Teaching, Learning, and Leadership The Relationship Between Secondary Literacy Coaches and Secondary Content-Area Teachers

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INTRODUCTION

Beginning in the year 2000, the field of education identified a need for content area literacy instruction (Fisher & Frey, 2007). Data suggests that content area teachers focus on specific contents, but many educators know relatively little about effective instructional reading practices (Fisher & Frey, 2007). Even though undergraduate teacher preparation programs, as well as direct professional development units have attempted to meet this need by creating content area reading instruction courses, the need for literacy instruction and support for secondary teachers remains unmet.

Literacy coaches can support content area teachers. The purpose of literacy coaching is to expand teachers’ knowledge and expertise in literacy instruction and, in turn increase student achievement. The International Reading Association (2006) defines content area literacy coaches as “skilled collaborators who function effectively in middle and high school settings” (p. 5). In 2017, many districts employ literacy coaches to support facets of a district’s professional development program. The addition of a literacy coach provides a different aspect of teacher learning that is missing in other models of professional development programs.

According to Kamil (2003), as students matriculate through the K-12 school system, the complexity and content shifts from reading acquisition skills, taught through fictional texts, to expository and content-focused reading. Additionally, secondary students are typically no longer instructed in cognitive processes. The metacognitive modeling, evidenced in think-alouds and teacher modeling, is less prevalent in high school than it is in elementary school classrooms. The expectation is that the student will make meaning of the highly complex texts.

Although literacy coaching is often included in a school district’s action plan, there is little research to provide a basis for decisions that prove its effectiveness. When investigating the topic, Nowak (2003), found that there is minimal research that focuses on the relationship between teachers and coaches; more specifically, there is a lack of studies that highlight various aspects of the teacher-literacy coach interaction.

Due to the ambiguity of the coaching position itself (Jay & Strong, 2008), the field is left searching for a clear understanding of who is best trained to fill the role of literacy coach and what his or her job description should be (Casey, 2006). The individual qualities of the coach are important in determining the role, as well as the functions of the job itself. It is important to determine the role of the literacy coach and the relationship between the literacy coach and classroom teacher. Contemporary models of instructional coaching, recent research, and current practice lack identification of the impact of an individual’s relationship with his or her peers prior to moving into the position of a literacy coach (Jay & Strong, 2008). The lack of clarity of the coaches’ role and responsibilities creates a gap that this study investigated.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Literature focusing on coaching models, role clarification, and reading in secondary settings informs this study. There is a myriad of models of literacy coaching that have been implemented by school districts and investigated by researchers in the field. Many of the models implemented in secondary settings are elementary models adapted to meet the contexts of different age group settings. Additionally, Kannapel (2008) submitted that many coaching models have not been implemented long enough to gather sufficient data to assess their effectiveness. It is suggested that it takes about three years to see any evidence of the model’s impact. According to Calabrese (2002), the complexity of schools requires innovative methodology. It is also necessary to revise the foundational structures of the educational system and examine new and evolving roles within the system. This includes the role of the literacy coach. According to the International Reading Association (2006) literacy coaches should facilitate professional development, initiate the development of literacy plans, and act as a non-evaluative liaison between teachers and administrators.

Researchers have argued that secondary literacy coaching is different than literacy coaching in an elementary setting (Riddle-Buly, Coskie, Robison & Egawa, 2006; Snow, Ippolito, & Schwartz, 2006). Research on coaching within the context of elementary school settings is limited in its’ transferability to secondary settings (IRA, 2006). It has also been reported that middle and high school teachers’ perceptions of literacy instruction and collaborating with literacy coaches is lacking in the literature (IRA, 2006).
METHODOLOGY

This study utilizes a qualitative, phenomenological methodology. The sample population is a cross-sectional representation of the coaching population. Participants were selected because of their employment as a literacy coach in secondary (grades 6-12) school. The literacy coaches chose to participate voluntarily and recommended 3 teachers that they coached. The time of year, self-reported limitations of time and resources of school personal, as well as budgetary constraints were challenges that were overcome by widening the geographic area of school districts included in this study. Through semi-structured interviews outlined by Seidman (2005), 5 literacy coaches and 9 teachers were interviewed. A modification of Van Kamm’s (1966) model of data analysis provided the open-coding structure in which textual, structural and composite descriptions that informed the four emergent themes; The Complexity of Secondary Settings, The Variability and Implementation of Coaching Models, Defining the Coaches’ Role and Influences of Relationship Building.

FINDINGS

This study concluded that several key factors impact the successful implementation of literacy coaching. Relationships between the four themes were interconnected on multiple levels (Selvaggi, 2016; Shaw, 2007) Although it would be beneficial to study each relationship independently, it would be difficult to isolate the mediating and moderating variables in each context.

Participants in this study found that secondary settings were distinctly different from elementary settings. The student's levels of literacy, and stage of development, were reported as factors affecting the strategies and programs utilized by teachers (Fordham & Sandmann, 2006). The educational structure of secondary schools, in which content areas appear to be separated from basic skills, furthers the range of variability in both student learning and teacher performance. The complexities and contexts highlighted in this study parallel those found in the literature.

This study found that there are numerous literacy coaching models that districts can choose to integrate, but few models are consistently implemented (Manzo, 2005; Hasbrouck & Denton, 2007). More so, those implemented often lacked the fidelity to allow for accurate measurement of goals. The variability of the secondary setting impacted the ways in which coaching models were chosen and implemented. The lack of funding, staffing, administrative support, and constraints in content area curriculums, ultimately influenced if and how literacy coaching occurred within each district of this study.

The role of the literacy coach was found to be ambiguous (Darwin, 2002). Every participant in the study communi- cated the role of the literacy coach differently. Some of the literacy coaches in this study took on roles that aligned to the IRA's standards (2004). Others assumed roles and responsibilities of a school administrator. Thus, the role of the literacy coach was often misaligned.

The relationships that were built and maintained among literacy coaches and teachers were highlighted as the most important aspect of a successful literacy coaching relationship. Literacy coaches who were knowledgeable, supportive, honest, and organized were referenced as successful (Boyles, 2007). Literacy coaches that established and maintained trust in their relationships with both teachers and administrators were found to be effective (Casey, 2006; Greene, 2004). Thus, the need for trust in the relationship was a factor woven through every theme of this study. Annie, a literacy coach, stated, “to still be successful in year seven, is working on relationships and building trusting relationships between me and everyone.”

Previous studies have provided data to indicate that literacy coaching positively impacts teachers and student learning (Casey, 2006; Jay & Strong, 2008). The composite descriptions from this study echo those findings. Individual characteristics of a coach, the districts procedures in implementing coaching models, as well as the importance of positive collegial relationships between secondary literacy coaches and secondary content-area teacher, were successful and effective literacy coaching.

DISCUSSION

This study is important because it reveals aspects of the relationship between secondary literacy coaches and secondary content-area teachers. The fact that the number of literacy coaches is decreasing means it is important to examine the relationship closely. The findings from this study provide evidence of an increasing need for deliberate methods of integration of literacy coaching into secondary settings, as well as, purposeful investigation into the characteristics of the secondary literacy coach and the factors surrounding the formation of lasting relationships with teachers. In the end, a full model of support from administrators to teachers is needed for an effective coaching relationship.

This study concludes that literacy coaching positively impacts teacher’s instruction. Teachers affirmed that their instruction reflected a more thorough understanding of literacy processes and procedures, and that even in challenging situations, the literacy coach was helpful. Even though a variety of barriers arose throughout their tenures, through collegial discussions, literacy coaches and teachers were able to either adopt coping mechanisms or overcome the challenge through mutual support.

According to Jay and Strong (2008), for the first time in history, literacy coaches are being utilized in professional development programs to support classroom teachers. This
concentrated and unprecedented focus has the potential to positively impact the field.

It can be concluded that the field of literacy coaching offers great promise. Literacy coaching can evolve to specialize in individual content-specific literacy instruction that at the secondary level, increases students' literacy skills. With innovation, administrative support, and teacher collegiality, secondary literacy coaching can grow to its fullest capacity.

REFERENCES


What we know and what we need to know about literacy coaches in middle and high schools: A research synthesis and proposed research agenda. Standards for middle and high school literacy coaches (pp. 35-49). Newark, DE: International Reading Association.