Literacy Coaching Clearinghouse

Coaching Considerations:

FAQs Useful in the Development of Literacy Coaching

Douglas Fisher, Professor, San Diego State University

The National Advisory Board for the Literacy Coaching Clearinghouse have identified a number of considerations that we believed needed further discussion as schools, districts, and states embrace literacy coaching. We negotiated and discussed a number of issues surrounding coaching and agreed on 10 key ideas that should be part of the discussions educators have as they implement, revise, and operate literacy coaching initiatives. In this brief, we will focus on each of the considerations and explore the meaning behind them.

Consideration 1: What are the intended purposes of the literacy coaching program? How are they made clear to everyone--including teachers, coaches, principals, district administrators, parents, students?

This first consideration is designed to ensure that there is transparency within the educational system when it comes to school improvement efforts involving literacy coaching. When literacy coaching is funded, the sponsors often have a clear idea of what they expect to gain from their investment. As Toll (2005; 2007) notes, there are a number of reasons that coaching programs are initiated. These are not mutually exclusive categories, but understanding the primary mission of those paying the bill is important. Literacy coaching can be funded to improve test scores, mentor new teachers, ensure that a new curriculum is understood and used, or to engage teachers in a professional learning community.

Equally important are the ways in which the purposes are communicated within the educational community. Teachers expect and deserve to know about such efforts. Failure to involve classroom teachers in setting and communicating the purpose can lead to disagreements, disgruntled employees, and grievances. Similarly, failing to communicate the expectations and purpose of a literacy coaching initiative with parents, administrators, school board members, or students is planning its failure. As with nearly any change initiative, transparency and communication are critical (Fullan, 1999).

Consideration 2: What are the theoretical underpinnings and the research base of the literacy coaching program related to: literacy learning and development, adult learning, leadership, and professional development?

Once the purpose has been established, those responsible for the successful implementation of literacy coaching must identify the theoretical foundations on which they will base their initiative. Being clear about beliefs, theories, and which research evidence is privileged is a critical step in the successful implementation of literacy coaching. In part, a careful examination of core beliefs about teaching and learning allows for the development of a common language. This common language allows for successful communication between the coach and those being coached, as well as between coaches who share their challenges and successes with other coaches or their administrators. It is also important for a coach and administrators to share a common language and beliefs about literacy in order to extend, rather than conflict, with

each other's work.

At the very least, four areas should be discussed. First, teams should be clear about their beliefs related to literacy teaching and learning. Teams will ask themselves about the definition of balanced literacy, when to use direct instruction, the role of assessments, how basal or core programs should be incorporated, the place of literacy within content teaching, and many other topics. Being clear about these foundational beliefs adds to the transparency discussed in consideration #1 and creates a constructive dialogue within the school system.

In addition to beliefs about literacy teaching, teams should discuss adult learning, leadership, and professional development. The ideas, theories, and beliefs inherent in each of these topics vary widely. While one group might subscribe to the tenants of learning communities (DuFour, 2004), another might believe that individually guided development or inquiry is critical (Sparks & Loucks-Horsley, 1989).

The point is that these discussions should occur. Those developing and implementing literacy coaching should examine their beliefs, and they should reach some agreements on the values and theoretical foundations that will guide their school change and improvement. In essence, the leadership team has already made a strategic decision by initiating literacy coaching. The team needs to finish their work by identifying the guiding principles of their program.

Consideration 3: What qualifications of literacy coaches will ensure that those hired are highly qualified in the areas of literacy learning and development, leadership, adult learning, professional development, assessment, curriculum development, and technology? Are the expectations for expertise clear and evaluated fairly and effectively as part of the hiring and ongoing evaluation processes?

Once the literacy coaching program has been developed, identifying coaches becomes a priority. An effective literacy coach has to know a lot. As expressed in the consideration, literacy coaches must understand literacy development as well as how adults learn. They also must have strong interpersonal and communication skills. As Bean, Swan, and Knaub (2003) note, literacy coaches and other reading specialists also need significant leadership skills if they are to be effective.

As literacy coaching initiatives are launched or revised, it seems prudent to identify the essential qualifications of the coaches. These qualifications should be directly related to the purpose of the coaching initiative. If the coach will be expected to provide professional development sessions, the qualifications should include public speaking and presentation skills. If the coach will coordinate professional learning communities, the qualifications should focus on interpersonal and leadership skills. The most important factor is that the qualifications are consistent with the program purpose and how the coach will spend his or her time. Additionally, IRA and the Carnegie Foundation have recently developed a self-assessment for middle and high school literacy coaches. IRA and NCTE want to provide professional development opportunities that will allow middle and high school literacy/instructional coaches to further develop their skills.

Consideration 4: What are the ongoing professional learning opportunities for coaches, teachers, and administrators? What additional support do coaches receive from both district and school-based administrators?

Once a highly qualified coach has been hired and the program designed, the real work begins. Literacy coaches need a system of support if they are to be successful in creating change. While coaches know a great deal and are often among the most knowledgeable on the school staff, these individuals also need professional development. The ongoing support that the literacy coach receives is one of the factors that distinguishes successful initiatives (Blachowicz, Obrochta, & Fogelberg, 2005).

Providing support and guidance for literacy coaches is often done by administrators at the site or district level (Moxley & Taylor, 2006). To be effective, these individuals must understand the need for life-long learning opportunities and create opportunities for coaches to engage in their own professional development. The models that different programs use to provide

this "coaching of coaches" vary. Some provide time for coaches to meet and discuss their experiences and approaches. Others hire "expert consultants" to meet with the coaches and engage them in professional development opportunities. Still others use "ride alongs" of coaching events in which the coach is observed doing his or her job and then discusses the experience with the observer (Lapp, Fisher, Flood, & Frey, 2003). Regardless of the system of professional development provided for coaches, it is critical that site and district administrators understand the need for this professional development and that all coaches participate. In addition to being a good habit, professional development ensures that coaches practice what they preach, experience information as learners, and are rejuvenated with new ideas on a regular basis.

Consideration 5: What is the nature of the relationship between a literacy coach and the teachers with whom he/she works? How do administrators help to support this relationship?

Casey (2006) describes her work as a literacy coach working with teachers. In her words, "I coach teachers in their classrooms, demonstrating lessons, working alongside teachers as they teach, problem solving together how to better meet the needs of their students" (p. 1). The coaching relationship must be collegial and supportive, not evaluative. Teachers should view the coach as a resource, someone who has ideas and time to reflect and to discuss those ideas with teachers.

The danger comes when the coach is seen as *The Expert*. When teachers view the coach in this way, they are likely to become critical and evaluative of everything the coach does. As we know, every instructional event can be improved. When the coach is seen as *The Expert*, teachers evaluate the coach against an impossible criterion – the perfect lesson delivered by the perfect educator.

Instead, the coach needs to be seen a supportive resource for teachers. To support the coach as a resource, knowledgeable other, and ally, administrators cannot ask the coach about an individual teacher's performance. If coaching is to be accepted as a school improvement initiative, administrators cannot assign coaches to teachers who have experienced trouble or difficulty. And administrators cannot interfere with the development of collegial relationships between the teachers and the coach.

Nevertheless, it is important to note that accountability for professional development and for student achievement is a reasonable expectation of administrators (e.g., Kinnucan-Welsch, Rosemary, & Grogan, 2006). Literacy coaches can, and should, be part of the overall professional development model for which teachers are accountable. They just cannot be part of the accountability system.

Consideration 6: Where do the topics/issues for literacy coaching come from?

Deciding how coaching topics are identified is messy. In general, it seems reasonable to suggest that the topics are based on the purpose of the literacy coaching initiative. It seems logical to suggest that the literacy coaching initiative be focused on an instructional framework—general beliefs about teaching and learning held by a group of educators—that was developed by a cross-sectional group of teachers and administrators (e.g., Fisher & Frey, in press). Using this system, there might be a range of topics from which the teacher and coach could select a focus. Together then, the coach and teacher would develop a plan for such a focus. The plan might include demonstration lessons, classroom observations, shared readings and discussion, other targeted professional development, and so on.

However, this model does not always work. There are times at which the topics simply are not the most important thing happening in a classroom. For example, should a teacher who needs help with classroom management be denied that help because the literacy coaching is focused on shared reading? It is hard to imagine that shared reading will be effective when the teacher needs to know about student engagement. Strong literacy coaching programs do have a focus, yet the administrators of these initiatives trust teachers and coaches enough to know that sometimes they have to build background knowledge and experiences before turning their attention to the topics at hand. Frequent communication and feedback—either written or oral—help to assure that coaching topics are

meeting teachers' needs.

Consideration 7: What are both the predicted and intended outcomes of the literacy coaching program for teachers, coaches, administrators, and students? What might be other potential outcomes?

Change should be the outcome of coaching. That change might be defined in terms of teacher behaviors or student learning or both. Of course, schooling is about student learning. However, those who implement coaching programs might be wise to accept some surrogate measures of student learning, such as increased student engagement, change in teaching repertoires, and the like, as evidence of their impact. Regardless, the coaching program should include goals that are measurable. These goals will further the purpose and communication needs as discussed in consideration #1 as well as provide some accountability for the program itself. Without clear goals, and the resulting accountability these goals entail, coaching programs are at risk of the political whims of the leadership (superintendents, school boards, unions) and may not be able to continue, much less achieve optimal effectiveness.

Consideration 8: What are important components of the program implementation? How will the coaching program be funded? How will capacity be developed and sustained?

Sustainability is key to successful literacy coaching initiatives. In too many places, coaching is initiated without a plan for continued funding and support. As such, coaching programs reinforce a prevalent notion in school professional development —"this, too, shall pass." The sustainability plan should include the essential components of the coaching plan, the funding mechanisms required for the plan, as well as the capacity needed to continue the initiative. Literacy coaching should not be tied to a specific individual, but should be a cultural change within a school such that it is "no longer business as usual." In systems where literacy coaching has become part of the culture, teachers protest loudly when any cuts to the program are considered. In systems where literacy coaching is tied to a specific individual, teachers are pleased when funds are cut.

Consideration 9: How do literacy coaches gather evidence of their effectiveness and become self-reflective and proactive in making improvements to the coaching program?

Coaches need to receive feedback on the work that they do; such feedback can come from a knowledgeable administrator. Coaches can also seek feedback from the teachers they serve, and certainly, coaches need to be self-reflective. Districts with literacy coaching may want their coaches to devise a rubric that can be used for assessing each coach's strengths and possible areas for improvement. Such a system should be used for developing on-going learning opportunities for coaches.

In addition, coaches and directors of coaching programs should plan their data collection efforts in advance. Every coaching program will be asked, at some point, to evaluate its effectiveness. If data are collected on a regular basis (and even analyzed by the district's research office), coaching programs can determine their effectiveness as well as areas in which they could become increasingly effective.

In developing an evaluation system, coaching programs may want to consider the Content, Input, Process, Product (CIPP) evaluation scheme presented by Stufflebeam (1971). According to Stufflebeam, evaluation is "the process of delineating, obtaining, and providing useful information for judging decision alternatives." CIPP evaluation provides the necessary information for four types of decisions to be made in evaluation. These are:

1. Planning decisions pertaining to the selection of objectives;
2. Structuring decisions involving the selection or preparation of materials, procedures, and activities to achieve the objectives;
3. Implementing decisions referring to the procedures used to install and monitor the materials, procedures, and activities selected or developed;
4. Recycling decisions concerning the judgment of

the effectiveness of products and programs developed in seeking the stated objectives.

For each type of the four decisions, there is a corresponding evaluation procedure that is used and documented in project reports. Briefly, these are: 1) content evaluation which serves planning decisions by identifying unmet needs, unused opportunities, and underlying problems which prevent the meeting of needs or use of opportunities; 2) input evaluation which serves structuring decisions by projecting and analyzing alternative procedural designs; 3) process evaluation which serves implementing decisions by monitoring project operations; and 4) product evaluation which serves recycling decisions by determining the degree to which objectives have been achieved and by determining the cause of obtained results.

Consideration 10: How might the literacy coaching program share learning with others?

The ultimate literacy coaching program is one that shares—coaches—other programs. They are also sure to share with other schools in their own district. Most schools and school systems do not believe that it is their responsibility to provide technical assistance to peer school systems. Imagine what would happen if they did. School systems spend significant amounts of time and money reinventing the wheel. Some schools implement models that have failed elsewhere. Other school systems develop "new models" that have already been implemented successfully elsewhere. When developing a literacy coaching program, the leadership team should look to others for guidance and support. One way of doing so is through the Literacy Coaching Clearinghouse (http://www.literacycoachingonline.org). Please consider entering your school or district literacy coaching program into the LCC data base. You can also examine the programs already entered to start or revise your literacy coaching program.

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