A Closer Look: How Middle School Principals' Perceptions About Teacher Mindset Impact Instructional Coaching

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A CLOSER LOOK: HOW MIDDLE SCHOOL PRINCIPALS’ PERCEPTIONS ABOUT TEACHER MINDSET IMPACT INSTRUCTIONAL COACHING

by

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Table 2. Open Coding- Interview About Teacher with Perceived Fixed Mindset .......... 26
The purpose of this qualitative study was to examine how a middle school principal’s perception about a teacher’s mindset affects how he provides that teacher with coaching and feedback as an instructional leader. The research took an in-depth look at two middle school principals with experience as teacher evaluators and instructional leaders. The theoretical framework for this qualitative study was phenomenology. All data came from interviews conducted with middle school principals. Interviews were audio recorded, transcribed, and confirmed prior to individual and team coding and data analysis. The study was designed to shed light on how a middle school principal’s idea about whether a teacher has a growth or fixed mindset impacts the style and process of instructional coaching. The results of this study indicate that a principal’s belief about a teacher’s mindset has a direct impact on the differing ways the principal provides instructional leadership and coaching for the teacher. Results also indicate that the principal’s perception about the teacher affects the style of verbal and nonverbal communication as well as the way the principal feels about the process of providing instructional coaching. The discussion about these results, along with the recommended future research, will help educators to better understand the critical relationship between principal and teacher and therefore add a new layer to the conversation about instructional leadership.
CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

In today’s world of education, principals are responsible for consistently improving student achievement data. Simply being the manager of the school is no longer satisfactory. Instead, successful principals must also act as the instructional leader for all teachers, fostering a school culture where educators are continuously working together to improve their craft and therefore increase the level of student achievement. When the principal demonstrates both transformational leadership and instructional leadership, focusing on regular improvement of instructional pedagogy and effective teaching practices, improved student achievement results will follow (Marks & Printy, 2003).

Successful principals work to build positive relationships with teachers. This creates a happier working environment and establishes a productive level of professional, collegial trust. Once this trusting positive relationship is established, teaching and learning will improve within the school (Arneson, 2015). Even while recognizing the positive impact a principal can have on improving teaching and learning and therefore student achievement, principals can become frustrated with teachers they perceive to be negative and/or weak instructional practitioners (Myricks, 2009). This may cause principals to take their focus off instructional improvement with specific teachers.

Carol Dweck, renowned psychologist at Stanford University, is known for her research on mindset. Dweck’s widely accepted research deals with perceptions about whether intelligence is fixed or continuously developing. Dweck’s research supports the idea that intelligence is not fixed and this belief, known as having a growth mindset, can
lead to huge improvements that others with a fixed mindset are not often capable of achieving (Dweck, 2006).

As principals continue to be challenged with the role of serving as a school’s instructional leader and working to build positive, professional relationships with teachers, it is important to look at all dynamics of the principal-teacher relationship. This certainly includes principals’ perceptions about teachers and each teacher’s mindset, or their attitude about professional growth. In order to truly understand this coaching relationship, we must look at how a principal’s perception of a teacher influences how he coaches that teacher. This conversation could lead to important breakthroughs and continued innovation in the way principals successfully work with teachers as instructional leaders.

**Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to investigate how a middle school principal’s perception of a teacher’s mindset affects how he provides that teacher with coaching and feedback as an instructional leader. The research took an in-depth look at two middle school principals who have experience as an evaluator and instructional leader of teachers. The study was designed to shed light on how a middle school principal’s idea about whether a teacher has a growth or fixed mindset impacts the style and process of instructional coaching.

Dweck (2006) makes it clear that our capacity to learn and grow is shaped by our mindset and provides undeniable evidence that a growth mindset can be developed. Knowing this, it seems critical that we understand how a principal’s perception about a teacher’s mindset impacts the coaching relationship. Do principals work harder to positively impact teachers they perceive to have a growth or a fixed mindset? Do they
enjoy the challenge of working with some more than others? Are there times when working around, rather than coaching, a teacher with a fixed mindset takes place? Understanding the relationship between principals’ perceptions and how they coach teachers differently should enable us to begin recognizing possible biases that may negatively impact instructional coaching and open new dialog about providing impactful instructional coaching for all teachers.

**Research Question**

This study focused on the relationship between a principal and teachers, from the principal’s perspective. The interview process and the coding of those interviews focused on answer the following question. The research question was:

How does a principal’s preconceived idea about a teacher’s mindset influence how that teacher is coached by the principal?

**Definition of Terms**

**Achievement/Student Results**

Student achievement is made up of both growth and proficiency data. This often comes from a combination of regular formative assessments as well as higher stakes summative assessments. In most cases, increases in student achievement are thought to be a reflection of quality instructional practices.

**Observation**

This is the process of observing a teacher throughout a school year. This can include observation during meetings and collaboration sessions with other educators, but usually focuses on the principal formally and informally observing classroom instruction on a regular basis.
Feedback

This is information a principal provides to a teacher about elements of classroom practices. Principals can provide this information to teachers during detailed face-to-face goal setting meetings, formal or informal written observations, shorter conversations, or even emails about observed practices.

Goal Setting

This is a piece of the instructional coaching process. During goal setting meetings, principals work with teachers to reflect on areas needing improvement and then assist the teacher in setting obtainable professional goals for improving instructional practices and therefore student learning.

Instructional Coaching

Instructional Coaching is the process of observing a teacher during classroom instruction and then providing specific feedback. This includes reflecting on areas of strength and areas needing improvement. It also incorporates discussing formative data with the teacher in order to make data-driven curricular decisions. This process, which includes observation, reflection, and goal setting, is implemented to improve classroom instruction and therefore student achievement.

Mindset (Growth/Fixed)

The way in which a person views intelligence, as either a fixed trait or something continuously changing, is known as their mindset. People fall on a continuum, but for the most part are identified as having either a fixed or growth mindset (Dweck, 2006).
Professional Development

Opportunities to learn new, or refine already learned, instructional techniques are described as professional development. Often, these learning opportunities are made available to teachers by principals or district administrators. The purpose is to increase the teacher’s knowledge base and teaching skills in order to improve teaching and learning. Different types of professional development include things such as principal coaching, joining a professional learning community (PLC), attending workshops or conferences, participating in a book study, or even observing other successful teachers during classroom instruction.

Limitations of the Study

This study was qualitative in nature and data was collected through interviews with middle school principals. Therefore, the study relied heavily on the principals’ honest, reflective answers during the interview process. Opinions about quality instructional practices varied. Additionally, generalizing results for all principals and teachers may not be appropriate in all cases because this study looked closely at middle school principals, in one school district.

Summary

This research study was designed to look at how the principal’s perception of a teacher’s mindset affects how he approaches instructional coaching with that teacher. In other words, does a principal approach a teacher he perceives to have a growth mindset, about professional development and other growth opportunities, differently than he would a teacher he perceives to have a fixed mindset? Up to this point, this unique question has not been part of conversations as it relates to mindset theory or to instructional leadership. As more and more focus in schools moves toward the
improvement of student achievement and teaching practices, the principal is often tasked
with serving as the lead-learner within the school. The purpose of this study was to add a
new dimension to the instructional leadership conversation and therefore help start new
dialogue about how principals’ perceptions about teachers’ mindset can influence the
professional coaching relationship.
CHAPTER 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Teacher and Principal Relationships

It is increasingly important for principals to invest in relationship building with teachers. Establishing these positive professional relationships is the first step in instructional leadership. In fact, Fullan (2001) stressed the importance of principals building meaningful relationships with teachers to effectively and successfully lead their school.

Previous research about the principal-teacher relationship suggests that the leadership role of the principal should include fostering a supportive environment where the principal remains approachable to teachers. Teachers who feel trusted to use their professional judgment, collaborate with colleagues, and receive guidance from the principal have a higher sense of self-efficacy and generally more likely to remain in the profession. (Johnson & Birkeland, 2003).

Arneson (2015) writes about the different types of communication between principals and faculty, stating that “teachers and administrators who have a trusting working relationship will find that communication is easier and more productive” and this trust leads to improved dialogue, “much more likely to have a profound effect on teacher growth” (p. 36).

Developing and nurturing successful teacher-principal relationships can lead to a happier and more productive school climate. Richards (2003) found that positive teacher and principal relationships relate directly to satisfied teachers, a higher level of school morale, and teachers who are more focused on students’ needs. Knowing this, it would
make sense that all educational leaders remain focused on continuing to improve relationships with all teachers.

In a 2013 study, Krohn found that teachers emphasized the importance of having a strong relationship with their principal, or the individual doing the instructional coaching. This in-depth look at one specific middle school indicated that teachers desired a coaching structure resembling a safe and trusting partnership. In fact, “Establishing a partnership became influential in how teachers viewed being coached” (Krohn, 2013, p.106).

**Effective Instructional Coaching and Achievement Results**

The world of education has changed and the expected role of a successful principal has shifted. At one time, principals were expected to simply be managers. Now, principals are increasingly thought to be both the building manager as well as the instructional leader of the teaching staff they supervise. This role of instructional leader, usually tasked with improving student achievement, requires the principal to consider best practices in professional development, instructional coaching, and building trusting relationships with faculty members. Routman (2012) demonstrated that a school principal, who acts as a knowledgeable instructional coach, “can have a profound effect on teacher effectiveness and student learning (p. 59). However, this model of instructional coaching hinges on a certain level of candidness and professional trust. Routman (2012) also found that successful instructional coaching “requires unique talents and sensitivities by the coach and a willingness and openness by the teacher being coached. The winning combination is only possible where high trust and expert teaching go hand in hand” (p. 59). Others have expanded upon this idea of a trusting relationship
between teacher and principal and the resulting positive impact on student achievement. Gareis and Tschannen-Moran (2015) found that faculty trusting the principal was directly correlated with instructional leadership, school climate, and student achievement. Others have added to this idea about a positive working relationship between principal and teacher leading to increased student achievement. Zeinabadi (2014) found that positive interactions, or exchanges, between teachers and students led to positive outcomes in the form of student achievement. Principals who lead teachers in meaningful professional development will positively impact both teachers’ instructional effectiveness and student achievement. Kaster (2010) looked at teachers and principals across the state of Wisconsin and found that “providing job-embedded, meaningful, long-lasting professional development opportunities are a must for building leaders aspiring to build teachers’ instructional capacity and ultimately increase student learning” (p. 100). For that reason, it is imperative that principals provide teachers with job-embedded, appropriate professional development opportunities.

**Principal Directed Professional Development**

If principals can impact student achievement by providing quality feedback and professional development, one might ask which characteristics of principal feedback are typically most effective. According to Hattie & Timperley (2007), effective principal feedback should be descriptive, specific, timely, clear, and compare work to specific expectations or previously established criteria. However, no amount of feedback and professional growth can be successful if the principal fails to first establish a positive relationship with teachers. As others have stated, a back-and-forth collegial relationship is key in making any instructional coaching model successful. For that reason, it is
essential that principals work to build a healthy relationship with every teacher that “isn’t broken down into the separate roles of supervisor and employee, but instead involves joint work in the service of student learning” (Brookhart & Moss, 2015, p. 30).

Continuous improvement and professional development must be a priority for any successful school principal. Principal leadership is second, behind only quality instruction, as the factor most influential in affecting student achievement (Darling-Hammond et al., 2005). Methner (2013) looked closely at how principals work with teachers and how the quality of that working relationship impacts teachers’ attitudes about collaboration and professional development. Findings suggested that when working with middle school teachers specifically, principals who encourage faculty “to be reflective and to participate in dialogues that encourage self-analysis” will improve relationships with teachers and “increase teacher willingness to take risks and collaborate in change initiatives aimed at augmenting student growth outcomes” (p. 125).

**Self-Fulfilling Prophecy & Self-Efficacy**

It has long been thought that teachers are impacted by a self-fulfilling prophecy, relating both to their individual teaching ability as well as the future success of their students. Self-efficacy, or the judgement about one’s specific capabilities, can greatly influence desired outcomes. Pajares and Schunk (2001) found that people with high levels of self-efficacy are more often successful and will approach a challenge as an opportunity to master and learn something new, even working through setbacks and temporary failures. Norton (2013) studied successful secondary teachers in challenging schools. She looked at the teachers’ feelings about self-efficacy; their belief that, despite challenges, they could be successful in the profession. It was found that teachers
believed administrative support from their principal to be one of the most critical factors impacting their perceived level of self-efficacy.

If previous research indicates that educational leaders play a critical role in helping teachers avoid negative self-fulfilling prophecies and assist in building a sense of self-efficacy, what should principals be focusing on? Bakker (2009) found that both self-efficacy and job satisfaction are increased when leaders regularly interact in discussions about the employee’s role and function in the organization. A 2015 study by Beattie, Woodman, Fakehy, and Dempsey found that detailed feedback about performance led to increasingly positive future performance. In this way, regular employee engagement, in the form of professional dialogue between principal and teacher, as well as specific coaching and feedback from the principal should go a long way in improving teacher self-efficacy.

Mindset

Growth mindset and fixed mindset are terms often used in educational circles. However, many do not completely understand what it means to have a growth mindset, and instead think of it as simply being open-minded to the idea of learning new things. In reality, having a growth mindset about something means so much more.

In 2006, renowned Stanford University psychologist, Dr. Carol Dweck, published *Mindset: The New Psychology of Success*, which was the result of decades of research on achievement and success. That particular book prompted both national and international dialogue about the inextricable link between a person’s ability and their ultimate success. What was once thought of as raw talent has been turned upside down by shifting the focus to determine a person’s approach to a challenging or difficult situation. Someone with a growth mindset believes
that intelligence can be developed through effort and supports. Psychologists
describe it as incremental theory, a belief that intelligence is malleable
(Blackwell, Trzesniewski, & Dweck, 2007). The opposite of that is someone who
employs a fixed mindset. According to Dweck (2010), those who have a fixed
mindset believe that intelligence is a static trait: some students are smart and some
are not, and that’s that (Hope, Short, & Snyder, 2014).

Carol Dweck has spent more than 20 years researching students’ perceptions
about intelligence. Dweck has found that many students have a fixed mindset because
they believe intelligence is a fixed trait; they are born with a certain amount of
intelligence and are not able to change that. Meanwhile, other students have a growth
mindset. They believe that intelligence can be developed, meaning that the brain is
malleable. Students with a growth mindset typically believe that one can increase
intelligence or the ability to perform through education, hard work, and persistence
(Dweck, 2008). Students who demonstrate a fixed mindset are often more focused on
looking smart than on learning. In fact, previous research (Hong et al., 1999) found that
those with a fixed mindset will sacrifice the learning of crucial information needed for
future success to avoid admitting or displaying ignorance.

The majority of Dweck’s research has been backed up by other research,
including findings that the brain is malleable and has incredible growth potential
throughout life (Doidge, 2007) and that many of the most critical aspects of human
intelligence can be developed over time (Elliot & Dweck, 2005).
How Feedback Impacts Mindset

While most educators and parents know that praise can be powerful, they may not always recognize the importance of specific types of praise. Dweck (2006) found that praise centered around intelligence or correct outcomes led to a fixed mindset. She found that parents and teachers who praised children mostly based on positive outcomes and intelligence fostered an environment where children began to feel less valuable when they were not completely successful. These children began to perceive their level of intelligence as being fixed or permanent. Mueller & Dweck (1998) found that avoiding outcome-based praise, and instead praising based on effort and persistence led to a growth mindset. This nation-wide study found that students praised for effort showed more academic growth over time, stayed motivated longer during more challenging tasks, and worried less about how intelligent they appeared to others.

Stanford Professor of Psychology, Doctor Carol Dweck, has published research proving that students learn at a higher rate, enjoy being challenged more often, and ultimately experience more success when they are praised for their hard work or effort instead of being praised for successful outcomes or being “smart” (Dweck, 2006). She has demonstrated that when students believe that the brain is malleable and intelligence is not fixed, or a “genetic blessing from the sky,” they start to focus on the things they can control. Dweck’s research clearly demonstrates that educators and parents must work to praise students for hard work and persistence throughout the learning process. “People nearly always perform better if they focus on things they can control, such as their effort, rather than things they cannot” (Glenn, 2010, p.B6).
Summary

Research has repeatedly supported the idea that mindset education programs can develop an increased growth mindset in students and subsequently augment the level of student achievement. A 2007 study found that growth mindset programming and interventions led directly to consistent gains in student achievement, particularly for low achieving and at-risk students (Blackwell, et al., 2007). Others have found that growth mindset sessions delivered to college students increased content mastery and course grades (Paunesku et al., 2015).

While much of the mindset related research is associated with students, Dweck (2015) points out that to foster an environment where students have a growth mindset, it is equally important that teachers believe in professional growth for themselves and are praised or rewarded for their own growth by administrators. If teachers have fixed mindsets, they will likely be focused on low-performing students, feel threatened and defensive about setbacks, and blame students for any professional shortcomings. Contrarily, Dweck states that teachers can develop a growth mindset for themselves and their students when they “believe that their own skills can be developed” and “each student provides an opportunity for them to learn more about their craft” (p. 244).

Silbey (2016) offered some tips for instructional coaches (typically principals) wanting to develop teachers’ growth mindset. Instructional coaching should be done by providing teachers with constructive criticism. Principals should encourage teachers to examine smaller formative assessments and students’ daily progress rather than simply looking at summative testing data. Principals should engage in conversations that assist teachers in reflecting on their teaching and how they persisted during challenges in to help students learn.
Torff and Sessions (2009) looked at principals’ perceptions of ineffective teachers. They found that principals overwhelmingly believe that most ineffective teachers, regardless of grade level or subject area, struggle because of a lack of pedagogical knowledge (lesson-planning, lesson implementation, ability to interact with students, ability to establish rapport with students, and classroom-management skills) rather than a lack of content knowledge. It is essential for principals to work with all teachers to create an environment where educators regularly reflect critically on their classroom practices (McManus, 2007). Balyer (2012) found that most teachers feel effective principals can help them improve by motivating and respecting teachers, but do principals work to motivate and coach all teachers similarly? Myricks (2009) found that principals often grow frustrated with teachers they perceive to be marginal educators, resistant to change, or lacking passion. This causes principals to work toward documentation and punitive measures or attempt to move the teacher into a position with less influence on student achievement. However, none of the principals interviewed discussed working closely with weaker teachers to encourage goal setting, growth, or development. Todd Whitaker, Professor of Educational Leadership at Indiana State University, believes that principals sometimes struggle to treat teachers like they all have potential and therefore start to focus on improvement only for teachers who appear to be coachable. Whitaker believes that if principals would treat mediocre teachers like they have potential to be great, principals would see positive results (Drake, 2009).

The research discussed here indicates the importance of principals building positive relationships and acting as instructional coaches with teachers to increase student achievement. However, it also tells us that principals often become frustrated with
marginal teachers and approach them differently. For that reason, it makes sense to ask about principals’ perceptions of teachers’ mindset and capacity to become better teachers when coached. Looking at a principal’s perception of a teacher’s mindset and how that might impact instructional coaching is new to the mindset conversation, but others recently started to investigate somewhat similar ideas. Stenzel (2015) looked closely at how the mindset of a teacher impacts that educator’s attitude about being coached and developed, and recommended future research that would explore the relationship between the perceptions of educational leaders and the mindset of a teacher. When asked via email about the idea of investigating whether educational leaders shift their approach to instructional coaching based on their perception of a teacher’s mindset, Dr. Carol Dweck herself stated that this might be a gap in the area of mindset research (Dweck, C.S., personal communication, October 15, 2014).
CHAPTER 3. METHODOLOGY

Design Framework

The methodology used in this study was phenomenology. Patton (2002) describes phenomenology as a qualitative framework used to gain a deeper understanding of “how people experience some phenomenon- how they perceive it, describe it, feel about it, judge it, remember it, make sense of it, and talk about it with others” (p. 104). According to Patton, phenomenology aims to take an in-depth look at how people interpret and describe their own experiences and then make sense of them, with the eventual goal of obtaining a deeper understanding or meaning. Using phenomenological methods, it is possible for the researcher to interpret the experiences of a participant in such a way that allows for generalizations to be applied to larger populations, or a specific group of people who share similar experiences to the research participant (Patton, 2002). As we look closely at the principal-teacher relationship, phenomenology can help us ask “What is the meaning, structure, and essence of the lived experience of this phenomenon for this person or group of people?” (Patton, 2002, p. 104).

Researcher and Possible Bias

It is appropriate for me, as the researcher in this study, to recognize that I have my own professional background knowledge and experience as a school principal and have spent years coaching teachers to improve instructional practices. To prepare for this study, I looked closely at previous research, planned my own study, and discussed the role of the principal as instructional coach with two colleagues working on similar studies at different levels of public education. It was advantageous that principals in this school district recently took part in a professional development session on Dweck’s mindset
research. This session gave all possible participants a baseline understanding about the existing body of mindset research. I requested that principals interested in participating volunteer confidentially by replying to an email from me. Throughout the project, I recorded, sorted, and analyzed data and then moved forward with interpretation. Because I have a large amount of background knowledge in principal-teacher relationships and instructional coaching, I recognized that there is the potential for me to bring personal bias into the study. I believed that principals should model being growth minded learners for their teachers. It is my opinion that great principals find ways to coach teachers and improve instructional practices, regardless of the principal’s perception of teachers’ mindsets. Great principals find ways to motivate all teachers to grow professionally at a pace that is appropriately challenging and therefore motivating. Thinking about my individual philosophy on instructional coaching allowed me to keep personal bias under control so as not to project my own beliefs into any part of the qualitative research process. I kept a journal and made notes about my personal thoughts prior to and after interviews. I expressed my opinions about the interview and the principal participants. This was done by design to aide me in recognizing my own personal thoughts and beliefs, and then I kept them separate from the data being collected. In addition, two other colleagues and researchers periodically reviewed my notes and coding to assist me in accounting for any possible personal bias about these principal participants as instructional leaders.

Participants

To accomplish the goal of this dissertation, participants willing to honestly describe thoughts and experiences were necessary. Principal participants had a baseline knowledge about mindset research as they took part in a mini-professional development
session about Carol Dweck’s mindset research (2016-17 school year) prior to volunteering to take part in the study. The background knowledge provided during the earlier mindset session enabled the participating principals to make judgements about the teachers they work with, determining specific teachers perceived to possess a growth or a fixed mindset. The participants were principals at a large middle school in a school district with over 10,000 students. These participants have observed and evaluated educators teaching a variety of subjects in grades 6-8. Participants have been observing, evaluating, and coaching teachers for multiple years. Prior to serving in their current role, these participants spent numerous years working in secondary public education as teachers, and athletic or academic coaches. For this research, participants (middle school principals) were purposefully selected from the group of volunteers based on experience and gender, selecting the female and the male participant with the most experience observing, evaluating, and coaching teachers.

**Mindset Professional Development Session**

Two other researchers doing similar work, but at different levels of public education, worked with me to develop a mini professional development session on Carol Dweck’s mindset research. The three of us worked together to present the information to all principals, had some discussion, and answered their questions about the existing research. This session took place during the 2016-17 school year and lasted approximately one hour. The purpose of this professional development was to provide the principals with a baseline of knowledge about the existing mindset research and get them to begin thinking about how they consciously or subconsciously perceive teachers in their school. This session served as professional development for the school district’s administrative team and was arranged prior to the start of this research, however it also
set the stage for asking for participant volunteers and the beginning of the interview process.

**Interview Protocol**

All principals in this school district were provided with professional development on the existing Carol Dweck mindset research prior to a request being sent seeking voluntary participants. After participants were established, a meeting was scheduled to remind participants about the mindset research they learned about during previous professional development and to discuss the difference between a teacher perceived as a struggling educator and one perceived to possess a fixed mindset. The researchers explained the process of participants identifying which teachers are believed to have a growth or a fixed mindset. Participating middle school principals were asked to think of two specific teachers they perceive to be complete opposites on the mindset continuum, one they view as having a growth mindset and one they believe most often demonstrates a fixed mindset. The participants kept a private list of these teachers they intended to discuss during the upcoming interviews. In this way, I had no knowledge as to the identity of the teachers represented, or later discussed during interviews. This made it possible for the participating principals to identify two teachers we focused on during the interview sessions, one with a perceived growth mindset and one with a perceived fixed mindset.

I worked with two colleagues doing similar research (at different educational levels) to design the interview questions. With the advice of a dissertation committee advisor, we developed five interview questions that kept the conversation focused, but questions that were not too confining (questions found in Appendix D). The interview protocol involved sharing the predetermined interview topics, but not the specific
questions, with the participants. The decision not to share exact interview questions with
the participants prior to the interviews was an effort to obtain more honest, less
calculated, responses from participants and was agreed upon by the dissertation
committee. Participants were informed that I would likely ask additional probing
questions to obtain more specific details, based on the principals’ answers to my
predetermined questions. I made sure that principals knew that any additional questions
would remain focused on the idea of instructional coaching and that we would only focus
on the two teachers previously determined. The principal participants were informed that
they could stop the interview at any point and/or could refrain from answering any
question(s) that made them uncomfortable. The interviews were conducted in the
principal’s office and recorded. During the interview, I took anecdotal notes about things
like facial expressions and body language that would not show up in the interview
transcription. The audio recording of the interview made it possible to create a very
precise transcription of the interview and then begin the process of data analyzation.
Throughout the interview process the participating principals were encouraged to share
experiences and thoughts. They were asked about their experiences and day-to-day
actions, giving me a glimpse into their beliefs about providing instructional coaching for
two teachers they perceive in very different ways. This phenomenological approach
allowed us to look closely at the principals’ lived experiences and how those experiences
shaped their view, actions, and possibly the view of other educational leaders in similar
circumstances.
Data Analysis

Prior to data analysis, I sent an email to participants that included the transcription of everything said during the interview(s). I asked the participants to review and approve the transcriptions. I completed both the collection and analysis of data. Two other researchers were involved in reviewing the coding of the transcribed interviews and therefore assisted me in avoiding researcher bias. A retired professor from Purdue University who specializes in qualitative research was also consulted about the coding process. Open coding was performed to look at the very specific details of the data and develop some initial categories. Knowing these categories enabled me to develop codes and label themes that emerged during the interviews. This selective coding enabled me to group ideas together under a specific coding label. As data were analyzed, new themes were either be placed in already established codes or new codes were created. After data analysis was complete, I arranged an in-person meeting with participants to review the coding. This additional member check served as an added layer of verification and therefore increased validity.

Summary

This study, completed through the framework of phenomenology, was designed to look closely at the experiences of two middle school administrators and how they act as instructional coaches to two specific teachers they perceive in very different ways. The beliefs and lived experiences of the participating principals were the driving factors in the data that were collected and the conclusions of the analysis. Data were analyzed using open coding and every effort was made to account for and control personal bias.
CHAPTER 4. RESULTS

This study was conducted in the spring of 2017. Two middle school principals were interviewed in their office at a time that was convenient for them. Both participant number one and participant number two oversee a middle school with 800-1,000 students and act as the primary instructional coach and observer of teachers within the school. The interviews were recorded using an audio device and the both principals were assured that they would only be referred to as participant one or participant two to protect their identity. In addition, participants were asked to maintain the confidentiality of the specific teachers discussed during the interview process and names were never mentioned nor recorded. Within this format, participants were open and willing to share information about the professional relationship and instructional coaching they provide for two teachers they perceive in very different ways.

Qualitative Analysis

Each participant was provided with a mini professional development session that served as a refresher in Carol Dweck’s Mindset research (Appendix C) prior to taking part in the interview process. This helped establish a common understanding of the growth and fixed mindset continuum. Before the scheduling of interview sessions, the voluntary participants were asked to consider two teachers they have worked with while acting as an instructional coach during the appraisal process. These were to be teachers whom they perceive to be on opposite ends of the mindset continuum, one possessing a growth mindset and one a fixed mindset. The topic and the protocol of the impending interviews were shared with participants, but the specific questions were not shared in an attempt to elicit honest and unprepared answers as well as body language during the
interview process. During the interviews, notes were taken about participants’ observable body language and audio was recorded. After the interviews, the audio was transcribed and then sent to each participant via email for approval. To reduce possible bias, participants replied that the transcription was accurate prior to any analysis taking place. I then read through the transcriptions multiple times before I began the process of open coding.

**Coding Participant Interviews**

Each participant responded to all interview questions and confirmed the accuracy of the transcriptions before I began coding and analysis. The coding of the transcripts as well as my notes taken during the interview sessions allowed for common themes, ideas, and even some phrases to emerge in the analysis. The common themes were grouped into eleven bins and then transcripts were shared with two other colleagues doing similar research at different academic levels. Team coding then took place, adding yet another level of validity to the data analysis. The following tables show common elements found during open coding and were pulled from participants’ answers to each of the interview questions, exact words taken directly from the transcripts. The last column is taken from my notes about the participants’ nonverbals during each response. The two tables show the participants’ common highlights, similar answers, and nonverbals when the interviews focused on the teacher with perceived growth and fixed mindsets respectively.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Participant 1</th>
<th>Participant 2</th>
<th>Nonverbals</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>How do you set goals with this teacher?</td>
<td>have conversation and set one or two goals, because I know that they are trying to get better themselves</td>
<td>I back them up and then sit and have another discussion, some open dialogue and conversation, to see where we go next</td>
<td>P1: Leaning forward, engaged</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>P2: Leaning forward, slow hand gestures while smiling</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How do you use data in setting goals with this specific teacher?</td>
<td>want me to come in more to see what they are doing just because they love feedback…. they crave that more than a teacher with a fixed mindset</td>
<td>We find that letting a teacher go with a student opens up opportunities</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>How do you feel about the process of evaluating this teacher?</td>
<td>I feel fantastic. These are the easiest evaluations because the teacher is always open to constructive feedback…. start my conversations with whatever we are focusing on, what the teacher wants to improve upon, in terms of their instruction. It is then easier to give feedback and be received</td>
<td>Excitement. Growth. A sense of adventure. I feel like we really become strong colleagues because we speak another language that other people don’t understand yet. It is exciting</td>
<td>P1: laughter and smiles when saying “fantastic”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>P2: Smiling with excitement and multiple slow, soft hand gestures</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How do you coach this teacher to help him or her improve in their craft?</td>
<td>We have dialogue…I ask them a lot of times, what do you want to get better at</td>
<td>Carefully, I am saying that because I don’t way to get in their way</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>How does this teacher respond to your coaching?</td>
<td>They always respond with a positive attitude. They are always willing to listen and they are not quick to defend themselves, even in situations where there</td>
<td>Excitedly. I feel like this person often stops by my office, especially at the end of the day or sometimes really early in the day or will email me</td>
<td>P1: smiling</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>P2: smiling, leaning forward, talks enthusiastically</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
might be an area where we are trying to improve upon something that has happened...and you are in support of them when they continually want to share with you or ask questions

What do you do when this teacher’s response is other than what you anticipated?

It’s never happened. Not very often, if ever...I can’t think about any concrete examples if we are talking about instruction and coaching someone with a growth mindset this person-really the sky is the limit, but there were some behavioral issues...Through conversation, it was like, you are totally right and I’ve never thought about it like that...Let’s figure this out, together

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Nonverbals</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>P1: Slow, stumbling response</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P2: Slow answer, requiring thought, soft hand gestures</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2
Open Coding
Interview About Teacher with Perceived Fixed Mindset

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Participant 1</th>
<th>Participant 2</th>
<th>Nonverbals</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>How do you set goals with this teacher?</td>
<td>it is harder for them to see where their shortcomings might be and so with them when we are working on goal setting I have to be careful in making suggestions because I need to make sure that I have data to support the goal setting process with that teacher. When I am working with someone that is growth mindset, it can be an open-ended question like what do you want to get better at with this teacher I have to be more direct and I use a lot of strategies to help them see what students’ capacities are and look at places outside of their content. And I think just sharing the excitement you get when students are successful instead of just being so negative about the fact that they still don’t know their basics yet.</td>
<td></td>
<td>P1: leaning back, slow to answer/calculated response</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>P2: laughs, pauses, eye roll, pointed quick hand gestures</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How do you use data in setting goals with this specific teacher?</td>
<td>it is better to have regular data that we get throughout a school year to help guide the goal setting</td>
<td>it is hard for that person...I still like SRI data here. I think for them to see what some students are</td>
<td>P1: leaning back, then leaning forward, fidgeting with papers on the desk</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Process with that particular teacher… Once you have it, let’s look at that together and see, what are we looking at here… with this teacher I have them work with another staff member in a PLC and when they look at their data together it can be eye opening</td>
<td>really capable of doing. And that we are still holding them back in that respect. When they are able to comprehend and yet the assignment you are asking them to do is very rudimentary because I notice that this teacher does not stretch kids</td>
<td>P2: Thoughtful pause before carefully answering, very calculated</td>
<td></td>
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<td>---</td>
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<tr>
<td>How do you feel about the process of evaluating this teacher?</td>
<td>It is always more challenging because when I think about always trying to give more positive feedback than negative, trying to keep it at a three or four to one ratio of feedback, it is harder to find positive feedback sometimes… I probably don’t always give as much positive feedback as I should because I feel like I need to be more direct in terms of what my expectations are and what we are trying to accomplish. With a teacher with a fixed mindset, they may not be accelerating as fast as what they should be in terms of what they are doing with kids.</td>
<td>P1: laughs while repeating the question, decreased energy in voice, more direct tone</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>It is not as happy. Um, I really feel like I’ve had some people that have had this mindset. I tried to encourage them and move them forward but this person I am thinking of has not had a whole lot of change… I see it as being within a very safe net. Opportunities they are giving to students are very safe and very controlled so I try to be a cheerleader</td>
<td>P2: laughs before answering, then pointed and direct tone of voice</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How do you coach this teacher to help him or her improve in their craft?</td>
<td>Very scripted. If there is a glaring issue, and it would have to be grounded in data, we have to look at… I’m more direct depending on where that</td>
<td>I try to get them to really research and read. I try to share information with them and sometimes they don’t want to go there with that and then if they have a</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>P1: leans back before answering, then leans back forward and fidgets with paper on the desk while answering</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| How does this teacher respond to your coaching? | sometimes there is a defensive response, like you are questioning the way I’m doing things and I’ve been doing this a long time. I always come back to that we are trying to get better, reviewing data, and not always having excuses | Guardedly. I think they want to try something different but they see it as a lot of work and it gets very messy when you start working… So I think encouraging them and mentoring, or trying to pair them with someone that can mentor them in a different way | P1: Adjusting papers on desk, gets pointed while talking using “data”  
| How does this teacher respond to your coaching? | sometimes there is a defensive response, like you are questioning the way I’m doing things and I’ve been doing this a long time. I always come back to that we are trying to get better, reviewing data, and not always having excuses | Guardedly. I think they want to try something different but they see it as a lot of work and it gets very messy when you start working… So I think encouraging them and mentoring, or trying to pair them with someone that can mentor them in a different way | P1: Adjusting papers on desk, gets pointed while talking using “data”  
| What do you do when this teacher’s response is other than what you anticipated? | with this particular person when I get that negative reaction I can usually tell early on that this is not going to be an opportunity to get anything done…if we have a big assessment coming up really soon, I may change my tone and be pretty direct… timing dictates the directive | I’m pretty direct…it’s just a really mundane thing…I would say I’m pretty direct. I always say- I’m there to support…but when I’m disappointed with them not really expanding or taking on another level of the curriculum and haven’t enhanced their students’ experiences, it’s disappointing | P1: direct tone, leaning forward, sharp hand gestures while talking about being “direct”  
| What do you do when this teacher’s response is other than what you anticipated? | with this particular person when I get that negative reaction I can usually tell early on that this is not going to be an opportunity to get anything done…if we have a big assessment coming up really soon, I may change my tone and be pretty direct… timing dictates the directive | I’m pretty direct…it’s just a really mundane thing…I would say I’m pretty direct. I always say- I’m there to support…but when I’m disappointed with them not really expanding or taking on another level of the curriculum and haven’t enhanced their students’ experiences, it’s disappointing | P1: direct tone, leaning forward, sharp hand gestures while talking about being “direct”  

P2: Quick reply of “guardedly” then stops to think before providing the rest of the answer, serious face  

P2: raises eyebrow when stating “I’m pretty direct” quick, serious face, sharp hand gestures
Themes

After personally recording and coding all transcripts, and the additional confirmation provided as a result of team coding, some clear themes emerged in this research. Some themes were found within participants’ answers to a single question, while other themes were found across questions throughout the interview process. The themes that follow are discussed in order of their impact as determined by the researcher based on the frequency and emphasis the participants placed on the ideas. Direct quotes from the transcripts are used to support the emerging themes in this qualitative phenomenological study.

Communication Style and Dialogue

Principals communicate differently with each teacher based on how they perceive the teacher. As the main evaluator of teachers, the principal must act as an instructional coach and work with teachers to consistently improve instructional practices. However, the style of communication and the type of dialogue, as related to instructional coaching, varies greatly depending on whether the principal believes the teacher has a growth or a fixed mindset. When the principal perceives the teacher to have a growth mindset, he is conversational, leads with questions, and trusts the teacher’s ideas about areas needing focus. He allows the conversation about instructional practices to be reflective and teacher centered. Inversely, when the principal believes that the teacher has a fixed mindset, the style of communication becomes more focused on student outcomes and achievement data. The principal is more direct, less collaborative, and often attempts to narrow the focus, looking at specific student outcomes and data as goals for the teacher. The following commentary provides a few examples in the differences as related to
principals’ communication and coaching style when working with teachers they perceive differently.

Participant 1:

When I’m working with a teacher with a growth mindset, to have conversation and set one or two goals, because I know that they are trying to get better themselves. I ask them what they want to improve upon in terms of their instruction. They are open to ideas and conversation, thinking about trying new things. I think the teacher with a fixed mindset, it is harder for them to see where their shortcomings might be and so with them when we are working on goal setting I have to be careful in making suggestions because I need to make sure that I have data to support the goal setting process with that teacher. When I am working with someone that is growth mindset, it can be an open-ended question like what do you want to get better at.

Participant 2:

I start by listening first because this person (growth mindset) does see students in a different way, their capacity in a different way. I maybe contribute or make suggestions but try to stay out of their way…I back them up and then sit and have another discussion, some open dialogue and conversation, to see where we go next. Well with this teacher (fixed mindset) I have to be more direct and I use a lot of strategies to help them see what students’ capacities are… I would say I’m pretty direct.

Emotion

Principals have very different emotional responses when reflecting on the process of instructional coaching with teachers they perceive to have a growth or a fixed mindset.
The idea of working with a teacher thought to possess a growth mindset is exciting and can seem rewarding. However, providing leadership for a teacher believed to have a fixed mindset can feel disappointing and discouraging. The participants shared these thoughts in the interview sessions.

Participant 1:
I feel fantastic (about working with a teacher with a growth mindset). These are the easiest evaluations. (When asked about the teacher with a fixed mindset) I would definitely say that I’m not always as excited.

Participant 2:
Excitement, growth. It (working with a teacher with a growth mindset) makes me believe that maybe public education can do it after all. A sense of adventure. I feel like we really become strong colleagues….It brings growth for me…It is exciting.

It is not as happy (working with a teacher with a fixed mindset). I tried to encourage them and move them forward but this person I am thinking of has not had a whole lot of change… it’s disappointing.

Body Language and Nonverbal Communication

The idea that I would notice a difference in body language and nonverbal communication during the interview sessions was something that occurred to me, but I never anticipated it would be such a drastic difference. As displayed in the figures in this chapter, the nonverbal communication was positive, upbeat, and excited when talking about teachers who were thought to possess a growth mindset. However, the body language and nonverbal communication became negative, rigid, and direct when discussing teachers believed to have a fixed mindset. When talking about these teachers with a fixed mindset, participants appeared to be cautious and somewhat calculated while
selecting their words, often pausing before answering. The drastically different nonverbal communication that participants demonstrated during the interview sessions aligned with the emotions participants described when talking about the differences in these two types of teachers.

**Coaching Preparation and Predetermined Responses**

As part of the process of instructional coaching, principals prepare for conversations with teachers in different ways. While doing this research, I found that principals go into a coaching meeting with a teacher they perceive to have a growth mindset with a less structured agenda, seemingly open to conversation that is teacher-centered. However, principals spend significantly more time preparing to meet with teachers they believe have a fixed mindset, gathering student achievement data and sometimes artifacts, to build their case as they anticipate conflict with the teacher. Additionally, principals often predetermine teacher actions, reactions, and responses based on perceived mindset. These predetermined responses include the idea that teachers with a growth mindset will be invested in ongoing improvement and will desire feedback from the principal. Meanwhile, teachers with a fixed mindset will see very little value in the instructional coaching process and shy away from feedback and/or professional risk taking, feeling judged in negative way.

Participant 1:

Anyone with a growth mindset kind of understands the overall vision. A teacher with a growth mindset will want me to come in more to see what they are doing just because they love feedback… they crave that more than a teacher with a fixed mindset. We have dialogue, I ask them a lot of times, what do you want to get better at…they are not feeling like I am judging them as their administrator. They
may have always had the same kind of conversation…they are open to ideas and conversation, thinking about trying new things. I have to be careful in making suggestions (to teachers with a fixed mindset) because I need to make sure that I have data to support the goal setting process with that teacher….It’s different, when I am working with someone that is growth mindset, it can be an open-ended question. I’ve been in the room before and I’m approaching it with the same mindset…but maybe my expectations aren’t as high going in. Knowing past experiences and what I have seen, sometimes I don’t feel as excited as I would with a growth mindset teacher’s classroom. When I get that negative reaction, I can usually tell early on that this is not going to be an opportunity to get anything done and be productive… it (the follow up conversation) would have to be grounded in data.

Participant 2:

I don’t way to get in their (teacher with a growth mindset) way….we all tend to have our mindset framework and I want them to help me think outside the box and not put my limitations on them. (When working with a teacher with a fixed mindset) I still like SRI data here. I think for them to see what some students are really capable of doing…and that we are still holding them back in that respect. I tried to encourage…and move them forward but this person I am thinking of has not had a whole lot of change since I’ve been working with them. I see it as being within a very safe net. Opportunities they are giving to students are very safe and very controlled.

**Teacher Response to Feedback**
Principals must provide teachers with constructive feedback as part of the instructional coaching process. The response to that feedback varies greatly. Those with a perceived growth mindset respond positively as they desire communication with the principal and seek out the feedback necessary to continue growing as a professional. The same cannot be said of teachers who are believed to have a fixed mindset. They feel like they are being judged and often become very defensive and guarded. These teachers sometimes avoid feedback that might push them outside their current reality.

Participant 1:

This teacher (with a growth mindset) always responds with a positive attitude. They are always willing to listen and not quick to defend themselves…. not feeling like I am judging them as their administrator. When we are talking about instruction and coaching someone with a growth mindset, I’ve never had someone not be open to feedback. They may have always had the same kind of conversation me, they are open to ideas and conversation, thinking about trying new things or doing things differently. (When working with the teacher with a fixed mindset) Sometimes there is a defensive response, like you are questioning the way I’m doing things.

Participant 2:

I feel like this person (teacher with a growth mindset) often stops by my office…or will email me something that has happened in the classroom…so they do take more of your time, but it is a sign that you are having success in your communication and you are in support of them when they continually want to share…so it is fun. That is why I am still doing this. (The teacher with a
perceived fixed mindset) Reacts to feedback guardedly. I think they want to try something different, but they see it as a lot of work and it gets very messy.

**Praise and Encouragement**

Principals attempt to remain positive with all teachers, regardless of the situation. However, principals often find it necessary to provide teachers who are believed to have a fixed mindset with extra praise and encouragement, regularly going out of their way to see that these teachers feel like a valued member of the staff. At times, this praise is distributed to teachers in hopes that they will then be more receptive to feedback and constructive criticism.

Participant 1:

(When working with the teacher with a fixed mindset) I’m always trying to give more positive feedback than negative, trying to keep it at a three or four to one ratio… trying to keep a positive relationship with teachers you’ve got to balance.

Participant 2:

(When working with the teacher with a fixed mindset) I think just sharing the excitement you get when students are successful instead of just being so negative… and giving them pats on the back when they are doing something, taking risks, it helps. I try to be a cheerleader.

**Purposeful Pairing**

Principals attempt a variety of techniques and approaches to assist in the growth of teachers they perceive to have a fixed mindset. One of these techniques is the idea of purposeful pairing. This is when a principal encourages collaboration between a teacher he perceives to have a fixed mindset and a teacher who is believed to have a growth mindset. This is often done in hopes that the teacher with a fixed mindset will grow
professionally as a direct result of collaborating with the other teacher who is perceived differently.

Participant 1:

With this teacher (believed fixed mindset) I have them work with another staff member and when they look at their data together it can be eye opening…and they are like, how did you teach that, or what did you do differently. When they are with their peers and their PLC and they are looking at assessment data, that sets the tone for a different conversation about instructional techniques.

Participant 2:

I think encouraging them (teacher with believed fixed mindset) and mentoring, or trying to pair them with someone that can mentor them in a different way…having conversations or asking them to sometimes be with a new teacher in a small group.

Summary

After the interview sessions, the open coding of those transcripts (both individual and team coding), and the analysis of the transcripts and the researcher’s notes, this qualitative study helps us better understand the unique relationship between principal and teacher. As with any phenomenological study, the participants, in this case middle school principals, were interviewed and spoke about their own lived experiences. The mini professional development session, based on research done by Dr. Carol Dweck, gave the researcher and the participants a common understanding and language for categorizing teachers as having either a growth or a fixed mindset. The ability to understand this difference, in how principals perceived two teachers in very different ways, allowed the open, honest dialogue that took place during the interview sessions to help us understand
how a principal’s preconceived idea about a teacher’s mindset influences how that teacher is coached by the principal. After reading large amounts of previously completed research, conducting the interviews, transcribing all audio files, followed by the coding and analysis of the data, seven themes emerged. The themes are as follows, listed in order of their impact: communication style and dialogue, emotion, body language and nonverbal communication, coaching preparation and predetermined responses, teacher response to feedback, praise and encouragement, and purposeful pairing. Finally, after further analysis of these themes, three assertions were developed. These assertions are as follows:

1. The principal’s beliefs about a teacher’s mindset have an impact on the differing ways a principal provides instructional leadership and coaching. These differences include how the principal prepares for instructional coaching meetings, the type and frequency of praise that is given, the expected and often predetermined teacher responses, and the type of recommended professional development.

2. The principal’s beliefs about a teacher’s mindset have a substantial impact on the way in which the principal communicates with the teacher. The varying style of communication, based on the principal’s perception about a teacher’s mindset, includes contrasting types of both verbal and nonverbal communication.

3. The principal’s beliefs about a teacher’s mindset are directly tied to the emotion generated when the principal reflects on the process of instructional coaching with that specific teacher.
These assertions were all supported by previous research and the data gathered and analyzed in this study. Further discussion about these assertions, along with recommendations for future research, will be discussed in the subsequent chapter.
CHAPTER 5. DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This chapter focuses on the implications of this phenomenological study, including the examination of the original research question and recommendations for future research that would continue adding to this conversation about the impact a principal’s perception has on the professional working relationship with a teacher.

Overview

This qualitative research looked closely at how middle school principals work with teachers whom they perceive in very different ways. Mindset, the growth versus fixed continuum, was used to assist in providing a common baseline language that the researcher and participants could utilize to identify teachers thought to be quite different by the participating principals. The participants brought their own perspective, based on their own life experiences, into the study and every effort was made to account for any possible bias. The research question guided the development of interview questions, all designed to look at how the principal’s perception of a teacher’s mindset affects how he approaches instructional coaching with that teacher. To date, this topic has not been part of conversations related to mindset theory or to instructional leadership. Understanding how perception and human nature impact how a principal coaches teachers is critical as more and more focus in schools moves toward the improvement of student achievement and teaching practices. The results of this study should add a new dimension to the instructional leadership conversation and shed light on a critical piece of the professional coaching relationship between principals and teachers.
Review of the Literature

Fullan (2001) stressed the importance of principals building and maintaining meaningful relationships with teachers to effectively and successfully lead their school. Richards (2003) found that positive teacher and principal relationships relate directly to an increased level of school morale and focus on students’ needs by teachers. Therefore, it seems critical that principals remain focused on continuing to improve relationships with all teachers.

Krohn (2013) looked specifically at middle schools and found teachers felt more optimistic about being coached professionally whenever they sensed an established partnership with the principal. Working toward this partnership and a high level of trust between teacher and principal can have a positive impact on many different factors. Gareis and Tschannen-Moran (2015) found that faculty trusting the principal was directly related to improved instructional leadership, school climate, and student achievement. Additionally, Methner (2013) found that principals who encourage teachers “to be reflective and to participate in dialogues that encourage self-analysis” will improve relationships with teachers and “increase teacher willingness to take risks and collaborate in change initiatives aimed at augmenting student growth outcomes” (p. 125).

Previous research indicates the importance of principals acting as instructional coaches while building positive relationships with teachers. It also tells us that principals sometimes become frustrated with teachers they perceive as marginal and approach them differently. Therefore, looking closely at a principal’s perception of a teacher’s mindset and how that impacts instructional coaching is critical in advancing the conversation about instructional leadership and teacher development.
Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to investigate how a principal’s perception of a middle school teacher’s mindset affects how he provides that teacher with coaching as an instructional leader. The research took an in-depth look at middle school principals with experience as evaluators and instructional leaders of teachers. The study was designed to spark new conversations about how a middle school principal’s perception about a teacher impacts the style and process of instructional coaching. Understanding the relationship between principals’ perceptions and how they coach teachers differently should start new dialog related to providing all teachers with meaningful, impactful instructional coaching.

Methodology

This qualitative study, completed through the framework of phenomenology, was designed to look closely at the experiences of middle school principals and how they act as instructional coaches to specific teachers they perceive in very different ways. The beliefs and lived experiences of the participating principals were the driving factors in the data that were collected and the conclusions of the analysis. Data were analyzed using open coding, as well as team coding with two other researchers, and every effort was made to account for and control personal bias.

Participants

The participants in this study were willing to honestly describe their thoughts and experiences about serving as a middle school principal and providing instructional coaching to different teachers. The participants previously took part in the same mini-professional development session about Carol Dweck’s mindset research, enabling them
to make judgements about the teachers they work with, determining whether specific teachers (who remained confidential to the researcher) possessed either a growth or a fixed mindset. The participants have regularly observed and evaluated educators teaching a variety of subjects in grades 6-8 and have been observing, evaluating, and coaching teachers for several years. For this research, participants were purposefully selected from the group of volunteers based on experience and gender, selecting the female and the male participant with the most experience observing and coaching teachers.

**Research Question and Procedures**

This study focused on the relationship between a principal and teachers, from the principal’s perspective. The interview process and the coding of those interviews focused on answering the following research question. How does a principal’s preconceived idea about a teacher’s mindset influence how that teacher is coached by the principal? All interview questions were developed to gather data and eventually answer this research question.

Research procedures were defined prior to the study and documented throughout the project. After participants were established, the process of participants identifying which teachers were believed to have a growth or a fixed mindset was explained to participants and they had the opportunity to ask questions. Participating middle school principals were asked to think of two specific teachers whom they perceive to be on complete opposite ends of the mindset continuum, one they view as having a growth mindset and one they believe most often demonstrates a fixed mindset. The participants kept a private list of these teachers they intended to discuss during the upcoming interviews.
The interview protocol involved sharing the predetermined interview topics, but not the specific questions, with participants. This strategy of not sharing specific question prior to interviews was an effort to obtain less calculated, more honest responses from participants. All interviews were conducted in the principals’ offices and audio was recorded. During the interviews, anecdotal notes were taken about things that would not show up in interview transcriptions like facial expressions and body language. The audio recording of the interview made it possible to create a very precise transcription of the interview and then begin the process of data analysis.

**Data Analysis**

After the interviews, all audio was transcribed and sent to participants for confirmation. Transcriptions were reviewed multiple times and participants confirmed the accuracy of the transcriptions before coding and analysis began. The coding of the transcripts and notes taken during the interview sessions allowed for common themes to emerge during the analysis. Common themes were grouped into bins and then transcripts were shared with two other colleagues doing similar research at different academic levels so that team coding could add another level of validity to the data analysis. The emerging themes eventually led to three assertions discussed below.

**Discussion of Findings**

This research primarily focused on how a middle school principal’s perception about a teacher’s mindset affects how he provides that teacher with coaching and feedback as an instructional leader. The study was designed to shed light on how a middle school principal’s idea about whether a teacher has a growth or fixed mindset impacts the style and process of instructional coaching. After data analysis, seven themes emerged and these themes led to three assertions. All seven of the emerging themes
(communication style and dialogue, emotion, body language and nonverbal communication, coaching preparation and predetermined responses, teacher response to feedback, praise and encouragement, purposeful pairing) fit nicely into one of the three assertions. Additionally, all three of these assertions were based on research and the analysis of the commentary provided during the participants’ interviews.

Zeinabadi (2014) found that improvements in student achievement are much more likely to occur when a school’s principal and teachers communicate positively with “high-quality exchanges” (p. 406). In most cases, principals are expected to act as a school’s main instructional leader, assisting in the development of teachers and improving student achievement. For these reasons, it is critical to look at the intricacies of the principal-teacher relationship, attempting to understand the coaching dynamics between principal and teacher and the idea that a principal’s perception about a teacher influences how he coaches that teacher. This study could lead to new and important breakthroughs as well as continued innovation in the way principals successfully work with teachers as instructional leaders.

The following research question was used as the foundation for this study:

How does a principal’s preconceived idea about a teacher’s mindset influence how that teacher is coached by the principal? This question acted as the basis for the interview questions that were developed and then posed during the interview process as well as the lens through which all data were analyzed. Based on the results of this study, it is apparent that a principal’s beliefs about a teacher’s mindset do in fact have an impact on the way the principal provides instructional leadership and coaching. The three assertions established from this research are discussed below.
1. The first assertion indicates that middle school principals alter how they prepare for meetings with teachers, the type and frequency of praise they distribute, and the type of specific professional development they recommend based on their perception of a teacher’s mindset. This is important to understand considering previous findings by Methner (2013) where principals who both praised and gave honest, reflective feedback to teachers, including recommending ways for professional development, positively impacted middle school teachers’ attitudes as well as student outcomes. Additionally, this research demonstrates that principals often predetermine how teachers will react to feedback and how teachers will perform during classroom observations based on the principal’s previously established perception of the teacher. This sometimes includes predetermining whether students will experience successful outcomes based on the principal’s perception of the teacher. This finding that principals provide a varied type of educational leadership, based on their established perception of a teacher, is a new idea in the field of education.

2. A second assertion, resulting from this research, is that a middle school principal’s belief about a teacher’s mindset has a substantial impact on the way a principal communicates with a teacher. When a principal perceives a teacher to have a fixed mindset, verbal communication becomes more structured, data informed, and direct. The principal is typically less patient and less teacher-centered. Inversely, when communicating with a teacher with a perceived growth mindset, the principal often leads with questions and is open to professional dialogue about anything the teacher feels she wants to focus on. The principal fosters more collegial conversations and allows the teacher with a perceived growth mindset the freedom necessary to determine her path of
development, maintaining a more conversational style of communication throughout the coaching and appraisal process. This differing style of communication is critical to understand and be aware of as previous research by Arneson (2015) found that different types of communication between a principal and faculty can build or destroy trust and the working relationship that exists between principals and teachers. This new research indicates that there is also a difference in nonverbal communication when talking about teachers perceived in different ways. When reflecting on collaboration with a teacher thought to have a growth mindset, the principals smiled, appeared engaged, leaned forward when talking, and made soft, positive, enthusiastic hand gestures. However, when discussing teachers believed to possess a fixed mindset, principals were very calculated in choosing the correct words and smiled less (in some cases not at all). There was an obvious decrease in energy and enthusiasm. At times, principals rolled their eyes and made more direct, rigid hand gestures. The overall nonverbal communication was negative and dramatically different than when talking about teachers perceived as having a growth mindset. This finding that principals communicate quite differently with teachers based on their perception of the teacher’s mindset is a new idea in the field of education. Keeping in mind this new finding as well as earlier research done by Richards (2003), which found that positive teacher and principal interactions relate directly to more focused and satisfied teachers, it makes sense that educational leaders remain focused on continuing to improve relationships with all teachers by increasing positive verbal and nonverbal communication.

3. The third assertion from this research revealed that a principal’s belief about a teacher’s mindset is tied directly to the emotion the principal feels when reflecting on the
process of instructional coaching. Principals were positive, enthusiastic, and excited about collaborating with teachers thought to have a growth mindset. They used words and phrases like “excitement,” “fantastic,” and “sense of adventure.” However, when asked to reflect on and discuss the instructional coaching relationship with teachers believed to have a fixed mindset, principals became less energetic, even admitting working through the observation process with these teachers feels “unhappy,” “less positive,” “frustrating,” and “disappointing.” The difference in emotions principals attached to working with these teachers was originally underestimated by the researcher, but became obvious throughout the interview sessions and the analysis of data. This finding that a principal’s thoughts and emotions about the instructional coaching process differ based on the principal’s perception about a teacher is a new idea in the field of education. Knowing these results about principals’ emotions and attitudes, as well as findings by Norton (2013) where successful secondary teachers possessed a shared belief that positivity and support from their principal was one of the most critical factors impacting their success and level of self-efficacy, are critical pieces in understanding the dynamics and impact of the principal teacher relationship.

**Recommendations and Future Research**

This research provides evidence that the principal’s perception about teachers significantly impacts multiple aspects of the principal-teacher professional relationship. As principals and others serving in educational leadership positions are tasked with providing instructional coaching that will support teachers in the improvement of their craft, it is imperative that those serving in these leadership roles continue to learn about the direct relationship between their own perception and how they work with teachers.
Additional research is necessary to support and build upon the three assertions made in this research.

Further research could include longitudinal studies to investigate how principals’ perceptions about teachers change over time and whether that too impacts the professional dialogue between principals and teachers. In a profession where teachers often have the same job at age 55 that they had at age 25, it is important to look at how relationships that affect the instructional coaching cycle between principal and teacher shift over the course of many years. This is especially true given the result of this research. If a principal does in fact communicate with and coach a teacher differently based on their perception of that teacher, it is critical to learn how years of a differing approach by the principal impacts teachers and whether this could be tied to teacher motivation, teacher self-efficacy, and possibly teacher burnout.

Further research is also recommended to look at the topic investigated in this study, but from the vantage point of the teacher. Another step forward in understanding the complicated professional relationship between principal and teacher would look at how teachers receive messages, both verbal and nonverbal, from principals. This study indicates that middle school principals provide coaching, and communicate differently with teachers, based on their perception of the teacher’s mindset. It seems vital that educators understand whether teachers generally recognize the differing approach that principals utilize with teachers and whether that might impact how teachers respond to principals and ultimately influence school culture.

**Conclusion**

Over the years, stakeholders inside and outside the world of education have voiced a desire for schools to improve teachers’ general teaching practices and therefore
student achievement outcomes. Typically, the principal is given the task of raising the level of student proficiency by supporting teachers as the lead instructional coach in a school. This study indicates that a principal’s belief about a teacher’s mindset has a direct impact on the differing ways the principal provides instructional leadership and coaching for the teacher. It also indicates that the principal’s perception about the teacher affects the style of verbal and nonverbal communication as well as the way the principal feels about the process of providing instructional coaching for specific teachers who are perceived in different ways. If principals are supposed to elevate all teachers through effective communication and consistent, appropriate professional development and instructional coaching, it seems imperative that we fully understand the way in which the principal’s perceptions color the working relationship between principal and teacher. This research, along with the recommendations for future research, will assist educators in better understanding the critical relationship between principal and teacher and therefore add a new layer to the instructional leadership conversation.
CHAPTER 6. TYING IT ALL TOGETHER

The research I conducted utilized participants at the middle school level. However, two other researchers conducted similar studies at different levels. Steven Hope and Heather Short used the exact same research question, interview questions, and procedures, looking closely at the elementary and high school levels respectively. The three of us team coded our qualitative data to reduce possible bias and add an additional layer of validity to the findings. After team coding and individual data analysis, all three researchers worked collaboratively to look for common themes and bins across all levels of education, elementary through high school. Surprisingly, the findings were quite similar for all three research projects; a principal’s perception about a teacher does in fact affect the way in which that principal works with and provides instructional leadership for that teacher.

Themes Across K-12 Education

As the three researchers looked closely at the results of each project, common themes emerged. One significant theme found in all three projects relates to instructional coaching dialogue between principals and teachers. All three researchers found that when principals work with teachers they perceive to have a fixed mindset, they often start with data and purposely narrow the focus to specific targets. In these conversations, principals are typically more direct and less collaborative, regularly encouraging the teacher with praise, but then redirecting them to focus on student achievement outcomes. When principals meet with teachers thought to possess a growth mindset, principals are more collaborative and the conversation is typically teacher centered. This dialogue
provides the freedom to focus on things the teacher believes need attention and the coaching relationship is more collegial overall.

Additionally, all three researchers found that principals prepare for instructional coaching meetings (where feedback will be provided) in very different ways. At all three levels, principals look forward to meeting with teachers thought to have a growth mindset. However, principals prepare for these same coaching meetings with teachers perceived to have a fixed mindset by gathering data as evidence that can be utilized during the coaching conversation. Principals routinely anticipate conflict during these more structured meetings and feel the need to have evidence (student data) ready to share during the eventual, anticipated conflict.

Differences in the way principals communicate with teachers, based on the principal’s perception, was also a common thread in all three research projects. When principals believe a teacher has a growth mindset, they often lead conversations with questions, listen to the desires of the teacher intently, and demonstrate flexibility based on the conversational interactions. Principals are collaborative and open in their approach, trusting that the direction the teacher wants to go or the things the teachers wants to focus on improving are in the best interest of all stakeholders. Inversely, when interacting with teachers thought to possess a fixed mindset, principals are more direct and less conversational in the way they communicate. Principals do not typically see this as having a negative impact on the working relationship they have with these teachers, but future research is recommended to investigate the teacher perception and long-term effects of this more direct, less collegial style of professional communication.
Another common theme found by all three researchers was the predetermined outcomes and responses from each teacher based on the perception of the teacher. Principals typically predetermine that teachers thought to have a growth mindset will be more invested in professional development, desire feedback regularly, and take a more open approach to constructive feedback. However, principals predetermine that teachers they believe have a fixed mindset will be less receptive to any constructive feedback, finding very little value in professional conversations with the principal. Considering previous research related to self-actualization and self-efficacy (discussed in chapter two), years of principals predetermining how different teachers will respond to feedback could negatively impact the development of many teachers.

One final significant common theme found by all three researchers was tied to the emotional response principals have when reflecting on the instructional coaching process with teachers whom they perceive differently. When principals think of coaching a teacher they believe has a growth mindset, they describe feeling proud, excited, or energized about the working relationship. When principals reflect on how they feel about supporting a teacher they believe has a fixed mindset with instructional coaching, they describe feeling frustrated and disappointed. Again, recommended future research should look at whether teachers perceive these vastly differing emotions that principals have about working with teachers thought to have a different mindset.

The three researchers each completed a qualitative study using the same research question and procedures, but looking at different levels of education. While pieces within each study were slightly different, many themes emerged. Looking closely at these themes across all levels of education advances the conversation about educational
leadership, instructional coaching, and the process of improved teaching and learning at all levels. These three independent yet connected research projects provide critical insight that leads to additional questions. These new questions should be addressed through future qualitative and quantitative projects, and therefore serve as a larger body or research that will help educators understand how perceptions, and human nature in general, can impact how principals and teachers work together.
REFERENCES


Dweck, C.S. (personal communication, October 15, 2014)


APPENDIX A. CORRESPONDENCE TO ACCEPTED PARTICIPANTS

____________________________________,

Thank you for volunteering to be part of the study on principal’s perceptions on teacher mindset and the impact of those perceptions on instructional coaching. You have now been selected as a participant in this study. As a voluntary participant, you will be asked to do these things:

- Participate in one or more interviews with a principal investigator. These interviews will be conducted in your office at a time that is convenient for you. Each interview will last approximately 30-45 minutes. Interviews will be recorded using a digital recording device. The interviews will be secured in a locked cabinet in a secure room.
- Review transcriptions of the interviews, checking for accuracy and adding any insight for the principal investigator.

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary and you may leave the study at any time.

During the interviews, you may elect not to answer any question.

During the interviews, it will be important not to divulge the name of any teacher being discussed. Details of coaching particular teachers will be done referring to the teachers only as numbered individuals to protect their identity.

If you have any questions or concerns about the study, please contact Jayson Snyder at the following email address:

snyde138@purdue.edu

Respectfully,

Jayson Snyder
A Closer Look: How Principals’ Perceptions About Teacher Mindset Impact Instructional Coaching
Dr. Marilyn Hirth, Associate Professor
Educational Leadership
Purdue University

What is the purpose of this study?
You are being asked to participate in this research because you volunteered to share your perceptions regarding teacher mindset and instructional coaching. The purpose of this study is to explore your perceptions about teacher mindset and how those perceptions influence your coaching. Interviews will be utilized to conduct the research.

What will I do if I choose to be in this study?
If you choose to participate in this study, you will be asked to participate in interviews. I will be asking you questions and gathering your feedback. The interview session(s) will be audiotaped and transcribed.

How long will I be in the study?
The research study includes an interview lasting approximately 30-45 minutes. If a follow-up conversation is warranted, there may be another interview scheduled.

What are the possible risks or discomforts?
The risks are minimal and no greater than would be encountered in everyday life. Breach of confidentiality is a risk related to the research. The risk is a possibility, but safeguards are in place as described in the continentality section of this form.

Are there any potential benefits?
There are no direct benefits to you, but this research study has the potential to change the professional development and training provided to principals as educational leaders become more aware of how their perceptions affect the way they work with teachers they observe and evaluate.

Will I receive payment or other incentive?
There is no compensation for your participation in this study.
Will information about me and my participation be kept confidential?

The research records will be stored in a secure, locked location accessible only to the researcher. The interview audio recordings will be erased six weeks after taping. Transcriptions of the data gathered will contain no identification of you and will be kept indefinitely. All identifiable information concerning student learning outcomes will be removed by you before sharing the data with the researcher. The project’s research records may be reviewed by departments at Purdue University responsible for regulatory and research oversight.

What are my rights if I take part in this study?

Your participation in this study is voluntary. You may choose not to participate or, if you agree to participate, you can withdraw your participation at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. Please understand that participation in this study will not have an impact on your job status.

Who can I contact if I have questions about the study?

If you have questions, comments or concerns about this research project, you can talk to one of the researchers. Please contact the principle investigator, Dr. Marilyn Hirth, Associate Professor, College of Education Beering Hall of Liberal Arts and Education Room 5134, 100 North University Street, West Lafayette, IN 47907-2098, 765-494-1228, mahirth@purdue.edu or any of the graduate students, Steven Hope, hope0@purdue.edu, Heather Short, hshort@purdue.edu, or Jayson Snyder, snyde138@purdue.edu

If you have questions about your rights while taking part in the study or have concerns about the treatment of research participants, please call the Human Research Protection Program at (765) 494-5942, email (irb@purdue.edu), or write to:
Human Research Protection Program - Purdue University
Ernest C. Young Hall, Room 1032
155 S. Grant St.,
West Lafayette, IN 47907-2114

Documentation of Informed Consent

I have had the opportunity to read this consent form and have the research study explained. I have had the opportunity to ask questions about the research study, and my questions have been answered. I am prepared to participate in the research study described above. I will be offered a copy of this consent form after I sign it.

__________________________________________                        _________________
Participant’s Signature                                                                                  Date

__________________________________________
Participant’s Name
APPENDIX C. MINI PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT SESSION
(PREVIOUS PARTICIPANT TRAINING - MINDSET)

Slide 1

Mindset & Leadership:
How does mindset affect instructional coaching?

Slide 2

The concept of intelligence
What is mindset?

- Growth Mindset
  - Amenable to change, I can learn from my mistakes.

- Fixed Mindset
  - My abilities are fixed, I can't improve my skills.

- Dr. Carol Dweck, Stanford
What creates motivation?

Often, that answer can be directly linked to how individuals view their own intelligence...

MINDSET

But the best news...MINDSETS can CHANGE!

Research supports that students who are taught about the brain being a muscle, and how the brain continues to develop and change over their lifetime start to think differently about ability.
Slide 9

How Do We Praise Students?

Slide 10

Growth or Fixed?

“I really like the way you tried all kinds of strategies on that problem until you finally got it.”

“See, you are good at this subject. You got an A on your last test.”

“You really studied for your test and your improvement shows it.”

“Look at how smart you are.”

Slide 11

Growth or Fixed?

“I love how you stayed at your desk and kept your concentration in order to keep working on that problem.”

“You are one of the top students in this class.”

“Great job. You must have worked really hard at this.”

“This is easy. You will get this in no time.”
Have you heard statements like these as you are in and out of classrooms?

In your mind, can you picture the teachers who are saying them?

Slide 13

Approaches to integrate growth into teaching...
  Praising students for taking risks and persevering
  Emphasizing positive improvement and growth mindset in the classroom
  Using formative assessments, self-evaluation, and assignment revisions

Slide 14

Approaches to integrate growth into teaching...
  Encouraging multiple strategies for learning
  Changing language used in classroom instruction and feedback
  Supporting peer-to-peer learning
  Setting process goals and individual student expectations
Seeing those approaches, talk with a colleague about a teacher in your building that incorporates those instructional strategies. Don’t use names. Rather, concentrate on the behaviors you observe.

Now, think of a colleague who uses fewer of these techniques. Don’t use names. Rather, concentrate on the behaviors you observe.

….now what?
Resources
APPENDIX D. INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. How do you set goals with this teacher?

2. How do you use data in setting goals with this teacher?

3. How do you feel about the process of evaluating this teacher?

4. How do you coach this teacher to help him/her improve their craft?

5. How does this teacher respond to your coaching?
December 20, 2016

To whom it may concern:

Excellent teachers and administrators never stop learning. They're always exposing themselves to the latest educational tools and information in order to help their students and schools advance to the next level. It is for these reasons that I support Mr. Steve Hope, Mrs. Heather Short, and Mr. Jayson Snyder in their doctoral research.

I also recognize and support Mr. Hope, Mrs. Short, and Mr. Snyder conducting their research and interviews with the staff of Penn-Harris-Madison and at the buildings located within the Penn-Harris-Madison School Corporation’s district.

It is my pleasure to support my colleagues in the Purdue doctoral program.

Sincerely,

Jerry Thacker, Ed.D.
Superintendent of Schools
VITA

Jayson P. Snyder

EDUCATION

2017 Purdue University, West Lafayette, Indiana
   Ph.D., Educational Leadership

2010 Indiana University South Bend, South Bend, Indiana
   M.S., Educational Leadership

2002 Purdue University, West Lafayette, Indiana
   B.A., Elementary Education

PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE

2017-Present P-H-M School Corporation, Mishawaka, Indiana
   Director of Professional Development & Student Learning

2012-2017 P-H-M School Corporation, Mishawaka, Indiana
   Principal, Meadow’s Edge Elementary School

2010-2012 P-H-M School Corporation, Mishawaka, Indiana
   Assistant Principal, Schmucker Middle School

2003-2010 P-H-M School Corporation, Mishawaka, Indiana
   Teacher