I Already Do That! Helping the Reluctant Teacher

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Abstract

Since the No Child Left Behind Act (2001) schools have sought many avenues to improve student achievement. Sandvold (2008) was concerned that ". . . teachers try to do everything themselves, resulting in a hodgepodge of practices, a confused vision, and an impossible schedule. Unless teachers get rid of outdated practices, they will be frustrated" (p. 20). Reluctant teachers often assume too much responsibility for the learning, compounding the problem of delivering quality instruction to students. Transitioning from traditional passive teaching to helping students think and question often requires one-on-one coaching. This is one person's first year journey helping reluctant high school teachers in a persistently low achieving urban school.

Keywords: literacy coaching, reluctant teachers

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Since the No Child Left Behind Act (2001) schools have sought many avenues to improve student achievement. Professional development in many forms is the main source for getting new ideas to teachers. Schools have varied the delivery of professional development from hiring experts to speak each month about research-based practices to providing graduate classes to large groups of teachers or having in-house workshops to deliver cutting edge strategies for smaller groups. Teachers had theory and strategies explained, but then went back to their very busy classroom schedules. They either did not have time to implement new ideas, or were not aware of how the new ideas were really working toward student achievement. Many teachers were very complacent being comfortable with the methods they had used for years. Sandvold (2008) was concerned that ". . . teachers try to do everything themselves, resulting in a hodgepodge of practices, a confused vision, and an impossible schedule. Unless teachers get rid of outdated practices, they will be frustrated" (p. 20). Traditional staff development has not increased student achievement. Knight (2007) concluded, "The worst consequence of an overreliance on traditional forms of professional development may be that poorly designed training can erode teachers' willingness to embrace *any* new ideas" (p. 2).

The U.S. Department of Education (2002) states,

> "Professional development must clearly align with the instructional program, including its research base, as well as with State academic and performance standards, and include adequate time for teachers to learn new concepts and to practice what they have learned. Professional development

> must be an ongoing, continuous activity, and not consist of 'one-shot' workshops or lectures. Delivery mechanisms should include the use of coaches and other teachers of reading who provide feedback as instructional strategies are put into practice" (p. 26).

Many schools have imbedded professional development. Teachers meet during their preparation time with experts and coworkers to develop better strategies or to form study groups around more specific needs. Teachers could form study groups to read about research-based practices, they could peer coach, or could have specialists talk to smaller groups. It was a shared feeling that if consultants worked with teachers on the same topic all year, there would naturally be a gain for students. Jay & Strong (2008) believe ". . . that site-based professional development can improve reading scores. I think that it is really important that we use a site-based, long-term research approach to improving reading achievement through improving teachers" (p. 19).

What was missing was twofold: the lack of accountability and data collecting, and the lack of someone in the classrooms helping teachers discover if they were achieving fidelity with the strategies and ideas they were teaching.

Observing teachers giving instruction, modeling strategies for teachers in their own classrooms, and having reflective conversations with teachers will certainly improve the chances that teachers will not only use research-based strategies, but also improve chances of increasing fidelity to the model. Joyce & Showers (2002) agree that coaching in classrooms will make professional development more effective. Effect size of training that includes information, demonstration, and practice for teachers goes from 0.00 to an effect size of 1.42 when coaching is added. Transfer of professional development

sessions is minimal in the classroom without coaching. Literacy coaching is a model of professional development that could include large and small group instruction and modeling, but further support teachers on an individual basis by observing and modeling in the classrooms. Jay and Strong (2008) affirm "An effective coach has the ability to remind, encourage, and inspire individual teachers to hone their skills" (p. 5).

Schools are hiring literacy coaches to be in the classrooms observing, helping to plan lessons, gathering data, modeling strategies, and conducting training sessions. Literacy coaching can be traced back to the 1970s when positive benefits were found as teachers helped each other in the classrooms (Joyce & Showers, 2002). Little research can be found providing the extent of literacy coaching's effectiveness on student achievement. Casey (2006) states that ". . . literacy coaching is evolving, growing, and unstable" (p. 4). Walpole (2004, in Moran, 2007) adds that literacy coaching is "a practice in search of research" (p. 1). But literacy coaching is a strong link between transferring theory and attaining fidelity to a model in the classrooms. Jay and Strong (2008) believe that literacy coaching " . . . has the potential to effect positive change in the learning culture of an entire school" (p. 2). The potential, yes, but how to help those who do not wish to change practices? "It is essential to consider coaching in the context in which it occurs. The embedded nature of coaching makes it a powerful agent of change but also often frustrates its success" (Steckel, 2009, p. 14).

Casey (2006) states the following purposes of literacy coaching:

1. help design and facilitate professional development
2. work with teachers, demonstrating instructional strategies and guiding teachers as they model

3. evaluate students' literacy needs and collaborate with teachers on how to meet those needs
4. provide teachers with opportunities to learn from each other

The International Reading Association (2004) outlines five criteria for being an effective literacy coach:

1. be excellent classroom teachers and teachers of reading
2. be able to observe, model, and provide feedback to teachers
3. be knowledgeable about reading processes, acquisition, assessment, and instruction
4. have experience working with teachers to improve instructional practices
5. be excellent presenters to lead groups, facilitating reflection and change.

Literacy Coaches' Needs

A literacy program director stated in an interview that her district's elementary teachers had weekly professional development with a literacy leader, who also modeled strategies in classrooms. She had a hard time, though, reaching secondary teachers' individual needs. Last year her district hired five literacy leaders (coaches) at the middle school level to model literacy strategies for individual teachers in classrooms, collect school-wide data, and facilitate embedded professional development with small groups. The literacy leaders also worked with administrators on district goals.

Three of the five new literacy leaders were then interviewed in March, near the completion of their first year. They had over twenty years' experience teaching in urban districts. All three held a master's degree and a reading endorsement. One leader had experience with professional development in the same district. Her prior position as

literacy leader for all the middle schools meant that she worked mostly with administrators in planning professional development and goal setting. There was no time for modeling in classrooms or helping individual teachers when she had ten middle schools to work with.

All three coaches found the new position working with only one building more personal. They all analyzed student achievement data, helped decide building-wide goals, provided small group professional development, and helped individual teachers, who mostly asked for resources. However, all three felt uncomfortable getting into rooms where help was really needed. Most of the teachers felt threatened if someone wanted to come in to observe. All three coaches admitted to being accepted as teachers, but not accepted as coaches who might do more than assessing students and providing resources.

When asked what an experienced teacher would need to feel more comfortable in a literacy coaching position, two leaders answered the same: help with analyzing student achievement data, help with reflective conversations, and motivating reluctant teachers. Both felt very comfortable with literacy content and assessment.

Excellent classroom experience plus an endorsement in reading are required in most schools who hire literacy coaches. “It is essential to consider coaching in the context in which it occurs. The embedded nature of coaching makes it a powerful agent of change but also often frustrates its success” (Steckel, 2009, p. 14).

Motivating the Reluctant Teacher

To work efficiently with teachers, coaches must work with the teachers’ strengths. Coaches must observe and interview teachers to realize what needs each teacher has in helping students learn. Then coaches must determine the level of support individual

teachers need. Casey (2006) refers to this as 'soft data' (p. 64). Coaches need to be in individual classrooms prior to coaching sessions to discover the teacher's strengths. Student work, portfolios, the classroom climate, how students are working together, and a teacher's management system must be observed first-hand. How the teacher presents a typical lesson needs to be observed. Is the lesson motivating? Relevant? Does the lesson tie to an overarching concept or is it taught in isolation? Do students have schema necessary to relate to the material? Have students been taught how to monitor their own reading or other activities necessary for the attainment of new ideas? Does the lesson have a closing that assesses what students learned? How to observe and assess teachers' needs can be taught. But again, how to gain trust and help teachers who do not think their teaching needs improvement?

Literacy coaches need to develop positive working relationships with administrators and teachers (Casey, 2006). Teachers need to welcome the literacy coach into the classroom. In some districts, teachers must request help, in other districts, coaches come in as necessary, or are assigned to struggling teachers. In assigned situations, teachers may ". . . perceive coaching as punitive-a remedial service for those who aren't teaching up to standard" (Moran, 2007, p. 3). Nothing will be gained if a positive, learning relationship is not established.

Many teachers who are reluctant to have coaches in the classroom use traditional teaching methods that simply do not work if we want students to think critically and problem-solve, mastering 21st century skills. Students must assume ownership and feel responsible for their own learning (Maitland, 2000). Giving the same reading assignments to all students, writing study guides that bypass student self-questioning, and

assessing students with fact-based quizzes as the culminating activity after reading may indicate teachers who are in "survival mode" (Wong & Wong, 2009). Yet traditional teachers often feel their methods worked decades ago, therefore, they should still work. Or the traditional methods worked for them when they were students, so they are convinced they do not need to change methods for current students. Literacy coaches need to model research-based practices to help traditional teachers 'discover' how engagement is more motivating for students over the passive traditional methods. Reluctant teachers often assume too much responsibility for the learning, compounding the problem of delivering quality instruction to students. Transitioning from traditional passive teaching to helping students think and question often requires one-on-one coaching. Teachers may have coaches help design, then model engaging lessons. Coaches need to help teachers release responsibility to students to show not only how engagement is more motivating, but often less work for the teacher!

My Journey as a First Year Coach

I was asked to work half-time in the smallest of five urban high schools. This school had approximately 1170 students in grades 9-12. The district's graduation rate was 82%. Iowa Tests of Educational Development were used as the proficiency rating. The district rated 59.3% proficient on this assessment, and the high school rated 52.8%. It was the fourth year of being labeled a School in Need of Assistance (SINA) and first year being a Title I high school. The poverty rate was 74.6%. Diversity was 41% Caucasian, 59% nonwhite, with 9% English language learners and 25% special education students. Overall, this school scored at the bottom 5% of the schools in this state.

My assignment was to help bring reading scores to the proficiency goal of 79.3% or at least reach safe harbor bringing scores from 52.8% to 57.5%. I was to work primarily with the English/reading teachers. This seemed like a 'blank page' to start. There was little direction. I wanted to speak at the beginning of the year faculty meeting sharing my vision for staff:

School is an exciting place of thinking and inquiry

Work with students' strengths

Curriculum should teach big ideas, led by essential questions to explore

All reading should be on individuals' levels with as much individual choice as possible within the concepts of curriculum

Textbooks should be used as resources only

This did not happen. I felt like I was starting off with a faculty not aware of what we would need to do as a team to build the scores. I knew I needed to help build a team to achieve the goal. I met with the English faculty next to get started. They were a friendly group who admitted only two had reading endorsements, although I found that three of the nine faculty did. Reading methods have changed greatly since two had received their endorsements. They wanted ideas, and I said I would be observing the first few weeks. I would observe the following:

Organization of the lesson

Strategies evident

Vocabulary lessons taught

Guided practice

Student engagement

The overall classroom environment

Student work was displayed

I observed for the full 90 minute block, walking the room, listening in, sometimes adding to discussion, and taking notes. I thanked and complimented the teachers for allowing me to observe. I planned to compile the data and share in a small group what was research-based practice. I wanted to celebrate and discuss effective practices among the group, then let the group decide what we would work on together or what each would like to practice individually. Again, that meeting did not happen. Several teachers decided that I would not "tell them what to do." One emailed the principal and shared a similar concern. I knew they were afraid of being judged by a new faculty member. Several did not think there was any need to change how instruction was delivered. I heard, 't is not us, it is the kids' and 'just fix the kids'.

I discussed the concerns with administration and decided to work with the whole faculty, not just the English department. I felt too often literacy was viewed as a concern only for English faculty, not shared whole-school. I knew the lower proficiency scores were a systemic problem, and should not just rest on English faculty.

In a faculty meeting, I announced that I would like to be asked in classrooms. I was asked by a few who thought it was necessary to get good evaluations by the principals. I talked with each prior to coming in to observe to know what each wanted, whether they were trying out a new strategy or concerned with student engagement. After I observed, I asked for a 10 minute post observation conference where I wanted to use a cognitive coaching conversation. This generally did not go well. Many thought the observation was over, were interested in my notes, signed off, and thought that was it.

One said, “I complied, anything else?” Another stated, “Oh, we are doing cognitive coaching now. OK.” A third said, “I know all this, I have a reading endorsement.”

By the third week, the district decided a full time literacy coach was needed and I could not work full time. By mid-September I had a partner who also started modeling in classrooms. We kept a checklist on which teachers were observed and which we modeled for. We kept busy for six weeks. The teachers felt they had complied, so it was over for them. At this point, we knew another tact was needed. We decided to add two new ideas: reading incentives and small group embedded professional development twice a month. Teachers would come in for 25 minutes during advisory time. Administrators would take the students so teachers did not have any additions to their work load.

We decided to call the sessions, ‘conversations’ so teachers would not expect us to stand in front and teach, as was traditional professional development. Instead we wanted teachers to share with each other what ideas were working and model new ideas. We had a district goal by then of vocabulary development, so we started each conversation with a group grounding, using a broad question to discuss, then go into a brief explanation of a theory or strategy, model, have teachers practice a technique, and finish with a closing question to determine what was needed next. The closing was written to we could keep track of data. Sample closing questions included, “What is your role in professional development” and “How comfortable are you addressing the reading needs in your classroom?” We always added a line for signing if teachers wanted us to observe or model. Each time, a few more faculty members would allow us to come in their classrooms to model a strategy.

Teachers signed in, and we noticed many did not come. Teachers also complained about time taken and not 'needing more professional development." I heard, "I already do this!" over and over. This was not evident from any classroom observations, so we knew there was a disconnect between effective practices and actual practices.

We had been asked by the district to test each 9th grader on the Analytical Reading Inventory in September and would post test in May. Only three students scored proficient. This was a huge concern. We took the results to the 'conversations' and discussed with faculty how they could model engagement strategies and teach tier two words (Fisher & Frey, 2008). With the 9th grade faculty, I also mentioned that the test given was on a 10.9 reading level. They were very upset. I was also upset and informed the district. The district did not view this as a problem. However, testing students above their reading levels does not give accurate information. The three students were not proficient, but were advanced proficient to score well on a 10.9 leveled test.

The 9th reading teacher then gave the Stanford test to the same group. They scored much higher than on the ARI. To discover more about the discrepancy in scores, I performed a reading level test on this exam. It was a 6.0-8.2. Scores were celebrated, but I still did not think the scores adequately showed how our students were doing on 9th grade reading.

Since the school would be judged by 11th grade scores, I created three IRIs for 11graders closer to an 11th grade reading level. After scoring each, I returned to each class to explain the scores and to model metacognitive thinking while reading. The students learned what the scores meant and strategies they could practice. I was not allowed to guide their practice, just take some class time. After three IRIs taking three

months, I compiled a list of 37 students who scored 80% or higher on the IRIs, but scored less than the 41st percentile on ITEDs.

I then discussed the actual taking of the tests. Teachers had given test taking strategies, but I thought it was not the problem. Students proved they could do well one prompt at a time. So I thought the problem was how much reading they were doing. I polled students on how many books they had read since the start of school (this was the end of March). Most students had said none or one. Only a few had read two-six books. So one problem was the fact they were simply not reading outside of school.

The second problem I considered was sustainability. Again, one prompt at a time, students could do well. Eight prompts of more on a single test? I also asked students how long they read at a single sitting. Few said more than five-ten minutes. Many teachers admitted to reading text to students since the students could not comprehend the textbooks. I substituted one block in a newspaper class. The teacher had copied a short editorial about sportsmanship. I handed out the page, said I would give five minutes to read, we would then brainstorm a pro/con list of reasons from the editorial. The 10th graders politely stared at me. I asked, is five minutes enough time? The problem they said was that the teachers always read to them. They were shocked I thought they should read alone. They did fine on their own, and gathered a little reading practice!

Reading incentives were done three times between November and May. The first incentive was a challenge for students to read two books of their choosing in five weeks. Students had reported to us that they just did not read, and teachers backed up those claims. So reading two books in five weeks was a start. We designed six bookmarks with four questions each they answered for accountability. These were metacognitive

questions, like state a prediction, clues, and whether the prediction came to be. We had noticed that most students were asked to fill out questions in study guides or at the ends of chapters. This was very passive learning, and had no buy in from students. We wanted them to think and be engaged in the books they chose.

The first incentive had 32 students ‘winning’ a trip to a book store and choosing a ten dollar book of choice. This was funded through the Smaller Learning Communities budget. The next reading incentive challenged students to read one book in two weeks. We changed the goal since we had so few students taking part. They filled out six metacognitive entries and were to discuss the books with their advisory teachers. Fifty-five students ‘won’ the same book trip, choosing a ten dollar book. The third and last incentive still had the one book in two weeks goal. A reading teacher created a reading map that ‘drove’ students through their books with metacognitive questions. Sixty-five students won the final trip.

Scholastic held the first high school book fair at our school during spring conferences. This also generated interest in books and gave us 554.00 in Scholastic book money. We split the funds between two teachers who were creating units using multiple texts.

The SINA plan required us to hold a parent night. We decided to hold a book swap in May. We had announced for a week for students to bring in books they did not want to keep and receive a token for each to exchange during an evening book swap. We had no books. Six faculty members and a principal saved the evening by bringing in enough books to spread out on three tables-adult, teen, and children’s reading. Around 50 people came bringing many books to swap. We had free pop and pizza. We were

delighted that most stayed for an hour, discussing books and taking time to view all selections carefully. It was a small, but successful evening.

Summary

Coaching, like teaching, is all about building relationships (Wong & Wong, 2009). Coaches must be flexible and highly skilled at establishing rapport with all teachers. “Simply put, if teachers like a coach, they usually will try out what the coach suggests. If they don’t like the coach, they’ll resist even good teaching practices” (Knight, 2009, p. 53). The success of any district’s profession development using literacy coaching will rest in facilitating the value of establishing relationships, and “hiring the right instructional coach” (p. 53).

Walpole and Blamey (2008) state that literacy coaches are struggling to define roles and organize time. When examining the various requirements, one wonders who could fill this impossible position. They need to create a risk-free climate for the teachers they work with to build learning institutions (Senge, Cambron-McCabe, Lucas, Smith, Dutton, & Kleiner, 2000). Literacy coaches need to know more than literacy content. They need to build relationships with teachers and administrators in order in move the district forward. As Rainville & Jones (2008) state, “Literacy coaching also involves figuring out how to draw out the best in individual teachers and how to inspire them to make changes in their thinking and teaching” (p. 440).

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