

FROM READING SPECIALIST TO COACH AND BACK AGAIN: CONSIDERING COACHING CONVERSATIONS WITH TEACHERS

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A new teacher pulled me out of the hallway and into her classroom and asked me to teach a guided reading lesson for her, as she was terrified of trying it out. I did not hesitate – when a teacher makes such a request, the best move I can make is to abide immediately. I taught the lesson while she, a usually excitable and jittery teacher, sat quietly by and hung on every teaching prompt. After the lesson, she looked at me and said two things: “I can do that!” and “Will you please do another one?” This teacher was hooked. The next move needs to be intentional and swift and might take the form of a purposeful one-to-one coaching conversation with the teacher. In this article, we discuss how reading specialists and interventionists might enhance these learning opportunities with coaching sessions.

With the 2018 International Literacy Association standards for Specialized Literacy Professionals on the horizon, the daily duties of campus literacy coaches and reading specialists are overlapping, as are their titles. A quick search of elementary schools in a large suburban area in Texas reveals the various titles that these individuals hold: Reading Specialist, Instructional Specialist, Instructional Coach, Literacy Coach, and Reading Interventionist. We recently interviewed three such professionals in this same area who identify their roles as primarily reading interventionists, but who have been encouraged by their district to incorporate coaching individual teachers into their schedules. They have many years of teaching experience and have each held some type of reading interventionist or literacy coach position for several years; however, this marks their first attempt to do both, and they want to do it well. Their hybrid positions officially began this school year, and while they are excited about the opportunities to work with teachers and are hopeful that this initiative will enhance classroom instruction, they are currently working out the logistics. Fortunately, they have one another and supportive district personnel with whom to share their wonderings and suggestions for the spring.

TIME FOR COACHING

During the most recent “What’s Hot in Literacy Survey” (Cassidy, Grote-Garcia, & Ortlieb, 2016), 25 leading literacy professionals indicated that the topic of literacy coaches and reading specialists is “not hot” but “should be hot” (p. 4). This is again reflected in what we found by looking at more than 100 suburban elementary schools in Texas, who each employ at least one such person. In a recent study by Bean, Kern, Goatley et al. (2015), reading specialists said that “supporting teachers” was one of their top five roles, which might include “less formal coaching” (p. 140). According to the

three reading specialists we interviewed, this work usually includes demonstrating lessons and providing group professional development; however, the individual planned reflection and conversation piece is missing. Bean (2015), Cassidy, Garrett, Maxfield et al. (2009), and Dole and Donaldson (2006) agree that the main role of the coach is to meet with teachers individually to grow their skillsets in the teaching of reading and writing and ultimately improve student achievement. The struggle for reading specialists is to find the time to do this as they, as one coach put it, “wear so many hats.”

As these three reading professionals are blending the roles of reading interventionist to literacy coach, many questions have arisen. All three expressed that there is not enough time in the day. Meetings are scheduled. Duties are assigned. Student intervention groups are growing. They wondered how best to combat this problem in an already busy schedule that includes teaching children in Tier 2 and Tier 3 reading intervention groups, teaching dyslexia intervention groups, leading campus professional learning communities, and meeting with teachers for grade level planning.

These specialists have had to think outside the box this year to ensure that valuable coaching conversations occur. They realize that they must be intentional about carving out set times each week specifically for literacy coaching and the coaching conversations that accompany it. It is their hope that by devoting time explicitly to literacy coaching, it will not fall by the wayside as just a hopeful task as it has in the past. When asked how often she meets with teachers, one specialist told us, “not as often as I’d like.” Another has set a goal to check in with several teachers at least once per week, even if it is just to say “How’s it going?” or “What can I help you with today?” Furthermore, the coaches interviewed expressed that they hope to make time to plan ahead for conversations in order to coach with intention (Heineke, 2009).

SUPPORT FOR COACHING

In the Bean et al. survey (2015), “65% of respondents identified as reading or literacy specialists stated they needed more coaching experiences during the first year in their positions” (p. 95). It is possible that reading specialists who are asked to coach are not comfortable with the idea and are “required to learn [coaching skills] on the job” (Bean, 2015, p. 138). One coach discussed how she is “just as nervous as the teachers are” to get started with coaching. The coaches desire to understand their role, and one said that she is not sure that administrators even fully know what is expected of them. Even so, many reading specialists, including our participants, are extremely resourceful and have as a starting place the work that they have done with children. For example, one reading specialist discussed how she had attended several focused workshops on conferring with student readers in the classroom. She said, “I really should be applying this [information] to my work with teachers.”

TEACHERS AS PARTNERS

Although other responsibilities take time away from coaching, especially in the case of reading specialists and interventionists, it is important to invest some time in getting to know teachers (Lowenhaupt, McKinney, & Reeves, 2014). This is true for those who are new to the school or new to the coaching role in the same school; the latter being just as important as the teachers and reading specialist will get to know one another on new terms (Pletcher, 2014). Another common wondering among those interviewed was how best to build a trusting relationship with all teachers. Lowenhaupt et al. (2014) acknowledge that it “takes time to get rolling with coaching because coaches need to build trust with teachers.” Through frequent and informal interactions, our coaches are building positive relationships with teachers, thereby showing them that the role of coach is not a “gotcha,” but rather one to support instruction. One coach mentioned that some of her teachers saw her presence as indicating that they had “done something wrong,” so she plans to be transparent about her role by posting a description of possible ways she might work with teachers. They desire to demonstrate that literacy specialists and teachers are a team. “We’re doing this together” is one specialist’s mantra.

After building these relationships, Bean (2009) advises coaches to “seek opportunities” to work directly with teachers (p. 138). Reading specialists are accustomed to spending their time working with children; however, they must also be able to work with adults as learners (Shaw, 2009). The coaches we talked to expressed some concern about having the necessary abilities to coach teachers effectively. They wondered if they are doing too much of the talking during coaching conversations, thus creating “one-way conversations.” They fear they have been telling teachers what to do rather than helping them to make discoveries for themselves. All three coaches want coaching conversations to be open discussions in which teachers feel comfortable to take risks, ask questions, and deepen their understandings of classroom literacy instruction practices. They do not want teachers to feel as though they are telling them how to “run their classrooms,” as this defeats the purpose of coaching conversations. These literacy specialists must transfer their knowledge of getting to know individual children as learners to “assessing strengths and identifying needs to address” in teachers (Shaw, p. 16) and can then take this information and scaffold teacher problem-solving (Stephens & Mills, 2014), rather than always making suggestions (Heineke, 2013).

FINAL THOUGHTS

Through literacy coaching and associated coaching conversations, reading specialists can begin to empower the classroom teachers and strengthen literacy instruction across our campuses, thus lessening the number of students being served in reading intervention and opening up more time in their schedules to engage in coaching. This kind of growth cannot happen through quick conversations in the hallway between lunch duty and third grade intervention time or through emails shared back and forth over the course of a few days, but may occur through regular and planned one-to-one coaching conversations.

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