

Literacy Coaches: A Support System for New Teachers

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Abstract

This qualitative study identifies how literacy coaches adapt their coaching to meet the needs of beginning teachers. Data were gathered from 30 literacy coaches serving elementary schools along the U.S. and Mexico border. A thematic analysis of data revealed literacy coaches' roles uniquely situated them to support new teachers. Five ways in which coaches differentiated their coaching for beginning teachers were identified (i.e., time, types of instructional assistance, professional development, support in areas beyond literacy and affective support). The study suggests that school leaders promote literacy coaches' role as mentors to accelerate the growth and retention of new teachers.

The need for school systems to retain quality teachers has received much attention in the literature. The hiring, retention, and development of quality teachers have been identified as a strategic priority for school district improvement efforts (Moir, Barlin, Gless, & Miles, 2010). Veteran teachers are no longer a majority in schools across the country. Over 52% of today's teaching force is made up of teachers with fewer than ten years of experience (Coggins & Peske, 2011). Thirty to fifty percent of beginning teachers leave the profession within five years (Ingersoll, 2003; National Commission on Teaching and America's Future, 2003). This presents a challenge as new teachers are expected to be as effective in supporting student growth and achievement as their experienced colleagues (Cochran-Smith, 2005).

The Needs of the New Teacher

Beginning teachers do not want to be left on their own to sink or swim in the profession. The Harvard Graduate School of Education conducted a five year qualitative study of 50 new

Massachusetts teachers. The study identified the type of support that new teachers wanted from their campuses. Johnson and Kardos (2003) wrote:

What new teachers want in their induction is an experienced colleague who will take their daily dilemmas seriously, watch them teach and provide feedback, help them develop instructional strategies, model skilled teaching, and share insights about students' work and lives. (p. 27)

Andrews, Gilbert, and Martin (as cited in Hoover, 2010) also noted new teachers wanted opportunities to work with and learn from experienced peers in a non-evaluative setting. In addition, they report greater satisfaction when support is received from an insider within the organization (Berry, 2011). Stansbury and Zimmerman (2002) describe new teachers as needing support in the following distinct areas: personal and emotional support, solving specific teaching problems, and thinking critically about their own teaching practices.

The Principal's Role in Supporting New Teachers

Principals, in particular, have been identified as having one of the most vital roles in providing support for the retention and growth of new teachers (Carver, 2003; Moir, 2009a; Roberson & Roberson, 2009; Watkins, 2005). Administrative support for beginning teachers often does not occur. Kardos and Johnson (2007) report that, "many novice teachers today are likely to begin their teaching careers in schools where they must find their own way" (para. 9). Administrative efforts to retain new teachers may be organized around mentoring, and induction programs. Strong (2009) reviewed numerous research studies related to mentoring and induction programs and concluded, "...the more components of induction support teachers report having received ...the greater the likelihood they will remain in teaching" (p. 44).

One key component of an induction program is that of mentoring. The use of mentors is seen as a means to build new teacher capacity. Joyce and Calhoun (2010) describe the rationale behind mentoring as, "... to help new teachers develop 21st century teaching skills for students needing 21st century learning skills and knowledge" (p. 42).

Literacy Coaching

A variation on the supportive theme of mentoring is coaching. Wong and Wong (2008) note that coaches are an important part of the induction process. Coaching provides for continuous, job embedded learning with ongoing support consistent with what research has identified as having an impact on teacher learning (Darling-Hammond & Richardson, 2009; Knight, 2009).

A popular form of coaching is that of the literacy coach. Joyce and Calhoun (2010) describe the purpose of literacy coaches as follows: "The overall goal [of coaching] is to help

professionals develop better skills and knowledge, either across the curriculum areas or in a particular one – literacy being the most prominent at the present time” (p.51).

Principals need to understand the role of coaches in working with teachers. Knight (2006) identified factors that principals should consider to increase the impact of coaching. He asserted that coaches should function in a non-evaluative role, build trusting relationships with teachers, and be provided sufficient time to work with teachers in a collaborative setting that allowed for modeling lessons and conducting observations.

In terms of guidance for the literacy coaches’ work, Bean (2007) emphasizes the non-evaluative role of coaches and the importance of coaches not making judgments about teachers’ instruction. L’Allier, Elish-Piper and Bean (2010) emphasize time and collaboration as principles in guiding the work of literacy coaches.

Methods

Although little research has been completed specifically on coaching of novice teachers, Bean and Isler (2008) wrote, “Coaching for these novice teachers is money well spent. With coaching feedback, these young teachers become experts more quickly” (p. 2). The following research looks at the roles of literacy coaches as they relate to newer teachers and the type of differentiated coaching support given to them.

Participants and Setting

Thirty literacy coaches from elementary schools along the border with Mexico participated in the study. At the time of the study, they were working as Reading First Coaches, focused on kindergarten through third-grade classrooms. They worked at schools in which about 34 percent of students were ELLs (English Language Learners) and about 96 percent of students were categorized as economically disadvantaged. Their years of experience in coaching ranged from one to six years, with over half having three or more years of experience. Most of the literacy coaches had extensive experience as teachers before becoming coaches. Of the 26 coaches who answered an online follow-up survey, ten had more than 15 years, ten had between 8 and 15 years, and six had between 4 and 7 years of teaching experience before becoming a coach.

Data Collection

Data came from three sources (i.e., survey, focus group discussion, and an anonymous online survey) to triangulate and validate the findings (Creswell, 2003). The first data were collected in a survey given before a literacy coaches’ meeting. The survey focused on how coaches differentiated their coaching content and style to meet the needs of diverse teachers and students. The following are examples of questions from the survey:

- 1) How do you adapt your coaching to meet the needs of diverse teachers?
- 2) What factors do you take into consideration when you coach a teacher?
- 3) Why do you feel those factors are important?

The survey was anonymous and voluntary but included an optional section at the end, which asked participants to write their names and contact information if they wished to participate in follow-up interviews.

The second source of data was a face-to-face focus group with four coaches in which the researchers followed-up and clarified the responses from the initial survey and reflections. Responses were audio taped and later transcribed.

For the third source of data, the researchers designed an anonymous online survey to collect follow-up data from participants. A link to the survey was sent to the e-mail of all 36 coaches who had been present in the initial meeting. Of those, 26 responded to the survey. Participants were asked open-ended questions about topics such as what they viewed as their most important contributions as coaches and how their coaching differed for new teachers versus experienced teachers.

Data Analysis

A thematic analysis was conducted by focusing on repeated words, phrases and ideas (Grbich, 2007). Researchers searched for patterns in the data and then categorized the data according to the patterns that emerged (Creswell, 2003; Merriam, 1998). Each of the three researchers reviewed the data individually and then met to discuss the patterns that each of them had found and to collapse overlapping areas. The patterns were then categorized by broader themes. Although numerous themes emerged, the ones that are included in this paper address the ways the coaches supported novice teachers.

Results

Literacy coaches' primary responsibility was to oversee their schools' reading program in kindergarten through third grade. The results of the study showed that, among other factors, coaches took into consideration the years of experience of teachers when assisting them with reading instruction. The following five patterns emerged as ways the coaches differentiated for less experienced teachers: time, types of instructional assistance, professional development, support in areas beyond literacy, and affective support.

Time

Coaches reported spending more time with less experienced teachers than more experienced teachers. One coach expressed that “less experienced teachers obviously need an abundance of ideas and opportunities to excel.” Another wrote, “when working with new teachers information provided is more explicit and more often.” One participant explained that “new teachers get more specific one-to-one coaching.” Coaches also said that it is important to support new teachers all year long because it takes time before they feel comfortable enough to ask questions.

Instructional Support

In descriptions of how instructional support was provided, coaches modeled and team taught more lessons with newer teachers. A coach explained, “I do more professional development, co-teaching, and modeling. While the experienced teacher just needs to reflect, new teachers need ample time to practice the skills then reflect and they require more direct feedback.” Coaches also helped make arrangements for new teachers to observe in the classrooms of successful veteran teachers. For example, one coach mentioned, “I try to get in with new teachers as much as possible to model or provide opportunities to observe experienced teachers.”

Professional Development

Professional development was tailored for beginning teachers. For example, one coach explained that she provided “refresher trainings for experienced teachers, [compared to] the whole training/presentation for ‘new’ teachers.” Professional development also depended upon the specific instruction previously received in the programs being used at that grade level. One of the participants mentioned that she took into consideration the “years of experience and how long they have been teaching at that grade level and if they have been properly trained.” Literacy coaches provided “individualized professional development to meet the needs of each teacher.”

Beyond Literacy

In order to support literacy instruction, coaches found the need to provide novice teachers assistance in areas beyond literacy, such as classroom management. During observations, one coach stated that she “look[ed] at the classroom management first and at the students’ behavior” to determine if children were interested and involved in the lessons. One coach developed a program for new teachers and described it as “Reading First and...a combination of other areas as well. Just to make sure that...the new teachers are not lost because ... I remember being lost.”

Affective Support

Coaches described themselves in a number of roles, including “advocate,” “good listener and problem solver,” and “a shoulder to cry on.” A coach wrote, “My role is also to provide ample opportunities for teachers to feel confident in the classroom.” Coaches developed trust by keeping information confidential. One of the coaches shared the following experience:

“One particular teacher thought I was only working with her and... I told her,...I can’t really come and say, ...I’m also working with so and so. Just like I can’t go around and tell everybody else that I’m working with you.”

As relationships with teachers grew, the coaches were better able to support the teachers emotionally as well as academically. One participant shared the following experience: “When the relationship grows... it’s amazing. They come to you [coach]... instead of going over to the facilitator or administration.” This participant also explained that “if they [teachers] feel that they need something, they come to me... because I’m there and they see me as a support. So, it’s a strong bond that we have.”

Discussion

The literacy coaches in this study differentiated their coaching practices based on teachers’ experience levels. The new teachers’ needs were taken into consideration by the coaches as illustrated in their coaching practices. Literacy coaches did not regard new teachers as “finished products.” By providing frequent and individualized help that differed from support given veteran teachers, they showed recognition for the distinct needs of new teachers. This is consistent with the literature that suggests the specialized needs of new teachers must be addressed if they are to develop and grow into quality teachers and be retained in the profession (Feiman-Nemser, 2003).

Specifically, literacy coaches reported spending more time with new teachers to focus on individualized needs, to provide extra instructional and affective support, to aid and assistance on teaching matters beyond literacy, and to offer job embedded professional development tailored to needs. The differentiated coaching provided for new teachers aligns with the continuum of support recommended by Stansbury and Zimmerman (2002) because it focused on personal and emotional support, problem-focused support, and support in reflection on teaching practices and student work.

Affective support was provided for new teachers by coaches who spent extra time with them and frequently visited their classrooms throughout the year. As a result, new teachers viewed literacy coaches as trusted colleagues and confidants to whom they could consult at difficult times. These trusting relationships also provided a critical and essential ingredient for successful coaching (Knight, 2006). Emotional support is identified as the first step in the successful induction of new teachers (Stansbury & Zimmerman, 2002).

Participating coaches spent time on specific classroom issues such as classroom management and attended to other needs of first year teachers outside of literacy instruction. Feiman-Nemser (2003) suggests new teachers need support for their nitty-gritty day to day dilemmas. Assistance with distinctive teaching problems is the second type of support recommended on Stansbury and Zimmerman's continuum (2002).

Literacy coaches assisted new teachers' reflective ability by modeling instruction, co-teaching lessons, observing teaching, and giving feedback on instructional practices within their classroom. This type of coaching support fits with Stansbury and Zimmerman's (2002) recommendation for helping new teachers reflect critically upon their own teaching. Feiman-Nemser (2003) observed that "beginning teachers have legitimate needs that cannot be grasped in advance or outside the context of teaching" (p. 26). The literacy coaches in our study provided needed support within the context of the new teachers' classrooms. Additionally, literacy coaches fulfilled new teachers' desires to work collaboratively with experienced peers on instructional matters (Johnson & Kardos, 2003) in a non-evaluative setting (Andrews, Gilbert, & Martin as cited in Hoover 2010).

School leaders' support is vital to new teachers' success. Leaders are to assign them expert mentors and facilitate the relationship (Brock & Grady, 1998; Hope, 1999; Shann, 1998), help them build collegial relationships with peers (Hope, 1999), and provide collaborative opportunities to work on instructional matters with experienced peers (Kauffman, Johnson, Kardos, Liu, & Peske, 2002). Principals should establish a professional culture that encourages teacher collaboration across all experience levels (Johnson & Kardos, 2003; Johnson et al., 2001) and promote sustained ongoing school-based professional development (Feiman-Nemser, 2003; Johnson & Kardos, 2003; Moir 2009a; Wong, 2003). Literacy coaches can support all of these practices.

Conclusion

Research indicates that new teachers require support if they are going to provide quality instruction to their students and remain in the field (Berry, 2011; Moir 2009b). This support is best provided by an expert peer rather than an administrator because the administrator is also responsible for evaluating the teacher. The results of our study indicate that literacy coaches can support novice teachers with classroom management and environment, daily scheduling, paperwork requirements, and other needs as well as coaching them in literacy instruction. Literacy coaches have the experience as teachers, the formal education, and the professional development in how to mentor teachers. Their role as coaches allows them to team teach and model lessons in the classroom, something that administrators or other teachers are usually not in a position to do. In addition, they build relationships and trust with new teachers so that the teachers are willing to accept suggestions from them and even consult with them about the challenges they encounter. Literacy coaches, therefore, should be considered a resource for new teachers because they are uniquely positioned to provide support for novice teachers.

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