INTERNATIONAL LITERACY ASSOCIATION

LITERACY LEADERSHIP BRIEF
Literacy Coaching for Change
Choices Matter

L iteracy coaching has become a mainstay in schools around the world. Its growing presence as a means of supporting teachers and promoting literacy achievement has been recognized by teacher educators, school personnel, policymakers, professional organizations, funding agencies, and educational researchers.

Because of the intense need for literacy coaches, hundreds of articles and books are written on the topic to clarify who coaches are, what they do, and what preparation they need. Most agree that coaching is a two-way street for change: Most teachers welcome what they learn from literacy coaches, and literacy coaches learn to become stronger coaches in the process.

However, not all models of literacy coaching are the same. There are choices, and the choices matter. Consequently, there is a need to clarify some of the differences among various models of coaching. Although coaching is sometimes described as either directive or responsive, three models of coaching for change are worth noting in detail: coaching to conform, coaching into practice, and coaching for transformation.

Coaching to Conform

This is the model for coaching used most commonly; in fact, the roots of current literacy coaching, found in the U.S.'s No Child Left Behind policy, were framed around conformity. Some refer to this model as coaching for fidelity. Coaches take on the role of supporting the implementation of an innovation, policing the use of the innovation as designed, or both.

This model of coaching became popular with the recognition that one-shot workshops were more effective in producing change with follow-up coaching. Coaches, under these circumstances, assume the role of expert and provide direction for teachers on how to implement the features of a program under adoption.

However, coaching to conform is not always connected to the adoption of a program. Literacy coaches working with teachers in a school may observe and give feedback on what they liked (i.e., approved/sanctioned) and what they think can be improved based on the coaches' general knowledge of the field and understanding of standards for performance. This coaching toward a standard (e.g., a personal standard of the coach,

Coaches, under these circumstances, assume the role of expert and provide direction for teachers on how to implement features of a program.

a district standard, a state standard) is used to evaluate the teachers and their practices and help them to conform.

To be successful, coaching under this model is focused and direct. Most often, a coach in this situation would coach a teacher using a tool (e.g., a checklist) that becomes the centering point for conversations with the teacher. The coaching interactions focus on how well (fidelity of implementation) or to what degree (integrity of implementation) the teacher is implementing the innovation/program or in what ways the teacher is meeting the standards for the school setting.

Coaching conversations often start with "I liked how you…" and then would move onto "Here's what you can work on" (often called, "two glows and a grow"). The coach's job is to help the teacher get to higher levels of implementation or to conform to the expected standard as quickly as possible. Typically, coaching sessions are used to plan upcoming professional development sessions with teachers grouped together around "needs."

The expected coach–teacher relationship under a conformity model is a professional separation that allows space for supervisory and authoritative functions to play out. Whereas some teachers appreciate the direct messages offered to them by coaches under this model, other teachers may resist being told what kind of teaching is needed most for the students they serve in their classrooms.

Coaching Into Practice

From a practice stance, teachers are in a constant state of doing, thinking, and learning as they engage with their students in the classroom. They make instructional choices based on anticipation of outcomes and look back on those choices to decide if their actions were wise. Then they adjust their practice. The coaching model that keys on supporting this dynamic is sometimes referred to as coaching for reflection, but its potential is best conveyed by stressing the goal (growing more powerful practices) over the process (reflection).

The short-term goal and role for the coach assuming a practice perspective is to support a teacher in making sense of the experiences the teacher has in a classroom. Like the other models of coaching, coaching into practice typically involves a preconference, an observation, and a postconference.

The short-term goal and role for the coach assuming a practice perspective is to support a teacher in making sense of the experiences the teacher has in a classroom.

Many teachers exposed to the coaching to conform model come to the postconference with the expectation of feedback. The coaching into practice model operates from the basis of "You received your feedback (and all the feedback you need) from the students while you were teaching. What did they tell you? What did you learn?"

The coach may focus on adjustments or surprises during the teaching and what teaching moves the teacher made at that point and asking, "What choices did you consider?" The coach may focus on data he or she gathered during or after the observation (e.g., a transcript of a discussion, an interview with a student after observation, a student artifact). These data are used to simulate reflection on practice leading to reflecting for practice (i.e., How did I grow as a teacher? What can I take forward into my teaching?).

Although praising the teacher has no place in coaching into practice, appreciating the students' response to the teaching is appropriate. Everything in this model of coaching focuses on the students as the context for teaching growth through reflection. The long-term goal is for teachers to engage in self-reflection through practice.

There is a common misconception that in this coaching into practice model the role of the coach is limited to listening and asking questions. This is not true. It is expected that the coach will take an active role in codeveloping an action plan for moving forward. It is expected that the coach will become a resource for teachers in growing their practices (e.g., to provide opportunities to observe other teachers; to coteach with a mentor; to suggest readings and other resources to support the teacher). The expectation for the coach–teacher relationship in this practice model is less about authority and more about mutual trust, care, and respect.

The expectation for the coach–teacher relationship in this practice model is less about authority and more about mutual trust, care, and respect.

Coaching for Transformation

Coaching for transformation has some similarities with coaching into practice, as both focus on growing practices through reflection. However, simple reflection around practice has limitations. The major limitation of simple reflection is that it operates within unexamined assumptions.

If we assume that the sun revolves around Earth, then we have a different set of questions about the planets and the stars

than we do if we assume that Earth revolves around the sun. Scientists refer to this as the limit of paradigm. Laypeople call it thinking inside the box.

We typically reflect in simple forms inside the box. A teacher having difficulty getting his or her students to line up operates under a simple (and single) reflection loop as he or she attempts different strategies. The teacher's reflection assumes that lining up is important or necessary. However, there is another way.

The teacher could also question the assumptions behind the need to line up and walk students down the hallway in a straight and quiet line. When teachers engage in this type of double-loop reflection, they are disrupting the status quo and examining their own notions of what counts and for whom.

A coach who is coaching for transformation creates spaces where teachers engage in double-loop reflection and question not only their own practice (as in coaching into practice) but also the historical power structures that operate within schools. As we consider the assumptions that surround literacy teacher decision making and reflection, we often tap into the histories of institutions, the mechanisms of power and control, and the ultimate reality that schools as institutions are designed to preserve the status quo.

The lining up example is just at the surface of deep-seated institutional biases. A coach who takes a teacher into the domain of double-loop reflection is entering brave and powerful spaces. The deconstructive processes of double-loop reflection must be accompanied by reconstructive processes that promote humanizing pedagogies, both in the classroom and in coach–teacher interactions. These humanizing coaching pedagogies can center on critical inquiry groups that decodify traditional and "best" practices.

This stance on coaching for transformation asks literacy coaches to step out of their comfort zones (in some cases, of prescribed roles and hierarchies) and to engage in discussions that challenge traditional notions of professional development with classroom teachers. When literacy coaches step out of their comfort zone, they are asking the teachers with whom they work to step out too, a challenge that cannot be undertaken without the support of the school leadership.

> *A coach who is coaching for transformation creates spaces where teachers engage in double-loop reflection and question not only their own practice (as in coaching into practice) but also the historical power structures that operate within schools.*

Choosing a Model

Literacy coaches have choices to make when working with teachers. Those choices are grounded in ideological beliefs, context, and goals. Here are some guidelines for coaches to consider when making an informed decision on the coaching model best suited to specific engagements:

- If the coach's concerns are related to standards (e.g., on which model is easiest, on which model follows tradition and is used most often, on which model leads to maintaining a job), then a ranked answer might be conformity followed by practice followed by transformation.
- If the coach's job is to get someone to teach in a particular way, then the choice would be conformity.
- If the coach's goal is to help teachers grow their own practices through teaching, then the choice would be coaching into practice.
- If the coach's goal is to participate in challenging the fundamental processes of schooling and literacy instruction, then the choice would be coaching for transformation.

If the coach's goal is to participate in challenging the fundamental processes of schooling and literacy instruction, then the choice would be coaching for transformation.

    If literacy coaches feel confused, conflicted, or uncomfortable, then they are in that growing space somewhere at the intersection of these models. In such a case, coaches should dig deeply into the very reasons they came into coaching and what they imagined for their teachers and the children and young people with whom they work. Coaches are teachers first; as such, they might use their uncomfortable or uncertain state to engage in their own double-loop reflection on their own professional life to find their voice and make their choice.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Argyris, C., & Schön, D. (1978). *Organizational learning: A theory of action perspective*. Reading, MA: Addison Wesley.

Dewey, J. (1910). *How we think*. Boston, MA: D.C. Heath & Co.

Freire, P. (1985). *The politics of education: Culture, power and liberation*. South Hadley, MA: Bergin & Garvey.

Hunt, C.S., & Handsfield, L.J. (2013). The emotional landscapes of literacy coaching: Issues of identity, power, and positioning. *Journal of Literacy Research*, *45*(1), 47–86.

Sailors, M. (forthcoming). Re-imagining teacher education. In D. Alvermann, N. Unrau, & M. Sailors (Eds.), *Theoretical models and processes of literacy* (7th ed.). New York, NY: Routledge.

Sailors, M., Martinez, M., Manning, L., Davis, D.S., Stortz, R., & Sellers, T. (2018). When effective instruction is not enough: A critical look at emergent understandings of liberatory pedagogy by teachers in a master's program. In A.E. Lopez & E.L. Olan (Eds.), *Transformative pedagogies for teacher education: Moving towards critical praxis in an era of change* (pp. 15–30). Charlotte, NC: Information Age.

Schön, D.A. (1983). *The reflective practitioner: How professionals think in action*. New York, NY: Basic.

Schutz, K.M., & Hoffman, J.V. (2017). "I practice teaching": Transforming our professional identities as literacy teachers through action research. *The Reading Teacher*, *71*(1), 7–12.

Wetzel, M.M., Hoffman, J.V., & Maloch, B. (2017). *Mentoring preservice teachers through practice: A framework for coaching with CARE*. New York, NY: Routledge.

International Literacy Association: Literacy Research Panel 2016–2017