The politics of coaching assistant principals: exploring principal control

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to explore how school principals influenced or controlled leadership coaches working with assistant principals in urban secondary schools.

Design/methodology/approach – This longitudinal qualitative case study drew upon semi-structured interviews and program documents obtained from participants in a university-based leadership coaching program across three academic years. The study included 22 total participants, including ten assistant principals, nine leadership coaches, and three program staff.

Findings – A thematic analysis of the data produced three themes. First, principals controlled coaches' work with assistant principals both directly and indirectly. Second, the extent of principal control influenced how coaches developed a confidential relationship with the assistant principals and what strategies they used to preserve the confidential nature of the coaching relationship. Third, the focus of the coaching support evolved in response to the assignment of responsibilities and duties to the assistant principals, which were largely outside the assistant principal and leadership coach's control. The absence of alignment between coaching priorities and leadership responsibilities frustrated coaches.

Originality/value – The findings from this study make two significant empirical contributions to the literature. First, the study provides critical new insights about the extent to which politics generated by principals and administrative teams may influence the work of leadership coaches. Second, the study contributes to the sparse literature about leadership coaching for assistant principals, particularly those working in secondary school settings in the USA.

Keywords Coaching, Educational leadership, Sensemaking, Assistant principals, Micropolitics, Leadership coaching, Administrative relationships

Paper type Research paper

Leadership coaches work within the political context of schools. When coaches work with an assistant principal they must navigate the political context of the school's administrative team, including the supervisory relationship between the principal and assistant principal. Principals create conditions within these teams by establishing norms, identifying improvement priorities, and assigning duties to their subordinates (i.e. assistant principals). As research notes, these assignments shape the work of assistant principals and define their roles within the school (Hartzell *et al.*, 1995; Marshall and Hooley, 2006; Shoho *et al.*, 2012). Research suggests that assistant principals have recently assumed more sophisticated leadership responsibilities, as school leadership functions become increasingly distributed and responsibility for school improvement becomes more widely shared (Bukoski *et al.*, 2015; Grubb and Flessa, 2006; Portin *et al.*, 2009; Spillane, 2007; Spillane *et al.*, 2001). Such changes increase the need for support for assistant principals, many of whom may not have the administrative skills they need to succeed in these complex tasks.

Recognizing the limited skills of many assistant principals, scholars have increasingly advocated exploring new strategies that support skill development for

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assistant principals. Leadership coaching has been suggested as one strategy to support assistant principals. In this paper, we define a coach as someone who "provides continuing support that is safe and confidential" and coaching as a professional support that "has as its goal the nurturing of significant personal, professional, and institutional growth through a process that unfolds over time" (Bloom *et al.*, 2005, p. 10). This definition presumes that leadership coaches enter their work with a responsibility for developing not just individual leadership skills, but also supporting the development of the entire school organization. Although different coaching models exist, most scholarship conceives of coaching as a relationship involving two people who are working together within the context of a confidential relationship to set and achieve professional and/or personal goals (Barnett and O'Mahony, 2008).

Surprisingly, few scholars have considered how coaching might be useful or what unique conditions might arise for coaches who work with assistant principals (Oleszewski *et al.*, 2012; Smylie *et al.*, 2005). Instead, scholars have mostly focussed on the support coaches provided to school principals (Lochmiller, 2014a; Lochmiller and Silver, 2010; Silver *et al.*, 2009; among others) and found that this support may be valuable, particularly when coupled with feedback from classroom teachers in the school (Goff *et al.*, 2014). These studies have generated some understanding about coaches' work with principals, though they have not widely considered the political aspects of coaches' work or the ways in which coaches manage the micropolitical challenges that arise when working within the context of administrative teams. As Hargreaves and Skelton (2012) note, "The political perspective is about allocations, distributions and dynamics of power, and about the interplay of different interests within educational change" (p. 126). Indeed, Shanklin (2006) has called for more research into the politics of coaching with a particular emphasis on examinations that explore the micropolitics between coaches and administrators within the context of schools. This work seems particularly fruitful in light of the absence of research about leadership coaches who work with assistant principals.

Purpose of this study

Using micropolitical and sensemaking perspectives (Ball, 1987; Blase, 1991; Blase, 1998; Hargreaves and Skelton, 2012; Iannacone, 1991), the purpose of this study is to explore how principals influence leadership coaches working with assistant principals in secondary schools. The study addresses a single research question:

RQ1. How do principals influence the support provided by leadership coaches to assistant principals who are members of their leadership team?

To address this question, we completed a longitudinal, qualitative case study (Yin, 2014; Stake, 1995) in a leadership coaching program housed in the College of Education at a private, mid-sized university in the western USA. The program provided leadership coaching support to public school administrators working in two urban school districts. The program targeted coaching support to administrators employed in schools serving a large proportion of students from low-income families. Coaches employed by the program had previously served as school or district administrators and had retired within the past three years. The program trained the retired administrators as leadership coaches using the blended coaching model (Bloom *et al.*, 2005). Coaching support spanned a period of three consecutive school years. In the first and second year of support, the coaches met with the assistant principals for four to six hours per month plus provided telephone and e-mail assistance. In the third

year of support, the coaches met with the assistant principals for two to three hours per month plus provided telephone and e-mail assistance. The program provided coaching support at no cost to the administrators through a cost-sharing agreement between the university and school districts. Philanthropic support from a private family foundation made this arrangement possible. Assistant principals "opted in" to the coaching program and were free to leave the coaching program without penalty. Assistant principals served by the program were not on plans of improvement or otherwise identified by the district as having ineffective leadership performance.

Literature review

As noted previously, research on assistant principals has received relatively little attention from the academic community, particularly within the USA. Cranston *et al.* (2004) noted that assistant principals have largely been "forgotten leaders" (p. 225) within the context of schools. While a few scholars have pursued research in this area (Hartzell *et al.*, 1995; Marshall and Hooley, 2006) and there have been recent efforts to examine more deeply the role and work of assistant principals (Barnett *et al.*, 2012; Oleszewski *et al.,* 2012; Shoho *et al.,* 2012), the vast majority of research continues to focus on school principals. Indeed, our review of recent scholarship about the contributions of leaders to student achievement finds a nearly exclusive focus on school principals (Grissom and Loeb, 2011; Hallinger and Heck, 1996; Hitt and Tucker, 2016; Leithwood and Louis, 2012; Witziers *et al.*, 2003). Likewise, recent discussions pertaining to a host of education topics ranging from discussions about the implementation of school improvement initiatives (Fullan, 1992), district support for leadership development (Elmore and Burney, 1997; Honig, 2012), and school-based efforts to develop teacher capacity to implement education reforms (Youngs and King, 2002) have neglected or touched lightly upon the potentially important role that assistant principals might play in these efforts.

The absence of attention to assistant principals may be changing, however, as research highlights the importance of both supervisory and non-supervisory leaders in the work of improving student learning and achievement (Portin *et al.*, 2009). Further, emergent conceptualizations of school leadership roles suggest an increasing importance for assistant principals (Grubb and Flessa, 2006; Pounder and Crow, 2005). Indeed, as scholars increasingly point to the merits of distributed forms of school leadership, the importance of the assistant principal within the school's leadership team seems likely to rise. Thus, one rationale for expanding current research efforts related to the assistant principalship reflects the reality that assistant principals may now serve as a critical member of the school's instructional leadership team. This certainly seems the case from some research, which has focussed on schools employing distributed leadership models within which principals and assistant principals are equally empowered (Grubb and Flessa, 2006). Further, as Marshall and Hooley (2006) note, assistant principals are critical to schools for several reasons, including their important work maintaining the norms and culture within the school, mediating conflicts that arise between the school stakeholders, as well as in preparing for future service as school principals. Indeed, more recent research appears to support the assistant principal's important role in development school community and leading school reform efforts (Bukoski *et al.*, 2015).

Existing research describes the work of assistant principals in primarily administrative terms. In one descriptive essay outlining the changing nature of the assistant principal's position, Panyako and Rorie (1987) noted the assistant principal

was historically assigned administrative duties such as supervision of buses, cafeterias, student lockers, sports events, fund raising, buildings and grounds, and student behavior management (i.e. discipline). Additionally, principals have assigned their assistant principals numerous clerical, custodial, and other "social" duties. These have "[…] constituted the major functions of the assistant principal" (p. 6). More recently, however, scholars have found that assistant principals have begun to assume primary responsibility for instructional leadership, teacher supervision, and school improvement (Barnett *et al.*, 2012; Bukoski *et al.*, 2015; Portin *et al.*, 2009). Indeed, each of these recent studies has pointed to a shifting conception of the historical responsibilities of assistant principals (Barnett *et al.*, 2012; Bukoski *et al.*, 2015; Cranston *et al.*, 2004; Portin *et al*, 2009; Sun, 2012). Given the changing responsibilities for assistant principals, new questions about the types of support they receive seem important to ask.

Research on coaching for educational leaders

Research focussed on leadership coaching may be an especially important area for further study given assistant principals' changing professional responsibilities. However, research focussed on leadership coaching support for assistant principals is quite thin. While there has been an expansion in recent empirical research that examines coaching in K-12 school settings generally (Fletcher, 2012; Killion, 2012; Lochmiller and Silver, 2010; Lochmiller, 2014a; Lovely, 2004; Pomphrey and Burley, 2012; Rhodes, 2012; Silver *et al.*, 2009; Woulfin, 2014), the research about coaching has predominately focussed on coaching for classroom teachers and to a lesser extent, school principals (Kennedy, 2005; Rhodes *et al.*, 2004; Rhodes, 2012). Scholars have focussed on novice principals who are new to their leadership roles and receive coaching as a form of professional induction (Lochmiller, 2014a; Lochmiller and Silver, 2010; Silver *et al.*, 2009). Within the US context, the literature about coaching for administrators is less developed. There appears to be much more research about coaching administrators in international settings (Barnett and O'Mahony, 2008; Rhodes, 2012; Rhodes and Fletcher, 2013). As Rhodes and Fletcher (2013) noted based on their review of previous research, "Coaching and mentoring have been increasingly seen as important mechanisms of professional development in schools and in development of school leadership in many countries" (p. 50).

Most of the research related to leadership coaching for school leaders provides programmatic descriptions (Lochmiller, 2014a, b; Lochmiller and Silver, 2010; Silver *et al.*, 2009), initial cost estimates for state-level programs (Lochmiller, 2014b), and numerous discussions of various coaching models (Bloom *et al.*, 2005; Costa and Garmston, 2002; Knight, 2008; Reiss, 2012, 2015). Of the models described within the literature, the blended coaching model (Bloom *et al.*, 2005) developed by the New Teacher Center is one of the most popular coaching models used with school administrators. The blended coaching model rests on a two-person coaching relationship wherein the coach engages in a series of probing questions, modeling behaviors, and reflective opportunities to facilitate the administrator's development of clear action steps in response to identified areas of personal and professional growth.

The existing research offers a few insights into the coaching practices that are most associated with the development and support of school administrators, particularly novice administrators. First and foremost, research affirms the importance of the establishment of confidentiality and trust to a successful coaching relationship (Fletcher, 2012). The coaching relationship provides a space for administrators to

express concerns, problems, challenges, or insecurities that they may not feel comfortable sharing with an administrative supervisor or other colleague (Du Toit, 2007). Second, coaching focusses on skill development and so it aligns with the unique needs of the school or school district and often relates to programmatic implementation or reform efforts (Hargreaves and Skelton, 2012). Finally, one-on-one conversations that include thoughtful questioning by the coach and opportunities for reflection and self-evaluation by the coachee are critical in that conversations create learning opportunities for the coachee as well as provide insights to the coach as to areas on which to focus further skill building (Du Toit, 2007; Fletcher, 2012). While this research has contributed to the field's understanding of coaching methods, more rigorous research pertaining to coaching outcomes are clearly needed, as are more detailed theoretical applications (Crow, 2012). In fact, our review found only one study that employed an experimental research design to assess the effect of coaching on leadership practice (Goff *et al.*, 2014). This appears to reflect other recent research, which highlights that coaching and mentoring may be beneficial to principals (Grissom and Harrington, 2010).

Theoretical framework

To inform our analysis of the data, we integrated two theoretical perspectives of micropolitics (Ball, 1987; Blase, 1998; Hargreaves and Skelton, 2012; Iannacone, 1991) and sensemaking (Spillane *et al.*, 2002; Weick, 1996). Micropolitical theory assumes conflict is ever-present in organizations and that assistant principals as newcomers to a school's administration are learning the unwritten rules for allocation power, resources, and responsibility (Marshall and Mitchell, 1991). This perspective requires that we acknowledge that coaching takes place within the context of the political system that already exists within a school (Hargreaves and Skelton, 2012). Indeed, Hargreaves and Skelton (2012) state the importance of coaches being aware of the power structures, both formal and informal, that exist in a school that may create challenges for the coaching process. For example, problems can arise when a coach becomes a tool for surveillance or given responsibility for programmatic compliance (Hargreaves and Skelton, 2012). School principals have a significant influence on the policies, programs, mandates, and practices within their schools (Matsumara and Wang, 2014). It follows then, that their political power, and therefore their influence on the coaching process, may be a significant factor influencing coaches' work.

Successful coaches are required to understand an organization's goals and navigate the space between these goals and a coachee's ability (understandings of the goals or development of skills) to achieve the goals (Du Toit, 2007). We view this as a sensemaking activity wherein the coach simultaneously reflects on their understanding of the political environment, the coachee's needs, and the coach's own actions, beliefs, and assumptions (Du Toit, 2007). To support this perspective theoretically, we employed sensemaking theory (Spillane *et al.*, 2002; Weick, 1996) to describe how the coaches recognized and responded to the conditions surrounding their work with assistant principals. This perspective assumes that coaching is fundamentally a cognitive activity within which the coach makes sense of the needs of the assistant principals they coach through the lens of their own prior experience. Thus, coaching is as much about identifying the needs of assistant principals using questioning strategies as it is about the coach working through his or her own assumptions, reservations, and opinions (Starbuck and Milliken, 1988).

Methods

Research setting

We completed this longitudinal qualitative case study (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2014) in a leadership coaching program housed in the College of Education at a private, mid-sized university in the western USA. In total, the program supported nearly 100 school administrators with leadership coaching support during its five-year history. The research presented within this study focusses on the program's operations across three academic years, beginning in 2009-2010 and concluding in 2011-2012. During this three-year period, the program embarked on a partnership with two school districts. The partnership resulted in the deployment of leadership coaches to support assistant principals working in secondary schools (i.e. schools serving students enrolled in seventh through 12th grade).

Research participants

As illustrated in Table I, this study includes a total of 22 program participants, including leadership coaches ($n = 9$), assistant principals ($n = 10$) working in secondary schools, and program staff ($n = 3$) who oversaw the coaches' training and ongoing support. While the program typically matched one coach with one administrator

Gender	Race	Age	Years in admin	Experience in education	Highest degree	University alumni
Assistant principals						
Female	White	47	0	8	Masters	No
Male	Black	44	2	17	Masters	No
Male	Hispanic	38	3	10	Masters	No
Female	Black	42	5	12	Masters	No
Female	White	35	2	11	Masters	No
Female	White	33	0	10	Masters	Yes
Female	White	42	0	6	Masters	Yes
Female	White	43	0	13	Masters	Yes
Female	White	34	0	2	Masters	Yes
Male	Black	52	9	26	Masters	No
Leadership coaches						
Male	White	68	29	34	Masters	No
Female	Black	69	28	32	Masters	No
Female	White	64	10	22	Masters	Yes
Female	White	63	17	28	Masters	No
Male	White	67	24	30	Masters	No
Female	White	66	18	a	Masters	No
Female	White	65	15	a	Masters	No
Male	Asian	66	a	a	Masters	No
Female	White	68	a	40	Masters	No
Program staff						
Female	White	64	a	a	Masters	No
Female	White	49	a	a	Masters	No
Male	White	64	44	a	Ph.D.	No

Table I. Research participants

Notes: Participants' age and experience calculated as of final year of program 2012. [a]Study participant did not provide data

(i.e. a coaching pair), in one instance a coach retained by the program supported two, different assistant principals. Hence, the differing number of coaches and assistant principals included in this study.

Data collection

Qualitative data collection began in fall 2009 and concluded in spring 2012. Data collection included semi-structured interviews with assistant principals, leadership coaches, and program staff. Throughout the same period, the first author collected program-related documents. Documents included coaching logs submitted at the conclusion of each coaching session and reflections submitted by coaches on a quarterly basis. In addition, electronic copies of feedback provided to the leadership coaches by program staff were collected using Microsoft Word documents with the tracked changes and commenting features enabled. We describe each of the data collection strategies in greater detail below.

Semi-structured participant interviews. Semi-structured interviews with assistant principals, leadership coaches, and program staff were conducted twice a year – once in the fall and again in the spring. In total, more than 95 individual interviews lasting approximately 60 minutes each were completed with the research participants. The number of interviews completed in each year of the study varied based on participant availability. In the first year of the study, the first author completed 44 interviews. In the second and third year of the study, the first author completed 30 and 21 interviews, respectively. A professional transcriptionist transcribed all of the interviews. For interviews with program staff, the interview protocols focussed on identifying similarities and differences in coaching practices, support provided by the program to assist coaches in their practice, and to document concerns raised by assistant principals related to the coaching support. Interviews with leadership coaches focussed specifically on the types of support provided to assistant principals, the issues or concerns that they were working with the assistant principal to address, and contextual issues that were unique to coaching an assistant principal. Finally, interviews with assistant principals included questions asking specifically about their working conditions and responsibilities, relationships with other members of the administrative team, and about the nature of the coaching support they received from the leadership coach.

Collection of program-related documents. In addition to the interviews conducted with program participants, the first author also collected program-related documents throughout the data collection period. Document collection was primarily electronic and involved the use of a Google Mail account. Program staff, leadership coaches, and assistant principals e-mailed electronic copies of coaching logs, coaching reflections, and other program-related documents to the Google Mail account throughout the duration of the data collection. This process enabled ongoing collection of the information and maintained an electronic repository of the information. In total, the Google Mail account collected 364 coaching logs, 103 coaching reflections, and 28 other program-related documents throughout the completion of the study. These documents provided a source of evidence with which to triangulate statements provided by program participants in interviews.

Data analysis

We completed a thematic data analysis using ATLAS.ti 7, a computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software package. Data analysis included four primary steps. First, we created an ATLAS.ti project file that contained copies of the interview

transcripts, coaching logs, coaching reflections, and other program-related documents. This file served as the electronic repository for the project. Second, we read each data source and noted passages within the data sources that related to the coaches' work with an assistant principal. We created "quotations" within ATLAS.ti to flag these passages of text for future analysis. At this stage, we did not assign analytically oriented codes to these passages but instead used descriptive codes (Saldaña, 2015) to note the substance of the passage. Such codes included single- or multi-word statements such as "AP challenge" or "coach role description." Third, we created memos within the ATLAS.ti environment to record our initial hunches or interpretations of the data. Memoing served as an opportunity to record our interpretations of the data as well as to document the development of initial themes. Fourth, we applied a second level of codes, which more specifically related to our research questions and reflected a higher level of inference about the meaning we assigned to the coded data. Thus, the codes at this stage related more specifically to the ways in which we perceived the coach made sense of the principal's influence on the assistant principal, and so drew upon sensemaking and micropolitical literature that formed the theoretical framework. In particular, the codes reflected: concepts presented in literature describing administrative control (Murphy *et al.*, 1987; Peterson, 1984); sensemaking (Weick, 1996); previous research about the roles and responsibilities of assistant principals (Glanz, 1994); previous research about effective coaching practices (Bloom *et al.*, 2005; Lochmiller, 2014a; Lochmiller and Silver, 2010; Rhodes, 2012); and research about the political aspects of leadership coaching and mentoring (Hargreaves and Skelton, 2012; Sun *et al.*, 2014). Table II presents a summary of our final coding scheme reflecting Level 1 and Level 2 codes that were applied ten or more times. Finally, we completed our analysis of the data by selecting key quotations and passages that were illustrative of the themes that we produced. We selected quotations and examples that were representative of the participants in the study.

Quotation stage	Level 1 codes	Level 2 codes
No codes applied	AP challenge	*Theme 1*
	AP professional goals	Sensemaking (coach)
	AP successes	Sensemaking (coachee)
	AP role description	Problem identification (coach)
	Coaching barriers	Political influence
	Coach challenge	Control examples
	Coach role description	Control strategies/tactics
	Coach success	*Theme 2*
	Example of coach response	Confidentiality
	Example of external influence	Instructional leadership
	Example of support	Instructional supervision
	Principal descriptions	Political influence
	Principal influence	*Theme 3*
	Principal role	AP duties and tasks
	Program goals/descriptions	Classroom observations
	School challenges	Instructional leadership
	School successes	Instructional supervision
		Teacher support

Notes: The above table represents a partial list of codes used in the completion of this qualitative analysis. Codes applied fewer than ten times have not been listed to preserve space

Table II.
Selected examples of level 1 and level 2 codes used in qualitative coding scheme

Findings

We produced three themes through our thematic analysis of the data to address a single research question:

RQ1. How do principals influence the support provided by leadership coaches to assistant principals who are members of their leadership team?

Our analysis indicates that leadership coaches work within a political context created by school principals. Principals influenced the coaching relationship by shaping the working conditions of the assistant principals within their schools, which included targeting specific skills that they felt the coaches should work with the assistant principal to improve, establishing reporting requirements for leadership coaches, and assigning or re-assigning assistant principals to new and different work responsibilities. As one coach observed, "principals set the school agenda, establish conditions, and define responsibilities […] this all impacts what assistant principals do in their schools and what I can do as their coach." This description highlights the extent to which the principal was a factor in shaping the coaches' work with the assistant principals. Indeed, across our interviews, we noted that coaches were acutely aware of the supervisory relationship between principal and assistant principal. This relationship conferred significant power to the principal over the assistant principal and to some extent the leadership coach. This power required coaches to make sense of the principal's influence and adjust their coaching practice, which we discuss in greater detail below:

Theme 1: making sense of the principal's political influence on coaching

Coaches indicated that the principal's influence over the coaching support grew more pronounced when the principal had expressed concerns about the assistant principal's job performance. This concern often prompted the principal to engage the coach in an attempt to influence the support provided and under what conditions. We found the principal's influence was manifest in several ways. For example, in the most direct manner, coaches indicated that some principals offered them specific critiques about the assistant principal's performance as an administrator. One coach recalled a conversation she had with the principal in which he described the assistant principal as "struggling to understand her work" and noted that her abilities as an administrator were much less developed than those of the other administrators on the administrative team. As the coach wrote in a written reflection, "having a coach is a double-edged sword for her. It's something she says she wants and values, but it's another obligation and makes her a target because she's seen as being less competent as a leader." Further, the coach wrote, as an assistant principal "it puts her in a position that looks different, less able than her other colleagues." In this example, the assistant principal was the newest and youngest member of the administrative team. The other assistant principals had more than nine years of experience in the school and previously taught there. The assistant principal was the first assistant principal hired from another school and so lacked relationships with both her administrative colleagues and teachers. As the coach wrote in a written reflection early in her work with the assistant principal, "I am not sure how to help her. The principal wants to know what I can do to help her, but in our conversations we often talk about her feeling like she is being unfairly judged compared with her colleagues." This statement highlights well the coach's efforts to make sense of the context within which the assistant principal was working. Another reflection provided further evidence of sensemaking.

The coach wrote that the "politics of the administrative team demand that I coach her differently." Her reference to "politics" referred to the level of control the principal attempted to exercise over the coaching support. As she wrote later in the same reflection, "I see how hard she is working […] but I also see that she is being limited by her principal and so I am having to adjust my approach with her. I am trying to empower her while also addressing the weaknesses that she has." As these comments illustrate, the coach was aware of the impact of the school principal on the assistant principals, the political nature of the assistant principal's work, and the influence that these factors had on their work as coaches.

Our data indicate that principals did not always influence coaches' work directly but certainly established a context for their work. For example, several coaches described how recent changes in the school administrative team seemed to interact with principal concerns about the assistant principal's performance. In one example, the principal had recently assigned the assistant principal to lead a school-wide professional learning community (PLC) and to take over supervisory responsibilities related to the English and Language Arts Department. As the coach described it, "The principal has been clear with me that he thinks her weaknesses are really in facilitating leadership discussions within the PLC and thinks we should spend time talking about these issues." When asked how the principal communicated this, the coach offered a description that highlights both the extent to which the principal sought to influence the coaching relationship and the extent to which the principal tried intervening directly to shape what the coach worked with the assistant principal about. As recounted by the coach:

> He e-mailed me […] before my first coaching meeting this year and asked me to meet with him before it. He told me he wanted to give me some advice about her needs. He said she was struggling this year with the new assignments and that he was seriously thinking about putting her on a professional growth plan. He wanted to know what I could do and what I could share so he could make his decision […] Well, as soon as I heard this, you know, I shut down because that's not how coaching works. We don't fix people for other people. I explained that to him and he said he understood. But he's kept at it. Asking me about our work together. He even asked me for copies of my coaching logs. It has been a very awkward situation, really. It's been a very difficult relationship to navigate.

A review of the coach's coaching logs indicated that much of her time was spent working with the assistant principal developing strategies for school-wide PLC meetings. Across the 18 coaching logs received during the academic year, we found that 16 of them referred in some way to the PLC. Thus, on one hand, the principal may have correctly identified an important professional learning topic for the assistant principal. On the other hand, the extent to which the principal continued to "check-in" about the coaching served as an ongoing source of tension for the coach. In one coaching reflection, she wrote:

> Today we discussed the school-wide PLC and what [coachee] needed to do facilitate a productive conversation. (Assistant principal) walked out of our session and the principal was there to ask me how it went. It happens almost every time now. He stops me before I leave and asks what we are working on. […] It's frustrating to me that he keeps checking in on our work together. It makes me feel uncomfortable. I feel like I'm looking around my shoulder when I am in her office.

The coach's description offers evidence about the extent to which the principal was seeking to influence and manage the coaching support. Certainly, the context required the coach to think differently about how she met with and supported her coachee.

Assistant principals provided further evidence about the ways in which the principals sought to influence the coaching support. Assistant principals often spent considerable time in our interviews describing their relationship with the school principal and how that relationship influenced their work with the coaches, created challenges within the broader administrative team, or shaped what they were most worried about in terms of their own evaluation. For the most part, assistant principals perceived that their principal was supportive of their work with the leadership coach. Yet, in two specific cases, the assistant principals offered comments that suggest that the principal's control of their work may have undermined their work with the leadership coach. One assistant principal, who was new to the administrative team, explained that his principal "established priorities for coaching support" and thus to a certain degree determined what the assistant principal worked on with the coach. As the assistant principal noted, "[…] my principal has been very directive with me about the things I need to work on this year with the leadership coach in order for me to be effective." Another assistant principal noted that his principal expected "to shape my learning goals for the year so it aligned with the team." The principal gave her coach a list of learning objectives or goals at the beginning of her coaching support. As the assistant principal recalled:

> My principal views me as his mentee. He has been very direct with the coach about the types of activities that he hopes we complete this year. His goal is that we are aligned with the team and that my work with the coach benefits the broader administrative team. […] He is a very hard principal to work with. He doubts my abilities in many ways and so he views this as his opportunity to try to strengthen what I can do. I've talked with my coach about this.

As the assistant principal's comments suggest, the principal's influence on the coaching relationship was far-reaching and created questions about the purpose of the support and its alignment with the assistant principal's professional learning goals. Further, his comments highlight the political nature of coaching by referring to the tensions that exists between the coach's role and the mentoring role that the principals attempted to assume.

Theme 2: establishing confidentiality within the context of principal control

The extent of a principal's control over the coaching support often complicated the process of establishing a confidential relationship between the coach and the assistant principal. This seemed particularly true when the principal tried to control the coaching relationship directly. Principals who actively sought to control the coaching support required coaches and assistant principals to define how their confidential relationship would work and what information from that relationship would be shared with the assistant principal's direct supervisor (i.e. their principal) and their administrative colleagues (i.e. other assistant principals). While coaches approached their work with the assumption that all matters discussed within the coaching sessions were confidential, in several of the schools the assistant principals and coaches both reported that such an arrangement left principals feeling "uneasy" or "uncertain" about having a member of the administrative team receiving coaching support when other members of the team were not included. Coaches recounted several exchanges with principals which included "trying to get details about our conversation." The program director also remarked that she had received e-mails from principals asking for summaries of the coaching sessions. As one assistant principal reflected, "It (the coaching) makes my principal nervous […] like the coach is going to tell me to do something he won't agree

with." The program director acknowledged this concern was not unique but rather a challenge for many of the coaches working with assistant principals. She noted that her advice to coaches was always to maintain the coachee's confidentiality, pointing out that, "We are in the school to work for the assistant principal who is receiving coaching support, its fine for a principal to ask how it's going but they need to understand that we will not share information." Yet maintaining this confidence often proved more challenging in practice. One assistant principal described their principal and other members of the administrative team as "[…] interested in my work with the coach because they think I am failing in my job." A few of the coaches expressed concerns that the principal was "looking for information to terminate."

Coaches clearly recognized the principals' interest as a serious threat to their work and often adjusted their practice by finding "safe ways" to report to the principals and other members of the administrative team about their coachees' progress. Consequently, coaches adopted a variety of strategies – ranging from meeting quarterly with the principal to inform her about their progress, attending administrative team meetings to become clear about school improvement priorities, and offering to meet one-on-one with the principal and assistant principal at the beginning of the school to establish a mutually agreed upon scope of work. One of the coaches explained that these conversations served as an opportunity to share broad thematic descriptions of the coaching sessions and never any private details. As one coach recounted, "I was asked by the principal early on in the first year to tell me everything we were discussing. He wanted to know what the concerns she had were and what she was saying that he could help her with." The coach recognized that sharing this information with the principal would violate the confidentiality afforded to her coachee:

> Coaching is a confidential relationship. So I had to develop a strategy to report on big topics that we discussed and I always let the coachee decide which topics I report back. So I tell the principal, "We worked on her instructional leadership today." I keep it vague. I would not even report this much, but the principal was pretty insistent. He is a very controlling and wants to be in the know. So we had to come up with this strategy.

The assistant principal offered support for this view, noting that her principal often "checked in with her about the coaching" and sought information about her concerns. As the assistant principal noted, "I get asked about my coaching support from my principal […] [he] is very interested and wants to know what I am discussing. It gets awkward at times because it makes me feel as though I need to share details which the coach tells me I do not." As these comments suggest, the work of coaching assistant principals often becomes muddied within the overlapping supervisory structures within which these leaders work. As their direct supervisors, principals are concerned about their junior colleagues and interested in maintaining cohesion among members of the administrative team. Yet, given the confidential nature of coaching, their concerns and interests may complicate the coaches' work.

Theme 3: assistant principals' administrative responsibilities as a political context

The assistant principal's administrative responsibilities as a member of the school leadership team appeared to become a political context for coaches, as well. Coaches had no formal authority over the school, the principal, or the assistant principal and thus were unable to modify responsibilities to allow the assistant principals more time to work on their professional learning goals or to assign them duties that would

support these goals. These conditions were largely set by the principal and were particularly challenging when the assistant principal spent most of their time working on administrative tasks. The program director noted that "assignment was one of the variables over which the program had little control and could do very little about." As she further explained, "successful coaching depends on the opportunity for the coachee to practice the skills they are working on, if you are not able to do this work or are never given the chance to do it, and then it becomes very hard to practice it." As these comments illustrate, the program director and leadership coaches both felt that there should be some congruence between the types of activities assigned to the assistant principal and the topics or skills which served as focus in the coaching support. Yet, in many cases, this was not happening as directly or intentionally as the coaches and assistant principals expected.

Frequent changes in the assistant principals' responsibilities made it difficult for coaches to spend considerable time working with them on their instructional leadership, particularly when these changes increased administrative responsibilities placed on the assistant principal. With assistant principals, the expectations placed on them as members of the larger administrative team and the responsibilities designated to them by the principal directly influenced the extent of their instructional leadership. As one coach reflected in an interview, "I think he's a rough form of an instructional leader […] He's not getting to show those skills though. The principal has him assigned to discipline and so he is not stepping into the instructional leadership role." In a related statement, the program director observed, "[…] assistant principals aren't being used as instructional leaders in some of the school sites and that complicates things for the coaches as they want to prioritize instructional leadership." Likewise, several assistant principals indicated that their desire to use coaching as a strategy to improve instructional leadership practice was not being fulfilled as the nature of their work was primarily administrative or student discipline related. As one assistant principal noted, "I spend 80 percent of my time on discipline and the other 20 percent is mostly unrelated to classrooms." Collectively, these statements suggest that coaching support tended to follow the assistant principal's current assignments and responsibilities which often meant that coaches spent little time working with the assistant principal on instructional leadership development as opposed to coaching the assistant principal through specific administrative tasks or procedures.

As an illustration, one of the leadership coaches who worked with a middle school assistant principal described how he spent considerable time helping the assistant principal develop skills conducting classroom observations only to find this work undermined by increasing administrative responsibilities. The coach noted that this was an area in which the assistant principal "had expressed an interest in becoming more effective at the beginning of the year." To this end, the coach used coaching sessions to model classroom observation techniques, demonstrate how to script lessons and record key comments from teachers and students, share previously written classroom observation notes with the assistant principal as samples, and also spent time with the assistant principal practicing how to have effective conservations with classroom teachers about poor performance. Despite a commitment from the school principal to allow the assistant principal time with the coach to go into classrooms, the coach observed that it became "harder and harder over the course of the year to get him [the assistant principal] into classrooms." The assistant principal reflected this perception, as well. During an interview, the assistant principal noted that "[…] I'd like to spend more time in classrooms. We just haven't been able to get into them as much

as I'd like to." As this example highlights, despite identifying instructional leadership as one of their learning goals for the academic year, the competing responsibilities assigned to the assistant principal by the principal influenced the extent to which the coach supported the assistant principal in achieving these goals.

Conclusion

This study explored how school principals influenced leadership coaches' work with assistant principals in secondary schools. Collectively, the findings indicate that principals' influence created political conditions that impacted the coaching relationship and required coaches to engage in sensemaking activities. More specifically, the presence of these political conditions prompted coaches to identify how principals controlled the assistant principal's work with the leadership coach. This control extended to both the conditions surrounding the coaches' work as well as the expectations for the assistant principals' work. Throughout the coaching process, coaches were thus required to manage the pressures generated by the principals on the confidential coaching relationship they cultivated with their coachees. A primary conclusion from this study, then, is that leadership coaches working with assistant principals not only engage in sensemaking as a strategy to understand the multi-faceted influence that school principals have on their coaching relationship, but also must remain adaptive in their coaching practice in response to changes in the school context and leadership team dynamics.

At a theoretical level, the findings from this study further establish potentially fruitful links between leadership coaching research and the theoretical perspectives of sensemaking and micropolitics. The findings from this study largely align with previous research about the influence that politics have on leadership coaching (Hargreaves and Skelton, 2012). Indeed, this research has highlighted the potential influence that political factors, such as power relationships, may have on leadership coaching. Past research indicates that political conditions likely moderate various supervisory relationships as well, including those between supervisors and their mentees (Sun *et al.*, 2014). It is thus not difficult to assume that political factors might also moderate the relationship between leadership coaches and assistant principals. The research also indicates that coaching might align conceptually with work on sensemaking (Spillane *et al.*, 2002; Weick, 1996). Such alignment offers new theoretical insights into the particular ways in which coaches undertake their work. This includes providing new evidence about the ways in which coaches identify and frame problems, articulate theories of action, and ultimately seek to support their coachees.

The findings from this study have significance for the work of leadership coaches and school administrators. With regard to leadership coaches, the findings indicate that coaching may involve far greater awareness of school-based political factors that may influence the extent to which coaching can occur. Indeed, these factors might wield both direct and indirect effects on the coaching support provided and thus, might bear significantly on the success of the coaching intervention. While recent studies have examined the efficacy of coaching (Goff *et al.*, 2014; Grissom and Harrington, 2010), they have not considered the particular contribution that school factors might have in shaping efficacy of coaching. For school administrators, the findings highlight how their actions shape the coaching experience and thus, provide further evidence of the moderating effects that administrators as supervisors have on their teachers as employees. Indeed, as the findings within this study highlight, the nature of the school principal's relationship with the assistant principal and the stability of duties assigned to the assistant principal significantly impact the coaching relationship.

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