Expanding Your Expertise in Responsive Literacy Coaching

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If you are a literacy coach, you are an important asset for the team in your school. You may be a full- or part-time coach; you may be in a role that involves coaching as well as other responsibilities; you may be a supervisor or principal who sees your role as both evaluative and supportive; or you may be part of a team that engages in peer coaching to support professional learning. You may be a teacher leader who has the responsibility of supporting the development of teachers and monitoring the implementation of a highly effective intervention like Reading Recovery.

Coaching may be well established in the school or district, or it may be a new venture. You may be appointed because of the expertise of your teaching, with the assumption that you can work successfully with adult learners. Or, hopefully you have had training in effective coaching skills, either generic or context specific. Whatever your role, we hope you will find this article useful as we dig into the acts and interactions of responsive literacy coaching.

A Culture for Effective Coaching and Teamwork
Coaching is most effective in a healthy school culture that supports teamwork, a common vision and curriculum, and continuous professional learning by all the educators.

The following characterize a strong culture to support effective coaching (Fountas & Pinnell, in press):

- The coach is viewed as a member of the school team and has participated in creating the school’s common vision for literacy learning.
- The staff holds a common vision for the goals of literacy learning over time and the curriculum they want to use to accomplish their goals.
- Coaching is welcomed and expected as part of the teachers’ roles in improving their craft.
- Everyone, no matter how much experience they have, participates in coaching with enthusiasm.
- There is an ambiance of trust and teamwork.
- Every educator treats others with respect and collegial generosity.

Achieving the above cultural characteristics in your school, in itself a large accomplishment, requires the commitment and participation of the great majority of the staff and is continually in process. But even within these conditions, you will want to make the most of your coaching time and engage teachers in interactions that result in shifts in the ways they think about teaching and learning and result in improved student outcomes. You can expect teachers will want to be coached when they find the time you spend together is well worthwhile.

A Responsive Coaching Structure
Your role is to facilitate a conversation that is productive for the teachers and fosters a relationship of trust and risk taking. These processes take place within a general coaching structure, such as this.
Essential Elements and Your Role as Thinking Partner

We ask you to consider several important concepts related to your coaching: stance, language, data and tools for coaching, and reflection.

In our view your role is not the “expert,” but you are a thought partner whose role is to support the developing expertise of colleagues so that your team can impact the achievement of all the students in the school. You certainly bring to your role your unique experiences and lots of “expertise,” your professional training in working effectively with adult learners, and your knowledge of how to position yourself to make coaching a valued opportunity instead of something to avoid. The teacher also brings expertise and experience to the conversation and brings the most knowledge of the students.

Your coaching stance
Stance encompasses your underlying attitude and philosophical understanding of your role as a coach. How do you see yourself? How do you see the colleagues you coach? Are you the giver of knowledge and the teacher is the receiver? Or do you see yourself and your colleague as partners in learning?

These are critical questions because your stance influences everything you do or say as a literacy coach.

An investigative stance. It is highly productive to engage in collaborative inquiry as you work with teachers in a coaching situation. Both you and the teacher are looking for evidence and finding direction together as you investigate the problems of practice. Together, you create hypotheses, gather information, and come out with productive direction. Both of you can learn from every coaching interaction. Not only will you learn more about how children become literate, but as a coach, you will be refining your own understanding of teachers’ perspectives and development as professionals over time.

An efficacy stance. Coaching begins with the belief that teachers are competent and can develop and learn and that everyone wants to improve. Indeed, in all our experience we have not encountered any teachers who want to be ineffective. It is imperative that they see themselves as capable of improvement. Teacher efficacy means that they believe in themselves. There may be struggles or periods of discouragement, but they believe that, with effort and support, they will become better teachers each day.

An inclusive stance. Every act in the school, including coaching, rests on strong beliefs regarding the individuality of each adult and each child. Coaching skill involves sensitivity to implicit and explicit biases as well as to racism, sexism, and the diversity of lived experiences of all members of the school community. It means being able to foster a willingness to create an inclusive school where people are knowledgeable and work together to assure equitable student outcomes. It means considering the unique strengths and experiences of the adults as well as the children. It will mean differentiating instruction so that every child receives the support needed to reach full potential. It will mean differentiated coaching support for teachers to assure every teacher is successful.

A supportive stance. Teachers need different forms/levels of support according to their current understandings and skills. When an instructional practice is completely new, they will have many questions and need some specific information and even demonstration. It will help to take it slowly, providing guidance that will increase understanding not only of instructional procedures but of the rationales for using them. You will need to introduce assessment processes for gathering information and tools that will provide helpful directions.

You will find, though, that teachers can quickly learn the steps of an instructional practice and begin to be somewhat automatic and efficient. Your role is to support a deeper understanding of the decisions made within the act of teaching. The power of teaching is in the interactions the teacher has with students within the structure of the lesson, whether whole class, small group, or individual. Most teachers need coaching support to achieve these powerful teaching moves that are most responsive to the students and most effective in helping teachers develop their understandings of literacy as a processing system.

Your language
Learning is social and it is supported by talk. Talk is your greatest tool as a coach; you do the following through conversation:

- Collect the information you need.
- Gain insights as to the teacher’s present understandings, strengths and perspectives.
- Reveal and shape your professional relationship.
- Shape thinking in subtle ways.
We invite you to reflect on the role your language plays in promoting the teacher’s sense of agency and ability to reflect on teaching and learning. Your language impacts your team’s view of your role and your stance. It communicates that you are a genuine colleague who can add another set of eyes and ears as you think together about teaching and its effects on student learning.

Language to support teacher growth can be generic, meaning language that helps the individual self-reflect within any instructional context, or it can be highly specific, meaning it is geared to particular subject matter areas and instructional contexts. The use of language specific to literacy has been shown to improve instruction and increase collegiality among teachers over a 4-year period (Hough et al., 2013).

Language does not mean simply answering every question a teacher asks or telling a teacher what to do; it involves active listening and facilitating and supporting teachers’ construction of something deeper. It involves helping the teachers discover for themselves what they know and how they can engage in the problem-solving process.

**Facilitative talk.** You make choices in the language you use, and when you do talk, use language that accomplishes your goals. It is important to consider your language choices thoughtfully to make conversations collaborative and substantive rather than resorting to a telling-only format. You will, of course, offer suggestions, but the more the teacher engages with concepts and participates in the investigative process, the greater the learning and the more likely the teacher is to become independent. The goal, after all, is to help teachers continuously learn from their teaching. Your carefully considered language can result in the teachers learning to ask themselves the same questions as they reflect on their own teaching independently.

The language you use is meant to facilitate coconstruction of new understandings and problem-solving together. The coaching experience has generative power. You and your colleague use your time together to gain deeper understandings of teaching and learning that have implications for not only that lesson but for thinking about teaching other students in other lessons. If you observe a coaching conversation, you might hear the coach use talk like this that prompts teacher inquiry and reflection:

- What was your thinking about …?
- I wonder if/whether …
- Where did you see evidence of …?
- What do you think about …?
- Maybe we should look at some records of their reading together …
- Is there another way to think about that?
- I noticed … . What were you thinking about that?
- What were surprises for you?
- When do you think the children were most engaged? Why do you think that?
- When did you notice a shift in the children’s understandings?
- What language did you think was most effective in enabling the children to do their own thinking?
- What do you think was most effective in your teaching today?
- What aspects of your teaching today did you find tricky?
- What did you learn about the children today as readers/writers?

**Collaborative inquiry.** The language interactions explored above shape the situation into more than a perfunctory observation/feedback loop. With your colleagues, you engage in collaborative inquiry. Genuine inquiry is an everyday occurrence in the classroom but it rests on what is essentially a scientific process. Together, you and the teacher coconstruct new understandings. You sharpen your observational powers to discover and articulate evidence of learning, identify problems and/or what the child needs to learn next, and develop hypotheses that can be tested. This process is more important than perfect lessons (which we all know are not possible). Participants, including both you and the teacher, internalize the analytical
and reflective process so that it becomes an integral part of teaching and of the coaching process.

Collaborative inquiry sets up a way of working together that furthers the conditions described earlier. It increases trust, allows for focus on specifics, and removes judgment of good and bad to a state of investigation. Both coach and teacher are on a quest to find ways of deepening understanding of literacy as a complex process, refining teaching decisions, and facilitating the development of the student’s literacy competencies.

The power of listening. Sometimes we forget that productive conversation requires intentional listening. The pressure to be a good coach can lead to a diminished tendency to listen actively. While the teacher is talking, there is the temptation to form your own response. But your best information comes from listening with concentration as the teacher talks. Through listening, you gain critical information and insights such as the following:

- Understandings the teacher currently has (as the beginning step in providing support to extend learning)
- Answers to your own genuine questions about the children, their learning, and the literacy experiences they experienced in the classroom (a valuable help in understanding beyond your limited experience as an observer)
- Clarification of the teacher’s rationales
- Appreciation for the teacher’s expertise and attempts to grow
- Respect for the teacher’s knowledge and perspectives

A general rule of thumb is to ask genuine questions, the answers to which you do not know. Your questions are not a test of the teachers’ knowledge and active listening will place you in a learner’s role. You need much of the information the teacher holds and there is no other way to get it. For example, if you need information on how the children’s literacy processing has changed over time, the teacher and the artifacts and tools they have used are your best source of information. A listening attitude will keep you away from jumping to prescribe, which undermines thinking and problem solving.

As you listen, ask “why” or “what makes you think that” or “what do you notice.” Notice tone, gesture, and body language. Be sure to provide wait time and pauses that allow your colleagues to think. Try to get behind the teacher’s thinking. There is no substitute for giving full attention to what the teacher says and does. It shows your respect for the teacher as a professional.

Data and tools for coaching
In the process of coaching, it is critical to use data from the student’s literacy processes to guide instruction and ground your thinking in evidence. You also need useful tools that, in a sense, “corner the conversation” so your conversation stays focused on how the child is building a literacy processing system and how the teaching decisions influence what the child can do. The data and tools move the conversation from one person telling the other what to do or being the judge of what is right or wrong to a process that involves two professionals as co-learners searching for answers and understandings together. Some examples of artifacts and tools include the following:

- Records of reading behavior (running records)
- Written products
- Readers’ or Writers’ Notebooks entries

Reflect on Your Coaching
You need time to reflect in order to support your own growth. Consider these questions.

- Did I listen with dedication?
- Did my questions ask for information and clarification?
- Did I see information to help me understand the teacher’s understandings and perspectives?
- Did I avoid judgment?
- Did I involve the teacher as a colleague in seeking information?
- Did I see evidence of shifts in teacher understanding?
- Did I use tools to keep the focus on the evidence of the child’s learning?
• Observational notes from teaching reading and writing
• *Literacy Lessons Designed for Individuals* (Clay, 2016), which describes procedures with rationales, and guides for observing closely the children in Reading Recovery or Literacy Lessons.™
• *The Fountas & Pinnell Literacy Continuum* (2016), which details characteristics of texts and evidence of learning across time for several classroom contexts for instruction.

Such tools will help you keep the focus on the children’s literacy processing and how the teaching decisions influence the children’s responses (as opposed to a critique of the teacher’s performance). Using these data and some of these tools or others that you have found helpful, you and the teachers (or even a small group of colleagues) can problem solve together. The process introduces another resource or level of expertise into your conversation.

**The Power of Your Responsive Coaching**

Responsive coaching means the coach observes and tunes in to the precise knowledge of the colleague to lead him forward. It means being able to notice what teachers know and are able to do. Too often educators slip into focusing on what the teacher cannot do instead of building on a foundation of strengths.

As a coach you can assume every teacher is committed to children and is capable of growth. The heart of your responsive coaching is supporting your colleagues’ ability to develop their understandings about literacy processing, their powers of observation, and their understanding of how their feedback or responses to students confirm or expand their competencies.

Responsive coaching is based on
• seeing the teacher as a capable and continual learner,
• gathering evidence of teacher understanding and shifts in learning (not just of the execution of the steps of a lesson), and
• making informed decisions about how to support the teacher in further learning.

**Your Professional Growth as a Coach**

There is no question that coaching teachers is a challenging task requiring highly intellectual activity and skill. As a coach you need a high level of expertise in the particular context you are working; but that is not sufficient. You need to be able to analyze teaching interactions and make quick decisions as to the type of support to offer. You need to hold an intimate knowledge of the teacher’s understandings and be able to document evidence of teacher and student shifts in understandings. This is a process of continuous learning and every coaching opportunity will add to your expertise. We encourage you to take every opportunity to be engaged in your own professional development as a coach so that you can model the kind of lifelong learning as a professional that you support in your school.

**References**


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