The Thinking Focus Cohort:

Exploring Teacher Perceptions of Customized Professional Development

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ABSTRACT

In response to a lack of teacher-focused professional development (PD), a Kentucky school district developed and implemented its Thinking Focus Cohort (TFC), a customized professional development program that provides opportunities for training, coaching, and teaching rounds. We undertook a qualitative case study to determine if teachers perceived TFC positively and successful in changing the delivery of PD within the district. Participants identified specific pedagogical skills implemented because of TFC participation, which they perceived as leading to higher teacher self-efficacy and student efficacy. Participants described instructional coaches and teaching rounds positively, serving as catalysts for changes in teachers' pedagogical practices and opportunities for teacher collaboration. We recommend that teacher needs should drive the foci of professional development rather than state mandates. Reticence to miss instructional time and the lack of sufficient substitutes served as potential barriers to participation.

KEYWORDS

professional development, pedagogical practice, instructional coaches, teacher rounds

In its mission to transform the advanced preparation of educational professionals to lead through scholarly practice for the improvement of individuals and communities, the Carnegie Project on the Education Doctorate (CPED) developed its framework, guiding principles, and design concepts. Among these design concepts is the identification of a problem of practice, defined as "a persistent, contextualized, and specific issue embedded in the work of a professional practitioner, the addressing of which has the potential to result in improved understanding, experience, and outcomes" (CPED, n.d., para. 12).

One such persistent problem within many P-12 schools and districts is a lack of meaningful professional development (PD) wherein the needs of teachers drive the foci of the PD provided to them (Coldwell, 2017; Darling-Hammond et al. 2009). Traditional models of professional development often include a *one-size-fits-all* approach through generic workshops, conferences, seminars, and staff meetings (Carter, 2013). These often fall short in providing teachers with the learning they need at different points in their professional careers (Fairman et al., 2023). Critiques of teacher professional development include the passive engagement of participants that lacks opportunities to engage with colleagues, observe expert teachers, or choose the foci professional learning opportunities. This contributes to limited motivation among participants and limited effectiveness in reaching outcomes (Coldwell, 2017; Darling-Hammond et al. 2009).

Such was the case within Bullitt County Public Schools (BCPS), a suburban Kentucky school district. External instructional staff developers contracted by the district visited classrooms and spoke with teachers regarding their prior experiences with professional development. Their findings led to the recommendation that the district alter its provision of professional development, moving away from lectures of content to facilitators of collaborative learning through coaching, opportunities to observe other teachers, and having teachers both identify and drive the focus of their PD. In response, BCPS developed and implemented its Thinking Focus Cohort (TFC).

Intervention Studied—the Thinking Focus Cohort

In Kentucky, administrative regulation (704 KAR 3:305) requires a minimum of 24 hours of professional development per year for educators that, "aligns with standards and goals, focuses on content and pedagogy, occurs collaboratively, is facilitated by educators, focusing on continuous improvement, and is on-going". It defines a professional development program as a "sustained, coherent, relevant, and useful professional development learning process that is measurable by indicators and provides professional learning and ongoing support to transfer that learning practices" (704 KAR 3:305 §1.5).

BCPS followed state regulation, but the district administration felt the district was lacking a quality professional development platform to improve teacher effectiveness and student achievement. External instructional staff developers visited classrooms and spoke with teachers regarding their prior experiences with professional development within the district. They confirmed anecdotal evidence that teachers perceived existing

professional development offerings as ineffective and recommended that the district alter its delivery of professional development. In response, BCPS developed and implemented TFC, a customized professional development experience that provides teachers with training, classroom visits, and coaching to create the foundation for deeper learning experiences and improved pedagogical practices. BCPS briefly highlighted its efforts with district stakeholders via a news brief (Bullitt County Public Schools, 2024).

The district modeled TFC after the Public Education and Business Coalition thinking strategies (Gallagher & Pearson, 1983). The district selected teachers based on feedback from instructional coaches and administrative teams. Selected teachers must continuously display flexibility within their classrooms, growth mindsets, and willingness to take risks supported by expert teachers. In the 2014-2015 school year, BCPS implemented TFC, beginning with 21 educators from across the district and expanding to 68 in 2019-2020 (See Table 1). In 2019-2020, the COVID-19 global pandemic led to the temporary suspension of TFC.

Table 1. TFC Participation in BCPS, 2014-2015 to 2019-2020

Level	2014-2015	2015-2016	2016-2017	2017-2018	2018-2019	2019-2020
Elementary	6	21	14	24	13	31
Middle	6	23	23	23	19	21
High	9	17	18	20	19	16
District	21	61	55	67	51	68

Coaching, within TFC, seeks to personalize the needs of the teachers and to facilitate collaboration and authentic engagement between teachers and coaches. Instructional coaches are also able to facilitate teacher rounds, assisting the teacher to experience the desired instructional strategies. Table 2 provides a curriculum overview of the TFC and facilitators in use.

Table 2. Annual Curriculum and Facilitators of TFC

Month	Curriculum	Facilitator
July	Welcome & Introductions	Director of Secondary & Elementary Education
August	Community	Instructional Coaches
September	Thinking Strategies	Instructional Coaches
October	Teacher Rounds	Instructional Coaches
November	Coaching Cycles	Instructional Coaches
December	Gradual Release of Responsibility	Instructional Coaches
January	Teacher Rounds	Instructional Coaches
February	Gradual Release of Responsibility	Instructional Coaches
March	Academic Discourse	Instructional Coaches
April	Coaching Cycles	Instructional Coaches
May	Celebration & Closing	Director of Secondary & Elementary Education

RESEARCHER POSITIONALITY

To mitigate biases that may result from one's own subjective experiences within the collection and interpretation of data, we utilized Milner's (2007) framework, which seeks to explore researchers' roles, responsibilities, and positionalities; empower researchers in the research process; and hold researchers more accountable to the communities and people with whom they conduct research. These personal explorations were important, as the lead researcher formerly served as an administrator within the case study district and was involved with the development and implementation of the TFC professional development program. We discuss these in summary form below by author/researcher.

Lead Author

As a practicing scholar-practitioner, I have experienced and believe in the power of life-long learners through the impact that professional development has on an educator's ability to improve student learning. Unfortunately, like many of my colleagues, I have also experienced dreadful, compliance-driven professional development. I do not want any other educators to have the same negative experience. As the former Director of Secondary Education within the cooperating district that served as the context of this study, and an educator at heart, I am intently aware of the challenges our educators face today to engage and empower our students with 21st century skills all while covering rigorous standards. Then and now, I want to provide teachers with energizing, impactful, and transformative professional development. I want our educators to have strategies that not only tie to their professional growth but are readily applicable to their content and increase student engagement. I want them to have a community of learners through coaching and observations of other educators. I also wanted to know if educators perceived the district's investment and intervention (TFC) positively. If not, how could it improve?

Second Author

Given that the lead researcher formerly served as an administrator within the case study district and was involved with the development and implementation of TFC, we sought to mitigate this limitation by involving a second researcher external to the district (Gore et al., 2021; Miller et al., 2019) with no involvement in the development and implementation of professional development within the district.

As a former educational practitioner from the state of Mississippi, I served as both a participant and provider of professional development for educators. These prior experiences with professional development—good, bad, and mediocre—shaped my design and delivery of PD in my former school and district. I sought to offer better PD than what I received. It was only in my advanced graduate studies that I realized that I had not leveraged existing research on PD to improve what I provided. I look back on those PD sessions with remorse. I unintentionally utilized some effective instructional strategies but tended to rely on traditional models of delivery (e.g., one-size-fits-all approach through generic workshops). My prior experiences enduring and delivering PD certainly shaped my perspective on the problem of practice addressed in our study, as did my exposure to existing research on PD and subsequent delivery of PD to educators in schools, districts, and in higher education.

REFLECTIONS ON CPED'S GUIDING PRINCIPLES

Given that CPED and its journal, *Impacting Education,* seek to provide a forum where academics and practitioners alike may publish scholarly articles that meaningfully contribute to the improved preparation of PK-20 educational leaders, a reflection on CPED's six guiding principles (n.d.) within the context of our present study is in order (See Table 3). Our reflections suggest strong alignment between our study of teachers' perceptions of TFC and CPED's guiding principles.

Table 3. Authors' Reflections on CPED's Guiding Principles

CPED Guiding Principles	TFC Study
Framed around questions of equity, ethics, and social justice to bring about solutions to complex problems of practice.	The lack of teacher-focused PD within the district evinced inequitable responses to teachers' unique needs going unmet prior to implementing and studying TFC.
Prepares leaders who can construct and apply knowledge to make a positive difference in the lives of individuals, families, organizations, and communities.	The study is derived from a dissertation-in-practice undertaken at the University of Louisville (UofL), a CPED-member institution. Graduates learn to develop and apply research to persistent problems of practice in P-12 schools and districts.
Provides opportunities for candidates to develop and demonstrate collaboration and communication skills to work with diverse communities and to build partnerships.	UofL EdD. students are expected to collaborate with faculty advisors and school/district stakeholders in developing and implementing research studies. Once findings are generated, students are expected to share their findings with other educators, cooperating schools, and cooperating districts.
Provides field-based opportunities to analyze problems of practice and use multiple frames to develop meaningful solutions.	Lead author served as a district-level leader within the cooperating district, collecting data in situ. Authors engaged in explorations of researcher positionality using Milner's (2007) framework.
Grounded in and develops a professional knowledge base that integrates both practical and research knowledge, which links theory with systemic and systematic inquiry.	Study framed by Knowles's (1973, 1980) andragogy theory (1980), and Bandura's (1997) social cognitive theory.
Emphasizes the generation, transformation, and use of professional knowledge and practice.	Findings informed district decision-making regarding sustainment and improvements to TFC within the district.

We sought to determine if teacher participants perceived the district's intervention positively and successful in addressing the problem of practice that centers our manuscript—the lack of teacher-focused PD. We asked the following research questions:

- After participating in TFC, do teachers perceive the teacher-focused professional development program positively and improving their pedagogical practice?
- After participating in TFC, do teachers perceive instructional coaching positively and improving their pedagogical practice?
- After participating in TFC, do teachers perceive teaching rounds positively and improving their pedagogical practice?

REVIEW OF RELEVANT LITERATURE

Researchers have sought to identify the characteristics of effective professional development for teachers. These characteristics include meaningful, ongoing professional development aligned with students' needs, time to implement the strategies learned, and opportunities for collaboration, coaching, and reflection on the content and strategies taught to them (Bailey & Jakicic, 2019; Long; 2014; Wallace, 2014; Wei et al., 2010; Yoon et al., 2007). These stand in contrast to those of traditional models of professional development, which are typically *one-size-fits-all* approaches delivered by means of *sit-and-get* workshops, conferences, seminars, and staff meetings with passively engaged and unenthusiastic participants (Carter, 2013).

A growing body of evidence suggests that coaching improves teachers' instruction and student achievement (e.g., Allen et al., 2011; Campbell & Malkus, 2011; Garrett et al., 2019; Kraft et al., 2018; Matsumura et al., 2010). Ongoing, individualized instructional coaching that provides active learning opportunities and alignment with teachers' needs supports them as they implement instructional practices within their classrooms, yielding improved student and teacher outcomes (Kraft et al., 2018). Instructional coaches draw from their learning communities' knowledge or their abilities to facilitate collective learning while collaborating with individuals or teams of teachers. Instructional coaches can help teachers incorporate elements of effective professional development with learning communities, being a strength of the practice when developed and implemented adequately (Woulfin & Rigby, 2017).

Researchers reveal that effective instructional coaches require organizational skills, collaboration, communication, time management, leadership, and building and sustaining positive relationships between the coach and teachers (Calo et al., 2015; Gross, 2012; Smith, 2012). Coaches who assume the role of peer can facilitate opportunities for collaboration and growth more than those who assume the role of evaluator. Peer relationships build confidence in the coached teachers as well as trust and rapport between the coach and the coached (Calo et al., 2015; Gross, 2012).

Although coaching for teachers is a prevalent approach to improve pedagogical practice and student learning, there are often challenges as instructional coaches begin their work (Blamey et al., 2008; Gross, 2010; Miller & Stewart, 2013). The transition from individual practice of teachers to community practice and learning can be challenging and generate fear amongst teachers (Leahy et al., 2025). In addition, the lack of support from school administrators and teacher time present further challenges that mitigate the success of coaching (Miller & Stewart, 2013). Shelton et al. (2023) found that despite having a literacy coach in their school, many teachers did not report receiving coaching even though literacy support to students with disabilities was needed.

Drawing from medical rounds that doctors use in hospitals (Del Prete, 2013), teacher rounds are another form of teacher professional development. Typically consisting of pre-classroom visit preparation, the classroom visit, and post-classroom visit debriefing, teacher rounds provide an opportunity for educators to learn what is happening in classrooms in a systematic, purposeful way. Australian studies (Gore & Rickards, 2021; Gore et al., 2021; Prieto et al., 2015) reveal that teaching rounds are a useful means of professional development for teachers across a range of experiences levels and school levels. Pre-service teachers reported valuing the practice-based experiences and the opportunities to reflect on their teaching and that of others (Prieto et al., 2015). Prieto et al. also found that pre-service teachers enrolled in a master's degree in teaching were significantly more insightful about planning for and reflecting upon teaching practice than those in undergraduate degree programs.

Gore et al. (2021) implemented a four-arm cluster randomized controlled trial to, among other things, compare participation in a quality teaching rounds (QTR) group to a *usual-practice* control group in terms of student achievement (reading, mathematics and science). They found QTR participation had a significant and positive effect ($p < 0.000$) on student mathematics achievement ($p < 0.000$) and reading achievement ($p < 0.004$) among the QTR group in comparison to the usual practice control group.

Gore and Rickards (2021) identified three components of high quality teacher rounds critical to instructional improvements. These were the adequate provision of time afforded teachers to refocus on quality teaching and to observe teaching and learning. Finally, teachers value a process of teacher rounds founded on trust in and respect for teachers. The ongoing examination, analysis, and evaluation of professional development is necessary in order to reveal the aspects of professional development that facilitate or impede their effectiveness with teachers (Zambak et al., 2017).

METHODS & DATA

We undertook a qualitative case study (Yin, 2018) of BCPS's TFC model. We drew upon three sources of data: document analyses, one-on-one semi-structured interviews, and a group level assessment (GLA). Qualitative document analysis (QDA) provides a systemic, reflective, methodological process for gathering meaning from document evidence (Bowen, 2009). Our QDA consisted of a review of district documents, training materials, and notes from external observers, ranging from the infancy of the cohort groups in 2014-2015 until 2019-2020. Consisting of seven steps (climate setting, generating, appreciating, reflecting, understanding, selecting, and action), GLA is a qualitative, participatory, and collaborative data collection model that allows the researcher to work with participants in the generation, analysis, and prioritization of information from their own perspectives (Vaughn & Lohmueller, 2014).

There are limitations and strengths of every research design, including qualitative case studies. One limitation is the inability to generalize findings to other educative contexts (Yin, 2018), but as Stake (2005) noted, "the purpose of a case report is not to represent the world, but to represent the case" (p. 460). Indeed, one strength of case studies includes the ability to provide an in-depth understanding of complex phenomena within their natural environments (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Yin, 2018).

In terms of the implementation timeline of this study, the university's institutional review board approved our application on March 2, 2022. Once approved, data collection commenced in March 2022. Throughout the study, data collection and analysis occurred simultaneously, following Miles et al. (2014) and Strauss and Corbin (1990). Data collection activities concluded in June 2022, allowing time to focus on data analysis, interpretation, and presentation of conclusions and implications for policy, practice, and future research from June 2022 until November 2022 when the dissertation-in-practice was defended and concluded.

In total, 30 teachers participated in this study (See Table 4) – 16 participated in semi-structured interviews and 14 participated in the GLA. We sought to maximize the variation of participants in terms of grade levels (elementary, middle, high) and cohort membership (2014-2015 to 2019-2020). To protect their identities, we assigned pseudonyms to individual participants (e.g., LM, KS)

Qualitative data analysis was initially theory-driven, drawing upon Knowles's (1973, 1980) andragogy theory and Bandura's (1997) social cognitive theory, particularly the construct of teacher efficacy. Research reveals that higher levels of teacher self-efficacy are associated with higher levels of job satisfaction, well-being and school effectiveness, specifically with student success (e.g., Gulistan et al., 2017).

Table 4. Study Participants and their Cohort Membership

Level	2014-2015	2015-2016	2016-2017	2017-2018	2018-2019	2019-2020
Total Elementary			3	1		6
			1*	1*		3*
			2**			3**
Total Middle	1		5	2	1	1
	1*		1*	2*	1*	1*
			4**			
Total High		1	3	3	1	2
		1*	2*	2*		
			1**	1**	1**	2**

*Notes: * = Semi-Structured Interviews; ** = GLA*

In terms of strategies to strengthen the credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability of our study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), we sought to triangulate our findings through multiple sources of data. We used member checking following the GLA and interviews through sharing transcripts. We sought to provide rich, thick description of the participants and research process to enable the readers to determine whether our findings are transferable to other educational settings.

FINDINGS

Teachers' Perceptions of TFC and its Influence on Pedagogical Practice

Four themes emerged from our participants regarding their perceptions of TFC and resulting changes in their pedagogical practices. These were perceptions of their own pedagogical skills, improvements in their self-efficacy, perceptions of improvements in their students' efficacy, and transformational teaching.

Pedagogical Skills

Participants in both semi-structured interviews and GLA revealed they learned intentional pedagogical strategies, as they chose words like gradual release of responsibility (incrementally transferring responsibility for learning from the teacher to the student). JH stated, "The gradual release of responsibility was the most difficult to master. However, it has made a huge impact on my student engagement, which is why I am still working on it." Similarly, NT shared "I have always struggled with allowing students time to reflect at the end of the workshop lesson. After attending the Thinking Focus Cohort, I intentionally implemented it throughout my lessons."

Teacher Self-Efficacy: Low to High

Our participants contrasted their perceptions of self-efficacy before and after participating in TFC. For example, KS stated, "I didn't know how to come up with stuff on my own. I didn't know my voice as a teacher. I didn't know anything about myself as an educator." LM mirrored KS sharing, "I know where I wanted to be as an educator, but I didn't know how to get started."

After participating in TFC, participants reported perceptions of higher self-efficacy. Participants shared they had received a variety of what they perceived as valuable new instructional strategies, seeing them modeled and implemented within classes. For example, KS explained, "What was most beneficial for me was that Thinking Focus Cohort enabled me to find my individuality. It gave me my voice as a teacher." TP stated, "It recharges you, building the internal belief I can do this and what else can I try without fear."

Perceptions of Greater Student Efficacy

Our participants also perceived greater self-efficacy among their students. LM stated, "Before I thought student engagement was just listening. I quickly realized that is not active engagement. Now my students have tools such as a whiteboard or a graphic organizer to support their thinking and learning." Like LM, JH shared, "I went from a low engaged classroom to a completely student-centered engaged classroom. I give them opportunities for productive failure where we discuss what went well and what didn't. Shifting to this style of lesson has increased student ownership."

Transformational Teaching

Transformational teaching involves creating dynamic relationships between teachers, students, and a shared body of knowledge to promote student learning and personal growth, such as improved lesson planning or pedagogical skills. Transformational teachers share best practices, build mentoring relationships, observe their peers, keep things fresh by modeling their subject's usefulness (Slavich & Zimbardo, 2012). Participants chose words such as transformational lesson planning, causing educators to become facilitators of learning instead of dictators of learning. WP explained, "Thinking Focus Cohort has been a game changer for me. I have been able to create lessons that are engaging, provide opportunities for students to work in groups, and have a much higher classroom synergy than ever before." Other participants discussed specific components that transformed their lesson planning and pedagogical skills. For example, KK stated the shift in engagement, "My students were used to sitting in rows. I did the talking. I have implemented the workshop model I learned. It has made me a better teacher. Its help students talk about their learning."

Teachers' Perceptions of TFC's Instructional Coaches

Four themes emerged from our participants regarding their perceptions of TFC's use of instructional coaches. These were fostering improvements, mentoring, transformational changes in instruction, and collaboration.

Fostering Improvements

Our participants revealed that instructional coaches fostered improvements in teaching. For example, KK shared, "Our instructional coach is very supportive, always being accessible and in my classroom to help." KS explained, "Our instructional coach has been very, very helpful in listening and supporting me in anything I want to try to implement." NT described, "Our instructional coach knew how to make me better through their ideas and creative thinking." JH stated, "The instructional coach is instrumental in illustrating what outcomes are possible and giving you a goal to work towards." DH shared, "Our instructional coach supported your learning allowing you to determine your growth and draw out from other observations to get you further than you thought you could get on your own."

Other participants identified content specific opportunities within the TFC modeled curriculum. WP explained, "The instructional coach had a huge impact in my classroom. He would help me create engaging lessons and then follow through with it with me." SR was similar to WP in describing the support of their instructional coach, stating, "I didn't know how to activate a schema with parallel lines and angles. The instructional coach gave me a simple idea of printing pictures of real-life examples and having students identify them." AL stated their instructional coach, "encouraged and coached me through my growth process. The instructional coach first supported me in the implementation of community building, truly focusing on creating a space for students to own their learning and feel safe to take risks." SM stated, "The instructional coach kept me calm during teacher rounds and had a wealth of ideas to make something simple much more engaging, which was better than my ideas."

Mentoring

Participants described instructional coaches as mentors to help them in their shifts in pedagogical strategies. For example, LM explained, "I realized I had work to do so I signed up for a coaching cycle because I had a lot to process. My instructional coach was there and ready to support me through the coaching cycle." ST described, "Our instructional coach is one those people I could approach. She coached me in reading and writing multiple times." WP stated, "I would develop an idea in science, and our instructional coach would watch me deliver during class. After we would debrief and with his coaching, we developed ideas to see if engagement would be better." JH explained, "My growth area is goal-oriented planning. My instructional coach coached and showed me what those outcomes could be." KS stated, "I am a very rigid person. Things, in my mind, were due at a certain time. Our instructional coach has pushed my thinking in coaching cycles, helping me manage that internal drive to slow down, letting the kids think." NP explained, "Our instructional coach would come into our classroom, observe, and provide feedback. She even helped plan a lesson and even came into our classroom to help or model when I was struggling."

Other participants identified specific ideas or overall impact on their teaching from the instructional coach. KA stated during science classes, "You should incorporate thinking strategies while reading scientific information, but I didn't know how. Our instructional coach helped coach me on how to implement a thinking strategy to support my students to increase their literary components as a scientist." SR share their instructional coach, "helped capture the attention of my students through their creative ideas of hooks as I designed lessons using workshop model. The instructional coach coached me on hooks. Due to their coaching, my students were more engaged through my implementation."

Transformational Changes in Instruction

Participants in our study describe the role of coaches in transforming their classroom instruction. Participants used the phrase, *challenge thinking*, to support their transformation of their pedagogical skills. JH explained, "Without our instructional coach, my thinking, and setting a goal to work towards, I wouldn't have guidance to improve my teaching. I'm getting more support and better at my craft. I know this because my students are showing me." LM stated that their instructional coach, "helped [them] think about those students who already get it and how I can push their thinking, while still pulling those who need re-teaching. Our instructional coach challenged my process I originally used to make me a better educator." KS stated their instructional coach, "helped me to manage that drive that I believed centered around the pacing guide. The instructional coach helped me through reflection of my teaching and student assessment to let the kids take longer to think and showcase their learning." SM shared their instructional coach was a "phenomenal asset. I asked how to make something exciting after I described what content I wanted students to learn. The instructional coach would challenge my thinking by focusing on the learning outcome rather than the activity, making it better." SR explained, "I wanted my students to talk more. Our instructional coach challenged my thinking to set up activities to allow for more discussions, which was awesome."

Other participants described how instructional coaches increased their pedagogical skills through reflection or professional learning, which increased the teachers' self-efficacy. NP described their instructional coach implementing a book study and its impact, "Our instructional coach would observe me teaching. Afterwards we would meet, reflecting on my implementation by discussing strengths and what I would like to change. I changed because of her coaching and support, not because I was told to." DH was similar to NP, stating, "Every time we have a cohort meeting we reflect on our progress. Our instructional coach was more beneficial and powerful because she helped see, support, and continue to reflect on our progress to improve my teaching craft." CM explained their instructional coach, "caused me to dig deeper, realizing I have great ideas. When we met, I shifted from 'I don't know' to 'here is what I think we could do', which was such a change in my belief as an educator."

Collaboration

Participants revealed that their coaches created collaborative partnerships with them. KS stated, "I would always get writer's block when coming up with lessons. Our instructional coach was always good at collaboration of ideas. Some of the best lessons have come from bouncing ideas off the instructional coach." Similarly, NP stated, "Throughout the Thinking Focus Cohort and beyond, our instructional coach was in and out of my classroom. We would collaborate before, during, and after school, focusing on what I want to try in order to stretch my teaching."

Some participants described specific instructional strategies while others described the time collaborated with their instructional coaches. DH stated, "I wanted my students to talk more academically. I learned how to create dialogue through questioning. Our instructional coach and I collaborated to allow my students to experience this since this is where I had such growth." WP shared, "I wanted to improve the lessons I delivered. Our instructional coach and I explored certain ideas together by honing in on my thoughts to help generate better thoughts, which in turn were more engaging." CM, KA and SR described the frequency of their collaboration with each of their instructional coaches. CM explained, "Our instructional coach and I collaborated all of the time. It was easy to pick her brain and support my teaching capacity." KA described, "I met with my instructional coach on a weekly basis my first three years of teaching. We collaborated on everything, classroom management, engagement, instructional strategies, assessments; basically everything." SR stated, "Our instructional coach and I met weekly. We collaborated on grading, assessment creation and results, and mini lessons to help improve my teaching."

Teachers' Perceptions of TFC's Instructional Rounds

TFC participants initially reported not wanting to leave their classrooms to observe others, as accountability policies and teacher evaluations draw, in part, from the test scores of their students. After overcoming this reticence, our participants described TFC's instructional rounds as exemplar modeling, facilitating collaboration within the district, transforming instruction, and increasing teacher self-efficacy.

Exemplar Modeling

Exemplar modeling was the most frequent theme used by the participants in describing teacher rounds. CM stated, "One thing I really enjoyed was getting in and getting to see actual implementation of one component of the Thinking Focus Cohort." NT was similar to CM sharing, "I'm a visual learner. So definitely just seeing it happen during live instruction was powerful for me." WP explained, "When I went to another high school's classroom, I observed the science teacher in action. It was very helpful to see what implementation looks like in practice, not just theory, not just discussion." SR was similar to WP describing, "Talking and learning about each component of the Thinking Focus was good. Just getting to see how other teachers had implemented those components was really helpful for me."

Some participants mentioned specific components of TFC they saw during teacher rounds. DH explained, "You can't understand the implementation of a strategy, like Thinking Strategies, without seeing it in person." KK described, "It was really nice to see how a math lesson can be better and more engaging through the implementation of the workshop model." SM stated, "For me, to be able to enter into other teachers' classrooms and see how they put their own twist on think strategies and incorporating the idea of gradual release, merged all of the learning together." ST explained, "I wanted to change academic discourse for my students but didn't know how. Just seeing other teachers do this and seeing how it works helped me to see how I could change." KA summarizes, "I am a visual learner and not so much auditory. I heard all of the components of TFC and the instructional pillars. Definitely seeing it modeled was better, especially since I could see it in action."

Collaboration within District

Participants appreciated the opportunity to collaborate with other teachers from across the district. For example, KS described, "It's nice to see my peers teaching. Seeing what they struggle with versus what I struggle with and then be able to talk about." NP shared that, "having conversations and having the ability to ask questions afterwards was huge. It gave me a plateful of strategies

that I could use and a lot of people I could reach out to if I have any questions." SM explained, "I learned from every classroom because I witnessed with my eyes and ears teachers being creative in all these different pieces. Plus, I expanded my network of collaboration within the district." CM responded similarly to SM, explaining, "I feel like getting to visit classrooms, that's the golden opportunity we all want. It was great to hear someone else experiencing the same thing from a different point of view." As TP put it, "It's always a good thing to see others in action. It's imperative if we want to continue to move forward with the Thinking Focus Cohort. Collaboration is impeccable and would not take the teacher rounds away because of this."

Our participants noted that participating in TFC, interacting with coaches, and engaging in teacher rounds created opportunities for them to step out of their classroom and school to collaborate with each other. Participants expressed the desire for more teacher rounds, divulging that the experience outweighed the instructional time lost. However, they acknowledged that doing so would increase their time away from their students and increase the need for more substitutes at a time when substitutes are hard to get.

Transformational Changes to Instruction

Participants remarked how seeing specific activities and practices in action during teacher rounds assisted in the transformation of their pedagogical practice. SM stated, "What I learned after going into every classroom I walked into, we all had some foundation. Everyone implements them differently in their classroom. We all get better each time because we see it in action." Other participants discussed how the teacher rounds were the most memorable activity leading to the overall transformation in their teaching. NT shared, "For me, the Thinking Focus Cohort was definitely the most memorable professional development. The most powerful part was seeing others in action because I could then see how to make a change in my classroom." LM described TFC similarly to NT, stating "Seeing those classrooms do different things was huge. It was awesome. I mean Thinking Focus Cohort has totally changed the teacher I want to become or be at the end of the day."

Higher Teacher Self-Efficacy

Participants used words such as beneficial and inspirational when seeing different content. ST stated, "I think watching other classrooms is the most beneficial professional development that anyone can get." JH shared, "I thought I had the only content, science, where learning drives curiosity. However, I saw English and math."

Other participants described their experience with teacher rounds, leaving them wanting more. TP described, "The teacher rounds were the most memorable component. Doing it in your own room is great but going out and seeing them happen with kids in the room, it changes your whole aspect of what can and can't work." KA's response was similar to TP's, stating, "I think teacher rounds are extremely beneficial. That is what truly allowed me to see it working, wanting to be better for my students." AL summarized it by sharing, "The teacher rounds were extremely beneficial. I've gone back to my notes, even the slides the teacher I visited shared. I constantly pull from them because I know it works. I am better for this experience."

Two participants noted how teacher rounds supported their need for students to increase student ownership. LM stated "Through teacher rounds. I saw higher order questioning and students nailed

them. I want to make sure that my students are exposed to high levels of questioning to increase their academic discourse, knowledge, and self-confidence." JH explained, "I have the benefit of letting a student's curiosity drive their learning through their interests. Teacher rounds showed me student ownership through a student's curiosity to drive instruction, thus having students with higher investment in their learning."

DISCUSSION

We now summarize the findings for our research questions, highlighting how our study adds value to practice within the cooperating district and the broader field of educational practice. We then discuss the implications of our findings for policy—at both the district and state-levels. Finally, we conclude with some potential directions for future research.

A persistent problem of practice within many P-12 schools and districts, including the one that served as the context for our study, is a lack of meaningful professional development (PD) with teacher needs driving the foci of the PD provided to them (Coldwell, 2017; Darling-Hammond et al. 2009). After participating in TFC, the participants in our study revealed they overwhelmingly perceived the district's efforts to improve professional development positively. Participants lauded TFC and its facilitators as providing teacher-centered opportunities to engage in learning and professional conversations with other educators, including coaches and district peers. In so doing, TFC helped to create dynamic relationships and a shared body of knowledge to promote student learning, personal growth, improved lesson planning, and pedagogical skills. Participants identified specific pedagogical skills implemented because of participation in TFC, which they perceived as leading to higher teacher self-efficacy and student efficacy. Likewise, our participants perceived TFC's specific professional development strategies—coaching and teacher rounds—as positive experiences that fostered improvements, mentoring, transformational changes in instruction, and collaboration.

Scholars note the existence of competing goals in the provision of professional development. One is the transmission of skills in pursuit of education reform efforts and accountability demands, while the other is the pursuit of professional development for its own sake apart from any education reform efforts and accountability demands (Fairman et al., 2023; Kennedy 2016). Researchers (e.g., Mitchell, 2013) also note that external pressures of accountability predominate professional development emphases. Our participants were certainly aware of federal, state, and local policies that govern the provision of professional development, standards, testing, and accountability. Indeed, participants expressed some reticence to participate in TFC due to concerns over how their participation—and time away from their students—could affect their students' test scores. Otherwise, our participants' responses focused on TFC's benefits in providing opportunities to engage in professional conversations with other educators rather than emphasizing state standards, assessments, and accountability policies. As the superintendent noted in a press release discussing his district's professional development efforts and approach to education, "Test scores aren't our number one; they are not our target" (Bullitt County Public Schools, 2024). Rather, the target is to improve teachers' content knowledge and instructional skills used to prepare their students to succeed in life after high school—the stated mission of the school district. The district leaders and educators that

developed, delivered, and supported TFC sought to balance the requirements of the law by first and foremost providing teacher-centered, collaborative, school-based, job-embedded, and active learning opportunities for its participants yet aligned with school improvement goals and state and district standards (Darling-Hammond et al., 2009; Desimone et al., 2002; Garet et al., 2001; Goddard et al. 2007).

Although our participants perceived TFC and the provision of coaches and teacher rounds positively, they also revealed some conditions that may adversely affect program delivery. To allow for job-embedded professional development, substitutes need to be available to cover teachers participating in TFC as coaches, facilitators, and participants. Currently, schools not only have a shortage of teachers. They also lack substitutes to allow them to attend district professional development opportunities throughout the day. Scholars (e.g., Abbaspour et al., 2024; Hallinger, 2011) highlight the importance of adequate support and resources from educational leaders within the school and district to increase the likelihood of success of professional development.

Kentucky administrative regulation provides clarity regarding the desired outcomes of each professional development offered. However, it does not provide optimal opportunities for job-embedded professional learning and intentional support. Compliance with regulations and laws drives districts rather than the desired intent of professional development. In order to see the desired changes in a teacher's pedagogical practice, the mandated professional development laws need revision by policymakers. Currently, districts and schools must develop a professional development plan that responds to the needs of the students identified in the comprehensive school and/or district improvement plans. The needs of teachers should drive the foci of professional development, and in so doing, one would hope to see improvements in student learning and outcomes.

Part of the continuous improvement process for districts and schools is to analyze professional development continually for its effectiveness in supporting teachers' pedagogical practice. In our study, we drew upon the perspectives of teachers who participated in TFC prior to the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. This poses some opportunities for future research. Firstly, we focused on teachers' perceptions of their experiences as TFC participants. Further research should move beyond perceptions of professional development, focusing on the impact on teachers' observed implementation of pedagogical practices, and particularly their impact on student achievement.

In response to the pandemic, student instruction and the delivery of professional development had to adapt. Researchers (e.g., Fairman et al., 2023; Smith et al., 2024) note the increased use of technology in the delivery of professional development. In future research, scholars may want to compare teacher perceptions of professional development and/or student outcomes prior to and after the pandemic or explore educators' perceptions of different modalities of professional development delivery. One final suggestion for future research is to examine the changes in teacher-created assessments that result from participation in this type of professional development. Examining the teachers' assessment changes, or lack thereof, may be of interest to scholars and practitioners alike.

In summary, the demands of teaching have evolved, in part, due to high stakes accountability systems, but our analysis shows

the importance of high-quality teacher-focused professional development as a means to yield improvements in pedagogical practices, teacher collaboration/sharing, and hopefully, indirect improvements in student learning and outcomes. Greater intentionality in the delivery of high-quality, teacher-focused, professional development may help districts like BCPS mitigate compliance driven by regulations and law, thus making it more meaningful in the eyes of the participants.

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