

With the recent heavy focus on science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) at the national and international level, the role of the literacy coach is evolving to disciplinary literacy coaching. Although the evolving role of the literacy coach is recognized on a continuum of professional learning experiences and opportunities across disciplines (Puig & Froelich, 2011), its principal function continues to be teacher leadership and professional learning. In fact, exemplary disciplinary literacy coaches provide daily instruction to students (not as the teacher of record), and invest a great deal of time in classrooms supporting colleagues (Bean, Swan, & Knaub, 2003). In a multi-tiered support system, the critical teacher leadership role of the literacy coach includes working with colleagues to ensure quality first teaching across academic disciplines (Puig & Froelich, 2011).

The Florida Literacy Coaches Association fully agrees with the International Reading Association that school districts should hire as literacy coaches individuals who meet the following minimum qualifications:

- Are excellent literacy teachers
- Have in-depth knowledge of literacy processes, acquisition, assessment, and instruction
- Have expertise in working with teachers to improve their practices
- Are excellent presenters and group leaders
- Have the experience or preparation that enables them to model, observe, and provide feedback about instruction for classroom teachers

Furthermore, IRA states, that in order for teachers to fulfill these minimum qualifications they need to have completed several years of outstanding teaching; substantial graduate-level coursework in reading; and coursework related to presentation, facilitation, and adult learning.

Definition of Literacy Coaching

In this position statement we define disciplinary literacy coaching as a mentor-colleague responsible for providing professional learning opportunities with teachers in schools. Specifically, there is evidence that one-shot, workshop oriented professional learning efforts alone do not result in forward shifts in classroom practices or in student learning. Disciplinary literacy coaching provides the additional support needed for teachers to implement a variety of programs and instructional practices (Puig & Froelich, 2011). Poglinco, Bach, Hovde, Rosenblum, Saunders, and Supovitz (2003) performed an evaluation of a coaching model that offers a review of coaching:

Coaching provides ongoing consistent support for the implementation and instruction components. It is nonthreatening and supportive—not evaluative. It gives a sense of how good professional development is. It also affords the opportunity to see it work with students. (p. 42)

Why Literacy Coaches?

Although the concept of disciplinary literacy coaching has been around for decades, with the advent of the Reading Excellence Act and No Child Left Behind, we have seen a rapid increase of literacy coaches as a response to increase literacy learning and even more recent, literacy learning across the academic disciplines. In several states, significant appropriations to improve literacy acquisition and instruction have included funding for literacy coaches. The basic assumption is that increasing the expertise of literacy professionals to work with classroom teachers at the school level will support teachers in learning more about literacy acquisition and instruction and consequently improve literacy instruction and student learning.

What Do Literacy Coaches Do?

Effective and efficient literacy coaches invest approximately 40% of their workweek working in classrooms with students (Puig & Froelich, 2011). When literacy coaches are removed from students, the job of the literacy coach becomes blurred. When this blurring occurs literacy coaches are assigned to extensive data entry positions, hall duty, bus duty, cafeteria duty and “other duties as assigned” removing them from the reason that the jobs exist - to directly support students and the teachers in improving literacy acquisition and instruction. We DO NOT intend for this to mean that the literacy coach be the teacher of record. The literacy coach can never be the teacher of record for a given cohort of students. When this occurs, the title and obligations of a literacy coach need to be reconsidered. A literacy coach has to have the scheduling freedom to visit with colleagues and other classrooms if they are truly to be coaching so that they can improve literacy learning and instruction.

Principals and literacy coaches need to have a clear understanding of the roles and responsibility of a literacy coach. An honest and open discussion is a critical step for schools and districts that plan on utilizing a literacy coach to guide them as a lead learner. The operative word here is “guide”. A literacy coach that serves as a lead learner never dictates a direction, but through research and data (formal and informal) guides to recognize and investigate adaptive challenges.

What Must Literacy Coaches Know and Be Able to Do?

- Develop a common language for understanding
- Have a clear understanding of literacy learning as a process
- Be aware of past and current research
- Have the ability to identify the need for future research
- Possess a working knowledge of instructional practices that can be implemented
- Understand the students’ strengths and needs
- Understand the teachers’ strengths and needs
- Develop a menu of possible literacy focus lessons that teachers can use
- Support teachers in developing focus lessons based on literacy processing
- Create a short term and a long term plan for implementation
- Design a comprehensive literacy framework that supports all students and accounts for learning over time in grades K-12 with built-in safety nets at all grade levels

Summary

Literacy coaching is a powerful intervention with great potential for generating forward shifts in teaching; however, that potential will be unfulfilled if literacy coaches do not have sufficient depth of knowledge and range of skills to perform adequately in the coaching role. Education reform is full of examples of potentially formidable interventions that frustrate reformers and forsake the students they are intended to benefit. The Florida Literacy Coaches Association urges stakeholders involved in implementing literacy coaches to pay close attention to the hiring of literacy coaches and devote themselves (a) to hiring only those individuals who have the knowledge and skills required and (b) to assuring that literacy coaches exceed the minimum qualifications set by the International Reading Association. It is better to delay implementing literacy coaches than to push ahead with inadequately trained literacy coaches. At all levels, a literacy coach who has an in-depth knowledge of literacy learning as a process and a sophisticated sensitivity to adult learners must support classroom teachers improve their knowledge of literacy acquisition and instruction across all content areas.