Literacy Coaching Clearinghouse

To Have or Not to Have?

Factors that Influence District Decisions about Literacy Coaches

Melinda Mangin
Assistant Professor of Educational Administration at Michigan State University

Across the nation, from large urban centers to small rural districts, many schools have turned to literacy coaching as a means to improve teaching and learning. While much has been written about the advantages of having a literacy coach on staff (Moran, 2007; Toll, 2005; Walpole & McKenna, 2004) and there has been some research on school-level coaching practices (Mangin & Stoelinga, 2008) little attention has been paid to the factors that influence the decision to have a literacy coach.

To better understand the decision-making process, I spent three years learning from district-level administrators in 20 Midwestern school districts that were considering hiring, and in some cases, already had hired, literacy coaches as part of their instructional improvement strategy (Mangin, 2009). These 20, demographically diverse districts were part of the same regional district, which actively advocated for literacy coach roles and provided free professional development on literacy coaching to any interested district. All 20 districts took advantage of this training opportunity, sending teachers, principals, reading specialists, department chairs, and other educators to learn about literacy coaching. Not all districts, however, decided to add a literacy coach to their staff. My on-going conversations, surveys, and annual interviews with district administrators in the 20 districts provided insights into the factors that influenced districts' decisions about literacy coaches.

Factors that Positively Influenced District Decisions about Literacy Coaches

Districts' interest in literacy coaches was positively influenced by three factors: state and national reform contexts; student performance data; and existing roles and programs.

Pressure to improve as a result of state and national reform contexts.

At the national level, these pressures included compliance with standardized testing regulations, yearly progress measures, and teachers' subject area qualifications. At the state level, accountability pressures included compliance with new curriculum standards, school improvement frameworks, accreditation regulations, new graduation requirements, and increased focus on student performance. These pressures led districts to consider literacy coach roles as a way to facilitate compliance with national and state mandates and to raise student achievement.

Identified need for coaching due to low student performance data.

Low student performance on standardized assessments was another factor that caused districts to consider literacy coaches. One assistant superintendent explained that low achievement had galvanized her district to develop coach roles: "When you have half your kids not making it, gosh that's a wakeup call." Districts realized that disaggregated test scores revealed areas of weakness that could be addressed with the support of a literacy coach. The literacy coach could work with teachers to identify students' needs and target areas for instructional improvement for the end goal of improving student performance.

Exposure to coaching through existing roles and programs.

Literacy coaches were more likely to be added to a school or district if teachers had been exposed to coaching practices as a result of other roles and programs in their schools: cognitive coaches, curriculum coaches, or restructuring coaches. Similarly, where reading specialists performed coaching functions or schools had successfully implemented professional learning communities characterized by collaboration and dialog, the teachers were more receptive to coaching. As a result, these districts were more likely to add a literacy coach to their staff.

Factors that Negatively Influenced District Decisions about Literacy Coaches

Districts' interest in literacy coaches was negatively influenced by three factors: limited finances; satisfactory student performance data; and existing roles and programs.

Limited finances for new initiatives.

All 20 districts reported that the state's economic situation had resulted in budget shortfalls and spending cutbacks which decreased funding and made it difficult to introduce new initiatives. Half of the districts reported that the lack of funds prevented them from adding literacy coaches to their staffs. As one administrator explained, "We haven't been in the position of adding new programs or new services." Faced with limited resources, all of the districts had to make choices about the kinds of reforms they could implement, prompting half the districts to reject literacy coaching as a feasible improvement strategy.

Satisfactory student performance.

In a quarter of the districts, aggregated test score data served as a disincentive for the implementation of literacy coach roles. In these districts, satisfactory test scores made it difficult for district leaders to make a case for coaching—there was no apparent need to improve instruction. An administrator in one such district explained the following:

> *We perform pretty well and the reason we do is because we have pretty affluent children. So when you have 90% or 95% of your kids at the elementary level passing the reading [test], it's pretty difficult to say we need to improve. Now, we're not scoring that well across the board . . . But we haven't done a very good job of putting that data in front of teachers . . .*

Thus, aggregated test scores projected satisfactory student performance, reducing the perceived need for literacy coaching.

Reluctance to eliminate existing roles and programs.

In half the districts, long-standing roles such as reading specialist and para-professional were described as hindering district efforts to hire literacy coaches. Teachers had come to rely on reading specialists and para-professionals to work with under-performing students. In many cases, reading specialists and para-professionals were deeply institutionalized members of the school and local communities. Administrators were reluctant to eliminate the positions and the idea of assigning coaching responsibilities to these existing roles was not easily translated into practice. As one administrator explained, "They don't want to give up their kids. They don't feel confident enough that they can coach others."

How Districts Capitalized on Facilitating Factors and Reduced Constraints

Districts that capitalized on the factors that facilitated literacy coach roles and deemphasized the constraining factors were more likely to implement literacy coach initiatives. On the contrary, districts that focused on the constraining factors failed to implement literacy coach roles despite the supports they received from the regional district. In addition, districts that chose to have literacy coaches:

- ***Prioritized student learning.*** National and state mandates that focused on improving student achievement served as an impetus to direct improvement efforts toward increasing student learning. Districts recognized the need to do things differently, examine long-standing practices, and question their assumptions about how to best improve teaching and learning.
- ***Pledged to help all students.*** Districts rejected the notion that aggregated test scores were an adequate measure of individual student performance and actively sought to identify areas for improvement. Using disaggregated student performance data allowed districts to better understand their instructional strengths and weaknesses. Data were viewed as a formative source of information that could provide insights into areas for improvement, not as a tool for casting blame. As such, all students were the target of instructional improvement efforts.
- ***Recognized the collective responsibility for improvement.*** In a departure from traditional student support services where select teachers (such as reading specialists) were responsible for underperforming students, all teachers were viewed as sharing responsibility for all students. Teachers could no longer subscribe to a "fix the kid" mentality and send low achievers out of the classroom for instruction. Classroom teachers had to take responsibility for helping all students learn.
- ***Prioritized teacher learning.*** Recognition that all teachers would need to take responsibility for all students led districts to more actively support teachers' learning. Districts worked to strengthen

opportunities for content-area professional development and put structures in place that would facilitate school-embedded professional development. Building teachers' instructional capacity was understood as a key component to increasing student learning.

- ***Promoted coaching practices as a means to improvement.*** Districts worked to promote coaching practices and to provide teachers with on-going learning opportunities by taking advantage of in-house expertise and building teachers' understanding of literacy coaching. By providing teachers with time to observe and model in each other's classrooms and to engage in critical conversation about instructional practices, districts worked to strengthen teachers' comfort with coaching and their receptivity to literacy coach roles.
- ***Reallocated finances to reflect new priorities.*** Districts demonstrated a willingness to shift resources to focus on new priorities. In particular, districts with growing populations of under-achieving students examined the capacity of existing reading specialist and para-professional roles to service large numbers of students. Following Elmore's contention that "(T)he money is there. The problem is that it's already spent on other things" (p. 27), these districts worked to reallocate resources toward the twin priorities of teacher and student learning. In almost all cases, this included shifting resources away from, and sometimes eliminating, other programs and initiatives.

Conclusion

While it may be important to focus on facilitating factors, the factors that constrain literacy coach implementation should not be trivialized or ignored. Financial constraints are very real and can seriously limit school improvement efforts. Likewise, reading specialists and para-professional roles should not be discarded lightly, particularly given the heavy investments many schools and districts make in developing these roles. At the same time, districts should carefully attend to improvement indicators from disaggregated student performance data. Doing so can help districts focus on real needs and pose difficult questions about how resources are being used, how they might be optimized, and what kinds of changes might need to occur. Ultimately, however, districts that commit to literacy coaching will need to build and emphasize the facilitative factors described here.

References

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