Editor’s note: This article is intended to support Reading Recovery professionals in all of their roles as literacy coaches. Reading Recovery teacher leaders are literacy coaches for the Reading Recovery teachers they support. In addition, many teacher leaders and teachers are literacy coaches for classroom and other teachers in addition to their Reading Recovery roles.

With renewed hope and energy, many of us who have played a role in supporting teacher development have embraced the journey of establishing professional communities of practice in our schools. Such communities of practice are learning places in which teachers look not only to themselves but to each other to improve their expertise in educating all of the students. Instead of working in isolation, the educators in a professional learning community value collegial learning (Hargreaves, 2003). They understand their common purpose, continuously reflecting on the ways their roles in the learning community improve teaching and maximize the learning of every child. In the new culture, teachers and administrative leaders view high-quality learning as the single goal of the community (Brandt, 1995; Biancarosa, Bryk, & Dexter, 2008). The learning of the educators is directly linked to the learning of the children.

In an increasing number of schools and districts, a literacy coach plays a key role in fostering a school culture that supports teacher participation in continuous collegial learning (Deussen & Buly, 2006). When employed and supported effectively, the literacy coach enhances district

### Keys to Effective Coaching

1. **Begin by clarifying your role as coach:** Communicate your understanding of the role to your administrator and your colleagues.

2. **Foster a collaborative culture so long-lasting change in teacher beliefs and practices is possible.**

3. **Build a strong relationship with your administrator by meeting regularly to communicate essential information, problem solve together, and advocate for active support for collegial work in the school.**

4. **Work to get a clear description of the school’s literacy program—the values, beliefs, and theoretical underpinnings that lead to the instructional practices and assessment system.**

5. **Work to establish trust, open lines of communication, and cultivate an atmosphere of collegial collaboration and problem solving.**

6. **Help your colleagues develop their understandings of how children build a reading and writing process over time.**

7. **Ground your coaching conversations in behavioral evidence and root all decisions in rationales.**

8. **Listen actively to your colleagues and use language that communicates respect, opens conversation, and facilitates genuine inquiry in your coaching conversations.**

9. **Combine the teacher’s agenda with your expertise to lift her understandings.**

10. **Help teachers use professional resources so they can become more independent in their learning.**

11. **Build your expertise but don’t present yourself as “the expert.”**

12. **Focus on “change over time” in teaching understanding, student achievement, and the culture of the school.**
professional development systems by providing each educator with the support needed to build knowledge, improve practice and promote student achievement (Neufeld & Roper, 2003).

In this article, we discuss 12 key factors we have gleaned from our work in a variety of communities of professional practice and have found critical to effective literacy coaching.

We address those of you who provide one-on-one coaching sessions as well as professional development sessions for groups of educators. Whether you are a Reading Recovery professional or play another role in coaching literacy teachers, we believe you will find that these principles of effective coaching apply to your work. We include the important role administrators (for example, principals and other key leadership personnel and your Reading Recovery site coordinator) play in supporting the work of coaches. The principles that follow represent a series of actions that underlie successful coaching and professional development sessions — both essential to teachers’ ability to continue their development as self-extending professionals.

1 Begin by clarifying your role as coach: Communicate your understanding of the role to your administrator and your colleagues.

When you accept the position of coach, be sure to get clarification, preferably in writing, of the expectations of your role. If coaching is a new role in the system, you may be able to actively participate in shaping the job so that you can be most effective. Just as a teacher is there to support the student’s growth, not to “fix” the student, your goal is to help teachers expand expertise rather than to fix them. Be careful not to become the “implementation police,” checking off a list of practices instead of working towards the deeper aspects of expanding teacher understanding and decision making.

Often a coach is selected because he is an excellent literacy teacher. To work effectively with teachers, working well with children provides a strong foundation. Advocate continuing your work with children to establish and maintain your credibility and to refine your expertise. If you want your colleagues to grow in their teaching expertise, you will need to do the same. If you are a Reading Recovery professional, this standard is well defined in the Standards and Guidelines of Reading Recovery in the United States. If you are another literacy professional in a coaching role, you may need to provide a strong rationale for continuing to refine your expertise through teaching. In addition, direct work with children will increase your credibility and make it easier to form a bond with colleagues. Many possibilities exist—teaching a literacy block daily, working for several weeks at a time in a classroom, or other arrangements—all will make large contributions to your success in the coaching role.

Of course your expertise in teaching children, although critical, is not sufficient for your work in teacher development. Teaching adults is simply not the same as teaching children. Be sure you advocate for professional development in working with adult learners as part of your role (Joyce & Showers, 2002). Just as you expect the teachers to engage in continuous learning, you will need opportunities to refine your expertise in all aspects of the coaching role.

Make clear the need for confidentiality. A coach must be a trusted colleague. This means making it clear that you will not discuss a teacher’s performance with anyone at any time without his permission, and the teachers can count on that. If you are expected to discuss the teachers’ progress with others, will you let them know that? It is important that you distinguish coaching from supervision. Supervision involves support

Whether you are a Reading Recovery professional or play another role in coaching literacy teachers, we believe you will find that these principles of effective coaching apply to your work.

but also includes judgment of the teachers’ performance, is related to employment, and is usually a function assigned to the school or district administrator.

The role of a coach is new to most schools, so an introductory meeting may have great payoff. Direct observation and coaching of teachers in their classrooms may be a very new situation; teachers may not know what to expect. We have learned that much of what has been described as “teacher resistance” is in fact fear of not knowing what to expect or not doing well enough and being judged inadequate.

To launch your new role, you can gather your new colleagues and your administrator for a 15-minute meeting (preferably in a circle of chairs
with refreshments, of course). Share briefly how you see your role in the school. Explain how excited you are that your school values the collective expertise of the staff and has dedicated time for talking about teaching and learning. You may want to talk about how pleased you are to be able to learn from them and facilitate opportunities for them to learn from each other. Discuss topics such as how you will work with them, what to expect in coaching sessions, schedules, confidentiality, and be sure to let them know you will be eager for feedback as to how your work together is going. Position yourself as a learner so they see that you are modeling the stance of a growing professional. And lastly, help them know you are not there to judge their teaching, nor are you the literacy guru (the person with all the answers), but a fellow educator who will share your expertise as a supportive colleague in the community. Even if coaching is not a new role, you may be a new person in the position so the introductory meeting will be helpful. If you have been in the role for a while, a meeting at the beginning of each school year to renew your goals for your work together is a positive communication opportunity.

2 Foster a collaborative culture so long-lasting change in teacher beliefs and practices is possible.

The culture of your school or district plays a major role in your effectiveness as a coach. In a collaborative culture, teachers see their roles as helping each other be as good as they can be. They strive to support each other’s learning as well as their own for the common purpose of school improvement. Rather than striving to compete with their colleagues, teachers value collegiality, sharing their knowledge and insights, talking about teaching, observing one another, helping each other, and striving to work together on behalf of the success of the children. Each teacher believes that the boundaries to children’s learning are limited only by her own expertise and sees self-reflection as part of her professional role (Barth, 2006). The research on effective teaching indicates that effective teachers elicit information and criticism from others. To improve their ability to have a positive impact on student learning, they readily accept constructive criticism and reflect upon it (Stronge, 2002).

Barth (2006) describes collegiality as “getting [the school players] to play together, about growing a professional learning community” (p. 11). He argues that the nature of relationships among the adults in the school plays a critical role in the quality of the school and on student achievement:

If the relationships between administrators and teachers are trusting, generous, helpful and cooperative, then the relationships between the students and teachers, between students and students and between teachers and parents are likely to be trusting, generous, helpful and cooperative. If on the other hand, relationships between administrators and teachers are fearful, competitive, suspicious and corrosive, then these qualities will disseminate throughout the school community. In short, the relationships among the educators in a school define all relationships within that school’s culture. (p. 9)

The way teachers relate to their colleagues has implications for how they develop as teachers. If teachers do not value collegiality in the culture and see change and growth in their expertise as essential, they will be less likely to engage in collaborative learning opportunities with each other and with you in professional development sessions or in one on one coaching sessions (Walker et al., 2008).

The journey to a collaborative culture can include many types of authentic professional learning venues in which the professionals have opportunities to collaborate and experience the benefits of collegiality. For example, if you schedule team meetings, study groups, professional development sessions, and/or peer observations, teachers have the opportunity to talk with each other about teaching and learning, work in groups of various sizes and memberships, and develop a sense of belonging and responsibility to the group as a whole.

As the literacy coach, your work can thrive in a community of professionals who understand the value of continuous professional learning and in the commitment and contributions of everyone to the good of the school. As you think about your school culture, ask yourself:

• How do the teachers in the school relate to their colleagues?
• Are there frequent, regular opportunities for teachers to exchange information, questions and insights on teaching and learning?

You, as the coach, have an exciting opportunity to make a difference in your school — for everyone in
it. Keep your eye on your common goals. Identify strengths and problems together so you can benefit from each other’s thinking. When the culture is positively focused and engaged as a collaborative community, the learning and problem solving is easier and more productive.

3 Build a strong relationship with your administrator by meeting regularly to communicate essential information, problem solve together, and advocate for active support for collegial work in the school.

Your relationship with the principal will be a key factor in your development of a strong professional learning community (Bean, n.d.). The administrator and coach can work best in partnership to celebrate teachers’ strengths and distribute leadership and decision making so that it is inclusive. The transformation of the school culture from one that isolates teachers and places the principal as the manager is a difficult challenge that requires commitment and time.

The school leader pays a crucial role in promoting a culture of collegiality (Sebring, Allensworth, Bryk, Easton, & Luppescu, 2006). Through valuing collegiality, sharing leadership, promoting democratic decision making, and honoring the collective expertise of the professional staff, the school leader can acknowledge teachers’ contributions and cultivate their strengths. You can build a shared ownership in the common goals of the school. You can play a key role in your partnership with the administration to accomplish this goal.

Schedule a regular meeting time with your administrator. The more regular communication you have, the more you can get to know each other and build trust. In your meetings, help your administrator understand more about the school’s literacy program if needed, and advocate for the kind of support needed to promote your goals. In your meetings you have a chance to model the professional stance you take regarding the school’s teachers. Show that you value their collegial work, respect the teachers, and are committed to taking each teacher from where he is to as far as you can take him in a climate of respect and sensitivity.

Confidentiality, as mentioned previously, is critical to your success as a coach, even when talking with the administrator. We believe you need to get agreement with your administrator that you will not discuss teachers by name or in any way participate in conversations that compromise confidentiality. For example, an administrator may innocently ask about “the fourth-grade teachers” while making it obvious she has a particular person in mind. In responding, be careful not to appear insubordinate, but help your administrator understand that you can be most effective as a coach when the teachers know that you will support their ongoing development and not discuss their progress with others. This also implies that reporting praise would create the same compromise of confidentiality.

On the other hand, you want to be sure to present to the principal the topics and issues you are working on with the professional staff so the administrator is aware of what the teachers have learned or are working on in their teaching as a group. It will be helpful to discuss what kinds of things the administrator can do to support the continued progress of the group, or what to look for in lessons or in classrooms during his visits. You will also need to share the data that reflects student achievement.

The administrator’s primary interest is in the success of the school’s literacy program, and the development of the teachers is the activity most likely to result in the greater achievement of the students, so it is important that you keep the administrator informed.

Since your administrator is overwhelmed with responsibilities, it is important that you keep your meetings short and try to make them at a consistent time. Thirty minutes may be enough, and it is just fine to end it early. Decide together if once per month or every 2 weeks is what is needed; for example, 8:00 to 8:30 the first Tuesday of the month, or 3:00 to 3:30 the first Wednesday of the month. Explain that you need 30 minutes of her time and ask, “What will work best for you?” Show that you value her time by requesting that she make a list of topics she wants to address and making the meeting efficient. Come with a written agenda of topics. You may want to begin by summarizing the actions you agreed together to address at the last meeting as a follow up. It is a good idea to take notes and send a follow-up email confirming what you accomplished.

4 Work to get a clear description of the school’s literacy program — the values, beliefs, and theoretical underpinnings that lead to the instructional practices and assessment system.

Educators in the school need a common understanding of the theoretical underpinnings and the instructional practices that comprise the literacy program. A cohesive, coherent theory guides the selection of the instructional practices, the assessments used, the materials used, and the professional development design.
The school’s literacy program is not a set of books you must use, or even a set of practices. It is built on a set of values and beliefs as well as rationales and explicit competencies that constitute a high-quality literacy program for students, along with the instructional practices that teachers are expected to implement to achieve the standards (Wollman, 2007). When the school’s literacy program is not articulated clearly, you as coach are in a tricky position. The result is that children do not have a coherent and consistent journey in their literacy learning.

The teachers in the school are charged with the role of implementing the school’s literacy program (or Reading Recovery intervention), so when there is a clear understanding, all can work towards a common goal. For example, providing small-group guided reading lessons on a regular basis to all children may be a requirement of the school’s program for children. Using ongoing assessments to compare your observations with an objective tool may be required. Early intervention in the form of daily lessons in Reading Recovery may be an essential element of the school’s literacy program. Whatever elements are required, the professional community is responsible for collectively providing the school’s literacy program to every child. Knowing those elements will help them focus their time and energy and professional learning.

The clarity of this description will have much impact on your coaching role. We do not mean that all classrooms or every teacher should look like they came from a cookie cutter. Every teacher has an individual style. But the child in the school will be guaranteed a cohesive, coherent journey in the school’s literacy program and that will be evident in the consistency across classrooms. Teachers will have a common language, common assessment, and a common, coherent set of goals for their work and the professional learning. You will be able to conduct your work with everyone heading for the same destination.

5 Cultivate an atmosphere of collegial collaboration and problem solving that is characterized by trust and open lines of communication. Coaching takes place within a relationship. Building respectful, trusting relationships takes time, energy, and skill. Take time to get to know the teacher as a person and as a professional colleague and let her get to know you. A teacher will take risks and grow when she trusts her coach to support her, and will resist the support when she has no confidence in the collegial nature of the relationship (Rainville & Jones, 2008). When your colleagues know that you always assume the best of them, they are more likely to consider your insights and engage in the process of reflective practice (Schön, 1983). Otherwise they may understandably work to protect themselves from you (Bryk & Schneider, 2003). Honor and respect your colleagues’ knowledge and experience; trust their sincerity in seeking to teach children well. It is better to support the teacher who is finding change difficult than to label her. You may find yourself in situations in which others talk critically about a teacher. In these cases, it will be important to physically remove yourself by let-
ting your colleagues know that you do not want to be part of that conversation, difficult as it is to do so. You are a model of how to treat colleagues sensitively and respectfully in their presence and in their absence. Your belief that all teachers want to get better at their practice and do what is best for children needs to permeate your actions.

6 **Help your colleagues develop their understandings of how children build a reading and writing process over time.**

Your goal is to help your colleagues teach their students more effectively, not to help them teach programs better. Programs or materials are resources for effective instruction. But we teach children, not programs. You will achieve a high degree of coaching success when teachers go beyond recognizably implementing specific practices, to making better teaching decisions within those instructional practices.

The first step towards those goals is to help teachers closely observe the reading and writing behaviors of their students (Clay, 2005a, 2005b). As a first priority, help them learn systematic ways of gathering evidence of learning. When they can identify precise behaviors, they can then talk about them and what they mean and use the information to make good teaching decisions. They can also learn more about the reading and writing process and how it changes over time as they observe the different paths of literacy learning evident in the children they teach.

7 **Ground your coaching conversations in behavioral evidence and root all decisions in rationales.** Your primary goal in coaching conversations is to help your colleagues become better observers of children’s reading and writing behaviors. You want to help them learn how to use their observations to develop sound rationales for their decision making on behalf of children.

When you ground the discussion in the behavioral evidence from the lesson, you can help the teacher analyze her own effectiveness in accomplishing her goals. Questions that get at the “why” of practice are very useful because they get the teacher to articulate her own thinking and focus on sound rationales for her decisions. You want your colleagues to learn that teaching is not about rules but about decisions that are grounded in children’s behaviors.

8 **Listen actively to your colleague and use language that communicates respect, opens conversation and facilitates genuine inquiry.**

Typically, a one-on-one coaching session consists of a preobservation conference, a lesson observation, and postobservation discussion. Think of these sessions as opportunities to learn more about the teacher’s thinking and for you to benefit from each other’s thinking.

When you listen actively to the teacher and ask genuine questions to explore her thinking, you can meet her where she is and build on her knowledge. Many of us find it easier to talk than to watch and listen, to talk at the teacher rather than to talk with her, so consciously monitor your

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**Figure 1. A Tool to Explore Language in Coaching**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Think About Your Language</th>
<th>Example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Does your language communicate a tentative stance?</td>
<td>This is one hypothesis. Another reason might be…</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Are you genuinely seeking to discover more about the teacher’s thinking?</td>
<td>What did the child do that made you think that?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Are you using language that supports collegial problem solving and coinquiry?</td>
<td>Let’s talk about your decision to…</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Does your language demonstrate your desire to clarify and understand more?</td>
<td>Talk more about that.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you listen attentively and empathetically?</td>
<td>When you said _______ to Peter, what was your thinking?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you paraphrase occasionally to show that you are seeking to understand the teacher’s precise comments and questions?</td>
<td>This is what I hear you saying. …</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
role in the coaching conversation. Think of your conversation as putting two sets of eyes and ears together to do better thinking or problem solving than one could do alone. Value the teacher’s observations and thinking, as she knows a great deal about the children from working with them frequently.

Your goal in the coaching conversation is to bring your experience and knowledge together with the teachers’ experience and knowledge, using language that opens conversation and facilitates inquiry. This inquiry stance is a very important aspect of the coaching relationship (Lyons & Pinnell, 2001; Rodgers & Rodgers, 2007). Think about the examples of language we provide in Figure 1 and how they communicate the stance of the coach.

As you know, the tone of your interactions and your choice of words will make a difference in how you are received by your colleagues. Be careful to communicate as an equal, not to talk down to your colleague or imply that you are the one who has the answers. Your goal is to help the teacher learn how to reflect on her own teaching by leading her to self-analyze. When you make statements or ask questions that lead the teacher to analyze her own teaching, she will learn how to do the same when you are not there. Here are some general principles for you to consider in your use of language in coaching conversations:

- **Maintain an exploratory, inquiring stance.**
- **Make your points about teaching and learning clear by using concrete examples.**
- **Ask genuine questions to understand better.**
- **Offer rationales and other useful information.**
- **Paraphrase and extend the teacher’s comments.**
- **Avoid the use of judgmental terms or making either/or conclusions.**
- **Make statements or ask questions that help the teacher confirm effective decisions and reflect on decisions that did not influence student learning.**
- **Use language that promotes the teacher’s self-analysis and promotes independence.**

9 **Combine the teacher’s agenda with your expertise to lift her understandings.**

Encourage each teacher to bring his own questions and concerns to your sessions. It is important to assure you attend to the teacher’s agenda as part of your observation and discussion. The teacher will learn to value your upcoming sessions and note questions or issues he would like to think about together because he finds your time together valuable in resolving them.

From your observations of the teaching and learning, you will also have in mind a number of coaching points that you believe will be helpful in expanding the teacher’s attention to literacy behaviors, understanding of the literacy process and her students’ development, and the effects of the teaching on student learning. This means that the coaching discussion brings together the concerns and expertise of both colleagues.

In your coaching of the teacher, the purpose of examining the lessons is to provide concrete evidence of the teacher’s present understandings and the student’s learning. The lesson becomes a jumping-off point from which you can engage in a discussion that leads to new understandings that will impact more children in other lessons. This is different than attempting to fix lessons the teacher has already taught. When teachers reach new understandings in the course of the lesson analysis that can be applied to teaching other students we call it **generative learning.**

Generative learning is most powerful because it impacts the way the teacher thinks about teaching. At the end of each coaching session, make the generative learning explicit by asking your colleague how the new insights or learning will be helpful in teaching other students.

10 **Help teachers use professional resources so they can become more independent in their learning.**

When you help your colleagues use professional books to develop their understandings of rationales and practices, you give them a resource they can go back and refer to for continued learning. You will need to help your colleagues learn how to use these resources as references. The professional text *Literacy Lessons Designed for Individuals Part One* and *Part Two* (Clay, 2005a, 2005b) provides a set of grounded rationales and practices to guide decision making in your Reading Recovery lessons or your Literacy Lessons. When the teacher uses the Guidebook with you, he builds understanding of the words as they apply to his practice. The ideas in the professional text come alive when they are applied to your own teaching.

If you are providing coaching on other topics, think about the seminal resources that you can help teachers learn how to use to support their teaching. We have found that *The
Build your expertise but don’t present yourself as “the expert.”

Your professional development is every bit as important as the professional development you provide to others. Every child you teach is an opportunity to learn more about literacy teaching and learning. Keep up with current articles and professional resources on literacy so you can select from the latest information available to provide to your colleagues.

In addition, think about your growth as a coach, one who supports the development of adult learners. This knowledge is not the same as that of teaching children so you will benefit from opportunities to learn more about all aspects of working with adults. Think not only about reading and attending professional development sessions, but consider visiting another coach, having a coach observe you, or videotaping a coaching session to reflect on your craft. We also suggest that you seek out opportunities to develop your skill as a leader so that you can continue to learn more about how to inspire others for a common vision.

Let your colleagues know that you are learning from them. As you observe their teaching, it expands your thinking. And, let them know that their feedback helps you to grow. When you seek feedback from the teachers you coach, you present yourself as a growing professional. At the end of each coaching session or professional development session, invite your colleagues to share their thoughts about how you worked together. Invite their suggestions for ways you might work better together in the future. This signals to your colleagues that you are also working on your craft. You also show how much you value their time and want to make your work together beneficial.

When you present yourself as a learner to your colleagues, you become a model of a reflective professional. Often your colleagues will seek to label you as the expert who can tell them if what they are doing is right or wrong. To support generative learning, try to resist that role by turning their questions back to them or helping them see where they will be able to find information to help them with their own questions.

For example, if a teacher asks, “Did I do the introduction right?” you might respond with, “What parts of your introduction did you think were most helpful to the children when they read the book?” Or, “Let’s take a look at some elements of an effective text introduction and think about yours. Look at the bullets on page 46 (referring to the professional text). Which of those did you include in your introduction? Are there ones that you did not include that you think might have been helpful to the children?”

Your colleagues expect the coach to bring lots of expertise to the conversation, but if you make tentative statements rather than declarations, and if you don’t make judgments about right or wrong, then they will be less likely to be dependent on you as the expert and will focus on rationales for the decisions they make in teaching.

Focus on “change over time” in teacher understanding, student achievement, and the culture of the school.

Keep the notion of change over time in the forefront of your thinking as you work side-by-side with your teachers. When Fullan referred to the complexity of the change process, he called it “a journey,” not an event (Fullan, 2001). As educators we need to remind ourselves to look back and see from where we came so that it will energize our continued movement forward. It is easier to become frustrated with where we want to be than to take a minute to think about how far we have come.

Document the change in teacher development in your “coaching notebook” (a collection of your coaching records) and look back to see patterns of growth. Help teachers see the change in their students over time by supporting their ability to keep efficient but informative records of growth. Involve your colleagues in summarizing the changes that you feel you have accomplished as a community in the school each year or at intervals in the year. Too often we don’t take the time to celebrate the accomplishments as we focus on the problems to solve. Celebrations give new energy to problem solving and recognize the efforts of all individuals who contribute.

The Journey Ahead

Coaching by the side of your colleagues holds great promise for their growth as professionals, but the waters of change are not always smooth. As a leader, consider how your understandings as a coach prepare you to inspire your colleagues and help them realize the power of reflective practice on improving student achievement. It may seem a tall
order to establish the 12 principles in your school. But, as you will have noticed, they are interrelated; each supports all of the others. And, when you keep them in mind as goals, you will find that your learning community develops a synergy of movement. Everyone contributes to the goals that are held in common and the children benefit from our collective expertise.

References

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