meetings lasted approximately an hour-and-a-half. Prior to our first meeting, we shared educational autobiographies (Bullough & Gitlin, 2001), and periodically shared written journals and professional documents related to coaching practices in school divisions. Rather than perceive the community of practice as a training space, we viewed it as a developmental space where the group could individually and collaboratively improve understanding of, and practice related to, instructional coaching. Meetings were open-ended in nature, though we would return to the texts Brandon provided in the trainings to re-orient our learning (Knight, 2007, 2018). We often shared tensions and problems we experienced in our work and sought input from those in the group. In January 2022, we felt a need to re-center our development and agreed to frame remaining meetings through a book study of Gross Cheliotas and Reilly's (2018), "Coaching Conversations".

### Data Collection and Analysis

Once we agreed to participate in the SSCoP, we defined the parameters of the community space and data collected related to our work together. Prior to the first meeting, we committed to sharing educational autobiographies (Bullough & Gitlin, 2001). Although we interacted across several instructional coaching trainings, we were still unfamiliar with one another. Sharing our personal experiences as educators and critical incidents that led to our transition into teacher education/leadership jumpstarted SSCoP development (Branyon et al., 2022). We also periodically shared journal entries related to tensions we experienced as instructional coaches, which provided an additional space separate from our bi-weekly meetings to reflect and learn from one another. Finally, we recorded and transcribed our bi-weekly meetings between September 2021 and May 2022.

We first coded data deductively using provisional coding (Saldaña, 2021), framed through the Leadership Development Program Model (Palus & Drath, 1995). This was followed by theoretical coding that generated the study's findings, where we identified our learning in the SSCoP as expressed through the Leadership Development Program Model. To ensure trustworthiness, we fully articulated the context of our study, identified our data sources, and detailed the analytic process (Hamilton et al., 2020). Additionally, we use "previously defined categories validated from research" to provide exemplars from our learning in a self-study community of practice (Mena & Russell, 2017, p. 115).

### Outcomes

In this section, we highlight our experiences in developing as instructional coaches in a self-study community of practice. These findings are framed through the three stages of the Leadership Development Program Model (Palus &

Drath, 1995). We begin by considering our readiness to learn and develop together in a SSCoP. We then turn to a consideration of processes that assisted in our development as instructional coaches and conclude by exploring how participation in the SSCoP helped us develop new meanings, actions, and competencies related to instructional coaching.

### **Forming a Community of Educators: Expressing Readiness for Development**

The first stage in the leadership development model is having a readiness for development. Each of us had careers in which we had taken on leadership responsibilities, including presenting at conferences, hosting student teachers, serving on leadership teams, and sponsoring student organizations. But what drew us together at this specific moment in time was our individual transitions into a formal teacher leadership role as instructional coaches. We were driven by a mixture of internal and external factors to participate in the SSCoP.

Early in our time together, Brandon asked us, “What sparked your interest in taking part in this [SSCoP]?” Kerstin replied, “For me, it’s an interest in wanting to be a better educator, but then once I get into the group, I feel like, ‘Oh, this is a supportive group’... then I feel safe to share.” Rose agreed, adding, “I wanted to learn how to be a leader, a better leader and a mentor, and then in this group, [they are] people who are in the same space that I am, transitioning from the classroom.” Danielle’s readiness to develop as an instructional coach was informed by her recent experiences hosting a student teacher and the impact the mentoring program had on her practice and her student’s growth. She noted how she applied that learning and “the difference it made in him alone. So, then I realized, why can’t this happen to our teachers as a whole?” She identified that experience as the impetus for accepting her new role as a lead mentor, but acknowledged a need to continue learning how to coach teachers, hence her participation in the SSCoP. Angela shared the sentiment, noting she was “thirsty” for knowledge related to instructional coaching.

Although several internal factors influenced our decision to participate in the SSCoP, we also highlighted external factors that reinforced the need for a supportive learning space. Few of us identified any learning supports provided by our schools as we transitioned into our new roles. As such, we craved opportunities to engage with and learn from others in similar circumstances. When support was mentioned, it often ran counter to what we were enacting in our practice. For instance, Danielle highlighted a brief training provided by a local university that focused on evaluative and directive coaching, which ran counter to what she had learned from Brandon and successfully enacted with her mentees. Hence, the SSCoP provided her – and the group as a whole – with opportunities to problematize practice through a shared interpretation of coaching practices.

### **Learning in Community: Processes That Assisted in Our Development**

In establishing a readiness to participate in a developmental inquiry space, we also had to make effective use of that space if we were to fully develop as instructional coaches. This would require learning experiences that actively engaged us as learners, challenged our routines, provided us with support, allowed us to develop new ideas, and helped us sustain change rather than reverting to prior conceptions of instructional coaching. Angela highlighted the “attentiveness and organic-ness of our group” as assistive in her professional learning. We noted that the SSCoP structure allowed us to shift focus to meet individual and collective needs so that we could share and learn from different perspectives and troubling experiences (what we called “roadblocks”). Simone mentioned the ability to have a “moment of reflection... because even though we are instructional coaches, sometimes our building administrators make us drift off in other places, and we start losing that [coaching identity].”

We challenged ourselves to think differently about our practices, especially when faced with “roadblocks” that prevented us from fully enacting our work as instructional coaches. These “roadblocks” included external issues such as guidance received from district administrators regarding coaching policies and trainings provided by outside consultants that ran contrary to what we were learning and practicing regarding coaching. But they also included instances where we were unsure about how or when to provide teacher support in a meaningful manner. For instance, Danielle was “struggling... about when to move on to the next [coaching] phase,” while Kerstin was challenged by the regularity in which she was to enact a coaching cycle with teachers.



Although we faced challenges, we also experienced successes and celebrated these moments. In one meeting, Simone shared a positive coaching experience with the group, and after sharing she received this feedback:

*Danielle: That sounds amazing.*

*Rose: You're actually coaching Simone!*

*Simone: It's amazing! I felt so busy like I was doing office work, but then to be in her room and it felt good.*

*Brandon: How is [the teacher] responding?*

*Simone: She is loving [coaching]. She put in ... our little newsletter and she shouted me out for investing my time in her, and she texted me and told me how she likes my approach.*

Such moments reinforced for us that what we were learning was important and sustained in us the importance of being effective coaches for the teachers with whom we worked.

### **The Impact of Our Community: Identifying Outcomes and Taking Action**

The SSCoP provided us with space to create new meanings and interpretations for our work as instructional coaches. Additionally, we were encouraged to take action and develop competencies that would continue our professional growth. Brandon noted how the SSCoP was helping “us center and recenter ourselves continuously so that we are grounded in the work that we’re trying to do.” Angela echoed this sentiment, stating,

*I think it helps us to remember our “why.” Why we’re doing what we’re doing and why we’re taking the steps that we’re taking because there is a method to the madness and if we’re ever reminded of what the method is, we can understand what the outcome should be and we’ll know if actually hit the target.*

Rather than serve as a space where we simply reflected on our coaching experiences, we drew on our collective experiences to affect change in our individual practices. Personal actions became collective outcomes. For instance, Rose and Simone shared a specific strategy they used to provide teachers with formative feedback, to which Danielle responded, “I’m gonna take that and run with it because I think that’s a great idea.” Such moments repeated throughout our year together as we sought to develop conceptual clarity and pedagogical capacity as instructional coaches.

### **Discussion and Conclusions**

Barth (2001) argued, “Teachers who succeed in influencing the school are tireless and undeterred by the obstacles that seem to leap from behind every bush. Commitment to their causes is stronger than the hurdles they encounter” (p. 447). We joined together in our self-study community of practice because we were concerned about the obstacles we would inevitably experience as we shifted into our new roles as instructional coaches. We believed that the SSCoP would provide us with a supportive environment that would reinforce our commitment to the instructional coaching model we had come to embrace while mentoring teacher candidates but were uncertain how to enact with practicing teachers (Knight, 2007, 2018). Through participation in the SSCoP, we found our developing understandings of, and pedagogical practices associated with, instructional coaching strengthened.

Katzenmeyer and Moller (1996) suggested that “the key to reducing the flow of teachers to other professions is to develop new roles for excellent teachers that extend beyond the classroom” (p. 93). However, like others (Carver, 2016; Huggins et al., 2017), we argue that teachers who transition into new roles require training and support if they are to effectively make this transition. One option available to educators as they transition from teacher-to-teacher leader is participation in a community of practice (Borko et al., 2021; Wilson, 2016). Drath (1996) noted that “leadership comes from the relationships people form when they are doing something together” (p. 3). We argue that the characteristics of communities of practice (Wenger et al., 2002), and self-study communities of practice more specifically (Kitchen, 2022; Kitchen & Ciuffetelli Parker, 2009), provide the necessary structures for teacher leaders (and instructional coaches) to develop relationships and learn together as they transition into new leadership roles.

The SSCoP helped us reposition, reframe, and reimagine our roles and responsibilities as instructional coaches. Our work together provided us with powerful insights into the tensions, problems of practice, and personal experiences that instructional coaches encounter when crossing the “threshold” from teacher-to-teacher leader. Additionally, our work highlights the need to give voice to instructional coaches and teacher leaders who are often absent in educational research. Although much of the scholarship on instructional coaching and teacher leadership is qualitative in nature, it does not take the form of participatory research (e.g., self-study, teacher research, action research). Such research is needed so that additional contexts and insights are provided about how to best prepare and support those transitioning into teacher leadership.

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