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What Works? Research into Practice

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How can literacy coaches improve student achievement in elementary schools?

Research Monograph #6

The Effectiveness of Literacy Coaches

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Research Tells Us

- Literacy coaches have positive effects on student achievement at both the classroom and district levels.
- Coaches work most effectively when using a variety of approaches (one size does not fit all).
- Teachers benefit most when they view coaches as collaborators and not as “external trainers” or “evaluators”.
- Principals play an important role in nurturing collaborative relationships and monitoring achievement targets.

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This article offers a review of studies on literacy coaches. It highlights the diversity of roles that coaches play, the resulting improvements to student achievement, and the implications this holds for teachers and principals working with coaches to improve student learning in elementary schools.

In an educational culture that sets targets for achievements in literacy, coaching offers a relatively economical professional development strategy to support these targets district wide. Most school boards in Ontario now have school-based and/or board-based literacy specialists working with administrators, teachers, and students; their goals are to promote student learning and to raise achievement. A recent study of district-wide strategies to raise student achievement across eight Ontario school boards explicitly highlights the effectiveness of literacy coaches.¹ Russo reports on a study in Dallas, Texas that found, five years after the literacy coaches' work in low-achieving schools, every school involved had been removed from the state's low-performing list, and their students' reading performance had improved dramatically.² And Guiney linked dramatic increases on a Massachusetts standardized test (Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System) directly to work undertaken by teachers in concert with their coaches. Students' scores were highest at schools where literacy coaches had been working longest to improve children's learning.³

Coaching in Ontario Schools

In Ontario, school boards use different language to refer to their literacy support specialists – including early literacy teachers, literacy coaches, facilitators in literacy, itinerant teachers, literacy resource teachers, and family of schools literacy coordinators. Such terms distinguish between professional support personnel who work district wide (often assigned to a family of schools) and specialists who work in a specific school (often with release time from teaching). Here, we use the generic term “literacy coaches” to refer to board-identified literacy specialists whose primary goal is to improve literacy achievement; they accomplish this by working collaboratively with teachers and principals to deepen their understanding of the reading and writing process and to extend their repertoire of teaching and learning strategies.



Successful Practices

Coaching in the U.S. and Canada

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In existing research on this group, these coaches are nearly always teachers who have both content and instructional expertise in literacy. For example, early literacy teachers in Peel District School Board all have a minimum of five years of teaching experience, Ontario Additional Qualifications, and experience working with board-supported resources such as First Steps and the AlphaKids Reading Assessment Kit. Similar profiles can be found in other school boards in the province.

The roles of literacy coaches vary considerably in assigned responsibilities and personal practices. Our recent survey of two large school boards in southern Ontario suggests that the self-assumed roles and approaches of these coaches vary greatly even within a district, with some coaches spending a significant proportion of their time working with principals, and others placing overwhelming emphasis on working with teachers and students.

The literature documents a series of successful instructional strategies adopted by coaches, such as demonstration classrooms where teachers can watch sample lessons that they can later replicate with their own students.² Symonds outlines a more common strategy, one that includes support for literacy instruction through direct, school-based work with groups of teachers; literacy coaches successfully model lessons, observe classroom instruction, and coach teachers one-on-one or in grade-level groups.⁴ Efficacious literacy coaching takes place on a continuous basis; involves specific examples of student work, which are closely tied to a specific curriculum and teachers' practice; and relies heavily on research on effective practices.² The International Reading Association (IRA) highlights the role of literacy coaches in providing teachers with current research and assessment data to inform their teaching.^{5,6}

Coaches can also work with teachers to improve their evaluation measures of children's achievement. They can meet with teachers and principals to discuss assessment data and analysis. Several states in the U.S. that have incorporated literacy coaches into schools, and have shown gains in district-wide assessments, incorporated assessment of data progress and interpretation into their professional development sessions.⁷ Instruction for coaches is often linked to assessment. For example, some coaches assist teachers in administering diagnostic assessment measures, and using data on individual students to help teachers meet student needs.⁴ Assessments, including reading tests, writing samples, observations surveys, running records of students' reading behaviours, and teachers' grades, enable coaches to help teachers interpret, discuss, and choose strategies to meet children's literacy needs. The Education Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO) test scores, in conjunction with the Ontario curriculum, can provide teachers with a summative assessment of the impact coaching has had on their teaching. Accountability for coaches is often based on teacher self-assessments, such as checklists on strategies used, and coaches' surveys and journals.

Numerous benefits have been attributed to the incorporation of literacy coaches in schools and classrooms. Perhaps the most commonly hailed benefit has been the opening of classroom doors to create more collaboration and a greater sense of community among teachers in a school.² Symonds notes that while literacy coaches help teachers to formulate and attain classroom goals, they are not part of the formal process for evaluating whether these goals have been met.⁴ Nonetheless, schools expect their involvement to yield higher scores on literacy assessment tests.



How should teachers and principals work with literacy coaches?

Part of what makes literacy coaching effective is the collaborative relationship between coaches and classroom teachers. Literacy coaches need to know how to support teachers effectively:

“In order to assist teachers’ delivery of effective instruction, reading coaches must learn what to pay attention to, and how to interact with teachers’ statements, beliefs, and instructional behavior.”⁵

As in other effective communication processes, coaches must first acknowledge teachers’ areas of strength and then focus specifically on what needs to be done to improve the success of students.

Despite the effort that coaches bring to their role, it is crucial that teachers are also willing to consider alternative ways of teaching to increase students’ literacy success. In order to accomplish this, there are specific steps teachers can take to make their relationships with coaches effective. Teachers should view these relationships as collaborative and non-evaluative. Instead of looking to coaches for all the answers, teachers should evaluate their own decisions and reflect on why those decisions were made.⁸ Coaches make informed recommendations and provide modeling of effective practice as well as the use of materials, but it is necessary that teachers view the solutions as coming from themselves. Then, teachers will view the coach not as an evaluator, but rather as a collaborator who shares their goal of improving children’s achievement.⁶ Coaches can help establish a plan for teachers, but it is the teachers’ responsibility to make changes and reflect on them.⁸

Teachers should share student progress and areas of persistent difficulty. Coaching is about helping teachers improve; strategies are part of the process. To help minimize confusion over responsibilities in the collaboration process, it is important that teachers understand the role of literacy coach. Further, teachers should attend sessions that introduce these expectations and responsibilities. There is a need for both collaboration with classroom teachers and skillful evaluation of the curriculum to make the role of the literacy coach most effective.

Principals can support the collaborative relationship between teachers and coaches by organizing meetings to clarify the roles of each and to monitor progress. Principals can provide resources, such as materials, and organize time schedules for teachers.⁷ Principals can also identify performance targets and long-term literacy goals, and collaborate with teachers and coaches to create strategies for attaining these goals.

Conclusions

Literacy coaches play an important role in elementary schools. The preceding research outlines some of the benefits they provide. The effectiveness of coaches is often determined by the relationships they establish with classroom teachers and principals. This research points to a number of implications for educational practice.

1. There is much literature that highlights the positive effects of literacy coaches – at both the classroom and the district-wide level. Evidence suggests that literacy coaches work most effectively when utilizing a variety of approaches (one size does not fit all). The literature contains an abundance of examples of different support roles. Rather than adopting a pre-determined, centralized approach without regard for the specific context, it is important to allow collaborative practices to evolve locally, within the broad confines of the role. Such practices should not only be sensitive to research and district-wide policy, but also recognize the short- and long-term needs and desires of individual schools, classrooms, teachers, and students.

Literacy Coaches ...

- Work closely with teachers and principals
- Adopt a wide range of instructional strategies
- Help connect teachers with research and assessment data

Teachers ...

- View relationship as collaborative
- Incorporate agreed-upon strategies
- Reflect on practices and changes made
- Report students’ progress/areas of difficulty

Principals ...

- Support locally-defined roles
- Nurture a collaborative relationship
- Monitor ongoing assessments and identify performance targets
- Provide leadership, knowledge and support



Coaching, Facilitating, and Co-teaching

The Ontario Ministry of Education's Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat is committed to improving the achievement of all students in Kindergarten to Grade 6. Precise instructional practice is key to realizing our shared goal of high achievement for all students. That precision requires ongoing learning on the part of all educators. Many school boards are supporting this ongoing learning with in-school teacher leaders or coaches.

For print and video resources – including the LNS Professional Learning Series – visit <http://www.curriculum.org/LNS/coaching/index.shtml>

Explore current issues and effective practices in literacy and numeracy by listening to LNS webcasts. Join an LNS webconference to continue the conversation with the experts. www.curriculum.org

2. As a consequence, successful literacy coaching relies heavily on a collaborative relationship between principals, teachers, and coaches, in which responsibilities are clearly delineated. Elementary teachers should view literacy coaches as collaborators and not as “external trainers” or “evaluators”. Literacy coaches should recognize teachers’ more general pedagogical expertise as well as their particular classroom experiences.

3. Given the diversity of methods, it is important to have ongoing research at the district and local level that both informs and evaluates collaborative approaches.

4. Given the demands, those who hire and support coaches must be aware of the diverse requirements of the role. Coaches may experience conflict between the collaborative nature of coaching and the need to establish immediate and positive instructional improvement.⁹ Principals should meet with coaches and classroom teachers together so that all parties can discuss the overall literacy goals for the school and the specific role of the literacy coach. Principals should be willing to discuss strategies with the literacy coach. Regular reporting and discussion between the coach and the school principal may reduce tension for the literacy coach. Principals should also support literacy coaches by finding resources for new materials and modifying time schedules.⁷

There is a need for more in-depth research on the effectiveness of literacy coaches. During the past two years, school boards in Ontario have invested heavily in literacy coaches. This presents an ideal opportunity to study their efficacy, while recognizing that their roles are more diverse than simply raising test scores. It should be recognized that coaches not only support teachers in helping children improve on specific assessment measures, but also engage them in learning new techniques and practices; these practices, based on accredited research and teachers’ literacy needs, will improve children’s literacy learning overall.

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