

Meeting the Professional Development Needs of Early Childhood Literacy Coaches

Katrin L. Blamey, Brenda Dorrell & Lisa Albert
Delaware Center for Teacher Education
University of Delaware

Sometimes as coaches we are so preoccupied with meeting the professional development needs of our teachers that we forget our own. It might seem counterintuitive that as professional developers providing site-based, ongoing support to teachers we have our own needs for professional support; yet, in another sense it is logical that we who make professional development our primary focus must be engaged in continuous professional support. The stakes are high; our work with teachers is only as good as our own vision for what to work on and how to do it.

In our work as early childhood literacy coaches in an Early Reading First project, we have researched, designed, and implemented many professional development sessions. We serve a diverse audience—teachers, teaching assistants, and center coordinators—so our professional support tasks are complex. However, we can count the number of experiences we have leveraged for our own growth as educators on one hand. Why? First, as coaches we know what and how we want to learn, making us highly selective. We know exactly what we are willing to attend and what and how we want to learn. Perhaps this narrows the field of presenters willing to work with such a demanding audience. Also, we have found that results take precedence in the fast-paced reform efforts in which we work, leaving precious little time for our own professional development. Despite these factors, however, we know we need to grow as coaches. We know that we have much to learn, and we think our learning is important to the success of our work in preschool. Our needs have real implications for future designers of professional development for early childhood literacy coaches. We draw on our experiences to outline our ideal professional development agenda for early childhood literacy coaches.

Professional Development Agenda

1. The ideal early childhood literacy coach has extensive knowledge of early childhood educational practices. In the area of literacy, the coach needs to know both theoretical underpinnings and concrete classroom practices in each of the core preschool language and literacy areas: oral language, vocabulary, alphabet knowledge, phonological awareness, developmental writing, and concepts of print. An understanding of how theory connects to classroom practice is essential when building the knowledge base of teachers. Recently a teacher approached us after a professional development workshop on phonological awareness to explain that she had never really understood why teaching rhyme was so important; however, now that she had seen the relationship between phonological awareness and future reading acquisition she understood the importance of her instruction. Sometimes our work is facilitated by our own efforts to link theory to practice, but it would be helpful to us if we saw researchers make this link explicit.
2. The early childhood literacy coach also needs a breadth of knowledge in a wide variety of topics from multiple genres outside of literacy, including understandings of child psychology, socio-emotional development of young children, developmentally appropriate practices for math and science education, constructive play, classroom management, and gross- and fine-motor development. We need that knowledge, and we need to know the specifics for our population. During group lesson-planning sessions, teachers often ask us for advice not only on storybook reading and small group literacy instruction but also on connecting children's experiences through centers, including the sensory table and the science table. Similarly, we serve as a resource for teachers to

go to when they need help deciding how best to direct and support a student whose behavior presents a challenge. We might answer these questions based on our experiences, but deeper understanding of research in these areas would increase our effectiveness.

3. Due to a growing number of students learning English as a second language, many early childhood literacy coaches could benefit from an understanding of developmental issues for beginning English language learners. The coach should be aware of the developmental stages in learning English as a second language as well as developmentally-appropriate instructional strategies for promoting literacy growth in young children. At the beginning of the school year a teacher came to us with concerns about a student that did not appear to understand the stories and vocabulary discussed in class. The teacher's evidence for the student's lack of understanding was her silence. Upon further discussion the teacher revealed that this was the young girl's first experience outside of a Spanish-only speaking home. The teacher began scaffolding questions to accommodate the language acquisition of the girl, and the girl left the silent stage and emerged with one word answers followed shortly by longer answers with both English and Spanish combined. Such positive professional support experiences could be more numerous if we had stronger conceptual understandings of the special case of young children developing both English language and emergent literacy.

4. An understanding of early childhood and elementary state standards for literacy could aid the coach in her work to ensure that instruction is standards-based and appropriate for developing the skills necessary for students' future success in kindergarten. During a professional development session with teachers, the teachers were able to see the connections of what they are doing in the classroom and how it prepares the students to be ready to meet kindergarten state and national standards. This alignment lets the teachers see what is vital to teach, as well as what they no longer need to teach. More purposeful unions of the work of preschool educators in a comprehensive PK-12 system would decrease the alienation we (and our teachers) sometimes feel.

5. The home-school connection is essential in the early childhood setting. Parents can greatly influence their students' literacy growth and development by their actions at home, and teachers are in a good position to help educate parents on what they can do to help their children. The coach needs knowledge of learning activities that are appropriate for home use and techniques for effectively disseminating this information to teachers and parents. We have worked with teachers to create take-home letters to introduce the monthly curriculum theme to parents so that they may in turn use theme-related vocabulary at home with their child. Both teachers and parents have praised the connection between home and school. We could benefit, though, from work with our colleagues who specialize in family and community engagement; we are likely now only scratching the surface of possibilities.

6. Using data to make instructional decisions is a key role of the early childhood literacy coach. The coach must understand what individual assessments measure and how the data can be used accurately in the classroom. In addition, coaches need knowledge of how instruction can be differentiated to meet the individual needs of students based on assessment data. Equally important, coaches need to know how to effectively teach the early childhood teachers how to analyze and use data to guide instruction independent of the coach. Related to working with data is knowledge of technology; coaches must use computer applications to illustrate data for teachers. In working with a small group of teachers after a Curriculum Based Measurement, the teachers were uncertain as to what the data revealed for their instruction. We were able to produce a chart to display the data that made it easy to see which students were struggling, achieving to age, or excelling. In turn the teachers were then able to regroup their students to provide more effective small-group instruction based on the children's identified needs. Strategies for understanding and representing data in flexible ways are essential, and there are probably many strategies that we do not know.

7. The coach also has to have knowledge of effective adult learning practices. She can draw from her understandings of how adults learn best as

she prepares professional development opportunities for her teachers. Related to adult learning is the coach's understanding of how to facilitate adult reflection and goal setting. In our experiences, it has proved challenging to lead the adults we work with to reflect on their practice and to set goals for improvement based on these reflections. Coaches of early childhood educators have the added challenge of working with adults who may or may not have experiences with higher or continuing education. Coaches need to know how best to work with these individuals while building their feelings of professionalism and respect. We have found that even the most independent teachers respond to our requests when we approach them as professionals with student-level data to support our ideas. We could benefit from more intensive work on strategies for building teacher efficacy.

8. Professional development for coaches should also include leadership techniques. Coaches at all levels—early childhood, elementary, and secondary—are asked to provide leadership for the teaching teams with which they work. Leadership topics of interest include not only generic issues such as time management and organization, but more subtle issues such as developing trusting relationships with co-workers, creating buy-in to new ideas and practices, and being able to communicate effectively with adult stakeholders. To gain the trust and respect of new staff one of the first things we do as a coach is informally interview each teacher. This interview provides the opportunity to get to know our teachers as well as to discuss goals that we both have for student achievement as well as teacher development. This is a time for personal discussions that remain only with the teacher and coach. This helps the teacher feel more comfortable to work with the coach knowing that her interactions are held with respect and trust. Professional development work on coaching conversations, both formal and informal, would benefit us.

9. Additionally, coaches at all levels profit from instruction on effective professional development techniques. What better way for a coach to learn how to improve her own professional development sessions than by participating in trainings

that model masterful staff development techniques? Designers of professional development for early childhood literacy coaches must be as aware of the modes they use for presenting as the content they present, providing opportunities for practice and reflection. Related to presentation techniques is use of technology. Coaches need to be adept at using technology tools. An important piece to our work includes videotaping and videotaping our teachers during their lessons. Videotape allows us an opportunity to reflect on the lesson. We must be able to use the equipment and also do it well enough to capture nuances in the lesson. Additionally, we should be able to edit video to save time during the sessions. Technology training is essential to our work; we have much to learn from specialists in that area.

10. Lastly, coaches need to appreciate the factors—cultural, social, and economic—shaping both their own perspectives and the perspectives of teachers and families with which they work. Coaches who understand students' backgrounds are better equipped to identify appropriate learning strategies to meet students' varied needs. Over time and with experiences working with families from different cultures, we recognized that our cultural and social beliefs were one set among possibilities. Once we learned to put our own biases aside and think about students' experiences, we were better coaches. However, we recognize that we still have a lot to learn about other cultures. Professional development opportunities focused on developing cultural understanding and sensitivity would aid our work.

We encourage designers of professional development for coaches to consider the specific needs of coaches working in the early childhood setting. While some aspects of coaching are essential across settings, such as leadership skills and knowledge of adult learning practice, others are not. Needs unique to early childhood coaches include knowledge specific to the instruction of very young children and working with adults unfamiliar to continuing education opportunities. Ultimately, it is through high-quality professional development designed with the unique needs of the early childhood setting in mind that literacy coaches and teachers will improve their work with our youngest students.

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