Fostering Teacher Learning: Reflections on Leadership Roles

Alayne Power and Amy Boutilier

Over the months of a graduate course in literacy education, we engaged in many conversations about our leadership roles in the district in which we both work. Our schools are actively engaged in school improvement with a focus on enhancing student achievement. The district and the provincial Department of Education have given priority to literacy and numeracy through curriculum initiatives, teacher professional development, and student assessment. We both have a responsibility to support teacher change. We play different roles, Alayne supports elementary teachers as a literacy coach in two schools; as a principal of an elementary school, Amy guides and supervises the work of teachers. We shared many of the same questions and issues as we grappled with how best to foster teacher learning. In our conversations, similar themes surfaced such as resistance to change, trust and relationship building, and the need to build capacity and leadership in the school.

Defining the Roles of the Principal and Literacy Coach

Coach Alayne: Research and statistics highlight the effectiveness of a coaching model in guiding reflective practitioners and initiating positive change in schools. Toll (2006) states, "Literacy coaching supports significant instructional change and increased teacher reflection, which contributes to the reshaping of school cultures. Above all, literacy coaching contributes to increased student achievement in literacy" (p. 8). Coaches are responsible to present new literacy initiatives to staff and work supportively to ensure teachers adopt and/or make shifts in teaching practices. As coaches, we need to work collaboratively with the school's administration in supporting classroom teachers.

Principal Amy: In order to support classroom teachers, school administrators need to be proactive in clarifying the role of the literacy coach at the beginning of the school year. From the onset, teachers need to be assured that the coach is an accessible on-site instructional resource. I find Nancy Shanklin's (2007) description helpful in making the distinction between the coach's role versus the principal's role. Teachers need to know "that the coach's role is not to be evaluative, but to assist teachers in reflecting upon their work, learning new practices, analyzing student work and assessments, and designing more effective lessons" (p. 2).

In the process, teachers need to feel valued as leaders, supported and appreciated by their administrators and coaches. Allocating time for teachers to reflect on their successes gives teachers more perspective on their growth and increases their motivation to improve instructional practices.

Coach Alayne: There are times when coaches face too much resistance and regardless of all the attempts made, a coach may have to call in the administrator to intervene. Toll (2006) clearly asserts what coaches do and don't do. Coaches don't act in a supervisory rule as they will never gain the necessary trust. Nor should coaches judge the teacher or the instructional practices. Coaches should not be required to observe teaching, serve as an expert, or provide pull-out services. I rely on principals to provide these supports for classroom teachers.

Principal Amy: As a principal, there are times when I need to intervene and bring the conversation back to student learning. Teachers need to be reminded that they are accountable to provide quality instruction to all learners. Student achievement is directly linked with the school improvement goals that were written as a collective group based on the school's self-assessment, standardized assessments, board-wide surveys, common assessments, and classroom observations. Therefore, communicating the importance of teamwork and support as we work through the unpleasantness coupled with change is essential in the process of doing things differently.

Building Trusting Relationships

Coach Alayne: We need to take the time to develop trust, as trust is paramount in developing successful coaching relationships. To build trust, I need to demonstrate that I mean what I say, follow up in the time I have stated, and remain confidential. In order to build and strengthen relationships, leaders should initiate conversations in both a formal and informal context. I engage in conversations in the staffroom, in the hallway and in the classroom. I work at active listening skills and contributing when it is natural to do so. I make sure to stay authentic in what I say and in my actions. I give respect to what teachers have to say and validate the efforts they are making in the classroom. Passing judgment causes alienation and limits the amount of interactions I can have with teachers. As a coach I have

to be perceptive enough to know what will work with what teacher and to select carefully which new implementation the teacher is able to take on at that time. Teachers have to believe and endorse what I am suggesting. If I overwhelm teachers, guards will inevitably go up and the value of the coaching relationship will be lost.

Principal Amy: The same is true for principals. In order to improve teacher efficacy, principals need to maintain high expectations for best practices while remaining cognizant of each individual staff member's situation. We have to shift how we respond depending on the social context. Rainville and Jones (2008) refer to this as maintaining situated identities, "When we engage with people in different contexts we also often shift how we think and what we think about" (p. 441). Our role is also to maintain momentum, to remain positive, to show compassion and to cheer people on.

Building Capacity

Coach Alayne: There are teachers who value the coaching relationship. They are reflective practitioners who want to make continuous improvements in themselves as educators. They are vested in making a difference in their own professional development and in their students as learners. Schools need to identify and support literacy leaders. My experience is consistent with what the research shows: teachers who have difficulty delivering effective practices build a reliance on the coach and often do not show improvements in practice. Further, coaches are most effective with teachers who are "almost there." In *Content-Focused Coaching*, Switzer states that "you don't help the weakest teacher until everyone else is on board – until you train people to be fabulous leaders and the average teacher to do their job well. The weakest people should always be invited and they should be expected to come, but that is not where to focus for long-term results" (qtd. in West, 2003, p. 129). Schools should work at building capacity in the school so that new and existing teachers can support each other and have reflective discussions about their practice throughout the year.

Principal Amy: Administrators can help build capacity by focusing energy on teachers who are making positive change in their classrooms. There is a hope that the "resisters" will buy into the change over time as they see how the changes have had a positive impact on student achievement. Change will be embraced if teachers feel invested in what is happening and are given some choice. Change is sustainable when teachers make changes voluntarily.

Working through Resistance to Change

Principal Amy: As leaders of change, we have to keep in mind that there will always be resistant teachers who will cause us to reflect and to question our actions in the process.

Coach Alayne: Regardless of whether the teachers are completely on board with new initiatives or to being coached, literacy coaches must continue to work toward engaging individual teachers in an effort to improve student learning. The following scenario describes my journey with a teacher colleague. It illustrates how we worked together by having professional dialogue, improving our educational expertise, and securing literacy success for students.

"Are you kidding? That would never work in my classroom! That's all good for those 'other' schools, but my children wouldn't be able to handle that!" Boisterous, humorous and sarcastic, he was able to state some of his firmly held beliefs about the school system without having to take issue with anyone. He saw teachers as pawns that were being "played" by the big wigs at the school board offices and society at large. He used the home life situations and experiences of the children to explain the lagging literacy progress of his students. Hearing this statement and others like it time after time from a particular teacher, I finally decided to address the comment. But, I couldn't have replied authentically to it at the beginning of the year. I had to somehow forge a relationship with the teacher before I tackled the difficult issue of his low expectations for his students.

Reflection on how to change his practice, in order to improve all students in the class was not happening. The strongest students got stronger, the average students were achieving but the lowest achieving students' gaps in meeting curriculum outcomes increased every month.

I knew I needed to respond to Steve's statement about classroom practice and student success. I was direct but sensitive to what he shared. I started by using Toll's (2006) method for guiding teacher practice by being honest and expressed my concerns about his stance. I talked about the important role teachers play in enhancing student learning and about research that shows that better teaching, regardless of a school's social or economic circumstances, results in improved student learning (Schmocker, 1999, p. 20). I then shared my own personal beliefs and my past efforts in the classroom to enhance student learning. I challenged him to see that he had to be the advocate for the children. I shared what I had learned about the need to bridge the school discourse with the primary home discourse as it "will almost certainly affect how the child reacts to, and resonates with, school-based ways with words and things" (Gee, 2001, p. 723).

I listened, but I also steered him to focus on creating positive experiences for all his students. I helped him set goals for his instruction during reading/writing workshop time and I helped him to plan action steps in an effort to meet the goals he set for himself and the class. I scheduled

time to go into Steve's classroom. Depending on the focus, I acted as a facilitator, a co-teacher, or a support person in delivering the literacy curriculum.

Does Steve still share more beliefs charged with emotions and misconceptions? You bet he does. I continue to choose my battles and take the time to address only the salient points in a constructive and non-judgmental way. I see my role as to enlighten, not discourage. I want to praise what is effectively being done in the classroom and to help him scaffold any new learning into his practice. I want to gradually release responsibility to him in an effort to make him more accountable and reflective.

Has working with Steve helped to develop and change my practice as a Literacy Coordinator? You better believe it. I learned how to negotiate in conversations that were authentic and meaningful with someone who resisted change. It was a challenge but one that I overcame. I made a point of engaging in continuous reflection on the outcome of previous conversations. I tried to anticipate the challenges I would face the next time. I learned I could adapt and be flexible in my problem solving as I kept the focus of my work in the forefront of my mind improving teacher practices that will inevitably positively affect student learning.

Principal Amy: Sometimes, as in the following description of a real-life situation, the principal has to intervene with teachers who may be struggling to negotiate the demands of the curriculum, to implement new initiatives, to plan for improvements, or to manage their classrooms. In my experience such intervention can often open possibilities for the involvement of a literacy coordinator/coach with teachers who initially did not invite such support. I see it as my responsibility to take action to improve the practices of such teachers. The scenario shows how such a teacher and I engaged in reflective practice and celebrated the "small moments" in her shifts in practice.

To her professional colleagues, Sarah (a pseudonym) appeared confident, competent and enthusiastic. Conversely, in my frequent classroom walk-throughs I observed a teacher who was "stuck" in a place that prevented her from moving forward in her classroom practice, yet she was silently seeking support. While observing her student interactions, I was reminded of the work of Gee (2001) related to the ways children are disadvantaged because their home discourses do not match what is expected in school. It was obvious that Sarah's traditional ways of teaching were not helping students to bridge the gap from home to school. She was clearly uncomfortable with my visits; despite her discomfort, I needed to find ways to support Sarah in making changes so that all students in her classroom would benefit from the most effective literacy instruction possible. The struggling

readers and writers in her classroom particularly concerned me as they were becoming even more marginalized because of a lack of differentiated instruction. From the beginning, I knew there were challenges ahead; therefore, I needed to be very careful how I went about business.

As in Alayne's work with Steve, Sarah and I designed her goals by building upon the positive working relationship that we had developed to address various aspects of her teaching. As I continued to visit her classroom, I assured her that I would support her in aligning her practice with the provincial outcomes framework. I began every conversation accentuating the positive and engaging in reflective questioning.

Although Sarah expressed her frustration and feelings of inadequacy, I tried to validate the good things that were happening in her classroom as part of best practices. I knew that I had to be a good listener, respect her thoughts and feelings, release my own assumptions that I may have had, and allow her to share openly and honestly.

I set the bar high for Sarah while supporting her by offering extra professional development, substitute time to job-shadow other colleagues, and to work with teachers at her grade level. Over time, I witnessed small, but significant changes in program delivery and assessment practices as Sarah allowed her students to bring their primary discourses into the classroom.

It was only then that she could make her own decisions about what practices needed improvement and that she began to seek out support from the literacy coordinator. As the principal, I felt that I no longer had to be the "surrogate parent" to Sarah. I was able to be less directly involved while I continued to monitor her progress with the support of the literacy coach.

Principal Amy: Our work with Steve and Sarah reaffirms the importance of building relationships within a school, dealing with teacher resistance to change and ultimately building capacity at the individual school sites. As leaders, we both use a variety of styles and need to act as sounding boards for teachers as they wrestle with new ideas and ways of teaching and learning: therefore, it is incumbent upon principals and coaches alike to be viewed as learners who are willing to invest time and resources to support teachers in making the necessary shifts in practice to meet the learning needs of all students.

Coach Alayne: The role of a literacy coach contains a huge amount of complexity. Coaching effectiveness will be based on the individuality of the teacher, the coach, the school administration, and the school. All teachers come with different experiences, strengths, and personalities. This element alone makes coaching a sensitive and chal-

lenging role. School Boards need to ensure they hire persons who can work dynamically with all adults in a respectful and supportive way.

Principal Amy: Our hiring practices are complex. However, the hiring of coaches allows for more flexibility by our school board in terms of matching the most qualified individuals with specific schools. The infusion of literacy coaches in schools has had a positive impact on improving student achievement levels. Coaches are incredible resources, and when utilized properly will support literacy development for all learners. One of the most challenging areas for principals is to let go some of the control, to micro-manage less, and to invite other leaders, including literacy coaches, like Alayne, to help us get the job done. There is no democracy in leading alone!

References

Gee, J. P. (2001). Reading as situated language: A sociocognitive perspective. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, 44(8), 723.

Rainville, K. N. & Jones, S. (2008). Situated Identities: Power and Positioning in the Work of a Literacy Coach. *The Reading Teacher*, 61(6), 440-448.

Schmoker, M. (1999). *Results: The key to continuous school improvement.* Alexandria, VA: ASCD

Shanklin, N. L. (October 2007). What supports do literacy coaches need from administrators in order to succeed? Literacy Coaching Clearinghouse. Retrieved from http://www.literacycoachingonline.org/briefs/LCSupportsNSBrief.pdf

Toll, C. A. (2006). *The literacy coach's desk reference: processes and perspectives for effective coaching.* Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English.

West, L. & Staub, F. C. (2003). *Content-focused coaching: Transforming mathematics lessons.* Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.