



WHAT TEACHERS WANT: THE QUALITIES OF AN EFFECTIVE LITERACY COACH ACCORDING TO CLASSROOM TEACHERS

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ABSTRACT

This article presents findings from a study in which nine classroom teachers interacted with campus literacy coaches. Teachers were interviewed about qualities that they believe constituted an effective literacy coach. The themes that emerged were that literacy coaches have strong interpersonal skills, are knowledgeable, provide specific feedback, and understand the nature of coaching conversations. These characteristics are well supported in the research on literacy coaching and were also evident in recorded coaching interactions between teacher and coach during our larger study of coaching conversations. Becoming aware of the qualities that teachers are looking for in a literacy coach may aid coaches in working with classroom teachers to grow their literacy practices, thus making literacy coaching a highly effective form of professional development.

Michelle (all names are pseudonyms), an energetic first grade teacher, is eager to try out a new method for managing her classroom library. Being a reflective educator, she ponders the possibilities and visits with the school's literacy coach, Anne, for advice. The two colleagues comfortably begin to engage in one of their frequent coaching conversations.

"Should I use interactive writing to create our classroom library expectations or have students brainstorm whole-group and then allow tables to write posters with the expectations?" Michelle inquires.

The literacy coach, Anne, hesitates, holding back the urge to tell her what she would do if she were in the classroom, and replies, "What do you think would be most beneficial for students? And purposeful for instruction?"

"Interactive writing," she quickly responds, "but I'm nervous because it hasn't worked for me yet."



"Why do you feel that it hasn't worked? What's getting in the way of it working well?" Anne asks.

"The behavior of those students that aren't chosen to write."

"So, what are some things you could try to engage those students?"

Michelle sits quietly for a moment, thinking about her students and a solution to the problem she faces. "I have an idea! I could have them act out the expectation either correctly or incorrectly."

"That's good!" Anne responds, knowing that she could easily end the conversation there. Michelle has developed a solution to her problem and is ready to try it out, but something prompts Anne to probe further. "How do you think you might deter unwanted behavior during interactive writing?"

"I'm not sure" Michelle answers, "...without actually removing them from the lesson."

"Well, in the beginning, do you think that would work? For example, saying 'Oh I'm so sorry but we have to stop our writing right now because some of our friends aren't following expectations'."

"And actually stop?" she laughs. "Because then I'll have to use another day to finish!"

As difficult as it is, Anne resists giving her opinion and instead chuckles along with Michelle.

"I mean, keeping it short. Maybe I should only have them do two expectations and then add onto it later," Michelle says.

"That's a great idea! Build their stamina for interactive writing over time."

"Okay. Thank you!"

This powerful coaching conversation did not come naturally, or easily. This coach studied the art of literacy coaching, video-recorded her coaching conversations, and reflected on her practice. Additionally, the conversation above is a result of listening to teacher input about what they want in a literacy coach and modifying coaching discourse to best meet those needs.



THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

A literacy coach, as defined by Toll (2014), is someone who “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” (p. 10). Unlike other professional development models, literacy coaching, including the one-on-one conversations that occur between the classroom teacher and the literacy coach, aims to meet teachers where they are in order to move them forward in their literacy practices (Eisenberg, 2017; Stover et al., 2011; Toll, 2017). Effective literacy coaches encourage teachers to think deeply about their students, reflect upon their own classroom practices, and take ownership of problem-solving for issues that arise during daily literacy instruction. The valuable partnerships between coaches and teachers have the potential to impact not only classroom practice but also student achievement (Bean et al., 2008; Heineke, 2013; Toll, 2014).

Being an effective literacy teacher does not necessarily make one an effective literacy coach (Coskie et al., 2005), as the skill set differs for each. Further, there is a critical difference between adult learners and young learners, with adult learners often desiring to be self-directed and cognizant of the ways in which their new learning directly applies to their given situation (Knowles, 1968). While there are many approaches to coaching (Yopp et al., 2011), researchers agree that successful literacy coaches share common characteristics, such as having the ability to build trusting relationships (Heineke, 2013; McLean et al., 2010) and possessing a deep knowledge of literacy practices (Toll, 2014).

RESEARCH DESIGN

During a year-long study of five literacy coaches’ one-on-one coaching conversations with teachers, the authors sought to determine how coaches navigate coaching conversations with teachers in order to build teacher capacity in the area of classroom literacy instruction. The coaches were given the freedom to choose any two teachers on their campus to work with based on the teachers’ willingness to participate. At these schools, located in the suburbs of a large city in Texas, teachers were not required to participate in these one-to-one coaching conversations. However, it was encouraged as these schools were moving to more formal coaching activities. As part of the larger study, we recorded literacy coaches and teachers as they planned and reflected on reading and writing lessons during one-to-one coaching conversations. Two coaching conversations (one in fall and one in spring) were recorded with each of the teachers. We also debriefed with the coach after each conversation. Midway through the study, we decided it would be beneficial to include the teachers’ perspectives on working with a coach. Thus, at the end of the school year, the nine female teachers with whom the coaches were working for the purposes of the study were interviewed (see Appendix for the interview protocol) and each 10-15-minute interview was recorded. Through these interviews, the authors sought to explore the qualities of effective literacy coaches according



to classroom teachers. Additionally, the authors aimed to identify if the characteristics outlined by the teachers were supported in the research on literacy coaching and were observed during the coaching conversations from the larger study.

FINDINGS: QUALITIES OF AN EFFECTIVE LITERACY COACH

After analyzing the teacher interview transcripts, four characteristics of effective literacy coaches were identified by all the teacher participants: 1) coaches possess strong interpersonal skills; 2) coaches are knowledgeable; 3) coaches provide specific feedback and praise; and 4) coaches understand the nature of coaching conversations. Each of these categories will be discussed, along with research from previous studies on literacy coaching and specific examples that were lifted from the observed coaching conversations.

COACHES POSSESS STRONG INTERPERSONAL SKILLS

According to teachers, a literacy coach should be “friendly,” “upbeat,” and “bubbly.” They also expressed the desire for a literacy coach to be honest, yet simultaneously supportive and encouraging. Additionally, a literacy coach should seem “approachable,” “organized,” and “flexible.” One teacher expressed that she sought out her coach specifically due to the coach’s approachable and friendly disposition. This same teacher discussed how her coach frequently said, “If you need help just call me...I’ll be happy to come help you!” and seemed sincere about it because she always followed through on these requests. Thus, she knew her coach was available to answer her questions.

These descriptions align with research that maintains interpersonal skills are just as, if not more, important than knowledge about instruction (Ertmer et al., 2003; Jones & Rainville, 2014; Wall & Palmer, 2015). Further, honest, supportive conversations can only occur if positive relationships between the coach and the teacher have been established, as trusting relationships are the foundation of true coaching partnerships. When teachers view the coach as a collaborative partner in their learning, they may be more likely to take risks, admit mistakes, and share ideas or solutions to problems (Eisenberg, 2017; Toll, 2014; Wall & Palmer, 2015). Building this type of positive, credible relationship is a critical aspect of any coaching work (Heineke, 2013).

Similarly, literacy coaches must also trust in the teachers with whom they work. Inherent in being an effective literacy coach is an understanding of how to talk to teachers in ways that demonstrate respect for the knowledge of their classrooms and students, as well as their capacity to problem-solve. The instructional coach's success hinges on the ways in which they relate to teachers as intelligent professionals who are willing to try various strategies to ensure student achievement. Heineke (2013) found that teachers are hesitant to work with a coach whom they believe views them as incompetent or lacking the skills to be successful on their own. Trusting that teachers have their students’ best interests in mind and are constantly working towards optimal student



achievement is a crucial characteristic of an effective literacy coach (Wall & Palmer, 2015). Without this basic understanding, a coaching partnership with honest dialogue between the classroom teacher and the coach may not be possible.

COACHES ARE KNOWLEDGEABLE

Vygotsky's (1978) social learning theory contends that there must always be a more knowledgeable partner in the learning process in order for growth to occur. Teachers in our study tended to view their literacy coach as skilled and competent. During her interview, one teacher stated that her coach had "more answers" than she did as a classroom teacher. Teachers see literacy coaches as having many years of classroom and coaching experience, and therefore expect them to be aware of many resources. For example, one participant expressed "As a teacher, we don't have time to look through all the resources – it's great if the coach knows about all available materials." This was a common theme the teachers expressed when asked about working with their literacy coaches, which is similar to findings in other studies (Bean et al., 2003; Calo et al., 2015; Vanderburg & Stephens, 2010). Although the teachers reported that they frequently sought their coach's expert advice, we wish to point out that this can sometimes put the coach in the precarious position of always acting as the expert and that coaches should find ways to distribute leadership amongst their teachers (Bean, 2020).

The coaches with whom we worked often provided resources or shared professional articles during the recorded coaching conversations with their teachers. Frequently, the coach supplied the teacher with new materials on the spot so that they could review the materials together. At the end of the year, one of the teachers indicated that the biggest takeaway she had from her coaching experience was when her coach gave her a specific resource to use for instruction. It is interesting to note that, while our coaches told us during their interviews that their goal for the year was to build capacity in their teachers and avoid getting into the habit of always telling them what to do, most of their teachers said that they wanted their coach to be the "expert." This creates an especially challenging position for coaches as they work to share knowledge while they simultaneously encourage their teachers to become critical, reflective thinkers. Many literacy coaches possess a wealth of knowledge related to the reading process and best practices for literacy instruction (Toll, 2014); however, they must be mindful not to simply transfer this knowledge to teachers, but instead use coaching techniques, such as asking questions and paraphrasing, to encourage teachers to become problem-solvers (Hudson & Pletcher, 2020; Wall & Palmer, 2015). While the coach is likely to be more knowledgeable of literacy practices, coaching conversations are most successful when both parties assume responsibility for the outcomes and share ways to reach instructional goals (Yopp et al., 2011).

Staying current with trends in literacy education both at the district and state level was also perceived to be an important aspect of a literacy coach's knowledge base according to our participants. Teachers rely on literacy coaches to keep them up to date with changes to the state standards and district curriculum. Examples of this were evident in the coaching conversations



observed when coaches articulated comments such as, “This is following your (state standards). It’s exactly what [students] need to be doing.” Or, after watching a model lesson by the coach, a teacher mentioned, “It was definitely on schedule with the curriculum and what we needed.”

COACHES PROVIDE SPECIFIC PRAISE AND FEEDBACK

Interestingly, when we interviewed the teachers with whom our coaches worked, we did not ask about feedback specifically; however, the topic emerged during almost every interview. The teachers in our study indicated that they want to work with a coach who is complimentary. Indeed, as we viewed the recorded coaching conversations, we heard coaches make statements like “I thought that was great how you...” and “I’m proud of you.” During her study of three literacy coaches’ work with teachers, Collet (2012) found that the coaches “affirmed” and “offered praise” to teachers to assist with problem solving. Dozier (2008) and Heineke (2013) noticed similar phrases while listening to coaching conversations. This skill requires a careful ear and close attention to teachers’ personalities in order to learn how they respond to different kinds of feedback.

While teachers desire to hear that they are doing well, they also want constructive and straightforward feedback from their coach. One teacher said she wanted to hear things like “you’re doing awesome; now here are some things to work on,” suggesting that, while she wants her coach to praise her, she also wants to receive honest and direct observations about her work as a teacher. “The other thing I think you could have done...”, “The only thing I’ve seen that you could tweak a little bit is...”, and “I want to share some things I noticed” are helpful, clear phrases used by the coaches in our study that were aimed toward both relationship-building and teacher learning.

Providing useful feedback is undoubtedly one of the most critical parts of a literacy coach’s role. The language a literacy coach employs while meeting with a teacher can either promote self-reflection within the teacher or hinder it. Successful literacy coaches are adept at asking open and honest questions that provide space for the teacher to talk through ideas and encourage deep thinking about their own literacy practices (Stover et al., 2011; Wall & Palmer, 2015). Heineke (2013) found that learning was less likely to be maintained when the teacher did not have the opportunity to talk through their own thinking during a coaching conversation. Thus, coaches are most effective when they lend an experienced ear to the teacher, rather than attempt to dictate what the teacher does in the classroom (Eisenburg, 2017). Further, allowing time for self-reflection, talk, and ownership over one’s own learning is imperative when working with adults (Heineke, 2013). Effective literacy coaches are aware of the power of their discourse and recognize that engaging in coaching conversations is one of the most important aspects of being a literacy coach (Toll, 2014).

COACHES UNDERSTAND THE NATURE OF COACHING CONVERSATIONS

The interviewed classroom teachers expected their coaches to understand how to engage in a productive coaching conversation. Teachers desired to leave coaching conversations feeling empowered and confident, knowing that they have some answers and are equipped to try



something new in their classrooms. After coaches learn about teachers' interests, needs, and personal goals, they can stimulate teachers' thinking and propel them to develop and refine classroom literacy instructional practices. Coaching conversations that are based around the teacher's areas of concern are the most impactful on classroom literacy practices because they demonstrate that the teacher's voice matters (Stover et al., 2011; Yopp et. al., 2011).

The teacher participants shared many of the same beliefs about what constitutes an ideal coaching conversation. They agreed that the conversations should feel comfortable, similar to a teacher meeting with a student. Moreover, rather than having a strict script to follow, teachers said that coaching conversations should take their own course depending upon the specific needs of the classroom, students, and teacher. While all of the coaches observed in this study began conversations with an open-ended question or prompt, no two coaching conversations followed the same path. Just as teachers adapt lessons to students' individual needs, each coach tailored the content of the conversation to the teacher's specific interests and goals.

Similarly, literacy coaches might also alter the coaching model they use depending on the situation (Heineke, 2013). No two teachers are alike and, therefore, the ways in which they learn best may differ as well. One teacher might prefer watching demonstration lessons, while another may prefer reading and discussing professional texts to gain a deeper understanding of a concept under study. This individualization is why literacy coaching is believed to be one of the most effective forms of professional development (Stover et al., 2011).

It is important to note that, at the culmination of this research study, each of the participating teachers recommended that all teachers work with a coach. They agreed that one-on-one coaching conversations are "absolutely beneficial." One teacher stated, "you can't get the same kind of help in a group." A second teacher expressed the belief that working with a coach had a direct impact on students' reading and writing achievement in her classroom, stating "there is a direct line from the coach to teachers and the teachers to the students." Several teachers also expressed the desire to be able to meet with their coach once a week in order to engage in a coaching conversation. As many teachers feel pressed for time, this is a powerful testament to the value of literacy coaching in schools.

LIMITATIONS

Each literacy coach had the freedom to choose teachers whom they knew would be open to coaching and would therefore be easy to work with for the purposes of this study. Further, the coaches and their respective teachers had previously established good rapport prior to the study. Certainly, this impacted the teachers' views and opinions of the conversations that occurred. Another limitation is that we did not decide to interview the classroom teacher participants until after the study had already begun. Thus, holding a debriefing session with the teacher immediately



following each coaching conversation may have provided greater insight into their attitudes and opinions of individual conversations.

FINAL THOUGHTS

Through interviews with nine classroom teachers who had worked one-on-one with a literacy coach over the course of a school year, the authors identified characteristics that classroom teachers believed effective literacy coaches possess: approachability, possessing a wealth of knowledge, providing praise and feedback, and understanding the nature of coaching conversations. The research on literacy coaching supports these features, and the coaches who participated in our larger study displayed these traits during their coaching conversations with teachers. When coaches are aware of the needs of teachers and adapt discourse to meet these needs, teachers become open to working with a coach in a collaborative relationship to grow their literacy practices. A coach's welcoming personality can help teachers to feel comfortable during coaching conversations. Teachers might then feel they can ask questions or express their needs in ways that they may otherwise feel uncomfortable doing in a team meeting or large group professional development session.

Anne, the literacy coach we met at the beginning of this article, found effective ways to work with Michelle, the teacher, during their coaching conversation, most notably by actively listening to Michelle's ideas about writing instruction and asking questions to find out more information. Anne had taken the time to get to know Michelle as a teacher and to understand how her needs differed from those of the other teachers whom Anne coached. The teachers who participated in this study possessed various personalities; however, they shared a set of common beliefs about the characteristics that a literacy coach should possess. It is advantageous for coaches to be aware of these characteristics so that they might consider tailoring their coaching skills to best meet the needs of the teachers with whom they work.

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APPENDIX

Interview Questions for Teachers

- How often do you meet for formal one-to-one coaching conversations with the literacy coach on your campus?
- Where do these conversations typically occur?
- What are some recent topics you have discussed with your literacy coach during these conversations?
- Does your schedule allow you enough time to meet with your literacy coach for individual coaching conversations?
- How do you feel about these conversations?
- Who usually initiates these conversations – you or your literacy coach?
- Who usually does the most talking during these conversations?
- Do you take notes during these conversations?
- What do you envision as the perfect conversation with your coach?
- What kinds of goals have you set for yourself for next year regarding how often you would like to meet with your literacy coach for individual coaching conversations?
- When you think about the perfect literacy coach, what do you see?

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