Secondary Level Literacy Coaches' and Content-area Teachers' Relationships as an Avenue for School Improvement

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The purpose of this paper is to report on a qualitative study that examined secondary level literacy coaches' and secondary teachers' relationships in one educational region of a U.S. northeast state. This study employed a phenomenological approach. Data was collected in two phases. In Phase 1, the researcher interviewed five literacy coaches about their role as a coach. In Phase II, the researcher interviewed nine teachers to understand their perceptions of the coaching experience. Findings from the study show three interconnected themes. First, literacy coaching in the secondary setting is notably more complex than the elementary school level. Second, role ambiguity complicates the teacher-coach relationship. Third, lack of job clarification requires the literacy coach to define their position through relationship building. Implications for school administrators concern the importance of clarification and collaboration with teachers and coaches in implementing a coaching model. This study contributes to the current lack of evidence-based research on the secondary teacher-literacy coach relationship and how school administrators can better support the literacy coaching model.

Keywords: Literacy coach, Secondary education, role ambiguity, coaching model

In United States public high schools, 85% of students graduate in four years (National Center for Education Statistics, 2019). According to the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), in 2019, only 34% of eighth grade students performed at or above the proficiency level in reading (2020). These statistics indicate the need for school leaders to recognize the importance of literacy instruction at the secondary level. Specifically, students in high school must possess reading skills demanded by increasingly complex content area courses (Biancarosa et al., 2010; Joftus, 2002; Joftus & Maddox-Dolan, 2003). With limited teacher preparation, dwindling resources, and high-stakes testing, U.S. educational leaders are left with complicated questions within a complicated system.

How do secondary educators assess and teach reading skills to high school students? Benjamin (2013) outlined the dilemma faced by teachers in the secondary setting where many content area teachers do not view themselves as reading teachers. High school teachers divulge that students have difficulty decoding and comprehending academic texts, but teachers do not know how to solve the problem (Schoenbach et al., 1999). According to Schoenbach, Greenleaf, Cziko, and Hurwitz (1999), secondary teachers express feeling pressure to cover the curriculum and content of their discipline. Unprepared to give reading support, many secondary teachers find themselves teaching "around reading" (p. 4). Secondary teachers are aware of students' inability to understand written information, yet there remains a lack of professional development to help teachers learn how to teach students high-level vocabulary and comprehension. Thus, content area teachers are often isolated in their efforts to deliver instruction effectively to below grade level readers (Benjamin, 2007; Schoenbach et al., 1999). Literacy coaching emerged to fill an instructional gap.

The focus of this paper is on secondary literacy coaches' and secondary teachers' relationships, and how relationships inform the coaching construct at the secondary level. According to Fullan and Quin (2016), human capital within a school remains a key driver to organizational coherence, and creating a cohesive school with a collaborative culture is a requirement for school improvement. To improve schools, administrators need to understand the complexity of literacy coaching, and ways school leadership can support coaching as an embedded part of instruction (Selvaggi, 2016).

Literature

Following is a review of the literature on literacy coaching as it intersects in three domains: secondary content areas, administrative challenges, and teacher relationships.

Literacy Coaching in Secondary Content Areas

Literacy coaches support content area teachers. The purpose of literacy coaching is to expand teachers' knowledge and expertise in literacy instruction and, in turn increase student achievement. Sandvold and Baxter (2008) identified over 100 different instructional methods used by classroom teachers. Teachers reported lacking sufficient guidance and support in choosing the best instructional method, and specifically identified a need for professional development in teaching reading. According to Sandvold and Baxter (2008), literacy coaching

provides scaffolding and continuous support for teachers that other modes of professional development do not.

The International Literacy Association (International Reading Association, 2006) defines content area literacy coaches as "skilled collaborators who function effectively in middle and high school settings" (p. 5). Districts employ literacy coaches to support the district's professional development program, and provide an expanded aspect to traditional teacher learning. According to Jay and Strong (2008), utilizing literacy coaches in professional development programs provides concentrated focus and support to classroom teachers.

According to Kamil (2003), as students matriculate through the PK-12 school system, the complexity and content shifts from reading acquisition skills, taught through fictional texts, to expository and content-focused reading. Additionally, secondary students are typically no longer instructed in cognitive processes. The metacognitive modeling, evidenced in think-alouds and teacher modeling, is less prevalent in high school than it is in elementary school classrooms (Kamil, 2003). Approximately 8.7 million, fourth through twelfth grade students struggle with required reading and writing tasks (Kamil, 2003). Secondary teachers find it challenging not only to engage students with reading but also ensure students have the required literacy skills to succeed in other content areas (Fisher & Frey, 2008)

According to Strickland and Alvermann (2004), what teachers teach, and the time allotted for each topic and skill, accounts for the greatest amount of variance in student achievement. The increased pressure of state standards and high-stakes testing contributes to the demand placed on secondary teachers. In order to share the responsibility for literacy instruction, teachers should collaborate within their content-area departments and grade levels (Strickland & Alvermann, 2004).

Content area literacy instruction is important (Fisher & Frey, 2008). Literacy coaching is an often cited staff development model in public schools (Hasbrouck & Denton, 2007; Manzo et al., 2005). Data suggest that content area teachers know relatively little about effective instructional reading practices (Fisher & Frey, 2008) and minimal preparation as to how to directly instruct students who struggle with complex literacy tasks (Schoenbach et al., 1999). According to Strickland and Alvermann (2004), content area teachers also lack resources to support struggling students in highly academic, subject-specific writing. Although literacy coaching is often included in a school district's action plan, there is little research to provide a basis for decisions that prove its effectiveness. (Strickland & Alvermann, 2004)

Literacy Coaching and Administrative Challenges

One challenge faced by school administrators is proving the efficacy and outcomes of coaching models. Many coaching models have not been implemented long enough to gather sufficient data to assess effectiveness. According to Kannapel (2008), it may take several years of observation to measure the degree of impact on student achievement. With finite budgets, and limited staffing positions, school administrators must be clear on the role and responsibilities of the literacy coach (Kannapel, 2008).

According to Taylor, Pearson, Peterson, and Rodriguez (2005), perceptions of the literacy coaches' role can be misinterpreted by a school's staff. Even though the concept of a literacy coach is often viewed as a position of leadership, it may not be the reality. Literacy coaches are

often former reading teachers with dedicated pedagogical experience. However, it is unclear if the step to literacy coaching is a step-up or a step sideways (Hunt & Handsfield, 2013). The perceived position of power is further complicated when the literacy coaches' role and use of time is not defined by school leaders. Although it is recommended that a literacy coaches' role be clear and extensively outlined, coaches spend a significant amount of time creating their place within the school culture. In turn, perceptions of the position, instead of valid and reliable measures of effectiveness, are used for evaluation. Thus, a lack of data may hinder sustainability of the position (Taylor et al., 2005).

Outcomes of successful coaching are linked to supportive administrative leadership (Selvaggi, 2016). According to Taylor, Zugelder and Bowman (2013), the school principal is the most influential person to the literacy coaches' success. Interactions between the principal and teachers, in reference to coaching, can positively or negatively affect a teacher's perceptions and acceptance of the literacy coach. Wilder (2014) suggests that if the roles and responsibilities of the secondary literacy coach are not clarified by school leadership, the coaching role might cease to exist.

Literacy Coaching and Teacher Relationships

Miller and Stewart (2013) proposed three tenets required for districts to implement successful team coaching. One, establish a thorough understanding of the coaches' role to all stakeholders. Two, identify specific qualifications of the coach. Three, present the coach in a non-evaluative, supportive role versus a position of administrative power. Neutrality empowers teachers and provides professional space for teachers to self-direct their professional development with the coach (Miller & Stewart, 2013).

The International Literacy Association (ILA) provides a guide for a literacy coaches' job description (2010; 2018). According to the ILA, a literacy coach should model instruction, facilitate professional development, initiate the development of literacy plans, and/or act as a non-evaluative liaison between teachers and administrators. Literacy coach job postings often list a range of requirements from a teaching degree, required years of teaching experience, a reading specialist certification, or additional educational training. An individual with knowledge of research-based, literacy instruction and leadership experience is the best fit (International Literacy Association, 2010; 2018).

In addition to professional experience, literacy coaches must possess tacit skills in communication and culture navigating to both build or mitigate teacher perceptions (Dugan, 2010). Hull (2011) investigated the perceptions of teachers and principals regarding the role of a literacy coach. The ability to communicate and listen were two of the 14 categories that emerged as the most positive coaching attributes. Pletcher (2013) suggests literacy coaches are most successful when they are approachable and they, as well as others, understand the literacy coaches' role.

According to Smith (2012), coaches initiate a connection with content area teachers through their service as curriculum resources and establish relationships with teachers through conversation and feedback. This interaction of relationship building validates the coach's pedagogical knowledge. Thus, if teachers experience a collaborative relationship with the coach,

they perceive a greater degree of coaching expertise. Coaches reported this collaborative relationship vital in their responsibility to mentor teachers (Smith, 2012).

The position of a literacy coach is complex because the process involves teacher change (Leent & Exley, 2013; Shaw, 2007; Smith, 2012). A literacy coach is, by definition, a colleague. Yet many teachers could perceive a literacy coach as a person with authority. Depending upon the context of the coaching situation, and if the integration of a literacy coach was a grass roots initiative versus an administrative mandate, the outcome of the literacy coaches' effectiveness might be impacted. Thus, it is important that principals and coaches stress the non-evaluative nature of the coaching phenomenon (Coburn, 2005; Pomerantz & Pierce, 2013).

As most literacy coaches were former teachers or reading specialists, role confusion exists. Without clear definitions by school administrators, the role of the literacy coach shifts within teacher perceptions. For example, Stevens (2011) reported that although the literacy coach is the coaching expert, without school leadership's clarification of the literacy coaches' role, the literacy coach is viewed and utilized as a reading specialist. Rather than coaching teachers or implementing professional development, the literacy coach provides services similar to a remedial reading teacher. To add to the confusion, literacy coaches are left to define their role organically, building relationships with teachers one-at-a-time that allow the coach to perform as a coach and share expertise (Stevens, 2011). Thus, for literacy coaching to be a tool for school improvement, it is important to investigate the relationship between teachers and coaches (Hunt & Handsfield, 2013).

Methodology

The purpose of the study was to investigate secondary literacy coaches' and secondary teachers' relationships in one educational region of a U.S. northeast state. The primary research question was:

- How do secondary literacy coaches and secondary teachers perceive the teacher-coach relationship?

This study employed a phenomenological approach (Moustakas, 1994) and sought to describe the lived experiences of literacy coaches in what Moustakas refers to as "textual" and "structural" (p. 118) descriptions of the experience. The state for this study has 29 educational service units that provide teacher and operational support to the state's 500 school districts. Data was collected from teachers and literacy coaches within two educational service units. The researcher was employed as a reading specialist, giving direct student support, in the same state as the study. They were not employed as a literacy coach or in either of the educational service units used in this study.

Participants were selected and interviewed in two phases. In Phase 1, the researcher used public district information to directly contact literacy coaches working in the secondary setting. Five literacy coaches agreed to participate in a one-hour interview about their role as a coach. After the interview, the researcher asked for contact information of teachers with whom the literacy coach had worked. In Phase II, the researcher interviewed nine teachers to understand their perceptions of the coaching experience. All interviews were completed in-person.

Seidman (2005) advocates structuring interviews in a way that connects data collection with data analysis. To ensure a holistic exploration of the phenomenon, interviews included

open-ended questions that allowed participants to describe their experiences and perceptions. Although primary research questions guided the interview as the interview unfolded, participants were asked follow-up questions to clarify, or further explain, their response. Interviews were audio recorded, transcribed, and sent to each participant for member checking (Creswell, 2013). The researcher also took notes and recorded anecdotal information along with participants' answers

For purposes of this study, secondary teachers were defined as any teacher working in a middle or high school that taught a dedicated discipline such as English, Math, Science or Social Studies. A literacy coach was defined as any person in the formal role of "coach" and someone who specifically offered teacher coaching versus direct student support. To protect participant identity, participant information was deidentified and pseudonyms assigned. Table 1 lists the literacy coach, and the number of years each coach spent as a certified teacher and a literacy coach. Table 2 lists teacher participants, years as a certified teacher, years in current position, and content area taught.

Table 1

Literacy Coach Participants

Participant Pseudonym	Years as a Certified Teacher	Years as a Literacy Coach
Ali	13	3
Annie	18	7
Brian	21	6
Gayle	13	8
Colleen	11	6

Table 2

Teacher Participants

Participant Pseudonym	Years as a Certified Teacher	Years in Current Position	Content Area
Brady	14	14	Language Arts
Catherine	27	13	Language Arts
Dorey	10	10	English
Ellen	14	14	Math
Francis	17	17	Math
Hannah	4	4	Language Arts
Harper	7	7	Language Arts
Isaac	33	33	Social Studies
Ivy	26	26	Spanish

Data Analysis

Data included 14 hours of recorded interviews, 126 pages of transcripts, and 10 pages of memos and anecdotal notes. Data was analyzed by a modification of the van Kaam (1966, as cited in

Moustakas, 1994, pp. 120-121) method of data analysis. Each transcript was hand-coded via horizontalization (Moustakas, 1994) and grouping of phrases relevant to the coaching experience. Phrases were then sorted and labelled. Labelled data was clustered into three interconnected themes.

1) Literacy coaching in the secondary setting is notably more complex than the elementary school level, with a greater focus on content area subjects.
2) Role ambiguity complicates the teacher-coach relationship.
3) Without administrative clarification, the literacy coach must build relationships with teachers to implement the coaching role

In qualitative research, validity begins at the study's inception (Morse et al., 2002; Richards & Morse, 2012). Thus, the researcher implemented bracketing and reflexivity (Moustakas, 1994) throughout data collection and analysis. Findings were also checked against interview data and field notes for accuracy (Creswell, 2013; Morse et al., 2002).

Findings

Complexities of Literacy Coaching in the Secondary Setting

The *Standards for Middle and High School Secondary Coaches* (International Reading Association, 2006; International Literacy Association, 2010) propose that literacy coaching in the primary grades requires the coach to have a different skill set than middle and high school grades. Stevens (2011) agrees that the instructional responsibilities of a high school literacy coach cannot be compared to an elementary school literacy coach. As one literacy coach summarized, "It's harder the higher you go."

Focus on Subject Area Discipline

Throughout the interviews for this study, participants mentioned facets of the secondary setting that contrasted with elementary school. Dorey, a high school English teacher, emphasized her focus on her discipline. She said "there is more of a focus, whereas in elementary school, you have more of a broad sense of what a literacy coach does because there is so much."

Catherine, a middle school English teacher, who previously taught in elementary school, described the difference. She said that in elementary school the literacy coach was "pulling out small groups [of students] into her little closet and providing those interventions, and I could see her sending books home with kids." Catherine continued, "she was very present with the students and those kids who really need the support."

Catherine contrasted her memory of the elementary school literacy coach with the literacy coach in her middle school.

> Here in the middle school, it's different. I don't know what [the literacy coach] does exactly. I know she's doing something. She's not coming into the classroom and saying I need to take this group of kids to go do this intervention. I see her as more of a teacher support.

Fitting Coaching into Subject Area Teaching

According to participants in this study, the integration of reading strategies across the curriculum was sometimes met with resistance. Isaac, a middle school social studies teacher stated, "I've always looked at it like, I'm a history teacher, not a reading teacher." Brady, a secondary language arts teacher reported, "We definitely need more professional development in those core content areas." She also stated that without the guidance and support of a literacy coach, the delivery becomes inconsistent and ineffective. She continued, "we really want our coaches in [our] classroom. You know, doing job embedded professional development."

The majority of the teachers interviewed were in favor of using a literacy coach, even if they did not fully understand the coach's role. As Ellen, a math teacher said

> I didn't really know of that resource [a literacy coach] for the first couple years I was in the middle school setting. [The literacy coach] helped me look at things in a very different way and really helped break it down into how the kids could make more sense of it. She came up with several ways of focusing on math vocabulary, so the kids didn't even realize they were, like they thought they were having fun! If there was something that I knew I would struggle with, like a concept, I would go to her and just get another view of how to present it, because her experiences are totally different than mine.

Ivy, a high school Spanish teacher, described how she learned about the literacy coach

> I think we had a summer in-service that was about the Reading Apprenticeship program and I can't remember if it was voluntary or you had to do it over the summer or do it when you got back to school. But, I took that course and that was kind of when I met [the literacy coach] to begin with. Then I learned about whole literacy, and the whole idea of coaches because that was kind of new to us.

In spite of the challenges to understanding the literacy coach position, 13 of the 14 participants interviewed responded that the literacy coaches' role was to "support." Brian, a literacy coach, said "There is support and there is pressure. You're always there to support." Congruent with literature (Shaw, 2007; Smith, 2012), other descriptive words given by the participants include "resources", "different strategies", "responsive", and "listener and relationship builder." Ali, a literacy coach, described her role as a teacher resource.

> The main thing is as a resource. Someone that the teachers can go to when they have questions about content, instructional strategies, and methods. Someone who is available just to listen at times. Some teachers just need someone to listen, not always offer advice, as a sounding ground. Someone they want to just check and see, this is my idea, do you think it's okay? Do you think I'm on the right track?

Catherine, a language arts teacher, described ways the literacy coach can function in a supportive manner, and bridge the role to administration. She said, "I think their role is staff development and it is helping to assist everybody in that building." She mentioned the importance of being "good kid watchers" and "working with administration to help plan what staff development may be needed." She iterated the importance of working together for students versus administrative standards and said "I think it just sets a healthy positive tone that we're here for kids.

Role Ambiguity Complicates Teacher-Coach Relationship

Of the nine teachers interviewed, none of the teachers remembered a formal introduction to the literacy coach, or an administrative explanation of the literacy coach's role. In this study, teachers reported that the literacy coach was simply part of the staff; and it was up to the teacher and literacy coach to find a way to work together. Sometimes, this was in response to a curriculum mandate unrelated to reading. Oftentimes, the support of the literacy coach was a welcome surprise. Ali, a literacy coach, describes her experience with the science department.

> Science was expected from administration to use [a specific learning resource]. That was kind of a given [and] opened the door, that yes - I and those teachers, as soon as they saw what I knew, once they saw what I could do, and what I could teach them to use with the [learning resource], that it's not just cut and dry. Then we could have another conversation [about] depth of knowledge on common assessments and their concerns. That just kind of bloomed naturally.

Lack of Role Clarification from Administrators

Participants reported the role and job description of the literacy coach was developed by school district leaders. Some participants credited the superintendent, along with the elementary curriculum director, as the creators of the position. Other participants reported principals, as well as curriculum directors, teaming together to choose and implement a literacy coaching model. In this study, it was often noted by the participants that there was not a collaborative approach in defining the literacy coach position. More so, none of the participants, teachers or literacy coaches, were asked by their district administrator for input prior to the implementation of the literacy coaching position. The lack of clarity in role definition created tenson between the teacher and literacy coach.

Annie, a literacy coach, provides an example from her experience the first year she, and another literacy coach, were employed.

> We were just plopped in. I don't even think there was an introduction to the principals about what our job was, what our role was, and what the job requirements were. So, when we were first put in here, we were just plopped in here and we had no training as to how to be integration specialists at all. It was just go and be an integration specialist.

She described "misunderstanding from the staff" but that she understood why the staff was confused.

> I totally get it and understand it. Who are these people and what is their job? Who are they? Are they a teacher or an administrator? Are they judging us? They can't evaluate us.

Annie said that her experience stemmed from the point of job creation. In her district, the job was created by central administrators, not by teachers in the building. More so, school administrators did not make clear to the teachers if Annie was a teacher or administrator. She reported that this differentiation was important, and would have helped her in negotiating her position with colleagues.

> From the very beginning, there was a very big misunderstanding about what our jobs were. And shame on us for not developing something to send out to everyone, but we didn't know what we were supposed to be doing either or how that was supposed to work. We had no training.

Ali, a literacy coach, reflected on the evolution of the role of the previous literacy coach. She reported, "I took over for [previous literacy coach] who retired." She continued to describe the "morphing" of her position.

> People started going to [the former literacy coach] with questions and it kind of built on its own naturally. But, they never officially said she is this role. They let her figure out what the needs were and build [the position] on her own. It was definitely self-directed for the first year or two that she did it.

The forced self-direction of the literacy coach was reflected in data from both teachers and literacy coaches. Similar to Annie, the literacy coaches were required to build their position in real-time by supporting teachers and students. Teachers were left on their own to interpret the literacy coach position. In one school district, the lack of administrative clarification resulted in elimination of the position. According to Francis, a secondary math teacher, the literacy coach model was in place for four years; but after four years, teachers felt the position was a "waste of money." She continued to describe the stress on the literacy coach.

> I think that the district never gave [the literacy coach] a chance to show the value of his position, like they stretched him too thin from the start. I think, and again, I think it all boils down to the money and so that was one of the cuts that were made because I don't know that he was given a true opportunity to show how effective it could be.

Literacy Coach as an Administrator

In this study, literacy coaches, as well as teachers, reported the literacy coach being required to assume roles that did not align to the standards of the IRA (2004). For example, nearly all of the participants mentioned the literacy coach assuming an administrative role. Some literacy coaches were even directed to complete formal teacher observations. Although these reports were not tied to any disciplinary actions, participants said that it made the role of literacy coach more confusing for both the teacher and coach.

Brady, a middle school language arts teacher, explained her understanding of the literacy coaches' role. "In some districts, coaching capacities are kind of more in the administrative role, so they are able to go in and do like 'walk throughs,' that is part of their job role." She acknowledged that the coach in her school did not do observations; but, said that given the lack of clarity from administration on what the role of the coach should be, teachers could get the wrong impression. She said, "I think that kind of makes it a little bit harder for [literacy coaches]. I think some of the teachers don't have that trust built yet because I think they think [the literacy coach] is just going to go back and talk to the principal."

Isaac, a middle school social studies teacher, discussed the pseudo administrative role of the literacy coach in his building.

> She is very knowledgeable, and she tends to come across like, this is what you should be doing, and she is not an administrator, but she sometimes came across like she thinks she is an administrator. That's the way people take it so that causes a lot of pushback on the part of the faculty.

Ali, a literacy coach, divulged that an administrator asked her to break confidentiality regarding a teacher's performance; but once she set a boundary with the administrator, the issue did not happen again. All five of the literacy coaches interviewed said they were required to

attend administrative meetings. However, they also reported being given directives by their administrators to act as a standardized test coordinator, sign students in or out of school, complete staff walk-through observations, and handle student discipline. Dorey, a high school English teacher described the staff's perception.

> I think that put [the literacy coach] in a very delicate position because she is mandated to do these [observations] but she understands that it puts her on an, 'us versus them' sort of thing. Some people were really turned off by that.

The pseudo administrative perception of the coach by teachers made it challenging for the literacy coach to work with teachers in the classroom. As Dorey said

> Like they don't want [the literacy coach] going into their classroom, like what are you looking for? It was very defensive on the educator's role and it put [the literacy coach] in an awkward position because they are not administration. They sort of were viewed as administrators because they were doing administrative things.

Literacy Coach Must Build Relationships to Define Position

In this study, literacy coaches reported relationship building with teachers as the most important aspect of their job. Both teachers and literacy coaches said that the teacher-literacy coach relationship developed positively over time in response to the coaches' approach, the teacher's perception, and the mindset of both individuals. Even those who described their initial interactions as "iffy" and "challenging" said that over time, they were able to overcome barriers., Ali, a literacy coach said, "I wish somebody would have just said to me make relationship with everybody.

Embedded in relationship building was the building of trust. Every participant in the study referenced trust and rapport as parts of an effective relationship. Annie, a literacy coach said, "If they don't trust me and have a relationship with me, they will not try it in their classroom and they don't care."

However, building trust between teachers and literacy coaches takes time. One of the challenges for literacy coaches in this study was the number of teachers, or schools, that demanded the literacy coach's attention. Ivy, a high school Spanish teacher, described the demands placed on the literacy coach compared to the teachers, who usually teach a single subject within one school. She said

> I think the schedule that [the literacy coach] has to keep, and the number of buildings that she has to see prevents her from developing those relationships with teachers to get them to trust her.

Still, in spite of the time restrictions, trust remained an integral part of the teacher-literacy coach relationship. Annie, a literacy coach, summarized by saying, "That is the most important part of the whole coaching, is having people's trust."

Brady, a middle school language arts teacher, described the importance of trust as a tool that equalized the relationship between the teacher and the coach. She described how building trust was especially important when the coaching job was viewed as an administrative mandate or a step-above the teacher.

> The trust factor, you know, has made [the relationship] develop. They [literacy coaches] went from being classroom teachers, to you're a leader, which I know has been difficult. If you don't get buy in from your teachers, it is not going to work.

When teachers felt that the literacy coach assumed a trusting, supportive, collegial role, they were more likely to not only work with the literacy coach, but also, share areas that he or she identified for improvement. Teachers reported being more willing to divulge gaps in their own professional development when they felt that the literacy coach kept their conversations confidential. Ali, a literacy coach, explained that as trust increased between her and her colleagues, the amount of time she was invited into classrooms to work with teachers increased, as well. In her first year as a literacy coach, she reported working directly with teachers 12% of her time; in year two, her time increased to 22%, and by year three, she was working directly with teacher 52% of the time. She said

> I think my first year, [the teachers] were a little hesitant. There was some trust that needed to be built there. There are things that maybe they wouldn't tell a teacher that they might talk to a literacy coach about. I think that first year, I had to build that relationship with not only my staff, but my administration, to know that, yes, I am someone that can be trusted.

Successful coaches were characterized by teachers as "approachable", "open-minded", "willing", "assertive", "honest", and "authentic." Harper, a middle school language arts teacher, and relatively new to the district, described her first interactions with the literacy coach and "seeing" whom she was working with as a "real person."

> I could tell that there was no fakeness in her. She brought down books for me. She brought down poster board and anything that I needed. She was very open and said 'contact me whenever you need it.'

Ivy, a high school Spanish teacher reported on the coaches' knowledge.

> She's always staying up on what is going on. She doesn't just put information in a cabinet and it's forgotten about. I mean, she thinks very much about what she's doing and about how she can help.

In this study, coaches that were not only able to connect and support their colleagues, and rally teacher buy-in, were characterized by teachers as successful in their role. Through the increased visibility of the literacy coach, teachers reported increased contact with the literacy coach for support. More so, teachers talked about the positive aspects of coaching with each other. Ali, a literacy coach, reported, "A lot of it is word of mouth. When they hear it from a colleague, and not an administrator, then they will come and talk to me."

Brian, a literacy coach, echoed the importance of a positive teacher recommendation. He said that, "typically, people wouldn't come directly to me." He describes having a "host classroom" and as successful coaching was evidenced, news spread to other teachers. He said "Once we did something, it sort of spread from there. Word kind of got out. Everybody in the building, saw what [me and the teacher] were doing. We fought a lot for buy- in."

Participants mentioned that coaches who got involved with the faculty and spent time getting to know teachers increased the staff's willingness to work with the literacy coach. Ali, a literacy coach, reflected on the process of teacher recommendations, "I got one [recommendation] and when that teacher found out what I had, they were like, 'you need to go see her' and all of a sudden, I had everybody ask me to come in and work with them."

Summary of the Findings

In this study, participants reported that secondary literacy coaching and secondary teaching were complicated by the subject area focus of the secondary setting. However, understanding the literacy coaches' role without formal introduction or definition from school administrators, put pressure on the relationship between teachers and coaches. Without clear administrative support, literacy coaches were forced to build relationships with teacher to garner teacher buy-in.

Discussion

Understanding how secondary literacy coaches and secondary teachers perceive the teacher-coach relationship requires situational context. Secondary settings are notably different from elementary settings. The students' levels of literacy, and stages of development, inform the strategies and programs utilized by teachers (Fordham & Sandmann, 2006). Secondary settings are interwoven and interactive (O'Brien et al, 1995). Pedagogy and culture intermix with the curriculum and produce individualized situations (Hunt & Handsfield, 2013; Leent & Exley, 2013). Secondary content-area teachers are experts in their curricular area and protective of their subject's status and resources (Smith, 2012). Congruent with the literature, this study found that although cautious, teachers were willing to embed literacy instruction and embrace the possible effectiveness of literacy coaching in their classrooms.

Lack of administrative clarification regarding the literacy coach position complicates the teacher-coach relationship. For teachers, the way a literacy coach can support teaching must be made clear before teachers feel comfortable working with a literacy coach. Still, the role of the literacy coach is often ambiguous (Darwin, 2002; Hull, 2011; Roller, 2006; Selvaggi, 2016; Smith 2012). In order to be effective, both teachers and literacy coaches need a congruent definition of the coaching position (Coburn, 2005). This study supports the need for a definition of a literacy coach's job that reflects ILA standards (International Literacy Association,2010; 2018). Teachers are more receptive of the literacy coach's role when the position is collegial versus administrative (Smith, 2012). Thus, school administrators must use teacher input when creating the literacy coach position and facilitate continuous conversation with both the teachers and literacy coach as the position evolves.

Without clear administrative directives, literacy coaches must rely on relationships to maintain the teacher-coach dynamic. Congruent with Casey (2006) and Greene (2004), relationships built and maintained between literacy coaches and teachers defines the success of the coaching model. However, literacy coaches voiced needing administrative support, and adequate time, to develop a positive, agreeable approach with teachers. The literacy coach has expert skills in content area reading instruction (Boyles, 2007). This study shows that to be an effective literacy coach, pedagogical knowledge is equally important as high-quality relationships with teachers. Thus, not only must school administrators define the literacy coach's role; they must allow time for the coach to interact with teachers outside of traditional professional development.

Trust is an important component of collegial relationships (Coburn, 2005). In this study, the lack of administrative clarification or assigning literacy coaches quasi-administrative tasks, complicated the teacher-coach relationship. Secondary teachers needed to trust that the literacy coach was not going to judge their teaching, or report problems to administrators. Literacy coaches were forced to prove credibility. Thus, role confusion elevated the importance of trust between teachers and literacy coaches. According to Greene (2004), school leaders are responsible for building a culture of trust. Through positive communication and a trusting relationship, school leaders can minimize teachers' defensiveness and create a collaborative climate (Fullan, 2016). According to Fullan (2016), teachers want to be recognized by school leaders when negotiating any type of curriculum or school change. Thus, school leaders should acknowledge and support both teachers, and literacy coaches, as part of a holistic model of school improvement.

Implications for Practice

District and school administrators should enact best practices when implementing literacy coaching at the secondary level. Following are practical applications for administrative leaders:

Clarify the role and responsibilities of a literacy coach. The International Literacy Association (International Reading Association,2006; International Literacy Association,2010) provides a framework from which school districts can align the literacy coach's role and responsibilities. Literacy coaches are not teacher evaluators; they are teacher coaches. All stakeholders (teachers, coaches, and administrators) involved in the literacy coaching phenomenon need to collaboratively clarify the roles and responsibilities of the secondary literacy coach

Involve multiple stakeholders in decision-making processes. Administrators need to be reflective and deliberate when choosing a literacy coaching model, as well as purposeful in choosing the individual assuming the role. The modes and procedures that administrators utilize to articulate the role of the literacy coach and the ways in which the model is implemented, contributes to the efficacy of the position (Coburn, 2005).

Provide support. Literacy coaches, as well as teachers, need support and the opportunities to try new strategies, take risks, and act as innovators in order to change the culture of the school and increase the level of students' literacy achievement. Literacy coaches need time and support to connect with teachers (Hunt & Handsfield, 2013; Sandvold & Baxter, 2008). Through informal conversations and collegial dialog, the literacy coach can establish a helpful supportive role.

Be strategic when choosing the individual for the literacy coach position. The individual chosen to assume the role of the literacy coach impacts teachers' willingness to participant in any type of professional development with the literacy coach (Casey, 2006; Jay & Strong, 2008). The literacy coach's personality traits can both positively or negatively affect the development and growth of the relationship with both teachers and administrators.

Conclusion

Literacy coaching positively impacts teachers and student learning (Casey, 2006; Jay & Strong, 2008). However, multiple constructs intersect to create an effective coaching culture. Individual characteristics of a coach, the districts procedures in implementing coaching models, as well as the importance of positive collegial relationships between secondary literacy coaches and secondary content-area teacher, can create a successful and effective coaching climate. To improve schools, administrators must embrace their role in defining and supporting the literacy coaching model.

Future Research

This study was focused on a single educational region of a northeast state and a sample of five literacy coaches and nine teachers. Congruent with purpose of qualitative inquiry, the small sample allowed the amplification of the literacy coach's voice, and an opportunity to understand the construct of the relationship between coaches and teachers in the secondary setting. Future research would benefit by expanding this study to other states and educational regions. Future studies could also include the perspective of school and district administrators, and case studies of schools or districts that have implemented successful coaching models at the secondary level.

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