

## CHAPTER 1

# Content and Context Matter

## Coaching Doesn't Happen in a Vacuum

### GUIDING QUESTIONS

- In your school and district setting, how deeply embedded and connected are instructional coaches within the larger system?
- Are there ways in which coaches are isolated or disconnected from larger systems of professional learning and leadership?
- When designing and supporting instructional coaching, how might we consider both the content and context of the coaching program?
- How might considering both content and context support and sustain coaching work in schools?

When we (Jacy and Rita) each began our work as instructional coaches, we were enthusiastic and energetic. We were eager to share our growing expertise and learn with and from the teachers whom we supported in teaching reading, writing, and communication across grades. Jacy was the first formal middle school literacy specialist and coach employed in Cambridge Public Schools, Massachusetts, which made sense given the number of struggling adolescent readers in the district at that point in time. Rita began to coach, in addition to her duties as a K–12 reading specialist in Upper St. Clair, Pennsylvania, given the number of novice teachers in the district at that time. Both of us forged new paths and crafted new professional identities as coaches, working side by side with teachers and teams to refine instructional practice.

However, even though we collaborated with teachers and leaders regularly, we also quickly realized that we were a bit unsure of our roles and positionality, similar to coaches who have reported feeling like “neither fish nor fowl” (Ippolito, 2010, p. 169) in their schools. Clearly, students, teachers, instruction, and curriculum were at the very center of our respective school worlds. Widening our lens, we were also aware of principals, assistant principals, district leaders, and adult professional learning networks. All of this was part of the wider sea in which we were each swimming. But where did that leave *us*, as instructional coaches, exactly?

Quite often we felt a bit alone in our work, without a sense of deeper connection or feeling fully embedded within our school systems. We responded to requests for support as they arose, often from individual teachers raising a student dilemma or asking for resource suggestions. But we didn’t always feel as if our work was systematic. We weren’t always connecting individual teaching and learning dilemmas with larger team or school goals. Almost like captains of speedboats, we would zip from classroom to classroom, or sometimes from school to school, gazing down into the blue waters of classrooms and then up into the open skies of school and district systems and structures. But how were we to know if our work was really attending to and connecting both worlds? How were we to determine where to speed next, how fast to go, and whom to bring with us?

As coaches, working in the early days of the instructional coaching movement, it perhaps made sense that we felt a bit isolated or disconnected; after all, we were taking on qualitatively new and different roles. But we also thought that was how coaching was meant to function. Each of us made our decisions based on teacher or administrator requests, or what we thought might be helpful given our interpretation of the goals and vision for instruction in the district. Neither of us began our work with a broader understanding of how our coaching work might truly support larger school and district systems, nor did we understand how those larger systems might support teaching and learning (let alone support our own coaching efforts).

As we each transitioned into university roles as professors, researchers, and consultants with school districts, we began interacting with coaches and studying coaching widely. We found something surprising. Many instructional coaches across grade levels and content areas were all feeling quite isolated, as though they were working in a vacuum. Even coaches who worked alongside other coaches in their school or district felt uncertain about the direction they were taking, the efficacy of their work, and whether they were really making a difference in teaching and learning broadly. Moreover, there were so many differences in how coaches functioned across grade levels, schools, and districts, that the question “What is the coach’s role?” surfaced again and again, both for the coaches themselves and for teachers and leaders.

In trying to understand this phenomenon, widespread feelings of coach isolation or in-betweenness, coupled with ongoing questions and confusion over the roles and work of coaches, we have come to believe that these feelings can partly be explained by thinking about coaching through the lens of *context*. In so many schools and districts across the United States and world, instructional coaching is *decontextualized*. Educators and educational leaders all too often treat coaching as a role and set of activities distinctly separate from the day-to-day systems of teaching, learning, and leading in schools. In these cases, coaching is robbed of its most powerful potentiality, the potential to be an integral part of establishing and sustaining a schoolwide culture of ongoing learning and development. This culture is what we often think of as a *culture of coaching* in schools, in which all students and adults are continually and collaboratively learning, growing, and supporting one another.

While we (Jacy and Rita, individually and together) have written a great deal about coaching over the past 20 years, much of our work has focused on coaches themselves, their roles and responsibilities, their preparation, and their relationships with teachers and leaders. In looking back over our body of work, we realize that this focus has been on what we now call *coaching programs and processes* (see Chapters 5, 6, and 7 of this book). Our work arose out of a dual interest in reflecting on our own past as coaches, and a growing research interest in describing and understanding coaching models and programs, describing and understanding *what* coaches do. In fact, we are reminded of a comment made after one of our presentations: “We have plenty of research that tells us *what* coaches do, but we are limited in understanding *whether* what they do makes a difference, and *how!*” The ambiguity and inconsistency in roles, and even the early lack of professional standards in coaching, caused some to label coaching, even beyond the walls of schools into businesses and other organizations, the “Wild West” (Sherman & Freas, 2004).

We have learned a great deal since 2004, and in this book, we refocus our efforts, widening our lens to consider the ways in which effective instructional coaching must closely consider both the *content* or target of coaching work (i.e., the instructional core of teachers, students, and curriculum) within the broader *context* of school and district systems and structures that greatly shape coaching efforts. Therefore, our goals for writing this book include:

- To *recontextualize* coaching, such that coaches, teachers, and leaders view coaching as more fully embedded within and intertwined with the larger systems and structures that support (or sometimes hinder) professional learning and improved student outcomes.
- To provide ideas to guide coaches, leaders, and teachers in aligning

coaching work with the specific content and context that shape teaching, learning, and culture in every school. Ultimately, we expect this alignment to result in more equitable learning opportunities and outcomes for all students.

To extend our earlier metaphor, this book will help coaches dive from their speedboats to explore and better understand the waters of both teaching and learning (content), while also being able to parasail up into the skies of systems and structures in schools that shape coaching and teaching work (context).

If coaching is to truly live up to its potential, then we argue that instructional coaches, school leaders, and teacher leaders would be wise to consider both the *content* and *context* of coaching alongside coaching practices themselves. Across this book, we show you how.

### **CONTENT AND CONTEXT: BOTH/AND, NOT EITHER/OR, WHEN IT COMES TO COACHING**

In the field of linguistics, a powerful and longtime distinction has been made between *content* and *context*. *Content* refers to *what* is being said or communicated. Think of it as the dictionary definition of a word or phrase. *Context* refers to *how* something is being said or communicated. Think of it as the larger reason for the communication, the setting, or the how/when/why of the situation. A quick example of this distinction might be someone saying, “I’m a doctor.” This phrase might mean one thing if uttered at a cocktail party in response to a conversation about professional work, whereas it means something completely different if yelled in response to a cry for help at a restaurant when someone is choking. In short, *content is dependent on context*.

This content–context relationship not only helps us think about language and communication, but it can also be used as a lens to help us understand and improve coaching as a professional learning mechanism in schools. For instance, we have found the content–context distinction to be a powerful frame to help coaches, leaders, and teachers understand the possibilities and pitfalls of instructional coaching programs and processes. On one hand, we encourage educators to focus on the *content of coaching*, the target of coaching work (i.e., the teaching and learning that is happening in classrooms; the instructional core). On the other hand, effective coaching programs must also carefully attend to the larger *context of coaching*, the environment in which coaching takes place (i.e., the larger school and district systems and structures that support or hinder coaching efforts). In this way, and throughout this book, we strive to help coaches, leaders, and

teachers hone coaching programs and processes by simultaneously attending to *content* and *context*.

For us, this notion of attending to both content and context arose from questions we have often been asked by coaches and leaders about improving coaching programs and processes in schools. All too often, the questions are content and context neutral, as if curricular decisions, teachers' qualifications and experiences, the presence or absence of time for adult collaboration in the schedule, or principals' direct support of coaching does not influence the coaching program. Educators ask content- and context-neutral questions about coaching such as:

- Who are the coaches, and what are their qualifications?
- Which coaching activities (e.g., modeling, coteaching) are most effective?
- What is the optimal schedule for a coach to follow?
- What is the right balance of one-on-one, small-group, and large-group coaching?

These are all perfectly good and important questions for educators to ask and answer! However, such questions focus primarily on a school's coaching program and processes, without much regard for the *content* of teaching and learning or the larger *context* within which that teaching, learning, and coaching work is taking place.

Alternatively, more *content*-aware questions might include the following:

- Is the curriculum new to the school, or has it been implemented for years?
- Is there a clear scope and sequence articulated for each grade level or content-area department?
- To what extent are teachers encouraged to create their own curricula, or are they required to follow a specific, adopted curriculum?
- Are coaches, teachers, and leaders in agreement about the foundational elements of excellent teaching and learning in each discipline across grade levels?
- In what ways can teachers provide an engaging classroom environment that provides students with equitable access to curriculum and instruction?
- When and how does teaching and learning shift back and forth between in-person, face-to-face work and online or hybrid work?
- Who makes curricular decisions in the school, and how are those decisions made?

Answers to these questions, about the *content* on which coaches focus—the interaction of students, teachers, instruction, and curriculum—absolutely shape the coaching work itself.

Meanwhile, broader questions about the *context* of a coaching program might include the following:

- What are our school’s hopes and expectations for collaborative professional learning?
- How are we supporting all educators’ professional growth to better support student growth?
- How are school leaders establishing and maintaining strong systems of adult communication, collaboration, and professional learning?
- How are we balancing goals around adult professional collaboration with agreements about teacher autonomy?
- Who makes decisions about the focus of coaching, and how are those decisions made?

Notice how these content- and context-focused questions are not just about coaching work specifically. The answers to these questions require thinking about both teaching and learning and about larger systems of leadership, communication, and collaboration among all adults in a school. Importantly, the answers to these questions can greatly influence coaching work.

#### **STOP AND REFLECT**

- Which of the questions posed about content and context (related to coaching work) have been asked and answered in your school or district setting?
- Which of these questions seems most important for you and your school to answer?
- What additional questions arise for you, related to content and context, as you begin reading this book?

#### **Shifting from Decontextualized to Contextualized Coaching**

In many schools and districts, coaching has been separated from both the intricacies of teaching and learning, and the larger systems and structures that directly support teaching and coaching. In such schools, there might be a tacit assumption that knowledgeable coaches can accomplish all professional learning activities on their own, meeting individually and in groups with teachers, without much need for ongoing direction or support. This way of operating ignores the impact of school, district, and state contexts

on coaching work, and it sometimes subverts the intended goals of coaching, diminishing ongoing adult and student learning in the school.

From our own work as instructional coaches, researchers, and consultants, we have found a pattern of coaches and school leaders primarily asking questions about coaching programs and processes, with less attention given to the broader (and sometimes hidden) context within which that coaching is taking place. We believe this has led to a widespread pattern of *decontextualized coaching* in schools (see Figure 1.1 for a glimpse of what coaching work might look like in decontextualized vs. contextualized school settings). Coaches and their work are all too often treated as separate and distinct from the work of teachers and leaders. Questions about the goals, supports, impact, and evaluation of coaching are left unasked and unanswered. It is simply assumed that highly qualified coaches will know what to do, and they will go about their work with teachers without needing dedicated support systems such as a district-based coach liaison/facilitator, ongoing professional learning for coaches, monthly opportunities for coaches across schools to connect, coach representation on each school's instructional leadership team, and so on. In our experience, this represents a missed opportunity.

Therefore, this book aims to *recontextualize* coaching work in schools by aligning coaching content, programs, and context. Our goal is to help instructional coaches, school leaders, and teacher leaders to see coaching programs and processes not as isolated but as the crucial connection between the *content* of coaching (i.e., the focus on teaching and learning) and the *context* of coaching (i.e., the larger culture of leadership and systems and structures for collaboration). By seeing the relationship among these domains, naming them, taking ownership of them, and aligning them, schools can begin to *recontextualize* coaching work and establish a larger culture of coaching. To read how Dr. Kevin Marie Laxalt, former coach and current Education Programs Professional/Early Literacy Coordinator for the Nevada Department of Education, makes sense of a contextualized culture of coaching, see the Voices from the Field excerpt on page 11.

### **Building a Culture of Coaching by Considering Content and Context**

The phrase *culture of coaching* is mentioned often by educators. Coaches and even school leaders, for example, tell us that a culture of coaching does not exist in their school. Generally, they mean that teachers overall aren't receptive to coaching or don't understand its value. Yet when we ask coaches and leaders to be more specific about what needs to be done to develop a culture of coaching, they aren't so sure; they put the onus on themselves; or sometimes they implicate the teachers (i.e., teachers aren't interested in being lifelong learners). We believe there is a need to rethink

<b><i>Decontextualized Coaching Looks Like . . .</i></b>	<b><i>Contextualized Coaching Looks Like . . .</i></b>
Coaches meet only with individual teachers, interested in coaching, to support specific individual requests.	Coaches meet with many or all teachers in the school, individually and in groups, to support both individual teacher requests and larger schoolwide instructional goals.
Coaches rarely or never meet with school leadership to discuss the vision for coaching in the building.	Coaches meet frequently with school leadership to discuss and enact a common vision for coaching in the building.
Coaches rarely collaborate with other specialists, interventionists, curriculum coordinators/directors; there is lack of information flowing among these educators and thus less chance of a shared vision for teaching and learning in the school.	Coaches regularly collaborate with other specialists, interventionists, curriculum coordinators/directors; clear structures (e.g., regular meeting times) and communication channels increase information exchanges among these educators and facilitate a coherent vision for coaching, teaching, and learning in the school.
Few educators understand and can articulate the roles, responsibilities, and workflow of coaches; this lack of understanding is exacerbated when there are no coach role descriptions, or descriptions that are not regularly clarified and communicated.	Many or all teachers in the school understand and can articulate the roles, responsibilities, and workflow of coaches; this understanding is aided by clear coach role descriptions, which are updated and shared regularly.
Coaches are not included in instructional leadership team meetings or other schoolwide decision-making processes and groups.	Coaches are at the center of instructional leadership teams and other schoolwide decision-making processes and groups.
There is little to no ongoing coach professional learning in the school or district; there is not a designated liaison or facilitator leading coach learning in the school or district.	There is regular, collaborative, and individual coach professional learning and support in the school and district; there is a designated liaison or facilitator bringing coaches together across schools and supporting their work.

**FIGURE 1.1.** Decontextualized coaching versus contextualized coaching.



**VOICES FROM THE FIELD**

Many of my after-school teaching conversations at Ross Elementary acted as the foundation of my own professional philosophy of coaching. First, I learned that in order for coaching to be effective, it must be authentic. It cannot be delivered as simply another “checklist” on a school’s governance plan. Second, I learned that coaching must be locally driven. It cannot be facilitated by a packaged program or a list of online “tips.” Third, I learned that coaching must be grounded with an understanding of the socio-cultural make-up of the school and its surrounding community. It is only then that it becomes truly relevant. Lastly, I learned that the development of a coaching culture within a school greatly transforms that school. A spirit of collaboration replaces the unfortunate hopelessness of isolation.

—DR. KEVIN MARIE LAXALT,  
Education Programs Professional/Early Literacy Coordinator

this notion of a culture of coaching to take into consideration the work of the coach *and* how that coach is or isn’t supported in effectively interacting with teachers, leaders, and the wider school community.

A true culture of coaching is about the alignment of the work of teachers in classrooms, the work of coaches supporting them, and the work of leaders who help establish a culture of collaborative, ongoing professional learning that is woven into the daily fabric of schools. A true coaching culture isn’t about a single, heroic coach. Nor is it about simply adding more coaches to the roster and assuming that a culture of coaching will naturally emerge with more coaches on the bench. The kind of aligned culture we envision isn’t built overnight, nor is it built by a single coach. Such a culture is built slowly, deliberately, collaboratively, and with great attention to the systems and structures that support coaching.

In fact, we think the broader notion that schools must be places of learning for all (Swan Dagen & Bean, 2012)—including the learning of leaders, teachers, students, and yes, coaches too!—better reflects our belief that coaching is just one element (an important element) of a comprehensive, job-embedded professional learning plan. Such a plan should be based on a deep understanding of the goals and vision for teaching and learning in a school and district, an analysis of what is needed to accomplish those goals, and a plan for achieving those results. This book is fundamentally about developing schools that understand the importance of putting coaching in context.

To us, putting *coaching in context* means seeing coaching as just one mechanism within a larger system of collaboration, communication, and change in schools. Viewing coaching this way allows us to understand that

coaching works well (or poorly) in a school as the result of how a number of systems and structures interact, not just as the result of a single, heroic coach's successes or challenges. While a coaching culture may center around an instructional coach or team of coaches, it naturally extends far beyond those coaches to the mindsets and actions of all within the school community (e.g., school leaders, specialists, interventionists, special educators, librarians, classroom teachers). It extends to the systems and structures that support or hinder collaboration, communication, and change.

This notion of aligning content and context through coaching has the power to completely transform how school and district leaders, coaches, and teachers understand and support coaching work. If we take this notion seriously, it also impacts how we prepare coaches, teachers, and leaders to collaborate with one another as opposed to perpetuating the long-held norms of individualism and isolation in schools (Lortie, 2002).

Instead of focusing our energies on cheering or jeering the coach, we must turn our attention simultaneously to the inner workings of classrooms and to the larger school as a learning organization. Therefore, this book focuses on how to build a rich culture of coaching and sustain it over time by coaching with awareness of both content and context. To do so requires that coaches, leaders, and teachers all look simultaneously at the larger systems of collaboration, communication, and change operating within their school—the *context* within which coaching is operating—as well as consider their own roles and responsibilities within those systems. Only through seeing those systems can educators take ownership over them, tinker with them, and fully support coaching and ongoing professional learning.

In this book we share what we have learned from both research and our cumulative years of supporting coaching efforts across schools and districts. We introduce readers to the foundational elements that support content- and context-specific coaching, which when taken together, interact to support a vibrant coaching culture.

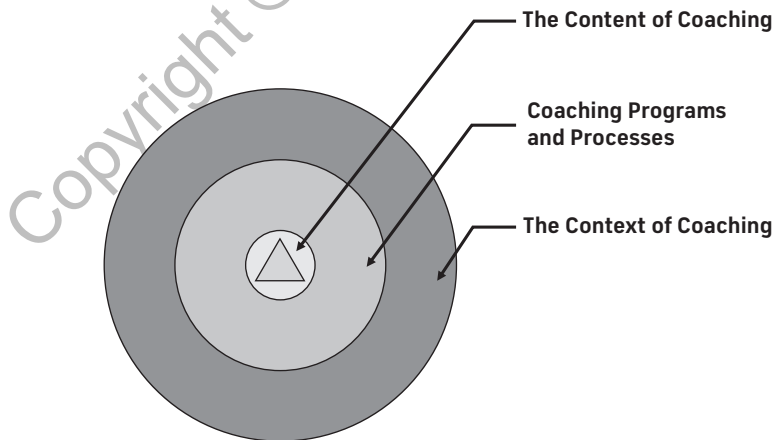
## **INTRODUCING THE CONTENT AND COACHING IN-CONTEXT FRAMEWORK**

So how might we invite school leaders, coaches, and teachers to consider both the *content* and *context* of coaching work? How might we consider the goals and routines of a particular coaching program as they relate to specific instructional goals and wider environmental supports and constraints? How can we move beyond a one-size-fits-all coaching model, and instead design and implement coaching programs that are tuned to support specific content/context factors?

Increasingly, we have approached this work by highlighting the three distinct domains that educators might examine when thinking about coaching efforts, giving special attention to which domains are robust, which need support, and how aligned the three domains are with one another. We have begun to call these domains “focus rings,” borrowing from the field of photography. On a camera’s lens, a “focus ring” is used to help a photographer bring into focus different areas of the field that is being viewed. In our framework, the three “focus rings” operate similarly, helping educators to focus on different aspects of school life that affect and are affected by coaching work. See Figure 1.2 for an illustration of our Content and Coaching in Context (CCIC) Framework. By considering each of the three focus rings individually, and then together, we find that educators are better equipped to notice and align the content and context of coaching over time. We review each focus ring briefly here, in service of then exploring each more expansively across this book.

### The Center: The Content of Coaching

To understand the framework illustrated in Figure 1.2, start by looking at the center of the figure, what we call the *content of coaching*. We think of this as the target of all coaching work, or what coaching exists to influence. The center of our framework focuses on the interaction of teachers and students with attention to content, and not just curricular content, but all essential “content,” including student engagement, access to the curriculum for all learners, equitable instructional practices, and attention to



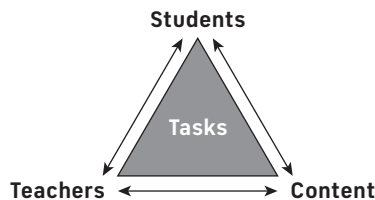
**FIGURE 1.2.** The Content and Coaching in Context (CCIC) Framework.

the diversity of student learners along all continua (race, language, neurodiversity, etc.). If well-designed and -implemented, coaching can both support and influence this center, improving outcomes for students as well as for teachers.

Thus, the content of coaching work might be humanities- or science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM)-focused. It might be project-based or skills-focused. State and/or national standards likely guide this work. In a learning organization, there is an ever-present need to continually examine the ways in which teaching and learning processes might be refined, and coaching efforts must be focused on leading that charge. This is also a space in which individual teachers' professional (and sometimes social emotional learning) needs are met. Ultimately, the focus of the center is on the continual improvement of teaching and learning.

One simple way to think about the center of our framework, the content of instructional coaching, is to think of it in terms of what researchers have called the *instructional core* (City et al., 2009), which refers to the long-held notion that all educational work must fundamentally focus on the relationships and interactions among teachers, students, and content, with each of these critical elements being placed at the point of a triangle. At the center of the triangle are the tasks that make up classroom work, the results of interactions among teachers, students, and content. See Figure 1.3 for an adapted version of City et al.'s (2009) representation of the instructional core.

We have placed this instructional core at the very center of the CCIC Framework, because all coaching work must support and seek to improve the instructional core. Student learning is, and must be, the central focus of any school's work, and it certainly must be at the center of any framework describing instructional coaching efforts. In fact, City et al. (2009) articulate a fundamental principle about the instructional core, stating that if we are making a change in schools and don't see any changes in the instructional core (i.e., changes in teacher behavior, student behavior,



**FIGURE 1.3.** The instructional core. Adapted from City et al. (2009, Figure 1.1, p. 22), Harvard Education Press. Copyright © 2009 the President and Fellows of Harvard College. Adapted with permission.

and/or content or tasks), then our interventions haven't really worked. The authors name this principle #3: "If you can't see it in the core, it's not there" (p. 27). We have found this way of thinking about coaching work incredibly helpful. If coaching work isn't fundamentally shifting and improving the instructional core, and impacting student learning, then we might be hard-pressed to suggest that a particular coaching program is effective.

It is also critical, when coaches focus on the instructional core, that they take into consideration the attitudes, beliefs, and personal needs of teachers, as they, too, influence teaching and learning. A teacher who has significant home-life responsibilities (e.g., raising a young child) may not be able to easily meet with a coach after school, even though that teacher is fully committed to excellent teaching. Likewise, a teacher who is experiencing a health issue may not be tuned in to a conversation in which they are being asked to reflect on a specific lesson and its impact on students. This may be even more true following the COVID-19 global pandemic. Now, more than ever, we need to coach with awareness of the complexity of teachers' personal and professional lives (Aguilar, 2020).

Therefore, the needs of students and teachers, the curricula they encounter, and the joint tasks that they engage in are rightly placed at the center of our framework. This is the bull's eye or target of coaching work. Instructional coaches exist to ultimately support high levels of student learning via work with teachers and the curricula. Given this critical need to focus on (and align) the content of coaching with coaching programs and processes, we zoom in on the instructional core and related coaching implications in Chapters 3 and 4 of this book.

### **The Middle Ring: Coaching Programs and Processes**

To broaden our field of vision, we turn to the next ring of our CCIC Framework, the ring that focuses on coaching programs and processes that operate within particular schools and districts. This ring of the framework helps educators ask the important question: "Which coaching models, theories, or designs are guiding our coaching program?" While it may sound like an obvious question to most readers, many school leaders, coaches, and teachers are hard-pressed to answer this question. In other words, not all coaching programs are intentionally designed and implemented. By the end of the 20th century, schools and districts were hiring instructional coaches in droves, partly in response to federal funding for programs such as Reading First, and partly in response to lackluster student achievement as measured by national and international tests such as the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP; the "Nation's Report Card") and the Program for International School Assessment (PISA). For a while, coaching was seen as a panacea, a new lever to lift all teacher practice and student achievement.

However, the reality over the past 30-plus years has been far more complicated. First, coaching programs have come and gone, often in response to the waxing and waning of funding initiatives. Therefore, in some schools and districts, coaches did not have the opportunity to implement coaching as a fully realized program. There was little support for coaching, or coaching programs simply were not in the schools long enough to make a difference. And we know that coaching is a marathon, not a sprint.

Second, although some coaches have thrived and succeeded in influencing the instructional core in their schools, others have struggled mightily. Not all schools and districts that hired coaches developed or adopted coaching programs with great intentionality. In many cases, coaches were hired because it seemed like a great idea, but very little was done to ensure that coaching was systematic, intentional, and part of a larger system of ongoing professional learning. The unstated assumption was that once hired, coaches would self-organize, connect with teachers in deep and productive ways, and teachers would receive coaches with open arms; the instructional core would be influenced as a result. While this may have been the case in some schools and systems, it certainly has not been universal.

In a recent and widely cited meta-analysis on the impact of instructional coaching (Kraft et al., 2018), researchers found that coaching has had a positive impact on teaching and learning overall (across the 60 peer-reviewed studies the researchers analyzed). The big finding across studies was summarized this way: “Teacher coaching has large positive effects on both instructional practice and student achievement. . . . On average, coaching improves the quality of teachers’ instruction and its effects on student achievement” (Kraft & Blazar, 2018, p. 71). However, despite these positive findings, the researchers were quick to note that when looking at the size of various coaching programs, “the average effectiveness of the coaching program declines as the number of teachers involved increases, suggesting the difficulty of successfully taking such programs to scale” (p. 72). The researchers went on to suggest that factors such as “coach quality” (i.e., preparation, knowledge, skills, and support), “financial constraints,” “standardization” (i.e., “systems and structures to ensure program fidelity”), and “teacher engagement and school climate” (pp. 72–73) may all contribute to differences observed between coaching programs and especially programs that seek to support large numbers of teachers. All of this is to say that while instructional coaching efforts appear to be effective overall across the research literature, the devil is in the details. Schools and districts (particularly those hoping to deploy coaches across many classrooms) may struggle to see the positive effects of coaching, at least without careful consideration of both content and context.

One other detail from the Kraft et al. (2018) study is important to note. They remind readers of the importance of understanding the “theory of action underpinning the coaching program” (p. 575), as it is critical in both research and practice to understand the ways in which leaders and educators expect coaching to shift the instructional core. Not only should researchers seek to understand the stated goals and related outcomes of the coaching programs that they might compare in research studies, but school leaders, coaches, and teachers also might benefit greatly from clearly articulating the goals and intended outcomes of their coaching program. By articulating a clear theory of action for coaching, in the form of “if–then” statements (see Chapter 2 for more details about crafting a coaching theory of action), educators then create a method for understanding and beginning to measure the success of their coaching work. In our experience, many district and school leaders, coaches, and teachers are not quite clear on either the underlying coaching model or theory of action guiding their specific coaching program.

Therefore, the second focus ring in our CCIC Framework zooms in on individual coaches, their qualifications, and their specific coaching moves, as well as systems-level questions about the design of the larger coaching program. Just as the center of our framework, the instructional core, focuses on student and teacher learning, the middle ring focuses on the adult learning of coaches, specialists, and teachers and leaders who assume coaching responsibilities. It is within this ring of the framework that we help educators to understand the intentional design decisions that coaches, leaders, and teachers must make regarding coaching programs and processes (Chapters 5, 6, and 7). We view this ring of the framework, and the related chapters, as the very heart of this book, connecting coaching content and context.

Next, we broaden our field of vision once again as we begin to see the ways in which coaching is influenced by the larger context of the school and district.

### **The Outer Ring: The Context of Coaching**

The first two focus rings—the content of coaching and coaching programs and processes—focus us on the daily work of coaches, the teachers with whom they interact, and the students who are at the center of our efforts. These domains are critical, yet they still do not fully explain coaching successes and challenges.

It is only when we turn our attention to the third and final ring, the outer encompassing ring of school and district context, that we begin to fully understand the environment in which coaching work is taking place.

It is when we turn our attention to this ring that we begin to ask questions about school and district leadership, and how they support coaching work. We begin to ask about school and district visions for instructional leadership, systems and structures for communication and collaboration among adults, and systems for understanding and evaluating coaching work. These questions help us focus our attention beyond student and adult learning, and instead begin to consider the organization and learning of the entire school as a system.

Researchers who study coaching have just begun to turn their attention to the ways in which coaching influences and is influenced by school and district contextual factors (Hannan & Russell, 2020; Kraft et al., 2018; Mangin, 2014; Woulfin, 2015; Woulfin et al., 2023). Research questions have begun to mirror some of the questions that we are increasingly asking coaches and leaders to think about when they consider the efficacy of a coaching program, including the following:

- How might the district support ongoing coach professional learning?
- How is coaching being framed by school and district leaders?
- How does overall school culture and climate support or inhibit coaching work?
- Is there a common mission and vision for coaching shared among all schools in a district?
- How might state or national policies influence coaching work in a particular school or district?

It is becoming clearer, both in research and practice, that we must answer these and other contextual questions to explain and take ownership of the ways in which context influences coaching work across entire schools and districts.

It is this last piece of the framework, this final outer focus ring, that we are perhaps most excited to introduce in this book. Given that coaches often operate as “go-betweens” (Thomas et al., 2022, p. 113) among teachers, school leaders, and district leaders, they are often responsible for interpreting the policies, practices, expectations, beliefs, and attitudes of one group to another. It is often coaches who make the decisions about which aspects of a specific policy to adopt, and which to ignore (Woulfin, 2015; Woulfin et al., 2023). As recent research has revealed, context can vary widely from school to school and district to district, and these varied contexts do indeed seem to shape coaching efforts over time (Hannan & Russell, 2020). Therefore, it is within this final focus ring on the *context of coaching* (Chapters 8, 9, and 10) that we ask and answer context-related questions that make all the difference to the success of coaching programs and processes.



## A FINAL NOTE ABOUT ALIGNMENT ACROSS THE CCIC FRAMEWORK

For us (Jacy and Rita), helping coaches, leaders, and teachers to consider both the content and context of their specific coaching programs has been a professional privilege, and we have found that schools and districts able to consider all three focus rings together are well-positioned to create, evaluate, and sustain robust coaching programs over time. Moreover, it is in the alignment of content, coaching, and context that we see the greatest progress in creating equitable learning opportunities and outcomes for students. Ultimately, even though educators may wish simply to focus on coaching roles, responsibilities, and practices to build and support coaching programs, we have found that the most effective programs are those in alignment with both content- and context-dependent factors.

While schools and districts may begin their investigative and design work around coaching programs at different points, we find it helpful to start by thinking a bit about schools as systems and learning organizations (Chapter 2). We then recommend walking through the CCIC Framework starting at the center (Chapters 3 and 4) and moving slowly outward to explore the coaching programs that influence the instructional core (Chapters 5, 6, and 7), before finally considering the larger organizational context that shapes all work in schools (Chapters 8, 9, and 10). Therefore, we have arranged the chapters in this book to mirror that thinking process.

Of course, we invite you to dip in and out of chapters as you see fit, to serve the needs of your own context first and foremost. In Figure 1.4, we offer a simple note-taking and intention-setting tool as a way for you, as readers, to jot down some initial thinking and set some personal intentions for learning and reflection as you begin this book. Consider what may already be *in focus* (i.e., well-developed, widely agreed upon, widely shared) versus what may be *fuzzy* (i.e., undeveloped, unspecified, unclear) in each of the three areas of the CCIC Framework when applied to your setting. This initial note taking might then guide you in setting intentions for both close reading of specific sections of this book and prompting early thinking about the alignment (or misalignment) of these domains in your school or district.

## SUMMARY

In this chapter, we have introduced the Content and Coaching in Context (CCIC) Framework and have argued that effective coaching programs and processes must necessarily attend to the specific content (i.e., instructional

The Content of Coaching	Coaching Programs and Processes	The Context of Coaching
What seems <i>in focus</i> in your school or district, when considering each area of the framework?		
What is clear and widely agreed upon and communicated?		
What seems <i>fuzzy</i> in your school or district, when considering each area of the framework?		
What is undeveloped, unspecified, unclear?		

**FIGURE 1.4.** Initial note taking and intention setting considering the CCIC Framework.

From *The Power of Instructional Coaching in Context: A Systems View for Aligning Content and Coaching* by Jacy Ippolito and Rita M. Bean. Copyright © 2024 The Guilford Press. Permission to photocopy this figure, or to download and print enlarged copies ([www.guilford.com/ippolito-forms](http://www.guilford.com/ippolito-forms)), is granted to purchasers of this book for personal use or use with students; see copyright page for details.

core, target of coaching work) and context (i.e., larger school systems and structures for communication and collaboration) present in each school or district setting. We outlined the three focus rings of the CCIC Framework and offered initial guiding questions that we will begin to ask and answer across the three related sections of this book. Finally, we have ended with a note about the alignment of the three focus rings and how this book might be used as a reflective tool to gauge and increase alignment in your own school setting. Next, before delving into the specifics of each ring of the CCIC Framework, we turn to Chapter 2 for a discussion of why, first and foremost, it is critical to begin seeing schools as a collection of communication and collaboration systems, each of which can be analyzed and influenced intentionally. This is the first step in recognizing and aligning the rings of the CCIC Framework.

### Reflection Activities and Questions

- With your instructional leadership team (or with a representative group of teachers, coaches, and leaders), look at Figure 1.1, *Decontextualized Coaching versus Contextualized Coaching*. Individually annotate the figure, considering the following questions, and then share your thinking.
  - Where would you place your district, school, department, or grade level on each element of the figure?
  - What might it mean if you identify with more of the “decontextualized” statements?
  - What might it mean if there is an equal balance of “decontextualized and contextualized” items?
  - Even if most of the items you identify with are “contextualized,” what further insights might be gained from thinking about coaching work in this way, in your school setting?
- With your instructional leadership team (or with a representative group of teachers, coaches, and leaders), look at Figure 1.2, *The Content and Coaching in Context (CCIC) Framework*, and Figure 1.4, *Initial Note Taking and Intention Setting Considering the CCIC Framework*. Individually annotate the final figure, then share your thinking.
  - When thinking about instructional coaching and professional learning in your school, where have you put most of your design and support energy: toward thinking about the instructional core, the coaching program, or the context of the coaching program?
  - Which focus rings of the framework receive the most attention in your school and district? Which might not receive enough attention?

- When coaching work appears to be succeeding, where do you look for evidence of that success?
- When coaching work appears to be struggling, where do you look for evidence of that struggle?
- **Virtual Connection:** Review the *Educational Leadership* special issue titled “A Culture of Coaching” (November 2019) found at [www.ascd.org/ella-culture-of-coaching](http://www.ascd.org/ella-culture-of-coaching). How do the various authors across the special issue characterize a “culture of coaching”? What might be some initial implications for how to foster a culture of coaching in your own setting?