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**CONNECTING AND COMMUNICATING: THE ACTIVATION
OF MIDDLE SCHOOL PARENTS AS LEARNING COACHES
FOR ELA CLASSROOMS IN ONLINE CHARTER SCHOOLS**

A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
Louisiana State University and
Agricultural and Mechanical College
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

in

The School of Education

by

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To Lou. Your long talk in the boat that one day paid off. I didn't settle.
I wish you could be here to see the cool hat I got.

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ABSTRACT

In recent years, K-12 online charter schools have seen increased enrollment as parents and guardians seek alternate options for educating their children. Online schools provide opportunities for flexibility, individualization, and continuous learning when in-person learning is not available. However, research on K-12 online schooling is currently minimal despite enrollment. Further, little to no research explores middle school online students or delves into the stakeholders who support students. Some online schools have employed a Learning coach—an adult assigned to work with a student at home. Learning coaches can be an asset for engaging learning. The researcher asks the following questions: How are learning coaches utilized and supported by middle school ELA teachers in online schools? How do parents of middle school students enact their role as learning coaches in online schools?

This study investigated the role of learning coaches in an online school system to understand better how learning coaches work with students and the school and, second, determine what strategies or tools the school uses to assist learning coach practice. The mixed-methods study evaluates learning coach roles from the school and a middle school parent's perspective. The researcher collected interviews from five middle school English Language Arts teachers, a learning coach teacher who was an employee responsible for working exclusively with Learning coaches, and five middle school parents who were the assigned learning coach for their child. Moreover, the researcher analyzed ELA courses for curriculum content and communication to determine how teachers interacted with Learning Coaches through the content. The researcher also studied school-produced literature for Learning Coaches to establish the school district's expectations of Coaches. Finally, the researcher surveyed middle school

Learning Coaches as quantitative data to further understand the enactment and utilization of Coaches.

The findings of the study revealed three major themes regarding Learning Coach roles. The first was that learning coaches are monitors and supporters of their students. The second was that Learning Coaches maintain a partnership with the school to create a learning environment that aligns with school expectations. The third theme was the importance of developing effective communication and connections between home and school. The implications of this study show strategies and structures online schools and traditional schools can implement when distance learning.

CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

Learning in the 21st-century is evolving at a rapid pace. The shape of the classroom is beginning to change as educators, parents, and policymakers begin to consider what new learning looks like. Acedo and Hughes (2014) note, "A 21st-century curriculum should have a strong emphasis on learning, and on learning to learn, as these stand at the center of meaningful education" (p. 507). Today's students need more robust learning experiences that encompass the ability to receive information, produce information, think critically, collaborate, and gain digital literacy skills vital for the current world (Donnovan et al., 2014; Kivunja, 2014).

Online schooling is one option that has emerged as a response to changing times and students. Computer-based learning has the potential to promote access and an individualized learning experience that traditional schools cannot. Etherington (2008) gave an early reflection of what online learning could do to and for traditional schooling arguing that online learning could impact epistemologies and the way education is traditionally considered (pp. 34-35). Opposition to traditional educational practices is perhaps what is needed to improve education. Practices like flipped learning and self-directed learning allow for students to take on most of the cognitive load, which promotes the qualities of a 21st-century curriculum (Bond, 2019; Uus et al., 2019). Online learning is primed—and perhaps better-suited—for achieving this goal, as traditional education often does not meet the needs of a 21st-century student.

Online learning through virtual schools, often referred to as cyber charter schools in the United States, online schools, or online charters (used interchangeably throughout), has been gaining traction over the past two decades as an option for students and parents seeking alternative learning choices. Cyber charter schools are characterized by the school's remote structure—students and teachers working in different locations with the internet and learning

management system or other programs being the bridge between the two. Additionally, cyber charters are public, meaning they are open to all students as a school of choice, often at no cost. Many cyber charter schools offer "standards-aligned curriculums, employ certified teachers and require students to take proctored state standardized tests," giving students a comparable experience with more control and flexibility over their learning than their public school counterparts (Revenaugh, 2006, p. 61). Because of adaptable funding, online charters can often provide students with all necessary materials for learning, including laptops, internet subsidies, or tangible materials which offset disparities in socioeconomic status of enrolled students.

Despite higher attrition rates, enrollment in K-12 online schools has steadily increased since their inception nearly two decades ago. Demographically, the majority of students enrolled are white, although by only a small percentage, and online schools received Title I funding at a lower rate than public schools in similar areas (Mann, 2019). Parents seek out online schools because of increased autonomy, flexibility, innovation, or individualization. As online schools are schools of choice, parents make conscious decisions to send students despite a lack of accountability and lower-quality curricula. Due to the non-standard structure of cyber charter schools, students often face lower performance on test scores (Borup & Stevens, 2015; Mann & Baker, 2019). In Louisiana alone, all of the cyber charter schools received a D grade for the 2018-2019 school year due to low standardized test scores, graduation rates, and diploma strength (Louisiana Department of Education, 2019). Yet enrollment increases and waitlists fill with families eager to send children to virtual schools.

Research into cyber charter schools is currently in its infancy, and with the current COVID crisis, the conversations about meaningful online learning are becoming necessary to ensure that a student will receive a quality education whether in a classroom or at home. This

past year saw a quick change in the conceptualization of educational practices with the short transition into online learning in schools across the nation. The conversation about education is rapidly and consistently changing, so this reinforces the need to understand online learning as much as possible.

Area of Interest

The current research on online learning focuses mainly on structures and policy within online schools. High school and adult distance learning, as two of the original target markets of online learning, receive much attention as well. Only in the past three years or so have researchers taken a deep dive into best practices for school and home, exploring demographics and engagement practices. An initial search for “online schooling” will bring up over 6000 results focused on college, gamification, supplementary courses, or teacher education. The language surrounding online learning and online schools is still unclear or incomplete, as noted by the short list that I provided. *Cyber Charter Schools* gleaned the most relevant results for the potential work of this dissertation, although authors used additional descriptors in their works.

Middle school and elementary school are seeing increased enrollment in cyber charter schools, but the research is not yet focused on the younger groups. Additionally, research into fully online cyber charter schools is limited, as blended-learning or supplementary online courses are more dominant in the literature. Research in the last five years that *has* focused specifically on cyber charter schools (e.g., Beck et al., 2016; Beck et al., 2017; Borup & Stevens, 2015; Hasler & Leong, 2014; Mann & Baker, 2019; Mann et al., 2018) often produces inconclusive or contradictory results. Researchers are not sure about what works best in online schools or why parents choose schools that do not perform as well as other options. In fact, little is discussed at all in regard to the curriculum or instructional practice within peer reviewed research.

Further, there is little to no exploration of parental perceptions of online schools' curriculum and instructional practices, though parents are often responsible for acting as a teacher as well in such contexts. Many studies highlight the importance of parental involvement as a major factor in student performance (e.g., Bond, 2019; Desforges & Abouchaar, 2003; Flynn, 2016; Mo, 2008; Rouse & O'Brien, 2017; Thomas et al., 2020). An assumption can be made that parental involvement in online schools is incredibly important due to the distance between student and teachers. Online students have access to their teachers, but students work mostly apart from their teachers and peers. Minimal time is spent in synchronous lessons. Depending on the student's needs, some of the heavy lift of instruction will shift to parents as they work to facilitate and support their children as students. Online schools engage parents as a secondary instructor, often referred to as a learning coach, to monitor, support, and coach students with daily instruction (Hasler & Leong, 2014).

My research focused on a fully online cyber charter school in the southeast United States to add to the body of research and attempt to address some of the unknowns identified in the literature. I explored the following questions within this context:

- In what ways are learning coaches utilized and supported by middle school English Language Arts teachers in online schools?
- How do parents of middle school enact their roles as learning coaches in online schools?

Through this research, I worked to understand how learning coaches are used by the school to support students and help maintain a learning environment when working separate from the teachers. I also worked to unpack how learning coaches enact their roles. I determined what strategies were employed to support productive application of coaches. Further, I focused

on the middle grades. Here, students are experiencing a transition in physical, emotional, and educational development. Parents are becoming less involved, but students still benefit from parental support (Bilton et al., 2018). Finally, I worked to answer my questions through a case study at a large cyber charter school in the southeast United States, with around 3500 students currently enrolled from around the state, nearly 1000 of whom are in the middle grades. Moreover, I zoomed in on English Language Arts classes in the middle school grade-band to understand how learning coaches support students with content.

As a curriculum facilitator at an online school, my role is to support implementation of the ELA curriculum. Some states mandate the use of specific curricula that “exemplify quality” to maintain funding or the charter in the case of charter schools (Louisiana Department of Education, 2020). These curricula are designed for in-class use, are typically discussion-based, and are meant to support students in meeting grade-level standards (Louisiana Believes, 2016). In our online environment, however, the curriculum and instruction have to pass through multiple channels before reaching the student. The curriculum has to be modified for individual, asynchronous work. Lessons have to be built into the learning management system in addition to being modified for live lessons where students have limited access to collaboration tools. Teachers have to determine how to assess students daily, as recommended by the curriculum, without clogging up their grade book or losing track of student work when students are working at different paces as dictated by flexibility policies. Even more, the curriculum has to be accessible to a student without a teacher present. Understanding how online schools can best utilize their parents as learning coaches is invaluable. Outside of my school context, understanding how to preserve meaningful online learning is necessary as educators consider how to continue instruction when face-to-face learning is not an option.

Theoretical Framework

Students in online schools face unique challenges for creating connections and conducting meaningful communication with their teachers and peers. Most schools typically assign a parent or guardian to the role of learning coach to help mediate between student and teacher and support students in their work. Borup and Stevens (2015) define the learning coach as the following: "Learning Coaches are commonly used by cyber schools and typically assume many of the administrative and supervisory roles that are performed by the teacher in face-to-face environment" (p. 72). The learning coach creates a small community alongside the teacher and the student to aid in student success. Anderson (2011) theorizes, "Sufficient levels of deep and meaningful learning can be developed as long as one of the three forms of interaction (student-teacher, student-student, student-content) is at very high levels" (p. 67). While in a traditional setting, the teacher and the content are readily accessible, online schools place the teacher at a distance, and the content is situated in a virtual space—an arrangement that requires additional provision. In an online charter school, the parent as the learning coach is the first point of access to learning for students. Parents are engaging with instruction and assessment in many of the same ways as teachers.

Connectivism

Siemens (2017) presents one of three frameworks on online learning: Connectivism. The other frameworks, Community of Inquiry developed by Garrison, Anderson, and Archer (2000) and Online Collaborative Learning developed by Harasin (2012), highlight in-group learning that takes place online (cited in Anderson, 2011). Studies using these two frameworks focus on student/teacher interactions or peers and interactions with online materials. Siemens's (2017) Connectivism framework is best suited for considering the whole online learning network—

students, parents, teachers, and the medium. Connectivism is interested in *how* learning takes place within the network.

Siemens argues that learning theories such as behaviorism, cognitivism, and constructivism are limited because they "do not address learning that occurs outside of people (i.e., learning that is stored and manipulated by technology). These theories also fail to describe how learning happens within organizations" (Siemens, 2017, n.p.). The author continues that the theories do not address the "value" of what is being learned, which is often a major concern for online schools (n.p.). When considering my focus on parent perceptions and choice, the theory has to encompass the component of value as well as the how organization can support learning.

Siemens (2017) outlines the following seven principles of Connectivism for online learning:

Learning and knowledge rest in diversity of opinions. Learning is a process of connecting specialized nodes or information sources. Learning may reside in non-human appliances. The capacity to know more is more critical than what is currently known. Nurturing and maintaining connections is needed to facilitate continual learning. Ability to see connections between fields, ideas, and concepts is a core skill. Currency (accurate, up-to-date knowledge) is the intent of all connectivist learning activities. Decision-making is itself a learning process. Choosing what to learn and the meaning of incoming information is seen through the lens of a shifting reality. While there is a right answer now, it may be wrong tomorrow due to alterations in the information climate affecting the decision. (n.p.)

The principles point to online learning and stress the importance of facilitating communication and connection across learning platforms and the learner. There is also an emphasis on flexibility and choice as a means of producing ever-evolving education. Siemens's framework is in line with the characteristics by which many online schools align themselves.

When analyzing the tenets of Connectivism, several stand out as ways to frame online education. The first principle connects back to alternative forms of education—learning is not limited to traditional brick-and-mortar schools, nor is it restricted temporally. The second

connects to the technological aspect of online schools. The third acknowledges 21st-century students need to be able to seek out information outside of the known lesson. The fifth, highlighting nurturing, connects to the learning coaches need to nurture their students as part of their role (Borup et al., 2014). The final principle on decision-making encompasses not only school choice but the ability of students and parents to create a learning experience through online charters that addresses children's scholastic and socio-emotional needs.

While Siemens's theory does not draw directly from communities of practice (Lave, 1991; Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, 2002;), connectivism relies on communities and connections within communities to produce learning in online environments. Connectivism begins with the individual, acknowledging that "personal knowledge is comprised of a network, which feeds into organizations and institutions, which in turn feedback into the network, and then continue to provide learning to the individual" (Siemens, 2017, n.p.). Learning takes place within this loop. While the individual is the starting point, there is a community created through the interactions between the school, the learning coach, and the student. The learning coach role in online schools is elevated to be able to support students in learning production. Parents become part of the community of practice through their regular interaction with the student learning process (Wenger et al., 2002). Lave (1991) situates learning somewhere in a middle space between the social and individual (p. 64). Online learning is social and personal as students are often isolated from teachers and peers, but through connections with learning coaches in the community of practice.

Opportunities for Expansion

One of the implications of Siemens (2017) framework is for the design of learning environments. Siemens connectivism theory was initially directed toward Massive Open Online

Courses (MOOCs), which provided online learning experiences largely for adult learners.

However, the principles can be applied to cyber charter schools as I have done within this study.

In my research methodology, I conducted a case study within a cyber charter school. Yin (2018) notes that case studies give an opportunity “to shed light on some theoretical concepts or principles” (p. 37). Through this research, I offered suggestions on how to expand connectivism to speak directly to the K-12 online learning experience. This included the technological aspects of learning, the flexible nature of a cyber charter school, and the learning coach role in decision making and support.

A second opportunity to expand the framework as well as the research on online learning is to consider including adolescent development theories or social theories such as concerted cultivation (Lareau, 2011). First, Vygotsky’s (1978) work on the zone of proximal development can be utilized to discuss the amount of parental intervention needed within online schools. The idea of nurturing to foster learning and connections will vary with student emotional, social, and academic levels. When online schools are determining how to support learning coaches in supporting their children, considering the needs of the student is of the utmost importance. With middle school students in particular, being able to identify specific developmental and educational needs for this group can shape how schools build parental instruction.

Moreover, Lareau’s (2011) work with concerted cultivation could contribute to ideas of school choice and parental rationale for selecting online schools and how that choice impact the role they assume. Concerted cultivation is the practice of middle-class parents exposing their children to varying experiences in order to “stimulate their children’s development and foster their cognitive and social skills” (p. 5). Online schools may offer an education inaccessible in the

child's neighborhood school or give the family space for advantages not allowed within the time restraints of a traditional school day.

To afford a student more opportunities, a parent might select an online school for academic reasons or social motivations. Academic and social needs, the zone of proximal development, and concerted cultivation help to expand Siemens's theory to encompass parents as learning coaches, as the proprietors of their students' learning within online environments. Further, I posited that understanding parent choice is a step in understanding how parents enact their roles as a learning therefore understanding how online schools can better support parents.

Definition of Terms

Cyber Charter Schools: Cyber charter schools are characterized by a remote, internet-based structure. Students typically work at home or at another site. Students are given standards aligned curriculums that are taught by certified teachers. Students are often allowed flexible work schedules with few hours of live instruction per week (Borup & Stevens, 2015; Mann & Baker, 2019; Revenaugh, 2006)

Learning Coaches: Learning coaches are parents, guardians, or other adults that work with a student at home to support them through their instruction. Learning coaches are responsible for monitoring student progress, administrative tasks, and providing supplementary instruction where applicable (Hasler & Leong, 2014)

Live Lessons: Live lessons are synchronous lessons that take place through conferencing software on the schools learning management system. During this time, students and teachers meet to learn in real time.

Learning Management System: A learning management system, or LMS, is an application that holds courses, grades, and some communication tools.

Learning Coach Teacher: A learning coach teacher works with learning coaches to ensure that they are trained to use the schools learning management system, understand their role, and have a contact point when there are questions.

Summary

The work presented in this dissertation serves to expand research on online learning and pursue more productive learning experiences for parents and students in cyber charter schools. Focusing on middle school parents as learning coaches helps to address gaps in the research on online learning. Additionally, the recent COVID crisis has exposed a need for online learning options while revealing major shortcomings in structure and execution. Gow's (2020) work, published just a few short months after the beginning of the pandemic, asserted that online learning showed educators how much learning is now learner-centered and how this structure can be reflected while learning online. This model, though, does take into account sufficient collaboration from all parties involved: students, parents, teachers, and administrators. Gow pushes for schools to increase communication and put effort into building meaningful relationships. While cyber charter schools have some of these structures in place, this research will attempt to identify how the structures are used to support student learning and how student experiences is impacted when working with engaged learning coaches. Online learning environments have potential to be productive learning spaces for different types of learners as well as provide instruction in times where brick and mortar classrooms are out of reach. Through this work, I began working toward improving practice in online schools to better serve students.

CHAPTER 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Online schooling, often called virtual charter schools or cyber charter schools in the literature, emerged in the mid-nineties as an alternate option to brick and mortar schools for K-12 students. Since then, the number of online schools in America has risen to around 528, with nearly 300,000 students enrolled (Molnar et al., 2019, p. 18). The Center for Research on Educational Outcomes, CREDO, (2015) defines online charter schools as “a public school operated under a charter as defined by the state which uses online learning as its primary means of curriculum delivery” (p. vii). Because these online schools are public, students and teachers are often held accountable to state standardized tests. Students are taught using a standards-aligned curriculum by certified teachers (Clark, 2000; Revenaugh, 2006). Since the schools are public entities, or schools of choice, all students have access to remote learning.

Charter schools in many states have much more autonomy from state mandates than public schools. Charters can alter the school structure, delivery of curriculum, or recommend other deviations from public schools because charters are not always held to the same expectations (Mann, 2019). Because most online schools are charter schools, online schools can create space for flexibility and access to students alongside an educational experience comparable to its brick-and-mortar counterpart. Initial trends in charter school research showed all students' potential—regardless of race, English-speaking status, or academic ability—to benefit from charter schools that are not held to the same rigidity as traditional public schools (Nathan, 1996). Online schools take this a step further by removing physical barriers of access to education and the time restraints of conventional schools while still offering largely high-quality curriculum and access to certified teachers.

The online school offers few limits on the location of the students enrolled. In many cases, online charter schools are open to students across an entire state. Mann et al. (2016) found that students in rural areas were among the lowest number of students enrolled at brick-and-mortar charter schools but saw an increase with rural students in cyber charters (p. 21). This implies that cyber charters were able to shrink the distance between rural students and to offer an option for a different educational experience in areas where schools tend to not perform particularly well in comparison to suburban or urban schools (Beck et al., 2016). While the demographic and socioeconomic status distribution of students in online schools is comparable to that of public schools, rural students did find more significant benefit in having online learning as a choice due to proximity (Beck et al., 2016; CREDO, 2015; Kotok & Mann, 2019; Molnar et al., 2017; Molnar et al., 2019;).

Online schools employ a combination of synchronous and asynchronous work for their students. On average, online schools hold around five hours of synchronous work per week, where teachers are leading direct instruction or small groups in real-time (Gill et al., 2015). Limited synchronous instruction leaves the week open for more one-on-one time, student advancement, or remediation, which gives the "opportunity to tailor the pace of instruction to the needs and desires of an individual student" (Gill et al., 2015). Online charters offer opportunities for support and enhancement that many other schools lack time for as teachers have more space in their work week to customize learning, meet with students, and structure lessons in ways that offer ideal support for a given student.

Online schools offer unique spaces for students to learn and grow. Donovan et al. (2014) calls for the use of what the authors cite as the 4Cs: "creativity and innovation, collaboration, critical thinking, and communication" (p. 163). The authors note technology rich, innovative

environments that will appropriately challenge a student to think critically and independently. Self-directed learning also supports the 4Cs for 21st century learning in that students take on the cognitive load of learning (Uus et al., 2020). These four skills are crucial to student success in a 21st century world, but most traditional classrooms are not yet structured to promote this kind of environment which put students at risk of falling behind.

Further, Bond (2012) focuses on the idea of a flipped classroom where students are doing work at home then coming to class to collaborate and complete projects, a task that the author found promoted self-efficacy. While Uus et al. (2020) and Bond (2012) are not concentrating specifically on online learning in their work, the structure of an online school requires significant amounts of self-directed learning as well as a flipped model where students work separately then come together for synchronous work. Online schools have an opportunity to be an exemplar of 21st century learning by providing students with exposure to learning structures that differ from a traditional model. There is a need for more research to attempt to pinpoint best practices for productive online learning environments through exploration of tools and structures that can identify solutions for areas that are under-researched, but invaluable, to the conversation.

While online charter schools offer distinct benefits to their students, they often fall short in several other aspects according to over two decades of inconclusive research. Recently, researchers Gulosina and Miron (2017) found that most studies available were on a blended model of learning instead of completely online charter schools, even though online learning is one of the fastest-growing options for students (p. 11). Further, there is no detailed repository of information, and data on cyber charters is often not easily accessible, making evaluating and understanding the design and production of cyber charter schools difficult to capture (CREDO, 2015; Gulosina & Miron, 2017; Saultz & Fusarelli, 2017; & Molnar et al., 2019). Therefore,

there is still much work to be done within the realm of research on online charter schools to determine functionality and options for improvement. This section highlights some of the issues that are often present with online charter schools.

Online schools often suffer from high attrition rates that can stem from test scores, turnover, and lack of accountability, although several authors note that the reason behind some of these shortcomings is hard to define (Borup et al., 2019; Mann et al., 2016). Students at online charters are given state standardized testing but show an initial drop in test scores in the first year with a cyber charter, and growth often happens at a reduced rate in the following academic years (Barbour & Mulcahy, 2009; Lueken et al., 2015; CREDO, 2015). High turnover rates for students are thought to contribute to the shortcomings in test scores. Students often have short stays at online schools, coming in after the year has a start and only staying for a year or two or a part of the academic year—the average stay being two years (Gill et al., 2015; Mann et al., 2016; Watson & Pape, 2015). Students transitioning between schools can harm their learning progress as online schools are very often not using the same curricula as brick-and-mortar schools do, though curriculum is not mentioned directly in any of the studies. More research is needed to compare test results of students with high turnover in face to face and students with high turnover online.

When considering factors that may impede student success in online environments, CREDO (2015) determined that being online was one of the main contributing factors of students not succeeding in online charter schools (p. 39). While this statement is rather outlandish considering that being online is the definition and purpose of an online charter school, the structure of online schooling can be challenging to adjust to and navigate around. For example, online schools tend to use programs that are not used in brick-and-mortar settings

requiring parents and students to learn how to navigate learning management systems and access curriculums. The learning curve here is thought to contribute to reduced student scores since it is an additional stress and distraction in the learning environment (Borup et al., 2019). Large class sizes are also theorized to contribute to low student performance in online schools. The teacher-to-student ratio in online classrooms is around 1:40, higher than the national average. The high teacher-to-student ration is often due to the falsely assumed automation of learning in online classrooms as curricula are plugged into learning management systems with little need for teacher building or the ability to adapt lessons (Molnar et al., 2019). Online classrooms can contribute to more specialized learning for students, but teachers are still limited in what they can do with their time or what is available to them.

Moreover, students require stable internet and computers to complete their assignments. Without financial support, students from low socioeconomic backgrounds may not benefit from online schools or struggle in times where materials are inaccessible to them. Students may also face lack of adult support due to working parents or general inexperience with computers (Kavanaugh et al., 2013; Midcalf & Boatwright, 2020). In conclusion, some students do not perform well in an online school, whether due to lack of formalized structure or the nature of self-paced learning, but again, the research has not tapped into why some students are failing or struggling in online schools while others succeed.

School Choice

Regardless of academic performance, parents turn to online schools as a viable option for their child's education. Enrollment across the nation is steadily increasing. This section will focus on some of the rationales behind school choice and begins discussing the research on parental choice and perception of online schools. Considering that online charter schools are typically

underperforming, this section will try to connect to what discernments encourage parents to choose online charters over other charters, private, or public options.

Characteristics of a Choice

Charter schools give parents a variety of options for their students to decide what works best for the child and the family. One thing to note is that charter schools are not often chosen with academic performance in mind. Kotok and Mann (2017) determined, "Enrollments still do not consistently align with academic performance indicators and instead cluster based on social and school demographic traits" (p. 24). Similarly, Potterton (2019) found that the child's social and emotional needs often overruled the academic quality of the charter school in the selection rationale (p. 24). First, Parents and guardians considered the needs of the child as paramount when selecting a school of choice except for distance and issues with travel, as noted by Ellison and Aloe (2018), Kotok and Mann (2017), Potterton (2019), and Shakeel and Henderson (2019). Travel had to be considered as some charter schools may not offer transportation, and the family cannot commute for education. Academics were secondary, if not the third consideration after travel, during the selection process.

Ellison and Aloe (2018) describe a *push and pull* phenomenon experienced by caretakers as they work toward selecting a school for their child. The authors explain that parents often feel as if they are being *pushed* from their districts by "issues of disorder and unsafety, poor material conditions and low academic achievement, and pathologizing racial discourse" (p. 1147). Simultaneously, they are *pulled* toward schools of choice that have "positive institutional culture, small class sizes that allow students to receive more individualized attention, and challenging curriculum and special programs that will prepare students for university education" (p. 1147-1149). In both cases, the authors use the word *perceived* to describe the push/pull occurring.

Parents then seek schools that they perceive to be the best fit for their children regardless of the actual quality.

Further, school choice is empowering for both parents and students. Regardless of why the choice is made, making a choice has a positive impact on experience and perception. Hamil and Cheng (2019) state that choice empowered parents by allowing them a voice and to "exercise a degree of authority over the direction of their child's education" (p. 177). Parents are often allowed much more room in charter schools to make decisions for their child and a level of involvement not often offered within public schools. Additionally, McDonald (2019) argues, "By shifting power to families, education choice creates greater variety in how young people learn and triggers education entrepreneurship and experimentation" (p. 7). Not only are families and students given more control when they can make their own educational decisions, but the choice also has the potential to bring about more significant change in all schools. McDonald's argument seems to suggest that schools are encouraged to adapt or innovate when parents begin seeking alternate options.

Two additional aspects of choice should also be considered: family socioeconomic status and information available on schools. The first, socioeconomic status was found to impact school choice (Botmotti, 1996; Uchitelle & Nault, 1977; Yoon, 2019). Uchitelle and Nault (1977) give an earlier perspective on school choice. Part of the researchers' argument involved parental access to knowledge that there was a choice and the qualities of that choice. In many cases, the findings showed that parents who were of low-socioeconomic status were unaware of their students' options, much less how to make that decision (p. 18). Botmotti (1996) in particular highlighted that parent education level, often tied to socioeconomic status, impacted how parents

made the choice. The author notes that parents had to seek out information to determine what schools to send their children to, something that not all parents were able to do (p. 32).

The next aspect is the available information on schools. As marked previously, parents have to seek out information even to begin considering a school of choice for their students. Therefore, without easily accessible information, the choice is denied to families. Some states do provide information on schools of choice, but this information is only a small snapshot of what the school can actually do for students. Mann and Baker (2018) argue that "an effective choice policy is that independent, accurate information about the academic quality of options is made widely available to the public" (p. 156). Shakeel and Henderson (2019) echo this by stating, "Lack of knowledge about charter schools undercuts support" (p. 4). While some families may find locating information out of reach, the schools also have a responsibility to make the information public to better inform school choice.

Toward a Digital Education

Historically, parents provided both learning opportunities and enrichment for their children before the advent of public schools. As public schools expanded and offered different experiences for students, charge for socialization began to shift toward the school and away from parental responsibility (Dawindowicz, 2000). However, Mid-century education witnessed a shift away from community schools and high levels of parent involvement in learning as teachers (McGee Banks, 2016). Homeschooling became a viable option as a way for parents to take back their child's educational experience (McDonald, 2019). The transition into an online learning environment is a natural progression for homeschooling parents as they are making choices in schools based on time, access, and ability to control schedule. These are assets offered mainly by

online schools at present. Moreover, online charter schools eliminate any worry about travel over long distances for an educative alternative for rural students.

Access and Opportunity

While online charter schools are not a perfect solution, they offer significantly more access to learning than homeschooling on its own or other charter schools as they are bound only by internet connection. As previously noted, homeschool families utilize online charters as an alternative school and makeup around 20% of the online charter population. Homeschool parents who want the student to earn a valid diploma, experience more socialization, or can no longer support their students academically turn to online schools as a way to maintain a home environment with the additional support of qualified teachers (Borup et al., 2019).

Alongside previously homeschooled families, online charters are available to and have been successful with all types of students. Cyber charters are marketed to all students, regardless of academic or physical ability (Mann and Baker, 2018). Students who have medical issues that limit their mobility or their ability to sit for long periods in classrooms are at a particular advantage as they can learn at home in whatever way is most comfortable to them (Marsh et al., 2009; Borup et al., 2019). Additionally, students who excel academically are not limited by what is happening in a singular classroom but can progress at their own pace. Further, athletes, working students, and those in remote areas, will all have the same access to learning through online charters.

Even with the work that still needs to be done with online charter schools, parents are choosing to send their children regardless of the school's academic score. In a study on why parents choose online charters, Marsh et al. (2009) found three reasons parents send their students to online charters. The first is that online schools can customize learning through

flexibility in daily schedules or in instruction delivery. Beck et al. (2016) echoed that parents appreciated personalization and flexibility within the classroom (p. 4). The second reason was that there was no financial risk in putting a student in an online school as most are public entities. The third reason was hope for change (Marsh et al., 2009, pp. 34-35). Whether in perception or reality, online schools do have some abilities to adapt learning to the child's needs.

Also, cyber charters are public. Therefore, they do not charge fees for enrollment. Students often receive all the supplies they need, including laptops and internet subsidies, to support internet-based learning (Marsh et al., 2009). Unlike private schools, parents can create the desired environment for students without the cost of tuition. Finally, for Marsh et al. (2009), online education is thought to bring about change in how learning is conceptualized through a non-linear, adaptable structure (p. 35). Beck et al. (2016) add two additional features that are characteristic of school choice: structural and behavioral (p. 4). Online charter schools are widely known for offering flexible schedules and well as a haven for students who may have experienced issues with behavior, bullying, or other issues in previous schools.

Home-School Connection

While the online schools are often public entities, learning takes place at home. As previously noted, parents will select schools for structural or behavioral reasons depending on what they feel their child will benefit from most. Home-School Dissonance, as defined by Henderson et al. (2020), is “differing values, beliefs, and behavioral expectations between home and school [which] may impact how some families choose to engage in the educational process” (p. 201). Dissonance can impact choice along with parental perceptions of school. Online schools allow for parents to have more control over their child’s environment and to what they are exposed. Ontari (2017) and Acar et al. (2018) concur that communication between the school

and the parent is essential in ensuring behavioral regulation, open communication, and desired environment where applicable.

Similarly, Rouse and O'Brien (2017) assert the importance of continuity between home and school. The authors argue that school can undo work done at home and, conversely, home life can undo the work at school (p. 48). Maintaining a stasis between the two is a significant contributor to building trust between parents and teachers (p. 46). When parents are considering online school for their child, control over the environment is a factor (Beck et al., 2016; Gulosina & Miron, 2017). Parents have the opportunity to maintain continuity between home and school by filtering the child's education through systems like a learning management system that can be managed. This choice, however, comes with increased need for involvement from parents. The next section will delve into parental involvement, the nature of involvement in cyber charter schools and unpack parent perceptions of their school choice.

Parental Involvement in Cyber Charter Schools

The rationale to send children to online schools varies by household, but what will come to the forefront with the decision is parents' need to be an active part in the child's education after making that choice. Gulosina and Miron (2017) highlight cyber charter school selection as a choice that reflects a long-term commitment to a child's learning. The authors write,

The private good aspect of online schooling suggests a large component of family school choice. It is expected that parents would like to have great choice in schooling arrangement—to opt out of brick-and-mortar schools in favor of online schools they believe would maximize their child's development and acquisition of skills, values, and learning experiences that capture the valued private benefits of schooling. (p. 8)

Parent involvement is key to student success in online charter schools for academic outcomes and developmental outcomes. Also, relationships between students, parents, and teachers factor into both involvement and student success in middle school classrooms.

Parental Involvement

Research has pointed to parental involvement in student learning to be a key factor in student success (Otani, 2017; Rouse & O'Brien, 2017; Thomas et al., 2020; Yazdani et al., 2020). Involvement is a mixture of home- and school-based practices and parental behaviors that center on a student's academic progress which range from asking students about homework to volunteering in the school (Otani, 2017; Thomas et al., 2020). Yazdani et al. (2020) found that higher levels of parental involvement correlated to higher reading scores in the younger grades (p. 15). Similarly, Garbacz et al. (2017) write, "This may suggest that parent educational involvement, in terms of overall involvement and school and activity involvement, is better considered as a promotive process in that it is more likely to promote adaptive skills rather than decrease maladaptive behaviors" (p. 648).

Tension exists between involvement and control with teachers and parents. Thomas et al. (2020) theorize that this may be the result of unclear expectation for teachers from the school. As Murray (2009) notes many teachers are not trained in how to effectively communicate with parents although Rouse and O'Brien (2017) make it the educator's role "to make available to the families current information about community services and resources to support parenting and family wellbeing" (p. 47). Anecdotally, many teachers have stories about being told little more than to use their customer service voice when interacting with parents rather than being given more detailed coaching on how to communicate expectations. Otani's (2017) definition as previously stated highlights the complex facets of involvement to show the necessity of both teachers and parents coming to an understanding of productive involvement. There is also an implication here for online schools to have clearly defined expectations for involvement since the lines between home and school and parent and teacher at risk of being blurred.

Learning Coach

In all school settings, parental involvement is central to student success. The same is true for parents in online charter schools, although, as in traditional schools, parental involvement will vary depending on the student (Borup et al., 2019). Online schools employ the use of learning coaches for students in what could be considered a partnership model of involvement where parents are ideally working alongside teachers with instruction. The teacher takes the lead, and as Ehman (1997) notes, “parents take supportive roles, but are respected and treated as equals in decision-making” (p. 33). Because parents are, in most cases, present with the students during the workday, the school places value on them in determining elements of what their child needs in order to be successful at school.

Engaging with students in their learning environment may entail encouragement, modeling, reinforcement, instruction, or variation that will provide the students with the tools needed in a particular moment (Liu et al., 2010, p. 109). Communication between the school and the learning coach is another component that can increase student success. The CREDO Report (2015) found that when schools did not monitor communication and interactions within a student's learning community—learning coach, teacher, and student—student test scores fell (p. 44). Because learning and instruction are happening at a distance, online charter schools benefit from maintaining families' engagement.

Learning coaches partner with the schools and teachers to ensure that their students are moving through school successfully. Hasler and Leong (2014) define the learning coach role as the following: "Roles range from administrative-type tasks to providing instruction and monitoring their students. Learning coaches are expected to track and monitor their students' academic progress and attendance" (p. 40). Furthermore, parents as learning coaches are seen as

managers, guides, and experts (Hasler & Leong, 2014). The learning coach role will often overlap with the teacher. Still, as the teacher is far removed from the student, instruction and various monitoring fall to the parent. Each online school will approach the learning coach role differently, but having this role is vital for student success in cyber charter schools. The use of learning coach begins to create a community between the student, teacher, parent, and school—all with the student's good in mind.

The online environment provides a unique challenge for all parties when considering educational interactions. The learning coach factors in a secondary component alongside the student and the teacher, adding another layer of complexity to online education. Due to the distance between teachers and students in online environments, the parent must step up to the model and reinforce many of the roles that a teacher usually assumes to promote student success throughout instruction such as reviewing instructions, monitoring quality of work, or maintaining a daily schedule (Liu et al., 2010). However, Flynn (2006) noted that at the time of the study, only around 4% of teachers had any formal training with effectively communicating with parents (p. 12). Later studies such as Kraft (2017), Acar et al. (2018), and Yazdani et al. (2020) relay the positive impact communication with parents has on children. In the online space, where distance between parent, students, and teachers is more pronounced, there is even greater need for teachers to know how to communicate expectations to the learning coach to support them in this role.

Alongside parental involvement, parental engagement in student learning as the learning coach can increase student performance in online schools. Borup and Stevens (2015) found five types of parental engagement in studying online learning perceptions. First, the researchers found that parents provided a space for nurturing relationships and interactions (p. 75). This could be

fostering communication with a teacher or a parent-child relationship. Next, Borup and Stevens found that parents engaged in advising and mentoring (p. 77). Parents were able to invest in their child's learning progression and coach them along in day-to-day tasks. Third, parents were seen as organizers of their student's materials and schedules. Fourth, parents were seen as motivating and monitoring (p. 79). Parents are often responsible for logging attendance and tracking progress, which requires a layer of motivation to ensure that students are progressing appropriately. Finally, as the learning coach, parents were responsible for instructing at various levels (p. 82). While some courses will be out of the learning coach's reach, teachers in online schools often provide support to parents to be able to teach mini-lessons and support students during asynchronous times.

Student Experiences and Expectations

Students in online schools have access to opportunities for a more personalized learning experience. Online charters tend to toggle between synchronous and asynchronous lessons that, in many cases, are self-paced. Because of this, students are often held to a looser schedule, and this flexibility is one method of helping to individualize instruction (Revenaugh, 2006). One advantage cyber charter parents have over other parents is that they have complete access to what students are learning. Beck et al. (2017) emphasize that this access is incredibly helpful for marginalized groups of students (p. 64). Parents are then able to shape their child's learning in a way that would have the most impact. The proximity to a student's entire education allows parents to seek support that is often out of reach.

Parental access to a student's education benefits online learning, so this sets a specific expectation from cyber charter schools. One-on-one time with a student and his or her teacher are often valuable but limited, suggesting that "most online charter schools expect that the bulk

of learning will occur during a student's individual engagement with the course material, perhaps with the help of a parent" (Gill et al., 2015, p. xv). Synchronous time is available, but asynchronous time takes the bulk of a student's time. Parents will have to do some of the heavy lifting. With this parental role in mind, Liu et al. (2010) and McGee Banks (2016) implore that schools develop strategies and structures to support *parents* in their role as secondary teachers, or learning coaches, as parents or guardians are often referred to in online charter settings.

Lost in the Middle

Many online schools cover grades kindergarten through 12 with high school being the largest area of enrollment. Middle school students, though, are in the fastest growing group of students being enrolled in online schools. Currently very little research speaks to this group of students in online environments although they have unique education and developmental needs. The online environment may be well suited for a middle school student since this group is often transitioning toward more independent learning.

Overall, middle school, particularly ages 10 to 14, is a time of significant developmental and school changes. Researchers cite physical, emotional, and intellectual shifts that may cause the student to feel increasingly turbulent and prone to burnout (Diemert, 1992; Garbacz, 2017; Motamedi, 2020; Skinner & Saxton, 2020). Middle schoolers are also experiencing departmentalized classes, which can limit exposure to their teachers and increase feelings of isolation or disengagement. Further, middle school students are becoming increasingly more at risk for drop out, something strategies and structures put in place in the school environment could potentially prevent (Waasdorp et al., 2020). Middle school students become increasingly reliant on friendships for support while their parents begin to take a step back from their child's education. Two things also begin to happen: parent involvement decreases and teacher

communication decreases (Patel & Stevens, 2010). Wang and Eccles (2012) pin this on the changing landscape of middle and high school in comparison to elementary schools which required significantly more involvement from parents.

The reduction in communication and involvement does not, however negate the benefits of support from teachers and parents. Wang and Eccles (2012) found that support from teachers, peers, and parents were “positively correlated with each other, and all of them were positively correlated with school compliance, participation in extracurricular activities, school identification, and subjective valuing of learning” (p. 884). Middle schoolers are seeking, and are capable of, more independence, but still benefit from support. As middle school students are teetering between childhood and young adulthood, having access to tools that cater to both groups—parental support and opportunities for independence—can promote student success.

Within education, middle schoolers are experiencing a shift in the way they experience education. Along with spending less time with teachers than they have in the past, middle schoolers are also experiencing a change with the way their parents interact with them about school. The interaction tends to be reduced as well as parents beginning to take on an advisory role while allowing children to take more responsibility for their learning (Cheung, 2019). To ensure that students are still being successful and getting the support that they need, Otani (2017) recommends schools maintain consistent communication with parents of how to help their child. Likewise, Desforges and Abouchaar (2003) elevated that conversation between parents and their children is also important for safeguarding a middle schoolers educational wellbeing.

Middle school students are also unique in their emotional needs, which could have an impact on their education. Because middle school students are experiencing a time of rapid development, their emotions can be unstable and need to be handled delicately. Luo et al. (2020)

encourage family intimacy to help in increasing self-control and help prevent burn-out, which middle school students are prone to due to increased stressors. When considering online education for middle schoolers, educators have to consider these middle school needs. Middle schoolers need a sufficient balance of support and rigor from parents, peers, and teachers in order to feel and be successful. This presents an additional challenge to online educators who are removed from their students.

Middle School ELA Classes

Middle school students are experiencing significant changes that have to be accounted for within their content classes. Eccles and Roeser (2011) argue that the current structure of middle schools is not set up in a way that is conducive to the way an adolescent student learns. The researchers acknowledged several elements that are not productive for middle schoolers. One element was the start time of the school day being much earlier than what is recommended for a middle school student. Another was departmentalization, which removes some of the personalized attention that students got from one teacher in elementary school. A third element was larger campus and classes sizes at a time where students need more individualization. On the structure of middle schools, Buecher et al. (2020) argue:

Middle or junior high schools are complex and transitional institutions that serve students ranging in age from 10-14 years who must learn to engage in active strategic use of languages across content areas as they navigate the linguistic and cognitive demands from one classroom to the next. (p. 781)

Middle school students are asked to navigate not only great developmental changes but are also navigating a school system that challenges them constantly.

In ELA classes in particular, students are experiencing more rigorous standards and higher expectations that are often difficult to meet (Swanson et al., 2015; Madison et al., 2019). State standards and curricula, at this level, require students to engage with complex texts and

ideas that require class-based discussion in order to fully unpack. Madison et al. (2019) and Lawrence and Jefferson (2015) identified collaboration between students and students access to working with teachers as having a positive impact on student performance in ELA. ELA courses, in most classrooms, are going to be more effective when adolescent students are allowed to cooperate with others rather than working in isolation.

Online schools have the potential to address some of the gaps or needs identified through recent research into middle school ELA classes. Online schools provide a flexible structure that students can adapt to their needs. Students are not held to a start time that is not ideal for a middle school student's developmental needs (Eccles & Roeser, 2011). Further, online schools provided some space for self-paced learning, which Madison et al. (2019) learned was a something students appreciated. The authors found, "Students felt prepared for and satisfied with their opportunities to learn and apply skills for collaborate and self-direction" (p. 483). Students in online ELA courses have more autonomy to determine when they work and what they complete. Online ELA classes can allow for more collaboration because there are more tools or options for accessing and creating course materials (Rose, 2010). Finally, charter schools are often not as restricted as public schools, so teachers can take advantage of using materials that interest students, creating more authentic learning experiences.

However, there are facets of online schools that are still unexplored regarding ELA classes. Swanson et al. (2015) note that some elements of ELA such as class discussions or formative assessments that teachers use to gauge student learning are activities that are not always structured but are student dependent. A question arises about how to account for that when working asynchronously or in a virtual meeting where students are not visible to teachers. Teachers may be missing teachable moments because of the distance between them and their

students. Even more, Lawrence and Jefferson (2015) note that many brick-and-mortar classrooms are limited by state testing, standardized curriculum, or district mandates that impact how teachers implement instruction and may not be able to deviate from the established curriculum. Similarly, online teacher risk leaning into a set and forget model of teaching where instruction is built into the learning management system and not adjusted for student needs.

Boardman et al. (2017) account for a certain amount of coaching and struggle support that comes from a teacher. They reason:

The importance of a teacher's role in facilitating meaningful interactions with a text cannot be overstated. Broadly speaking, some models focus primarily on enhancing the types of teacher moves that encourage shifts in student talk and higher-level reasoning about texts. (p. 178)

Teachers use strategies in class to promote student engagement, scaffold in the moment, or foster collaboration among students. The interactions are for student learning as well as building relationships which contribute to student performance (Eccles & Roeser, 2011). While this is happening in online schools to an extent, some of this work will be missed online. Some of the responsibility might have to shift to another party in the student's learning environment such as a learning coach.

Relationships

Building meaningful relationships is one impactful way to work toward ensuring middle school students have the appropriate emotional and educational support. Students who had appropriate support from parents and teachers saw a higher grade point average and higher perceived school competence (Sethi & Scales, 2020; Murray, 2009). As presented in this section, students need good relationships with *both* parents and teachers for the best chance at success. The caveat here is that visibility of a parent does not generally equate to more involvement, and, similarly, in cases where a parent is not as easily accessible, a strong relationship with a teacher

will be able to make up for instances of poor parent-child relationship (Murray, 2009; Patel & Stevens, 2010).

In online schools, though, parents take a more prevalent role in student education since students are home and parents are, in most cases, acting as the secondary instructor. As this work focused in on parents in particular, it was important to unpack the nature of parent-teacher relationships to determine how parents enact their role as a learning coach. Outside of online learning, parents have been found taking a “supporting role in which they merely endorse the teacher’s message” (p. 521). Similarly, Santiago et al. (2016) and Yazdani et al. (2020) assert that a parent’s relationship with a teacher had a direct impact on student outcomes. Therefore, more communication and trust between parents and teachers has the potential to lead to increased student success.

Communication is, again, a vital factor in the structure of a parent-teacher relationship. Bond (2017) reports that a disconnect exists with teacher knowledge of parental understanding. Parents have potential to be a secondary support for students, but they need direction and guidance from their child’s teacher. Kraft (2017) and Otani (2017) recommend consistent communication between the two parties that speaks to student learning and is personalized to a particular student’s needs. Chueng’s (2019) work further emphasizes that the relationship between the parent and the teacher has the ability to set the tone for the relationship between the *student* and the teacher.

Triangle of Support

The student, parent, and teacher create a mesosystem wherein cooperation between the three parties has the potential to lead to stronger student engagement and success in school (Sahin, 2018; Woolley et al., 2009). Bilton et al. (2018) propose that

parents and teachers have “separate but complementary roles,” which suggest that both are vital in supporting students, but each in their own way. Schools that promote partnering between parents and teacher, considering what parents and students need, can often see improved student performance and positive parental involvement.

Within the context of an online school where students are working separately from their teachers, communication as the locus of support becomes even more vital. Whitaker and Hoover-Dempsey (2013) argue that how expectations are presented to parents can impact school climate and, in turn, student performance. Clearly communicated expectations can help improve parental perception of their role. When parents are acting as a learning coach, perception becomes central to providing parents with what they need to be effective with their child’s learning. Sahin (2018) suggests that “parents should be given guidance and be informed about the importance of being in cooperation with the school in improving academic success and happiness of their children” (p. 322). With this in mind, the researcher can begin to unpack best practices for outlining the role of a learning coach to produce an effective mesosystem for online student learning.

Research Questions and Explication

Research Questions:

- In what ways are learning coaches utilized and supported by middle school ELA teachers in online schools?
- How do parents of middle school students enact their roles as learning coaches in online schools?

Online charter schools have recently received much attention, but research is often inconclusive or incomplete. Researchers are yet to find clear answers to many of the issues or questions faced within cyber charter schools. Moreover, there are many gaps identified within the research, including why some students do not succeed in charter schools, specific reasons why online schools underperform their public counterparts, turnover rates, and parental role and choice. While there is an attempt made to understand the nature of these issues, there is still room to explore. My questions sought to delve into three areas lacking research: how middle school ELA teacher use learning coaches to support students, how learning coaches are supported, and how learning coaches view and execute their role.

Online instruction and curriculum see very little research in the younger levels. Much exists regarding MOOCs or college courses, placing the focus of the research on adult learners. Learning management system (LMS) companies also produce materials on recommended instructional practices in online environments such as design principles, but peer-reviewed work on online curriculum and instruction is in short supply. The work focuses on understanding the experience, phenomenon, and policy of online learning rather than the value of what is taught and learned.

One area, cyber charter school choice, goes back to why parents choose schools that historically underperform but also require increased involvement. Several studies cited either location as a rationale or emotional needs of students. Further, Hamilton and Guin (2005) argued that parents choose schools on the "basis of educational quality" without a clear understanding of what *quality* learning entails (p. 43). Molnar et al. (2019) also reaffirm this, emphasizing that gaps in accountability measures at online schools bring into question the learning quality. This is

not to say that online schools cannot provide a quality learning experience, but to acknowledge a need for additional research.

As is the case with many online charter schools, teachers receive curriculums from textbook companies or large online learning companies such as Florida Virtual School or K-12, designed to be plugged into the school's LMS. From a teacher's perspective, this is easier to implement since students are able to work asynchronously with less support. The curricula, however, are often not aligned to state standards or require significant modification to tailor individual students' learning as well as the online environment. While some synchronous learning is available, most time is spent learning asynchronously obliging an adult to help support the student away from the teacher (Gill et al., 2015). As parents alongside their students are the proprietors of online learning, understanding their experience, specifically with the learning materials, roles as a learning coach, and student learning experience would be a mostly unexplored online learning area.

The final area, middle school learners, helped address the gap within the learners' age prevalent in the current research of online charter schools. High school and adult learners take the forefront as they have been learning online for longer, but the number of elementary and middle school students enrolled in online schools steadily increases. There is a pressing need to understand a middle school student's experience in virtual environments as middle schoolers developmental and educational needs are complex. Focusing on middle school was one step in understanding the complex parental role in selecting an online charter and role as a learning coach.

Summary

This chapter outlined the available research on online schools and identified areas where there is still a need for additional research. The literature reinforced online schools as alternate school options that promote flexibility and give options for increased parental involvement in what students are learning and experiencing in school. Conversely, the literature acknowledged that online schools significantly under-perform brick and mortar schools calling into question the accountability structure of online schools for student success. In spite of low performance, researchers did recognize online schools as beneficial for modern students because cyber schools are able to provide a learning environment that aligns to the qualities of a 21st-century curriculum.

Research online learning is limited, but of the available information, the following was notably missing and worth further exploration. One area that was missing from the literature was detailed information on what causes low performance in online schools and what can be done to alleviate low performance upon enrollment. Another area that was missing was research on younger students. Most of the work was on high school students, college aged, or adult learners. Increasing enrollment dictates the need for deeper understanding of younger grades. Finally, material on curriculum in online schools was nearly absent, marking a need more work in this area.

The literature revealed several factors that impacted the work of this study. The first was the weight of parent choice and investment in online schools. Parents have an important role to play in student success when choosing to enroll. Moreover, the literature was clear on the developmental needs of middle school students which impacts how they need to be supported in online schools. Finally, work on current English language arts curricula reveals the need for

collaboration for students to get the most out of their learning. All three pieces—parent involvement, developmental needs, and curriculum—help to inform the research questions as well as the implications of the study.

CHAPTER 3. METHODOLOGICAL PLAN

As a teacher in a K-12 cyber charter school, I have witnessed mixed reviews on parent and student experiences. On some days we hear from parents who value flexibility and customizable work schedules. We hear praises for teacher availability and one-on-one time that students have access to. We listen to stories about how having the option to attend our school saved a child's life after being bullied in his old school. I hear these stories and feel great about where I work and the opportunities we give students through our charter school. On other days, the school sees frustration with learning platforms, disconnect between teachers and students, and curriculums that are a challenge in an asynchronous environment. As a student researcher, I see inconsistencies, unknowns in online schooling, and evidence that online schooling has much room to grow.

In previous years, I taught dual enrollment at the school. This meant I was teaching mostly high school juniors and seniors in college-level classes. My interactions were primarily with students as we were working with them on good communication with instructors. They were at an age to better advocate for themselves. My role then shifted to a district position where I oversaw the implementation of a new curriculum. Within this world, my interactions were with administrators and teachers to ensure everyone was using learning materials correctly. The conversations about curriculum often led back to not only how students and teachers were interacting with materials, but how *parents* were using the materials.

Like many cyber charter schools, the school uses parents or guardians as learning coaches for students. Learning coaches work in partnership with teachers to support students during asynchronous learning time, manage a students' space, or communicate with teachers (Hasler & Leong, 2014; Molnar, 2019). As a high school teacher, I experienced low levels of learning

coach engagement as students were often encouraged to take more responsibility for their learning whereas younger students might be instructed to lean on support from a learning coach. From a district perspective, we hear about conversations with learning coaches—concerns or celebrations with student learning. The school also provides support through a learning coach teacher whose job is to support parents in supporting their children. We also have a course in the learning management system specifically for parents. What we currently cannot see is the enactment of the learning coach role and how tools or structures might aid parents in how they respond to this role in their child’s education.

Purpose of Study

The Center for Research on Education Outcomes (CREDO, 2015) reported that younger students require significantly more help and support from their parents than older students when attending cyber charter schools. The need decreases as students get older and varies depending on the individual student (p. 41). The self-paced, mostly asynchronous structure leaves a student to learn independently. A parent deciding to enroll a student in an online school is also choosing to be a secondary instructor for his or her child, especially when considering a student in the younger grades where support needs are greater—a point made transparent upon enrollment. The long waitlist, however, implies that a requirement for increased parental support is not a deterrent.

The purpose of this mixed-methods study is to develop a clearer understanding of learning coach roles in online schools and how learning coach impacts student experience. I attempted to reconcile the tension between perception and what research states is the reality of cyber charter schools: low student success rates, high levels of student turn over, and lower quality education (Borup et al., 2019; Mann et al., 2016). By focusing on the parent as a learning coach, I hoped to

unpack how to improve practice with learning coach, specifically in middle schools where research is minimal, and enrollment has been increasing.

Epistemology

The study used a constructivist approach to support my research goal of determining role of parents as learning coach in online schools. As constructivism is focused on meaning-making, this view helps to conceptualize parents' roles in online charter schools. Further, social constructivism is "the mode of meaning generation and not about the kind of object that has meaning" (Crotty, 1998, p. 53). Meaning is not limited to social interactions but can encompass natural interactions with things in the world. "All reality," Crotty (1998) argues, "as meaningful reality, is socially constructed" (p. 53). The online learning space is one of variant interactions. Students, parents, and teachers create the reality in the virtual space as they come together to make meaning. While constructivism is used to discuss how knowledge is created, Siemens (2017) expands the theory in his establishing of Connectivism. Connectivism highlights the use of the following principles:

Learning and knowledge rest in diversity of opinions. Learning is a process of connecting specialized nodes or information sources. Learning may reside in non-human appliances. Capacity to know more is more critical than what is currently known. Nurturing and maintaining connecting is needed to facilitate continual learning. Ability to see connections between fields, ideas, and concepts is a core skill. Currency is the intent of all connectivist learning activities. Decision-making is itself a learning process. (p. 5-6)

Connectivism is more about learning within a network. Students, parents, and teachers alongside the online platforms become the network. In constructivist classrooms, teachers shift into a facilitator role, while parents become more aligned with a consumer in taking ownership of their child's education like purchasing a product for learning (Adom et al., 2016; Bilton, 2018). Further, Kragebvl (2016) emphasizes that good educators should make a push for more diverse learning strategies that "maximize the potential for student learning to occur and transfer for

deep understanding” (p. 102). Therefore, Connectivism can be considered as an evolution of constructivism better suited for online learning and 21st-century classrooms.

Methodological Approach

Southern Online Charter School (SOCS) is a cyber charter school in the southeast United States. SOCS serves students from K-12 fully online with learning taking place synchronously and asynchronously. Enrollment is around 3300 students across all grade levels with 965 students in the middle school grade band. Students are enrolled from across an entire state since students are not limited by location. SOCS is a Title I school, 65% of whom are considered economically disadvantaged. The current student to teacher ratio is 30:1, which is nearly double the state average. The school employs 127 teachers, 35 at the middle school level, who are all certified or working toward certification. A large percentage of the teachers hold master's degrees or higher.

SOCS is defined by its state department of education as a Type 2 Charter. This means that it has recently separated from a larger, for-profit online learning organization within the last three years and is now run by an established board to ensure that all students have access to high quality curriculum and instruction as well as any diverse learners support (LDOE, 2020). SOCS is a *public* charter school meaning parents and students are free to choose SOCS, tuition-free. With state funding, SOCS provides laptops, any learning materials necessary for classes, and yearly internet subsidies to ensure students have all the tools needed for learning.

Additionally, as a public school, SOCS is held to "high academic, financial, and organizational standards" (LDOE, 2020). SOCS is currently working toward creating a high-quality learning experience for students by incorporating the state's Tier I ELA curriculum into its classrooms. This means that students are being exposed to high-quality, grade-level texts,

text-dependent questions, and the curriculum demonstrates a coherency of tasks throughout (Instructional materials evaluation tool for alignment in ELA grades K-12, 2021). Presently, the school is rated as a D level School due to low test scores and graduation rate. The other cyber charters in the state also rank similarly, are consider failing, and are in corrective action. SOCS is now taking measures to improve scores through system-wide improvements to curriculum and instruction.

Enrolled students are from all parts of the state, working from home or from wherever they have internet access. Students communicate with their teachers through a learning management system, or an LMS. SOCS uses Canvas as its LMS along with curriculum programs and video conferencing software. Students attend roughly two hours of non-mandated live lessons per week—6-10 synchronous learning hours. The remainder of the schoolwork is completed asynchronously in the LMS. SOCS prides itself on a model of flexibility where students can work from Sunday to Saturday at any time that works for their schedule. There is also a two-week window to complete all assignments.

Each student, upon enrollment, is required to designate a learning coach, whose responsibility it is to support the student academically. A coach can be any adult who will have to be available to the student during the school day which could include a parent, guardian, family friend, or other relative. A small percentage of students choose to work in co-operative settings or are enrolled from group homes where an adult worker takes on the responsibility of learning coach. SOCS has a full-time staff member assigned as a support person for the learning coach—the learning coach teacher—as they navigate the LMS and the assigned curriculum. The learning coach teacher is responsible for tasks relevant for ensuring learning coach support including creating training modules for new and returning learning coaches, being a point of

contact for coaches, and holding topical group meetings to keep coaches abreast of school happenings.

Research Questions

The consensus in the research is that parent involvement has a direct impact on student learning and achievement. Clark (2018) emphasizes that strong parental involvement has a direct impact on how students perform, correlating a more successful student to a more involved parent. Likewise, in a seminal work, Matzys (1995) stresses the importance of parent involvement, taking this a step further to highlight middle school as a transitional period for students. The transition requires a specialized approach from teachers and parents. The author recommends that “parents should be given guidance and be informed about the importance of being in cooperation with the school (family participation) in improving the academic success and happiness of their children” (p. 322). Middle school students are experiencing a time of quick development physically, emotionally, and intellectually. Parents and teachers taking time to learn the specific needs of students in this transitional period is a fundamental step in supporting a middle school student (Brooks & Brooks, 1999; Woolley, et al., 2009). Therefore, when considering online learning where students are positioned away from peers and teachers, typically two additional supports for student well-being, understanding how to provide for this group of students through learning coaches is imperative. To further the understanding of learning coaches in middle school online classes, the following research questions were explored:

- In what ways are learning coaches utilized and supported by middle school ELA teachers in online schools?

- How do parents of middle school students enact their roles as learning coaches in online schools?

Mixed Methods Case Study

SOCS current enrollment is over 3000 students, with 975 of those students in the middle school grade band. In order to encompass a larger sample size, I conducted a mixed methods case study. A mixed methods approach, according to Johnson et al. (2017), allows the researcher to combine qualitative and quantitative methods “for the broad purposes of breadth and depth of understanding and corroboration” (p. 123). Qualitative data can help to reaffirm or explain the findings in quantitative data and vice versa. Using mixed methodology can “expand and strengthen a study’s conclusion and, therefore, contribute to the published literature” (p. 110). Moreover, Greene et al. (1989) note that this methodology can promote triangulation, complementarity, development, initiation, and expansion with a topic, which is needed when observing an under-researched area like online learning.

The study presented here uses a qualitative dominant approach, which Johnson (2007) defines as the following:

Qualitative dominant [or qualitatively driven] mixed methods research is the type of mixed research in which one relies on a qualitative, constructivist-poststructuralist-critical view of the research process, while concurrently recognizing that the addition of quantitative data and approaches are likely to benefit most research projects. (p. 124)

The qualitative data in the project—interviews, course analyses, school literature—is where most of information to answer the questions comes from, but the survey helps to inform and reinforce findings. The findings were then presented using a “joint display” where qualitative and quantitative results were presented concurrently (Schoonenboom & Johnson, 2017).

Yin (2018) connects case study work to a constructivist approach in that case studies "[attempt] to capture the perspectives of different participants and [focus] on how their different meanings illuminate your topic of study" (p. 16). I employed an embedded single case study methodology, which Yin (2018) defines as what happens when the researcher attends a larger umbrella group and then a subgroup (p. 51). Scholz and Tiede (1999) organize embedded case studies into three layers: "the case as a whole...conceptual model of the real world, and scattered data and results for disciplinary sub projects" (pp. 30-31). Through this work, I increased my understanding of parental roles within online schools and practice within online schooling. The embedded case study allowed me to work within the overall organization, the school, and an important subgroup, the parents. My research question encouraged looking at not only the parental perception but also the general structures of online schools.

Moreover, one role of the case study researcher is a teacher. Stake (1995) highlights the roles as being one "to inform, to sophisticate, to assist the increase of competence and maturity, to socialize, and to liberate" (pp. 91-92). The responsibilities within teaching I elevated are "to inform" and "assist the increase of competence and maturity." As much of the research on cyber charter schools is still in its infancy, there is a need to inform other researchers and school leaders on best practices for online learning. Likewise, there is a need to increase competencies of how online learning is used, especially in the wake of the COVID crisis when the need for alternative educational options is heightened. Understanding how parents can be productively utilized as secondary instructors can help to bring to maturity instructional support systems in times of online learning in addition to online schools.

Sample Selection Criteria

As one of the most widespread cyber charter school in its state, SOCS provides a rich opportunity for research. My sample consisted of parents of students who are currently enrolled in sixth, seventh, or eighth grade at SOCS. The sample included parents who were the designated learning coach of their middle school child or children. In some cases, parents are not the learning coach. Students may attend cooperative groups where students are learning in a group setting with an adult facilitating the daily schedule. In other cases, another adult takes responsibility as the Learning Coach. The purpose of my study is to understand *parental* roles as Learning Coaching so proximity to home and student was important to the discussion. While all parents, assigned Learning Coach or not, are experiencing learning with their child, the Learning Coach is the most active participant in the student's education, next to the teacher, responsible for monitoring and presenting some of the student's education.

Moreover, middle school parents and teachers were the focus of the work. As previously mentioned, there is a gap in online charters' research for middle and elementary schools. Middle school students are the second largest population in online charters and therefore would benefit from more focused study (Molnar et al., 2019). Middle school students are also still relatively dependent on their parents for school support, although dependence begins to taper off (CREDO, 2015). The transition that a middle school student is experiencing is worth exploring especially considering the exceptionality of the learning environment. The learning coach is more involved to speak to their experiences with the curriculum and online instruction.

Along with middle school learning coaches, I also incorporated teachers and the learning coach teacher into my work. Middle school English language arts teachers were included to provide additional insight into how learning coach engage with content support for their child.

Additionally, the learning coach teacher's job was to be a coach for the coach. She was available for support and to offer a structure to the learning coach's role when needed.

Finally, I conducted a survey of middle school learning coaches. The survey was sent out to all adults who were the designated learning coach of a middle school student and then filtered to identify parents. Surveys in conjunction with qualitative data can potentially produce more consistency within research findings (Harris & Brown, 2010; Greene, 1989; Bryman, 2006). A researcher should structure survey responses carefully in order to align the work in quantitative data with the qualitative data. Harris and Brown (2010) show that the relationship between survey and interview data can be complex, but when analyzed carefully, the two can produce a more cohesive result. The use of survey data within this dissertation helped to not only expand access to participants but also to triangulate findings and shape how I selected and interviewed participants.

Data Collection

To answer the research questions, data was collected through interviews with English language arts teachers, a learning coach partner, and parents, a survey of learning coaches, and course documents. Data was collected over the course of four months beginning May 2020.

Research Question 1

To answer the first research question 1 – *In what ways are learning coaches utilized and supported by middle school ELA teachers in online schools?* – I first utilized semi-structured interviews to develop thematic and dynamic questions for the interviews (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). I collected the interviews from the learning coach teacher and five ELA teachers. I also analyzed ELA course content, communication, and school developed literature.

Interview Participants

To answer the first research question, I began by sending an email to all middle school ELA teachers and master teachers asking for volunteers to participate in the study by sitting in on a 30-minute interview via zoom. I selected ELA teachers to provide insight into how coaches support students in content areas and how content teachers work with learning coaches. Of the ten emails sent out, five teachers responded and agreed to complete interviews. Table 1 shows the details of each teacher participants. All names used in this study are pseudonyms.

Table 3.1 ELA Teachers at SOCS

	Years in Education	Years in Online Education	Grade Level
Anne	15	7	8
Jane	33	2	6
Kate	13	6	7
Sara	31	3	6
Lynn	26	1	7

Teachers who participated had an average of 23 years of experience in education between them, some having switched to SOCS post-retirement. As the school had only been open for a total of 7 years at the time of the study, most teachers did not have extensive experience with online learning. Anne and Kate were considered veteran teachers.

Teachers were asked the following questions: How does online school compare to brick-and-mortar? Describe your expectations for Learning coaches? What supports, if any, do you have in place for your Learning Coaches? What does interaction with a Learning Coach typically look like? What are some factors that impact the way Learning Coaches support students? How does it vary? Teachers were also asked to reflect on how they view learning coaches in their content specifically.

Along with teacher interviews, I conducted a semi-structured interview with the learning coach teacher, also called a learning coach partner, to help better grasp the established role, if

any, of a learning coach. The learning coach teacher could also potentially provide information on how the school used learning coaches, historically, at SOCS to support students. The learning coach teacher could also explain any training, resources, or guidelines produced by the school to support the learning coach. Examples of dynamic questions for the learning coach partner were as follows: Describe your role as the learning coach partner. What resources (training, one-pagers, discussion boards) are available to learning coaches to support them? What, if any, are the established expectations of learning coaches at SOCS? How have you seen learning coaches used? Does the age of the student have any impact on the learning coach role?

Course and Communication Analyses

Using the schools learning management system, Canvas, I analyzed the communication between learning coaches and teachers. Through Canvas, I was able to view the faculty journal that houses summaries of parent-teacher communication. Here, teachers log phone conversations, emails, Remind messages, and other moments where interaction between a learning coach and a teacher takes place. A second space for communication would be to look at a teacher's class announcements to determine if broadcasted information is directed only to students or if teachers communicate with the learning coaches through the announcements. If so, I worked to determine what is the nature of the communication and how does that communication support the role of the learning coach in instructing their child.

School Produced Literature

I also examined district-produced literature and tools available for supporting parents in their role. The literature is an important facet for understanding how coaches are expected to engage with students. In theory, well produced literature will assist in supporting parents. I first analyzed the school website for initial information of the expectations of a learning coach.

Secondly, the school assigns all parents identified as the learning coach to a “Learning Coach Corner” course in the learning management system. This course contains resources for parents. Finally, I considered any handbooks available for parents or students created with the intention of defining the learning coach role.

Research Question 2

To answer the second research question, I collected data from a survey sent to middle school learning coaches. From the survey, I identified five parents to interview who were the assigned coach for their student.

Learning Coach Survey

The survey was designed in two thematic sections. The first section asked questions about the overarching role of a learning coach including length of enrollment, self-perception of the role, tools used in supporting students, and satisfaction with training. The second section homed in on coaching ELA courses. Coaches were asked to determine what support tools were used in the content area, time spent supporting, time spent seeking support, and satisfaction about provisions for support with ELA. Participants also had the ability to opt into a follow-up interview.

The survey, along with a consent form, was sent to all learning coaches associated with a middle school student, which was 975 coaches. Of the communication sent, 55 coaches responded and 51 identified as the parent of their child. Table 2 outlines the distribution of the survey participants. From the 51 parents, 20 agreed to be contacted for an interview and 5 scheduled and completed an interview.

Table 3.2 Learning Coach Relationship to Student

	N	%
Parent	51	92.7
Legal Guardian	1	1.8
Grandparent	1	1.8
Aunt/Uncle	1	1.8
Other	1	1.8

Parent Interviews

A productive mixed-methods study that uses both survey data and interview data should align the interview to the survey data as much as possible (Harris and Brown, 2010). In this project, the interview questions acted to expand survey responses and gain a clearer understanding of the learning coach's role. Five parents agreed to be interviewed. Table 3.3 outlines the parent participants. Each had at least one student at the middle school level. Interviews took place via Zoom and were 30 minutes long. Names presented in Table 3.3 are pseudonyms.

Table 3.3 Parent Sample

	Years Enrolled in SOCS	Student Grade Level
Bren	1	6
Jade	7	8
Gina	1	7
Tonya	1	8
Leslie	3	6, 8

The thematic questions are as follows: Describe your role as a learning coach for your child? What impacted the decision to enroll in a cyber charter school? Does the age of the student impact choice or experience within the school? Dynamic questions may resemble the following questions: How many hours per day are you working with your student? What was the transition to the new curriculum like? How did your family come to SOCS? Describe your role as a learning coach? Describe a typical school day.

Triangulation

To triangulate findings, I examined the interview responses from teachers, the learning coach teacher, and parents, course-wide communication, course documents, and school-created literature, and survey data to triangulate findings. Patton (1999) implores the use of triangulation because "no single method ever adequately solves the problem of rival explanations" (p. 1192). I employed Patton's four methods for triangulating qualitative results by coding data from interviews, observations, and communications to determine themes or patterns in the data to begin unpacking the learning coach's perspective through comparison and consistency (Patton, 1999, p. 1195).

Member Checks

Within a week of the interview, transcripts were returned to the participants for member checking. Participants were asked to review the verbatim transcripts and respond with any clarifications, omissions, or requested edits (Carlson, 2010; Forbat & Henderson, 2005). Once participants responded, I began analyzing the survey data.

Data Analysis

Glaser (1965) presents the practice of constant comparative methods, which allows a researcher to "generate theory more systematically" through an outlined four-stage approach. The process can be used with any research artifacts, so I relied on the interview data, communications, course analysis, and survey to complete the analysis. The four stages include: "(1) Comparing incidents applicable to each category (2) integrating categories and their properties (3) delimiting the theory, (4) writing the theory" (p. 439).

In the first stage of comparison, I will begin coding data thematically. Through scanning the data, I categorized information into applicable categories and compared each new addition to

previous list items. The act of comparison led to the generation of broad, overarching themes about coaching from the perspectives of home and the school. In this first phase, I also triangulated data to ensure that responses are analogous. From there, I entered the second phase of analysis, which begins defining big themes in my work. The themes outlined findings and worked toward answering my question to understand parental perceptions.

Finally, I combine stages three and four. While I was not working toward defining a theory, I sought to expound on the theory of connectivism for online learning to include best practices for K-12 online learners. The thematic findings of the research can help formulate an extension of the theory or a modification that would encompass young learners in cyber charter schools. Connectivism in conjunction with constructivism can support an expansion of Siemens's theory related to how learning happens within young, online students who are experiencing non-traditional education practices.

Interview Data

For both research questions, I collected interviews as one source of data: five teachers and a learning coach teacher for question 1 and five parents who were the assigned learning coach of a middle school student. All participants were given pseudonyms. The interviews were semi-structured, meaning I came to the interview with a general set of questions and developed additional questions as participants responded (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). I created thematic questions, which are outlined in Appendix E as the framework for the interview. When interviewing, I developed dynamic questions that helped to increase participant engagement with the topics.

All interviews were conducted via Zoom. Due to a global pandemic and participants being from all parts of the state, virtual interviews were the best to secure the data. James and

Busher (2009) note that online interviews can be limiting; however, asynchronous interviews where the interviewer can see and hear the participant can be as productive as face-to-face meetings (p. 179). Where possible, the participants in this study used their cameras to imitate an in-person meeting. Doing this created a more authentic interview experience for me, and I could get a better read on my participants.

I set a direct purpose for the meeting (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009, p. 130). At the start of the interview, I told participants the goal and what knowledge I hoped to gain from the meeting. All questions and conversations stayed, then focused on the questions at hand. Kvale and Brinkmann (2009) noted that the interviews were easier to conceptualize when more structured (p. 131). Interviews were transcribed from the recording using naturalized transcription practices (Bucholtz, 2000). Transcripts were then analyzed for themes. The five teachers and the learning coach teacher's interviews contributed to the themes of the first research question, while parent interviews contributed to the second question. All themes were considered when completing the discussion to establish the overarching results of the work.

Course Data and School Literature

To analyze course data for question 1, I first determined what resources would be most meaningful to learning coaches. I began by analyzing the faculty journals of all eight middle school ELA teachers from the learning management system. The faculty journal is a communication tracker for individual students containing communication between members of a student's triangle of support. Also, I analyzed the eight teachers' courses from the learning management system. In each course, I reviewed the syllabus, the curriculum and instructional materials, and course announcements. Finally, I examined the school website for information that was directed toward parents and learning coaches.

With all course data and school literature, I looked for instances of the learning coach being directly addressed and how the coach was addressed. Additionally, I noted times where learning coaches were absent from a piece of communication or materials and tried to decipher the rationale behind the missing information. As with the interview data, I grouped my findings thematically, comparing each instance of a theme to a similar example of the same theme (Glaser, 1965). The data were also considered in conjunction with what teachers and the learning coach teacher had said on learning coaches to determine any areas of interest for future research or the implications.

Survey Research

The learning coach survey served as a second data source for question 2. Survey questions were derived from Borup & Stevens's (2014) work on learning coach roles. Since this work focused on parents, the first step was to remove non-parents from the data set. The survey used a combination of Likert scale questions and time intervals to define the use and enactment of learning coaches. The survey also contained two opened ended questions which were analyzed as qualitative data along with parent interviews. Of the 975 learning coaches who received the survey, 55 coaches responded. This left 51 responses available for analysis.

To derive results from the survey, I began by determining which variables could correlate or which ones I thought might be dependent on others. For example, I examined and analyzed the relationship between time spent in ELA and final grade and tools in relation to satisfaction. Using SPSS, I conducted several correlation tests to gather information on parent responses. Similarly, I conducted analysis variance, or ANOVA, to determine statistical significance between variables. As with the other data pulled for this study, the survey findings were used to establish themes in question 2 and were used as a comparison for the results of the interviews.

The learning coach survey served the additional purpose of identifying interview participants and driving interview questions. From the survey results, I was able to build some of the interview questions to clarify or expound on information in the survey results.

Limitations

A limitation of this study is the inability to observe the learning coach in their own spaces with their students. Due to distance between the researcher and families and limited travel ability into homes during a global pandemic, the researcher, at this juncture, is bound to online interviews. James and Busher (2009), in their book *Online Interview*, discuss conducting interviews in a digital space. The authors emphasize that the online interviews cause some of the data to be lost that you would typically gain from proximity—facial cues, an understanding of someone's space, and body language are not available to the researcher (p. 180). The authors note, "In other words, if researchers are to understand life online, they have to understand that participants' experiences are connected and shaped by cultural and social elements that are both real and virtual, public and private, and online and offline" (p. 11). An online interview can create a filter that blocks out some aspects of the information the researcher would be trying to gather such as an established learning space in a home, interactions between the learning coach and their student, or aspects of daily life would help develop a completed picture of parental perceptions.

An additional limitation to the study lies in the application of findings. Although parents at the research site are required to list a learning coach when registering their child, there is often no way to control what will happen at home. Students might be working completely independently due to parent educational level, which will hinder significant amounts of support, or parental work demands that prevent a parent from being home with the student during school

hours (Otani, 2017). When considering, too, how this work might apply to traditional schools that have to spend time virtually, researchers may run into similar roadblocks of available parent support. Not all students will have an available parent or adult to help them with asynchronous work, so considering how to make independent learning as accessible to the student as possible is important for providing students with education at a distance.

Summary

This chapter detailed the implementation of a mixed-methods case study to determine how learning coaches are used in online schools. The study structure helped to produce more comprehensive results through use of interviews, course analyses, and the learning coach survey. The chapter outlined how the researcher collected and analyzed findings to produce thematic results presented in chapter four.

CHAPTER 4. RESEARCH FINDINGS

This chapter will report the results obtained through investigation of learning coaches of middle school students in online schools. First, the chapter will determine how middle school ELA teachers utilize and support learning coaches. Next, this chapter will evaluate how middle school parents enact their roles as learning coaches in online environments. Finally, this chapter concludes with the theoretical implications of the findings.

The research was conducted at a K-12 online charter school in the southeast United States. Southern Online Charter School, or SOCS, has an enrollment of 3500 students, with 975 at the middle school level. Data was collected through interviews with school administrators, teachers, and learning coaches (parents), course and communication documents, school-developed literature, and a survey to respond to the following research questions:

- In what ways are learning coaches utilized and supported by middle school English Language Arts Teachers?
- How do parents of middle school students enact their roles as learning coaches in online schools?

Coaches in Classrooms

Research Question 1 asked in what ways are learning coaches utilized and supported by middle school ELA teachers in online school. To answer this question, I interviewed five middle school ELA teachers, analyzed school literature, and interviewed the school's learning coach teacher, who is responsible for working with learning coaches. The findings from the data revealed three major themes: middle school specific monitoring practices, partnership between the parents and the school, and communication and connecting.

Monitoring for the Middle

Middle school students are often in flux developmentally, requiring a delicate balance between independence and monitoring. Teachers, the learning coach teacher, and school literature point to learning coaches needing to strategically monitor their children as they work. Monitoring was noted as one of the most prominent ways to promote success for an online student. Students are becoming more independent and are able to do more work on their own but having an adult present correlated to a more successful online student.

Middle School Student Needs

Middle school ELA teachers and the learning coach teacher found that parents often allow their middle school student to work completely unsupervised or alone for large portions of the day. The interviews suggested that parents of students at the middle school level felt that their child was old enough by sixth grade to be responsible for their own work. This is often not the case, though, as the majority of middle schoolers still need guidance and support. The asynchronous nature of online learning means that students are without a teacher unless attending live lessons through the school's conferencing software. Even then, many students are finding ways to either make it look like they are working or avoid work all together. Additionally, the interviews also suggested that students at the middle school level benefit from emotional support from their parents and teachers, especially since they are learning online away from others.

Findings indicated that a student getting older did not equate to parents being able to relinquish control. The learning coach teacher, noted:

A lot of parents have this perception that they can put the child in front of the computer, and they're going to be fine and they just need to check in periodically, like maybe once a week or so and they don't understand they're still dealing with a child whose brain is not, you know, this frontal lobe is not developed and they don't have reasoning skills and

aren't really—can't really—self-direct like an adult can, like most adults. And so, the challenge with middle school learning coaches sometimes, thing is...that a middle school student in many ways, requires more monitoring and more support from the learning coach than up upper elementary child does, right, because the middle school child attention span, it starts to wane. They are distracted by so many things. (Learning Coach Teacher Interview, lines 200-210)

The learning coach teacher goes on to note that parents often look at the size of their middle schooler, who could be growing rapidly, as an indicator of maturity. Middle school students still need guidance from an adult.

Jane noted that she felt “sixth-grade was the first-grade of middle school” (Teacher Jane Interview, lines 70-71) indicating that children entering middle school are on a cusp of development. The teacher argued for more gradual independence rather than “throwing them to the wolves” (Teacher Jane Interview, line 75). She states, “some of the kids *need* that learning coach” (line 164). Similarly, Anne agrees, affirming, “I see this a lot in 8th grade where families do want them to be more independent for high school but they still working on where that balance is with supervision versus hovering” (Teacher Anne Interview, lines 164-166). Here, teaching independence and consistent monitoring will best suit most middle school students in online schools. They benefit from the same kind of checking in and monitoring that a younger student does, but also benefit from *structured* independence that will be discussed throughout this section.

Structure independence begins with learning coaches checking in and being aware of the work that is being completed. Here, I am referring to learning coaches simply making sure that their child is working. Participants found that students were often not working. Because the student was in middle school, the learning coach had pulled back to the point where they were not checking in at all and therefore the student began to fall behind. The learning coach teacher argues:

You're not dealing with a little adult here, you're dealing with a child, and that child needs you to be our eyes and ears to set expectations with them that he's in school that there's a certain amount of work you expect to be done that the teachers expect to be done and you're going to be checking in daily, at a minimum, to ensure that the work is done. (lines 264-268)

The child needs someone to ensure that they are completing what is expected of them. As they are working separately from a teacher and in some cases do not mature enough to self-regulate, students need a sort of facilitator to work alongside them. Kate emphasized a need for parents and learning coaches to not “rest on what their kid did in brick and mortar” as the learning environment more fluid and open (Teacher Kate Interview, lines 286-287).

Further, the requirements from learning coaches here are reasoned to be relatively minimal for a middle school student. Sara noted:

At the middle school level, it's mainly just a supervising of the kid, being present in their live sessions, staying on track with their lesson...just be there to answer questions or help guide just like a teacher would. (Teacher Sara Interview, lines 36-38)

The learning coach teacher aligns with Sara. She states:

[Learning coaches] can help guide the child to be a better student by reading instructions and following those instructions and hold them accountable to a level of engagement and performance that you know isn't minimal. (Learning Coach Teacher Interview, lines 326-237)

Considering middle school developmental needs, an online middle school student benefits from a learning coach who is engaged with their work. Middle school students are becoming more independents, so learning coaches are able to start being more hands off, but they still have to be present and aware of their student's work.

Along with educational support, middle school students need appropriate emotional support from their learning coaches. Online schools are at risk of not having some of the emotional and social structures like a brick-and-mortar school might have in the sense of someone being present who can recognize when a student needs something. This responsibility,

though, seems to fall partially on learning coaches to ensure that their middle schooler *feels* supported. One teacher said, “I taught sixth-grade for twenty years and I think the biggest thing they need is to know that whoever is helping them whether it’s their teacher, their parent, their learning coach, that person really and truly cares about them” (Teacher Jane Interview, lines 35-38). Another teacher argued, “They need tough love sometimes, they need...to know you’re there” (Teacher Kate Interview, lines 160-161). This seems to indicate that a productive learning coach will be consistently checking in with a student as well as ensuring that they are feeling supported and loved throughout the day.

Engaging with Learning Management System

Another aspect of monitoring students in online environments is for learning coaches to engage with the learning management system, Canvas. Specifically, teachers, school literature, and the learning coach teacher maintain that a successful learning coach is familiar with the learning system that the school has in place and is actively checking work that students are completing within the system. Participants at the school level emphasized that learning coaches should be engaging with the calendar, the gradebook, and missing assignments reports available in Canvas specifically. The calendar provides a checklist of daily student work that is updated as a student completes a task. The gradebook contains student grades but learning coaches can also access student work here. Finally, the missing assignments report lists work that is incomplete. Participants feel that when these three tools are checked daily—or every few days for students who may need less monitoring—by a learning coach it can have a positive impact on student performance in online schools.

The school website states that the role of a middle school learning coach is to “assist in maintaining scheduled work, monitor work and grades, and assist students or refer to teacher”

(Information Session, SOCS Website). Further, the school informs learning coaches that one of their main responsibilities is to make sure that work is complete (Information Session, SOCS Website). One teacher refers to this as the “bare minimum” (Teacher Kate Interview, line 597) of expectations to check in on the status of student work through the calendar; however, two teacher participants argue that to confirm that students are working, learning coaches should check the gradebooks to get an idea of the *quality* of student work. One of the teachers argues:

I feel like middle school learning coaches don’t have to do that much if they sort of put some basic steps into practice so that the kid knows “oh my mom’s going to check this” or “the learning coach is going to check this and see that I actually turned in a screenshot of math for my science paper.” (Teacher Kate Interview, lines 242-246).

Comparably, Anne remarks, “I encourage [learning coaches] to not just look at the calendar to see what’s crossed off but to go into modules on the student’s account so they can see in more detail what really is or isn’t getting done” (Teacher Anne Interview, lines 46-48).

While the calendar view is important for getting a general sense of what the student has to do, learning coaches will get a better idea of what their student is doing or what the student needs when zooming in through the gradebook or the missing assignment report. Learning coaches who are engaging with the available tools in Canvas are going to be able to support that student better. The learning coach teacher also encourages learning coaches to run the missing assignments report in order to “identify unsubmitted work and establish a recovery plan with the student” (line 336). While the learning coach is never expected to teach, the learning coach is, however, expected to ensure students are engaged, be cognizant of student performance to be able to refer the student to their teacher, and maintain a schedule. To do this, though, learning coaches have to be deeply aware of what their child is actually doing during the school day.

Maintaining Schedule

Online schools have the ability to put daily structure in the hands of the learning coach rather than forcing students to follow a particular schedule. The school information page boasts that learning coaches will have “flexibility and adaptability of schedule” (Information Session, SOCS Website) reinforcing that a student at SOCS is allowed to make their own schedule. The definition of flexibility can often get misconstrued by families, though, as indicated by the learning coach teacher. She reasoned:

I've had to shape that messaging [of flexibility] to make sure they understand that doesn't mean that they can go for weeks without doing any assignments and just do it when they feel like it, it means that if they work better at night then that's when they can do their work, right. If they are an athlete or an actor whose schedule doesn't accommodate daily lessons like you would if they were having to go to brick and mortar school, then that's fine but that work shifts to another time. (lines 461-467).

A flexible learning environment, as described here, implies that students are still working daily, just at their own pace and timing. This is another aspect of successful monitoring of middle school students by learning coaches in that their schedule is being maintained effectively. Regardless of what school looks like for each student, the learning coach should sustain a schedule for the student.

Teachers are in agreement that maintaining a schedule is part of ensuring student success in online schools. In alignment with the learning coach partner's statement, Kate felt that a schedule and routine helped to make parents take flexibility more seriously (lines 241-248). Jane noted that she wants each learning coach to “help set up a daily schedule and weekly schedule and I want the learning coach to be part of that, too, and then teach them to post it on the computer and then tell them what *their* expectations are” (Teacher Jane Interview, lines 100-103). Here, the responsibility is, again, on the learning coach to establish and maintain a

schedule that works for the child, placing responsibility on the family. This will look different for each family, but what matters is having a schedule.

Further, Kate also argues for keeping a schedule in relation to the learning space and confirming that students are awake and working. She stated:

I feel like a lot of our learning coaches/parents think that “oh my kid’s in middle school, I can sort of let them do what they do and go about my business” and I feel like in the very beginning of the year if you know your kid’s not...if your kid didn’t wake up on their own to go to brick and mortar, they’re not going to wake up on their own with their computers in their room. So, wake them up, make them get out of their bed if they...if you have an extra or different area of the house where they can go for school, make them go there ‘cause so many kids have sent me videos where they are literally in their bed. (Teacher Kate Interview, lines 210-223)

Going to a different location, the teacher argues, will help set the tone for school. This will also verify that students are up and active in their courses, engaging with work.

Learning Coach Presence

When considering monitoring middle school students in online schools, there is an implication that an adult is present with the child while doing school. The school’s website recommends having a parent home with the child during the day to monitor progress and provide support (Parent Information, SOCS Website). However, in conversations with teachers and the learning coach teacher, it was discovered that most middle school students were working alone during the day. Sara affirmed,

Unfortunately, in middle school, our learning coaches are at work doing their own thing and they’re coming home and supervising at night when they get off of work. It’s not a true ‘be there during the day’ kind of situation, so a lot of times they get caught up in their own work responsibilities and are not aware of problems that come up with their students. (Teacher Sara Interview, lines 72-74)

Jane noted that a factor that impacted student performance and engagement was whether or not a learning coach was there during the day with the student. Therefore, the absence of an adult is a

concern for student progress and creates a risk for students missing out on any necessary interventions since they are not being monitored.

Teachers also found that in some cases, students were being monitored by a grandparent or an adult family member that was not the learning coach. This created a second issue where the grandparent was not aware of how to use the computers or check work, so students still fell behind (Teacher Jane Interview, lines 244-253; Teacher Sara Interview, lines 85-88, lines 112-118; Teacher Lynn Interview, lines 80-87, lines 153-164). Sara believes that having someone to “supervise and monitor” a student should be the expectation; however, she also acknowledges that this person had to be able to help a student navigate through the instructional process (Teacher Sara Interview, lines 23-39). Learning coaches are trained on this specifically, so they are prepared to help a student with their lessons or with the learning system. An adult who is only watching the child during the day may not have the same access or knowledge as the designated learning coach.

Monitoring seems to be one of the simplest ways to ensure that students are working and having every opportunity to be successful in online schools. School literature maintains:

In our experience, students benefit most from our program when a parent or trusted adult serves as a learning coach and helps provide structure, motivation, and encouragement. (Informational Session, SOCS Website)

One teacher argues, “I think it makes a difference when the learning coach is not there very often” (Teacher Jane Interview, lines 284-285). Similarly, Sara states, “The main thing I feel for middle school is having someone there to make sure that they’re actually waking up, attending live session, staying on track (Teacher Sara Interview, lines 172-174). The presence of a learning coach is imperative for an online learner. Even independent students can benefit from having the support of an adult checking in and asking questions.

Partnering Between the School and Parents

Parents as learning coaches and teachers in online schools rely on a partnership between them to be able to work together for student success. Learning coaches are an extension of the school. The learning coach teacher determines the following:

It really explains to them what their role is, what part they play on the [SOCS] team as an *extension* of our team. What resources and supports they have available to them. What we expect and how to do it, ranging from everything from monitoring, there are students using the tools that are available, setting up an accountability system with their children, and be consistent in implementation of those things. I mean, it's pretty in depth. (Learning Coach Teacher Interview, lines 72-77).

One aspect of the partnership between the two requires the learning coaches to take advantage of available trainings to be in line with school expectations and aware of how to access programs to be able to support students. Another aspect is the willingness of learning coach to work with the teachers and school to provide adequate support for students.

One distinction to make here, is that learning coaches are not teachers, nor are they expected to teach. The school website states:

You are the facilitator, not the teacher. You are the liaison between the student and the teacher. Middle and high school students become more independent and start to build a rapport with teachers and call on them when they need additional help. As a learning coach, you'll be more involved than ever in your child's education no matter their grade level. You'll communicate with teachers on a regular basis and review the grade book. (Parent Information, SOCS Website)

This statement implies a relationship between the learning coach and the school that is academically focused and poised to establish a community of support. However, a slight distinction is made between the school and the family. As the learning coach teacher points out, administration and teachers refer to the student as "our student, your child" as a way of drawing a line between the two (Learning Coach Teacher Interview, line 338). Learning coaches are

expected to be involved and conscious of student progress, while connecting with the teacher to confirm their child is getting what he or she needs.

Training as a Means of Building a Partnership

Within the partnership, something that must be considered is that students who are enrolled at online charter schools like SOCS are held to state and district requirements for time spent in classes, submitting work, and standardized testing. So, while the parent as a learning coach has some say over how, where, and when the student is learning, there are still requirements for the student that the learning coach has to ensure are taking place. The school, then, works hard to make sure that learning coaches understand how to access materials and understand best practices for working with teachers for the success of the student through onboarding, the learning coach teacher, and the school created materials.

The learning coach teacher is responsible for supporting new and returning learning coaches as they begin to navigate the learning systems. She defines the evolution of her role as the following:

I was approved because my observation from my [previous school] days which carried forward into the [SOCS] days was that we were telling our parents that we needed them to play a role, but we weren't explaining to them what that really was or how to do it. So, when I proposed this position, I proposed it as a training and support role for learning coaches—and learning coaches is all inclusive, its parents, guardians or designated learning coaches...So the position included also the onboarding of new families, right? Because that's the critical piece when you're bringing a new student and a new family on board, they know nothing. This has evolved over the last two years with use of different tools and platforms, but I also have the responsibility of orienting and training new students and learning coaches to use our platforms and about what we expected from them, what they could expect from us as students and as learning coaches. (Learning Coach Teacher Interview, lines 50-62)

The role of the learning coach has not changed over the life of the school much, but the school has seen the need to clarify the role and responsibilities for families. The learning coach teacher does this by being first and foremost a touch point for learning coaches. Teachers mentioned

recommending learning coaches reach out to the learning coach teacher in times where questions were non-academic or outside of the teacher's scope (Teacher Sara Interview, lines 122-133; Teacher Jane Interview, lines 222-229).

Secondly, the learning coach teacher has worked with various departments across the school system to build trainings for learning coaches. Within this orientation and training, the learning coach teacher guides families through the learning management systems, reviews practices for communication, and outlines the expectations of the learning coach. Teacher Kate reinforces a need for the trainings by stating:

[The learning coach teacher] had been talking about [her role] since we were in Connections, that there needs to be somebody there to teach people how to be learning coaches because it's a different role than just being a parent waiting to find out what your kid's grades are. (lines 384-396)

This reenforces that the designated learning coach needs to be prepared to do more for their child. The learning coach must be comfortable with the technology to be able to actively monitor the work that is or is not being completed. The learning coach also must have some awareness of the materials and teacher expectations. Not all parents will instinctively know how to locate this information or know how to support their child, so training is vital for productive learning coaches and students.

While all learning coaches have access to the trainings and are expected to go through them when first enrolled, the learning coach teacher noted that some parents choose not to complete the training and that the training might not be as effective as the school perceives them to be (Learning Coach Teacher Interview, lines 120-139). Three of the teachers made remarks in reference to feeling as if learning coaches needed more training and oversight to do their job effectively. Teacher Kate argues that promotes the partnership between the teacher and learning coach by helping keep the learning coach aware of student behavior in the system. She stated:

I don't know how we train them better and better to make it easier on us, better so they can participate in their kids' education or what kid they're responsible for and help that kid be successful because they're there and I kind of feel like if it's not a partnership and you're just like 'that's your teacher, go learn from them,' or whatever, and it's not a partnership between the teacher and the learning coach, the kid will take every advantage that they can to do the least amount of work possible. (Teacher Kate Interview, lines 585-591)

Similarly, Teacher Jane suggested more help and guidance because of the absence she experienced from many of the learning coaches. She reasoned:

I did have learning coaches that didn't do their jobs this year. I don't think they did their jobs because just the fact that their kids, or whatever relationship they were to these kids, failed and we couldn't get in contact with them a lot and I'm wondering even at the beginning of the year if we had some kind of welcome live session just for learning coaches but I mean [the learning coach Teacher] does that where we could kind of give them the expectations and some help and some guidance. (Teacher Jane Interview, lines 223-229)

Jane made a connection between learning coaches who were hard to contact and student who were not successful during the school year. She felt that a more personalized training from teachers to set the tone and expectations would have been more effective.

Finally, Lynn, who was a new teacher this school year, also felt that there needed to be more involved trainings for learning coaches rather than a set-and-forget model that is the current structure. Lynn suggests the following:

The oversight and check in for learning coaches, there should be something there where those learning coaches have to come in at a certain time and say maybe it be every two weeks where they check in and there's someone to say, "Ok do you understand this? Where are you in the learning with your child? Is there anything that we can help you with that you're not seeing? Is your child...how many hours are you still having to do work outside of when you're with the child?" Because, you know, a lot of these parents don't know what they're doing and it's not their fault that they don't know. It's a different environment and so when you sign up for this, you should also sign up for the fact of there's some learning that had to take place on the learning coach's side of it. So, what I've seen is that there needs to be more oversight in and what I mean by oversight is more training, more than just, "Oh did you go through the process of learning how to do things? Did you go through the process of how to do Remind?" Let me check with you every week or however often to say, "Hey, how is this learning going for you?" (Teacher Lynn Interview, lines 98-110)

Here, Lynn recommends more communication between the teacher and the learning coach to confirm that the learning coach has what they need to effectively support their child. Lynn's recommendation is reminiscent of what a teacher would do with a student: consistently checking-in to make sure that they understand the expectations. Kate, Jane, and Lynn are tapping into a structural issue that the online school may be facing. Learning coaches are doing the work, but it may not be enough, or it may be an issue of learning coaches doing the training out of obligation rather than authentic understanding. The result is a faulty partnership and a risk of an unsuccessful student. Further, onboarding takes place after enrollment so parents can potentially enroll students without any understanding of their responsibility in their child's education. With this in mind, the importance of checking in or building a meaningful partnership is a valuable way to promote learning coach and student success.

Semi-Academic Role of Learning Coaches

While school literature makes it clear that learning coaches are not intended to teach students, part of monitoring a middle school student requires the learning coach to be familiar with the curriculums and school structures. As noted in the previous section, learning coaches have access to all of a student's work, grades, and the entirety of the curriculum. As Kate pointed out, "We need to stress that not just waiting for a teacher to tell them that their kid is failing, that you have access to that information" (Teacher Kate Interview, lines 421-422). Learning coaches are responsible for ensuring that students are engaged in their learning. Therefore, learning coaches take on a semi-academic role by facilitating learning for their child alongside the teacher.

Facilitation requires that the learning coach be tracking the progress that their child is making. Because coaches have access, they are positioned to know exactly what is occurring in

any given class and can respond accordingly. One teacher noted, “Learning coaches need to be more aware of what’s going on in the courses than I had realized” (Teacher 1 Interview, line 248). Likewise, the learning coach teacher stresses the importance of learning coach going over work and assignments with their child. She makes a comparison to a teacher walking around a classroom, redirecting students to follow all directions on an assignment or redirecting behavior. She argues,

Well, the parent can do something similar in terms of if I see it in time what was supposed to have been done, and I don’t think that’s right. Read those instructions again. And if they don’t want to read it to them—let’s read this together. (Learning Coach Teacher Interview, lines 365-370)

In this way, the learning coach needs to be engaged with instruction and the curriculum to be able to effectively support his or her child. Again, the coach is not teaching, but doing just that—coaching.

Further, teachers encourage the learning coaches to be mindful of student performance outside of just focusing on grades. In a classroom, teachers are watching for behaviors as well as academic performance; teachers are able to see when a child is disengaged or struggling with their tasks. In an online environment, though, teachers are very rarely able to see a student outside of work that is turned in or timestamp of time spent on a lesson. Anne remarked that even this is not a clear indicator of performance as technology can glitch and time spent on a lesson is often times not indicative of student ability (Teacher Anne Interview, lines 345-353). Anne and Lynn urge learning coaches to be monitoring how students are acting when working along with the quality of the work students are completing. Lynn encourages learning coaches to be noting times when they are distracted or having trouble maintaining stamina—things a teacher would be able to pick up on and address in a brick-and-mortar classroom (Teacher Lynn Interview, lines 480-487). This responsibility now falls on a learning coach to ensure that

students will get any necessary accommodations or supports that they might receive in a traditional classroom.

On the other hand, there is a risk that a learning coach might provide too much help to their students academically which could lead to teachers not being able to gauge student ability or need. As mentioned, teachers are often reliant on what students turn in, time spent in lessons, and live lesson attendance. However, the teacher cannot see the student; therefore, there is always a risk that the student is not completing the work. Teachers found that parents and learning coaches were doing work for their students in some cases (Teacher Kate Interview, lines 27-30, lines 440-444; Teacher Lynn Interview, lines 414-416; Learning Coach Teacher, lines 376-381). The implication here is bigger than the student not learning, but also running the risk of teacher missing a student who might need specialized support from the school. Learning coaches have to find a balance between monitoring student work closely and allowing students to experience authentic learning.

Supplemental Instructors

Along with helping facilitate learning for students, an argument can be made for learning coaches being supplemental instructors in online schools. There is some tension with calling learning coaches *instructors*. The school makes a clear distinction as well as the learning coach teacher and some of the teachers arguing against learning coaches teaching students. The general consensus is that teachers are responsible for teaching and learning coaches facilitate, coach, and make sure that students are engaging (Teacher Anne Interview, lines 259-263; Teacher Kate Interview, lines 27-31; Teacher Sara Interview, lines 277-278). However, when considering that students are working asynchronously the majority of their school day and that there is an

expectation that learning coaches are aware of the learning management systems and the curriculum, some instructing might be necessary. The learning coach teacher concedes:

If I want to label it something, I guess I could say supplemental instructor there, but I just don't for all the reasons I've said. I don't want to use that word, but they are reinforcing what the teacher is teaching so that they can learn how to count, and they can learn how to recognize the alphabet. (Learning Coach Teacher Interview, lines 401-405)

This also applies to older students when considering writing projects or talking about what they have read in class.

The learning coach has to step up to an extent and be willing to instruct in some cases.

Lynn remarks the following on instructing:

I dealt with [learning coaches] as if they were the teacher...and I look at it as an intervention type situation because you have that one on one aspect of the parents. (Teacher Lynn Interview, lines 242-243)

Teachers at SOCS have much more space in their schedule to support students and are not limited to when the student is in their classroom. However, families are not always on the same schedule as when the teacher is in office or there is another factor that limits the communication between the learning coach and the teacher. In cases where learning coaches are able, there is an implication that they take the lead on their child's learning. While teachers do not want learning coaches to take hold of the entirety of the child's education, there are some facets that learning coaches are more than capable of handling.

Teachers acknowledged that learning coaches should be listening to and taking notes on what the students are learning. One teacher recognizes that there is a bit of discomfort for a learning coach when it comes to engaging with the academic side of their role, especially if they have no experience with education (Teacher Lynn Interview, lines 480-483). But being aware of what is happening in a student's class is the first line of defense for being able to either support a student or recommend that student to their teacher. Another teacher initially wanted her learning

coaches to, at the minimum, “check grades and that they make sure that you’re turning in work” (Teacher Anne Interview, lines 277-278). However, she recognized the following:

The parents *do* need to provide some sort of additional support and, even if they can’t give it to the kids themselves, have a conversation with me so that I can explain it to you so that you can help your kid. (Teacher Anne Interview, lines 283-285)

The academic engagement a learning coach should have with their child’s education is one that is focused on the child’s needs. Students might be hesitant to reach out to a teacher or not know how to ask for help. Herein lies the importance of learning coaches being aware of a student’s academics: to be able to advocate and step in when necessary.

Practices for Partnerships

One thing worth noting is that materials within ELA courses are solely student facing. All curriculum, instruction, and resources in the eight ELA courses analyzed were targeted toward students, meaning teachers did not have learning coach supports build into their courses. Though there is an expectation of learning coaches being able to be a secondary instructor at times, there were no course materials available to specifically aid learning coaches in attending to that component of their role. Kate commented:

They have all the access they need and so I think if they’re actually checking on that it would be a lot of times it would make the phone calls a lot more pleasant or it’s, I think just about being proactive. (Teacher Kate Interview, lines 388-390)

There are two parts to unpack here about developing a partnership to support a student. One is that the teacher feels that coaches have everything they need to be successful in their role. The second is that the learning coach is expected to be proactive. Teachers seemed to be reliant on learning coaches working alongside the student and seeking help from the teacher from that point rather than having separate information. While this might be encouraging the family to lean more

on the teacher for instruction, it begs the question of if additional instructional materials specifically for learning coaches could improve some of the issues that arise with them.

The school website outlines one of the responsibilities of a learning coach as partnering with the teacher to “develop a plan for students” (Informational Sessions, SOCS Website). The learning coach teacher concurs that the learning coach, teacher, and student should all be “part of the solution” (Learning Coach Teacher Interview, line 342). Accomplishing this, however, requires ongoing communication about progress between the learning coach and the teacher. In online schools, the weight on student performance is more heavily on learning coaches since they should be most available to the student. Jane surmised on the role of learning coaches:

[Students] have two learning coaches basically in brick and mortar: their classroom teachers and then hopefully someone at home helps them. But in online, their main learning coach is that person at home who had just that huge responsibility of making sure that kids are responsible and log in and then take care of their business. (Teacher Jane Interview, lines 7-11)

Because the learning coach is responsible for their child’s work, the coaches have to be willing to collaborate with the teacher for the benefit of the student. The partnership only works when the learning coach is present *and* active in the student’s courses. Anne stated:

The parent needs to provide some sort of additional support and even if they can’t give it to the kids themselves have a conversation with me so that I can explain it to you so that you can help your kid. So, it needs to be more of a partnership rather than just “we’re only going to talk to each other when things are dire.” (Teacher Anne Interview, lines 285-287)

Similarly, Lynn noted:

The best learning coach is one that is willing to call you when that kid isn’t working and said, “Hey, you know what? What do I need to do? What do you suggest? What do you suggest I do? How can I be a partner with you?” Because they’re not just a learning coach for their child. They’re supposed to be a partner with the teacher. (Teacher Lynn Interview, lines 418-422)

The learning coach role, in this sense, extends past supporting the child, but being the eyes and ears for the teachers.

In a way, the partnership between a teacher and a learning coach is preventive in nature where the learning coach is taking steps to ensure that their child has what they need at all times. The partnership is meant to be ongoing rather than only in times of crisis. The learning coach also has to be willing to acknowledge when they need something from the teacher as some parents find it difficult to relinquish control to a teacher. But by working *with* the teacher, the student is more likely to feel and be supported.

Communication and Connecting

As with all schools, it is important to build relationships between families and schools. To do this, learning coaches have to be consistently checking in and accessible to teachers when necessary. Teachers also must be cognizant of how they are communicating to parents and learning coaches to promote relationships and communication between families and the school. In turn, learning coaches have to be open-minded about what their child is experiencing or struggling with to serve them best. Finally, at the middle school level, students are reaching an age where they are capable of reaching out to a teacher and would benefit from the learning coach teaching the student how to connect with their teacher.

Building Relationships Online

Although students are working apart from their teachers, this does not limit the potential for relationship building between the school and families. However, relationships take a little more effort on the school and the family's part because there has to be a concerted effort from both parties to maintain the connection. Communication should be ongoing to "optimize learning

experiences” (Information Sessions, SOCS Website). From working with families across the entire school system, the learning coach teacher found:

Typically, if the student is not engaged, the parent is not engaged or doesn’t know how to execute some of the things that you know were suggested and the thing I don’t have any control over is whether the family is going to do onboarding right. (Learning Coach Teacher Interview, lines 118-121)

Good communication practices are covered in the training, so if the parent is not successful at communication, it is an indication that they missed a pivotal part of the trainings that emphasized the need for open communication between all parts of a student’s support system. This, in turn, can impact student engagement and, therefore, student success. Families have to be ready and willing to put in the necessary effort to make sure that students are connected appropriately to their teachers and the school.

On one hand, though, students may experience a disconnect with their teachers because of the distance. Not seeing a teacher aside from on the computer a few times a week seems to eliminate some of the human element from the school. In a traditional school, things like body language, touch, verbal cues all contribute to the relationship that a student has with a teacher.

Kate notes:

I think their interactions with their teachers [in brick and mortar] are a little bit different because they see us as real human being, where a lot of time, I feel our kids don’t make the connection until they actually see us. (Teacher Kate Interview, 43-45)

Kate recognizes that there is a barrier between an online student and the teacher. Online schools run the risk of feeling automated or robotic, but the human element is an invaluable factor for student success. Teachers being visible and available is a way for families to see teachers as people and help build the relationships.

On the other hand, there are instances where online environments are significantly better suited for building relationships with families than traditional schools. Anne states:

I do find that shifting to online it's easier to build relationships with the whole family instead of just with the kid and then that makes a difference because you have more of a partnership with the parents if it's a parent who is available and answers the phone and is willing to talk. (Teacher Anne Interview, lines 8-12)

Anne makes an important distinction here. Whereas teachers in traditional schools are often exclusively student focused unless there is an issue, online teachers have an opportunity to connect with the entire family. There is much more space in an online teacher's schedule to reach out to families. The relationship does require effort on the part the parent or learning coach, as Anne has argued. Because of the distance, learning coaches and students are positioned to not respond to emails or phone calls often times causing the student to be completely unreachable. A family's willingness to reciprocate communication will speak to the quality and productivity of the relationship. Families that do take advantage of the relationships have an opportunity for meaningful relationship and a deep partnership between the school and the family.

Learning Coaches Engagement and Accessibility

Learning coaches being accessible is the most direct way to create connections between the school and families. As previously mentioned, the willingness to communicate is an easy step learning coaches can take to connect. The school site is definitive in stating that coaches will "communicate with teachers on a regular basis and review the gradebook" (Parent Information, SOCS Website). In order for teachers to be able to rely on learning coaches as partners, being accessible is a simple expectation set by the school. However, as the learning coach teacher found, learning coaches are often hard to pin down. Her desire for learning coaches is as follows:

The expectation, and again there's no way to make this happen, but the expectation is that they're going to read and respond to electronic communication within 24 hours and that they will respond to phone calls within 24 hours as well. And I'm giving them that 24-hour period because while people work, so you know they can't necessarily answer the phone. (Learning Coach Teacher Interview, lines 344-348)

The learning coach teacher acknowledges that not everyone is able to respond immediately but should try to get to the communication fairly quickly. This highlights the idea that middle school students are working alone while parents are at work by recognizing a recommendation for a response window. The learning coach teacher is also noting that there is no real policy in place to ensure that coaches are taking time to view communication and respond. Checking messages and assignments, as will be discussed, is a highly recommended practice rather than an established policy that is monitored. There does not seem to be any consequence for learning coaches not checking in as this is separate from issues like student engagement. But as previously mentioned, there does seem to be a correlation between learning coach engagement and student engagement.

Teachers agree that learning coaches need to be accessing student work and managing communication frequently to ensure that students are successful in their courses. Similar to the learning coach teacher, Kate found that in working with learning coaches, they would go long periods of time without following up on communication and work. She noted:

Guys you need to check your students' gradebooks at least once a week. Make sure they're doing their lessons. Go in to pick a couple of lessons. Go in to see what they've actually submitted. Make sure you check your canvas messages or your emails so that you can see messages that are coming from the teacher because I get a lot of parents that when they find out, "Oh he's failing, oh well I haven't heard anything." Well, we've sent you fifteen emails, so literally you have fifteen emails that said he was failing. This is the number you have to call so we can check about it and what he can do. This was the plan that we gave him two months ago and he didn't do anything on it. So, I think not just expecting communication from the school but actually making sure you go through that communication. (Teacher Kate Interview, lines 400-409)

Choosing not to check communication or course progress can result in students not receiving recommended assistance from teachers. Kate is also pushing for a level of proactivity where learning coaches are not waiting for someone to reach out but taking the responsibility as a secondary instructor to seek out what their student needs. Communication, here, is the

responsibility of the entire system: teachers, learning coaches, and students. All parties have to have forethought when managing communication to avoid missing pertinent information.

However, communication within the learning management system is most often not parent or learning coach facing. There are a few instances where Coaches and parents are directly addressed such as standardized testing information from administration, advisory course information, and some failures notices are directed to the parents with solutions built in. Of the eight middle school ELA teachers, the majority of communication that was not a general class wide broadcast was between a student and their teacher. In one instance a teacher instructed the student to have the learning coach contact her for help with the assignment. Other examples showed the learning coaches reaching out to discuss why a student had been behind, but this was a very small selection of communication. Communication is happening frequently, but not always directed specifically at learning coaches which could affect how they are consuming the information. This seems to reemphasize the need to check-in and follow up frequently with available communication.

One thing that teachers reiterate as far as learning coach engagement and accessibility is concerned is that learning coaches have to be available. The expectation is, again, not necessarily that coaches respond immediately, but that they are there for their student and willing to take time to communicate with teachers and the school when they can and when necessary. Sara goes back to the argument of the importance of learning coach training. She states, “[Coaches] would need to be trained that way because it’s more of an issue of them being accessible” (Teacher Sara Interview, lines 188-189). She refers, here, to coaches having an awareness of what their student is doing and also a willingness to take the time to dig into courses and check communication to be able to step up or reach out if their student needs support. Anne argues that parents should be

available “in the same way that you will expect a parent of any child in any school to just be there like if you have a question” (Teacher Anne Interview, lines 274). While traditional brick and mortar schools do not have the same level of communication need as online schools, the need for parent involvement is universal. learning coaches will have to be guided and reminded of the importance of taking that responsibility for their students.

Teacher Communication Moves

Learning coaches should make themselves available and be proactive in checking courses and communication, but teachers also have a responsibility to ensure that they are providing adequate support for the learning coaches. Middle school ELA teachers noted some practices for improving or supporting communication that they used with learning coaches for their courses. Anne discussed how she used a tool, Remind, for sending out quick communication to Coaches as well as how she framed her instructions in the course to help learning coaches. She said:

I think for me it’s making sure that how I write the directions or how I send out messages and reminders. I used Remind I think more to focus on “hey everybody just a reminder we have this major essay coming up at the end of the week. Don’t forget about it.” That way the parents kind of knew what was coming up without necessarily having to log into Canvas and look at every course all the time. (Teacher Anne Interview, lines 256-261)

Anne is cognizant that learning coaches are working through assignments many times with the students, so providing detailed information on the assignment is important for Coach support. The instructions in her ELA courses are not directly toward a learning coach but are clear and direct since the student and the coach are working asynchronously much of the time. Assignment directions were as much part of communication as messages. Anne is also conscious of the time that learning coaches have. As many middle school students are working alone while the Coach is at work, Anne’s communication is quick and on a platform that does not require logging into

the learning management system. This strategy allows the information to be a little easier to access since, as we have learned that not all parents are as engaged in courses as might be ideal.

Similarly, Kate also sent out parent facing communication when major assignments were involved. Her communication out is limited to the assignments. She stated:

If I do give [learning coaches] information, it's very specific to an assignment and I send out to everybody in a Canvas message, the only messages that I send out to students. All their parents, all the observers on the account get the same message. (Teacher Kate Interview, lines 434-437)

Kate limits her broadcasted communication to major assessments in ELA. All members of a student's team get that communication as a way to ensure that the student is doing the assignment and that the coaches are prepared in the instance that they have to provide support. When considering that learning coaches are in partnership with teachers, giving the coach the tools that they need is invaluable for a strong partnership and for the success of the student.

The learning coach teacher also stresses the importance of the teacher making an effort to communicate out to coaches. She argued:

I would say we are making sure that we're communicating and reaching out to those students who are demonstrating that they're struggling in one way or another. Even with the gifted student. If the gifted student is underperforming or is racing through assignments and not performing at a level that one would expect, then you know we need to make sure we're connecting with the student and the learning coach. (Learning Coach Teacher Interview, lines 437-441)

The learning coach teacher emphasizes the teacher responsibility to be checking in with student progress in a similar manner to how teachers expect learning coaches to check in with student progress. The responsibility to monitor students' needs cannot fall on one party but has to be the combined work of a student's entire support system.

To accomplish a productive connection, the learning coach teacher recommends using available programs outside of the learning management system. She found, "One of the nice

things about Remind and Go To Connect are some people still [get in touch] if they text us or we can text them” (Learning Coach Teacher Interview, lines 349-350). Remind and Go To Connect allow for phone calls and texts to and from teachers on a smart phone. Coaches do not have to log into Canvas, which can be cumbersome. As instruction in online schools is flexibility, there is an argument here for flexibility within communication to making it specific to a particular family’s needs. Anne discusses how she adapts communication to be better suited for each family. She notes:

So for most of them I try to keep it short and to the point because I know that they have other things going on and they don’t necessarily want to be on the phone all day...So I like to, from the beginning, find out what method of communication the parent would prefer and I’ll make note of that on my spreadsheet, my Google sheet...Sometimes I will send a Canvas message to the student and copy the parent on it and then the parent will reach out to me to talk about it, so it’s kind of a case by case basis on what the kid needs at that time. (Teacher Anne Interview, lines 82-99)

Anne’s effort to establish the best method of communication with her families early on elevates her chances of effectively reaching families in times of need. It also creates a clear method for the learning coach to reach out.

On Being Open and Honest

In the ELA classes, teachers found that learning coaches were able to get a better read on students than teachers could since teachers are not seeing students. As had been discussed, student work or time in courses is not always an accurate read of what a student need. Teachers are missing immediate interaction with students (Teacher Jane Interview, lines 15-23). It then comes down to the learning coaches being proactive with a child’s education and honest about what they are seeing from the student at home and in the courses. Some conversations might be uncomfortable, but in order for the teacher to be able to provide help, they have to have a clear picture of what is going on behind the screen.

As part of maintaining communication, learning coaches have to be open-minded about what their student is doing in each course. Kate reasoned,

They know their kids. You know your child whether you want to admit it to a stranger or not, you know your kid so check in on them and even if your kid wouldn't do that, still check on them because what I've found is that kids who would never do those things, because they really didn't have the opportunity to do those things, they will do them here. (Teacher Kate Interview, lines 273-277)

This goes back to the need for middle school students to be monitored by their learning coach.

When there are issues or a student needs help, if the learning coach is not aware of what is actually happening for that student academically, the teacher and the coach cannot work as effectively with one another. Middle school students are becoming capable of being more independent, but they still require the structure and support of an adult. Coaches, though, have to be willing to make difficult calls and be willing to recognize when their student is not doing well.

Another facet of communication is the learning coach knowing their limits and where they will need help as a coach. Anne was a proponent for learning coaches reaching out when they needed clarifications on assignments or strategies for ELA support. She noted:

You know if you know your kid struggles in ELA or if you know *you* struggled in ELA and you don't know how to help them, then let's talk early on before a problem starts so that way, we kind of are on the same page from the get-go. (Teacher Anne Interview, lines 289-291)

Anne hopes to build that communication early on with Coaches to prevent major issues along the way. Similarly, Lynn recognizes that being a learning coach is difficult, especially since most are not teachers nor have had any teaching experience. She said,

Unless you're retired teacher or someone who's been teaching it's not going to be comfortable to just sit there and listen to someone else and try to monitor. So, what are you doing? Are you taking notes while the student is work? (Teacher Lynn Interview, lines 480-481)

Anne and Lynn know that learning coaches are not experts but can be trained in their role.

Honesty and openness with the learning coach can be a way to build a meaningful connection that creates a channel of support for a student.

When considering connections with learning coaches, Lynn also found that when there was openness, she was able to make suggestions to the learning coach more easily. For example:

You can say to the parent, hey you know what? I've noticed XY and Z while he's working. So, if you're going to work with him over the weekend, you know you might want to make sure he does XY and Z. (Teacher Lynn Interview, lines 492-295)

Coaches are, again, positioned to be a secondary instructor, but in order to do that, they have to be willing to be part of the conversation.

In some cases, though, teachers have found that learning coaches were unwilling to respond or engage with the school. Kate noted of some returning parents:

The repeat parents, the ones whose kids have been here for years, they don't do anything. They will literally set themselves on fire to try to not talk to me. (Teacher Kate Interview, lines 356-357)

Some parents refuse to step in or are willing to help. They commit to the bare minimum of communication, which does not serve the student well. In order for the learning coach to be a valuable resource for middle school students, Coaches have to be willing to connect to the school and be honest about their own needs and the needs of their student.

Developing Student Communication

As students in middle school are maturing, one step a parent or learning coach in online schools can take with their child is to support them in developing meaningful relationships with their teachers. While many learning coaches will still take responsibility for communication, teachers found that there is value in a student learning to reach out to their teacher. Jane discussed what she wishes for her students. She said:

But I did encourage the kids to be the one to email when they need help. I always do that because it's just because I feel like the learning coaches at this age should be encouraging the kids to do it too. (Teacher Jane Interview, lines 196-198)

Jane understands that some children might not be comfortable with this but recognizes that they can be the ones to take the lead on communication with the right support. Kate also notes to parents, "Hey if [the students] have a question about an assignment, let them call me" (Teacher Kate Interview, line 301). This has the potential to reinforce communication as a shared responsibility between the school and the family.

Further, Anne established that many students are hesitant to reach out but emphasizes that helping the student become comfortable with communicating with their teacher can be beneficial. Anne discussed:

[Learning coaches] did have a lot of good questions and I would tell them, "Look you're going to have many more questions once your kid gets started." So, my big thing in seventh grade, those kids—the majority of them—do not want to interact with their teachers. They do not want to talk on the phone with their teachers. I had to tell the parents, "You've got to tell your kids I'm here all day. I'm here for them. That's why I'm here and so they've got to call." (Teacher Anne Interview, lines 338-348)

Anne is developing a relationship with the learning coach first to create a pathway to the student. The goal is for the student to be willing to communicate with the teacher along with the learning coach communicating with the teacher. Additionally, there is an implication here that the teacher working directly with the student might be the best instructional strategy since the student is the one who is working, especially in middle school where assignments are becoming more complex, and students are capable of more independence. Jane and Kate's encouragement for the student to initiate communication does not eliminate the need for a learning coach, but rather reinforces the power of strong connections between the student's support system.

Parents as Coaches

Research question two asked how do middle school parents enact their roles as learning coaches in online schools? To answer this question, I interviewed six middle school parents and conducted a learning coach survey.

Participants

The purpose of the second question was to determine what learning coaches do to support their students throughout their education within online schools. The sample resulted in 55 participants who were identified as the learning coach of a middle school student at SOCS. Of the sample, 92.7% (51 of 55) reported that they were parents of students demonstrating that the majority of learning coaches are parents of students. The remaining four participants identified as a legal guardian, a grandparent, aunt/uncle, and one selected “other.” The final participant wrote in that she was the sister of a student.

The survey was sent out to all emails associated with a middle school student. All recipients were given the opportunity to voluntarily complete the survey. The population consists of those 55 who completed the survey. At the end of the survey, participants had the option to volunteer to participate in a follow-up interview. Of the 55 respondents, 21 participants agreed to be contacted for an interview. For this study, 5 of 21 scheduled an interview and met with the researcher.

Survey questions fell into two categories: overall learning coach role and ELA specific supports. The first nine questions asked about the logistical structure of coaching. In the first set, participants were asked about number of years enrolled, time spent completing supporting tasks, identified role, resources used, and overall preparedness to complete the requirements for

coaching. The next set of questions addressed time spent in content courses, resources and activities used to support students, and coach preparedness for ELA.

From the surveys and interview responses, I examined the role of the learning coach and how that role impacted student success. My goal was to determine what kind supports learning coaches needed, how time enrolled impacts student success, and how the shape of the learning coach role effected students. The findings revealed three themes about the role of learning coaches. Learning coaches saw themselves as monitors and supporters, managers of the learning environment, and a liaison for their child.

Monitoring and Support

Learning coaches identified themselves as overseers for their middle school students. Their role was one of supervising the completion of work and establishing an effective routine for their student. To do this, though, coaches benefitted from completing school-made training and engaging with the curriculum materials to provide adequate support. Coaches also expressed their preference in choosing an online school because they had knowledge of what and how their students were doing in a way that was not afforded to them in brick and mortar schools. Having a deep awareness of their student's education was used in providing support to their child.

Role of the Learning Coach

Parents as learning coaches saw themselves as essentially overseers and coaches. They were adamant about not being a teacher, but rather having a support role for their student. Table 4.1 shows the learning coach responses for which title most closely aligns to their role as a learning coach. Of the 51 parent responses, 15 (29.4%) identified most closely with being a "guide" for the students. "Coach" was the second highest percentage with 13 (25.5%) participants responding to that being their responsibility in their child's education. Seven

participants (13.7%) identified as “teachers” although all of the interview participants did not see that as a major part of their role.

Table 4.1 Learning Coach Role Alignment

	N	%
0	1	2%
Nurturer	3	5.9%
Teacher	7	13.7%
Coach	13	25.5%
Partner	1	3.9%
Guide	15	29.4%
Monitor	9	17.6%
Other	1	2%

Interview responses reflected the survey data, highlighting a guiding or coaching role as the most prominent part of a learning coach’s job. Gina noted being a learning coach was simple if done right. She argued:

If you’re doing it correctly, you’re just facilitating, letting somebody else do it. You’re just making sure that things are going on. I mean, you don’t have to do anything other than just a little bit of oversight, right, so I think, for some people I’ve talked to, that has been the misconception that I’m teaching her. Oh no, I’m not. You know someone else is teaching her and I’m just making sure that she’s showing up and doing the things that she needs to do, right? (Learning Coach/Parent Gina, lines 225-231)

One parent argued similarly,

The teachers are wonderfully responsive to email. That helps a lot. I do not teach [my student]. The teachers do. I just support her doing assignments. (Learning Coach Survey Response, 18.14)

The coach is the person that has to make sure that things are being done right and well. The coach is not responsible for instruction, but rather making sure that students are getting through instruction. To do this, coaches have to be checking work and reaching out and communicating with teachers when necessary. The coach’s job is not in isolation, but in partnership with the school and the teacher.

The job of a learning coach is multifaceted, encompassing a variety of structures that met the needs of a particular student. Gina described her role as follows:

My role was more just guidance than anything, just making sure that everything was going well. She is really self-motivated, which was what makes this schoolwork for us. So, mine is more just at the end of the day, or even every few days looking at her calendar, making sure that she even submitted stuff like sometimes I'm not like "Did you submit it?" I just look for myself. I can look in the app and see what's submitted. What's not been submitted which is hardly ever anything. And then just making sure that she doesn't need help with anything very early on 'cause we were getting used to the platform. There was a little bit more of me trying to help her through more of the like applications that the actual content. But she kind of just goes with it. I'm just there in case something doesn't work. (Learning Coach/Parent Gina, lines 8-17)

Gina utilized her access to the schools learning management systems to check in on her child. She was proactive about making sure the student was up to date on assignments and was moving through her work without issue. Gina knew what her child needed and made her coaching style fit the needs of the student.

Moreover, one learning coach, Leslie, saw that middle school students have emotional and educational needs that have to be met by the learning coach in a similar way to how a teacher would in a classroom. She believes this about being a coach:

So, you kind of have that extra help, that love almost, of "you can do this, it's ok!" For middle school students, I think they need to feel that independence. But they also need to know that you're right there and that they can come to you at any point. You know, needing to be there so you as a learning coach you kind of get a little more of a, you know, you don't have to be that strict, like, "this is what you have to do." (Learning Coach/Parent Leslie, lines 233-239)

Leslie felt that she was more of a support person who oversaw her child's work as Gina and Tonya, who felt that her role was that of an overseer (Learning Coach/Parent Tonya, lines 28-29). Leslie is also tapping into an awareness of middle school developmental needs wherein the student needs to feel supported, but also needs his or her independence.

As previously mentioned, one major responsibility of the learning coach is having an understanding of student needs which will then impact how the learning coach approaches the support role. Leslie discussed her initial approach and then adjustments she made along the way.

She said:

But I was more hands off because I didn't know what to expect. So, I kind of feel like the boys more had a struggle, a harder time adjusting when I wasn't there. So no, knowing what to expect and being able to be there and more hands on, they're succeeding so much better with me kind of engaging and knowing. (Learning Coach/Parent Leslie, lines 105-109)

As Leslie was learning with her children, she was able to adjust the support she provided. She learned what worked well and led to success. A parent response noted a similar approach. They wrote, "For my middle school student I am more of the hand-holder, reminding him to get the work done and to rework anything he can to get a better grade" (Learning Coach Survey Response, 9.7). Because the parent was in tune with what her child needed, they were able to take appropriate steps in coaching.

Routines and Monitoring

While routines are part of managing a learning environment, learning coaches being mindful of and maintaining a routine for their student is part of monitoring and supporting students in online schools. A learning coach with an established routine for their student is a Coach that has taken time to be familiar with a student's schedule and workload and provides structure for completing assignments. One Coach, Jade, approached her student's schedule with knowledge of his ADHD in mind. She said:

Wake him up. Get his medicine. Get his breakfast in him and get him to work. Same with lunch. If he's got a project that I know that he's behind on, I'll check on him and make sure that he's on task or whatever. Or if he's got something that he needs help with, I try...now my kid has ADHD. He's a 504 kid and he is not always super motivated to do the hard stuff, so if I don't look at his calendar at least once a week or every other week,

odds are he's going to get behind on the stuff that he hates, which is the stuff that takes the most time, which is usually social studies. (Learning Coach/Parent Jade, lines 62-68)

The coach set up her student's day in a way that positioned him for success. She checks his calendar as well as checks in daily to determine what kind of support he needs. By maintaining his calendar and daily work, she is able to be a better learning coach for the student.

Another learning coach, Bren, took a similar tactic when approaching her children's schedule. She said:

[My youngest child] had her live session was 9:00 to 10:00 and 11:00. Had it on the calendar...then after they did live sessions, going straight into, "Ok, do your work, do your assignments." Not really taking a break or anything there. They would take a break for lunch. It wasn't like a set at 12 or whatever. It would usually be whatever stopping point they go to when they were hungry and then go back to it. And then, like I said, I would check up on them, make sure they're doing everything. [My youngest] was usually done by lunchtime and I would help her in that time in between live sessions and lunch, and we'd get her math and whatever done. And then the older one she would go back to it at lunch and I would stay on top of her, you know? And then once she got to that two o'clock, three o'clock time, then I would take a look at it and see, ok, what do we have left? And we definitely used on their calendar on Canvas, the Daily Agenda tab because it would show the week. (Learning Coach/Parent Bren, lines 119-132)

Bren made sure that her children were managing their time well to complete all assignments for the day. The coach spent time engaging with the calendar and workload. She was aware of where the students were work-wise by the end of the designated school day. This helped her maintain her children's progress and keep them on task.

In a third instance, learning coach Tonya, was also reliant on the calendar and the missing assignments tab in the learning management software to monitor and support her child. Tonya outlined her week:

So, what I would do was give her a goal that "Okay [student] by this time today your assignments have to be done" and would say most of the time she would finish it and then that would leave her the rest of the day to do whatever and then Sunday was a big catch-up day. I would kind of leave her alone on Saturday and Friday night and say, "Okay, let's look at missing assignments." It's a huge key that is a massive tool. On Sunday, I'd say, "Okay [student], let's look at missing assignments" and that might be

the only time I would sit with her. She'd say, "Mom, I tried to do this science lab. I finished the whole thing." But like she would forget to save at the end and it would wipe blank. "Could you come help me do this?" So, I had one day and that was Sunday...I would kind of really step in and say, "Okay, why are some of these things still here? Let's get these done." (Learning Coach/Parent Tonya, lines 78-88)

Tonya allowed her middle schooler to be independent, but also closely monitored her missing assignments and where she was weekly. This prevented Tonya's child from getting too far off pace. Additionally, this example shows how the learning coach is utilized by a student. The student is able to work without the aid of the coach but can tap into the coach when necessary. In all three examples, the coach creating the structure for weekly or daily learning check-ins provided an opportunity for discourse between the coach and the student. The conversation over the missing assignments page or the calendar seem to promote student progress.

Table 4.2 demonstrates the relationship between time, support, and grades in the students' ELA class. Coaches were mindful of their student needs, so they were aware of how much *support* their child needed. There was a correlation between hours of student support required from the learning coach and time spent in ELA suggesting that the more support a student needed, the more involved a learning coach is in student learning. However, the amount of time spent in ELA—supporting and working—did not reflect on student grades suggesting that student success was not necessarily grade dependent. Rather, success was more progress dependent.

Table 4.2 Descriptive Statistics and Correlation Coefficients for Study Variables for Time in ELA and Final Grades

Variable	N	M	SD	1	2
Time Spent in ELA per Week	41	3.66	1.49		
Final Grade in ELA	17	2.35	1.06	-0.39	
Time Spent Supporting in ELA	41	3.02	1.56	.66**	-0.16

**p < .001

Tools and Training

To ensure that learning coaches are capable of maintaining a routine and able to support their student, completing available training and using the tools in the learning management system are imperative for student success. Figure 4.1 shows the structures in place for training and support for learning coaches. Aside from onboarding for a new family, a learning coach has access to the child's teacher, the Canvas content courses, the learning coach teacher (listed as learning coach partner here), the learning coach corner, the advisory teacher, and other resources. Coaches tapped into the resources as needed depending on what the student needed. The Canvas course card was used the most—daily to several times a week—which aligns with coaches monitoring and organizing student work.

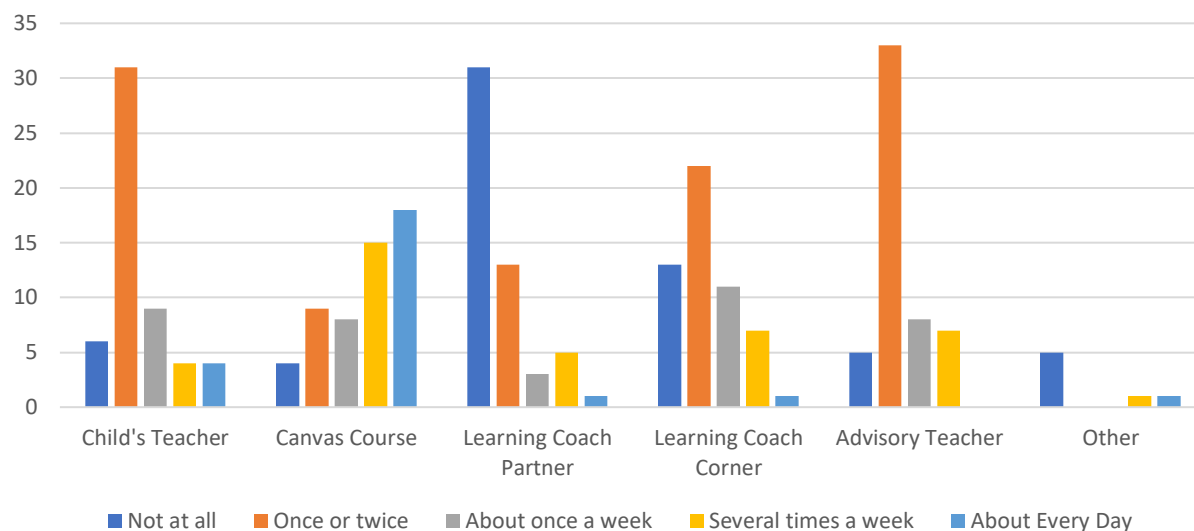


Figure 4.1 Tools for Coach Training and Learning

One learning coach responded to the survey with the following note on training and tools:

I feel trained adequately to help my son in ELA. That being said, I have sat in on live session, contacted his teacher when needing help and read through assignments with him. [SOCS] has given every opportunity to seek and receive support. (Learning Coach Survey Response, 18.15)

The training tools provided by the school prepared this learning coach for their role, but this note also implies that learning coaches who are successful and *feel* successful with their students are taking extra steps to ensure that that they feel knowledgeable enough to help their child. This coach engaged with student learning alongside the student and reached out when they needed help as suggested in Figure 4.1. The coach took advantage of what was made available.

Leslie also noted the benefit of completing the training tools, particularly the Learning Coach Corner, which provided necessary resources when getting started. She reasoned:

But the learning coach Corner really did help in the beginning, especially when they talked about how to manage the time and how to kind of keep caught up and never falling behind. So, thinks like that were very, very helpful especially when you were kind of at a loss and you were brand new, not knowing. This is kind of scary. We're taking their education in our hands. (Learning Coach/Parent Leslie Interview, lines 198-205)

She approached training with the understanding that she did not know how to manage learning prior to enrollment. Coaching in the capacity that is expected from the school and teachers is not something a parent would typically come in knowing. Coaches have to work through it and be given some best practices for monitoring and supporting a student. Leslie also highlighted the gravity of making sure the learning coach is doing a good job with their student, since they are partially responsible for their student's education.

Both the Learning Coach Survey response and Leslie emphasized using available tools in the way they approached their own learning and how they supported their students. Tonya also felt that the tools were an essential part of being able to support her student. She said:

Yeah, I think one of the biggest benefits for me was the missing assignments...It just gave me a snapshot of what she was doing and what she needed to do, and I like how when you look at Canvas, the calendar view when she did an assignment, it was the lines were through it. That's an excellent tool, too. (Learning Coach/Parent Tonya, lines 234-237)

Similarly, another parent survey response noted using missing assignments, in particular, as part of helping students. The parent wrote:

It would be very useful to have the option to view a daily work submission list. The missing assignments list is helpful, but it's too time consuming to extrapolate information from if your child is missing numerous assignments in multiple classes. (Learning Coach Survey Response, 18.13)

Here, the learning coach is using the missing assignments tool which lived in the Canvas Course Card but is also unpacking what would be helpful to be even more equipped for coaching. In these examples, each coach is finding what works best for them in helping their student. While all coaching starts in the same place with the learning coach training, each coach then has to take that information and apply it to their own needs and their student's needs.

Jade, who had been enrolled with the school for some time, noted that she went to the teachers for help. She noted:

When I need help like with coaching with his learning stuff, yes, usually I hit up the teachers and for the most part that's been a positive experience. (Learning Coach/Parent Jade Interview, lines 199-200)

Jade sought help from teachers for help with coaching subject specific areas. While the coach training was beneficial, to account for individual courses and materials, reaching out to a teacher directly to get their recommendation was also a valuable means of building learning coach capacity to help a student.

Educational Support

The school primarily uses learning coaches as facilitators of student learning (Parent Information, SOCS Website). Learning coaches do not teach. Rather, they provide support and connect to the school when necessary. Figure 4.2 outlines the distribution of learning coach time spent assisting students with various activities in ELA. Coaches were asked how often they provide support for the following tasks, ranging from always to never: reading course texts, annotating texts, discussing course texts, writing about texts, and editing writing assignments. Time distributed across tasks shows writing and reading course texts requiring the most time.

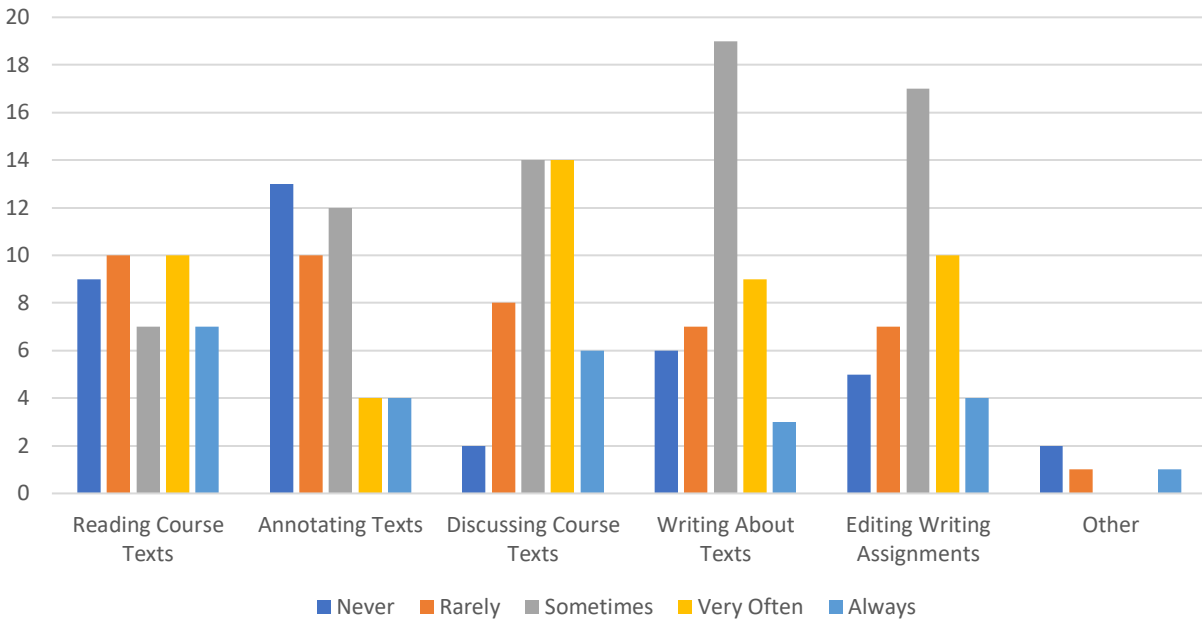


Figure 4.2 Areas of Support

As outlined in Figure 4.2, no one activity in ELA takes precedent over another, but relies on student need. Some activities, such as writing about and reading course texts take a little more time, but for the most part, there is a relatively even distribution of what activities learning coaches are completing with their student.

Learning coaches described their role as a facilitator of learning as being sounding boards and organizers for their students during instruction. Leslie described the work she did with her child. She noted:

So, for me as his learning coach, it's more of "Mom can you read my paper and make sure there's no mistakes before I turn it in" or "Can I get your input on this?" Or if he was struggling with math, I could go in there and you know, just support him and be like, "Do you want me to look at it? Do you want me to watch the recordings or sit with you during a live session?" (Learning Coach/Parent Leslie Interview, lines 228-233)

Leslie describes the working relationship she has with her child. Student work, in some cases, goes through her before submission. She also learns alongside her child in other cases. Her student seems to feel comfortable with using her as a secondary instructor with academics and

Leslie, as a learning coach is familiar with the curriculum and the systems to be able to find the information to support him.

Similarly, Bren stayed current within her student's courses to be able to provide support and coaching for reaching out to teachers. She said:

I didn't have to develop any curriculum or actually conduct any lessons, but I did have to stay on top of everything. Every single day I'm logging in with them. Now my 6th grader needed less help and less assistance. Hers was just the checking in as a parent kind of role, like "Did you do your assignment? Let me look and make sure you did your side. What are your grades? Did you email your teacher?" Those kind of things, although her workload was kind of a lot. I would say it was probably...and mind did the live sessions every day that they had them, during live. They didn't really watch the recordings later or anything. (Learning Coach/Parent Bren Interview, lines 18-27)

Bren's educational support role included monitoring her child daily and prompting the student to be proactive. Bren and Leslie both are allowing their children to work independently, but with guidance as is developmentally appropriate for middle school students. In both cases, the Coaches let the teacher be the one to educate, but Leslie and Bren are present and active in the students' courses.

With ELA in particular, coaches expressed a desire to learn about different skills in order to work with their students. Leslie spoke specifically about writing. She mentioned that her child's papers were getting longer, and he needed more help than previously. She said:

Basically, just the writing like getting the idea down on paper and not trying to get the first draft...nobody wants to go back and revise. They want it perfect the first time, right? So, I learned that from [an ELA teacher] this year when I reached out to her going, "Look, he's struggling and he's crying What do I do?" And it was more of get your ideas down and then go back and we can put it into the CER, right, and get it where you can figure out what to do and try to get it down, then we'll go back. That was the biggest thing with ELA for us. (Learning Coach/Parent Leslie Interview, lines 149-158)

Leslie reached out to the teacher to find strategies to use at home in a very similar way to how a tutor or a teacher would do in a small group. Because the student was at home, the learning

coach was positioned to provide support, but needed coaching themselves. Leslie, in a desire to help her son, was given a tool to use to help him with writing.

Moreover, two parent responses demonstrated that they were aware of what their student was reading and desired strategies to be able to read along or provide support. One parent noted,

Quick notes for the books they are reading. It's hard to check work if I don't know anything about the story. I don't really have time to read the book and teach all my children. (Learning Coach Survey Response, 18.8)

Similarly, another parent remarked that "the learning texts for Coaches is long" (Learning Coach Survey Response, 18.0). Coaches want to be helpful and are willing to work for the good of their student. Most learning coaches want to be prepared to support when the child asks for help.

Scholastic Awareness

One benefit to having a student in an online school is that parents and guardians have full access to what their child is doing within their education. They have access to teachers as well as curriculum materials and trainings to be effective in their role. Learning coaches mentioned a disconnect that happened when their child was at a brick and mortar school. They felt less able to help and did not have a clear understanding of what their child needed. Leslie discussed:

When they were in the public school setting, I didn't know what was going on. I had no idea what they were teaching. It was kind of come home, three hours of homework, and go, "I don't know, I can't explain it. What did your teacher say in class?" So, in this setting I'm more able to see "Okay, this is what she meant." This is how it was taught; this is what you've learned. So, I find it a lot easier to kind of assist them in their learning and how they're learning with being able to sit next to and see what's going on. (Learning Coach/Parent Leslie Interview, lines 55-52)

Because Leslie had access and an awareness of what her children were doing, she was able to help them with their learning. She was able to assist with homework or schoolwork. She learned alongside her child.

Likewise, Jade was able to see her child learn, which she found rewarding. She stated:

One of the best things about having your kid at home is that you get to see those lightbulb moments when they realize something. And that's the coolest part about working with him is with ELA stuff and he gets excited about what he's writing. Rewriting the ending of a story and stuff like that when he gets excited about it. But on the same token he gets so caught up in making sure it's perfect that he doesn't enjoy it as much as I wish he did. I wish that he enjoyed the reading and the writing as much as I do, but it's just not his. He's other side of the brain. (Learning Coach/Parent Jade Interview, lines 136-144)

As previously noted, many coaches spent time reaching out to their child's teacher for help with coaching through assignments. With this knowledge, coaches can watch learning happen, which is not an option in brick-and-mortar schools. Jade was able to see and understand exactly with what her son was and was not engaged. She was able to learn *how* he learned and, from that, gather information on how to support him.

Moreover, Bren had a similar mindset about the access she had to her child's learning.

She supplied:

[My child] was totally capable of doing it on her own, but it went faster when I helped, and it allowed me to have more opportunity to be involved with her learning. So, I really did like that, but a parent who wasn't home or didn't have an education background might not be comfortable doing that. (Learning Coach/Parent Bren Interview, lines 33-37)

Bren, like Leslie and Jade, valued the opportunity to be so closely involved with her child's education. She learned how her child learned and was able to meet the child's needs. Coaches took advantage of the awareness that they had of their child's education to be better supporters and coaches, though, as demonstrated in Table 4.2, time spent in ELA and hours spend supporting the student had an impact on the student grade.

Managing the Learning Environment

Learning coaches expressed that a major part of their role was managing their students' learning environment. Management fell into two categories. The first was managing the physical and computer-based learning environment of the child. Coaches set up nurturing spaces,

developed schedules, and managed assignments. The second was managing what kind of learning was taking place. Coaches in online schools took advantage of the school structure and opportunities to promote support or acceleration for individual students. Figure 4.3 defines how learning coach time is used on a weekly basis. Coaches were asked to determine how much of their week was spent instructing, organizing, nurturing, monitoring, and motivating. Nurturing took the largest amount of time per week with 26 Coaches noting that they spent over 10 hours a week providing a safe learning environment, loving and caring for the child, and supporting the development of social and behavioral skills. Monitoring and motivating was established as also taking 10 or more hours a week with 17 and 15 responses respectively. These three components made up the majority of a learning coach's time which was also evident in the learning coach interviews.

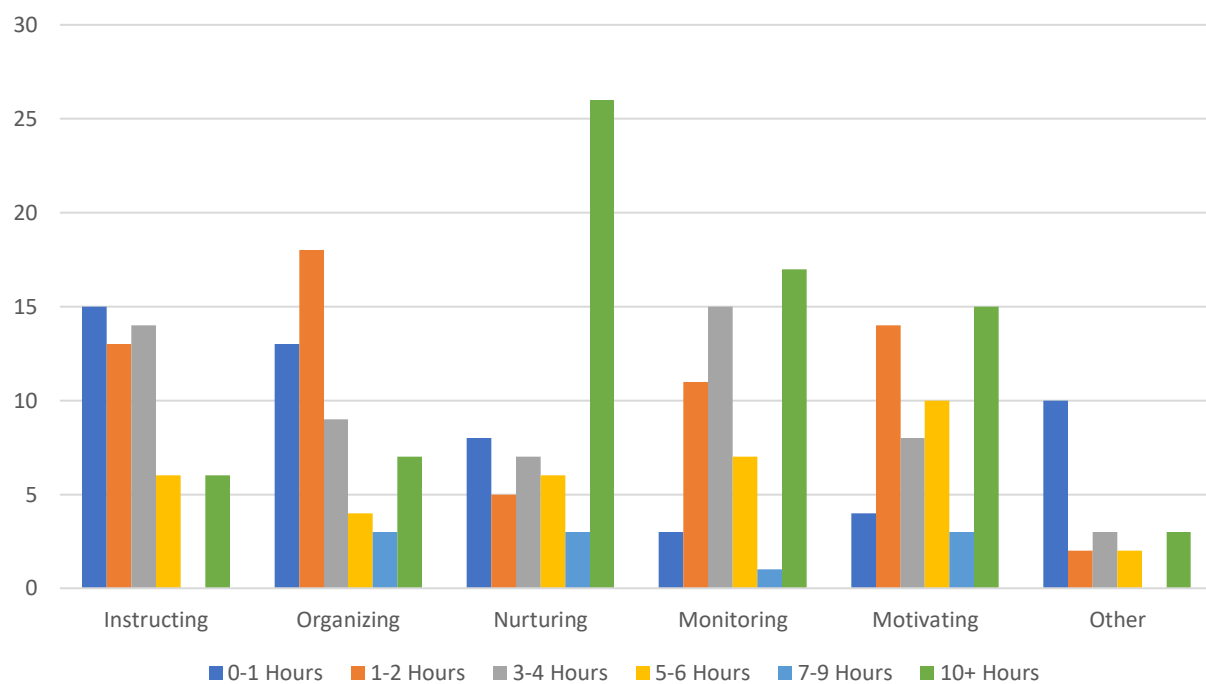


Figure 4.3 Hours of Support Needed in ELA

Coaching from the Sidelines

One parent, Jade, defined her role as the following:

Just that: I'm a coach, I keep him motivated. I keep him hydrated. I keep his belly full. I try to keep him on a schedule. A medium, a mediator between his school and his home life and I'm an advocate for him. And I feel like those are pretty common duties of a typical coach. (Learning Coach/Parent Jade Interview, lines 56-59)

Her role was comprised of these different parts that were sometimes academic and sometimes nurturing. The learning coach role seems to have to be somewhat parental in the sense that the coach is responsible for the emotional and physical well-being as much as they are the academics of the student.

The teacher gets to focus on teaching, and I get to focus on parenting and discipline. The teacher gets to focus on teaching, and I get to focus on discipline and behavior. Those are parent things. I think it's my job to do that when he's at home and it is the teacher's job to do that when they're in a brick and mortar school. But they don't always have the time to do that, especially with special needs kids. And it doesn't help when they're completely misinformed about the diagnosis and the education. (Learning Coach/Parent Jade Interview, lines 155-161)

Jade separates a teacher's role into instruction and discipline. She feels that in a brick and mortar, the teacher is taking on both components, but recognizes that there is often little time for them to do both as well as is needed. Jade also loops in parenting here as teaching, for her, has a bit of a nurturing factor. Since her child is at home, she is able to provide the kind of nurturing that he needs while his teachers can focus on delivering a quality education.

Bren reflected on how her past experiences as a teacher helped in her role as a learning coach. She said:

With me being a teacher, I felt very comfortable being able to take on the role of the learning coach. I didn't want to actually homeschool them completely. That just seemed a little too daunting to have to do two separate curriculums and all of those things we do some programs over the summer where we do that kind of stuff and it just seemed to big of a task. So, when we found [SOCS] it was the perfect fit to where the curriculum was done but I could still supplement as needed. I could still be as involved as I wanted to be and stay on top of things. (Learning Coach/Parent Bren Interview, lines 9-16)

Bren, like Jade, takes advantage of the teachers being responsible for curriculum and instruction to focus on providing what her children need. She is able to supplement where necessary because of her experience but could also focus on being a parent and coaching her children rather than having to teach as well.

SOCS strives to have its learning coaches be only facilitators. Coaches, as has been reiterated throughout, are not meant to teach. Tonya summarized the experience of being a learning coach as follows:

I think the format of [SOCS], the platform, the organization, the real dedication of the teachers, what they put into the lessons makes our job as a learning coach very easy. But as I said, I think it depends on the student. (Learning Coach/Parent Tonya Interview, lines 59-62)

Tonya acknowledges that SOCS is designed with the student and learning coach in mind. The structure of the school allows for Coaches and parents to form relationships between the school and the family, take time with their children, and provide specific assistance for their child. Jade and Bren reflect this, as well, in their responses and in the way they designed their learning environments as will be discussed.

Within the Learning Environment

Because SOCS is an online school, students are not restricted by time or space. They can work essentially anytime and anywhere with internet. Although there are live lessons throughout the day, students are not mandated to attend, and all lessons can be completed asynchronously if necessary. This implies, however, that coaches are having to take some responsibility for creating a structure and a schedule for their student, especially middle school students, who benefit from a more structured day. Figure 4.3 denotes coaches spending 2-3 hours per week organizing a student's work.

Leslie outlined a typical day for one of her kids. Because her student has specialized learning needs, she took care in maintaining his schedule. She said:

Daily we wake up and we look at what we have to do for the day. We look at what live sessions are going to happen, what classes we have and kind of go through that and then with my 11-year-old, he gets more assistance, more help. So, he actually had the IEP for iReady, so we usually start the mornings with iReady and does that completely on his own, so we know where he is. So, we'll do that first. And then after that he'll take a little break and we'll go on to a [live lesson] or English or whatever happens to be there. I'll kind of sit next to him during live sessions to make sure that I know, too, what is happening in that class for the day and that way during that lesson that might through us for a loop during the week, we have more understanding to see what the teacher has explained. So, I'll sit with him. (Learning Coach/Parent Leslie Interview, lines 28-49)

The routine established here emphasizes the coach putting the student's learning needs first.

First, Leslie knows what to do with her child's IEP. He has access to a program, iReady, that they complete first to situate him for the day. She knows how to use the program and understands why it is important for him to work alone during this time. Second, Leslie takes time to walk through the student's schedule each day so that they can prepare and has a set plan for schoolwork. Finally, she sat with her child during his live lessons so that she is aware of what he is learning and can support him throughout the week. Her maintenance of his schedule and awareness of his needs has led them to success within an online school.

Similarly, Bren monitors her students' schedules to keep them on task and get them through their work. She noted:

My youngest had her live session 9:00 to 10:00 and 11:00, had it on the calendar. And my oldest, it was the same times and everything, but so being structures with not missing those and then after they did the live sessions, going straight into "Ok do you work, do your assignments." Not really taking a break or anything there. They would take a break for lunch. It wasn't a set at 12 or whatever, it would usually be whatever stopping point they got to when they were hungry and then go back to it. And the, like I said, I would check up on them, make sure they're doing everything. [My youngest] was usually done by lunchtime and I would help her in that time between live sessions and lunch and I would stay on top of her. And then once she got to that 2:00, 3:00 time, then I would take a look at it and see, "Ok, what do we have left? And we definitely used the calendar on

Canvas, the Daily Agenda tab because it would show you [whole day]. (Learning Coach/Parent Bren Interview, lines 118-132)

Bren made sure her children were attending classes and managing their assignments by checking the calendars and following up with her children's work daily. She would ask them about their progress as well as physically checking the student work as was recommended by the teacher. Bren is managing two students, so she determined strategies that work best for each of her learners.

Oppositely, Tonya had her student to work independently of her, but still structured her child's day. She said:

Every morning, we would go exercise before school started and it allowed...the time of [SOCS] allowed me to get my other kids to the brick and mortar school. We would exercise every morning. She would come back home and then we have a room where we call it the homework room so she would sit in there independent of me and do her work. Now, I would pass through the room a lot to make sure. (Learning Coach/Parent Tonya Interview, lines 71-76)

Worth noting here is that Tonya used flexibility to her advantage. She established a routine of exercise and independent work that was good for her student's mental and physical health—something not afforded to the family by their previous brick and mortar school. This is also an example of a parent giving a middle school student a significant amount of independence and space to complete work but also following up daily or every other day to make sure her student was progressing appropriately. Tonya's structure also reflects nurturing a child as noted in Figure 4.3, which took priority for Tonya as a learning coach.

Gina spoke on maintaining the academic structure of her student through the learning management system. She stated:

A lot of [training] was, again, teaching you how to actually use the applications. This is what you do, how to set up alerts, which I think is very important because if you want to know the day that your kid didn't turn it in, great! If you want to give him a couple of days...everybody's life is different, right? Some people, some days of the week, can't get

this stuff done on the exact day or whatever, so I love it. You can set it up to alert you at your own time frame so there was that. I'm trying to remember, talking about office hours and the teacher how to contact people when you have problems. (Learning Coach/Parent Gina Interview, lines 37-45)

Like Tonya, Gina took advantage of the school's flexibility to find work times that worked for her family. She was able to manage assignments through alerts and by using the calendar. Her student still got his work done, but at their own pace. While she is monitoring student work in a similar way to Tonya and Bren, Gina's deviation from a rigid daily structure demonstrates how Learning coaches can take the lead on what the learning environment will look like for their child.

School Choice

The choice to enroll a student in alternative forms of education is part of managing a student's learning environment. At SOCS, parents choose online schools for various reasons, but three themes emerged in relation to school choice. The first was that students in SOCS were able to have their emotional needs met. The second was a desire from the families to have more control over their time and how their educational time is being used. The third was that online school provided the students with academic opportunities and access to courses that other schools did not.

Emotional Needs. Tonya and Leslie both had similar experiences in brick and mortar schools that led them move to online schools. Tonya's daughter was struggling with mental health and needed to be able to move at a pace that worked for her. Tonya noted:

That was the perfect amount of time for her, but now also I'll say if [my daughter] came to you because say I just was not happy with brick and mortar schools and she was not having any kind of...the setup of [SOCS] would allow her to go further with the assignments and the additional work that that you could gain access to. And I know her teachers, so she would have said, please give me something else to do on this topic they would have. So, I think [SOCS's] format allows for students who are struggling like [my daughter] to do what she has to do to become successful to meet her objectives. But then

it also would allow someone who is not dealing with any type of mental health or medical situation to go further if they want. (Learning Coach/Parent Tonya Interview, lines 206-214)

Tonya's daughter needed to be able to slow down assignments in some cases, but also get more from her teachers in times where she had the headspace to do so. This example highlights how the structure of online schools create an environment where students can take the lead in their learning and teachers have the space to support students effectively.

Similarly, Leslie saw that her child was struggling through school. Her motivation centered on him being able to work at a pace that made sense for his needs. She said:

So, once we were not able to kind of get that support from [the old school] we decided, you know, let's try something else 'cause he was struggling. He was dealing with low self-esteem and the fact that he wasn't keeping up with his peers and he was having to work so much harder. So, I decided to kind of pull him and bring him where we could learn on his pace and at his speed. (Learning Coach/Parent Leslie Interview, lines 165-170)

Since all students in the previous school had to be working at the same pace, Leslie's child fell behind, because he was limited by the previous school structure. Being able to learn at his own pace was beneficial to not only his academic well-being, but also his emotional well-being.

In both instances, the learning coaches, recognizing that their student needed a different structure, was able to make the choice that worked best for both the way the student learned and what they needed emotionally. Leslie and Tonya's students struggled with mental health in part caused by scholastic struggles. Choosing online school allowed for the learning coaches to manage the students' emotional health better. As previously discussed, online schools allow the teacher to focus on teaching and the parent to focus on parenting. The parents, as learning coaches, are able to monitor children in multiple aspects of their lives.

Along with emotional needs, parents also recognize that online schools allow for different uses of time. SOCS flexible schedule allows for students to work at any time during the

day along with giving students a nine-week window to complete assignments. As students are working independently, they are also not restricted to where their classmates are in assignments. Teachers at SOCS put out two weeks of assignments at a time, so student can pace themselves as needed whether that means taking extra time or working ahead. Table 4.3 shows the amount of time spent in ELA classes in particular. The majority of participants, 27.5%, responded taking 5 to 6 hours per week in ELA, which is less time than what most students around the state are taking for ELA. Likewise, Coaches responded with similar times in the other core subjects—math, science, and social studies.

Table 4.3 Hours of Support Needed in ELA

	N	%
0-1 Hours	2	3.9
1-2 Hours	10	19.6
3-4 Hours	5	9.8
5-6 Hours	14	27.5
7-9 Hours	3	5.8
10+ Hours	7	13.7
Missing	10	19.6

Learning coach Leslie contends that SOCS is much more productive for her student. She and her student appreciate the lack of busy work which allows for students to focus exclusively on what is required of them. She stated:

If I had the opportunity when I was growing up to kind of just go at your own pace. And when you do it, it would be awesome, and I really do. I know another thing like I know my oldest that really appealed to him. Like you know in school the busy work you know when, like the other students, are trying to catch up with the lesson he hated that he absolutely hated the busy work. So here he's just like, "Oh no, I understand this. I can go," or "I need more time. I need to go to office hours. I can learn this." So, the busy work from my children where it was a huge turnoff and a huge reason why now we're going here. This this works so much better 'cause there's no, "OK, here's a coloring sheet or here's you know, something so I can work with these kids over here." That's been very helpful to. (Learning Coach/Parent Leslie Interview, lines 312-323)

Teachers were more focused on core instruction rather than placating students who were working on lessons at different paces. Whereas in a classroom, students are limited to the instruction happening at the time, students in online schools had the option to take additional time to complete and/or move on the next task. Students were not bound by what their classmates were doing. Leslie considers her child's time as an educational priority.

Tonya and Gina also acknowledged the benefit of SOCS's structure because they felt as if their students were getting more out of each lesson, even though there was less time spent in synchronous instruction. Tonya remarked:

[My daughter] was like, "I was more productive in my hour class than I was in my class." You know, I think that our live session keeps the students engaged instead of trying to make it longer and then losing them. (Learning Coach/Parent Tonya Interview, lines 169-171)

A short, concentrated lesson was more valuable for students than a long lesson where teachers are having to fill empty spaces or administer discipline. Gina reflects:

So, the live instruction—and to me that's just as effective as a kid being right in front of that person—I feel like it's more effective because at our school, and I can't speak for everyone, my daughter class, if it's just, say if it was a 60 minute class, 10 to 15 minutes of that is going to be wasted with a teacher having to get on the problem students and administer discipline or that student interrupting. She's getting 60 whole minutes of instruction with [SOCS]. I feel like even though she's only going to these classes two days a week, she's getting more out of those two 60s than she was getting out of whatever she was doing. Otherwise, the school we went to, God love them, but every other week was a spirit week or was all this there were so many, which I'm not sure why we have to super motivate people to want to behave. I don't get it but they spent so much time on non-academic things trying to motivate kids to behave in the academic classroom and it just there was so much time not being spent on the things that needed to be. (Learning Coach/Parent Gina Interview, lines 167-180)

The focus for teachers in online schools can be on instruction rather than filling time or disciplining students. This left time for kids to do other activities or have shorter days without a loss of quality instruction. School could be school which was a motivating factor for online

learning according to the interview. Time spent in ELA, as noted in Table 4.3, did not impact grades, but seems to have an impact on overall satisfaction.

Opportunities and Access. Learning coaches expressed desire to be able to give their student more opportunities than what might be available to them in their local districts or within reasonable distance and financial range. Online school, for the parents interviewed, was a way to give their students access to classes and programs that were not restricted by distance, district offerings, or financial restrictions.

Gina outlines the status of the schools in her area and her choice to pursue SOCS as a viable option for her child. Here, Gina has recognized several factors that impacted her choice. The first was that, in order to attend a private school, there would be a significant commute for her family. She had eliminated parochial schools nearer to her because of what she deemed a lower quality of instruction and teacher qualification requirements. To travel to schools that would be better for her child would impede time she could have to participate in extra-curricular activities or local activities. Gina also did research on options through people she knew and knowledge of established school systems. She wanted the best for child and to do that she put in time and effort to ensure she was making a good choice based on what she had found (Learning Coach/Parent Interview Gina 3, Lines 132-165).

The academic quality and program availability of the local public school came into question when looking for options. Gina's seventh grade student was looking forward to taking honors classes when getting to eighth grade in the fall, an option, she notes that was not available in the schools near her. She said:

But our school doesn't offer honors classes and that was something that she's going to have the opportunity to do next year. Her teachers had said they had recommended her for the honors classes next year, at least in English and math. I don't know about the other ones. So, I love that we can challenge the next step and that's fantastic and the course

offerings you guys have where we are is rural, we can't. Our kids don't have the option of physics. They don't have the option of calculus. They don't have the option of trig or any of that and maybe coming from a super—my degree is super sciencey—and having to do all that, I'll look at my kids and at my son and I'm so glad you wanted to go for history because his high school has not prepared you for anything in the science field at all. I mean, just 'cause we don't offer it. So, our kids unfortunately are behind when they get there. (Learning Coach/Parent Gina Interview, lines 200-211)

Gina's choice to attend SOCS allowed for opportunities in middle school, but also looked ahead to her daughter's college experience. Gina, being in STEM, knew what her child would need to successfully engage with college level courses. The smaller districts could not offer what SOCS could which made SOCS the best choice for the student's long-term educational needs.

Similarly, Jade took enrolling her child in SOCS as an opportunity to expand access to courses and give him more prospects for when he would reach college and career age. She believed:

The importance of his electives and how they kind of determine the path that he takes and whatnot, and I feel sure that we're going to have more communication with the people who are there to help guide us along. That's been, through the years, the best part of what I've been looking forward to with [SOCS] because I had so much trouble with the brick and mortar schools not preparing my kids for college. And I had a math teacher tell my kid one time that it really didn't matter if he passed this test or not because he was either going to be a log truck driver or on disability like everybody else in this parish for the rest of his life. That said, guidance counselor didn't even inform parents that dual enrollment was a possibility. There were two kids in my son graduating class that had dual enrollment, the valedictorian, salutatorians, and the rest of us didn't even know about it. We didn't know it existed. You know how much money I could save. (Learning Coach/Parent Jade Interview, lines 249-262)

Jade's experienced difficulties with her two older children in brick and mortar schools and hoped her youngest would have a better chance at being prepared for college through the courses offered at SOCS. The district that they lived in, from her perspective, did not promote academic growth of all students but set a lower expectation for some groups. The choice to enroll in SOCS, for Gina and Jade, was both about nurturing and guiding their child to a more successful future.

By managing the learning environment, they were able to do what they felt was best and allow for as many opportunities for their child as possible.

Student Liaison

A third function of a learning coach is to act as a student liaison. While this is not an uncommon function of parents in schools, the learning coach is at a closer proximity to the student to have a better read on student needs. Oppositely, the teachers are removed from the student, requiring additional communication to ensure that students are being tended to and supported as needed. As a liaison, learning coaches will communicate with the teacher on behalf of the student or in preparation to work with their student. Coaches will also work with their child to build good communication practices with their teachers, which is a learned skill in online schools. Additionally, learning coaches may have to gather additional information on student learning to be able to support them at home. Finally, as part of building a meaningful relationship between home and school, learning coaches sought informal learning groups between other Coaches.

Communication with Teachers

Learning coaches are the initial connecting point between the school and their student. Coaches have a special responsibility to ensure that they are supporting their student and staying abreast of any detailed student needs. Jade notes that advocating for her student is part of “duties of a typical coach” (Learning Coach/Parent Jade Interview, lines 58-59). Jade noted throughout her interview that a traumatic experience at their previous school had prompted not only the switch to SOCS, but it also revealed a need for her to be hyperaware of what was going on with her student and his teachers. She spent time and extended effort to ensure that the teachers at

SOCS were aware of his situation so that he would be taken care of from the school's side.

(Learning Coach/Parent Jade Interview, lines 96-108).

While not all learning coaches experienced a similar struggle, coaches did see a value in making sure they were communicating with teachers to provide the best support possible for their student. Leslie argued:

Right so, especially with my 11 year old, I kind of am time manager and also almost maybe like the first defense against if he is in class and he maybe is not understanding anything before we kind of reach out to the teacher, I will see if I can maybe explain it more on his level because he is mine and I know, dealing with him, what might help him understand a little bit better how the teacher is describing the lesson. (Learning Coach/Parent Leslie Interview, lines 15-19)

Leslie goes on to state:

So, I have reached out to teachers a lot. There have been times that I've just sent an email going, "Hey, we're kind of struggling with this subject, so we're kind of, I'm not understanding how I can help with this." And so [his teacher] has been absolutely incredible this school year because there were times that I'm like, "Look, I just I don't know what to do," and so I've reached out for them for my oldest child. His English teacher...I personally, I will reach out to whatever teacher, they're kind of having that issue with that, you know, struggle in the class and I'll reach out there and make sure that I'm understanding what they need and how I can help them. (Learning Coach/Parent Leslie Interview, lines 77-88)

As previously stated, Table 4.1 denoted that 29.4% of coaches saw themselves as a guide for their student and 25.5% of respondents saw themselves as a coach. This could imply that most learning coaches are supporting students through assignments. Leslie reflects this idea in her response as she would frequently seek help from teachers in order to help her student. She takes what she learns from the teacher and translates it into a means that her student can understand and learn from. She is able to provide individualized support through her efforts to learn how to guide and coach her student.

Another facet of communicating with the school is the willingness of each party to reach out or respond and the timeliness of the communication. To build a productive relationship with

the school, both parents and teachers alike have to be putting forth the effort to establish meaningful connections. Tonya noted, “I would email the teachers and they were like rapid response” (Learning Coach/Parent Tonya Interview, lines 91-92). The preference to email, which was also reflected in Jade’s interview and Bren’s interview, is an example of building initial communication with teachers and determining a preference that will work best for everyone (Learning Coach/Parent Jade Interview, lines 36-40; Learning Coach/Parent Bren Interview, lines 263-270). Leslie would call, which got her the desired results for getting her the appropriate help for her student.

Fostering Student Communication with Teacher

While parent to teacher communication is important, middle school students benefit from learning how to communicate with their teachers independently. learning coaches expressed a shift in the way they encouraged their students to communicate with teachers as they got to middle school. Jade noted the shift, stating:

Over the years, the biggest change has been just the fact that he is getting older and more autonomous. Communicate... I think the biggest difference from year to year is in the teachers and how well they communicate with the parents. Because some are great communicators are always available and some are not. (Learning Coach/Parent Jade Interview, lines 28-31)

While teachers are improving their communication practices, there is also a shift in student autonomy. Knowing how is best to communicate with each teacher will serve the parent *and* the student well as they work toward student success.

Jade and Gina both note that increased student autonomy does not remove the need for learning coach intervention or guidance. Instead, they found that autonomy grew out of how they coached their student. Jade remarks:

So, I'll have to go sometimes and check his calendar and make sure that he's not just ignoring assignments that he is avoiding and sometimes he's avoiding it because he

doesn't understand it and he doesn't reach out to the teacher like he should. And so, I have to be like, "What's the issue? Why aren't you doing this?" And if it's a question that he has or something he doesn't understand, I'm like, "Well, you know the teacher. You know," So, he'll do it. He just he just has to be told so. (Learning Coach/Parent Jade Interview, lines 74-79)

Jade's coaching, here, is significant for two reasons. First, she is monitoring her son's progress consistently. She knows what he has and has not completed so that she can get him on task quickly. Secondly, she is aware of common behaviors such as avoiding an assignment and not reaching out when he needs to, so she is able to intervene and redirect. Her understanding of her student's behavior is contributor to her being able to coach him effectively toward independent learning.

Similarly, Gina used the awareness of available tools and the student schedule to help assist her daughter in developing a connection with her teacher in times that the child needs help.

Gina said:

If she's like, "Hey mom, I don't know how to do this math problem," which, if I know how, I kind of guide her through that, but also really just when she has a question, "Hey have you emailed your teacher? Have you went into your class? The office hours or the small groups or whatever and more encouraging in that direction of go to your small group. Go into the office hours and then if you still don't get it, let's talk about it, but let's let you learn it the way they do it." (Learning Coach/Parent Gina Interview, lines 21-27)

Jade and Gina both have detailed knowledge of their students' workload and progress. They can use this while coaching. Gina goes an additional step of having her child learn with the teacher and directing her to the teacher when she needs help. Gina is not unavailable to her student, but she seems to recognize a distinction between her role as a coach and the teacher's role to teach. Gina, like Jade, was there for assistance, but let the student take charge of communicating with the teacher when needed.

Learning coaches used the school-built onboarding as another strategy for helping build stamina for student led communication with teachers. Bren noted the following:

That was another really positive thing that you've taught my daughters is how to actually communicate with their teacher pretty much on their own. Even my younger daughter was very comfortable writing an email and sending it out. You know, in the on-boarding thing in August that they did, it actually taught them how to do that and what to include. Put your phone number, you know, address them, tell them what class you're in, blah blah blah, and so they were both very comfortable getting help directly from the teacher. And so, we did that a lot and [the English Teacher] would send [my daughter] a personal video explaining for 30 minutes how to do this math problem or what to do blah blah. So that was very, very useful. We never felt like we couldn't get something or there wasn't an answer. There was always the resource, at least directly through the teachers. (Learning Coach/Parent Bren Interview, lines 185-195)

Gina and Jade worked with their children to encourage them to be the ones to lead communication. Bren brings to the forefront a different facet of communication, which is given students a tool and strategy for creating the communication. Bren felt that teachers were the best resources, so knowing how to connect with the teachers was invaluable. The onboarding provided a structure for the students to feel comfortable enough to reach out directly to the teacher.

Finally, student communication with the teacher helps to foster meaningful relationships between the teacher and the student. Leslie noted:

So [my son] is very hands on. He wanted to kind of have that relationship with his teachers, so if he didn't understand anything, he'd go to office hours. He would email and I think that was a big thing for him to feel like he could and be there for them. (Learning Coach/Parent Leslie Interview, lines 225-228)

In this example, the student took the lead on reaching out to teachers and participating in his education. While this is not the case with every student, there will be some that are capable of or prefer to be the ones to take responsibility for connecting with their teacher. learning coaches don not have to be the exclusive link between school and home but can instead coach their student in establishing communication or allow the student to take responsibility for communication when a student is able.

Gathering Information for Student Learning and Emotional Needs

As part of being a student liaison, learning coaches have to have access to information on their student academically and emotionally. This requires a certain connection between teachers and families to ensure that all parties are kept up to date on student needs. Coaches did this through utilization of available tools and varied communication methods. Coaches also gathered information by reaching out to the school whenever they needed support. There was also an element of care when considering what a student needs from a teacher and a learning coach. Table 4.4 demonstrates a correlation between preparedness and frequency of communication with the students ELA teacher. When parents reached out more, they were more likely to feel prepared to support their student. Communication was important to safeguarding that coaches had the right information.

Table 4.4 Descriptive Statistics and Correlation Coefficients for Study Variables

Variable	M	SD	1
Preparedness to Support in ELA	4.20	0.95	
Frequency of Communication with ELA Teacher	2.14	0.8	.30*

* $p < 0.05$ (2-tailed), $n=44$

One parent response to the survey question that asked about what they could improve or change about the experience of being a learning coach stated:

We have a lot of help. I told a friend that we know more about our online school than I did in our [brick and mortar] office talking to the principal. All the information is there the only issue we had communication issues with both of our ELA teachers. Now if it was our issue or theirs is to be decided. (Learning Coach Survey Response, 18.12)

Coaches have access to teachers, curriculum information, school information, and help in ways that many brick-and-mortar parents do not, as mentioned in the response. The learning coach, here, feels that they have more resources or better access to resources than previously

experienced. The coach in this response does note that the communication is not without issue, but it did not stop the coach from getting the information that they needed.

Further, Gina also recognized the level of help and support that is available to learning coaches to be able to effectively coach a student. She proposed:

If there's information out there, I have read it like twice or I've gotten on the Facebook group or I've done it that's just who I am as a human. So, kind of like what I said with the kids, if you're not finding something out there, it's 'cause you've not looked for it. Because, quite honestly, there's so much information out there that all you have to do is ask or weed or search. (Learning Coach/Parent Gina Interview, lines 184-188)

Gina took initiative as a coach to make herself aware of any resources she could pull from when working with her student. This implies two things about a quality learning coach. The first is an initiative to seek information. A coach that researches and understands what is available is one that can potentially impact student performance as noted in Table 4.4. The second is that learning coaches are applying what they learn to decipher what resources will have the biggest impact on student performance. While the school provides many tools and resources, the responsibility of *using* the tools falls to the learning coach.

Similarly, Jade noted that being able to have various modes to communicate with the school and the non-traditional structure was a way to improve the communication she could have with her child's teachers. She said:

I went years without having any contact with my kids teachers when they were in brick and mortar school because I've always worked. And up until 2015 I didn't work just one job. I worked two or three jobs at a time and a lot of that time I was a single parent, so you know parent-teacher conferences and stuff like that, that didn't happen and I was at work and I worked an hour away from the school, so it wasn't like I could just take off and run to the school and come back to work. No, it's done. It's the end of the day. Being able to pick up the phone or shoot an email and I do know that technology has moved along and that schools, brick and mortar schools are using more online stuff for parents to be able to access their kids grades and communicate with their kids, teachers and look at assignments. (Learning Coach/Parent Jade Interview, lines 227-230)

Previously, time, distance, and means prevented her from having more productive communication with her child's teacher, but the structure of SOCS allowed for her to have more options, opportunities, and even control to extent over how she was gathering information on what her son needed. She also recognizes more schools transitioning to technologies that allow for parents to monitor student progress, but in some districts like the rural district she was from, will not have the same kind of systems in place for communication and information to be housed.

For some parents, SOCS allowed for more than academic support for their students. In some instances, a student's emotional needs were the rationale behind a shift to online learning. While all students need to be supported emotionally by teachers, some need further support that might outweigh their academic needs. In the case of Tonya's daughter, the student needed her teachers to be aware and mindful of what she was going through with her mental health. Tonya indicated:

I love to talk with you guys 'cause really I'm very grateful for what [SOCS] did. Not just their support, not just her academically, but her emotional. The care and concern that I would get from her teacher, hers was more than we got at her school when we pulled her out in January, and I've been singing y'all's praise, just praises all over [my town]. It's amazing. (Learning Coach/Parent Tonya Interview, lines 182-186)

The coach, in this example, developed a connection with her daughters' teachers to provide learning that was individualized to what the student needed as she worked through a hard time. When considering this as an example of gathering information, this shows how information is translated between home, school, and back again to ensure that the student is supported appropriately from the school and the coach.

Informal Learning Groups

To support learning coaches in their role and in being able to best support their students, one idea that emerged was the use of an informal learning group for coach learning. Tonya noted that, as a teacher, she appreciated parent nights or opportunities to build an informal rapport with parents for things like parent nights or open houses. She argued:

But I think like I said, I know as a teacher, even if four parents came to back to school night that made my night, you know that I interact just with just four and I think for parents out there I think it would be good to. Interact with other parents you know in this situation. (Learning Coach/Parent Tonya Interview, lines 296-299)

Tonya's experience helped her see the value of meeting with a teacher. While SOCS is entirely virtual, there are several opportunities during a normal school year for parents and coaches to meet with a student's teacher and build a relationship that is adjacent to the classroom.

Moreover, two parents mentioned the use of a parent Facebook page that they often relied on for information or connecting with other parents. Gina remarked:

So, the [learning coach Teacher], she's so great. She's so active on the little Facebook parent group and that Facebook parent group is fantastic. I mean, there are sometimes I'm like "OK people," but for the most part it's really, really great. And I love that she does monitor that from time to time and kind of be like, "Hey, what about like, you know, check in with me tomorrow." She's great. I also subscribed to a Facebook Messenger group which is for 7th grade parents only that somebody started up that was wonderful when I had questions. You know questions about. Something specific you know to do because you have a bunch of parents. These kids are in the same thing, so that that was helpful without always having to go to the teacher and wait on a response. But beyond that, I mean, I just emailed our advisor lady 'cause she was fantastic. She was so great. I loved her. (Learning Coach/Parent Gina Interview, lines 48-58)

One thing worth noting here is the role of the learning coach teacher within on the Facebook page. The learning coach teacher was an active member giving coaches an additional touchpoint when they needed help or suggestions for working with their students. Another note is the parents building smaller communities within the Facebook page that have the potential to provide even more detailed groups for support.

In contrast, Bren noted the downside to informal groups through her discussion of the parent Facebook. She stated:

Well, and it's interesting too, because I don't know if you've seen like the Facebook parents' group or anything. There's like an official one and there's one I guess is less official one and some parents still kind of complain a lot on there. And a lot of parents were very negative about the [state testing] preparation and acting as if they never seen this before and I was so confused because I'm like "Literally they took...something in the fall, then they took like an interim in November." (Learning Coach/Parent Bren Interview, lines 49-51)

In this instance, the group is not always seen as a positive or knowledgeable space. However, Bren's example demonstrates that parents are using this group as a space to vent or voice feelings. While not always productive, still a platform to connect to other parents and discuss their experiences or get feedback is a way to create and find community.

Summary

This chapter addresses the application and enactment of learning coaches in online schools. The chapter was organized by the findings from the two research questions: How are learning coaches utilized and supported by middle school ELA teachers in online schools? and, How do middle school parents enact their roles as learning coaches in online schools? Results for both sections were organized thematically.

The first section focused on how teachers and school level personnel tap into learning coaches. Findings showed that the teachers used learning coaches first as monitors and support for students as a sort of secondary instructors. Teachers also viewed learning coaches as partners, working at home to create spaces for the student to learn and maintain structure for the student. learning coaches were seen as important points of connection and communication between home and school when working in online schools.

The second section examined how parents view their roles as learning coaches in this online environment. The findings showed that parents saw themselves as being a monitor and a support person for their students' academic work. Parents also acted as a manager, creating and maintaining an environment that was conducive to student learning. Finally, parents established themselves as liaisons for their children, ensuring that they received what they needed academically and emotionally from the school.

CHAPTER 5. DISCUSSION

In this mixed-methods case study, the researcher explored the role and enactment of learning coaches within middle school English Language Arts (ELA) classes. Qualitative data included interviews with teachers, learning coaches, and a learning coach teacher, course communication documents, a survey of middle school learning coaches, and school-provided literature. Learning coach roles were analyzed from both school and home perspectives to examine the nature of coaching within online environments and make recommendations for best practices for online learning. Siemens's (2017) scholarship on how learning which fosters connections within a system is invaluable for sustained learning informed this study. The research explored the following questions:

- In what ways are learning coaches utilized and supported by middle school English Language Arts teachers in online schools?
- How do parents of middle school enact their roles as Learning Coaches in online schools?

This chapter discusses the findings of the case study in relation to literature on online learning at the middle school level. Discussions of implications include recommended practices for both online schools and traditional brick and mortar schools. Finally, the researcher will present the limitations and recommendations for future study.

The results of the two research questions revealed three overarching themes for the role for middle school learning coaches in online schools: (1) learning coaches act as monitors for their students providing academic and non-academic support daily; (2) learning coaches work in partnership with the school to create a learning environment for the student that aligns to the recommendations provided by SOCS; and (3) learning coaches are an important part in

producing and maintaining meaningful communication between the school and the student as a liaison and advocate.

The findings suggest that learning coaches are a vital part of the learning system to provide content support in online schools. Coaches are not responsible for instruction but take on the responsibility of ensuring that students have the structure and space to complete work successfully. The findings show that effective online schools need strategies in place to serve this population to ensure that they are supported and have the necessary tools to work with students.

Monitoring and Supporting Middle School Students

From the teachers, administrator, and learning coaches' perspective, being a monitor for students to account for the distance between the school and home is a prominent charge of a learning coach in this online school community. Hasler and Leong (2014) describe a learning coach as one who is responsible for both monitoring their child, and one who is given some latitude as an expert on what is best for their child. Parents are also assigned "administrative and supervisory roles" that reflect what teachers do in brick and mortar schools (Hasler & Leong, 2015, p. 72). Table 4.1 in Chapter 4 reflected this observation with coaches spending the majority of their time nurturing their children, which positions them as the expert in their children's lives. Along with nurturing, monitoring students took up the second largest percentage of the learning coaches' time. This implies that coaches are first parental figures followed closely by safeguarding that their children are working or have what they need for school success.

With the idea of nurturing and monitoring in mind, considering the needs of middle school students is paramount for teachers and learning coaches alike. Middle school students are often in flux developmentally, requiring a delicate balance between independence and monitoring. Gatbacz et al. (2017) also emphasized the need for balance between the two, noting

that proper monitoring can help develop skills middle school students need in order to be successfully independent. Coaches in online schools often forget or overlook the fact that their middle schooler still needs support, and they are going through significant changes physically, emotionally, and intellectually (Diemert, 1992; Garbacz, 2017; Skinner & Saxon, 2020). During an interview, the learning coach teacher reaffirmed, “A middle school student in many ways requires more monitoring and more support from the learning coach [than a younger student]” (lines 208-209). An older student does not necessarily equate to less support needed for success in online schools.

While some middle school students are capable of working independently, parent involvement is key in student success in online schools (Garbacz et al., 2017; Gulosina & Miron, 2017; Lui et al., 2010). The shape of involvement will change from student to student though, as each student will need different kinds of support from their Coaches. For example, Figure 4.2 demonstrated that no one task in ELA took precedent over another, but instead the learning coaches identified what their children needed from them, which often changed between subjects or topics within a subject. Leslie and Jade’s role as learning coaches followed a similar pattern with their children calling on them when they needed specific kinds of help such as editing a paper or reviewing an assignment (Learning Coach/Parent Leslie Interview, lines 228-233; Learning Coach/Parent Jade Interview, lines 136-144).

Along with the academic support, coaches were called upon to maintain a schedule conducive to learning. All five parents interviewed mentioned establishing a routine that worked for their student, including exercise or stretch breaks into their day as per what their student needed in order to be able to complete their work (Learning Coach/Parent Jade Interview, lines 62-68; Learning Coach/Parent Bren Interview, lines 118-132; Learning Coach/Parent Leslie

Interview, lines 78-88). Teachers echoed the need for routines in online schools, encouraging learning coaches to maintain a schedule that worked for their student (Learning Coach/Parent Jade Interview, lines 100-103; Learning Coach/Parent Bren Interview, lines 210-223). However, there was no clear recommendation or solution to what that schedule would look. Having awareness of what was best for the student seemed to be what was best for developing the schedule. Similarly, previous research notes that middle school students benefit from a schedule (Cheung, 2019; Wang & Eccles, 2012). But the recommendation was more conversational, varying by student (Desforges & Abouchaar, 2003).

To support the student academically and emotionally, a learning coach needed awareness of their student's needs and the content of the student's courses. Online schools provide parents with significantly more information than what is typically offered at brick and mortar schools (Beck et al., 2016; Revenaugh, 2006). Taking the opportunity to spend time in the course as a learning coach was found to be a dominant factor in student success although this did not appear in literature on online learning. The learning coach teacher noted, "If the student is not engaged, the parent is not engaged" (Learning Coach Teacher Interview, lines 118). Teachers agreed that learning coaches have to be available and aware of what is going on (Teacher Sara Interview, lines 72-74; Teacher Jane Interview, lines 244-253; Teacher Sara Interview, lines 85-88, lines 112-118; Teacher Lynn Interview, lines 153-164). Coaches have access to all student instructional materials that can be used to learn alongside the student. Leslie stated, "I find it a lot easier to kind of assist them in their learning and how they're learning with being able to sit next to and see what's going on" (Learning Coach/Parent Leslie Interview, lines 61-62). Proximity to the student and awareness of the student's work is a minimum expectation for coaches in supporting their student.

Partnerships for Creating a Learning Environment at a Distance

Creating a partnership between home and school was found to be another important factor in how SOCS used learning coaches. The role of a teacher and a coach was found to be separate, yet complementary as noted in the literature. Learning coaches might do some tasks that would normally be given to a teacher, but the majority of their time would not be spent *teaching* (Learning Coach Teacher Interview, lines 365-370; Teacher Lynn Interview, lines 242-243). Likewise, Gina stated, “If you’re doing it correctly, you’re just facilitating, letting somebody else [teach]” (Learning Coach/Parent Gina Interview, line 225). Borup et al. (2019) argued that online school allows for parents to maintain the home environment without having to teach their children. School is at home, but online school is not home-schooling.

One benefit of a productive partnership was the ability of the school and parents to create a learning environment that is unique to each student. March et al. (2019) recognizes that there is some restriction as far as state standards and district requirements are concerned that have to be upheld by an online school. Online learning, though, can provide a sort of “tailored pace” for students, as both partners can come together to design a school day or plan work schedules for the benefit of the student (Gill et al., 2015; Parent Information, SOCS Website). Tonya recognized the capacity of online learning, stating, “I think SOCS’s format allows for students who are struggling like [my daughter] to do what she has to do to become successful to meet her objectives” (Learning Coach/Parent Tonya Interview, lines 11-12).

Use of learning coaches in online schools enhances a student’s daily school experience. A coach can also have a long-term impact on academic and emotional well-being. Learning coaches have a vested interest in their students that is relevant to parents of brick and mortar students but is magnified in online schools because of the parent proximity to student work.

While there are online families that will be disengaged, there are as many that will use the opportunity to do the most for their student. Ehman (1997) found, “parents take supportive roles, but are respected and treated as equals in decision-making” (p. 33). The findings reflected this balance showing teachers and coaches working together in the best interest of the student.

To do this, though, involvement in courses and available training are the best methods for learning coaches to be effective. Teachers highlighted that the school-created trainings were vital for a meaningful partnership, since the trainings gave detailed instruction for how to access all parts of the learning system (Teacher Kate Interview, lines 384-396; Teacher Lynn Interview, lines 98-110; Learning Coach Teacher Interview, lines 461-467). Parents also noted that using available tools and completing trainings were a large part of what made them feel successful and capable as learning coaches (Learning Coach/Parent Leslie Interview, lines 198-205; Learning Coach/Parent Bren Interview, lines 37-45, lines 585-591). This aligns with research on parental involvement that correlates higher levels of involvement with higher performance in students (Garbacz et al., 2017; Otani, 2017; Thomas et al., 2020; Yazdani et al., 2020). While the research listed involved brick and mortar learning, the findings of this study support that the same is true for online learners.

Communication and Connections Between Home and School

Communication was paramount between home and school which was mirrored in the literature and the findings of the study. Wang and Eccles (2012) outlined a triangle of communication between the school, a parent, and the student which when well managed can have a positive impact on student performance. Kraft (2017) and Otani (2017) showed that consistent and personalized communication can serve students well. Credo (2015) reported that poor communication revealed poor results in online learners. To solve this, teachers at SOCS

recommended building meaningful relationships with their students with consistent, open and honest communication (Teacher Anne Interview, lines 338-348; Teacher Kate Interview, lines 273-277). Parents demonstrated communicating with teachers in anticipation of issues or as students needed specialized support (Learning Coach/Partner Jade Interview, lines 199-200; Learning Coach/Parent Leslie Interview, lines 77-88; Learning Coach/Parent Tonya Interview, 91-99). Moreover, online schools created opportunities for connections with entire families, so teachers were often intently aware of what was going on with students (Teacher Anne Interview, lines 8-12).

A second facet of communication that appeared was collaboration between home and school. This required parents as learning coaches to be available and aware of a student's progress and needs by checking the calendar, messages, and the gradebook (Learning Coach Teacher Interview, lines 344-348, Teacher Kate Interview, 400-409). From a learning coach's perspective, collaboration often required parents to encourage the student to reach out to the teacher when necessary. Learning coaches worked with students to build relationships with their teachers (Learning Coach/Parent Jade Interview, lines 78-79). Gina's response in particular gave an example of establishing meaningful communication between home and school. She stated:

Have you emailed your teacher? Have you went into your class? The office hours or the small groups or whatever and more encouraging in that direction of go to your small group. Go into office hours and then if you still don't get it, let's talk about it, but let's let you learn it the way they do it. (Learning Coach/Parent Gina Interview, lines 24-27)

Gina's recommendation to her child involves her coaching her student to use what is available to him, but still be available to him if he needs her and aware of what tools he does have. She at no point plans to replace the teacher but is working alongside the teacher. Teacher and coaches working together aligns with the idea in Donovan et al. (2014) of the Four C's that are necessary for productive online learning which are "creativity and innovation, collaboration, critical

thinking, and communication” (p. 163). All parties are having to work together to create a learning environment for each student.

The final component of communication involved learning coaches being liaisons or advocates for their students. Parent’s expressed the choice to attend SOCS as one that was dependent on what their student needed—academically or emotionally—and what was available to them in their home districts. Jade and Gina both had experiences where their districts did not have the resources for their child to be adequately prepared for college and career, but SOCS did without them having to spend additional money or travel (Learning Coach/Parent Gina Interview, lines 132-165; Learning Coach/Parent Jade Interview, lines 249-262). Tonya had a student who was struggling with her mental health, so she benefited from a looser structured and the ability to take breaks when necessary (Learning Coach/Parent Tonya Interview, lines 206-214). SOCS also accounted for parent’s desires for their children, providing a platform for parents to structure the day as appropriate for their child. School choice and desire for bettering children aligned with literature on school choice (Ellison & Aloe, 2018; Lareau, 2011; Potterton, 2019).

Recommendations and Implications

Based on findings from the research, this section will outline recommendations and implications. The section will give recommendations for established online schools and traditional brick and mortar schools that might have to be prepared to transition to an online format. Further, implications are provided for expanding connectivism as a framework for K-12 online learning. Finally, the section will identify areas for future research on the role of learning coaches in online schools.

Recommendations for Online Schools

Learning coaches are an integral part of supporting students in K-12 online schools. Middle school students, in particular, benefit from structure, care, and guidance in schools, which have to be carefully considered when enrolled in online schools. Students are working separately from their teachers, so a learning coach then becomes responsible for nurturing and guiding a student while the teachers focus mostly on education. This study showed that, when provided proper tools and training, learning coaches are positioned to be one of the most significant people in a middle school child's online education. Based on the findings, the following are recommendations for established online schools when considering how to support their students at a distance:

- Employ a support person whose job is specifically to work with learning coaches. While coaches have fairly consistent contact with teachers and access all of a student's work, the coach needs almost as much support as a student since coaches need a general awareness of what a student is expected to be doing. Someone like SOCS's Learning Coach Teacher becomes a valuable contact point for learning coaches and even teachers when there are questions.
- Provide leveled trainings for learning coaches. Teachers tap into learning coaches for some instructional components as well as ensuring that students are on task and maintaining a stable schedule. To do this, provide coaches with instruction that demonstrates age-appropriate supports and emotional needs, how to navigate a learning system, and strategies for building meaningful communication between home and school. Taking into account the amount of time a parent has been at the school can also help support parent training.

- Maintain a supported, yet flexible structure. Online schools are selected because of academic, physical, and temporal flexibility. By allowing families to work at their own pace, online schools afford opportunities that may not be found in brick and mortar schools. However, this should be a supported structure where students are still held to similar standards as traditional school.

Recommendations for Brick and Mortar Schools

While most curricula and instruction are designed to be conducted in person, there are instances where face-to-face learning is not viable. The recent COVID crisis, for instance, brought to light the need for productive online learning options for students but also illuminated the difficulties of transitioning to online learning. Traditional schools lack some of the infrastructure that online schools have in place to engage students who are at a physical distance from a classroom. The following are recommendations for brick and mortar schools in implementing online learning:

- Invest in a learning management system. Online schools use learning management systems, or LMS, to house asynchronous instruction and lessons, synchronous lessons, communication, grades, and assignments. An LMS allows for the school to deliver instruction in a cleaner package that can be accessed not only while in schools, but in cases where students are working away from school.
- Encourage parent/guardian participation in student learning. Provide parents with tools, information, helplines, or other supporting materials that will familiarize them with what students are doing in class. Similar to online schools, some parents may not engage, but having parent-facing material ready can help eliminate some of the initial confusion or stress of working online.

- Practice working online with students and parents. If structures are in place to do work online at times, have students complete tasks to practice navigating online systems.

Involve parents in the practice so that all parties are experienced with online learning if a situation arises.

Implications for Practice

The findings in this study can also inform teacher and parent practice for working in online environments. For teachers, the study reveals details about best practices for working with parents and how to support them. For parents, the study demonstrates ways they can engage better with student learning. In both cases, implications are presented here through the lens of an ELA classroom.

For ELA Teachers

When working with learning coaches, ELA teachers in online schools are one of the most-used tools for learning coach training and learning the content course in the learning management system. With this in mind, teachers should be cognizant of how they are presenting content in their courses to ensure that parents are aware of what their students should be doing and have the appropriate resources to provide support. This could include some parent-facing materials like reading and writing strategies, book summaries, questioning techniques, or other tools that parents can use when working with their student. Coaches not instructing has been reiterated throughout, but there is a level of expectation for parents to be tracking student progress. Providing a toolbox to learning coaches can build their capacity as partners to teachers.

Another strategy that teachers can use in their online classrooms is building meaningful rapport with their parents. Determining the best ways to communicate with families can improve the success of the contact. Schools have access to a variety of resources for communicating with

families. Having an initial conversation or sending out a quick survey for preferences can help support more substantial connections throughout the year.

Finally, teachers in an online ELA class has to rethink the way they do instruction. Online schools can use many of the same materials as brick and mortar schools, but execution will have to be different since students are not always learning at the same time. This means restructuring what is learned synchronously and what supports are provided for asynchronous learning to provide the best opportunity for students to learn. Further, there is more need to personalize lessons and instruction since students are working within a flexible space. This could mean speeding up or slowing down pacing to account for student needs and, as always, partnering with the coach to manage student progress.

For Parents

Parents in online schools have an added responsibility to ensure that their student is working and supported throughout the year. For a parent of a middle school student, one of the most important things to do is *know* the student. Middle school students need a delicate balance between hands-on and hands-off support. Knowing what the student needs is a big step for safeguarding that they are able to get through instruction. To do this, the coach can learn along with the student by attending live sessions with the student, reading what the child is reading, going through the course, and using the tools or supports the teacher has in place. By staying abreast of what the students are doing and what they need, coaches are positioned to support their students well.

Implications for Theoretical Framework

Online learning is elevated as a viable alternative education option and designed to serve a diverse population. While students are working within a learning system, online schools boast

flexibility and individually within instruction. Learning coaches and teachers work together to establish what is best for each student when considering work and schedules. The findings in this study exhibited the extent of the individualization that happens at online schools. Each teacher and parent interviewed or surveyed had unique experiences or needs for their student. Middle schoolers have similar developmental needs, but within that scope, each student had a routine, support style, or preference that the learning coach developed with them.

Siemens's (2017) theory of connectivism addresses the addition of technology into education as well as trends in how learning has evolved rapidly and continually. Connectivism is outlined in the following manner:

The starting point of connectivism is the individual. Personal knowledge is comprised of a network, which feeds into organizations and institutions, which in turn feed back into the network, and then continue to provide learning to individual. This cycle of knowledge development (personal to network to organization) allows learners to remain current in their field through the connections they have formed. (Siemens, 2017, pp. 5-6)

The theory is targeted toward adult learners, but the study showed that online schools have similar structures as represented here because of how learning happens within a network. In online schools, students are learning alongside a learning coach, teachers, and classmates. The network in an online school proved to be a key element to successful learning.

Further, four of the components of connectivism show how connectivism can apply to middle school online learning. The first is learning as the process of connecting pieces of information. Most curricula and standards for ELA call for students to be analyzing data and producing an argument. Student learning occurs through this process. The second is that learning “may reside in non-human appliances” (n.p.). Online schools use tools and have structures that alleviate some of the human element but can be used to enhance the learning experience. The third illuminates nurturing and connections as a means to “facilitate continual learning” (n.p.).

Connections between all parts of a student's triangle of communication is one of the most prominent factors to student success (Sahin, 2018; Wang & Eccles, 2012; Woolley et al., 2009). The final tenet highlights learning choice and deciphering meaning through reality. These four tenants can be expounded upon using an understanding of middle school developmental needs to expand a theory that accounts for younger learners.

Implications for Future Research

As there is a current lack of research in K-12 online schools, the opportunities for study are expansive. This project brought to the forefront the need for detailed discussions of caretakers in online schools. Some researchers in the past few years have examined parents, but work is limited and does not extend to all grade-levels. One thing that became evident was that each grade-level has specialized needs that should be accounted for by the school employees when considering how to coach adults working with students. Another factor that came into play was the tools that were available to learning coaches were often not reflected in content courses. Coaches had access to many different resources regarding navigating the learning space and some sources available for developmental needs. Aside from that, coaches were reliant on what the teacher gave them, if anything. Online learning tends to be very individualized, as well, which requires strong communication between all parties of a student's learning system.

Regarding future research, there are several areas of which a researcher could expand. Similar research questions to those asked in this project could be asked with different grade levels. Grades K-5 are notably absent from the body of research although, like middle school, the enrollment numbers are steadily increasing. With students in the younger grades, there is possibly an even greater need for monitoring and increased instructional support from an adult at home. Exploring this area can add to best practices for online schools.

A deeper knowledge of learning coaches could help online schools understand how to reach the community of coaches. This information could come from expanding the Learning Coach Survey to get a clearer picture of the learning coach in regard to demographics, education level, and relationship to students. This work focused on parents of students but discussing other relationships and how those relationships impacted support could add to the understanding of what works best for coaches and areas that need additional attention. Exploring this component might also provide insight into how schools should identify and define learning coaches.

Limitations

Limitations of the study were evident through the sample size and the survey question design, and the parental focus impacted the results of the work. First, the sample for the qualitative interviews consisted of five teachers, five parents, and a learning coach teacher who was responsible for working with the learning coaches. The teachers represented a majority of ELA teachers in the school, so data from this group was relatively comprehensive. The parent participants, though, were a much smaller percentage. Although the school had a middle population of 975, only 55 parents participated in the survey and 5 parents participated in interviews. While I was able to capture a variety of perspectives and experiences, the parent interviews did not provide as wide of a perspective as possible. From the survey, 20 parents volunteered to be interviewed, but scheduling, transitioning into summer months, and students transferring out of the school effected the overall number of participants.

Another limitation was the survey questions. I was able to pull information from the responses; however, there was an opportunity to add additional questions such as demographic information, education level, or other role-related questions that could have added to the notion of learning coaches. As with the interview responses, there was only a 5% return rate on the

survey. Communication for participants was sent out in the last weeks of school, so there is a chance parents missed the information in a flurry of end-of-year communication or were unavailable to complete a response with the start of summer. Future projects would be better served if sent out at a different time of year or through a different means that might have been better for parents to access.

Finally, the results demonstrated a distinct difference between parent responses and teacher responses in interviews which created tension that was not reflected in the findings. Teachers expressed instances of frustrations with learning coaches and what they felt were lacking in learning coach involvement. The parents that were interviewed, however, were examples of ideal learning coaches through their involvement, investment, and internalization of their role. This dissonance is not expressed in this work, but rather the findings were synthesized to clarify practical implications for coaches.

Summary

Meaningful connections between school, students, and parents can lead to more fruitful learning in online schools. This study explored the role, enactment, and application of learning coaches for middle school online students. The results provided some insight into how schools utilize this group of adults to support students as an extension of the school. The three overall findings suggested that a learning coach serves as an important stakeholder in a child's education in a way that does not appear in brick and mortar schools. The structure of the school allows for an individualized, fluid experience for students that is most productive when students are paired with a learning coach who invests time and energy into ensuring that the student has everything, they need to be successful.

The study contributes to a limited body of research on online learning and delves into the needs of middle school online learners, who are the second largest-growing group of those enrolled in online schools. As enrollment continues to increase, the need for researched-based practices increases as well. The study also contributes to current work on parents or caretakers in online schools. The use of Siemens's (2017) connectivism spoke to the importance of connections in learning environments as well as the idea that learning is no longer as individualized. Considering online learning through this lens helped to build my understanding of how cyber schools can promote community in ways that are similar to brick and mortar, but also more invested because of the structure. Gow's (2020) work argued that online learning was isolating and hyper-individualistic. The findings of this project, however, demonstrated that online learning has the potential to build strong, productive communities of learners.

APPENDIX A. IRB APPROVAL



Office of

Research & Economic Development

TO: Skinner, Kim
LSUAM | Col of HSE | Education

FROM: Alex Cohen
Chair, Institutional Review Board

DATE: 25-May-2021

RE: IRBAM-21-0527

TITLE: Tagging In: Parents as Learning Coaches
in Cyber Charter School ELA Classrooms

SUBMISSION TYPE: Initial Application

Review Type: Exempt

Risk Factor: Minimal

Review Date: 24-May-2021

Status: Approved

Approval Date: 24-May-2021

Approval Expiration Date: 23-May-2024

Exempt Category:

Requesting Waiver of Informed Consent: Yes

Re-review frequency: Three Years

Number of subjects approved: 975

LSU Proposal Number:

By: Alex Cohen, Chairman

Continuing approval is CONDITIONAL on:

1. Adherence to the approved protocol, familiarity with, and adherence to the ethical standards of the Belmont Report, and LSU's Assurance of Compliance with DHHS regulations for the protection of human subjects*
2. Prior approval of a change in protocol, including revision of the consent documents or an increase in the number of subjects over that approved.
3. Obtaining renewed approval (or submittal of a termination report), prior to the approval expiration date, upon request by the IRB office (irrespective of when the project actually begins); notification of project termination.
4. Retention of documentation of informed consent and study records for at least 3 years after the study ends.
5. Continuing attention to the physical and psychological well-being and informed consent of the individual participants, including notification of new information that might affect consent.

6. A prompt report to the IRB of any adverse event affecting a participant potentially arising from the study.
7. Notification of the IRB of a serious compliance failure.
8. **SPECIAL NOTE: When emailing more than one recipient, make sure you use bcc. Approvals will automatically be closed by the IRB on the expiration date unless the PI requests a continuation.**

** All investigators and support staff have access to copies of the Belmont Report, LSU's Assurance with DHHS, DHHS (45 CFR 46) and FDA regulations governing use of human subjects, and other relevant documents in print in this office or on our World Wide Web site at <http://www.lsu.edu/research>*

Louisiana State University
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<http://www.lsu.edu/research>

APPENDIX B. PARENT CONSENT FORM

1. Study Title: Connecting and Communicating: The Activation of Middle School Parents as Learning Coaches for ELA Classrooms in Online Charter Schools
2. The purpose of this research project is to gain an understanding of the role of a learning coach in cyber charter schools. In particular, the research focuses on the perception of learning coach roles in online schools and how clearly defined learning coach roles can impact student experience. The researcher will conduct one 30-45 minute interview with participants.

All interviews will be audio/video recorded. However, the participants can choose to not have the interview recorded or can request to have the interview deleted from the project at any time by contacting the researcher. All interviews will be stored in a password protected drop box.

3. Risks: There are no known risks.
4. Benefits: The benefits of this study is a deeper understanding of practices that can have a positive impact on student experiences in online charter schools. Findings might also benefit brick and mortar school policies for online instruction.
5. Investigators: The following investigator is available for questions, M-F, 8:00 a.m. - 4:30 p.m.; Lillie Connor-Flores, School of Education, LSU, 225-241-2912 and Dr. Kim Skinner, School of Education, LSU, 225-578-6709.
6. Performance Site: University View Academy
7. Number of subjects: 10-20
8. Inclusion Criteria: Parents who are the identified learning coach for a middle school student who had been enrolled in the school for more than two years, middle school teachers and administration, and the Learning Coach Partner
9. Exclusion Criteria: Parents who are not identified as the learning coach or who have not been enrolled for at least two years and staff not associated with the middle school grade band.
10. Right to Refuse: Subjects may choose not to participate or to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty or loss of any benefit to which they might otherwise be entitled.
11. Privacy: Results of the study may be published, but no names or identifying information will be included in the publication. Subject identity will remain confidential unless disclosure is required by law.
12. Signatures:

The study has been discussed with me and all my questions have been answered. I may direct additional questions regarding study specifics to the investigators. For injury or illness, call your physician, or the Student Health Center if you are an LSU student. If I have questions about subjects' rights or other concerns, I can contact Alex Cohen, Institutional Review Board, (225) 578-8692, irb@lsu.edu, or www.lsu.edu/research. I agree to participate in the study described above and acknowledge the investigator's obligation to provide me with a signed copy of this consent form.

Subject Signature: _____ Date: _____

The study subject has indicated to me that he/she is unable to read. I certify that I have read this consent form to the subject and explained that by completing the signature line above, the subject has agreed to participate.

Signature of Reader: _____ Date: _____

13. Identifiers might be removed from the identifiable private information or identifiable biospecimens. After removal, the information or biospecimens may be used for future research studies or distributed to another investigator for future research studies without additional informed consent.

Yes, I give permission _____
Signature

No, I do not give permission _____
Signature

APPENDIX C. SURVEY CONSENT FORM

1. Study Title: Connecting and Communicating: The Activation of Middle School Parents as Learning Coaches for ELA Classrooms in Online Charter Schools
2. The purpose of this research project is to gain an understanding of the role of a learning coach in cyber charter schools. In particular, the research focuses on the perception of learning coach roles in online schools and how clearly defined learning coach roles can impact student experience. To do this, the researcher will conduct a survey to collect information on the day-to-day role of the Learning Coach in a students' education at an online charter school. At the end of the survey, participants will be given the opportunity to sit for an interview to expand on their survey results. If participants choose to be interviewed, more information will be sent out at that time.
3. Risks: There are no known risks.
4. Benefits: The benefits of this study is a deeper understanding of practices that can have a positive impact on student experiences in online charter schools. Findings might also benefit brick and mortar school policies for online instruction.
5. Investigators: The following investigator is available for questions, M-F, 8:00 a.m. - 4:30 p.m.; Lillie Connor-Flores, School of Education, LSU, 225-241-2912 and Dr. Kim Skinner, School of Education, LSU, 225-578-6709.
6. Performance Site: University View Academy
7. Number of subjects: 975
8. Inclusion Criteria: Adults who are the identified as the Learning Coach of middle school students will be sent the survey.
9. Exclusion Criteria: Adults who are not associated with middle school students.
10. Right to Refuse: Subjects may choose not to participate or to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty or loss of any benefit to which they might otherwise be entitled.
11. Privacy: Results of the study may be published, but no names or identifying information will be included in the publication. Subject identity will remain confidential unless disclosure is required by law.
12. Signatures:

The study has been discussed with me and all my questions have been answered. I may direct additional questions regarding study specifics to the investigators. For injury or illness, call your physician, or the Student Health Center if you are an LSU student. If I have questions about subjects' rights or other concerns, I can contact Alex Cohen, Institutional Review Board, (225) 578-8692, irb@lsu.edu, or www.lsu.edu/research. I

agree to participate in the study described above and acknowledge the investigator's obligation to provide me with a signed copy of this consent form.

Subject Signature: _____ Date: _____

The study subject has indicated to me that he/she is unable to read. I certify that I have read this consent form to the subject and explained that by completing the signature line above, the subject has agreed to participate.

Signature of Reader: _____ Date: _____

13. Identifiers might be removed from the identifiable private information or identifiable biospecimens. After removal, the information or biospecimens may be used for future research studies or distributed to another investigator for future research studies without additional informed consent.

Yes, I give permission _____
Signature

No, I do not give permission _____
Signature

APPENDIX D. SCHOOL ADMINISTRATOR CONSENT

1. Study Title: Connecting and Communicating: The Activation of Middle School Parents as Learning Coaches for ELA Classrooms in Online Charter Schools
2. The purpose of this research project is to gain an understanding of the role of a learning coach in cyber charter schools. In particular, the research focuses on the perception of learning coach roles in online schools and how clearly defined learning coach roles can impact student experience. To do this, the researcher will send a survey to all middle school learning coaches. In the survey, the participants will have an opportunity to sit in on a interview. Interviews will come from volunteers who meet the inclusion criteria. The researcher will interview middle school ELA teachers, middle school administration, and University View staff that work directly with Learning Coaches including the Learning Coach Partner. The researcher will conduct one 30-45 minute interview with consenting participants who will be contacted via email with detailed information on the project and consent forms. Participants will have the option to opt out of interviews at any point in the process.

All interviews will be audio/video recorded. However, the participants can choose to not have the interview recorded or can request to have the interview deleted from the project at any time by contacting the researcher. All interviews will be stored in a password protected drop box.

Additionally, the researcher will conduct a course analysis on middle school ELA courses in the learning management software. This analysis will focus on finding any instances of parental communication within the courses.

3. Risks: There are no known risks.
4. Benefits: The benefits of this study is a deeper understanding of practices that can have a positive impact on student experiences in online charter schools. Findings might also benefit brick and mortar school policies for online instruction.
5. Investigators: The following investigator is available for questions, M-F, 8:00 a.m. - 4:30 p.m.; Lillie Connor-Flores, School of Education, LSU, 225-241-2912 and Dr. Kim Skinner, School of Education, LSU, 225-578-6709.
6. Performance Site: University View Academy
7. Number of subjects: 975
8. Inclusion Criteria: Parents of middle school children who identify as the learning coach for their child will surveyed. The researcher will focus on parents of students who have been enrolled in the school for at least two years. The researcher will also interview middle school ELA teachers, middle school leadership team members, and the Learning

Coach Partner. Finally, the researcher will analyze course content for instances of parental involvement.

9. Exclusion Criteria: Parents or guardians who are not the recognized learning coach for their student; school staff not associated with the middle school or who work closely with learning coaches.
10. Right to Refuse: Participation is voluntary. At any time, either the subject may withdraw from the study without penalty or loss of any benefit to which they might otherwise be entitled.
11. Privacy: The school records of participants in this study may be reviewed by investigators. Results of the study may be published, but no names or identifying information will be included for publication. Subject identity will remain confidential unless disclosure is required by law.
12. Financial Information: There is no cost for participation in the study, nor is there any compensation to the subjects for participation.
13. Signatures: The study has been discussed with me and all my questions have been answered. I may direct additional questions regarding study specifics to the investigator. For injury or illness, call your physician, or the Student Health Center if you are an LSU student. If I have questions about subjects' rights or other concerns, I can contact Alex Cohen, Chairman, Institutional Review Board, (225) 578-8692, irb@lsu.edu, or www.lsu.edu/research.

I will allow enrollees to participate in the study described above and acknowledge the investigator's obligation to provide me with a signed copy of this consent form.

School Administrator Signature: _____ Date: _____

APPENDIX E. INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Teacher/Administrator Question
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How long have you been teaching? How long at UVA? • How does online school compare to brick and mortar • Describe your expectations for Learning coaches. • What supports do you have in place for your Learning Coaches? • What does interaction with a Learning Coach typically look like? • What are some factors that impact the way Learning Coaches support students? How does it vary?
Learning Coach Partner Question
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Describe your role as learning coach partner • Explain any training, resources, or guidelines produced by the school to support the Learning Coaches <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Does this vary by age? Subject? • What resources (training, one-pagers, discussion boards) are available to Learning Coaches to support them? • What, if any, are the established expectations of Learning Coaches at UVA? How have you seen Learning Coaches used? • Does the age of the student have any impact on the Learning Coach Role?
Parent Questions
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Define role as a Learning Coach • Describe what support/involvement you have in your student's education daily and over the course of the school year? • If you've been with the school for a while, has your involvement in student learning changed? If so, how? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Bonus question: If LC has students at different grade bands – how does MS compare to the other grade bands? • How many hours per day are you working with your student? • Does your involvement in your student's learning differ between subjects? • What supports, if any, do you provide to your student during ELA classes?

APPENDIX F. LEARNING COACH SURVEY

Learning Coach Role

1. Relationship to student
 - a. **Parent, legal guardian, grandparent, aunt/uncle, other (note other)**
2. How many years have you been with UVA
 - a. **0-1, 2-3, 4-5, 6+**
3. In your role as a learning coach for your child, how much time do you feel you spend per week doing the following (Borup et al., 2014): **(0-1, 1-2 Hours, 3-4 hours, 5-6 hours, 7-9, 10 or more)**
 - a. **Instructing** – teach content based materials during asynchronous learning
 - b. **Organizing** – arrange daily schedule, establishing a physical working environment, manage learning time
 - c. **Nurturing** – provide safe learning environment, love and care for child, support development of social and behavioral skills
 - d. **Monitoring** – ensure students are on task and working during established school times
 - e. **Motivating** – provide positive reinforcement to support student engagement in online learning
 - f. **Other**
 - i. Note other
4. Which of the following most closely aligns with your role as Learning Coach:
 - a. Nurturer
 - b. Teacher
 - c. Coach
 - d. Partner
 - e. Guide
 - f. Monitor
 - g. Other
 - i. Note other
5. Consider your time spent learning how to be a learning coach. How often did you use the following resources: **(Not at all, Once or twice, About once a week, several times a week, About every day)**
 - a. Child's Teacher
 - b. Course card
 - c. Learning Coach Corner
 - d. Learning Coach Partner
 - e. Advisory Teacher
 - f. Internet search
 - g. other
6. When working with your child as the Learning Coach, how often do you use the following resources to support content instruction. **(Not at all, Once or twice, About once a week, several times a week, About every day)**
 - a. Child's Teacher
 - b. course card
 - c. Learning Coach Corner

- d. Learning Coach Partner
 - e. Advisory Teacher,
 - f. Internet search
 - g. other
 - i. Note other
7. I feel that UVA has provided adequate resources to prepare me for my role as a Learning Coach for my middle school student.
- a. Strongly Disagree, Disagree, Undecided, Agree, Strongly Agree**
8. Optional: If you are the Learning Coach for a student in a grade-band that is NOT middle school, describe how the support differs for that student(s). (open ended)

ELA Class

1. How much time did you and your child spend in each of their classes in the 2020-2021 school year: **(0-1, 1-2 Hours, 3-4 hours, 5-6 hours, 7-9, 10 or more)**
 - a. ELA
 - b. Math
 - c. Science
 - d. Social Studies
2. How often in the 2020-2021 school year did you communicate with your child's ELA teacher:
 - a. **(Not at all, Once or twice, About once a week, several times a week, About every day)**
3. When you seek support for coaching your child in ELA, how often do you use the following tools: **(never, rarely, sometimes, very often, always)**
 - a. Teacher
 - b. Course Card
 - c. Learning Coach Partner
 - d. Advisory teacher
 - e. Internet Search
 - f. other
 - i. Note other
4. When working on ELA lessons with your child, how often do you provide support for each of the following: **(never, rarely, sometimes, very often, always)**
 - a. Reading course texts
 - b. Annotating texts
 - c. Discussing grade-level texts
 - d. Writing about grade-level texts
 - e. Editing writing assignments
 - f. Other
 - i. Note other
5. How many hours of support do you feel your student needs in his/her ELA course? **(0-1, 1-2 Hours, 3-4 hours, 5-6 hours, 7-9, 10 or more)**
6. How often do you feel you need support as the Learning Coach within ELA course? **(never, rarely, sometimes, very often, always)**
7. Do you feel that UVA has provided adequate resources to prepare you for your role as a Learning Coach for your middle school student in ELA class.
 - a. **Strongly Disagree, Disagree, Undecided, Agree, Strongly Agree**

8. Consider your time spent learning how to be a Learning Coach. Is there anything you would change or improve about that experience?

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