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The Role and Qualifications of the Reading Coach in the United States

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reading specialists standards
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With the recent heavy focus on reading achievement at federal, state, and local levels in the United States, the role of the reading specialist has changed. Although reading specialists function in many roles, including remedial teacher, staff developer, supervisor, and mentor, the balance of their activities has shifted away from direct teaching and toward leadership and professional development roles. In fact, reading specialists working in exemplary schools, in addition to providing direct instruction to students, spend a great deal of their time serving as a resource to classroom teachers (Bean, Swan, & Knaub, 2003). Moreover, this change in role is consistent with the International Reading Association's (2000) position statement titled *Teaching All Children to Read: The Roles of the Reading Specialist*; that is, the reading specialist has three major roles: (1) instruction, (2) assessment, and (3) leadership. The leadership role includes working with classroom teachers to ensure that there is quality "first" teaching (Pipes, 2004).



With the changing roles have come a variety of new titles, such as *reading coach* and *literacy coach*, and there is considerable variability in the job descriptions for these coaches. Some coaches are volunteers with no specific training in reading, while others are school district employees with master's degrees and reading specialist certifications. In some schools, tutors who work with students are also called *coaches*. These individuals have a variety of levels of training, and they may work for companies (both profit and nonprofit) that supply supplemental services to students attending schools labeled by the state as "in need of improvement," based on the guidelines of the *No Child Left Behind Act of 2001*.

At present, there is little consistency in the training, backgrounds, and skills required for such positions, and there is little consistency in the general competence of coaches, in part because there are no agreed upon definitions or standards for the roles. The Association applauds the expansion of reading expertise available to students and teachers at the school building level. However, individuals designated as reading coaches, or literacy coaches, must be appropriately prepared and have the knowledge and skills necessary to be effective in the positions they hold.

Reading coaches frequently act as reading specialists when they provide leadership for school-, district-, and state-level reading programs. In the leadership role, they design, monitor, and assess reading achievement progress; they provide professional development and coaching for teachers and building personnel; they are responsible for improving reading achievement; and they may also supervise and evaluate staff.

These responsibilities are the responsibilities of reading specialists (see International Reading Association, 2000), and if reading professionals are serving in these roles (regardless of their titles), they must meet the standards for reading specialist/ literacy coach as indicated in the *Standards for Reading Professionals, Revised 2003* (International Reading Association, 2004).

However, in many cases reading professionals employed in these new positions are specifically focused on coaching classroom teachers and supporting them in their daily work within a specific school building or buildings. These reading professionals do not supervise or evaluate teachers but rather collaborate with teachers to achieve specific professional development goals. Ideally, these reading coaches would meet the standards for reading specialist/literacy coach in *Standards for Reading Professionals, Revised 2003* and hold a reading specialist certificate. However, given the current emphasis on reading coaching, the immediate need for reading coaches whose responsibilities are limited to those described in this paragraph, and the fact that in some states reading specialist certification is not available, the Association acknowledges that school districts may select candidates who do not meet the standards or have reading specialist certification but who have other qualifications that make them strong candidates for these positions. The goal in such situations should be to provide professional development opportunities, including participation in reading specialist master's degree programs, so that within three years the reading coaches meet the Association's standards. In the interim, school districts should hire as reading coaches individuals who meet the following minimum qualifications:

- Are excellent teachers of reading, preferably at the levels at which they are coaching
- Have in-depth knowledge of reading processes, acquisition, assessment, and instruction
- Have expertise in working with teachers to improve their practices
- Are excellent presenters and group leaders
- Have the experience or preparation that enables them to model, observe, and provide feedback about instruction for classroom teachers

Ordinarily, teachers cannot meet these minimum qualifications without having completed several years of outstanding teaching; substantial graduate-level coursework in reading; and coursework related to presentation, facilitation, and adult learning. Reading specialists should supervise reading coaches who do not have reading specialist certification.

Definition of Reading Coaching

In this position statement we address reading coaching as a means of providing professional development for teachers in schools. Specifically, there is evidence that one-shot, workshop-oriented professional development efforts do not result in changes in classroom practices or in student learning. Coaching provides the additional support needed for teachers to implement various programs or practices (Nowak, 2003). Poglioco, Bach, Hovde, Rosenblum, Saunders, and Supovitz (2003) conducted an evaluation study of a coaching model that provides a good summary of what coaching does:

Coaching provides ongoing consistent support for the implementation and instruction components. It is nonthreatening and supportive—not evaluative. It gives a sense of how good professional development is. It also affords the opportunity to see it work with students. (p. 42)

Why Reading Coaches?

The rapid proliferation of reading coaches is one of the responses to increased attention to reading achievement and the achievement gap in the United States. In recent years, reading has been the focus of both state and federal reading initiatives. Presidents Bill Clinton and George W. Bush and many state governors have spearheaded these initiatives. *The Reading Excellence Act of 1998* under Clinton and the Reading First provisions of the *No Child Left Behind Act of 2001* under Bush have allotted large amounts of federal dollars for professional development targeting improved reading instruction. In many cases, state education agencies have chosen to fund reading

FIGURE
Coaching Activities (Levels of Intensity)

Level 1
(informal; helps to develop relationships)

- Conversations with colleagues (identifying issues or needs, setting goals, problem solving)
- Developing and providing materials for/with colleagues
- Developing curriculum with colleagues
- Participating in professional development activities with colleagues (conferences, workshops)
- Leading or participating in Study Groups
- Assisting with assessing students
- Instructing students to learn about their strengths and needs

Level 2
(more formal, somewhat more intense; begins to look at areas of need and focus)

- Co-planning lessons
- Holding team meetings (grade level, reading teachers)
- Analyzing student work
- Interpreting assessment data (helping teachers use results for instructional decision making)
- Individual discussions with colleagues about teaching and learning
- Making professional development presentations for teachers

Level 3
(formal, more intense; may create some anxiety on part of teacher or coach)

- Modeling and discussing lessons
- Co-teaching lessons
- Visiting classrooms and providing feedback to teachers
- Analyzing videotape lessons of teachers
- Doing lesson study with teachers

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coaches as one component of their initiative. In several states, large appropriations for reading improvement also have included funding for reading coaches. The basic assumption is that increasing the expertise of reading professionals available to work with classroom teachers at the individual school level would allow these teachers to learn more about reading and reading instruction and thus improve reading instruction and student achievement.

What Do Reading Coaches Do?

A reading coach “supports teachers in their daily work” (Dole, 2004, p. 462). There are many activities that reading coaches engage in, from informal activities—such as conversing with colleagues—to more formal ones such as holding team meetings, modeling lessons, and visiting classrooms. It is critical that reading coaches understand that coaching may range from activities that help teachers develop or increase their knowledge about a specific issue to activities that focus on implementation issues. The Figure identifies various levels of activities, from those that are more informal and “low risk” (e.g., assisting with assessment) to those that require the reading coach to provide feedback about teachers’ classroom practices (e.g., classroom visits) and are more “high risk” (Bean, 2004a).

Descriptions of reading coaches usually draw from the work of Joyce and Showers (1996), who identify five kinds of professional development experiences: (1) theory, (2) demonstration, (3) practice, (4) feedback, and (5) in-class coaching. Although there is little research evidence related to reading coaches, there are many projects focused on reading coaching that provide program descriptions (see, e.g., Bean, 2004b; Lapp, Fisher, Flood, & Frey, 2003; Morgan, Saylor-Crowder, Stephens, Donnelly, Deford, & Hamel, 2003; Southern California Comprehensive Assistance Center, 2002; Sturtevant, 2003; Vogt & Shearer, 2003). There is a great deal of overlap in these descriptions, for example, the provision of demonstration teaching, observation, and feedback according to some professional development model such as clinical supervision, peer coaching, or cognitive coaching. Although reading coaches engage in a full range of activities, it is the in-class coaching that distinguishes the role of the reading coach.

Vogt and Shearer (2003) distinguish two levels of reading coaches: (1) the building level and (2) the school district level. South Carolina distinguishes between building-level coaches and regional coaches (Morgan et al., 2003). In general, the distinction is one between reading coaches who work directly with classroom teachers and reading coaches who coach other reading coaches. As stated previously, reading coaches who do not meet the Association’s standards and who do not hold a reading specialist

certificate should be working under the supervision of a reading professional who does meet those standards and holds a reading specialist certificate.

What Must Reading Coaches Know and Be Able to Do?

Because the primary role of reading coaches is to provide support to classroom teachers for classroom reading instruction, it is essential that they be excellent classroom teachers themselves. Their successful teaching experiences should include teaching at the levels of the teachers they will coach. That means that elementary school reading coaches should have successful teaching experiences at both the primary and intermediate levels, middle school reading coaches should have successful teaching experiences at the middle school level, and high school reading coaches should have successful teaching experiences at the high school level. Ideally, the documentation of successful teaching should include positive outcomes for student achievement.

A second requirement is that reading coaches should have in-depth knowledge of reading processes, acquisition, assessment, and instruction. Reading coaches cannot be expected to help classroom teachers improve reading instruction and student reading achievement if the reading coaches lack knowledge of the range of effective instructional methods, materials, and practices that can be employed at the levels they coach. Reading coaches must be knowledgeable about reading acquisition and development so they can aid teachers in planning instruction that meets the needs of all the students in the teachers’ classrooms, and reading coaches must be able to help teachers with classroom assessments that can indicate reliably what those needs might be.

This knowledge can be gained in many different ways, including completion of a master’s degree in reading that leads to reading specialist certification; ongoing professional development work; intensive, yearlong training for newly employed reading coaches in a school district; and/or enrollment in a reading specialist certification program.

A third requirement is that reading coaches have experience working with teachers to improve their practices. For example, reading coaches may have been involved in professional development experiences during which they participated in and/or led teacher study groups or teacher book clubs. In addition, reading coaches should be accustomed to reflecting on their own practices and making adaptations that improve instruction.

A fourth requirement is that reading coaches should be excellent presenters and be familiar with presenting to teacher

conferences at the local, state, and even national levels. Reading coaches also should be skilled in leading teacher groups to facilitate reflection and change for their colleagues.

Finally, reading coaches must have experience or preparation that enables them to master the complexities of observing and modeling in classrooms and providing feedback to teachers. The technical skills necessary for these coaching tasks can and must be developed. Moreover, reading coaches must be sensitive to the need to develop open, trusting relationships with teachers in order to serve effectively in a coaching role.

The Association strongly recommends that only teachers who meet these five criteria act as reading coaches. This recommendation is based on evidence from Poglioco et al. (2003) that indicates great variability in the effectiveness of reading coaches depending on their background and training. These authors found that reading coaches were more or less effective based on their knowledge and skills, and that when reading coaches were not confident and knowledgeable, they had concerns about their roles. For example, one coach remarked,

Our problem was that we weren't really clear on the big picture of it. Yes we got training on this and that, but to be trained on it today to roll it out tomorrow when you don't understand it yourself, is very difficult.
(p. 18)

A principal noted, "The literacy coaches are just one step ahead of the teachers. It diminishes their credibility and there is the danger of no follow-up" (p. 19). Even when reading coaches do meet the five criteria, they should be involved in ongoing professional development to strengthen their knowledge and skills, and thus their effectiveness as reading coaches. Moreover, if the reading coaches are to be successful in promoting changes in classroom practices, the expectations for the role of reading coach need to be clear to and understood by both the reading coaches and the school administrator, in addition to being supported by the school administrator.

Summary

Reading coaching is a powerful intervention with great potential; however, that potential will be unfulfilled if reading coaches do not have sufficient depth of knowledge and range of skills to perform adequately in the coaching role. Education reform is riddled with examples of potentially powerful interventions that disappoint reformers and fail the students they are intended to help. The Association appeals to the stakeholders involved in implementing reading coaching interventions to pay close attention to the hiring of reading coaches and commit themselves (a) to hiring only those individuals who have the knowledge and skills required and (b) to assuring that within three years these reading coaches meet the Association's standards and obtain reading specialist certification. It is better to delay implementing a reading coaching intervention than to push ahead with inadequately trained reading coaches. In all cases, a reading specialist who has the appropriate depth of knowledge and range of skills must supervise reading coaches who will, in turn, help develop reading expertise in classroom teachers.

Recommendations

U.S. policymakers

- Continue to fund reading interventions that focus on professional development of classroom teachers.
- Provide support for the development of reading coaches, and insist that those providing such preparation be adequately trained themselves.
- Mandate that all policy initiatives that support reading coaches must require that reading coaches meet the Association's standards for reading specialist/literacy coach (see International Reading Association, 2004).

State policymakers

- Use professional development funds to develop strong reading coaching interventions.
- Insist that reading coaches be well educated, with in-depth knowledge of reading and reading instruction and the range of skills necessary for effective reading coaching.
- Provide adequate supervision of and infrastructure for reading coaching interventions.

School boards

- Insist that reading coaching interventions are carefully conceptualized.
- Insist that the infrastructure to support reading coaching interventions is in place before beginning the intervention.
- Ensure that individuals hired as reading coaches have adequate initial qualifications and an ongoing program of professional development.

School district and building-level administrators

- Plan carefully before implementing a reading coaching intervention.
- Be sure that reading coaches are supervised and receive ongoing professional development.
- Provide principals with adequate training for understanding their relationships with the reading coaches.
- Support reading coaches as they, in turn, support classroom teachers in the daily work of reading instruction.

Reading specialists

- Insist that reading coaching interventions are supervised by certified reading specialists who meet the International Reading Association's standards for reading specialist/literacy coach.
- Provide reading coaches with ongoing professional development.
- Facilitate the interaction of school district administrators, principals, classroom teachers, reading coaches, students, and parents.

Reading coaches

- Recognize that the position of reading coach requires one to be a lifelong learner.
- Strive to fulfill the role of reading coach in a professional

manner, with respect for the work of others in the school (administrators, teachers, etc.).

- Request support from administrators and teachers.
- Interact with other reading coaches as a means of reflecting on your experiences.
- Seek feedback from the educators with whom you work.

Classroom teachers

- Receive preparation that enables you to understand the role of the reading coach.
- Provide feedback to reading coaches in terms of how they have helped you and how they can improve their performance.
- Recognize that the role of the reading coach is to enable you to reflect on your work in a professional and nonthreatening manner.

It is the responsibility of every stakeholder to do whatever he or she can to ensure that reading instruction is sound and effective. Reading coaching and reading coaches are potentially powerful interventions that can improve reading instruction. Every stakeholder, together with the International Reading Association, must insist that these interventions are well planned, that personnel are well trained, and that the implementations include whatever is necessary for reading coaching and reading coaches to succeed.

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