

Literacy Coaching Candidates: Motivation, Perceptions, and Expectations

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Abstract

This study examined the motivation, perceptions/future plans, and expectations of postgraduate students (referred to as literacy coaching candidates) enrolled in the first course of a Literacy Coaching Endorsement program at a large comprehensive institution of higher education. Results from data focus to: What motivates a licensed Reading Specialist to enroll in a post graduate program to obtain a Literacy Coaching Endorsement; what the students' expectations of the program and of coaching are; and students' perceptions/future plans at the end of the semester and plans for the rest of the cohort program. The data revealed the need for literacy coaching candidates to build confidence, look to new careers paths, become reflective practitioners, and consider the workload of the program. Collaboration with the professor and peers in the program was also considered.

Keywords: Literacy Coaching, Reading Specialist, Reading Professionals, Post-Graduate

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Introduction

The International Literacy Association (formerly International Reading Association) Standards for Reading Professionals require an emphasis on literacy coaching in preparation programs for reading professionals (International Reading Association, 2010), stating that the supervised practicum experience should require candidates to work with students who struggle with reading, as well as collaborative and coaching experiences with teachers. *The International Literacy Association considers the positions of the Reading Specialist/Literacy Coach to be one role and expects to see evidence of both in graduate candidates.* The Pennsylvania Department of Education recognized the need for further education in the area of coaching and created an endorsement in instructional coaching that could be added to existing graduate level courses. A large comprehensive institution of higher education with a dedicated Literacy Department created an endorsement program focusing on literacy based on the Pennsylvania Department of Education's guidelines for a coaching endorsement. This program is comprised of four courses that can be taken after an educator is a licensed Reading Specialist in the State of Pennsylvania. The program included a course on the theories of literacy coaching, a course on the analysis of data to inform coaching, a leadership/change theory course and a hands-on practicum course. This study examines the first cohort of students enrolled in the first course in this newly created program. Background information about literacy coaching is followed by a description of the study, the findings, and implications. The findings from this research validate the importance of the understanding the needs of literacy coaching candidates when developing a program for endorsement.

Need for the Study

The area of literacy coaching was prevalent in the early part of the last decade and recently

experienced a resurgence due to school district needs and grant opportunities. Because of this resurgence, a large comprehensive higher education institution began offering a four-course Literacy Coaching Endorsement program as a postgraduate offering. Since this was a new offering, a need existed for more information and research about the motivation, expectations, and perceptions/future plans of these post-graduate students.

Review of Literature

Roles of the Literacy Coach

The International Literacy Association released a research brief entitled *The Multiple Roles of School-Based Specialized Literacy Professionals* in 2015. This research brief defined the role of the literacy coach as someone who improves classroom instruction by improving teacher learning. According to the research brief, some of the many responsibilities of a literacy coach can include: serving as a resource to teachers through the coaching cycle, providing support for changes in instructional practice, managing school wide literacy programs, and providing professional development and leadership (International Literacy Association, 2015). The role of the literacy coach is further discussed in a national study (Bean, Kern, et al., 2015), which found that literacy coaches worked primarily with teachers, spending more time in coaching activities while reading specialists spent more time working with students experiencing reading or writing difficulties.

Qualifications for Literacy Coaches

Besides information from the International Literacy Association, it is important to examine research to inform our understating of the qualifications for what is still considered a relatively new position in the K-12 educational environment. Frost and Bean (2006) established a “gold standard” for literacy coaching qualifications that includes: A Master’s degree in literacy;

additional credentials in coaching; successful teaching experience; experience working with teachers, observing, and modeling lessons; and excellent presentation skills. This research highlights the need for a coaching endorsement with its inclusion of additional credentials in coaching.

Bean and Isler (2008) discussed the importance of Literacy Coaching and how this position increases teachers' abilities to be literacy instructors. The importance of developing a coaching program collaboratively by including administrators, key teachers, school board members, and union representatives is also discussed. This collaboration should lead to a clear job description for the literacy coach. Support from principals and district personnel is important for coaches to have time for collaboration along with opportunities for networking within the field of literacy. Ongoing evaluation and assessment should provide feedback and performance and change in teacher practice. In order to prepare effective coaches, a Literacy Coaching Endorsement program has to address these skills. School boards and administrators may question the position because it is not seen as having a direct impact on students.

L'Allier, Elish-Piper and Bean (2010) synthesized their own studies as well as the related literature to develop seven guiding principles for literacy coaches:

1. Literacy coaching requires specific knowledge about reading.
2. The focus of coaching should be time spent working with teachers.
3. Collaborative relationships are necessary for coaching.
4. Coaching should prioritize activities that support reading achievement.
5. Coaching must be intentional yet opportunistic.
6. Coaches must be literacy leaders in their schools.
7. Coaching evolves over time.

L'Allier, Elish-Piper and Bean (2010) believe these research based guidelines will help address the multifaceted process of literacy coaching and help coaches be more successful in influencing reading instruction and student achievement.

Research Design

Participants

Eleven postgraduate students (literacy coaching candidates) were involved in this study. Participants in this study included: three (3) elementary classroom teachers, one (1) middle school classroom teacher, three (3) high school classroom teachers, two (2) elementary reading specialists, and two (2) high school reading specialists. The participants' years of experience in education ranged from five (5) years to sixteen (16) years.

Data Collection

Surveys were distributed to the literacy coaching candidates before and after the semester of the first course in the endorsement program (Appendix A) and all surveys were returned. The surveys were cross-sectional (Creswell, 2003) since the data was collected at one point in time and they were self-administered questionnaires. The survey focused on the following three research questions:

1. What motivates a licensed Reading Specialist to return to graduate school to obtain Literacy Coaching Endorsement?
2. What are the students' expectations of this program and of coaching? How were these expectations met?
3. What are the students' perceptions/future plans at the end of the semester and plans for the rest of the cohort program?

The literacy coaching candidates were also asked for specific examples related to each of the research questions.

Data Analysis

The research design of this study was grounded theory. The goal of grounded theory is to develop a theory and conceptual categories from systematic research (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

Grounded theory as defined by Strauss and Corbin (1990) is:

inductively derived from the study of the phenomenon it represents. That is, discovered, developed, and provisionally verified through systematic data collection pertaining to that phenomenon. Therefore, data collection, analysis, and theory should stand in a reciprocal relationship with each other. One does not begin with the theory, then prove it. Rather, one begins with an area of study and what is relevant to the area is allowed to emerge. (p. 34)

Surveys were reviewed and analyzed by the researcher and coded according to the themes and patterns that emerged. Themes were analyzed through open coding, axial coding, and selective coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Defining the themes of the study enabled the researcher to describe the study using rich narrative.

The theory evolved during the research process due to the relationships between data collection and analysis. During data collection and analysis, theoretical sampling was used to ensure the collected information was complete. If additional data needed to be collected, it was collected based on analysis of the data and the emerging themes. Themes were further refined and organized to add to the description of the research and to the emerging theory. The researcher developed themes after careful consideration of the survey instrument. The original themes (motivation, expectations, and perception) under consideration were analyzed. A second review

of the data revealed the additional, more specific themes and a final review of the data revealed no new themes had emerged, thus it was determined that data saturation had occurred

Limitations

Although this study was relatively small in size and may limit reliability from the findings, it could be replicated on a larger level. The participants were selected based on their willingness to participate in the study; therefore, this is considered a purposive sample (Berg, 2009) for which the researcher uses knowledge about a group to select subjects who represent the population.

Findings

Motivation

In order to determine the literacy coaching candidates' motivation for entering the program, they were asked questions related to how much they expected the course to change and/or improve their literacy instruction and how much they expected the course to increase their understanding of course content (this includes topics such as professional learning, adult learning and coaching cycles). When the literacy coaching candidates were surveyed about how much the course had changed and/or improved their literacy instruction, results from the pre and post surveys were identical. In the pre-survey, sixty-three percent of the candidates expected the course to change or improve their literacy instruction extremely or very much and the same number were equally satisfied at the end of the course. The candidates who were classroom teachers shared in comments that they felt more confident attempting different teaching strategies in their own classrooms. Those working as Reading Specialists felt they were becoming more successful at coaching as a Reading Specialist. Since many Reading Specialists

are asked to coach as part of their roles, this newfound confidence is important as the role expands and changes.

Continuing with the motivation theme, participants were asked about how much they expected the course to increase their understanding of course content. Several participants listed coaching toolkits they created during one of the class sessions as an exercise that helped them explore valuable strategies for future coaching positions. The participants felt their understanding of the body of research literature related to professional learning, adult learning, and the coaching cycle had improved, along with the desire to incorporate more coaching into their varied present positions. Many participants mentioned two specific projects that helped with their understanding of course content. One project was an open-ended inquiry project where candidates were expected to apply their own exploration of current literature to an action research project. Topics literacy coaching candidates chose for this inquiry project included research on professional learning with Lexile levels, coaching across generations, and co-teaching as coaching. The other project literacy coaching candidates listed as instrumental in understanding course content was a review conducted of the Common Core State Standards. This project helped the candidates better understand how to use data from standardized state testing to apply the standards in coaching situations.

Before the course began, the candidates' pre-survey responses showed motivating personal benefits related to starting a new career path, gaining a position as a Reading Specialist in the next three years, and learning more about adult learning. One candidate stated, "I hope this course offers a fusion of reading and general coaching. There are not literacy coaches in my school so I am not sure about practical applications." After the course the candidates felt they had become better teachers, especially as reflective practitioners. Being a reflective practitioner

can assist a new coach with making important decisions when starting a new career path and/or gaining a position as a Reading Specialist in the near future. The participants mentioned specific assignments they found to be helpful and explained they had become more sensitive to working as a coach, especially when given the opportunity to tailor the assignment to understanding the various backgrounds of teachers with whom they work. As one candidate stated, “I appreciate projects that allow a lot of choice with regard to presentation format and topic.” Overall, most candidates agreed the first course had enabled them to network with each other to better appreciate the role of the coach and the teacher being coached, as evidenced in this statement, “I appreciate the opportunity to meet and get to know other reading professionals.”

Overall, the surveys indicated participants were initially motivated to join the program in order to start new career path, gain a position as a Reading Specialist or Literacy Coach, and/or learn more about adult learning. When asked about improving their own literacy instruction, understanding course content, and adding more coaching to their current practice and/or starting a new career path as a Reading Specialist or Literacy Coach in the near future, participants responded positively and identified these items as future motivators.

Expectations

On the survey, literacy coaching candidates were asked about expectations regarding convenience of the course, enhancement of coaching skills, and collaboration with both the instructor and peers. In terms of convenience, the candidates’ expectations before the course (88%) were lower at the end of the course (75%). According to comments and discussion, the candidates expected more online classes. In this course, which was taught in a blended format, two of the fifteen sessions were offered online. In addition, the candidates would have appreciated more choice in assignments along with very specific guidelines. Along with that

finding, the candidates seemed to expect more of a workshop format rather than a full graduate course. Some were surprised by the workload in the course.

Candidates' expectations were met in terms of the course enhancing their understanding of coaching. Pre and post results from the survey showed 88% felt the course had enhanced their understanding of coaching extremely or very much. Candidates mentioned an in class assignment to create a coaching toolkit based on several readings and the body of research literature explored in the course as instrumental in enhancing understanding of coaching. The course also led several of the candidates to mention a new desire to coach along with a better understanding of the facets/roles of the literacy coach.

Collaboration with the professor and with peers was also explored. In terms of collaboration with the professor, candidates appreciated the professor's responsiveness to emails, along with time in class to assist/answer questions and/or listen to concerns. They also praised the professor's involvement in class discussions and knowledge about the topic. In terms of collaboration with peers, the group appreciated working in small groups/pairs when participating in weekly class discussions. Candidates also valued hearing other viewpoints from classmates.

Perceptions and Future Plans

At the onset of the course, 88% of the candidates planned to work as a Literacy Coach in a K-12 school in the future. After taking the course, this number had been reduced to 55%. This reduced number speaks to the practical application of the first course in the cohort and to the increased understanding of coaching responsibilities along with perceptions of what other opportunities are available in school districts. This is a question that should be posed again at the end of the cohort and compared to this original result. With the increased knowledge of the typical roles and responsibilities of the Literacy Coach, candidates clarified original perceptions

and were able to realize what additional options exist to be pursued. These options included enrolling in a doctoral program, working in higher education, publishing articles in journals, and taking on other leadership roles. One candidate stated the goal to “get my feet wet” with a department chair position first, while another expressed interest in becoming a consultant for the local intermediate unit. One candidate stated it best by stating, “...I’m not sure what the future holds...”

Discussion

Further analysis of the survey data showed the emergence of the following additional themes: (1) literacy coaching candidates improved their confidence as either classroom teachers or coaches/Reading Specialists as a result of the first course in the endorsement program; (2) literacy coaching candidates are open to what the future holds in terms of their career paths; (3) literacy coaching candidates became more reflective practitioners as a result of the endorsement program; (4) it is important to consider practical aspects of the endorsement program including assignments, workload, and collaboration with professor and peers.

Literacy coaching candidates improved their confidence as either classroom teachers or coaches/Reading Specialists as a result of the first course in the endorsement program. Numerous examples of this improved confidence were evident in the comments on the survey. One candidate mentioned the many different teaching strategies she was able to apply in the classroom while another stated the importance of a new understanding of the school district’s goals and the literacy coach’s responsibilities. “I feel more confident when my teachers approach me with a question or problem” is a quote from one of the candidates that indicates the amount of confidence that was built throughout the semester.

Surveyed literacy coaching candidates identified the need to be open to what the future

holds in terms of their career paths. Some expressed interest in moving from the classroom into a Reading Specialist position, while others set a goal to include more coaching into current Reading Specialists positions. Others mentioned goals such as teaching in higher education, performing more research, moving into K-12 administration, and/or earning a doctoral degree.

Another benefit of the first course in the endorsement program was the development of the literacy coaching candidates' reflective skills. One candidate stated, "I feel I am a better teacher because I am reflecting on how I learn and trying to apply that to working with my students." Another candidate mentioned the importance of understating that teachers come from a "variety of backgrounds" and, therefore, need to be coached appropriately.

Last, it is important to consider practical aspects of the endorsement program including assignments, workload, and collaboration with professor and peers. The coaching candidates gave feedback about the need for very specific guidelines along with choice in some assignments. They also mentioned surprise at the workload; so it is important to communicate the nature of the course and the workload to future candidates.

Implications for Practice

This study leads to several important implications for professors and literacy coaching candidates. Professors developing an endorsement program should continue to maintain an open and collaborative environment that encourages communication with the literacy coaching candidates. Workload is also a factor; so professors should consider this when planning the program, creating assignments, and communicating with potential candidates. Professors should also strike a balance between online and on campus meetings. While the candidates appreciated occasional online meetings, they greatly valued the weekly in person sessions. Literacy coaching candidates should consider these factors as well when considering a program.

Recommendations for Further Research

Further research on literacy coaching endorsement programs is needed so that correlations between effective coaching endorsement programs and successful candidates can be explored. One way to supplement this research would be to study a larger and more diverse sample or to conduct a longitudinal study on the career paths of literacy coaching candidates. Surveys, interviews, and observations with other constituents such as classroom teachers, administrators, supervisors, and students would also add to this body of work.

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Appendix A

Student Survey

Please answer the following questions based on this scale: [Extremely/Very/Somewhat /Not at all] or add comments where requested.

1. How influential do you expect the course to be in helping you change or improve your own literacy instruction?
2. To what degree do you expect it to be convenient to work with the program?
3. To what degree do you expect the program to help enhance your understanding of the course content?
4. To what degree do you expect the program to help provide opportunities for collaboration between you and the instructor/professor?
5. To what degree do you expect the program provide opportunities for collaboration between you and classmates/peers?
6. Please cite at least one example of how you expect the program to help you change or improve your literacy instruction.
7. Please cite at least one example of how you expect the program to offer opportunities for collaboration among classmates/peers.
8. What personal benefit(s) do you expect to receive from the program.