The Promise and Potential of Literacy Coaching
by
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The recognition that we need to do a better job of educating our students, especially at the secondary level, has led educators to seek ways of improving classroom instruction. One approach that is being promoted at the present time is that of coaching. In fact, the Alliance for Excellent Education estimated that more than 10,000 literacy coaches would be needed in schools to address concerns about adolescents who read "below basic" (Sturdevant, 2003). In schools today, we find literacy coaches, math coaches, science coaches, instructional coaches, academic coaches, etc. Regardless of title, the rationale for coaching is to improve classroom instruction and ultimately increase student achievement in the school. The excitement and enthusiasm for coaching are positive signs; however, perhaps it is time for a cautionary note—one that highlights the roadblocks that may limit the effectiveness of coaching if we do not attend to them. In other words, if coaching is to be more than a band-aid or temporary solution to educational concerns, the following issues must be addressed.

Define what coaching is—and is not. In Figure 1, I highlight some of these distinctions. Coaching is based on research that highlights the value of on-going, on-the-job professional development. When teachers are provided with opportunities to learn more about the content they teach and how to teach it, there tends to be improved student learning (NICHD, 2000; Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 1995). Those who coach have roles that are very different from any found in schools previously. Coaches are not teachers nor are they administrators with evaluative duties. Further they are not teacher aides, test administrators, or data entry people. Although coaches, in their role, may help to locate materials or other resources for teachers, they need to be careful that their position does not evolve into one in which they spend the majority of their time duplicating or organizing materials. They may also enter data as part of their job, but they should not spend a major amount of time with administrative tasks that take them away from their primary task of supporting teacher efforts to improve instruction. And, experts who write about coaching, emphasize the fact that coaching is not an evaluative position in which coaches make judgments about teacher instruction and share that information with administrators in the school.

So what do coaches do? Coaches are there to support the work of teachers; the most effective way to do this is to respond to needs as identified by teacher and coach. Various types of data (test, observational) can be used to identify these needs. Given that the goal is school-wide improvement, coaching must be available to all teachers—the novice and the veteran teacher, the highly effective and those who may be experiencing difficulties with a specific class or topic being taught. The ways in which coaches work with teachers vary—from problem-solving sessions with individuals or groups of teachers to co-teaching, modeling, and observing in the classrooms. There are many different ways to support teachers in their efforts, and books such as those written by Kise, 2006; Puig & Froelich, 2007; and Toll, 2007 can be useful references for coaches. The websites of the Literacy Coaching Clearinghouse (www.literacycoachingonline.org)

and, of course, www.pacoaching.org, also provide valuable information about how to implement a successful coaching program and guidelines for coaching.

An organizational structure that promotes coaching. As indicated previously, successful coaching can only occur if the context for coaching is one that promotes it. Coaching thrives in a context in which there are positive relationships and a sense of community in the school; in other words, schools recognize the importance of human and social capital (Leana & Fil, 2006). Features that are especially important include the following:

- A supportive principal who understands and values coaching. In research that my colleague and I have conducted, coaches have identified their relationship with the principal as a key factor for success (Bean & Zigmond, 2006).   They cite specifics about ways a principal provides support, e.g., arranging the schedule so that there is opportunity for teacher interaction; meeting on a regular basis with the coach; and supporting the notion of coaching as a key to school improvement. These coaches also indicated that supportive principals recognized that coaches had to maintain confidentiality in terms of what they saw and heard in classrooms. When principals expected coaches to serve in an evaluative role, the relationship between coach and teachers became strained and ineffective;
- The school has a common vision and goals; there is an instructional framework that helps establish a roadmap for teachers;
- Teachers have high expectations for students;
- The school supports teachers as learners. Teachers interact with each other, value each other, and are willing to accept constructive criticism about their work.

Need for data about coaching and its effects. In order for coaching to be supported by policy makers, school boards, and other potential funders, we need evidence that coaching makes a difference in terms of teacher practices and student achievement. As indicated in *Standards for Middle and High School Literacy Coaches* (IRA, 2006), there are "few studies—and no systematic body of research—reporting on the direct link of literacy coaching to student learning" (p.2). Without that evidence, coaching may disappear as have other educational innovations or initiatives. What we have at the present time are some small numbers of studies that investigate teacher and coach perceptions of coaching, and effect of coaching on teacher practices (Bean, Belcastro, Hathaway, Risko, Rosemary, & Roskos, 2006). What is promising, however, is the research that is currently being conducted about the various initiatives in schools across this country. The evaluation reports about the Pennsylvania High School Coaching Initiative (PAHSCI) will provide important evidence about the nature of coaching and its potential for improving teacher practices and student performance.

Coaching holds much promise and potential; it provides the support that enables teachers to design and implement the best possible instruction for their students. It is based on a model that identifies the teacher as a reflective professional responsible for making decisions about how to best structure instructional experiences for students. It

would be unfortunate if such a model did not achieve its potential because it was misunderstood or implemented inappropriately.

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Coaching IS:	Coaching IS NOT:
Job-embedded professional development that is on-going and sustained; Support for teachers (both individual and groups); Based on teacher and student needs as identified by multiple sources; Form of inquiry and reflection; Cooperative and collaborative; Building school capacity; Means of improving school achievement.	Evaluative in nature; that is, coaches are not there to "judge" teacher performance; Administrative with major role to handle paperwork, budgets, order and organize materials; Serving as a Teacher's aide; Assessing students only; Data entry only; An instructional role, e.g., teaching students with problems.

Figure 1. Defining Coaching: What It is and Is Not