What Is a Literacy Coach?

This is an exciting, and perhaps somewhat intimidating, time for teachers in the middle. It is a time when teachers are being asked to open their classroom doors to someone called the “literacy coach.” You might be asking, what exactly is a literacy coach? We have asked the same question, and are wondering further: Who makes a great coach? Do all coaches do the same thing? And why are so many districts adding coaching to their professional development support? These are questions we will address over the next two years.

We hope this column will be helpful to all teachers who find themselves acting as literacy coaches in classrooms across the country as well as the teachers with whom they collaborate. As middle level educators deeply connected to schools and school districts, we have been bombarded with questions on this topic. Those questions started us on a quest to find out more about the roles of adolescent literacy coaches, qualifications for effective coaches, the learning journeys of everyone involved, and the impact that might be attributable to literacy coaching.

We are very aware that literacy coaching has been defined in multiple ways and that coaching models have manifested themselves into very different practices. Our focus will be on coaching models of a collegial nature, where the primary role of the coach is to support teachers to become more reflective, to refine what they are doing, to set goals, and to share with another their least successful instructional attempts. This model requires that coaches take a non-evaluative, respectful role in order for trust to develop. Carol Lyons and Gay Su Pinnell, in their book Systems for Change in Literacy Education: A Guide to Professional Development (Heinemann, 2001), identify trust as one of the critical factors in this kind of professional development.

Our early research shows that teachers and coaches are willing to talk candidly about their experiences. This is not a surprise, as we’re focusing on districts that have built the kind of coaching model where disclosure is part of daily practice. The learning steps of both the teachers and of the coaches are openly shared with one another, and it is assumed that “making mistakes” is part of the learning process. Coaches play the role of “lead learner in a community of learners,” rather than experts with all the answers.
The vignettes we will share come from systems with varying experiences and configurations. One district is moving into its third year with middle school literacy coaches and its second year with high school coaches. A second district is building from its strong primary grades coaching model as it begins the first year of middle level coaching this fall. A third program is nested within the South Carolina Reading Initiative (SCRI), a statewide literacy initiative that has embraced coaching at its core. Experienced SCRI middle grades coach, Marie Crawford, offers us a first visual look at what a coach is and is not [see Figure 1].

Our plan is to end this column series with a focused analysis of the results of these efforts to illustrate the impact of coaching initiatives on teachers, students, and school systems. We look forward to hearing your questions and concerns so that you can help guide our exploration and the content of this new column. We would love to hear stories from your school’s coaching model if they can add new perspectives to this endeavor. Contact us at coachescorner@ncte.org.

In *The New Meaning of Educational Change* (Teachers College Press, 1991), Michael Fullan laments, “Nothing has promised so much and has been so frustratingly wasteful as the thousands of workshops and conferences that led to no significant change in practice when teachers returned to their classrooms.” Coaching has the potential to be powerful in ways that isolated workshops, criticized by Fullan and others, have not. Coaching for reflective teaching takes place in the classrooms of real teachers with real kids and occurs on an ongoing basis. We look forward to a continued conversation with you as coaching enters more middle school classrooms.

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**Figure 1.** Graphic definition of literacy coach

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1 For more information about SCRI, see http://www.ncte.org/profdev/onsite/readinit/groups/110385.htm.