Literacy Coaching Clearinghouse

What are the characteristics of effective literacy coaching?

Nancy L. Shanklin, University of Colorado at Denver & Health Sciences Center

We are going to get a literacy coach! Principals and district leaders are often ecstatic when they obtain funding for literacy coach positions. Really, this is only the first step. Next, they ponder what they want to look for in a literacy coach. Starting to interview, they learn that finding a well-qualified coach is not so easy. What qualifications make sense in the first place? Often, it is a relief when they find someone that they like. The literacy coach him/herself is thrilled to have this new opportunity to impact teachers' and students' learning. Once in the literacy coach position, the coach must figure out how to define and develop the literacy coaching program for a building. Often a coach's job becomes very broadly defined, and there is danger that s/he many not succeed because so much is expected. The coach does not have time to focus on what can really make a difference to teachers' learning and their subsequent instruction of children and adolescents. A recent survey by Cathy Roller on the "The Roles and Qualifications of the Reading Coach in the United States" outlines all of the ways literacy coaches currently find their time used (2006).

Perhaps, it is best to step back from discussions of qualifications of literacy coaches and roles they might fill to defining effective literacy coaching. If we know what effective coaching is, then we may be in a better position to determine qualifications and craft more detailed job descriptions. We can also begin to link literacy coaching to the broader areas of teachers' professional learning and school renewal. We need to learn whether coaching leads to changes in teachers' instructional practices and then to increased literacy achievement for children and adolescents. There is growing evidence that it does (Paglinco, Bach, Hovde, Rosenblum, Saunders, & Supovitz, 2003).

The Advisory Board of the Literacy Coaching Clearinghouse suggests six characteristics that define effective literacy coaching. These characteristics can guide districts and schools to think carefully about the qualifications of the literacy coaches they hire, the realistic roles for coaches to fill, and the support systems that coaches need to be successful. Many of these points will be the topics of future Literacy Coaching Clearinghouse (LCC) briefs.

Effective literacy coaching:

1. Involves collaborative dialogue for teachers at all levels of knowledge and experience.

The efforts of a literacy coach need to be available to all members of a school regardless of their knowledge about particular topics or years of teaching experience. A coach often forms and then meets with cohorts of teachers—particularly those from a specific grade level or discipline. In such cohorts teachers of all levels of experience and knowledge can learn from one another. Without involving everyone in coaching opportunities, a school has little ability to become a learning community that makes coordinated decisions about instruction and how to meet students' needs. In some school districts, there is a belief that "all" educators in a district ought to have a coach. Everyone can become more reflective about work and improve its quality. Such a focus also honors teachers' decision-making roles in teaching—whether they are working with particular commercial programs, planning guides, or implementing their own unit designs to meet district and state standards.

2. Facilitates development of a school vision about literacy that is site-based and links to district goals.

Part of the work of a literacy coach is to partner with both a principal and teachers to facilitate a school's development of a sound vision about students' literacy learning and then to develop the capacity and structures to realize that vision. To this end, a literacy coach will share important research that bears upon instructional practices and concerns. S/he will also help teachers design inquiries to answer their own questions, as individual teachers or teams. A good coach will also make every effort to answer principal questions about quality literacy assessment and instruction. In addition, a coach often acts as a liaison between the school and the district, communicating views of literacy goals in each direction (Toll, 2006).

3. Is characterized by data-oriented student and teacher learning.

In effective literacy coaching, the focus of the interactions between teachers and a literacy coach is guided by analysis of students' learning. This analysis stems from examining both test data and actual student work in classrooms. A good coach suggests assessments and helps teachers learn to administer them, to interpret the data, and to design instruction from the information gained. Finally, s/he helps teachers learn to monitor students' progress. A coach encourages teachers to understand students' individual needs and to differentiate instruction for individuals or groups of students. This process may include helping to develop Response to Intervention programs and coaching teachers in methods to be used in such programs (Allen, 2006; Hasbrouck, 2005).

A good coach, in turn, encourages teachers to reflect upon their use of use evidence-based methods and to inquire into their own teaching as well as students' learning. A coach will help teachers form important questions about their instruction and explore new answers, particularly through study groups, data collection in their own classrooms, observations of demonstration teaching, or participation in other visitation structures facilitated by the coach (Casey, 2006).

4. Is a form of ongoing, job-embedded professional learning that increases teacher capacity to meet students' needs.

Literacy coaches work side-by-side with teachers during the school day—at group meetings and in teachers' individual classrooms. Effective literacy coaching helps teachers begin to work new practices into their everyday instruction, fit new practices to the students who most need them, and observe the effects of such altered practice. These nuanced changes require more than just professional development sessions that teachers attend after school, on professional development days, or on weekends. With the literacy coach on site, much of the work happens during the school day—at the point of need. This process embodies important features of adult learning and fits the lives of today's teachers. It helps to nurture a climate of continuous professional learning.

As an agent of job-embedded professional development, a literacy coach will lead teachers in study groups during planning periods. S/he may work with a teacher in his/her own classroom to model a new lesson. Finding creative ways to free up other teachers, a coach may lead pre-observations, observations, and debriefs of others' lessons. Sometimes a coach will take over a class so that a teacher can visit another teacher's classroom. Besides facilitating book study groups, a coach may lead groups in examinations of student work or inquiry studies into particular questions that are of interest to teachers or the school as a whole.

Sometimes a coach may simply offer encouragement to a teacher or reinforce that a teacher's idea is a good one. Such efforts can boost a teacher's self-efficacy. Other times a coach may influence instruction by suggesting text sets a teacher might use or ways to incorporate additional forms of media, music, or the arts. At still other times, a coach may suggest ways that a lesson can be made more culturally relevant. All of these efforts assist in thoughtful implementation of a school's literacy program and literacy curricula.

5. Involves classroom observations that are cyclical and that build knowledge over time.

Both teachers and literacy coaches themselves report that in-classroom coaching is the activity where coaches' work has the potential for most impact (Coggins, Stoddard, & Cutler, 2003). A design that has been quite effective is for a coach to work with a particular group of teachers for a period of time, usually about eight weeks, through study groups, modeling of lessons, and in-classroom coaching. After that time the coach would move on to work intently with another group of teachers, while keeping in touch with the first group via periodic study group meetings, e-mail, short chats, etc. This format allows the coach to work in teachers' classrooms for two to four visits that are close together. For example, in working with a second grade team of teachers, this model would allow a coach to model lessons for teachers, to work with teachers as co-teachers, and then for the teacher to move to implementing new techniques along with feedback from the coach.

Figure 1. Characteristics of Effective Literacy Coaching & Links to the Role of the Literacy Coach

Characteristics of Effective Literacy Coaching	Role of a Literacy Coach at the Building Level
Involves collaborative dialogue for teachers at all levels of knowledge and experience in a building.	Is careful to include all teachers regardless of knowledge and experience in professional learning.
Facilitates development of a school vision about literacy that is site-based and links to district goals.	May lead, or is a member of, the school literacy committee. Helps a school determine qualities of excellent literacy instruction that it wants to strive for. Answers questions of and advises the school principal about literacy learning. Facilitates teacher study groups. Leads or organizes other professional learning opportunities around literacy instruction.
Is characterized by both evidence-based student and teacher learning.	Helps teachers examine student work, suggests assessments, models and gives assessments, interprets data, may enter data, assists in Response to Intervention efforts. Evaluates coaching efforts and other professional development offerings.
Is a form of on-going, job-embedded professional learning.	Works to embed professional learning in the context of the school. Works along side teachers during the day. Implements sound practices for adult learning. Helps teachers keep professional learning going after coaching cycles end.
Involves classroom observations that are cyclical and knowledge building over time.	Understands gradual release of responsibility. Helps teachers develop means to reflect upon their own teaching and make improvements. Understands differences in the literacy strategies needed for particular content disciplines.
Is supportive rather than evaluative.	Helps teachers uncover areas where growth is needed. Assists teachers in being reflective about their own teaching. Understands gradual release and approximation of new learning.

At the middle and high school level, a good literacy/instructional coach also understands the specific literacy demands of each discipline. The coach is able to assist teachers in assessing the literacy skills that students already have in a particular content area and in learning ways to help students become more independent learners in the discipline (*Standards for Middle and High School Literacy Coaches*, 2006).

6. Is supportive rather than evaluative.

In today's world, almost all professions require continual professional learning. Teaching is no exception. Research leads to new findings about student learning and best practice. District and state standards demand close adherence to benchmarks, and sometimes teachers need to learn new methods for helping

students to meet them. Additionally, new commercial programs are introduced, and teachers need help learning how to make decisions that would use them effectively (Walpole & McKenna, 2004). Finally, teachers can find themselves working in neighborhoods where populations are changing and with them the cultures, languages, and learning needs of the students and their families (Kise, 2006).

In such a quickly changing world, teachers need the help of an intermediate figure, such as a literacy coach, who can help them learn new methods in a supportive manner (Coggins at al, 2003). Others, at higher administrative levels, can still play an evaluative role at a later point—once it seems realistic to expect that new methods have been implemented.

The literacy coach plays a very important role in realizing the literacy vision of a school through its actual implementation in classrooms. In literacy coaching, teachers may receive support from a coach with implementation of a method that they have individually chosen to work on, or that a study group has agreed to work on. At other times, the coaching may focus on the implementation of a particular program and the methods within it. In this later case, teachers may identify particular problems to work on or already know specific areas that the coach will be observing for and providing helpful feedback about.

Coaches also need to recognize the roles that risk-taking and gradual approximation play as teachers perfect new instructional methods. Effective coaching will recognize individual differences in teachers. Some will need more explicit assistance while others simply need reassurance and recognition. All types of coaching need to be supportive rather than evaluative if they are to produce desirable changes in practice.

These qualities of effective literacy coaching start to suggest how a literacy coach's role in a school ought to be constructed. Figure 1 begins to draw the link between characteristics of effective literacy coaching and the actions of a literacy coach. It is important that a coach have enough time built into his or her schedule to make cyclical classroom observations if s/he is to impact individual teacher instruction. Exactly how many times and over what period of time classroom observations need to occur is an empirical question about which research is needed. It may also link to individual teacher's beliefs, ways of learning, knowledge, and experience, and the depth and range of students' learning needs.

An additional helpful resource for literacy coaches, administrators, teachers, policy makers, state departments of education, and parents is the website of the Literacy Coaching Clearinghouse: http://www.literacycoachingonline.org.

References

Allen, J. (2006). *Becoming a literacy leader: Supporting learning and change*. Portland, ME: Stenhouse.

Casey, K. (2006*). Literacy coaching: The essentials*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

Coggins, C., Stoddard, P., & Culter, E. (2003). *Improving instructional capacity through school-based reform coaches*. Center for Research on the Context of Teaching, Stanford University & Bay Area School Reform Collaborative. EA 032 650, ED 478 744.

Hasbrouck, J., & Denton, C. (2005). *The reading coach: A how-to manual for success*. Longmont, CO: Sopris West.

Kise, J. (2006). *Differentiated coaching: A framework for helping teachers change*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.

Literacy Coaching Clearinghouse, http://www.literacycoachingonline.org.

Paglinco, S., Bach, A., Hovde, K., Rosenblum, S., Saunders, M., & Supovitz. J. (2003). *The heart of the matter: The coaching model in America's Choice schools*. Consortium for Policy Research in Education, University of Pennsylvania Graduate School of Education.

The role and qualifications of the reading coach in the United States. (2004). Newark, DE: International Reading Association.

Roller, C. (2006). *Reading and literacy coaches: Report on hiring requirements and duties survey.* Newark, DE: International Reading Association.

Standards for middle and high school literacy coaches. (2006). Newark, DE: International Reading Association in collaboration with National Council of Teachers of English, National Council of Teachers of Mathematics, National Science Teachers Association, and National Council for the Social Studies.

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

Walpole, S., & McKenna, M. (2004). *The literacy coach's handbook: A guide to research-based practice*. NY: Guilford Press.