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Middle Grades Literacy Coaching from the Coach's Perspective

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Abstract

This qualitative case study investigated middle grades literacy coaches' perspectives on their efforts to facilitate teacher change and impact classroom practice. Data were collected from three coaches as they worked with a variety of teachers in middle school settings, using field observation and interviews with coaches, teachers, and principals. Results suggest literacy coaches perceive the potential to effect positive teacher change but that they acknowledge challenges in building relationships with teachers, working within complex school structures to find time to do coaching work, and reaching across subject areas to facilitate teacher discussions of literacy instruction and student learning.

Middle School Literacy Coaching from the Coach's Perspective

Literacy coaching has become an increasingly popular professional development model nationwide (Marsh,McCombs, Lockwood, Martorell,Gershwin, Naftel, Le, Shea, Barney, & Crego; Walpole & Blamey, 2008). A major draw of coaching is its potential to impact teacher learning and improve classroom practice, providing an instructional link between standards and increased student achievement (Elmore & Rothman, 2000). Literacy coaching possesses a number of characteristics of effective professional development, including sustained and ongoing change, teacher inquiry and collaboration, and clear connections between teachers' learning goals and work with students (Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 1996). These characteristics aim to

effect teacher change and positively impact classroom practice, boosting the appeal of coaching.

In the last ten years, literacy coaching has experienced significant growth at the elementary school level, evidenced by the expansion of reading specialist roles to include coaching (Dole, 2004) and by the widespread use of coaches as an implementation tool for the Reading First initiative (L'Allier & Elish-Piper, 2006). More recently, literacy coaching has moved upward into middle and secondary settings, an expansion that raises several concerns. One concern is the context of middle school, which differs greatly from the elementary settings in which most coaching models originated. While many elementary teachers consider themselves to be teachers of reading, middle and secondary teachers may not, and common instructional elements such as those provided by Reading First are seldom found across middle and secondary settings. Another concern is the paucity of research examining the efficacy of literacy coaching (Marsh et al., 2008; Neufeld & Roper, 2003). While the International Reading Association has developed goals for middle and secondary coaches (IRA, 2006), research on literacy coaching at these levels lags behind implementation. This is a source of concern, as the degree to which literacy coaching aligns with the contexts of middle grades teaching and learning is not well understood.

Several recent studies have attempted to describe and examine literacy coaching in a variety of school contexts (Gross, 2007; Rainville & Jones, 2008; Smith, 2007; Walpole & Blamey, 2008). The purpose of this study is to add to this body of emerging research by exploring middle grades literacy coach perspectives on coaching roles, teacher change, and student learning.

Conceptual Framework

Conceptually, literacy coaching emphasizes knowledge sharing (Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 1996), a form of professional development that focuses on bridging the gap between knowledge introduced in learning contexts and application in classroom settings. A *literacy coach* is defined as a person who both supports teachers as they gain and implement instructional knowledge and skills (Toll, 2005) and provides leadership for a school's literacy program (Sturtevant, 2003). Situated both inside and outside classrooms, the literacy coach has the opportunity to foster knowledge sharing by facilitating teacher learning, supporting changes in practice, and impacting student learning.

Coaching Roles

Literacy coaches appear to have been charged with two major responsibilities, with specific coaching roles clustering around them. *Teacher mentoring*, one responsibility of coaching, focuses on work with individual teachers through observation, demonstration, and feedback (Dole, 2004; Toll, 2005). This responsibility addresses two of the four standards for middle and secondary literacy coaches established by the International Reading Association (IRA, 2006): specifically, Standard 2, skillful job-embedded coaches in core content areas, and Standard 4, skillful instructional strategists who focus on improving academic literacy. Associated roles focus on assisting teachers by planning, co-teaching, observing, and providing curricular and instructional support. These roles are situated in the classroom and are focused on helping individual teachers put new knowledge into practice.

Literacy program advocacy, the other major coaching responsibility, emphasizes group work through after-school training sessions, professional development meetings, and school-wide literacy initiatives (Sturtevant, 2003; Walpole & McKenna, 2004). This responsibility is reflected in the other two standards for middle and secondary literacy coaches: Standard 1, skillful collaborators who function effectively in middle and secondary settings, and Standard 3, skillful evaluators of literacy needs who collaborate with school leadership teams to interpret and use assessment data (IRA, 2006). Literacy advocacy roles emphasize professional development efforts such as school-wide workshops, department planning sessions, and administrative duties. This set of roles is situated in the larger school context and is aimed at promoting teacher learning across communities of practice (Wenger, 1998). Teacher learning communities, small groups of teachers guided by shared goals, inquiry, and literacy learning (Lent, 2007), may collaborate with the coach to engage in the change process and to improve teaching practice. Such communities may include study groups, collaborative teams, advisory committees, or teacher learning communities (National Middle School Association, 2003).

Together, teacher mentoring and literacy advocacy responsibilities, and associated roles, position coaches both outside and inside the classroom, providing them with a powerful knowledge-sharing approach

to professional development that has the potential to support teacher change across school contexts.

Teacher Change

Efforts to enact change in educational contexts have tended to move in discrete steps from research to change agents to teachers—an approach termed empirical-rational (Richardson & Placier, 2001). The normative-reeducative change process presents an alternative, emphasizing the social nature of intelligence and the need for individuals to participate in their own re-education (Chin & Benne, 1969). Situated learning theory aligns with this process by considering as integral both learning activities and the learning contexts in which these activities take place (Putnam & Borko, 2000). Professional development efforts grounded in situated learning and the normative-reeducative change process would need to be embedded in context, collaborative in nature, and ongoing to sustain growth in teacher learning and create change in instructional practice (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2001; Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 1996; Garet, Porter, Desimone, Birman, & Yoon, 2001; Steiner, 2000).

Viewed from the situated learning perspective, literacy coaching aligns with a process of teacher change separated into three distinct conceptual levels: (a) initial steps, (b) necessary supports, and (c) ongoing efforts (Smith, 2009). The first level, *initial steps*, involves relationship building between coach and teachers and the formation of teacher learning communities focused on issues of reflective practice (Ball & Cohen, 1999). The second level, *necessary supports*, emphasizes the coach's work in classrooms with teachers and the facilitation of professional development sessions. The third level, *ongoing efforts*, stresses sustained change through professional development of the coach and the independent work of established teacher learning communities.

This three-level change process has the potential to impact several forms of teacher knowledge crucial to improving teaching and learning. *Subject matter knowledge*, consisting of factual information, central concepts, and organizing information (Grossman, Wilson, & Shulman, 1989) is a major concern to middle grades teachers who need deep knowledge to teach subject-specific courses. To teach effectively, teachers must have the ability to transform subject matter knowledge into something teachable. This ability defines *pedagogical content knowledge*, which research suggests is a powerful factor in deciding what to teach and how to teach it so that students will learn what is taught (Grossman, 1989; Schempp, 1995; Shulman, 1986). Teachers may have various levels of pedagogical content knowledge depending on experience, skill, and previous professional development. Literacy coaching has the potential to impact teachers' subject matter and pedagogical content knowledge through professional development opportunities, participation in teacher learning communities, and mentoring work supporting changes in classroom practice.

Literacy coaching also supports the development of practical and personal practical knowledge. *Practical knowledge* is defined as knowledge of students, curriculum enactment, and practice within classroom settings (Doyle, 1988; Elbaz, 1983; Lampert, 1985). Coaches, working side by side with teachers, are situated to help teachers develop practical knowledge in classroom contexts. *Personal practical knowledge* development may also be supported through developing coach-teacher relationships. This form of knowledge brings together subject matter, practical, and even personal knowledge in the act of teaching and is based on the belief that teachers "hold knowledge that comes from experience, is learned in context, and is expressed in practice" (Clandinin, 2000, p. 29). The work of the literacy coach, in particular the responsibility of mentoring teachers, emphasizes personal connections and collaborative relationships, making personal practical knowledge integral to the relationship-building aspect of coaching. Through mentoring work in classrooms and literacy advocacy work across school professional development contexts, literacy coaching has the potential to support teacher growth across the three levels of the change process.

Middle Grades Literacy

Middle grades literacy coaches face a unique set of challenges, due, in part, to the relative paucity of research on middle grades literacy and effective reading instruction for young adolescents (Roe, 2004). More research is needed to better understand and support adolescents in classroom, school, and community contexts (Conley & Hinchman, 2004). Three elements of middle grades literacy have the potential to impact mentoring and literacy advocacy responsibilities of coaches. First, a range of literacy programs at the middle level adds complexity to the work of the coach. Young adolescents experience a variety of literacy settings over the course of a school day, from remedial reading to language arts block to no reading instruction at all (Irvin & Conners, 1989; Witte & Otto, 1981). Coaches involved in school-wide professional development plans would need to

navigate an array of literacy settings experienced by students as they work with a variety of teachers to facilitate change.

Second, middle grades students are expected to makes sense of a variety of materials without necessarily receiving reading instruction in subject-specific classes, resulting in a separation between literacy and content-area learning (Draper, Smith, Hall, & Siebert, 2005). Subject-specific classes emphasize content-area knowledge and not reading skills or strategies. As Irvin (1998) noted, "Sole emphasis on content leaves students with isolated information and without strategies for learning new content; sole emphasis on reading process leaves students with little about which to think or write" (p. 241). Many teachers do not feel there is a coordinated effort to teach reading skills in content-area classes (Gee & Forester, 1988). Coaches may face issues of inadequate preparation of content-area teachers to teach reading or resistance to spending class time in subject-specific classes on teaching reading skills and strategies.

Third, middle grades reading instruction tends to neglect higher-level thinking and reading skills, addressing instead lower-level skills in isolation (Langer, 2001). There is concern that instruction may persist at being "dominated by direct instruction, low-level skill routines, and passive activity" (Beane & Brodhagen, 2001). Further, reading comprehension strategies, vital to higher-level reading processes, may not be taught at all (Dole, 2000). Middle grades literacy coaches would need to address this potential gap between instructional theory and classroom practice when working with teachers to encourage change and improve instruction.

The purpose of literacy coaching is to support teacher change in knowledge and practice, thereby impacting student learning. Given the complexity of coaching responsibilities and contexts, the ways in which coaches go about their work in relation to this purpose are not clear. This study examined coaches' perspectives on coaching roles, teacher change, and student learning to better understand the work of literacy coaches in middle grades contexts. The following research questions framed this study:

- What are coaches' perspectives on the roles they assume as part of their work?
- How do coaches address the issue of teacher change?
- In what ways do coaches consider student learning in relation to their work with teachers?

Method

This study of coaches' perspectives was part of a larger study that examined the work of middle grades literacy coaches in context (Smith, 2007). Using a multiple-case structure designed to both describe individual cases and analyze themes across cases (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2003), that study examined the work of three coaches in two school districts in the Western United States. The current study utilized both existing data on coach perspectives collected during the 2004–2005 school year and data from follow-up interviews with the same coach participants conducted two years later.

Setting and Participants

The Stevens School District (all names in this study are pseudonyms) is a large urban school district with a diverse population of approximately 46,000 students. This district had recently begun a grant-funded literacy coaching program in three high-needs middle schools in an effort to boost teachers' literacy instruction and student achievement, particularly in reading. The Wallace school district, located ten miles outside an urban center, is an increasingly diverse, medium-sized district of approximately 16,000 students. In 2003 the Wallace district had created a district-wide middle grades coaching position as a way to help teachers implement a newly adopted language arts program and to support changes in teachers' literacy practices. The three coaches in this study were chosen to capture a diverse range of work and school settings in these two districts.

One participant, Grace, was a literacy coach in the Stevens School District. By the time of the follow-up interviews in 2007–2008, she had spent a total of three years as a grant-funded literacy coach at Adams Middle School (grades 6–8). In years previous to the study, she had been a literacy consultant in the district's central curriculum department and an elementary school teacher. After her years at Adams, Grace spent one year as a district-funded mentor for new teachers, and during the 2007–2008 school year, she had been placed in two different Stevens middle schools as a district-funded literacy coach.

Diane, a second coach participant, worked from 2003–2008 as a grant-funded literacy coach at Jefferson Middle School, also in the Stevens School District. She had a strong background in literacy, having worked for a number of years as a reading specialist and literacy consultant at both the middle and elementary levels. Grace and Diane brought literacy knowledge and professional development

experience to their coaching positions, but both worked in relative isolation, meeting occasionally with the small group of grant-funded coaches but rarely at the district level.

Michelle, the third coach participant, began working as a literacy and technology coach in 2004 for all seven middle schools in the Wallace school district. She had previously been a middle school language arts teacher and curriculum teacher-leader in the same district. This background helped her feel confident about networking with and supporting teachers as they implemented the new language arts program. At the time of the follow-up interviews, Michelle was still working in the same position, although she had taken on the additional responsibility of teaching language arts one period per day at one of the middle schools in her district. Table 1 displays demographic information for each of the schools assigned to these three coaches from 2004 through 2008.

Demographic information shown in Table 1 illustrates the diverse profiles of schools across these two districts, creating unique contexts within which the literacy coaches were expected to help teachers improve practice and positively impact student achievement.

Data Collection and Analysis

Initial data collection occurred over a five-month period during the 2004–2005 school year. Data sources included: (a) conversational and semi-structured interviews of coaches, principals, and teachers; (b) observational field notes; and (c) coach-written reflections. Each coach was observed for at least three one-week periods in a staggered schedule spanning the five-month data collection period. Additional data on coach perspectives were collected through follow-up interviews with coach participants. Questions were designed to explore themes from the initial data and to elicit additional information on coach perspectives. These interviews were conducted during the 2007–2008 school year using a format similar to the semi-structured interviews originally conducted, with a specific focus on coach perspectives on coaching roles, teacher change, and student learning.

Initial analysis involved examining data to develop codes through an open coding approach (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) and clustering coded data segments around common themes that had emerged (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Through this process of aggregation (Stake, 1995), a set of 36 codes were clustered in five thematic categories: (a) classroom practice, (b) coach background, (c) coaching roles, (d) social contexts, and (e) teacher learning. Each thematic category contained a number of codes, some broadly defined and some narrow in scope.

Subsequent analysis involved identifying a subset of 17 perspective-oriented codes, relating to three categories represented by this study's research questions: (a) coaching roles, (b) teacher change, and (c) student learning. See the Appendix for a list of perspective-oriented codes with descriptions. Using Atlas.ti (Version 5.0) as a filtering tool, coded data segments were clustered and analyzed in relation to these categories, making it possible to examine patterns across the three cases of coaching. An additional analytical approach, direct interpretation (Stake, 1995), was used to highlight additional themes and to pull apart differences across the cases of coaching. This approach allowed for additional themes, not immediately apparent in the first approach, to be identified.

Table 1
School Demographics

Coach	School	Enrollment	Free/ Reduced-Price Lunch	Transitional Bilingual	Special Education	Meeting Reading Standard	Classroom Teachers	Teacher Experience (Years)
Diane	Jefferson	745	69.0%	13.1%	14.7%	36.8%	41	12.9
Grace	Adams	800	70.8%	23.2%	13.1%	50.2%	49	10.3
	Meridian	594	47.3%	8.3%	16.1%	67.7%	32	10.0
	Waterford	1,037	36.3%	7.7%	8.5%	83.5%	52	12.0
Michelle	Fillmore	614	24.6%	11.2%	11.4%	74.5%	35	10.4
	Harrison	818	8.9%	7.7%	8.9%	90.9%	45	11.8
	Lincoln	497	41.9%	16.9%	15.9%	50.3%	37	7.0
	Truman	693	17.3%	.9%	9.2%	81.7%	36	8.9
	Wilson	792	10.1%	.3%	8.8%	79.6%	43	11.2

Results

This study examined literacy coach perspectives on coaching roles, teacher change, and student learning. Across the three cases examined, coaches experienced a multitude of roles, some of which seemed to relate to teacher change and student learning, while some did not. Teacher change, partly as a result of this role multiplicity, was less often a focus of coaching work and reflection than might have been anticipated. Further, in contrast to the coaches' perspectives on roles and teacher change, perspectives on student learning appeared unique to each coach within the context of work with particular teachers. The following sections reflect these data characteristics as results in each of the three areas explored.

Coach Perspectives on Coaching Roles

Three major themes emerged from the analysis of coaches' perspectives on their roles in relation to mentoring and literacy advocacy responsibilities. First, coaches emphasized the usefulness of serving as a curriculum resource for teachers. Second, they highlighted the importance of both establishing and developing positive working relationships with teachers across subject areas. Third, they raised concerns about advising and authority tensions within the middle school structure. These themes highlight the complexity of coaching roles and the manner in which the roles played out in context.

Usefulness serving as a curriculum resource. Coaches considered teacher-oriented planning and resource roles to be a vital foundational element of their work. For all three coaches, assisting individual teachers as a curriculum resource served as a primary focus of coach-teacher interactions. Coaches felt this work enabled them to demonstrate their knowledge of literacy and pedagogy, establish credibility as a useful addition to the school, and begin to cultivate positive relationships with teachers. Michelle, after conducting initial meetings with two language arts teachers new to the district, reflected:

> The nice thing about this job is I can follow up and say, "Now that we've given this assessment and have this data, what do we do with it?" And so it can be my job to pull some curriculum resources and say, "Remember the students are struggling in this, in the literature book we have this." I can do that part since teachers are so busy making parent phone calls, the reality of getting ready for the next day.

Michelle perceived this aspect of her work to be a vital part of the coaching process, as she was both providing curriculum support for teachers who needed it and completing time-consuming tasks so that teachers could focus on instruction. This work also helped Michelle facilitate positive interactions with teachers.

This perception of being a useful curriculum resource for teachers was shared by Diane, who, in the midst of working with several sixth grade language arts teachers, noted, "Just finding material for them is a huge benefit to them, whereas if they spent their time looking for stuff, it would take away their time with kids. It's a kind of support that's really valuable." Grace had a similar perception of this curriculum resource role, recalling in her follow-up interview that one teacher had told her she was providing the most support by helping him implement a new writing program in his classroom. For all three coaches, this was foundational supportive work that helped teachers and provided a starting point for developing coach-teacher relationships. It was also a way to address, if briefly, teachers' subject matter knowledge by providing assistance locating and used curriculum resources.

Establishing relationships with teachers. Coaches acknowledged the need for sensitivity in establishing relationships, flexibility in scheduling coaching work, clarity in establishing a purpose for observations, and thoughtfulness in providing feedback. Coaches considered their relationships with teachers central to the teacher mentoring responsibility of coaching.

The sensitivity of their relationships with teachers was on the minds of the coaches. Grace, reflecting on two years of coaching work with teachers at Adams Middle School, noted, "There's a whole psychology to how you approach different people I have to take into account. People's insecurities, what they are fragile about, and try to figure out the best way of moving them from one place to another without creating some type of issue between us." Both Grace and Diane attempted to work with teachers across subject areas, approaching these colleagues with caution. Diane was particularly aware of the importance of establishing trust, as teachers at Jefferson Middle School were still literally locking their doors to keep out unwanted visitors after a math coach had interrupted classes on several occasions to correct lessons. While these incidents had occurred before Diane was assigned to the school as literacy coach, she acknowledged their lasting negative effect on the teachers. Without safe

and positive relationships, coaches and teachers found it difficult to move forward with the coaching process.

Michelle used a low-key approach to cultivating positive relationships with teachers, which could be called the "check in." She would occasionally stop by a teacher's classroom during a planning period to say hello and see how things were going. Sometimes this led to a request for curriculum-resource work, while other times it simply helped the teacher see the coach as a useful person offering services without judgment. Michelle also used check-ins to observe teachers during class time. During her first year as a literacy coach she commented:

> I'll just pop into a classroom and see a teacher teaching and say, "That was awesome, can I go share that idea with another person?" or ask, "I see you're working on persuasive writing, did you know that there's this resource?" And sometimes it's just personal things, like "I used to teach social studies, I am not the social studies coach, but do you want to see what I did for a Civil War unit?" That kind of thing.

The check-in was a way to get into classrooms and to develop relationships with teachers. It was a casual way to build relationships and initiate the coaching process within the situated learning contexts of individual classrooms.

Developing relationships with teachers. Moving forward with the coaching process required a teacher's desire to be coached. Grace, who had experienced difficulties engaging teachers in the coaching process, emphatically stated in her follow-up interview, "The thing I know about coaching, and I've always known, is that it's better when people want the help. You can't force anyone to take help. You cannot." The desire for help was an essential element of the teacher-coach relationship, and without it, the coaching process led to frustration. This knowledge appeared to place even more pressure on the coaches to foster positive relationships with teachers so that forward progress would be possible. If the teacher wanted help, Grace felt she could make progress while also shaping the experience using her knowledge of the teacher and the coaching situation. Nevertheless, the need for coaching had to be apparent to the teacher, and this seemed to happen more often with language arts teachers than in other subject areas.

Another aspect of relationship development highlighted by the coaches was the need to be flexible with scheduling teacher meetings and observations. The complexity of the middle school schedule was daunting, with multiple class periods per day and teachers organized by subject area. The resulting schedules were a source of frustration. When debriefing a particularly difficult day, Diane commented:

> I do have a schedule where I'm in one class two days a week and then in another. It drives me crazy, and I can't say it's a good schedule because it doesn't allow me enough time to follow up on stuff and to do pre and post briefings, which is maddening. This is the maddening part of this job.

Diane's ideal schedule would have allowed her to conduct pre- and post-observation conferences with teachers, but the clustering of language arts classes, for example, did not permit this. Instead, she worked with them serially, focusing on continued conversations with one teacher over several weeks and then moving to another teacher. She saw this as a necessary compromise.

Coaches found it essential to maintain flexibility when visiting classrooms and to establish a clear purpose for observations. Diane summed up this point while in the midst of trying to figure out a consistent coaching schedule. She noted:

> It's not, "OK I worked with you, check, I worked with you…" it's kind of a fluid process where I'll come and observe and say, "I see this happening but am wondering how the conferences are going," and they say, "Oh I haven't done them for a month." So I ask what I can do to help get that started again. Maybe a reminder is good, or to help locate materials for that. Or maybe I need to model a conference to help a teacher remember what we talked about and how to do one. Or a teacher might say, "I don't have time to think about this, so could you just go away?"

Given this range of reactions, she did not conduct surprise visits. Rather, she focused on working with teachers who had previously committed to being coached. Yet, even with these teachers, she found it essential to emphasize flexibility as she offered to observe and work with them. This flexibility appeared necessary both to preserve relationships with teachers and to help them engage in change.

While setting a clear purpose for observations was helpful in getting coaches through the door, the issue

of feedback made coach-teacher relationships much more complicated. Michelle, for example, had to reassure teachers on a regular basis that she was not a district spy. All three coaches struggled to avoid the role of evaluator while also providing helpful feedback to teachers. Diane confessed, "I do have enormous amounts of evaluative thoughts, but it's not exactly clear how to make people move who are not moving. It's such a fine line, and there's a lot of finessing going on."

Grace, while working at Adams Middle School and trying to develop relationships with teachers, echoed this sense of caution, observing, "I think this brings up one of the challenges of doing what I do. I have to be really careful to make sure that I don't make anyone feel they aren't competent at what they do." Her comment both highlights and understates the significant challenge to coaches in terms of feedback: To encourage teacher change without criticizing teaching performance. As Diane noted, "The tricky thing is that nobody else is visiting classrooms, so I have to be careful to give positive feedback."

Coaches perceived the vulnerability of teachers in opening their classrooms to observation, scrutiny, and evaluation. They felt that providing overly critical feedback would damage the coach-teacher relationship and shut down the coaching process. To avoid this, the coaches favored subtle approaches to feedback, including asking questions in post-observation conferences and initiating conversations about instruction rather than making evaluative statements judging teaching performance. The goal was to foster healthy relationships while, at the same time, nudging teachers to change.

Advising and authority tensions. All three coaches acknowledged the tension between their work advising teachers and issues of authority. Across teacher mentoring and literacy advocacy responsibilities, coaches struggled to advise teachers through planning, mentoring, and providing feedback, while lacking authority to enact change. Coaches perceived their work as advisors in a positive light when there was a sense of progress but felt frustration when movement toward change was missing. Grace perceived a lack of awareness among administrators of her skills as a professional development facilitator, noting that some sessions for teachers had been taught by district office personnel rather than by her. Her hope was that she would be asked for help as the school year progressed so that she could play a more prominent literacy advocacy role in relation to professional development.

Michelle, in the literacy advocacy role of professional developer, was able to invite teachers from several middle schools to the district office to discuss student assessment data and writing samples. Reflecting on the experience in her follow-up interview, she commented:

> It's been powerful. When I get teachers together, it automatically, the discussion gets really detailed and not personal. We have these outside data, we don't even need to look at the kid's name or even what school he or she came from, at that level, it's big picture how are things going based on our reader scores.

Michelle regarded this as a success of her coaching work. Teachers were willing and engaged, and there was a clear sense of moving forward. Diane described a similar sense of success relating to teacher discussions of literature selections to use in reading class book clubs. She noted that, in the beginning, there was a huge amount of teacher resistance to some of the books. To her, this was an encouraging sign that the books contained edgy themes worth discussing in book clubs, so she facilitated teacher discussions of the books. For coaches, these kinds of opportunities in literacy advocacy roles allowed them to engage teachers in a positive manner.

In other instances, teachers seemed reluctant to change, leaving coaches aware of the limitations of their authority. In her continuing work to implement book club discussions, Diane encountered teachers who balked at participating in the coaching process. Some teachers appeared to accept her literacy advocacy work in professional development meetings but not her teacher mentoring activities, such as observations or discussions of pedagogy. This led Diane to refer the situation to her building principal, acknowledging she lacked authority to remedy the problem. After observing a language arts class in which little instruction appeared to be happening, a frustrated Diane explained:

> The extra support I need from the administrative staff, I have no role in evaluation, so when I am up against someone who is not making any changes, who is not trying new things, who will not cooperate, basically, they're not unfriendly but are totally uncooperative, that is an enormous challenge and is very frustrating. Sometimes I can observe their class and see so much damage occurring, it just breaks my heart. It makes kids not want to read, not want to come to school, not see themselves as competent learners.

As she moved across literacy advocacy and teacher mentoring responsibilities, Diane encountered teacher resistance and came up against limitations to her authority as coach. This tension of being advisors with limited authority was a primary source of frustration expressed by the coaches as they struggled to move forward with their work.

Coach Perspectives on Conceptual Levels of Teacher Change

In this study, teacher change was conceptualized as an ongoing process including three levels: (a) initial steps, (b) necessary supports, and (c) ongoing efforts. Within the context teacher mentoring and literacy advocacy responsibilities, the coaches in this study explored the challenges and successes in helping teachers move forward with the change process.

Initial steps. At this level of teacher change, coaches appeared to focus on building relationships and establishing a level of trust necessary to engage teachers in the change process through mentoring and literacy advocacy work. Although each coach addressed this level differently, they all found initial steps to be time-consuming but crucial. They also acknowledged that not all teachers wanted to take steps toward developing relationships with them or establishing learning communities with peers. Diane, resorting to humor to address teacher reluctance, commented (as she walked down the hall), "Some people see me coming, and they are reminded of what they maybe should be doing, while others hide when they see me. Maybe they don't really hide, but they certainly move the subject to the weather so that they don't have to discuss something."

Grace had similar encounters in her first school placement, noting that one of her assigned teachers frequently canceled planning meetings and rescheduled classroom visits for a variety of reasons. She expressed frustration over not having been able to work with this teacher once in a six-month period. Both Diane and Grace's experiences relate to the earlier discussion of coaches' perspectives on their roles and the need to develop relationships with teachers. Without positive and nurturing relationships, teacher change seemed unlikely. At the same time, these two coaches knew they needed to engage teachers one way or another. Both perceived there to be a great deal of work to be done to improve classroom practice in language arts classes and across subject areas—work that could only occur through a process of ongoing teacher change.

Moving from school to school, Michelle had surprisingly little trouble accessing teachers, but she acknowledged the challenge of moving beyond friendly conversation. She admitted that many language arts teachers in the district considered her a friend and colleague, which made it easy for her to show up and say hello but difficult to address effective instruction and teacher change. For all three coaches, locked doors, unanswered e-mails, and discussions of the weather were seen as obstacles that needed to be overcome to begin making a difference as coaches.

Necessary supports. This level of teacher change addressed most of what is typically considered coaching: (a) goal setting, (b) observations, and (c) debrief sessions with individual teachers working on implementing new instructional skills. The coaches also facilitated group discussions, in teacher learning community contexts, to encourage change. Coach perspectives on this level of the process emphasized the necessity of flexibility in roles, scheduling, and relationships with teachers in effecting teacher change. Grace, reflecting on her continuing work with a particular teacher, noted:

> We can only work on a little bit of this stuff at a time, so that's always my thing. We don't want to work on a long list of things unless we're going to do it over the whole year, but there are some big things that are related to what some of my aspirations are for [the teacher] that fit into that, like with lesson planning and knowing where you are going with things next and not being in such a hurry.

She considered these supports to be unique to the individual teacher, knowing that other teachers would perhaps not need the same kinds of assistance. This emphasis on specific needs held true for work with groups as well. Michelle, for example, experienced a growing sense of collaboration among teachers, allowing her to spend less time mentoring individuals as they began providing support for each other in teacher learning communities within the larger middle school context. In the follow-up interview, asked about mentoring, she commented:

> That is still happening, and it's funny because I haven't done a lot of reflecting on it, but when you asked that question, I thought, 'I feel like I'm not doing it as intensely with new teachers because their team members are serving that need,' and I think that it's because we do have

> a common curriculum. … There's really this mentality that this is what needs to happen for all seventh grade language arts students, and here's this new teacher. There's just a pretty strong collaborative sense at the building level.

Whether discussing curriculum issues with teacher learning communities, or developing relationships with individuals, all three coaches focused on providing necessary supports to encourage teacher change. When progress could be observed, these efforts were seen as positive. When things did not go well, frustration was often the result, and it became difficult for the coach to continue providing necessary supports. Diane, facing teacher resistance to book club implementation and discussion, noted:

> There's a breaking point where people just feel like they've had enough. "Nobody else has people in the classroom all of the time, why are you here? Why are you picking on me?" I actually had someone say that to me this year. I had to say, "It's not you. The focus is on sixth grade, and you are part of that team."

The coaches worked to provide necessary supports for teachers to engage in the change process. Their efforts were not always successful, and coaches, at times, expressed frustration and a sense that moving forward was not likely.

Ongoing efforts. At this third level, two coaches (Michelle and Diane) appeared to encourage collaborative independence among teacher learning communities that were moving forward with instructional change. Michelle, who had seen teachers progress from depending on her to working collaboratively, had a positive view of her ongoing efforts that appeared to be moving teachers forward with instructional change. In her follow-up interview, she commented,

> Teachers go to each other. And then it's cool because they will write to me or ask to speak with me as a group. But then, also, it's like, "Hey Michelle, we need to talk about this in our grade level meeting." So it's not even that urgency of "Help me!" but "Let's have this conversation together with all 10 of us." I think that's a good thing.

Diane shared this positive view of teacher groups gaining independence to enact change. After several years of intensive work with language arts teachers on book club implementation and comprehension strategy instruction, she considered progress to have been made. In her follow-up interview, Diane reflected, "I've really felt almost like a grandparent being able to step back and look at the kids developing on their own. Because right now at this school, I would say that we're strategy rich." At the same time, Diane was quick to point out how much work was still to be accomplished, noting that an increased emphasis on test preparation was not necessarily helping teachers focus on comprehension strategies. She explained:

> It's not, "Can they use the strategy to do that?" It's, "In this text, can they find this?" So we've kind of gone backward in my mind, because my comment when we talk about these things is, "If a kid can't identify the *theme* of a piece of writing, is it because they don't understand theme, or is it because they're not comprehending what they're reading?" And that remains the question.

In contrast to the other coaches, Grace did not appear to have spent much time working at this level of coaching but, instead, remained focused on necessary supports—the second level of coaching. In the follow-up interview, reflecting on her work with teachers, Grace noted:

> The one thing I know from being at that last school all those years is, when you do something that's effective with other people, often that's how you get those kind of people back is that they hear something from someone else or they envy something someone else has done, and they hear from that person, "The coach and I did whatever …," and then they invite you in.

Grace continued to rely on successful work with individual teachers as a way to gradually increase buy-in and to move forward with a coaching agenda. Working with teachers on the level of independent learning communities was beyond Grace's immediate focus.

In summary, all three coaches saw progress in facilitating teacher change but also acknowledged numerous goals yet to be achieved. They worked to enact teacher change by establishing initial steps, providing necessary supports, and encouraging ongoing efforts, and their perspectives were framed by the successes and challenges they experienced. These perspectives appeared to temper feelings of success but also to reduce frustrations over coaching and the change process.

Coach Perspectives on Student Learning

While themes emerged across cases in the analysis of coach perspectives on coaching roles and teacher change, perspectives on student learning remained distinct to the individual coach. To examine coaches' perspectives on student learning, the process of direct interpretation (Stake, 1995) was used to describe and analyze the unique factors associated with each case of coaching in this study. According to Stake, (1995) direct interpretation involves analyzing unique instances in the data—a different process than coding to find aggregate or recurrent themes across instances. The purpose of direct interpretation is to more deeply understand the individual case rather than to focus on identifying themes across cases.

Diane. Diane's perspective on student learning focused on student motivation and engagement in book club reading groups and discussions. These were topics to which she had dedicated large amounts of time and effort, and her thoughts about student learning were framed by these experiences. Having spent years helping teachers select engaging texts for book clubs, Diane focused on student learning evidenced through discussion of these texts. In her follow-up interview, she noted:

> I wanted to have the kids see how the book really spurs them to think about their own lives. "What are the solutions and the problems that the kids in the story have, and how is that different or similar to what you face? What can you get from that, and is there any guidance, any hope, or not, or could you write a book about this, even? How is your experience so important to your own life?" If we were crying every day in that class, I would have thought it was the best class—or laughing, one or the other. And we were getting to that.

One of Diane's major initiatives had been to get students involved in reading by using high-interest and relevant texts and by using book club as a structure for facilitating discussion of important themes. In this regard, her perspective on student learning was positive. After years of work, she was able to see students engaged in lively discussions, found that they had read the chapters assigned as homework, and observed them using text-related vocabulary in new contexts (with comical results). She noted:

> I think a highlight for me was at the end of that particular class where … I was interviewing a kid, and he said, "You know, one of the things that I liked about this class was that we learned so many great words." I said, "What's an example of something that you found useful?" He said, "Somebody was bullying me, and I told them, 'Stop being so belligerent.' They just sort of walked away because they didn't know what I was talking about." I said, "Wonderful!" This makes me feel like we've been successful. You know, that's what it takes. Use the power of words instead of force.

These observations of book club discussions were examples of how Diane's efforts had reached students. Accordingly, her perspective on student learning was framed by these experiences. Diane noted that students who had previously not read the book were now actively engaged in book club discussions. For Diane, this high level of student interest and engagement in reading was her legacy.

Grace. Grace considered student learning in terms of her work observing and mentoring teachers. While her coaching work had involved many different activities, shifts over time resulted in a specific focus on mentoring. Her perspective on student learning was framed by this work. When observing a teacher, Grace would watch students, talk with them, or analyze their work to assess both student learning and lesson effectiveness. She approached mentoring cautiously, but appeared to find it valuable. In the follow-up interview she noted:

> Sometimes I model. I haven't done a whole lot of that so far, but sometimes when I'm in a classroom and I'm looking at a notebook, I'll ask a student if I can look at his notebook, I might coach him. But I am concerned about doing it too much, only because it confuses people as to what my role is, and I don't want to give them a notion that I am a writing specialist rather than a coach. But part of my work, too, sometimes is to talk to the kids just so that we can compare and contrast our thinking about a student based on the work. So, if I can see the work and actually ask the student about it, it gives me some evidence of my thinking.

Unlike Diane, Grace had not been in the same school for a long period and had not had the opportunity to focus on one instructional approach over time. Instead, she framed student learning in terms of her ongoing mentoring work with individual teachers, considering this work as a way to assess teaching and coaching effectiveness.

Michelle. In a case juxtaposed to Grace, Michelle considered student learning from the district level. Over time, her work had shifted from mentoring individuals to facilitating teacher meetings in the school district office. This shift enabled her to analyze student performance data on district assessments and to facilitate teacher discussions of assessment results. She explained,

> The whole assessment piece, I think ,will tie back to student achievement because we're not collecting data for any other purpose. Those scores might not mean that much even to parents, and the state is not collecting them. It's not some graduation requirement or fulfillment of credit. We're doing it strictly to learn about student performance and then think about how they impact our curriculum and some professional development that we need to do. That's a piece that wasn't so much on my focus or my radar earlier in this position.

Michelle's perspective reflects the district-level curriculum development and implementation work that became increasingly important to her coaching efforts. This shift afforded her the opportunity to consider student learning in relation to district assessments and the language arts curriculum. She also interpreted data to identify future professional development directions for teachers.

At the same time, Michelle was doing much less mentoring than in previous years. Her strongest connection to student learning at the time of the follow-up interview was from the classroom teacher perspective, as she had been asked to teach one period of sixth grade language arts each day. Reflecting on this experience in a positive light, Michelle commented:

> This allows me to have firsthand experience and knowledge with the curriculum and to get a true sense about how it is working. I have also never taught sixth grade students. They were so eager and ready to please. One girl even drew me a picture during her lunch to take home. I also got a hug from a student who has special needs. That made my day.

Coaches' perspectives on student learning were unique to the individual coach, the balance of roles she experienced, and the ways in which she engaged teachers in the change process. With the complexity of coaching roles and the multiple challenges to enacting teacher change, the diverse ways in which the coaches connected their work to student learning is understandable. They seemed to orient their perspectives on student learning in relation to major goals they had established for their coaching work. The questions behind these perspectives were, "Did my work make a difference? Have teacher change efforts impacted student learning?" To answer these questions, each coach needed to look in different places to find evidence.

Discussion

This study examined the perspectives of three middle level literacy coaches on coaching roles, teacher change, and student learning. Several major themes emerge from this analysis. First, coach perspectives highlight tensions between mentoring and literacy advocacy responsibilities of literacy coaching. These two responsibilities appeared to pull coaches in different directions, increasing the complexity of coaching work while reducing the ability to focus on elements of coaching considered most important by the coaches themselves. Similar tensions were documented by Marsh and associates (2008) in a study of middle level literacy coaching programs across Florida. From the perspective of the three coaches in the current study, literacy advocacy responsibilities, such as the coordination of school-wide assessment measures and the facilitation of professional development initiatives, took time away from mentoring responsibilities such as providing curriculum assistance and helping with lesson planning and instruction. Mentoring was seen as vital, but the time and effort required were considerable.

This tension suggests the need to reconsider the balance between teacher mentoring and literacy program advocacy coaching responsibilities. The typical middle school, larger in size than an elementary school and comprised of multiple subject areas, may not be a manageable context for one coach to meet all four identified standards (IRA, 2006) to an equal degree. By redefining literacy coaching to emphasize teacher mentoring over literacy program advocacy, middle level coaches would be able to spend more time and effort focusing on teacher knowledge development (Toll, 2005) and change at the classroom level.

A second theme, building on the first, is the importance of developing relationships with teachers as an essential element of the coaching process. As Gross (2007) documented in her study of secondary

level literacy coaches, collegial relationships with teachers were a necessary component of many coaching roles. Specifically, developing relationships with teachers in the curriculum resource role and as part of initial steps in the teacher change process was perceived as a positive and productive aspect of coaching that helped teachers develop both content and pedagogical content knowledge. Other coaching roles, those that involved teacher assessment or evaluation, were, in contrast, perceived to be stressful and relatively unproductive. Coaches' perspectives on authority tensions associated with assessment and evaluation highlight the problematic nature of the evaluative element of coaching, which appears to impede the development of positive relationships with teachers. Coach perspectives suggest enacting change is a complex endeavor that needs to emphasize supportive rather than evaluative aspects of literacy coaching.

This theme suggests the need to reexamine the definition of literacy coaching in relation to roles that may exacerbate authority tensions. While it may be natural to assume an element of evaluation is intragal to the coaching process, this does not need to be the case. The peer coaching model outlined by Showers and Joyce (1996), for example, provides support for teacher learning through collaborative planning and instructional implementation while specifically excluding evaluative observation. Redefining literacy coaching in terms of the peer coaching model would allow middle level coaches to emphasize building positive relationships with teachers to facilitate change while deemphasizing roles and activities that contribute to authority tensions. Such a redefinition would help literacy coaching focus more clearly on elements of effective ongoing professional development while leaving assessment and evaluation to school administrators.

Finally, coaches' perspectives illustrate the challenge of impacting student learning and establishing clear links between literacy coaching, teacher change, and student achievement. While increased student learning remains an ultimate goal of literacy coaching (Deussen, Coskie, Robinson, & Autio, 2007), the process of impacting student learning through coaching is complex and involves a multitude of factors that affect the process in a variety of ways. The perspectives of all three coaches in this study suggest that the tension between coaching roles and the complex work of engaging teachers in the change process made it difficult to establish clear links between literacy coaching and student learning. For two of the coaches, when tentative connections were made, they were in relation to specific instances of the coach's work with an individual teacher or the coach's own work with students. For the third coach, student achievement data were collected at a district level, far removed from teacher change at the classroom level and difficult to separate from confounding variables such as other professional development options and the district's new language arts program adoption. Data showing increased student learning as a result of literacy coaches' work with teachers likely would not be identified in standardized measures of student literacy achievement. For administrators, a lack of school- or district-level data on coaching effectiveness raises concerns about the future viability of coach-oriented professional development programs.

The challenge of making clear connections between coaching, teacher change, and student learning illustrates the importance of situating the teacher mentoring responsibility of literacy coaching within a framework of school-wide change. Rather than struggling as a mentor in isolation or as a literacy program advocate without authority or support, the literacy coach should work with teachers as part of a coordinated school-wide action plan for facilitating change through ongoing professional development. Such an action plan, supported by all members of a school learning community, could explore ways to bridge content areas and literacy (Draper et al., 2005) to help teachers develop strategies for supporting students' conceptual understanding of subject areas through reading and writing (Fisher & Ivey, 2005). To make an impact on student achievement, the literacy coach must work with more than a handful of language arts teachers. Without the support of an established learning community and action plan, middle school literacy coaches may find themselves working in relative isolation, struggling to facilitate change and increase student achievement.

Conclusion

Literacy coaching in middle school has great potential as a means to improve instruction and increase student achievement, but coaching also faces a number of challenges. Perspectives examined in this study suggest a need to re-examine the way literacy coaching is conceptualized, implemented, and supported at the middle school level. Of particular importance is the balance of mentoring and literacy program advocacy and, in terms of mentoring, the degree to which work with individual teachers should be emphasized. Between the two

responsibilities of coaching, mentoring appears to warrant more emphasis than program advocacy. In regard to mentoring responsibilities, the question is one of establishing both a degree of standardization beneficial to an effective and streamlined coaching process and the degree of individualization necessary for meeting the needs of teachers as they engage in the change process. Coaches in this study appeared to seek a balance between these elements as they worked to impact teacher change, but their perspectives on this work suggest they did not find it.

Additionally, there is a clear need to connect literacy coaching to broader initiatives of school-wide change. Ideally, literacy coaching would be aligned with established ongoing professional development efforts so that the coach may provide support to learning communities and individual teachers as part of a developed school-wide action plan for improving teaching and learning. While literacy coaching standards have been established and responsibilities described, coach perspectives on roles, teacher change, and student learning suggest the way middle level literacy coaching is conceptualized and implemented needs further development. Future research should explore the ways supportive coaching work might develop in the context of an established action plan and how such work might increase student learning—the ultimate goal of literacy coaching.

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Appendix
Codes with Descriptions

Category	**Code**	**Description**
Classroom Practice	Coach Perspective	Coach's stated perspective/opinion of classroom practice
Coach Support	Professional Development	Coach observation of, or reflection upon, professional development opportunities participated in by the coach (usually district-level support)
Coaching Role	Coordinator	Coach conducting meeting or workshop focusing on issues of teacher learning and/or classroom practice
Coaching Role	Curriculum	Coach providing curriculum-specific tutoring or implementation assistance to teacher(s)
Coaching Role	Demonstration	Coach demonstrating instructional methods or techniques by working directly with a group of students
Coaching Role	Facilitator	Coach working to facilitate a meeting of teachers, coaches, or other staff
Coaching Role	Indirect	Coach working with teacher on classroom practice or teacher learning but in a subtle, almost indirect way
Coaching Role	Observer	Coach watching, usually silently, sometimes taking notes, mostly in classrooms
Coaching Role	Perceptions of	From various sources, reflections or comments on coaches and the coaching process
Coaching Role	Planning	Coach working with teacher to plan curriculum as a precursor to working on curriculum and/or instruction
Coaching Role	Resource Person	Coach gathering materials or resources, usually at teacher's request, often somewhat menial
Coaching Role	Teaching	Instances in which the coach reflected upon, or observed, in a long-term (permanent) teaching situation in addition to coaching duties
Coaching Role	Technology Assistant	Coach providing technology-specific assistance to teachers
Coaching Role	Direct	Coach giving advice to teacher in direct and assertive manner
Student Learning	Coach Perspective	Coach observation of, or reflection upon, learning evidenced by students through discussions or written artifacts
Teacher Learning	Coach Observation	Something the coach observed relating to teacher learning; usually communicated to PI by coach
Teacher Learning	Coach Perspective	Something relating to teacher learning reflected upon by coach, usually communicated to PI