

SECTION 1

Why Coaching?



CHAPTER 1

What Is Literacy Coaching?

- What exactly *is* a literacy coach?
- How are literacy coaches different from reading specialists and mentors?
- What is the value of literacy coaching?
- What is the demand for literacy coaches?

Coaching has become popular in schools these days. However, despite the proliferation of coaches and coaching programs, there is still confusion about what coaching actually is. I find that definitions of coaching range from “helping teachers do better,” to “improving instruction,” to “ensuring that teachers are all on the same page,” to “collaborating with teacher teams to analyze data,” to...well, you get the point: People understand coaching differently!

Literacy coaches often have to clarify—for themselves and others—the nature of their work. To help, I offered this definition in the first edition of this book:

A literacy coach is one who helps teachers to recognize what they know and can do, assists teachers as they strengthen their ability to make more effective use of what they know and do, and supports teachers as they learn more and do more. (Toll, 2005, p. 4)

I'd like to point out several significant aspects of this definition. First, note that the emphasis is on teachers. Coaches' clients are teachers. Greater student achievement is the desired outcome, but coaches' focus is teachers. Note, too, that this definition is written from a positive perspective; it doesn't say that literacy coaches fix problem situations or teachers. Another feature of the definition is that it places literacy coaches in the role of supporting teachers; in other words, teachers are responsible for identifying their strengths and growing their capabilities, and literacy coaches are there to assist. Some literacy coaches and teachers believe that the literacy coach is there to tell the teachers what they should be doing and to make sure they do it. That is not at all the vision of literacy coaching that you'll find in this book.

I like this definition for all the reasons above. However, it is a bit abstract. Therefore, over the years, I developed a second definition of literacy coaching:

A literacy coach partners with teachers for job-embedded professional learning that enhances teachers' reflection on students, the curriculum, and pedagogy for the purpose of more effective decision making.

This definition provides additional important details:

- Coaching is a partnership. Coaching is a collaboration between equals. I avoid language that implies that coaching is *done to* teachers, such as when one says that a teacher *is coached* or that coaches *provide coaching* to teachers. Rather, I talk about the coaching partnership. The metaphor I find helpful is a ballroom dance, where both partners move in synchronicity, with the lead partner providing the subtlest of pressure on the back or arm of his partner. (Yes, ballroom dancing still hews to traditional gender roles!) Similarly, coaches provide the subtlest of leadership by steering the process, but truly the partners are in sync when coaching is successful.
- Coaching is job-embedded. Teachers, myself included, want to learn what matters to their work with their students in their classrooms. Coaching provides support for that kind of work.
- Coaching is about professional learning. When coaching is effective, teachers learn. I no longer talk about “professional development” when I speak of coaching because *development* sounds like something done *to* teachers. In addition, when learning is emphasized, partners in the coaching relationship are reminded what it is all about.
- Coaching supports reflection about students, the curriculum, and pedagogy. Too often, coaching processes emphasize only one aspect of the work of teaching, for instance, when coaches and teachers address only best practices or only student data. This definition is a reminder that at one time or another, coaching partnerships consider all three aspects of teachers' work: students, content, and processes.
- Coaching leads to better decisions. Literacy coaches are successful when their teacher partners make decisions that increase student learning. True, coaching might lead to higher test scores, more orderly classrooms, or calmer teachers, if those are appropriate goals in particular situations, but the outcome of all coaching should be that students are learning more of what we want them to learn because teachers are making better decisions.

Who Is a Literacy Coach?

Not everyone can be a literacy coach. Literacy coaches need to be well versed in the research, theory, and practices of literacy instruction. In addition,

literacy coaches need a sound understanding of teaching, learning, and child development. Literacy coaches also need knowledge of adult learning, particularly teacher professional learning. Finally, literacy coaches need strong interpersonal skills, especially in the areas of communication and empathy, and good skills in planning and organizing. On top of all of these qualities, literacy coaches must be trustworthy so teachers are comfortable collaborating with them even when the teachers are struggling or have failed.

There is some overlap between the duties of a reading specialist and a literacy coach, and therefore these roles are sometimes confused. Both reading specialists and literacy coaches serve as building leaders in literacy instruction, and both support the goal of improving student achievement. However, reading specialists more often work with students directly and provide more support to curriculum development and implementation, whereas literacy coaches focus much more of their attention on improving student achievement by working directly with teachers. Granted, reading specialists sometimes work directly with teachers and literacy coaches sometimes work directly with students, but the latter usually happens only when demonstrating for coaches' teacher partners. In addition, members of both groups perform additional duties, such as contributing to building-level professional development workshops and advising the principal on literacy-related matters. Given these overlapping duties, it is easy to see why confusion between reading specialists and literacy coaches may occur. To make the distinctions easier, Table 1 outlines these differences.

Many individuals perform the tasks of both reading specialists and literacy coaches, either because they have a divided job, such as 50% reading specialist and 50% coach, or because they have the title of reading specialist but are asked to include coaching duties in their work. My advice to those of you with overlapping roles such as these is to monitor your time carefully to be sure that you give adequate attention to your coaching duties. Without care, many reading specialists never get around to coaching duties, or many coaches with reading specialist responsibilities as well find that their work with students consumes the time available to work with teachers.

There is also confusion at times between coaches and mentors. As with reading specialists, there is overlap between the duties of coaches and the duties of mentors. A key distinction, though, is the difference in clients. Coaches' clients are teachers: Coaching is job-embedded and focuses on teachers' challenges and interests. In contrast, mentors have several clients. Mentors work with new teachers to help them adjust to the teaching profession, learn about district and school policies and practices, and develop their teaching practice so their students learn well. Therefore, mentors' clients include administrators, teachers, and even the profession, given that mentoring has been promoted as a way to retain new teachers in the profession. Mentors sometimes attend to the challenges and interests of the new teachers they work

Table 1. Comparison of Reading Specialists and Literacy Coaches

Reading Specialists	Literacy Coaches
Support students, parents, and administrators, as well as teachers	Emphasize support for teachers, although support for others also may take place
Frequently provide direct instruction to students on a daily basis	Provide direct instruction to students primarily when demonstrating for teachers
Provide evaluations of students for a variety of reasons, including curriculum monitoring, student diagnosis, and monitoring teacher and school effectiveness	Provide evaluation of students primarily to demonstrate for teachers or to support teachers in their instructional decision making
Work directly with teachers to an extent but do not necessarily focus work on this area	Spend a great amount of time working directly with teachers in individual and small-group meetings
When working with teachers, may be responding to teachers' needs and concerns but also may be directing teachers to meet requirements or implement mandatory programs	Work with teachers mostly in response to teachers' needs and concerns

with, but mentors also attend to the curriculum, human resource information, or administrative tasks. Thus, coaching is likely one of the tactics in mentors' tool kits, but understandably, mentors must perform many other tasks as well.

Why Literacy Coaching?

With the range of experience and education that I have benefited from as an educator, I am at a point in my career that allows me to choose the focus of my work. I choose coaching, along with professional learning teams and administrative leadership of professional learning, because it has great potential. When done well, coaching helps both teachers and students be more successful.

Literacy coaching is particularly effective in supporting teachers' learning that enhances student learning because of these characteristics:

- Literacy coaching honors adult learners. Adult learners like to have a say in their learning and to have the learning process respond directly to their needs. In addition, many adults are aware of how they learn best, and most adults want their learning to be directly applicable to their lives (Cave, LaMaster, & White, 2006). The literacy coaching process honors the way adults learn by responding to teachers' needs and supporting

them as they learn about topics and issues that they have selected. In addition, literacy coaching supports teachers' growth in a variety of ways, according to teachers' styles of learning, and literacy coaching allows teachers to apply and test what they are learning in the day-to-day work that they do in their classrooms.

- Literacy coaching supports collaboration. Increasingly, evidence suggests that learners rarely learn in isolation (Davis, Sumara, & Luce-Kapler, 2007). Of course, teachers have long collaborated with one another, despite the myth that teachers always close their classroom doors and work in isolation. However, time for collaborations and processes for productive collaboration have often been missing from teachers' work. Coaching provides the conditions for collaboration, and a savvy coach provides the process expertise to optimize collaborative endeavors.
- Literacy coaching promotes reflection and decision making. Many educators believe that teaching is best when teachers are reflective (Schön, 1987; Zeichner & Liston, 1996). This makes sense, doesn't it? To do a job with the complexity of teaching, it is essential to think about it carefully and deeply—not just about what is happening at the time but about why it happened, how it affects and is affected by other factors and events, and what it will affect in the future. For instance, if you try a new teaching strategy—for example, doing shared reading with students—you'll do your best teaching if you think about how your use of the strategy went, including what went well, what needs improvement, what the students did well during the activity, what they tried that they hadn't tried before, and what knowledge and strategies they used during the activity. You also should look ahead and think about whether you'd use the practice again, what you'd do the same, what you'd do differently, and so forth. All of this reflection would help you make shared reading as effective as possible.
- Literacy coaching leads to greater student achievement. The largest studies showing that literacy coaching increases student learning are a study on coaching in the Literacy Collaborative program by Biancarosa, Bryk, and Dexter (2010) and a multiyear study of literacy coaches in middle schools throughout Florida (Marsh et al., 2008). There are many smaller studies that also suggest coaching's positive effects.

Literacy coaching serves many purposes. It supports teacher professional development in a manner that honors how adults learn best. It supports teachers' collaboration, reflection, and decision making. Above all, effective literacy coaching contributes to increased student achievement. Given all the reasons for literacy coaching, the need for literacy coaches is increasing rapidly.

The Need for Literacy Coaches

Although reading specialists and others have engaged in coachlike duties for many years, it was the Reading First program, enacted as part of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, that placed literacy coaching in the national spotlight. A requirement of Reading First was that every school receiving funding for the program had to have a reading coach. Thus, as Reading First was implemented in thousands of elementary schools in all 50 U.S. states plus the District of Columbia, American Samoa, and schools run by the Bureau of Indian Affairs, reading coaches were hired accordingly.

Many administrators in non-Reading First schools took note of the reading coaches in their colleagues' schools and found ways to fund their own coaches. In addition, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services advocated mentor teachers in all Head Start programs; in many of these programs, these mentors act as coaches and often are even called coaches or mentor-coaches.

Over the last decade, initiatives sponsored by education-related organizations, such as the Carnegie Corporation of New York and the Alliance for Excellent Education, have included literacy coaching, and various pieces of federal legislation, such as Striving Readers, the LEARN (Literacy Education for All, Results for the Nation) Act, and proposed reauthorizations of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, have included literacy coaches.

Two major initiatives in the United States are also increasing the demand for literacy coaches: Response to Intervention and the Common Core State Standards. Schools and districts are turning to coaches to support teachers in implementing these initiatives to their fullest. Additionally, coaches are seen as key partners in enhancing teachers' success with students identified as English learners.

Thus, the need for literacy coaching is evident across the United States, at all levels of schooling and in many educational settings. Coaching is seen as an important method for improving literacy instruction and literacy achievement.

Conclusion

Literacy coaches provide job-embedded professional development to enhance teacher reflection, leading to better teacher decision making. Effective coaching attends to the characteristics of adult learners and promotes collaboration and reflection. Ultimately, literacy coaching, when done well, results in greater student achievement. Given these effects of coaching, it is easy to understand why coaching has become popular across the educational spectrum. To learn how to get these results from your coaching program, read on.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- Burkins, J.M. (2007). *Coaching for balance: How to meet the challenges of literacy coaching*. Newark, DE: International Reading Association.
- Corrie, L. (1995). The structure and culture of staff collaboration: Managing meaning and opening doors. *Educational Review*, 47(1), 89–99. doi:10.1080/0013191950470107
- Vogt, M., & Shearer, B.A. (2003). *Reading specialists in the real world: A sociocultural view*. Boston, MA: Allyn & Bacon.