

# *Literacy Coaching: Research & Practice*

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## Literacy Coaching: What Are We Learning?

Nancy Shanklin

### Abstract

*Reviewed in this chapter are six recent studies, three elementary and three secondary, that acquaint readers with emerging studies on literacy coaching. These specific studies are not part of the proceedings from the First National Literacy Coaching Summit, but they illustrate ways in which the field is developing. This growing body of research has allowed NCTE and IRA to advocate for job-embedded professional development and implementation of coaches as part of Literacy Education for All, Results for the Nation (LEARN) Act (H.B. 4037). If LEARN does not pass through Congress separately, NCTE and IRA hope that it will become part of the reauthorization of the Elementary Secondary Education Act (ESEA), formerly known as No Child Left Behind (NCLB).*

The First National Literacy Coaching Summit provided an opportunity for the gathering of a rich mix of researchers, university faculty, policymakers, school leaders, literacy coaches, reading specialists, and classroom teachers to discuss new knowledge and findings about literacy coaching as a means for providing job-embedded professional development. Conference sessions permitted audiences to hear studies or other practical work on coaching and to uncover important patterns. Foremost in people's minds were questions such as:

- Can coaching improve teacher instruction and subsequent student achievement?
- What seems to be working across programs?

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- What are common problems?
- What solutions are people trying?

The sessions encouraged deep discussion and problem solving in a positive, hopeful atmosphere. Conference attendees were able to network and plan future endeavors to move this new field forward. Publication of these proceedings allows information shared at the conference to be distributed to even wider audiences.

Reviewed in this chapter are six recent studies—three based in elementary schools and three in secondary education—that acquaint readers with emerging studies on literacy coaching. These specific studies were not part of the proceedings of the conference, but they help to illustrate ways in which the field of literacy coaching is growing. They suggest threads that are extended by the pieces in the rest of this volume.

### ***Recent Studies of Literacy Coaching at the Elementary Level***

Recently one of most rigorous studies of literacy coaching to date was completed by Biancarosa, Bryk, & Dexter on the Literacy Collaborative (2008). The Literacy Collaborative is a school-wide literacy reform program developed by Irene Fontas and Gay Su Pinnell as an outgrowth of their work to bring Reading Recovery to the United States. While Reading Recovery has proven to be a successful intervention, questions remained as to whether students maintained gains in regular classroom settings. In response to this challenge, Fontas and Pinnell designed the Literacy Collaborative as a school-wide literacy program. One condition for becoming a Literacy Collaborative school is that a building already has had a Reading Recovery program in place. The Institute for Educational Studies (IES) funded a five-year study of 18 Literacy Collaborative schools. The research employed both rigorous quantitative and qualitative measures to address complex questions about whether Literacy Collaborative coaches could assist teachers to improve instruction, and whether subsequent gains in student achievement occurred.

In this study, all students (K-3) attending 18 public schools across eight states in the Eastern United States were assessed using part of DIBELS in the fall and spring for grades K-2, and the fall of the 3rd grade. Students also took the *Terra Nova* assessment in the spring of grades 1-3. The study took place over a period of four years. Results from the first year of the study served as a baseline while the coaches were trained. Coaches began working with teachers in the second year. At that time coaches were asked to keep monthly logs including how they carried out their roles, with whom, and what they did. The researchers also engaged in systematic observation of teachers' instructional practices in years two through four to document the changes they made. Teacher surveys in years one and four assessed individual agency properties, school organizational properties, and possible changes.

Value-added analyses of the schools and the teachers revealed an overall positive effect on children's literacy learning across all schools involved in the study. However, there was considerable variability between schools. Some showed 50% additional learning over usual student growth. Others showed substantial increments to average growth only after two years. Effect sizes increased for each year of the study: .25 in Year 2; .37 in Year 3; and .44 in Year 4. By the final year, there was a 33.4 % increase in learning across children, grades, teachers and schools over the baseline year. From this study it would seem that when coaches are carefully selected and trained to implement a research-based program, positive results can occur. It is important to note that results may not be seen in the first year of implementation; making changes to instructional practices takes time for teachers to implement well, and therefore additional years may be needed. While there may be more positive results with time, variability among teachers may also increase rather than decrease. With coaches helping teachers learn to make changes in their instructional practices, less effective teachers will make increases, but at the same time, more effective teachers make even greater increases. Besides this particular report, other reports exist concerning many other aspects of this



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large-scale study. (Atteberry, Walker, Fountas, & Scharer, 2008; Bryk, Biancarosa, Atteberry, Hough, & Dexter, 2008; Hough, Bryk, Atteberry, & Pinnell, 2008).

Another important project that implemented the use of coaches was undertaken by Chicago Public Schools, six universities, and the Chicago Community Trust in 2002. Given that the current Secretary of Education, Arne Duncan, was superintendent during this time period, it seems an important study for educators interested in coaching to know. Working together, the three participating entities developed the Advanced Reading Development Demonstration Project (ARDDP, 2009). The project targeted K–8 schools that were at low levels of reading achievement, but not necessarily the very lowest. Each university partnered with as many as 10 schools. Professional development focused on increasing teachers' knowledge, assessments to inform instruction, improving infrastructure for teacher leaders, and creating teacher teams to work on building K–8 coherence. Chicago Public Schools committed resources for coaches, called "lead literacy teachers" in the project, and for the professional development in the form of coursework for coaches that led to the Illinois Reading Endorsement. By the end of the fifth year, the schools showed improvement, student performance was higher, and a cadre of new school literacy leaders/coaches was created. This project demonstrates that successful results can be achieved in improving teacher instruction and student learning when school districts, university teaching and research faculties, and foundations work together over significant periods of time.

A third study of coaching at the elementary level was conducted in New Zealand (Timperley, Parr, & Hulsbosch, 2008) using a program that has shown very positive student achievement results reported in effect sizes. The assumption in this particular study was that the purpose of one-to-one coaching conferences is to improve teachers' practices. Coaches were provided with training in the principles and practices of effective feedback processes using protocols of learning conversations. The researchers collected data

as coaches engaged in three phases of giving feedback to teachers. Based on the results of each phase, the researchers made changes to learn whether coaches' conversations with teachers could be enhanced.

In Phase 1 of the study, the researchers found that coaches provided teachers with many indirect suggestions that were very practical, often focused on the students or particular points of the specific lesson, and made no reference to wider principles of effective teaching. In turn, the teachers themselves reported that they did not intend to enact coaches' suggestions. Based upon these results and employing iterative research cycles, the researchers taught coaches to provide feedback based upon theories of learning.

In Phase 2 and subsequent data gathering, the coaches were asked to provide teachers with reasons for any questions that they asked so that teachers did not feel interrogated, and understood why the questions were important to consider. The idea was to uncover theories underpinning teachers' current practices. Through discussion, coaches were to begin to shape teachers' views of effective instruction. Additionally, they were instructed to gather feedback on students' responses to lessons. The coaches asked questions of students that were consistent with developing meta-cognitive awareness.

Results from 22 of the 50 episodes in Phase 2 showed coaches engaging teachers in discussions of current theories of effective practice and probing teachers' reasons for particular teaching practices. Coaches and teachers would deconstruct the lesson and co-construct, but not at the level of theory engagement. Suggestions from coaches to teachers once again remained at the practical level. Coaches referred teachers to concepts learned in workshops where theory was also introduced, but only infrequently. In contrast with Phase 1, results from 42 of 50 episodes gathered during Phase 2 showed that coaches and teachers spent time discussing the links between teaching practices, students' understanding of the learning goals of a lesson, and associated success criteria.

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Student responses provided strong motivation for teachers to discuss changes in their individual practices. However, the researchers found that the coaches did not work with teachers to promote self-regulated learning wherein teachers set specific goals for themselves and their students and articulated monitoring strategies to determine if their new practices were more effective. All of these results from Phase 2 led the researchers to contemplate the potential value of configuration maps or levels-of-use instruments in Phase 3.

This study is one of a very few that has examined conversations between teachers and coaches in one-to-one coaching sessions. The study employed a potentially fruitful research strategy of iterative cycles that could lead to improvements in the quality of teacher-coach conversations. Additionally, it has the potential to provide meaningful content and practice for coaches' professional development.

### ***Recent Studies of Literacy/Instructional Coaching at the Middle and High School Levels***

Besides these studies of literacy coaching at the elementary level, there have been new studies of literacy/instructional coaching at the middle and high school level. A study of middle school reading coaches from eight Florida districts over the 2006–07 school year was completed by Marsh, McCombs, & Lockwood (2008). The researchers found that whereas coaches were asked to work with all teachers in their buildings, they worked most extensively with reading teachers. Surveys of reading coaches indicated that they desired more professional development training on working with adult learners, special education students and English Language Learners, as well as literacy across content areas. The use of coaches was associated with a small, but significant, improvement in average annual gains in reading for two of the four cohorts of students that were analyzed. It is curious that the coaches chose to work most with reading teachers. There are at least two possible explanations for this phenomenon. The middle

schools selected for the study were large, with only one coach per building. Although coaches could work with all teachers, they chose to work with the reading teachers who were most receptive and wanted to tap into the coaches' expertise. It could also be that coaches felt more comfortable working with reading teachers than with content teachers because they did not feel confident about their abilities to blend literacy and content learning in meaningful ways. Further research could be conducted to explore this question.

During the 2006–07 school year, Elizabeth Boatright (2007) documented the work of an external coach with the English/Language Arts teachers of one high school in an urban area of the Northwest. This large high school had just divided into three smaller schools. Boatright observed three coaching cycles by the external coach at each school for a total of eighteen days. She found that the external coach worked with teachers to examine student data and to model lessons in classrooms. For an additional six days, while the external coach was not present, Boatright observed the teachers for changes in their practices. She found that through demonstration teaching and modeling, the coach was able to change teachers' views about students' intellectual abilities. While working with the coach, teachers observed their students doing tasks that they had not believed the students could accomplish. Additionally, Boatright found that veteran teachers were hesitant to coach beginning teachers even when they knew information that would help them. Instead, all of the teachers were more receptive to critical comments from the external coach. This study suggests that through demonstration teaching, coaches can help teachers examine their assumptions about students' abilities and what they are capable of accomplishing. The study calls into question why the more experienced teachers were not willing to share practical teaching knowledge, even when it was apparent that new teachers and their students would benefit from it. It seems to suggest the need for the development of professional

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learning communities in which all teachers examine their instruction in order to increase student learning.

Cantrell & Hughes (2008) studied the teacher efficacy and content literacy implementation of 22 6th and 9th grade content teachers. Quantitative results showed the largest gains occurred in teachers' sense of *personal efficacy*, that each one could, individually, teach students to use literacy strategies helpful in their own specific content area. However, *collective efficacy*, the teachers' sense as a group that they could teach content literacy strategies that would improve students' abilities, was significantly related to the teachers' continued implementation of new strategies in the spring semester. The primary barrier to teachers' senses of efficacy in using the new instructional methods to increase students' learning was time. Teachers wanted more time to develop their skills, to implement strategies, and to collaborate with colleagues. Teachers affirmed that feedback and support from coaches was essential to their success. This is one of the few studies that offers insights into teachers' views of the coaching experience. It is very interesting that the teachers continued to try new strategies in the spring semester, even though finding time was difficult. Due to their collective efficacy, they maintained the belief that they could, as a group, improve students' learning.

### *New Learnings*

A careful reading of these six studies seems to suggest that districts and schools would be well advised to consider the following points when attempting to design or improve their literacy coaching programs.

- Principals need to set the stage for literacy coaches by working with them to present clear descriptions of coaches' roles to faculty.
- The formation of professional learning communities and school literacy teams that support analysis of data and critical talks about instruction add to coaches' successes.

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- Coaches need to document how they spend their time and share these logs with school literacy teams and principals to determine if their time is spent in ways that are most conducive to impacting teachers' instruction and students' learning.
- Coaches should consider use of feedback or classroom observation forms that are developed and shared with teachers as part of coaching conferences.
- Coaches and teachers need to believe that they can impact students' learning.
- Positive results are not always found after the first year of a coaching program; shifting teacher instruction in ways that show positive increases in student achievement takes time.
- Coaches benefit from ongoing professional learning to increase their abilities to do their jobs well.

Held in early April 2009, the National Literacy Coaching Summit occurred shortly after the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) (2009) had been passed by Congress. District leaders stated growing concerns that there would not be moneys to hire new coaches or even retain current coaches. In addition, many worried that districts did not have strong program evaluation designs in place that would demonstrate the benefits of coaching for both teachers and students. Others wondered, if they used stimulus moneys to hire coaches, whether they would be able to continue to fund those positions once ARRA moneys ended.

The Literacy Coaching Clearinghouse (LCC) has been concerned about issues around the funding of coaches' positions since its inception. It became the reason that the LCC Advisory Board decided to use the verb form "coaching" rather than the noun form "coaches" in its title. Although the Advisory Board hopes that funding for coaching will increase, it concedes that the official job or role of "coach" may disappear in some school districts

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during the economic downturn. However, the benefits of coaching as a verb have the potential to survive and to prove themselves.

School districts recognize that old forms of one-time sessions have not worked in terms of raising test scores or closing achievement gaps. They can see it is imperative to experiment with new ideas—sometimes even ahead of helpful information from research on effective coaching programs. The following forms of “coaching” seem to be most prevalent in books and research written by coaches as practitioners:

- Planning, facilitating, or leading professional development sessions
- Leading data analysis sessions
- Leading study groups
- Finding resources
- Holding conversations with teachers “on the fly”
- Organizing peer coaching
- Assisting with action research
- Doing modeling and demonstration teaching
- Leading teaching labs or lesson study
- Doing coaching cycles of pre, during, and post

All of these actions represent types of job-embedded professional development. It is possible for these actions to occur even if the job or role of coach itself disappears. It may be the case that forms of “coaching” could be distributed to various teacher leaders within schools. If these actions prove useful, then perhaps over time, when funding once again stabilizes or increases, actual coach positions may come to exist again.

Educators are under increasing pressure to improve student test scores because of No Child Left Behind (2002) and data showing that US students are not competing as well as they might on international tests. Educators are under increasing pressure as states are starting to develop even higher standards for students. In addition, voluntary national standards may be forthcoming.



There is also growing public will to put more emphasis on early childhood education. Educators in this area are often paraprofessionals who require further education to enhance student learning. At the other end of the spectrum, parents and business leaders are placing increasing emphasis on adolescent literacy and workforce readiness. In addition to the need to increase the quality of instruction at all levels, teachers will also need to be able to develop, administer, and analyze data from new assessments that will guide their instructional efforts. Therefore, job-embedded professional development will not go away, and the actions of instructional coaching will continue in spite of economic challenges. If such actions are successful, schools may decide that they need more coaches, not fewer. Two recent books that provide comprehensive ways that literacy coaches, knowledgeable administrators, and school literacy teams can lead to school improvements are: *The Literacy Coaching Challenge: Models and Methods for Grades K–8* (McKenna & Walpole, 2008) and *The Literacy Leadership Team: Sustaining and Expanding Success* (Froelich & Puig, 2009).

There are additional areas in which coaching may prove helpful. Currently 50% of new teachers drop out of the profession within the first five years. Coaching could help novice teachers become more successful in the classroom and increase their job satisfaction. The mindset across all educators' careers must be to plan for reflection, growth, and change as students and community environments change. For example, more schools are becoming settings where intergenerational learning takes place between students, teacher candidates, teachers, specialists, and administrators, who vary in age by up to two generations. Coaching can help prepare educators to work with a broad spectrum of age groups and learning styles. Job-embedded professional learning that is organized and delivered through coaching can help educators continue to enhance their expertise. Several of these ideas are discussed in the book *Finders and Keepers: Helping New Teachers Survive and Thrive in Our Schools*, based on the research of S. M. Johnson (2004) in conjunction with the Project on the Next



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### Generation of Teachers.

In part, through the efforts of the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) and the International Reading Association (IRA), the phrase “job-embedded professional development” has been written into the Literacy Education for All, Results for the Nation (LEARN) Act (2009). With other professional associations, NCTE and IRA have advocated for specific wording around the role and funding of coaches. They anticipate that criteria coaches will need to meet will be written in. If LEARN does not pass, the professional associations are hopeful that job-embedded professional development and the role of coaches will become part of the reauthorization of the *Elementary Secondary Education Act* (ESEA), more recently referred to as NCLB.

In the United States, as well as in other countries, there is a clear need to develop ways in which to help teachers improve the quality of their teaching throughout their careers and to help students keep pace in an ever-changing, challenging world environment. Coaching has emerged as a sensible means to increase teacher quality and subsequent student learning. The real question becomes this: Is coaching merely a nice but *unnecessary* strategy, or is coaching crucial to improving teacher quality and student achievement, working best when schools have well-qualified educators in the role? This volume provides lenses on the state of our current knowledge and offers suggestions as to ways this new field may proceed.

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