

FAQs about Literacy Coaching

Literacy coaching is effective because it provides professional development which is “ongoing, deeply embedded in teachers’ classroom work with children, specific to grade levels or academic content, and focused on research-based practices.”

—A. Russo, Harvard Education Letter Research Online, 2004.

Schools across the country are struggling to balance budgets while making crucial decisions about how to positively impact student achievement.

Literacy coaching, a professional development “delivery mechanism” recommended by the U.S. Department of Education (Guidance for the Reading First Programs, 2002), is receiving increased attention and funding.

The decision to hire or maintain support for literacy coaching is not without scrutiny; district administrators struggle with questions about the research base behind literacy coaching? In this column, we share frequent questions and answers, including research that supports our responses.

Is literacy coaching just a new fad?

Schools have been implementing coaching models for over 35 years. Research supporting this practice comes out of multiple fields including supervision, professional development, school effectiveness, and special education consultation. It also draws heavily from research in reflective thinking, cognitive psychology, and adult learning theory.

Why should we add literacy coaching to our professional development program?

Most of us are aware of research that shows that fewer than 10% of teachers actually implement

instructional innovations following workshops or inservice experiences. Researchers Beverley Showers and Bruce Joyce reported in their analysis, “The Evolution of Peer Coaching,” that when coaching was included as a follow-up to workshops, most teachers incorporated the innovations into their instruction (1996, *Educational Leadership*, 53(6), pp. 12–16). They also demonstrated that student achievement increased when coaching was included as a component of professional development. (Read *Learning from Teaching in Literacy Education: New Perspectives on Professional Development* [Pinnell & Rodgers, Heinemann, 2002].)

Do all coaches do the same thing? Are there different models of coaching?

There are multiple models of coaching. The largest distinction that surfaces in the literature is between *expert* models and *guided* models (Joyce & Showers, 1996). The primary difference lies in the purpose behind literacy coaching. *Expert* models frequently focus on program implementation directed by program goals and the coach sets the session agendas. The *expert* coach has received training in a particular strategy or program that the person being coached is expected to implement.

Guided models, in contrast, focus on deepening teacher understandings of literacy assessment and instruction and the implementation of new understandings into teaching. Collaboration is

central to a successful *guided* coaching program. Both the teachers and coach share in decision making and view each other as colleagues, even though the coach may be recognized as having additional expertise.

What are the key components of guided coaching models?

Collaborative or guided coaching models include variations of the following experiences: 1) Conversations between a teacher and coach directed toward developing a collegial relationship, establishing trust, and identifying potential areas of collaboration; 2) Conferences between the coach and teacher prior to trying out new practices or scheduling lesson observations; 3) Observations of demonstration lessons taught by the coach; coach's observation of an aspect of a lesson identified by the teacher; a lesson they co-teach and discuss; 4) Reflective conversations following the observations or teaching; 5) Establishing new plans or goals. (Read *Cognitive Coaching: A Foundation for Renaissance Schools* [Costa & Garmston, Christopher Gordon, 2002].)

Does the role of the coach include supervision and evaluation responsibilities?

Many researchers and practitioners firmly hold the belief that the inclusion of supervisory or administrative roles makes it impossible for effective coaching to take place. It is strongly recommended that supervision and evaluation not be part of a coaching experience. (Read *The Literacy Coaches' Survival Guide* [Toll, IRA, 2005] and "Making the Coaching Model Their Own: Instructional Coaching in Bellingham, WA" [Buly, retrieved on 5.27.05 from <http://www.ncte.org/collections/literacycoach/resources/118029.htm>].)

What could I read to learn more about coaching?

Two foundational resources on coaching include *Cognitive Coaching: A Foundation for Renaissance Schools* (see earlier reference) and *Student Achievement through Staff Development* by Bruce Joyce and

Beverly Showers (retrieved on May 27, 2005 from <http://www.ncsl.org.uk/mediastore/image2/randd-engaged-joyce.pdf>).

Our editorial team also serves as authors of an online collection of literacy coaching resources that includes a "best of the best" list of coach-recommended professional reading. The list is available at: www.ncte.org/collections/literacycoach.

On the same site you will find the new *Adolescent Literacy Coaching Standards*, a collaborative project between the National Council of Teachers of English, the International Reading Association, the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics, the National Council of Teachers of Social Studies, and the National Science Teachers Association. You may also want to print out a copy of IRA's *The Role and Qualifications of the Reading Coach in the United States*. (<http://www.reading.org/resources/issues/positionscoach.html>).

What questions need to be asked? What questions remain to be answered?

Although a growing body of research is available on how coaching impacts teacher behaviors and attitudes, little research has been done that links coaching specifically with student outcomes. Several studies with positive results are slated for publication. It stands to reason that positive changes and support for improved teaching practices will translate into improved student outcomes. We know less, however, about the coached teacher's perspective. We are currently interviewing educators who work with literacy coaching programs as one means to document the teacher experience. Our column in 2006 will share that research.

Finally, we agree with Neufeld & Roper (2003, *Coaching: A strategy for developing instructional capacity—Promises and practicalities*. Report for Aspen Institute Program on Education and The Annenberg Institute for School Reform) that coaching is definitely "a field of promise." Share your coaching experiences, and join us online by subscribing to the literacy coaching listserv at www.ncte.org/listssubscribe or submitting questions to coachescorner@ncte.org.