

Literacy Coaches

Roles and Responsibilities

By Sebastian Wren and Deborah Reed

For several decades, research findings have noted the importance of high-quality teachers to the reading success of students, especially students who are at-risk for reading and academic failure. While other factors, such as the quality of the core reading program and the teacher-student ratio in the classroom, appear to have some influence on reading achievement, the knowledge, skills, and experience of the classroom teacher seem to play a pivotal role in student reading success

(Block, 2000; Bond & Dykstra, 1967; Brady & Moats, 1997; Darling-Hammond, 1988; Moats & Foorman, 2003); Sanders & Horn, 1998; Snow, Barnes, Chandler, Goodman, & Hemphill, 1997).

Teaching all students to read is a complex task which requires that teachers have a sophisticated understanding of how students learn to read, a thorough understanding of appropriate interventions that can be used to help struggling readers keep up with their peers, and an ability to use a variety of instructional strategies to meet the needs of all learners (National Reading Panel, 2000). It is clear that if schools are to rise to the challenge of leaving no child behind, they must take steps to ensure that all elementary school teachers are well-trained, highly effective reading teachers and that secondary schools develop effective literacy instruction, especially for struggling students who need to acquire strong comprehension skills and build vocabulary.

High-quality training for all teachers, however, has been problematic in real school settings. It has



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been emphasized in a number of studies that the reading instruction training most teachers get is often limited both in time and quality (Dole, 2003; Fullan, 1991; Little, 1993). Training usually comes in the form of workshops, lectures, or training academies. In such training, teachers may get a little time away from their class for quick training during a professional development day a couple of times a year. That is not the sort of training that results in deep understanding and high levels of instructional skill building (Joyce & Showers, 2002).

A handful of teachers go above and beyond the most basic training to get richer, more advanced training in reading instruction. Those teachers may become reading specialists—highly trained, often certified professionals (NCES, 2004) who specialize in helping students who are struggling with learning to read in the regular classroom. Schools have come to depend upon reading specialists to help struggling readers and are more willing to make substantial investments in the professional growth and development of those reading specialists.

Teacher Quality and Reading

The studies cited in the first paragraph of "Literacy Coaches: Roles and Responsibilities" represent a range of studies that emphasize the importance of teacher quality in reading. Here is a brief summary of some of the research cited.

"The Cooperative Research Program in First-Grade Reading Instruction," by Guy Bond and Robert Dykstra (1967) is landmark research in the field of reading. The Cooperative Research Program included 27 research projects studying first-grade students, designed to gather data relevant to three basic questions:

- To what extent are various pupil, teacher, class, school, and community characteristics related to pupil achievement in first-grade reading and spelling?
- Which of the many approaches to initial reading instruction produces superior reading and spelling achievement at the end of first grade?
- Is any program uniquely effective or ineffective for pupils with high or low readiness for reading?

Each of the 27 projects collected different types of student data including personal information such as age, sex, amount of preschool experience, and the number of days of absence during the experimental period. Other data focused on information about the teacher, the student's class, the school in which he or she was enrolled, and about the community in which he or she lived. Numerous pre-instructional and post-instructional tests were administered and measures of each student's writing ability and attitude toward reading were obtained.

Bond and Dykstra's findings correlated teacher experience with student reading achievement, based on five measures of the Stanford Achievement Test. A rating of general teacher efficacy also correlated positively with the five achievement measures.

Susan Brady's and Louisa Moats's position paper for the International Dyslexia Association, "Informed Instruction for Reading Success: Foundations for Teacher Preparation," drew on 20 years of reading research to identify core requirements for reading teachers. They stress the necessity of teachers' receiving a solid foundation regarding the "theoretical and scientific underpinnings for understanding literacy development," including knowledge of the relationship between the spoken and written language, sophisticated understanding of the development of phonological awareness and the process of learning to read, and an understanding of what constitutes adequate research evidence. They also suggest teachers have a strong knowledge of the structure of language including knowledge of the English speech sound system and its production, knowledge of the structure of English orthography and its relationships to sound and meaning, and knowledge of grammatical structure.

Louisa Moats and Barbara Foorman conducted a four-year descriptive, longitudinal study of reading instruction in low-performing, high-poverty schools that included teacher surveys and observation. The researchers surveyed teachers who taught in grades K-4 to document their understanding of reading instruction and language concepts. They also

analyzed the teachers' misconceptions about sounds, words, sentences, and principles of reading instruction. Moats and Foorman reported that they "established a modest predictive relationship between teachers' knowledge, classroom reading achievement levels, and teachers' observed teaching competence." They also write, "We found surprising gaps in teachers' insights about learning to read."

Linda Darling-Hammond used data from a 50-state survey of policies, state case study analyses, the National Center for Educational Statistics' (NCES) Schools and Staffing surveys, and the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) to examine ways in which teacher qualifications and other school factors are related to student achievement across states. Quantitative analyses showed measures of teacher preparation and certification as the strongest correlates of student achievement in reading and mathematics, even after controlling for student poverty and language status.

William Sanders and Sandra Horn were among the researchers who analyzed the Tennessee Value-Added Assessment System (TVASS). TVASS is a large database linking students and student outcomes to the schools and districts in which they are enrolled and to the teachers to whom they are assigned from grade to grade. Sanders and Horn reported, "Research conducted from the TVAAS database has shown that race, socioeconomic level, class size, and classroom heterogeneity are poor predictors of student academic growth. Rather the effectiveness of the teacher is the major determinant of student academic progress."

Catherine Snow and her colleagues Wendy Barnes, Jane Chandler, Irene Goodman, and Lowery Hemphill used a mixture of approaches (interviews, observations, and tests) in their long-term study, which is documented and discussed in *Unfulfilled Expectations: Home and School Influences on Literacy*. They studied the effects of home and school experiences in the lives of low-income children on their literacy achievement, comparing low-income families that had children who had been successful in school with low-income families that had children who were below-average learners. One of the factors they examined was the performance of students who received instruction from teachers determined to be "strong" teachers versus the performance of students who received instruction from "weak" teachers. The researchers found a correlation between teachers and reading ability. Students who received two years of reading instruction from strong, knowledgeable teachers tended to become successful readers no matter how much home support they received. Even students who came from literacy-poor homes where reading and education were not well supported tended to be successful when given two years of instruction from knowledgeable, highly qualified teachers.

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There Is No Quick Fix

In many schools, struggling readers are pulled out of their regular classroom for short, intensive sessions with a reading specialist. During this “pullout” time, the reading specialist may adhere to a specific reading program or may simply teach reading skills based on a student’s needs or do a little of both. This short-term tutoring approach is used with the belief that struggling readers will learn effective reading skills and strategies from the reading specialist that they can then practice and use to help them when they return to their regular classroom.

Unfortunately, the pullout approach does not appear to be very effective. Walmsley and Allington (1995) reviewed research on remedial and special education reading programs,* finding that “in virtually every study the evidence indicates that some children seem to benefit enormously, but these children are not in the majority.” They suggest that once these pullout programs are established for the struggling readers, the classroom teachers excuse themselves from the responsibility of making sure these students become good readers. Walmsley and Allington assert that, as a result of these pullout reading interventions, the students “in most need of instructional support may actually receive less support in the regular classroom where they spend most of their school day.”

Additionally, the good habits, skills, and strategies taught by the reading specialist may not be supported in the regular classroom, and struggling readers are likely to revert back to their old, ineffective reading habits. For example, while a reading specialist may know to direct the student’s attention to sounding out unfamiliar words, offering help only when the student has reached a point of frustration, the classroom teacher may allow the student to simply guess at words on the page or may be more eager to identify the words for the student, thus teaching the student to depend upon the teacher for answers. As noted by Snow, Burns, and Griffin (1998), “It is nothing short of foolhardy to make enormous investments in remedial instruction and then return children to classroom instruction that will not serve to maintain the gains they made in the remedial program.”

This traditional model of depending on a few well-trained teachers to do most of the work with struggling readers is problematic for several other

reasons as well. For example, many schools have difficulty coordinating the times that students are pulled from the classroom with the classroom instruction schedule, and there is also evidence that segregation from the regular classroom stigmatizes children (Leinhardt & Pally, 1982). Considering the tremendous cost of training and supporting a full-time reading specialist who works individually or in small groups with struggling readers, the gains in student achievement are not as substantial or long-lasting as one would hope (Walmsley & Allington, 1995). Also, in many schools, there are simply too many struggling readers and the reading specialist is not able to work with all of them.

Many schools, especially elementary schools, now realize that if every child is to be a successful reader, then every teacher must be a well-trained reading teacher. In secondary schools, teachers often feel unprepared to support and instruct struggling readers—they generally have received considerably less preparation to teach reading than elementary teachers. The responsibility for high-quality reading instruction cannot be left to a few reading specialists; that responsibility must be shared by all teachers. Schools are looking for effective but cost-effective ways to build the capacity of all classroom teachers, and many recognize that their reading specialists are in a good position to share their wealth of knowledge with the rest of the teachers.

From Reading Specialist to Literacy Coach

Rather than having the reading specialist work with struggling readers, some schools are now asking their reading specialists to serve as reading coaches or literacy coaches, who provide ongoing, job-embedded training and support for the other teachers in the school to build their capacity and effectiveness as reading teachers. Researchers who examine issues related to teacher professional development are finding that the best-trained, most knowledgeable teachers (in any domain, not just reading) have had substantial support from a strong mentor or coach who helped them to learn new concepts and practice new skills in the classroom (Darling-Hammond, 2000). These highly skilled teachers get some training through

* Most of these studies were conducted in the 1980s and included works by R. L. Allington and P. A. Johnston (1989), R. L. Allington and A. McGill-Franzen (1989), L. Carter (1984), L. M. Gelzheiser, J. Meyers, and R. M. Pruzek (1992), K. A. Kavale (1988), B. Larrivee (1985), G. Leinhardt and A. Pally (1982), C. A. Lyons (1989), Slavin, R. E. (1987), and M. Will (1986), among others.

workshops and lectures, but the training that has influenced their instruction the most has been ongoing and job-embedded with the support of a knowledgeable mentor or coach.

Shifting the role of reading specialists into a mentoring and coaching role responsible for providing other teachers with support and guidance that improves reading instruction can be a powerful step toward improving achievement at low-performing schools. Thousands of schools are taking this step, in part due to the federal Reading First initiative, which considers coaches an important part of professional development. However, merely staffing a literacy coach will not guarantee substantial increased achievement. In addition to the requisite knowledge and skills about reading instruction, the effectiveness of the literacy coach likely depends on the roles and responsibilities that the coach has to fill, the level of support the coach has from campus and district leadership, and the culture of the school where the coach is working.

The recent proliferation of literacy coaches in schools across the country (International Reading Association, 2004a) has not been studied very thoroughly or systematically. There have been, to date, no evidence-based or data-driven empirical studies of the various factors that can influence the effectiveness of literacy coaches. However, there have been a number of less formal case studies of literacy coaches, and a good deal of useful advice can be gathered from recent books, articles, and papers based on the experiences of those who have established coaching programs. Examples of the current literature base include works by the International Reading Association (2004a, 2004b), which published a position statement about the roles and responsibilities of reading coaches and included reading specialists and literacy coaches in its *Standards for Reading Professionals* (2004b). Other examples include works by Lyons and Pinnell (2001), Dole (2004), and Symonds (2002) who examined the roles literacy coaches can play in literacy improvement and school improvement efforts. Walpole and Blamey (in press) surveyed principals and literacy coaches about their practices and their perceptions about the roles that they play in school improvement efforts.

Based on our own work at SEDL in school-improvement efforts involving literacy coaches and the experiences of others, we have recommendations that schools should consider when staffing a literacy coach. Although there are a variety of ways literacy coaching programs may be structured, the elements discussed below should be considered when establishing the coaching position and in ensuring campus support of the position.

Three Competencies of Effective Literacy Coaches

From our work and from other literature, we have identified three competencies that seem key to the success of literacy coaches. Effective literacy coaches

- **understand reading.**

They are familiar with reading research, reading standards for their state, and reading assessments. They know what is to be taught at each grade level.

- **understand pedagogy.**

They are familiar with best practices in reading instruction, they have a collection of effective strategies to draw upon, and they know how to manage a classroom of diverse learners so that the learning needs of individual students are addressed. They know that students learn in engaging learning environments, and they know how to engage students in appropriate learning.

- **understand coaching.**

They know how to help other teachers learn, experiment, and apply new knowledge. They know how to facilitate meetings, use questioning strategies, and offer support. They do not simply share information with teachers, but instead work collaboratively with teachers to learn new information and strategies together.

Recommendations for the Literacy Coach's Role

1. **Literacy coaches are resources for the teachers, always trying to provide support in a non-judgmental way.** Most of the examinations of literacy coaching initiatives have indicated that the successful literacy coaches are never put in a position of evaluating the job performance of other teachers. The principal or some other administrator is responsible for evaluating teachers and making decisions that may affect the pay, teaching assignment, or employment of the classroom teachers—the literacy coach should be represented as someone who serves as a resource for teachers and who provides support to help teachers improve reading instruction. The literacy coach should take steps to establish a safe, supportive environment for improving instruction. Certainly the literacy coach should observe instruction and provide feedback for the teachers, but the teachers should understand that the coach's observations are not used for formal evaluations of the teachers' performance. Teachers are less likely to trust a literacy coach who is evaluating their class performance, and in the absence of a trusting environment, they are less likely to take risks and try new approaches and strategies.

Teachers should understand that the coach's observations are not used for formal performance evaluations.

2. **Most of the literacy coach's time should be spent working with teachers, but the coach's own professional development should also be a priority.** The literacy coach's professional development should include reading articles, learning new strategies for instruction and professional development, communicating with other reading experts, staying abreast of the research, and gathering information to share with the other teachers. Time for the coach's own professional development should be explicitly scheduled and protected. It may be a good idea when first setting up the literacy coach position to specify what percentage of the coach's time will be spent working with teachers and what percentage will be spent on the coach's own professional development.
3. **The literacy coach should not work with students unless it is to demonstrate lessons to teachers.** The literacy coach is not a substitute teacher or a tutor. The time the literacy coach is working with students is not a time for the teacher to grade papers. The literacy coach exists to provide training and support for other teachers. The coach should visit every classroom regularly (several times a week), and the coach should work with teachers to make clear plans about areas of instruction to work on and practice between visits and meetings.
4. **The literacy coach should clearly focus on five areas of instructional support for teachers: theory underlying instruction, demonstration of activities, observation of teachers practicing new lessons, feedback and reflection about instruction, and supporting collaboration among teachers.** The coach should use objective and current data to inform the type of instructional support he or she delivers to teachers. For example, if assessments show that students are leaving kindergarten without developing phoneme awareness, the coach should emphasize the theory and practice of phoneme awareness instruction for the kindergarten teachers. Similarly, if data indicate that students are failing to develop appropriate fluency skills, the coach should emphasize theory and instructional activities related to developing fluency.
5. **The coach should facilitate frequent staff meetings devoted to examining samples of student work and assessment data, helping teachers interpret assessment information and use that information to provide more focused instruction based on student needs.** These meetings should be designed to encourage questioning, discussion, and dialog. The coach

should also focus on building expertise and leadership within the staff.

Recommendations for the School Leadership Support Role

The literacy coach cannot be effective without the consistent support of campus leaders. Initially, some teachers may not be enthusiastic about a literacy coach coming into their classrooms and may not welcome the support the literacy coach provides. Especially in the beginning, the principal and other campus leaders will need to play an active role to support the literacy coach.

1. The principal should communicate through both words and behaviors that the literacy coach is not evaluating the performance of the teachers.

As Cathy Toll (2004) suggests, "Coaching is new to the culture of many schools, and staff members often feel suspicious about claims that the coach is there to help. In such situations, when a coach behaves like a supervisor, even subtly, those suspicions flare and the entire coaching endeavor is compromised."

To this end, occasional positive comments from the principal can help to earn the teachers' trust and help teachers to see the literacy coach as an advocate, a resource, and someone to help meet their needs. To facilitate this, the literacy coach may share positive comments with the principal who, in turn, may want to share the positive feedback with teachers. This helps to reassure the teachers that the literacy coach is there to encourage and support good instructional practices. It also lets the teachers know that the principal is communicating with the literacy coach and is playing an active role in supporting the literacy coach.

2. **The principal plays an important role in holding staff accountable for working with the literacy coach to improve instruction.** There may be teachers who are reluctant to collaborate with other teachers or to work with the literacy coach—it is up to the principal to encourage active participation from all of the staff. This is a sensitive area, however, because it may undermine the trust that teachers should have for the literacy coach. It is best to begin with a clear expectation that teachers will accept support and will cooperate with the literacy coach to improve instruction. The principal should follow up regularly with the teachers and monitor whether the teachers are actually cooperating with the literacy coach. If the teachers are stubbornly reluctant, a direct intervention may be necessary.

But usually, just the consistent monitoring from the principal is sufficient to communicate an expectation for collaboration and cooperation among the teachers.

3. **The literacy coach and the principal should meet frequently (about once a week) to discuss goals and plans for activities.** The principal, as a good instructional leader, should have a clear vision for improving reading achievement in the school, and the principal should work closely with the literacy coach to ensure that they are both working toward the same goals. A collaborative relationship between the literacy coach and the principal will prevent the literacy coach's work from being undermined or derailed and will help the principal lead the school toward high levels of student success.
4. **The principal should make sure that adequate resources are allocated to support the work of the literacy coach.** Class schedules may need to be changed to allow for common planning periods, or space may need to be designated for meetings or professional resources. Funding may need to be provided for such professional resources as subscriptions to professional journals, trade books, or conferences.
5. **When the literacy coach organizes collaborative meetings for the staff, the principal should attend as many of those meetings as possible.** This helps the principal understand what is happening in the classroom and what he or she should be looking for when making classroom visits (something principals should be doing every week or so). Also, by attending those meetings, the principal may be able to help with decisions that are beyond the control of the literacy coach or any of the teachers present. Furthermore, the principal's presence communicates an expectation that every educator (including the principal) is expected to work with the literacy coach in some capacity.

The addition of a literacy coach can be a cornerstone for improving reading achievement for a school, but the school principal and other administrators must clearly, consistently support the coach if he or she is to be effective. Teachers know how important it is for children to become proficient readers and they do not want any of their children to fail to develop this essential skill. It has been our experience that teachers are usually eager to have someone on staff who can support them and help them improve reading instruction, but they also frequently ask for help from the coach that the coach cannot provide (like reduction in class size, retention of students, help with discipline problems). The

school leaders must work closely with the coach and the staff to set clear expectations and communicate clear boundaries for the work of the literacy coach.

The literacy coach and the principal should also work together to examine ongoing student assessment data and monitor the progress of their school improvement efforts. They should keep in mind that the gains in reading achievement may not be dramatic in the first year with a new literacy coach. It is not reasonable to expect a school to suddenly turn around in a year or to expect instruction to dramatically change immediately. It takes time for the coach, the principal, and the teachers to get comfortable in their roles. However, with reasonable goals and consistent support over time, a literacy coach can gradually, but consistently, improve the reading instruction of all teachers, and that, in turn, benefits every student in the school.

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