



"What am I supposed to do all day?": Three big ideas for the reading coach

*Janice A. Dole
Rebecca Donaldson*

Most educators would agree that professional development is a critical component of the teaching profession. Ongoing learning and professional development provide a collaborative community of teachers as learners. This community can help teachers orchestrate the complex elements of current school reform, including learning standards, instructional materials, and various assessments (Sykes, 1999).

Nevertheless, professional development in teaching has a checkered past. Although research has shown that teachers can and do learn from professional development activities (National Institute for Child Health and Human Development, 2000), the notorious one-shot workshop has been typecast as a failure for the amount of time, energy, and effort wasted (Hawley & Valli, 1999). Most one-shot workshops are evaluated, if at all, by the extent to which teachers enjoyed and found the workshop useful (Hawley & Valli; Sparks, 1995). Whether teachers use the information they gain in a workshop to improve their instruction is not evaluated, and neither is the improvement of student achievement that results from the information teachers learned (Fullan, 1990).

The reading coach

One of the newest waves in professional development is the recruitment and use of reading coaches (sometimes called literacy coaches). The underlying rationale supporting the need for reading coaches is similar to that of coaches in sports who assist and support athletes as they learn. Coaches are sometimes cheerleaders and some-

times critics. They guide athletes and help them become better at what they do. Likewise, reading coaches support and guide classroom teachers and act as mentors and assistants. Reading coaches use their own teaching knowledge and expertise to assist teachers in the complex act of teaching reading.

Although reading coaches may wear many hats, their primary and most important activity is working directly with teachers in their classrooms. They model how to teach reading and writing lessons for teachers. They observe teachers teaching reading and writing and provide feedback on their lessons. They assist and support teachers as they learn new reading instruction skills and techniques. Many reading coaches also act as the reading instruction leaders of a school building.

Reading coaches are different from reading specialists in that coaches spend their entire time with teachers, not students. Reading specialists, on the other hand, spend some of their time working with teachers and some time working directly with students. The amount of time varies widely. I have seen reading specialists who spend an average of 10% of their time with teachers and 90% of their time with students and I've seen others reverse those percentages.

The purpose of The Reading Coach's Corner Department is to help reading coaches and reading specialists in elementary schools whose job it is to work with teachers in their classrooms. In this column, I discuss how literacy coaches spend their time. In later columns, I will discuss other critical aspects of coaching.

The quality and quantity of research on the role of the reading coach is almost nonexistent.

Therefore, it is impossible to go there for the answers to the questions that reading coaches may have about their specific roles and responsibilities. What we do have, however, is the experience and expertise of many people who have been reading coaches themselves or who have worked with them for the last decade. These individuals can help us figure out the what, where, why, and how of the reading coach's role.

Three big ideas for reading coaches

At a recent conference, I overheard a newly hired reading coach lamenting to a colleague, "I just want someone to tell me, what am I supposed to do all day?" Her question is a critical one for reading coaches. How should they spend their time? What are the most important things that coaches should be doing?

The following are three big ideas for how reading coaches can and should be spending their time. An awareness of these ideas can help them keep a clear focus on their job responsibilities. I have seen too many reading coaches who lack a clear focus for their work. As a result, they are easily sidetracked from the main focus of it.

1. Focus your interest and attention on your primary goal. Just as basketball coaches must center their work on their athletes and athletic performance, so too must reading coaches center their work on their teachers, reading instruction, and student learning.

Newly assigned reading coaches usually find there is one of two ways their job may go. First, coaches may find a lot of paperwork and other administrative tasks to do—there may not seem to be much time for classroom visits. Some of this administrative work might include selecting, ordering, budgeting, and distributing books and other reading materials. Or it might include attending meetings and workshops.

A second scenario is when coaches discover there is nothing to do—the day seems to be an empty void that needs filling. Reading coaches may find themselves in a brand-new position at a school where there are no established procedures and routines for using a reading coach. In that case,

coaches may need to "make up" their jobs from scratch. In either case, reading coaches must remember that their first duty is always to their teachers, reading instruction, and student learning.

2. Ensure that you are frequently in classrooms. Initially, almost all reading coaches find it hard to begin working in classrooms with teachers. Many teachers are resistant to visitors. They may be used to teaching in isolation, beyond the purview of others. Teachers may feel intimidated by what they think are "prying eyes" watching every move they make. As a reading coach, you may be hesitant to enter teachers' classrooms because you can sense they are uneasy.

To alleviate the problem, think of yourself as collaborating with teachers to help them achieve *their* goal of increased student learning. You may wonder how to manage this initial interaction. One effective way is to offer to assist teachers in their daily work in classrooms. You might offer to teach a student in a one-on-one tutoring situation, or you might offer to work with a small group of students on some phonics or vocabulary skill. You could ask teachers for permission to use a small group of their students to practice a new teaching strategy that you have just learned. These activities place you in the classroom, thereby giving you a sense of the students, the teacher, and the logistics of the classroom. Eventually, teachers and students will become comfortable with your presence. You want to be able to walk in and out of a classroom without disturbing or interrupting the teacher or the students.

Another effective way to begin working in teachers' classrooms is to ask them if there are some difficult areas of reading instruction with which they would like help. Teachers may identify such an area—a particular skill within a phonics lesson or a particular comprehension strategy within a core reading program. You can then model that particular skill or strategy for the teacher, going over a few days' work rather than just one day. A series of lessons gives teachers a sense of continuity within a particular topic. You can also plan a series of lessons together. These activities get you into classrooms and working with teachers and students—your main focus as a reading coach.

3. Establish yourself as someone who can help teachers with their reading instruction. Just as

athletes will not value coaches they think cannot help them, it is also true that teachers will not value reading coaches they think cannot help them.

As a reading coach, you want teachers to value you and the knowledge and assistance you can provide. In truth, this kind of appreciation and trust is only established over time. Your initial work with teachers must be supportive and collaborative; otherwise, teachers will learn quickly to distrust you and dismiss you as a source for help.

Support and assistance

Reading coaches can help in the professional development of teachers by giving them support and assistance in their place of work—the classroom. Learning new strategies and techniques for teaching reading is hard work. Research indicates that unless learning occurs—in part—where teachers do their work, it will not be effective or transfer to their classroom work (Hawley & Valli, 1999; Joyce & Showers, 1995). Reading coaches in the United States have a powerful opportunity to assist teachers in the difficult and challenging work of improving student learning.

Dole is editor of *The Reading Coach's Corner* department. She teaches at the University of Utah in Salt Lake City. Donaldson is the

director of Reading First for the Utah State Office of Education in Salt Lake City.

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The department editor welcomes reader comments. E-mail dole@ed.utah.edu or write to Janice A. Dole, University of Utah, 1705 E. Campus Center Dr., Rm. 142, Salt Lake City, UT 84112, USA.