

# Reflections of Elementary School Literacy Coaches on Practice: Roles and Perspectives

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In this study, we examined the perceptions of Ontario elementary (primary K – 3 and junior 4 – 6) literacy coaches to determine their roles, beliefs, and practices. We interviewed thirteen literacy coaches working in one Ontario school board about their literacy coaching. All coaches interviewed were teachers with specialized experience working in a literacy intervention program in their school board. We identified three major topics in participants' statements: coaches' role, barriers to effective literacy coaching, and overcoming barriers. This research offers suggestions for change in practice and provides insight into the role of literacy coaching as a mode of professional development in a Canadian urban centre.

Key Words: professional development, primary/junior teachers, literacy, elementary schools, Ontario education

Dans cette étude, les auteures analysent les perceptions de formateurs en littératie (maternelle, primaire, premier cycle du secondaire) en vue de mieux cerner leurs rôles, leurs croyances et leurs pratiques. Elles ont interviewé treize de ces formateurs à l'œuvre au sein d'une commission scolaire ontarienne, tous des enseignants ayant acquis une expérience pointue dans le cadre d'un programme d'intervention en littératie. Les auteures ont identifié trois grands thèmes dans les propos des participants :

le rôle des formateurs, les obstacles auxquels font face les formateurs en littératie et les méthodes employées pour surmonter les obstacles. À la lumière de leur recherche, les auteures proposent des suggestions de changements à apporter dans les pratiques ainsi que des réflexions sur le rôle du formateur en littératie dans le perfectionnement professionnel au sein d'un centre urbain canadien.

Mots clés : perfectionnement professionnel, enseignants du primaire et du premier cycle du secondaire, littératie, écoles primaires, éducation en Ontario.

Literacy coaching, a relatively new professional development initiative within Canadian schools, is steadily gaining in popularity despite a limited evidence base to support it (Dole & Donaldson, 2006). Casey (2006), a veteran literacy coach, maintains that although research supports the theoretical basis for literacy coaching, "we literacy coaches are doing our jobs day in and day out without research's seal of approval. Studies of our form of professional development are scant" (p. 191). Rodgers and Rodgers (2007) similarly note that the implementation of literacy coaching in schools has preceded research on the practice. The lack of an evidence base for literacy coaching has, perhaps, contributed to some of the problems faced by literacy coaches that some researchers have identified, including role confusion, teacher resistance, and limited administrative support. Considering the time, money, and resources that are spent to implement literacy coaching across Canada, it is important to clarify the specificities of the coaching role, including coaches' perspectives on what is needed to improve it. To do this, we interviewed literacy coaches in a school board in Ontario about their beliefs and practice in relation to their coaching. Considering the limited research about literacy coaching in Canada, we provide in the present study much-needed insight into how to make this area of professional development more effective.

## UNDERSTANDING LITERACY COACHING

### *Conceptualizing Professional Development*

According to Vygotsky (1981), learning is deeply embedded within culture and social relationships, making these relationships key components of learning. Understanding professional development from a Vygotskian

perspective has many implications for literacy coaching (Rodgers & Rodgers, 2007). In traditional forms of professional development (which are often offered in one-day workshops), teachers are passive participants in the learning. Such modes of professional development have been found to be largely ineffective (e.g., Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 1995). In contrast, learning through collaboration has been identified as a characteristic of effective professional development (Fullan, 1995). Vygotsky's theories of learning support expert peer coaching (including literacy coaching), in which teachers discuss, share, and plan together, particularly when a more knowledgeable other supports further literacy development. Such professional development provides learning that is inherently social and collaborative, with teachers actively participating in their own learning. By examining literacy coaching through a Vygotskian perspective, we have interpreted the goal of literacy coaching as follows: "to support the way teachers teach so that a teacher is able to work with increasing flexibility and independence from the coach's help" (Rodgers & Rodgers, 2007, p. 18). This perspective allows researchers to focus on the importance of relationships between coaches, administration, and teachers, clarifying the specificities of the coaching role and its effectiveness, providing for the examination of the role of coaches as peer educators within the context of their regular teaching work. By asking questions about the coaching role, we have gained further information on how coaches support teachers' knowledge.

#### *Perspectives on Resistance*

Within the limited literature on literacy coaching, researchers have well documented the struggle and resistance of teachers against pressure to change (e.g. Dole & Donaldson, 2006; Lyons & Pinnell, 2001), with researchers expressing teacher resistance as a major concern for many coaches (Toll, 2005). Thus, when examining the coaching role, we found Foucault's (1978/1990) perspective of resistance useful. As Foucault explains, "where there is power, there is resistance" (p. 95). When literacy coaches appear to have power over teachers in terms of knowledge, teachers may resist their coaching. Teachers may reject the normative discourse of a correct method of teaching, valuing instead their local

knowledge of teaching methods. Because some teachers may be less concerned about their ability as literacy instructors than they are about being observed, judged, and examined by a literacy coach, they may resist coaching. Teachers may also appear to comply with normative practices but maintain their own personal beliefs about teaching practices (Hargreaves & Dawe, 1990), while others may resist peer coaching by simply refusing to participate. Teacher resistance to peer coaching, therefore, may be overt or covert, but as Hargreaves and Dawe have noted, most often teacher resistance is an “individual problem within the teachers” (p. 237). We propose that being attuned to the perception of power in coaching relationships may help clarify pathways to overcome teacher resistance by focusing on issues beyond problems situated within individual teachers.

#### LITERATURE REVIEW

##### *The Evolution of Literacy Coaching in Ontario*

Although literacy coaching may be new to schools, using peer coaching as a form of professional development is not. Much research has been published on its effectiveness (e.g., Joyce & Showers 1982, 2002). In the 1980s and 1990s, peer coaching became a popular form of professional development. With the publishing of numerous training manuals and ‘how-to’ guides (e.g., Forte & Griffith, 1986; Knapp, Stephenson, & Thornley-Hall, 1989; Mills, 1990), several Ontario school boards implementing peer coaching as school board initiatives (Watson & Kilcher, 1990). Although the roots of literacy coaching in Ontario schools can be traced to these early peer coaching initiatives, the adoption of “lead literacy teachers” in Ontario became a catalyst for implementing literacy coaches.

The Ontario Ministry of Education introduced the concept of lead literacy teachers in their 2003 report, *Early Reading Strategy: The Report of the Expert Panel on Early Reading in Ontario*. According to this report, the purpose of lead literacy teachers was “to improve reading achievement by working collaboratively with teachers to deepen their understanding of the reading process and to extend their repertoire of instructional strategies” (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2003, p. 58). After 2003, the Ministry of Education created the Ontario Literacy and Numeracy Secre-

tariat, which has published many documents supporting literacy coaching (e.g. Campbell & Fullan, 2006; Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat, 2006). These documents describe a similar role for literacy coaches as that outlined for lead literacy teachers in the *Early Reading Strategy*. By 2004, literacy coaching was on its way to becoming a common practice in schools. Today, it is a strategy that is “endorsed and supported by the Ontario Ministry of Education and most school boards in Ontario now have school-based and/or board-based literacy specialists in the coaching role” (Lynch & Alsop, 2007, p. 1).

#### *The Role of the Coach*

In 2004, the International Reading Association published *The Role and Qualifications of the Reading Coach in the United States*, outlining the association’s position on the definition of coaching, the role of the “reading” coach, and recommended qualifications for coaches. Despite the publication of this document, the role of the literacy coach in practice is not easily defined. Although coaches in practice may consider working with students to be their primary role, scholars have suggested that the goal of literacy coaching is to create a school-wide community of teachers, committed to developing literacy instruction (Shaw, 2006). Rodgers and Rodgers (2007) claim it is easy for coaches, may be very committed to students and student learning, to mistakenly gear their work towards students instead of “shifting teacher practice and understanding” (p. 123). Because a teacher’s ultimate goal is to increase student learning and achievement and because coaches are there to assist with that goal, the focus of literacy coaches should be to support teachers (Toll, 2005) and to help change teaching practices (Rodgers & Rodgers, 2007).

Undeniably, the role of a literacy coach is complex and multifaceted, with a literacy coach wearing many professional “hats” (Burkins, 2007). Although the literacy coaching position may be complex, coaches must balance their work with a variety of schools, teachers, and different coaching situations “to create a coaching plan that is robust but makes sense” (Rodgers & Rodgers, 2007, p. 134). Burkins (2007), a practising literacy coach, explains the many hats literacy coaches wear by defining their position as

an educator with specific expertise and extensive experience in literacy instruction who, through individual coaching, team meetings, formal professional learning, demonstration lessons, classroom visitations, study groups, and various other contexts, works with and for teachers to lead, assist, and honor them as they solidify and expand their skills in and understandings of literacy instruction. (pp. 28-29)

Although the role of a coach is varied, previous research has suggested that some coaching roles are more significant than others. For example, Lyons and Pinnell (2001) describe the role of literacy coaches as that of professional developers who will “introduce, describe, and demonstrate topics in class sessions and then be able to provide direct assistance and coaching in classrooms” (p. 52). Their role may include tasks such as “facilitating the work of ongoing collaborative teacher groups, centering the collaborative work on shared instructional challenges, promoting demonstration lessons and cross-classroom observations, and developing opportunities to inspect students’ performance on tests and in-class assignments so as to inform instruction” (International Reading Association, 2006, p. 36). Along with the in-class coaching of teachers, literacy coaches may be responsible for several tasks: (a) conducting professional development sessions for teachers and school staffs, such as educational assistants (Casey, 2006); (b) organizing and conducting study groups with teachers and staffs to discuss professional readings in a collegial fashion (Allen, 2006; Casey, 2006); (c) managing or organizing literacy materials (Burkins, 2007); (d) organizing student literacy achievement data (Burkins, 2007, p. 32); and (e) organizing team meetings (Lyons & Pinnell, 2001), which comprise teachers from the same grade level, those working on similar units, or those who have similar interests and needs (Poglinco et al., 2003). Overall, literacy coaches appear to work closely with teachers and support teachers “in their daily work – planning, modeling, team-teaching, and providing feedback on completed lessons” (Dole, 2004, p. 462). Literacy coaches are leaders in schools who lead “from behind,” meaning that they mentor and support others (Vogt & Shearer, 2003).

*Issues Related to Literacy Coaching*

Literacy coaches have expressed several concerns about their professional work ("Literacy Coaching," 2007). These concerns included role definition, time allocation, teacher resistance, and administrative support

*Role Definition.* They are striving to distinguish their roles as coaches from those of other specialist roles such as resource teachers and curriculum consultants ("Literacy Coaching," 2007, p. 13). Literacy coaches in Poglinco et al.'s (2003) study indicated that the lack of a clear definition of their role created confusion and misunderstanding with administrators and teachers, making their jobs difficult from the beginning. Literacy coaches felt that it was necessary that "coaches, principals, and cluster/team leaders have a mutual understanding and shared expectation of the role and responsibilities of the coach" (Poglinco et al., p. 10). Morgan et al.'s (2003) study echoed this sentiment, describing how literacy coaches' roles in South Carolina varied from school to school.

*Time Allocation.* An additional coaching issue is the amount of time expended on various activities within the coaching role. Roller (2006) reported that reading coaches spent two to four hours per week observing, demonstrating teaching, and discussing lessons taught. Moxley and Taylor (2006) found that literacy coaches spent the greatest portion of their day doing assessments and data collection. Rita Bean, an International Reading Association Board member (IRA Surveys Coaches, 2006), suggested that the small amount of time actually devoted to coaching teachers was a concern: "one wonders . . . whether that is enough time to make a difference" (p. 3). Moreover, Boulware (2006, as cited in Taylor, Moxley, Chanter, & Boulware, 2007) found that literacy coaches who stated that they focused most of their time on professional development with teachers made greater gains in student achievement scores than literacy coaches who reported spending the majority of their time engaged in other coaching activities, such as assessments and organizational tasks.

*Teacher Resistance.* Another common issue that has an impact on literacy coaching practice is teacher resistance, as noted above (Dole & Donaldson, 2006). Lyons and Pinnell (2001) noted that "while change can be exciting, it is also very threatening and sometimes draining" (p. 186). Nolan and Hillkirk (1991) suggested that teachers who resisted the un-

derlying philosophies of coaching would not likely experience changes in their thinking or teaching behaviour from participating in coaching (p. 74). In the South Carolina Reading Initiative (Morgan et al., 2003), many classroom teachers did not know what to expect from the new literacy initiatives, and although some teachers welcomed coaches into their classrooms, others preferred not to have them. For many teachers, the idea of having a colleague come into their classroom to help and not evaluate was a new one (Morgan et al.). To overcome potential resistance, it is important that teachers not see coaches as experts: "when the coach is seen as The Expert, teachers evaluate the coach against an impossible criterion" (Fisher, 2007, p. 3) Sturtevant (2004) suggested that teachers view successful coaches as those who understand teachers' "goals, frustrations, and vision – not as supervisors who evaluate their performance" (p. 12). In-deed, effective literacy coaches must have positive relationships with all members of a school community (Moxley & Taylor, 2006).

*Administrative Support.* Administrative support is also very important in the success of coaching (Poglinco et al., 2003). Gordon, Nolan, and Forlenza (1995) note that without administrative support the implementation of a coaching program may not occur. Gordon, Nolan, and Forlenza (1995) claim that "Schools with support from all levels of administration, including the superintendent, are also the schools with the highest level of implementation of coaching" (p. 81). As Moxley and Taylor (2006) have suggested, principals need to make literacy a priority with literacy improvement having a sense of urgency. Poglinco and Bach (2004) noted "a strong need for principals to enter into a partnership with coaches if the coaching model is to succeed in their schools" (p. 400). In the South Carolina Reading Initiative, principals were envisioned to learn alongside teachers so that "the traditional division between administration and teachers would be minimized" (Morgan et al., 2003, p. 142). These studies point to numerous challenges that literacy coaches may face in Canada, indicating the need to understand the issues identified from the perspective of those working in the field.

To add to the limited research on literacy coaches in schools (Walpole & McKenna, 2004), we asked literacy coaches in a large school board in Ontario to participate in this study. Our purpose was to gain



insight into literacy coaches' perceptions of their role and to determine the issues related to their role. Based on this insight, we have made recommendations for future literacy coaching practice.

## METHOD

### *Participants*

The literacy coaches who participated in this study were working in a school board in an urban setting in Ontario. We invited all primary (K – grade 3) and junior (grades 4 – 6) coaches with at least one year working as literacy coaches to participate (n = 9 primary level and 6 junior level). Thirteen coaches (9 primary and 4 junior level) consented to participate. All were working part-time as literacy coaches in several schools in addition to maintaining their own classroom teaching responsibilities in elementary schools. Most primary and junior teachers held a Bachelor of Education degree with additional qualifications such as specialty courses (most commonly in reading or in special education) or had a special education degree. Three of the 13 teachers had a Master's degree in education (two primary teachers and one junior teacher) in addition to other qualifications. Many literacy coaches had worked as a lead literacy teacher or mentor within their own school prior to becoming a system literacy coach, their experience varying from 4 to 20 years. To be part of the literacy coaching program, the board required them to have taught in a literacy intervention program within the board. Coaches served approximately 7 to 10 schools in their current role and typically visited each school once or twice every six weeks.

### *Data Collection: Interviews*

Participation in the study involved a 35 to 45 minute semi-structured interview based on McKenna and Walpole's (2008) research, questions composed by the researchers, as well as questions composed by the board of education (see Appendix). We interviewed each primary-level literacy coach individually in a small office at his or her elementary school during or following a general coaching meeting. We interviewed each junior-level coach individually in a quiet area of the library/work room of the board of education during or following a general coaching meeting. General coaching meetings were usually held bimonthly or

weekly, facilitated by a board member. The first author (Jacqueline) conducted all interviews. Because literacy coaching in the school board is a relatively new initiative, the board personnel suggested that Jacqueline not audio record the interviews to make the participants more comfortable in the interview.

#### *Data Analysis*

Jacqueline hand wrote participants' responses, and shortly after each interview, entered data into a word processing program. She engaged in member checking by summarizing participants' responses and questioning them at the end of each interview. At the completion of the study, we shared findings with the board personnel who forwarded them to the literacy coaches. We analyzed the data from interviews using the constant comparative method (Merriam, 1998). Jacqueline read through all the interviews, making comments about the data. Then, from reading the first interview transcript and comparing it with the second interview, she produced preliminary categories, forming more concrete categories after reading several transcripts, then modifying them after comments from Kristen.

#### FINDINGS

In this section, we present three major topics that we identified from participants' statements from the semi-structured interviews: the role of the literacy coach, barriers to effective coaching, and overcoming barriers. With regard to their role, some coaches reported variation in their role but overall, they reported designing lessons, observing teachers present lessons, and providing feedback to teachers. Although participants identified several barriers to effective coaching, they noted the importance of time to work with teachers, a major theme of the second topic. Finally, many coaches suggested ways to overcome barriers and reported how they had already worked to overcome barriers, such as by asking teachers to identify goals.

#### *Role of the Coach*

The first topic identified from the dataset centred on the coach's role. Within this topic, coaches' statements referred to common activities such

as informing teachers about strategies. The school board employed a department coordinator to oversee the coaching program as well as specialists to guide meetings with coaches. In addition to these bimonthly meetings to introduce new strategies or to discuss issues for the literacy coaches, the board provided professional development sessions for coaches, and some coaches had attended conferences on literacy coaching. No board policies described a coach's role.

When asked to describe their role, most coaches stated that at some point they had worked with teachers on new strategies, observed teaching practices, and worked with students. They also performed data analysis, co-taught lessons, engaged in lesson study and demonstration lessons, and worked with individual teachers and grade-level or divisional teams. However, the most common roles identified among the literacy coaches in this study were (a) designing lessons or modelling lesson or strategies, (b) observing teachers present lessons or having teachers watch them model lessons, and (c) debriefing or designing lessons after teachers watched them present strategies for application. Literacy coach #10 stated, "I meet them [teachers] to discuss what their needs are and then support them with the teaching strategies they need." A less commonly-reported format was (a) presenting a workshop to a group of teachers, (b) examining grade-level assessment (including a data wall <sup>1</sup>), and (c) determining ways to improve teaching and assessment. Overall, the primary goals for most coaches were planning and modeling with teachers. However, a focus on data analysis, such as examining a data wall, was an important aspect for a few coaches, particularly those who worked in the 4 to 6 grade levels

#### *Barriers to Effective Coaching*

Coaches reported many barriers to limit their ability to perform at an optimal level: (a) limited principal involvement, (b) resistant teachers, (c) too many schools to service, (d) role uncertainty, and (e) limited resource material. Time issues, a notable barrier, which seemed to be linked with

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<sup>1</sup> A data wall can include a display of the results of formal and informal assessments, most commonly a display of teachers' Running Records of children's reading levels (Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat, n.d.).

most other barriers that coaches identified, were often included in explanations of the other barriers.

*Limited Principal Involvement.* Coaches reported that school principals were a barrier if they did not attend meetings. According to coach #2, "The key is having a principal who is engaged and goes to meetings." The coaches considered meetings important, especially at the beginning of the school year, because they provided an opportunity for a principal and coach to clarify the coach's role in the school and the principal's role in supporting coaches (coach #4; coach #9). Coach #8 stated, "Principals do not know how to service, even with time and money" and noted that meeting with them was important. Coaches also identified principals who were not open to suggestions about time organization or money expenditure as a barrier to successful practice because coaches felt that having time to work with teachers and resources to support them were important. "It is important that administration is on your side because they create the schedule and allocate the release time" (coach #10). Coaches considered a principal who did not provide sufficient release time for teachers to meet with coaches to be a great impediment to fulfilling their role. "Principals who do not free up teachers are a barrier for my role" (coach #3), and "My main barrier was finding time to meet with teachers and support from principals" (coach #13).

*Resistant Teachers.* Resistant teachers were also a barrier for some coaches. Some coaches who stated that resistant teachers did not come to meetings (e.g., coach #11) attributed this lack of attendance to possible personality differences, feelings of inferiority on the part of a teacher, or lack of time or established routine that the principal could organize. Coach #5 stated that a teacher in one classroom in which she presented a demonstration lesson marked student work while she was demonstrating: "She [teacher] sat at the desk and didn't watch or participate in the debriefing." According to coaches, some resistant teachers, who did not understand how coaching or changes to their program could benefit them, were reluctant to listen or participate. Coach #7 commented that "in my second year it did not work as well because teachers continued to stay resistant even if the principal encouraged them." Resistant teachers did not want support. In one class, a teacher who said she did not need support left the room to use the time for planning (coach #7). Coach #13

commented that teachers who were not receptive “want instruction without discussion and want to get resources and materials and leave.” Coach #4 explained that resistance was fostered when “beginning teachers felt that mentors were evaluators to tell them what they did wrong.”

*Too Many Schools to Service/Lack of Time.* Many coaches reported that they had too many schools to service, restricting their ability to coach at their preferred level. Coach #5 commented that “not being able to focus attention on a few schools is a barrier.” Coaches stated that they required time to overcome resistant teachers as well as to provide further literacy support for teachers who needed it. They reported that an increased amount of time to work with teachers could prevent teachers from becoming resistant. Coach #10 said, “I would prefer a smaller number of schools so that I would have more time to work with teachers; more one-on-one time.” Other coaches worried about their job performance. Coach #8 stated, “I have a high number of schools and I am also teaching; I can’t do both.” Coach #10 noted, “When I am working at 11 schools, I am not able to have enough time to observe the children as well.” Hence, the amount of time available to literacy coaches themselves also limited their ability to perform their role to their preferred level.

*Role Uncertainty.* Many coaches stated that their role as a literacy coach was evolving both over time and within different schools. Most coaches stated that they felt competent in their role but that they were “continually learning along the way” (coach #13) or that their role was “evolving” (coach #2; coach #4; coach #5). Even when coaches reported feeling competent, some feared “not knowing what a coach is” and reported that feelings of uncertainty, at different times, posed a barrier for them because they did not have the same rapport at all schools (e.g., coach #5). Although many were engaged in a variety of practices, some coaches stated that they were still unsure of their role. For example, “Primary teachers really don’t know what our role is and we really don’t know what our needs are” (coach #8). This coach believed that there were too many roles for the coach in some schools and that they needed to be better clarified. Coaches could clearly articulate what a coaching session entailed, but, as coach #12 stated, at times coaching felt like “building a house without a basement.” Coach #5 commented, “I am not

certain I know what a coach is." A couple of coaches (coach #6; coach #8) stated that most of their learning was done in role or on the job.

*Limited Resource Material.* An additional barrier for several coaches was the limited quantity of professional and classroom resources available for themselves and in schools. Remarks included "I need more resource material on strategies," "I need books that I can use, such as shared reading or guided reading resources" (coach #10), and "Materials are needs" (coach #2). Coach #9 stated, "I need professional resources and book talks. A literacy coach can suggest resources, but if the school does not have them, it is difficult." Coaches noted that lessons on particular literacy strategies would be difficult without such resources. Some coaches stated that lack of resource material could affect their practice. Coach #4 remarked that "a lack of resources was a barrier but it is less of an issue now." Furthermore, some coaches said they could list resources that could help them, but they had to learn on their own: "Gaining knowledge mostly comes on your own" (coach #8).

#### *Overcoming Barriers*

Many coaches offered suggestions to overcome the barriers to coaching, identifying how they had addressed specific barriers in their coaching role. Some suggestions focused on personal change, but the majority of coaches focused on structural or systemic changes. In particular, they presented suggestions to overcome resistant teachers. These focused largely on personal communication strategies and training for principals. Other suggestions to overcome barriers included clarifying the role of a coach and having fewer schools to service. Many suggestions for overcoming barriers were interrelated.

*Overcoming Teacher Resistance.* To help minimize this barrier of teacher resistance, coaches identified the need for information about how to work with resistant teachers, indicating that more professional reading on the topic would help. Coach #6 commented that she wanted more information on "how to work with teachers to make it as positive as possible." Coaches generally wanted to know how to become more effective in their approaches to teachers.

Suggestions for coaches to overcome resistance among teachers also focused on personal communication strategies. Several suggestions in-

cluded not providing feedback unless teachers asked for this opportunity and accepting the knowledge that teachers bring to the coaching meeting. For example, coach #2 stated: "Bring [in] teachers' perspective [so that the] same expectation makes them feel you are someone like them," and "Always accept the level the teacher is at, make goals come from them, listen to experiences, make this part of the goals and evaluations, and acknowledge their expertise and experiences." Coach #1 suggested, "Establish a positive relationship, converse about why you are there . . . and find a common ground." Furthermore, "You need to define your role at the beginning" (coach #3), and "Start with the teachers who want to be there" (coach #9). Coach #7 said she used distance to overcome teacher resistance: "I left it to her [the teacher's] initiative and talked to the principal. The principal moved her." Most coaches reported that building relationships and rapport with teachers can overcome resistance but that this process takes time (e.g., coach #11). Coach #5 stated that she met with a teacher prior to the following year's coaching to plan early and this approach, she believed, reduced teacher resistance.

Coaches were aware that "There are many things happening within a school" (coach #11). However, they expressed the need for principals to take time to talk with them one-on-one about their role in the school and about concerns and progress. Coach #4 stated that "Principals need to be more supportive" because this support was an important part of being able to perform some coaching tasks well. Furthermore, Coach #9 stated that administrators in schools needed to "set-up the value of the literacy coach." By clarifying coaches' role in schools, principals could help overcome the barrier coaches experienced with resistant teachers. According to coaches, "Principals need to provide teachers with more release time and coverage [teacher replacement]" (coach #12), and "Principals need to release the teachers" (coach #2). Many coaches emphasized the importance of principals' providing release time for teachers and more principal and teacher accountability to overcome teacher resistance and to promote more effective coaching.

*Clarifying the Role of the Coach.* With regard to the barrier of role ambiguity, coaches generally believed that the school board and the Ministry of Education should provide more information and training to clarify the coaching role. Several coaches identified the need for more informa-

tion to improve coaching, including information on coaching models in other boards, and inquiring about literacy coaching courses at a university level. Coach #6 commented that "It would be helpful to have more training" and to learn best practices from other coaches. Coach #5 suggested that having an "actual coach to come and talk about the types of coaches, what was successful for them, and compare their model" to develop further would be helpful. According to Coach #11, "it is trial and error right now." Coaches suggested that more time to work with the literacy team, and perhaps videos of team members engaged in the coaching practice, would support their role. They suggested that one standard "book on coaching" (coach #3) or a formal curriculum would benefit coaches, and that meetings should include one main topic in the seminar. However, Coach #6 clarified that "having knowledge is one thing; knowing how to share information so that they [teachers] can learn from that is another." Some respondents proposed that having a lead literacy person from the Ministry of Education in charge of literacy coaching would be beneficial, as would a provincial professional organization for literacy coaches, which would help create support networks with other coaches province-wide. Others suggested that an additional qualification course from a department of education, or additional professional courses from a training/coaching institute, would help define the role of a coach. Overall, coaches made comments such as "Some more training would be helpful" (coach #6), and "Establishing a professional network in Ontario would be beneficial" (coach #3). However, despite some concerns about role ambiguity, many coaches believed that they were knowledgeable in their support of teachers' practice (e.g., coach #5).

*Fewer Schools to Service.* Coaches had various suggestions to address the barrier of too many schools to service. They varied in the number of schools they serviced as well as the number of staffs they worked with. Coaches working at the junior level tended to be more generous in the number of schools recommended per coach, typically recommending that part-time workers should service five to six schools and seven to eight teachers per school. In contrast, coaches working at the primary level generally recommended that part-time workers should service approximately two to three schools with five to six teachers. According to



Coach #13, "An ideal structure would be 1 to 3 schools per coach and 5 to 10 teachers per coach, and the amount of time should depend on learning needs." Coaches tended to agree that they should work part-time, although they acknowledged that literacy coaching could be a full-time position. Some coaches suggested that if they worked full-time instead of part-time, it might affect how some teachers viewed them. Because coaches were also actively teaching, some believed that this status supported a positive relationship with teachers they were coaching. For example, "Teachers are willing to call coaches because they are seen as partners, not above them. We may lose this if it [coaching] is full-time" (coach #3). Therefore, coaches most often recommended part-time positions.

Coaches generally indicated that it would be more effective to increase the number of teachers serviced within a school than the number of schools. Coach #7 noted that "Working in the same school allows you to build trust and rapport and that is very important." Coach #8 indicated that "There is a need for consistency in the same school . . . 2 to 3 years."

#### DISCUSSION

A literacy coach serves a number of roles in a school (Walpole & Blamey, 2008), the complexity of which participants in the current study identified. Many of the coaches observed in previous studies tended to work more with teachers than with students, and the coaches in the current study were no exception. This finding is closely related to Toll's (2005) definition of a literacy coach, in which coaches worked closely with teachers to support, assist, and guide them. Bean (IRA Surveys Coaches, 2006) questioned whether the amount of time that coaches spent working with teachers on their practice was sufficient to be effective. Coaches in the present study, who tended to focus on professional development, were concerned about the amount of time they spent in their various roles when they had many schools to service. It seems important that literacy coaches have sufficient time in their professional development roles with teachers because literacy coaches who spend most of their time in such roles result in children with higher achievement (Boulware [2006], as cited in Taylor et al., 2007).

Coaches in the present study tended to report that their role was “evolving.” Although an evolving role can support the needs of local schools, a lack of a clear definition of the role can create job confusion and result in difficulties for both coaches and school staffs (Poglinco et al., 2003). They also suggested the need for additional role clarification. In response to similar previous requests in other contexts, some coaches have been provided with detailed information about the role of the literacy coach to allow them to better understand the nature of their position (Morgan et al., 2003). Literacy Coach #5 summed up the issue of role identity: “I am knowledgeable as a literacy coach, but feel the fear but do it anyway.” The school board is working to produce a document that will further clarify the role of the coach.

In addition to the barrier of not having a clear coaching role, literacy coaches identified the barrier of resistant teachers. Researchers have previously reported teachers who resist interacting with literacy coaches as their number one concern (Toll, 2005), a barrier common to coaching (e.g., Dole & Donaldson, 2006). Indeed, perceptions of power inequality may have supported the resistance among teachers in the present study, an observation supported by Foucault’s (1978/1990) assertion that resistance will occur anywhere power exists. Shaw (2006) has suggested that a first step for literacy coaches is to build trust with teachers in a school. The coaches in the present study made similar claims. Casey (2006) has noted that coaches should be reflective and embrace resistance and questioned whether teachers are “resistant or just thoughtful, inquisitive educators who need more information, research, examples, experiences, or support . . .” (p. 29). Supporting Casey’s notion, many coaches in the present study linked time to the barrier of resistance among teachers, reporting that time with teachers affected their ability to establish relationships and build trust with teachers. It also affected the amount of information and examples that they could share with teachers. These coaches were most likely right in their observation, a conclusion supported by literature suggesting that with time and experience, teachers who were initially sceptical tended to become more welcoming to the coaching strategy (Snow, 2007).

According to Joyce and Showers (1996, 2002), feedback should not be included in the coaching model because it breaks down collegial atti-

tudes and forces coaches into evaluative roles. We found that coaches in the present study intuitively did not provide feedback unless teachers had asked for it, thereby fostering a more collegial than evaluative relationship, as Joyce and Showers have suggested. Some coaches reported that they began working only with the teachers who wanted to be there. Some research has supported this strategy at the beginning of the coaching process (McKenna & Walpole, 2008), but Toll (2005) argues that it is important to work with all teachers on staff, including those who are resistant so that coaches are not viewed as only working with the “good” teachers.

The importance of a principal’s role in the success of literacy coaching has been explained by Rodgers and Rodgers (2007), who suggested that principals may be limited in content-based knowledge of literacy. In a similar manner, Poglinco and Bach (2004) have stated that partnership with principals is critical for literacy coaching to succeed in schools. In tune with this research, many coaches in the present study wanted more involvement of school principals, particularly to provide release time for teachers and to help establish a positive view of literacy coaches in schools. Principals could achieve these suggestions by attending meetings and showing support for the coaches’ role. Additional suggestions identified by coaches in this study and by Sturtevant (2004) include school principals obtaining funding for new resource materials and organizing time schedules for teachers and coaches.

Research in the area of literacy coaching has offered suggestions for principals. To address the barrier of lack of support from principals, the International Reading Association recommended that principals be provided with adequate training to clarify their relationship with literacy coaches. Others (e.g., Morgan et al., 2003) suggest that principals learn alongside teachers. Although this may be optimal, we suggest that it may not be possible because of the often limited time principals have to focus on a specific initiative. Instead, we suggest that a more realistic solution would be to involve principals in learning about coaching, to some extent to help clarify the coaching process. Taken together, the findings of the present study and previous research indicate that principals can support literacy coaches in schools through greater involvement in addition to providing organizational support. We offer that Ministry

sessions for school principals about ways to support literacy coaches and some information about their role would be effective.

Some coaches reported that the time they had to devote to the coaching role, in light of their own teaching responsibilities, affected their success in literacy coaching. Coaches suggested that working with fewer schools and teachers would increase their effectiveness. In these situations, frequent visits to fewer schools might be more effective. If this solution is insufficient, increasing the position to full-time might be required for optimal success, according to coaches. Swafford, Maltsberger, Button, and Ferguson (1997) reported similar findings, concluding that time and frequent visits are a very important part in coaching teachers to change their instructional practice, giving credence to the suggestions of coaches in the present study.

Although the present study was delimited to interviews with literacy coaches, not observing them in practice (Walpole & Blamey, 2008), results provide insight into perceptions and beliefs that may be related to practice (Fang, 1996). Despite some issues that might limit their role, when the literacy coaches reflected on their experiences, they perceived coaching as an improvement over previous practices. Coach #3 stated that literacy coaching was "the biggest improvement the board had made" and coaches were glad to be a direct part of it. When asked to compare the coaching role to other professional development opportunities for teachers, Coach #3 commented, "The coaches are directly involved and they are seen as staff. They provide immediate feedback. Teachers are willing to call the coach because they are seen as partners, and not above them." Coach #3's statement gives support to our research, providing evidence of the need to continue and improve upon the role of literacy coaches and justifying the additional cost to the school board.

Our findings about how literacy coaches perceived their role raise other questions about literacy coaching programs. Further research will be required to clarify the complex relationships that occur in literacy coaching, such as those of power and resistance, and evaluation and peer coaching. An investigation of different models of literacy coaching and how literacy coaching is organized would also have practical applications for schools and school boards. Because literacy coaching is still a

relatively new initiative in schools, more research is required about many aspects of coaching.

#### SUMMARY

This research provides insight about the role of literacy coaches within a Canadian school board. Some of the important and recurring aspects of this role include teaching strategies, observation of teaching, and debriefing with the teacher. Certain barriers limit the effectiveness of coaches in their role, such as the amount of time available to work with teachers and limited resource materials. Some coaches have developed ways to overcome these barriers, and some have made suggestions for personal and systemic changes to improve literacy coaching, such as having fewer schools to service and increased support from school principals. It is expected that with increased support of literacy coaches that literacy coaching will ultimately lead to improved teaching practice.

#### CONCLUSION

Literacy coach #10 stated, "I am growing everyday; reflection on each experience and my role helps." Many other coaches reported enjoying their work. However, it is important to optimize the effectiveness of literacy coaches, given the resources that have been extended to support literacy coaching in schools. Our study has produced important findings about how coaches perceived their role and the limitations in their practice. It also has clarified how to improve the practice of literacy coaching by identifying how coaches could be more supportive of teachers and ultimately of students' learning. In many cases, coaches were able to identify ways to overcome barriers.

Clarifying the role of a literacy coach would help assure coaches that they are offering teachers and students the best possible program. Some coaches requested more province-wide information from other school boards about what the coaching role entailed. Even when roles are determined locally to meet specific needs rather than a more generic process of literacy coaching (Rogers & Rogers, 2007), more information about the experiences and practices of other coaches may help clarify one's own practice. One recommendation for the school board is to expand their level of understanding of literacy coaching to the current coaching

staff, perhaps through role-play videos, as suggested by one coaching member, or by having other school boards present information about their coaching program. Another recommendation is to use the summer for 'road mapping' or generating a curriculum map for literacy coaching (Walpole & McKenna, 2008). One literacy coach suggested an initial meeting with teachers to identify the focus for the next year, a practice that could reduce teacher resistance and promote role clarity, which could be recommended to other coaches.

Interviews with coaches also highlighted the need for additional support from school principals. Administrators' uncertainty about a coach's role may be related to the lack of support reported by some coaches. However, it may be difficult for school principals to support coaches when they are not clear about their role. Many teachers and administrators have experienced short term professional development initiatives, making the need to clarify the purpose of literacy coaching even more critical (Lyons & Pinnell, 2001). Meeting with principals should be a critical part of the coaching role, and an in-service session provided by the school board or Ministry of Education for school principals would also support literacy coaches. Coaches and principals could collaborate, in part, what the role of the coach might be in a particular school. More self-certainty about a coach's own role in schools could also improve support from school principals.

Issues related to time were an important theme from the interviews, particularly the need for teacher release time to meet with coaches. This issue is also linked to support from school administrators. Principals should be encouraged to provide opportunities for coaches to meet with staffs regularly and to support their position by acknowledging the accomplishments of the coaching practice in their schools. In addition, literacy coaches need more time to work with teachers; servicing fewer schools would allow coaches to feel more competent in their role. School boards should consider reducing the number of schools assigned to each coach.

Some research has suggested that coaching makes a difference in children's literacy achievement (Guiney, 2001; Russo, 2004). However, before making final decisions about the academic impact of literacy coaching on children's literacy knowledge, it is important for literacy

coaches to have an opportunity to perform at what they might consider an optimal level. If literacy coaching can provide more effective literacy learning for students, then it is vital to reflect consistently on those practices that are effective. For example, many coaches in our study reported feeling more competent with increased time in a coaching role. Considering the value of literacy coaching, Coach #11 commented, "Literacy coaches are the way of the future. We need to think about how we improve sustained change in teachers." Our study has made a contribution to the limited literature about literacy coaching in Canada and results can be used to inform future initiatives to improve the effectiveness of this innovative model of professional development.

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## Appendix

### Interview Questions

1. How long have you been working as a literacy coach? What grade levels do you work with? Please describe your educational and professional background.
2. How would you describe your role? (e.g., work with teachers on new strategies, observing teaching practice, work with students, data analysis, co-teaching, lesson study, demonstration lessons, work with individual teachers and grade level/divisional teams)
3. Please describe a typical coaching session.
4. Please talk about a coaching session that worked really well and one that did not work as well? What do you see as possible reasons for a session working well and a session not working so well?
5. What are the possible barriers to literacy coaching and are you able to overcome them? If so, how? (e.g., working with resistant teachers)
6. How competent do you feel in your role as a literacy coach? What professional learning and/or resource materials are needed to support you in your growth and development as a literacy coach?
7. What would you like to know more about in your literacy coaching role?
8. How important is literacy coaching in comparison to other types of literacy support teachers may receive, such as reading workshops?
9. What are the kinds of structures necessary to optimize the role of literacy coaches in schools?
10. What is the role of administration in literacy coaching? Are there ways that it can be improved?
11. What changes would you like to see in a literacy coaching programs, specifically with regards to training, relationships with teachers, administration, etc?
12. What do you believe would be an ideal structure for a coaching model? (e.g., full-time, part-time, number of schools per coach, teachers per coach, amount of time needed, visitation schedule, etc.)
13. Do you see yourself as an adult educator? Why or why not? What knowledge is important when working with adults?

Please feel free to add further comments about your beliefs and practices.