



# **Structural Supports for Learning Coaches: Lessons Learned from the Model Schools for Inner Cities**

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**TITLE:** Structural Supports for Learning Coaches: Lessons Learned from the Model Schools for Inner Cities

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# Introduction

## Background

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Coaching as a professional development strategy for school-based educators is a relatively new capacity building practice in Canadian elementary education. Teaching coaches provide direct on-site professional support and learning through their school visits on a regular basis over a period of time. Most coaching models prescribe roles that are subject-specific – often referred to as literacy coaches, math coaches, or early reading coaches. Their professional support is meant to go beyond attendance at occasional workshops or seminars led by field experts, and extend to collaborating with educators to support classroom pedagogy by providing hands-on support on school premises. By working alongside teachers, they can provide on-site and ongoing context-specific professional development, subject-area expertise, and model effective teaching strategies in real time (Mangin, 2009). Previous research on literacy coaches has highlighted the importance of having a clear role definition (Poglinco et al., 2003, Morgan et al., 2003; Lynch & Ferguson, 2010), ensuring adequate time allocation for each school (Lynch & Ferguson, 2010), mitigating teacher resistance (Dole & Donaldson, 2006; Lynch & Ferguson, 2010) and building a supportive partnership with teachers, and administrative (including principal and superintendent) support staff (e.g., Morgan et al., 2003; Moxley & Taylor, 2006; Lynch & Ferguson, 2010). Lynch and Ferguson (2010) found that literacy coaches were regarded by teachers as partners rather than as superiors and were able to provide immediate feedback and support to teachers.

At the Toronto District School Board (TDSB), the largest school Board in Canada, subject-specific coaches were in place in the early 2000s, with one literacy coach and one math coach for each family of schools (a geographic grouping of 20 or more schools). In 2006-2007, as part of their commitment to innovative teaching and learning, the TDSB implemented the system-wide Model Schools for Inner Cities (MSIC) initiative to support students who live in lower sociodemographic communities. MSIC adopted a generalist coaching model and created new Learning Coach (LC) positions to serve its 150 MSIC

schools. LCs were to provide educators at MSIC schools with holistic and integrated support to deliver literacy, math, and other curricular teaching with an expectation to have a grassroots, local understanding of the community along with an equity, social justice, anti-racism/oppression lens. They spent their time supporting formalized professional learning, modeling effective in-class pedagogy by leading lessons and/or co-teaching, as well as collaborating with inner city, literacy and equity staff and administrators. While being assigned to work with educators and leaders in MSIC schools, these MSIC coaches reported centrally to the MSIC Office, which established formal structures to support and oversee their roles, operations, professional learning, resources, and helped to embed accountability.

In 2016, the then new Director of Education initiated Board-wide restructuring as outlined in *A Vision for Learning* (2016). Among the various organizational changes was a shift in the Board's professional development strategy for educators to a job-embedded learning approach. Using the coaching concept adopted in the MSIC program, the Board created Kindergarten-Grade 12 (K-12) LC positions to replace the system-level subject-specific Instructional Leaders model of professional development across all (over 580) TDSB schools. As such, the LC position was scaled up in terms of number and extended beyond the MSIC schools. These new K-12 LC positions were to support local schools across the system with professional learning and school improvement planning with an emphasis on providing an equitable education for all students in every school (TDSB, 2016).

As the MSIC coaching model was adapted and expanded across the Board, the original MSIC coach positions were discontinued and former MSIC LCs who were interested in the K-12 LC role could apply for the new Board-wide K-12 LC positions. Furthermore, as a result of the disintegration of the central MSIC Office as part of the Board-wide reorganization in 2016, the original central structure and conditions behind the MSIC coaching model were also dissipated. Instead of operating under a central body, the 60 K-12 LCs, who were divided among the four newly formed regions called Learning Centres, reported to the leaders of their respective Learning Centre within the school Board.

In summary, the role of LCs has undergone two distinct implementation phases between 2007 and 2020 at the TDSB:

1. MSIC Central Model - a more centrally coordinated approach under the MSIC Office with 15 LCs serving 150 MSIC schools between 2007 and 2016
2. Learning Centre Model - a more decentralized and autonomous approach under the four Learning Centres since the Board restructuring in 2016; with about 15 K-12 LCs serving both MSIC and non-MSIC schools in each Learning Centre pre-pandemic.

## **Focus of the Study**

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This study investigates if and how restructuring has affected the roles and experiences of LCs in supporting educators and leaders in local schools. The research aims to identify lessons learned in terms of systemic structures and conditions from the two LC implementation phases in enhancing the roles of LCs to promote local school improvement and equity. As such, the research question used to guide this study is: What were the experiences of LCs under the two implementation phases, with a focus on lessons learned?

# Historical Context

## Model Schools for Inner Cities (2006-2016)

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The TDSB launched its MSIC program in 2006, as a system-level effort to address both the impact of poverty on student outcomes and the issue of achievement gaps experienced by historically marginalized groups. The program started off with seven elementary schools in high needs communities in its first two years, and expanded over the following five years to 150 elementary schools across the city. These schools, which were divided geographically into seven clusters, served over 56,000 students. As MSIC schools, they received extra funding, additional resources and intentional supports with the purpose of leveling “the playing field for all students regardless of their socio-economic circumstance or cultural background”, and to enable “students to achieve academically, socially and emotionally to their highest potential” (TDSB, 2005).

In the first 10 years of the program, a central MSIC Office was in place to lead, manage, and co-ordinate resource allocations, programming, community liaisons, and accountability for the 150 schools within the seven clusters. While individual schools had their unique school programming plans, all MSIC schools embedded the program’s five essential components:

1. Innovation in teaching and learning practice and school structure
2. Support services to meet students’ physical, social, and emotional needs
3. School as the heart of the community
4. Research, review, and evaluation of students and programs
5. Commitment to share successful practices

To fulfil these five essential components, a number of ‘special positions’ were established, including MSIC LCs and Community Support Workers (CSW) assigned to each cluster to support their respective MSIC schools and local school communities (Yau, Archer, & Romard, 2018). MSIC LCs and CSWs reported to the central MSIC office.

## School Board Restructuring (2016-18)

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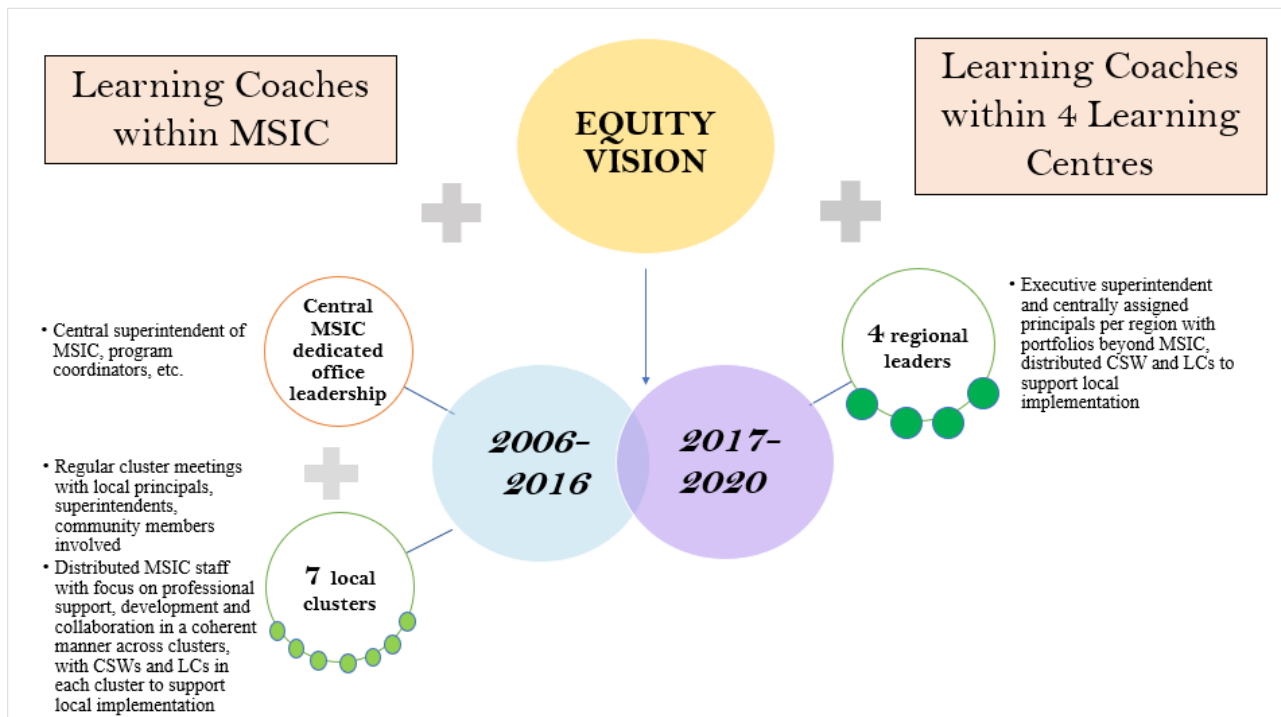
System-wide reorganization took place under new Board directorship in the Fall of 2016 (TDSB, 2016). Aiming to improve the effectiveness and responsiveness of the system and provide flexible and localized support to schools, the school Board adopted a more decentralized model by dividing the large jurisdiction into four regions, called 'Learning Centres'. Learning Centres intended to support TDSB school administrators and teachers in improving student learning outcomes, by shifting resources closer to schools and better positioning superintendents and school administrators to identify the necessary teaching and learning supports for teachers and students in the classroom (TDSB, 2017a). This was meant to decrease centralized initiatives and increase opportunities for decentralized initiatives and allow for greater flexibility and local planning in how to best support students (Shah, 2016).

Each Learning Centre included a number of school superintendents led by an Executive Superintendent who had system responsibility and an executive authority to oversee the operations of individual schools and various portfolios within the centre. These portfolios included School Effectiveness and Leadership, Teaching and Learning, Early Years, etc. A number of Centrally Assigned Principals (CAPs) were also in place with responsibility for an assigned portfolio(s) and to support local principals (TDSB, 2017a).

One other key component of the Learning Centre model was the introduction of K-12 LC and early reading coach (ERC) positions to replace the system Instructional Leaders as a way to offer more direct professional development to educators and leaders at the school site (DeJesus & Armson, 2019). Each Learning Centre had an average of 15 K-12 LCs and five ERC positions that were assigned to individual schools to support professional learning and school improvement planning according to localized needs. These coaches report directly to the CAP responsible for this portfolio in their learning centre.



With this system-wide decentralization, the original MSIC structure and governance were also reorganized. The central MSIC Office with its leadership and support team was dissolved. During the time of this research, to a large extent, the program had become decentralized with the executive superintendents and the assigned CAPs of each of the four Learning Centres overseeing their own MSIC schools and CSWs, with one to three CSWs per learning Centre and some CSWs working in more than one Learning Centre (DeJesus & Armson, 2019). In other words, there were four separate leadership teams with each leading and supporting their own schools, including MSIC schools, and their own regional support staff, including LCs, within their Learning Centre.



## Methodology

We spoke with K-12 LCs (2018) and MSIC school administrators (2018-2019) about their experiences within the two phases of the roles of LCs. Semi-structured focus groups were conducted with 10 LCs, along with semi-structured interviews with 11 MSIC administrative staff members, including principals, vice principals, and central TDSB staff. Focus group data collection with LCs took place in three separate groups according to level of experience as LCs:

- Experienced coaches: These were former MSIC coaches who became K-12 LCs in 2016, with 6 or more years of experience as a MSIC LC. They were able to discern similarities and differences, challenges and perceived effectiveness as LCs over the two phases – centralized versus decentralized. They were also able to reflect in hindsight regarding any lessons that could be applied to better support their LC role.
- Mid-level coaches: These were former MSIC coaches with 3-5 years of coaching experience. They had less experience in comparison with ‘experienced’ coaches, who became K-12 LCs in 2016.
- Novice coaches: These were new K-12 learning coaches, with 0-2 years of experience, and without prior coaching experience in MSIC. The voices of novice coaches were gathered separately in order to capture their perceptions of their role and related experiences, without the preconceptions held by former MSIC coaches.

Research team members reviewed verbatim transcriptions of audio recordings from focus groups and used inductive thematic analysis, informed by a grounded theory method (Birks & Mills, 2011). After preliminary inter-rater coding and discussion of discrepancies as they arose during meetings with the research team, a coding guide was finalized and data were coded thematically in NVivo 10.

Qualitative data analyses were supplemented with literature and document reviews of existing research on topics related to instructional coaching as well as pertinent school Board documents.

# Findings & Discussion

## Roles of LCs

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Under the central MSIC Office, the LC role was to offer educators in MSIC schools integrated and holistic support in delivering literacy, math and STEM curriculum with emphases on experiential learning, creativity, critical thinking, equity, social justice, and community involvement. In the school building, MSIC coaches facilitated teachers' learning from and with one another through co-teaching in a classroom setting. The goal was to transform teaching practices that would reflect higher expectations for students resulting in improved student engagement. In addition, MSIC LCs worked with school administrators and "Learning Classroom Teachers" (who were lead school-based coaches) in co-facilitating "collaborative inquiries that address the schools' immediate needs" with an intent to, "build collective knowledge, improve instructional practice and enhance school leadership that sustains ongoing professional learning for all stakeholders" (TDSB, 2015/2016, p. 2).

Aside from offering school-based support, MSIC coaches as a team often worked together and teamed up with subject experts as well as CSWs at the MSIC Office to co-develop Kindergarten to Grade 10 curriculum unit templates that were shared with MSIC schools. The unit templates utilized a cross disciplinary framework which integrated Language and Math with fundamental concepts from the Science and Social Studies curriculum along with STEM tasks, while incorporating a social justice lens and drawing from culturally responsive pedagogies. The unit templates were meant to be tailored by educators to their particular students (Shah, 2018).

Under the Learning Centre model, the role of K-12 LCs were to support individual schools in their Learning Centres within the school improvement process to meet the three Vision for Learning's goals - equity, achievement and well-being (TDSB, 2016). These coaches were assigned to schools, MSIC or non-MSIC, by their Learning Centre's Centrally Assigned Principals and superintendents who completed their school needs assessments to determine the schools that required the most support. According to the

interviewed coaches, their day-to-day activities mainly involved classroom-level support for teachers related to curriculum and pedagogy:

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*... in the classroom, [as the coach], I'm there to point out something that happens [while the teacher teaches the curriculum]. When we ask a certain question and see students respond in a certain way, [the teacher] may not notice at first, [they're] still learning but the coach is there to be reflective, like a mirror [for] what's actually going on. The job [is] inventive learning ... the coaches' job [is as an] embedded learning practitioner. (Coach, 2018)*

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K-12 LCs were given a broad role to work with teachers and/or school administrators to identify and mitigate challenges facing the school, to provide professional learning, and to support inclusive learning environments for students.

## Structural Supports for LCs

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Based on the qualitative thematic analysis of the focus group and interview data, the following structures and conditions were identified as important infrastructure to support LCs in their coaching role at local schools:

(1) Regular Peer Communication and Collaboration

(2) Ongoing and Integrated Professional Learning Opportunities with an equity lens

(3) School Leaders' Buy-in and Support

(4) Coherent System Leadership

## ***(1) Regular Peer Communication and Collaboration***

The main responsibility of LCs was to provide on-site support to educators or administrators within the school building, and their core daily activities involved visiting their assigned schools as individual professionals, offering customized support and services according to the peculiar needs of educators or the unique circumstances of the local school. As they shifted from school to school, they often faced unique contexts and local challenges. School districts can build capacity among teachers and schools in part by coordinating and aligning work through collaboration and communication (Rorrer et al., 2008). Research on literacy coaches (TDSB Early Reading coaches) has highlighted the importance of connecting with fellow coaches for mutual support and the value of regular professional dialogue among colleagues (DeJesus & Armson, 2019). While literacy coaches have expertise in reading and early years, mentoring and coaching educators and peers presented a new challenge (DeJesus & Armson, 2019). Creating opportunities for fellow literacy coaches to provide feedback to peers as “critical friends” (DeJesus & Armson, 2019, p. 23) can help to nurture coaching competencies. According to the Early Reading Coaches interviewed in DeJesus and Armson’s recent study (2019), the most valuable resource that they had was each other. Coaches supported and collaborated with one another, shared diverse expertise and experiences in schools, engaged in reflection and celebrated their progress (DeJesus & Armson, 2019).

Under the MSIC Office, formal structures were established for MSIC coaches to meet together on a bi-weekly basis. Through this physical setup and space, regular networking opportunities were created for professional dialogue, where coaches shared each other’s experiences and challenges, and exchanged ideas and strategies. As mentioned by some experienced coaches in the present study, there was “a [central] voice to lead regular communication for Model Schools coaches and regular [opportunities] to come together” (*Coaches, 2018*).

For MSIC LCs, these regular communication and collaborative opportunities, in the form of teacher learning networks and monthly meetings, were an important support system, which allowed for opportunity for pedagogical reflection and helped all MSIC coaches engage more effectively in their role.

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*The coaches [in MSIC] worked as a unit across the whole system so that there was a collaborative team belt that could come in and out. Go out into the field, come learn together. (Coaches, 2018)*

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Under the Learning Centre model, participants discussed the importance of having regular peer communication and collaboration among the LCs, noting that the LC role can be isolating without these processes in place. Unlike former MSIC LCs, the K-12 LCs felt that there were limited structures in place to support regular peer communication and collaboration. For example, one experienced LC who used to be an MSIC LC shared about how they missed the teacher learning network and monthly meetings to connect with colleagues in other schools on a regular basis:

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*[Learning Coaches] who were there when Model Schools [had] regular monthly meetings ... for a little while [said it was] a lot to go out every month and to learn all of this and now all of sudden [they miss it]. [They] miss our teacher learning networks [and] going out and having that professional learning within our clusters .... There is professional learning within the school but the actual connecting that we used to do with Model Schools [and] with the teacher learning network and with our monthly sessions ... people ... miss that. [They] would like more of that.... (Coaches, 2018)*

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To fill this gap, experienced K-12 coaches utilized their informal support networks, connecting with former MSIC colleagues in their Learning Centre. For example, one coach shared that, “When I need something done as a coach in my current job, I’ll call a former [MSIC] person to support me. ... I call the ... Model School coaches .... [Now] It’s a different job within a job.” (Coach, 2018). On the other hand, novice K-12 LCs commented on feelings of isolation in their role, sharing that while some networking opportunities existed, they were mostly sporadic depending on the individual leaders of their respective Learning Centre. In the Learning Centre model, not only was there an absence of a structure to share and learn among colleagues in their own centre, there was also a lack of opportunities to network with and learn from coaches across the system.

## ***(2) Ongoing and Integrated Professional Development Opportunities with an Equity Lens***

Success within the coaching role depends on building collaborative relationships with principals and teachers, which itself depends on clarifying role duties and responsibilities (Lynch & Alsop, 2007). Aside from peer networking, communication and collaboration, LCs also talked about the importance of having regular professional development opportunities and role clarity. LCs were expected to have expertise to address a breadth of varying circumstances and needs at their assigned schools. They were also expected to support local school improvement plans and the equity agenda of individual schools. As such, LCs found it instrumental to have ongoing opportunities for professional learning on different educational topics and equity in order to fulfill this wide range of expectations. Similarly, DeJesus and Armson (2019) found that while LCs participated in book clubs, sessions run by Student Equity Program Advisors, and/or sessions on the connections between math and literacy, LCs preferred more professional learning offerings that were personalized in order to better support their role specifically.

Under the central MSIC Office, structures and practices were established with the provision of regular professional development sessions, resources and materials. LCs shared that when they were MSIC coaches, “we had a lot of after school professional development sessions and we were putting those things together.” (Coach, 2018). LCs described a high level of prior support, for example, sharing that they “had PD twice a month intensively under literacy and mathematics” (Coach, 2018).

LCs shared that they appreciated the professional development sessions and collaborative work that they did to develop curriculum units under the MSIC Office. For example, one LC shared that,

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*We did the development of the curriculum and the writing of the literacy and numeracy units.... that really had us look at high yield strategies that intensified our learning and our cohesiveness as coaches too. And when we went out into the schools there was a very similar understanding.*  
(Coach, 2018)

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LCs worked with other program staff through the MSIC office to develop curriculum units. They felt that within the centralized model, the MSIC curriculum (which included social justice-focused units for grades K-9) provided the opportunity for teacher pedagogical development. MSIC coaches also shared about their regular opportunities to learn from and collaborate with MSIC CSWs, which resulted in deeper understanding of the needs of local communities through such innovative activities as “community walks” (Coach, 2018), where staff learned together about the neighborhood in which their schools reside.

While tailored to the local school and community, there was a cohesiveness in the approaches that coaches adopted within the centralized MSIC Office model. In retrospect, MSIC coaches talked about the “equity education” (Coach, 2018) that they received through the MSIC Office, and the deep understanding and skills that they had acquired in those earlier days that later helped them in their role as K-12 LCs.

Under the Learning Centre model, K-12 LCs reported that staff-training activities were helpful for them to learn about their colleagues’ learning styles and supported their capacity in working with their assigned schools (DeJesus & Armson, 2019). Specifically, activities such as literacy and math modules, embedded learning, co-teaching, observation from others, differentiated instruction, and assessment were cited as beneficial. Coaches also noted the value of these staff-training activities as an important way of promoting cohesion among staff (DeJesus & Armson, 2019). However, former MSIC coaches noted that such opportunities to gather for professional learning under the Learning Centre model were more limited and sporadic in comparison to those were offered under the central MSIC Office.

One coach further noted that while teachers and coaches were more comfortable and familiar with using technology as a result of the focus on technology in their professional development, many felt that the opportunities to learn about supporting and facilitating equity for all students—a key component of the MSIC initiative, as well as a key system-level vision — were less available for the LCs in the Learning Centre model. For example, one coach commented that, “there was a lot more professional development at the beginning, but in other stuff. Equity wasn’t even the focus. [While] our work was [supposed to be] all about equity, their focus was around technology.” (Coach, 2018)



Another coach pointed out that, "... when I spoke to the ... Model Schools coaches that came back when we were all cut they weren't getting professional development like we were [under the central MSIC Office]" (Coach, 2018). Some former MSIC LCs felt as though they had an advantage with their previous MSIC training, but felt a dearth of professional support in the new phase.

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*The irony is now we are the top of the food chain in a sense, [and] I get a lot of credit for what I do. A lot of times I go home and scratch my head. Because I think to myself, wow, they think that I [and others are] so [great]. I'm only where I am 100% because of [MSIC Office] and the three years that we were together. I have got nothing in the four years or five years since I've left the [centralized MSIC] program. Nothing. (Coach, 2018)*

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Commenting on professional development opportunities, another coach stated that, "we've come together once this year and there is no choice, there is no plan in the system for the coaches about what is needed, what learning skills people have and how to really train" (Coaches, 2018). Other coaches reiterated a need for professional development opportunities centered around equity, and noted that the professional development opportunities under the Learning Centre model had shifted their focus away from equity to technology, resulting in coaches losing focus on the training vital to their role. As one former MSIC coach described:

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*We [former MSIC coaches] were talking about [equity] and hammering on doors when no one would talk about it. We would go to teaching and learning meetings [out there] and it was like we had the plague. We've been talking about this for 10 years and it's been so frustrating. Now it's starting to come to light [in the system] but there is no structure to support that [equity learning]. That is the irony right. So now everyone is like oh ya, we got it, but there's nobody there to help you. We need... to have some regular sessions where people come together. We [used to have] intense support. (Coach, 2018)*

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LCs, as well as MSIC administrative staff, further noted an absence of community-based efforts, such as community walks, due to the lack of structure in place to support

these opportunities. They also reported that as these activities had dissipated, so had the benefits obtained from them. In short, LCs expressed a need for ongoing professional learning, with an equity lens, and felt that their existing Learning Centre structure was lagging as far as this need was concerned. In an analysis of qualitative interviews with MSIC related informants (including administrative staff, elected school board trustees, school administrators, partners and staff who were actively connected to the MSIC program for at least two years between 2004-2014), Shah (2018) found that there were varied notions of equity and ideological differences reflected among participants, and that equity and social justice were enacted differently within the MSIC program with both affirmative and transformative discourses reflected in the data. Affirmative discourses, refer to the notion that every student has the same needs and should strive for the same outcomes; this is linked to deficit thinking around the student, family or community that is to blame for the 'gaps' in educational outcomes. Transformative discourses refer to the idea that 'opportunity gaps' lie within the system and larger society, and teaching approaches should affirm students' lived experiences, removing barriers that prevent a focus on the excellence of students in the 'gap'. The research by Shah (2018) further reinforces the findings in the present study calling for ongoing and integrated professional learning, with an equity lens.

### ***(3) School Leaders' Buy-in and Support***

Research has highlighted that the success of coaching visiting educators depends on the level of school readiness (e.g., Morgan et al., 2003; Moxley & Taylor, 2006; Lynch & Ferguson, 2010) and staff receptiveness (e.g., Dole & Donaldson, 2006; Lynch & Ferguson, 2010) to the LC concept. More recent research on Early Reading Coaches in the TDSB highlights the key role of school administrators in supporting the coaches by providing professional learning opportunities, release time for capacity building, along with communicating and clarifying the role of the coaches with staff (DeJesus & Armson, 2019).

Under the MSIC Office, MSIC school principals and school teams were expected to have regular meetings with their counterparts from other MSIC schools within their regional cluster. As such, they developed ongoing networking and intentional professional

learning on MSIC concepts and practices. Over time, these MSIC school administrators deepened their understanding and commitment to the MSIC's five Essential Components, and the key concept of innovation in teaching and learning practices, which included the role of the LCs. For example, one MSIC administrator shared that,

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*... the schools that have consisted of principals who have taken the time to learn ... and really engage in this conversation and engage in the five essential components of Model Schools they really become the well-rounded principal that can lead their staff and get their staff to understand the five essential components and build that through their students and parents. (MSIC Administrative Staff, 2018)*

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According to experienced coaches, leaders in MSIC schools had adopted a co-teaching and co-learning stance among school staff, and had created an open collaborative environment for LCs whereby teachers were open to pedagogical innovation, working with external pedagogical leaders and even co-teaching. During focus groups, some LCs expressed feeling that [MSIC school] staff were more open to and supportive of and were better advocates for them than non-MSIC school leaders and staff who were less familiar with the LC concept.

However, it should be noted that a few experienced coaches did find that even within MSIC schools, some teachers who had a longer history at the school were generally less willing to adapt to changes, expressing that they know the students, the community, and what is best for them. Given that the role of coaches is to facilitate classroom improvement and work as part of a team with teachers in the classroom, coaches found it quite challenging to execute their role effectively under these circumstances:

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*I know teachers who have been teaching for 15, 20, longer years that are very open-minded and are willing to change and try new things and challenge their thinking but there are teachers [in some MSIC schools] that have been for 15, 20 years at that same school ... and they don't want to be challenged or change their thinking because [they say they] have been in this community, [they] know the kids ... and they're not*

*willing to look at things in another way, so it's really hard to move those teachers along inside [some] Model Schools. (Coach, 2018)*

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Under the Learning Centre model, LCs were assigned to schools beyond the MSIC schools. While this resulted in the great benefit of innovative practices being shared with more schools and educators across the system, coaches in their respective focus groups described encountering resistance, especially from non-MSIC schools, or even MSIC schools with new principals who had little prior experience in MSIC, perhaps due to a lack of understanding of the role of the LC. They further explained that there were schools, especially non-MSIC schools, where structures were not in place to allow them to fulfil their supportive role.

LCs noted that administrators without prior MSIC experience were less likely to be responsive to having LCs lead professional development at their school. Other coaches found themselves caught in the middle of administrators and teachers who in some instances had differing understandings of the role of LCs, hampering the LCs' ability to execute their full responsibilities. For example, one LC commented that, "we are often caught in the middle [of] administrators and teacher[s] so that [it] can be challenging.... there is a bit of a hierarchy issue..." (Coach, 2018). While LCs were expected to support school improvement planning (TDSB, 2018), they shared uncertainty about whether the school administrators that they worked with had role clarity with regards to this. As shared by one LC,

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*... our role [as K-12 learning coaches] is given purpose through the school improvement plan.... There are quite a few administrators that ask the coaches for support in developing the school improvement plan with the team. I don't know if that's our role. But our work should be guided by the school improvement plan. I think there are a lot of leaders in buildings who don't understand how to unpack data with their staff. I think there are a lot of schools [that] don't understand or see the value or know the value of student voice or how to collect student voice which should drive school improvement, right. So, if we don't have that, our roles are less focused. Teachers have no idea what the focus is or where we are going. (Coaches, 2018)*

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On the other hand, former MSIC LCs who were assigned back to the MSIC schools reported a much smoother transition. One LC mentioned that,

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*I am very fortunate because almost all the schools that I work in, I supported previously. So, I have relationships with the teachers and most of the administrators as well. I don't have any of those issues ...” (Coach, 2018)*

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School leader's buy-in and support was considered key by the LC participants in the present study. LCs shared that MSIC school leaders who had previously engaged in ongoing networking and intentional professional development related to the MSIC philosophy and equity-based practices over a period of time were more likely to implement the hallmark features of the initiative in comparison to counterparts from non-MSIC schools.

#### **(4) Coherent System Leadership**

LCs in the present study highlighted the need for clear and consistent Board-wide messaging around the goals, responsibilities and expectations of the LC role. This coherent system leadership was also seen as essential in supporting the aforementioned structural supports (1. regular peer communication and collaboration, 2. ongoing and integrated professional learning opportunities with an equity lens, and 3. school leaders' buy-in and support). Previous research on literacy coaches, points to the importance of coaches having a clear role definition (e.g., Poglinco et al., 2003, Morgan et al., 2003; Lynch & Ferguson, 2010), and coherent system leadership can help to support this. Similarly, DeJesus & Armson (2019) found that the clear, consistent communication regarding the roles and responsibilities of Early Reading Coaches with all stakeholders was key in ensuring their effectiveness. They described that the encouragement, feedback and guidance from Learning Centre leaders, while not consistent across the four Learning Centres, was very helpful (DeJesus & Armson, 2019). DeJesus & Armson (2019) also called for system-wide meetings with other coaches and support personnel, including opportunities for professional development and adequate allocations of coaches to ensure that they are not spread too thin. Similarly, Lynch and Ferguson (2010) found

that lack of time due to servicing too many schools was a frequently mentioned barrier to effective coaching and contributed to coaches' role uncertainty.

Under the central MSIC Office, with clearly defined MSIC goals and expectations for the LC role, along with the structural supports in place, MSIC coaches felt empowered and supported to become experts and leaders within their role as LCs. For example, one LC shared that,

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*I felt like in our roles [as MSIC Learning Coaches], we created experts from [the] leadership, to lead teachers, to us [LCs], to community support workers - to support that initiative. And those communities required that type of expertise... the [system] leaders created the opportunities for us to become experts in this. (Coach, 2018)*

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The centralized structure of the MSIC Office supported learning coaches in building their capacity and working collaboratively at local schools. In fact, LCs in focus groups indicated that those [coaches] with experience in the centralized structure of MSIC were better off because they could draw from their prior experience:

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*Those of us who were experienced were a little better off because we at least had our experience to draw from. I think when you know a structure that works well and was supportive to you in your role and then you are [placed] into a much more ambiguous type of structure ... it's definitely been a challenge. (Coach, 2018)*

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Under the Learning Centre model, LCs described how school superintendents in each of their Learning Centres were more consistently present in their schools, which created greater awareness of what was happening in the schools.

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*I think with this restructuring as well superintendents have a better sense of what's happening in schools. Now they go [into schools] a little bit more [than they used to]. At least from the superintendents that I work with that are assigned to the schools. I feel that they have a better sense of what's happening in the school. This year I think we made more partnerships ... (Coach, 2018)*

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However, participants pointed to a lack of coherence among the four Learning Centres, as the four regional teams worked relatively independently from each other. MSIC coaches and administrators attributed the lack of opportunities for co-learning and professional learning to the four Learning Centres not working as a group. For example, one LC noted that,

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*Now they have four supervisory teams [and] they never come together as a whole group so there's not a lot of learning that happens amongst the teams which I think is an opportunity that's lost. And I don't know if there's as much of a structure for learning as in the past [but] they continue to need to learn, as all of us do. (Coach, 2018)*

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Aside from sharing a desire for more structural and consistent support systems, study participants called for more collaborative and cohesive system leadership to provide greater clarity and transparency around the role of LCs across the Board. While some coaches felt that their role is to support the teacher in a classroom, others note a broader role in relation to the school improvement plan. LCs reported inconsistency across the Learning Centres in the role construction of LCs where there was no central leadership advocating or clarifying on their behalf. This affected LCs' ability to lead in their local schools. Reflecting on experiences over time, one LC shared that,

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*[Under the MSIC Office] we were at the bottom [of the] food chain. And [the MSIC leader] would always argue on our behalf. The irony is now we are the top of the food chain in a sense... I get a lot of credit for what I do. A lot of times I go home and scratch my head. Because I think to myself... I am only 100 000% where I am because of [MSIC system leadership]. (Coach 2018)*

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Under the Learning Centre model, the reach of LCs was wider, and included both MSIC schools and non-MSIC schools. While this meant that LC supports were shared with a greater number of schools, LCs and administrators expressed concerns about decreased support for each individual school due to the LC role being spread out with more schools per LC and less time per school in the Learning Centre model. Further, LCs

and administrators highlighted the value of having an LC work within a particular school community over time. For example, a school administrator noted that:

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*[The coaches] are...sort of taking on more schools so the support will be lessened. That's a challenge for me...I know other schools have needs...But to me this shouldn't be less, this should be more and it needs to be sustainable. You can't just put in [a math coach] for a year and then that's going to be...no...let's try five years. Work with a principal, work with teachers, parents, community and do that over a five-year span and say okay hey you know here is where we are in terms of the achievement data...let's look at that and where we are five years from now. I think the challenge when you do...these one-offs, the impact is not sustainable. (MSIC Administrative Staff, 2019)*

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Adequate time allocation supports coaches in developing relationships and becoming better acquainted with the school community to ensure more effective and sustainable changes over time (DeJesus & Armson, 2019).



## Conclusions

The present descriptive research summarized the perspectives of LCs and school administrators with varying levels of experience in their professional roles. This study adds to the limited research on LCs, helping to clarify the conditions or “infrastructure” needed to support LCs in enhancing capacity building among educators, and in promoting equity in education at the school level. The research offers unique perspective, in that it captures how the LC position at the TDSB underwent two divergent structural phases – from a relatively centralized phase under a former MSIC central office to a more decentralized phase under four Learning Centres, highlighting how these structural shifts affected LC roles, experiences, and according to participants, presented challenges in making sustainable impacts at local schools. By inviting LCs who had different levels of experience (novice, mid-level and experienced) in their coaching role to share their reflections, some pros and cons of the former MSIC office and four Learning Centres were identified. Qualitative analyses helped to point to conditions of success of the LC role, with implications on equity focused initiatives. As some former MSIC LCs pointed out, having the space to reflect through this qualitative study, helped to clarify perspectives on the structural changes, allowing them to share their challenges and the value of their past experiences. Given the importance of paying close attention to the experiences of individuals affected by educational reforms in ensuring success (Fullan, 2007; Mangin, 2009), this research is particularly timely. Future research with additional school-based stakeholder groups (e.g., teachers, CSWs, etc.) would help to further clarify the dynamics and impacts of LCs at the local school level.

## Key Findings

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Inductive thematic analysis of data collected through focus groups and interviews with 21 key informants (including LCs and MSIC administrative staff) identified four types of structural supports or key conditions for LC role efficacy. These four conditions were:

1. Regular peer communication and collaboration
2. Ongoing and integrated professional learning opportunities with an equity lens
3. School leaders' buy-in and support
4. Coherent system leadership

Aside from these four themes, a key finding is that these four conditions could not exist in a vacuum. By comparing the observations of LCs and school administrators with prior MSIC experience before the restructuring to those of novice LCs recruited after the restructuring, it became clear that some infrastructure had to be in place to allow the four conditions to be established. As mentioned earlier, the original MSIC structure had a central office dedicated to support all MSIC schools through seven local clusters. The LCs, who were assigned to serve schools in the clusters, reported to the MSIC central office, which played a coordinating and leadership role in providing structures and spaces for all LCs. In the MSIC central office, LCs could get together, form learning networks to share experiences and exchange ideas on a regular basis. Within the MSIC central office, they also had ongoing professional development and were able to collaborate with other MSIC staff to create curriculum unit templates or pedagogical strategies. Furthermore, the MSIC office organized regular meetings and workshops for their school administrators in each regional cluster. Through periodical cluster meetings among themselves and with the central MSIC office, MSIC principals had familiarized themselves with various innovative teaching and learning practices, including strategies to leverage the support of visiting LCs for their teachers. With the readiness and receptiveness of these school leaders, LCs could engage more smoothly, collaboratively, and as a result, more effectively in their schools. Also, with a dedicated MSIC office which provided frequent opportunities for interactions and sharing among the LCs and with central leaders, there was coherence and clarity about roles, expectations and goals.

On the other hand, after restructuring, the supporting systems established under the MSIC centralized model dissipated with the removal of the MSIC Office to “shared” responsibility and leadership of the MSIC by four Learning Centres, each of which oversaw its own schools (both MSIC and non-MSIC) and support staff including LCs in their region. With a regional approach under separate Learning Centre leaders, who at the same time had to manage multiple administrative portfolios, the delivery of the LC strategy was variable from region to region. For instance, the degree and type of support LCs received in their respective Learning Centres varied depending on the leadership style, interest, understanding and priority of the leaders of the respective Learning Centre. Moreover, the lack of collective resources at the regional level may have limited the local capacity to create the infrastructure necessary to sustain the four supporting pillars highlighted in this study. The initial aim of decentralization was to support an equity framework by encouraging an inclusive learning culture, eliminating barriers, aligning resources, sharing leadership, building staff capacity, and empowering school and community members to share their voices (TDSB, 2017b). However, the data reflects that decentralization dismantled some important structures that were vital to the functioning of LCs and key administrative staff members within MSIC. Overall, administrative staff members and LCs felt that the decentralized model reduced opportunities for collaboration amongst staff and decreased support for LCs, leading many to feel a lack of purpose in their roles. Consequently, many participants felt that the model within the centralized structure of MSIC had features that should be considered.

These findings highlight the key role that school districts play in successfully implementing the role of learning coaches (Mangin, 2009) and that centralized management and structure are, at times, necessary components of reform and can be helpful in providing system-wide professional development (Johnson & Chrispeels, 2010). While decentralization has been successfully used to increase participation of teachers, develop capacity and build ownership (Firestone, 1989), successful decentralization and reorienting of organizational processes requires that stakeholders first engage in a process of setting clear expectations, sharing

expertise, and working together before decentralizing. Overall, LC and MSIC administrative staff experiences upon moving from a centralized to a decentralized MSIC structure highlighted in the current study underscore the importance of a balanced approach that is neither too centralized so as to eliminate schools' and educators' autonomy, nor too decentralized so as to eliminate crucial structures for collaboration, support, and capacity building. While it was beneficial through decentralization to have promising LC practices applied to other schools and the system as a whole, this study clearly demonstrates that it is not enough to just scale up or replicate a role in a vacuum, without considering the necessary system supports. Valuable lessons could be adapted from promising practices in the past – in this context, in terms of sustainable structural supports in order to enable LCs to effectively fulfil their role in delivering on-site professional learning for school-based educators and administrators.

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# Appendix: Recommendations suggested by participants

Theme	Needs	Recommendations suggested by participants
(1) <i>Regular Peer Communication and Collaboration</i>	Structures that support collaboration and communication, amongst LCs assigned to different schools.	Establish learning networks and/or monthly meetings to provide LCs and administrative staff across schools with opportunities to connect with one another, discuss their diverse experiences, engage in reflection, celebrate progress and share advice.
	Opportunities for LCs to learn from others' experiences, and feel support; promote co-learning and ongoing professional development.	Create mechanisms for informal opportunities for LCs and MSIC administrative staff to connect with other schools and with the community, to enhance collaborative and supportive co-learning and ongoing professional development.
(2) <i>Ongoing and Integrated Professional Learning Opportunities with an equity lens</i>	Ensure that equity-based principles behind MSIC are understood by all MSIC school staff, including principals/vice-principals, and classroom teachers who work with LCs.	Implement ongoing staff professional development with an equity lens, with a focus on MSIC school staff (principals/vice-principals, and teachers) as well as LCs, CSWs, etc.
	Provide LCs with capacity building opportunities across a breadth of educational topics, including tools to support school improvement goals and equity at their assigned schools.	Offer ongoing, tailored professional development opportunities for professional learning on different educational topics and equity in order to fulfill the wide range of expectations of the LC role. This can include embedded learning, co-teaching, observation and opportunities to learn more about school improvement plans, etc.
(3) <i>School Leaders' Buy-In and Support</i>	Ensure that all school leaders understand LC roles, and that they support and advocate for LCs. Create increased accountability and transparency in coaches' role construction.	Mobilize staff who have prior experience with MSIC, and empower them to support and lead other staff within MSIC schools. Encourage MSIC school leaders to promote accountability and transparency in LCs' role construction with all teaching staff.
	Create opportunities for coaches to become leaders within their own role, with the aim of best supporting their school communities.	Provide training to new leaders and new staff within MSIC schools, and consider mentorship possibilities including having LCs with more experience accessible to more novice LCs.
(4) <i>Coherent System Leadership</i>	System-wide clarification of the role of LCs.	Provide clear and consistent Board-wide messaging around the goals, responsibilities and expectations of the LC role. Consider offering formal meetings or training sessions, with the explicit goal of clarifying the role of coaches for LCs and school staff.
	Establish a reasonable workload for each coach, with adequate resources to fund LCs.	Re-align the workload of LCs, by assigning fewer schools for each, ensuring adequate LC time and resources to support each school effectively.
	Increased coherence among the four Learning Centres.	Providing opportunities for formal and informal sharing about LC practices.