



Teacher coaching in Kenya: Examining instructional support in public and nonformal schools



Benjamin Piper^{a,*}, Stephanie Simmons Zuilkowski^{b,1}

^a RTI International, Misha Tower, 3rd Floor, 47 Westlands Road, P.O. Box 1181-00621, Village Market, Nairobi, Kenya

^b Learning Systems Institute, Florida State University, University Center C 4600, Tallahassee, FL 32306, USA

HIGHLIGHTS

- Teacher coaching can improve literacy in Kenyan public and nonformal settings.
- The more teachers a coach is responsible for leads to fewer visits per teacher.
- Outcomes are higher for pupils supported by coaches with 10 rather than 15 schools.
- Impact of coaching on outcomes is similar in Kenyan public and nonformal schools.

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ABSTRACT

Instructional coaching has improved student outcomes in the United States, and may help to solve Kenya's literacy problems. Coaching is costly, however, and evidence is lacking regarding the most cost-efficient teacher-to-coach ratio. We used student literacy outcome data from more than 8000 students participating in the Kenya Primary Math and Reading Initiative—a randomized controlled trial of instructional interventions in public and nonformal schools—to fill this gap. Coaches in larger public zones made fewer visits per teacher, and teacher-coach ratio and student performance were negatively associated. Using causal methods, we concluded that lower ratios might improve nonformal school outcomes.

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1. Introduction

In the United States and other developed countries, vast amounts of money, time, and research are devoted to in-service teacher training. In low-resource settings, however, in-service teacher training often falls fairly low on the list of educational priorities, below building schools, buying textbooks, and training new teachers. Yet this failure to attend to the teacher corps' professional development has real consequences for educational systems. Despite the fact that the Millennium Development Goal of universal primary education has been largely achieved in most countries, educational quality, as measured by student outcomes,

has remained stagnant. The teacher is at the core of the process of educating children, and in contexts where teachers are poorly educated and ill-prepared for their roles, effective in-service training and support may help improve outcomes in a sustainable way.

This study focuses on in-service teacher training in Kenya. Kenya has had a gross primary enrollment ratio well above 100% for the past decade (World Bank, 2013), but literacy outcomes remain poor (Mugo, Kaburu, Limboro, & Kimutai, 2011; National Assessment System for Monitoring Learner Achievement, 2010; Onsomu, Nzomo, & Obiero, 2005; Piper, 2010b; Wasanga, Ogle, & Wambua, 2010). In a recent study, just 4.9% and 3.3% of first- and second-grade learners in urban and peri-urban counties met the Kenya National Examinations Council (KNEC) benchmarks for oral reading fluency and comprehension in English and Kiswahili, respectively (Piper & Mugenda, 2012). This low level of literacy performance is not unique to Kenya, as similar challenges are found in many countries in sub-Saharan Africa.

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +254 20 3746671; fax: +254 20 3749921.

E-mail addresses: bpiper@rti.org (B. Piper), szuilkowski@lsi.fsu.edu (S.S. Zuilkowski).

¹ Tel.: +1 850 644 2570.

Outdated and ineffective pedagogy has been cited as one of the central reasons for these poor results. In Kenya, teacher lecture and whole-class oral repetition have been found to be the most common teaching methods, even in the primary grades (Ackers & Hardman, 2001; Dubeck, Jukes, & Okello, 2012; Pontefract & Hardman, 2005). Given large class sizes, lack of sufficient textbooks and materials, and teachers' limited pre-service and nearly non-existent in-service professional development, these findings are not surprising. In order to shift toward research-based pedagogy in this challenging context, teachers need additional pedagogical support. The challenge, in Kenya and other countries in the global South, is to determine how to provide teachers the guidance and support they need within the system's financial constraints. One possible means of supporting teachers in public schools in Kenya is through Teachers' Advisory Centre (TAC) tutors, who report to the Teachers' Service Commission (TSC) under the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology (MoEST).² One TAC tutor is assigned to each administrative zone—a geographically clustered group of schools—and supports from 8 to 30 government primary schools with targeted teacher training and instructional support. While TAC tutors have been in place in public primary schools since the late 1970s, the quality and quantity of services they offer vary widely. Similar systems of instructional support exist elsewhere in eastern and southern Africa, including Ethiopia (cluster supervisors), Uganda (coordinating center tutors), and Malawi (primary education advisors).

Enhancing the pedagogical support services that TAC tutors give to teachers will require a better understanding of the existing workload of the TAC tutors and the number of schools for which each tutor can reasonably offer ongoing instructional supervision. The aim of this study is to provide empirical evidence regarding the most effective ratios of coaches to teachers in Kenyan schools. We also discuss how these varying ratios affect the length and quality of coach–teacher interactions. These findings have critical policy implications for the MoEST in its goals to improve the quality of primary-level literacy instruction, as well as for governments and nongovernmental organizations involved in teacher education and support throughout sub-Saharan Africa.

2. Background and context

2.1. Teacher coaching and student outcomes

The majority of the research on teacher coaching approaches has been conducted in Western countries. In the United States, teacher coaching became widespread after implementation of 2001's No Child Left Behind Act (Dole, 2004), which increased pressure on low-performing schools to show improvement or risk sanctions. The principal's role in guiding his or her staff members has been an important focus on efforts to improve instruction in the U.S. However, a growing number of studies have pointed to the potential of coaches to support teachers to improve achievement, particularly in the area of literacy. Coaching activities vary widely along a spectrum from general conversations about a curriculum to joint lesson planning to modeling and lesson study (Denton & Hasbrouck, 2009; International Reading Association, 2004).

The theoretical approach to coaching in this study follows Guskey's (1985) model of teacher change. In this model, high-quality teacher professional development leads to changes in

pedagogy, which result in improvements in student outcomes. It is after the teachers observe those improvements that changes in teacher beliefs and attitudes occur. This model suggests that teachers require significant support during the implementation stage, as teacher buy-in will not occur until evidence of success is visible to teachers, using informal metrics derived by teachers. One-on-one coaching is one way to provide this direct support. Over time, the instructional change will prove long-lasting, as teachers derive their support for new instructional approaches from personal experiences of success rather than from the influence of the trainer, second-hand anecdotal information, or success stories from elsewhere.

A growing body of research in the U.S. suggests that coaching can have positive effects on teacher pedagogy and student outcomes (Blachowicz, Obrochta, & Fogelberg, 2005; Lovett et al., 2008; Reinke, Stormont, Herman, & Newcomer, 2014; Sailors & Price, 2015; Teemant, 2014; Teemant, Wink, & Tyra, 2011; Vanderburg & Stephens, 2010). Matsumura, Garnier, Correnti, Junker, and DiPrima Bickel (2010) investigated the effects of content-focused coaching (CFC) on new teachers recruited into a district that suffered from a high turnover rate among its teaching staff. Their findings indicated that the coaching program predicted significantly higher school-level gains on the state standardized test for English-language learners compared to schools whose teachers were not provided CFC. A value-added analysis of the Literacy Collaborative program, which included teacher coaching, found that it positively impacted student literacy outcomes (Biancarosa, Bryk, & Dexter, 2010). In South Carolina, coached teachers' pedagogy aligned more closely with state and national best practices (Stephens et al., 2007). A study in Michigan found that a professional development program for first-grade teachers that included coaching outperformed programs involving seminars or seminars plus self-evaluation, in terms of improving pedagogy (Carlisle, Cortina, & Katz, 2011). The success of these programs with pupils in the early primary grades and with second-language learners carries weight for countries like Kenya that are struggling to meet basic literacy goals, and indicates that enhanced coaching programs may prove effective in helping Kenyan teachers improve their pedagogy.

The amount of time coaches or tutors spent one-on-one with teachers appeared to be a critical factor in changing teacher behavior and subsequently improving student outcomes (L'Allier, Elish-Piper, & Bean, 2010; Ross, 1992). In a study of 20 Reading First coaches in the United States, Bean, Draper, Hall, Vandermolen, and Zigmond (2010) identified an association between the amount of time that coaches spent with teachers and teachers' attitudes toward their coaches—i.e., more time improved the relationship. Additionally, the authors concluded that coaches who spent more time working with teachers directly, as opposed to managing other tasks, were more effective in increasing student reading proficiency in first and second grades. Shidler (2009) found that, in the first year of a coaching program designed to support Head Start teachers in literacy instruction, the amount of time coaches spent with teachers was correlated with student knowledge of the alphabet.³ In a large urban district in the U.S., Elish-Piper and L'Allier (2011) identified a relationship between coaching time and higher scores on the Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS) assessment among second-grade students. As would be expected, the number of teachers assigned to a coach impacts the amount of direct support that coach can provide to individual

² Kenya also has numerous independent *nonformal* schools (also known as *low-cost private schools* or *complementary schools*) that do not receive financial support from the government or pedagogical support from TAC tutors. More about the distinctions between these two school types appears in the Methodology section.

³ Head Start is a U.S. program designed to improve school readiness through community-based daily instructional support programs for preschool-aged children.

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