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CHAPTER 1

Remodeling Schools for Effective Literacy Learning: The Case for Coaching

GUIDING QUESTIONS

1. Why is coaching best viewed as a set of activities rather than as a role?
2. What are the four tenets of the Framework for Thinking and Working Like a Coach?
3. In what ways do basic assumptions about coaching affect the roles and responsibilities of literacy leaders?

When her principal asked Melinda, an experienced classroom teacher, to coach two new teachers in teaching literacy, Melinda began to search for resources that would help her better understand these new and exciting responsibilities. In many ways, this book presents both the research and resources that we would want to fall into Melinda's hands. While fictional, Melinda represents a compilation of the many literacy leaders with whom we have worked over the years. Having both personally walked in Melinda's shoes and mentored many new literacy leaders like Melinda, we have chosen to begin each of our chapters with a brief snapshot of the tasks that Melinda is taking on and the questions that she might be asking along the way. Each chapter then serves as a resource for helping literacy leaders who coach to answer questions similar to Melinda's. Consequently, the two main purposes of the book are (1) to provide those who coach with an understanding of how coaching requires particular *ways of thinking* about adult learners in schools and (2) to suggest numerous related *ways of working* with adult learners, including dozens of practical tools for those who coach to operationalize the ways of thinking.

In this introductory chapter, we present what we view as foundational knowledge for and key assumptions about effective coaching, providing professionals like Melinda and other literacy leaders with key information about coaching and its potential for improving classroom practices and student literacy learning.

Coaching, although a somewhat new phenomenon, has gained momentum during the past several decades. In business, there are executive coaches; in medicine, health coaches; and in education, instructional coaches. Educational coaches come with a variety of titles (e.g., academic, change, instructional, literacy, and so on) and a dizzying and diverse number of roles and responsibilities. However, all those who coach, whether in business, medicine, or education, share a fundamental similarity, a desire to support the work of colleagues while continually improving their own practice. Atul Gawande, a nationally known surgeon and writer, realizing that he had reached a plateau in his learning, worked with a coach to further develop his technical skills and his ability to work with other members of his team. Gawande makes several key points about coaching; specifically, “the allegiance of the coach is to the people they work with; their success depends on it. And the existence of a coach depends on the acknowledgement that even expert practitioners have significant room for improvement” (Gawande, 2011). In other words, coaches must establish a trusting relationship with those they coach. Most important, all of us can improve as professionals; that is, we can become better at what we do. Coaching can play a big part in that process.

Given the importance of quality instruction, especially literacy instruction, as a key to student learning, accompanied by 21st century workplace demands and higher expectations for students, there is a need for those responsible for literacy instruction to think differently about how and what they teach. Further, as Gawande indicates, effective coaching can facilitate the learning of adult educators and assist them in meeting the challenges of providing high-quality literacy instruction. Before exploring further what we mean by “effective coaching” through our Framework for Thinking and Working Like a Coach, we begin simply by sharing two basic beliefs about the enterprise of coaching, which have shaped our work in schools, our research, and most certainly this book.

Basic Beliefs About Coaching

One of our basic beliefs mentioned throughout this book is that many educators in schools take on coaching responsibilities, from those with the title of “coach” to others such as reading specialists, teacher leaders, cooperating and mentor teachers, facilitators, consultant teachers, assistant principals, and (at times) principals. In other words, we view coaching as an *activity* rather than as a *role*. All of these individuals, regardless of title, may assume coaching responsibilities, which run the gamut from

serving as a resource or mentor to others, co-planning and co-teaching, to observing and providing feedback, and so on. The notion that many educators hold coaching responsibilities in schools is consistent with current research evidence that schools with a culture of shared leadership and collaboration are well positioned to increase student literacy learning (Bryk, Sebring, Allensworth, Luppescu, & Easton, 2010; Lewis-Spector & Jay, 2011; Louis, Leithwood, Wahlstrom, & Anderson, 2010). If we limit coaching responsibilities to only those who hold the formal title of “coach,” then we risk losing or undermining the wealth of experience, knowledge, and savvy of capable teachers and leaders.

This brings us to our second basic belief: coaching can be critically important to improving literacy teaching and learning in schools, across *all* grades and *all* content areas. Certainly, coaching can be beneficial for those responsible for teaching reading in the elementary schools—for teachers working with the youngest learners who are just beginning to learn the basics of sound-symbol connections or mastering their first sight words, to those working in upper grades, where the focus might shift to vocabulary and comprehension instruction. Moreover, there is also much more emphasis on the importance of “disciplinary literacy” strategies across all grades as a means of improving students’ content learning (Hynd-Shanahan, Holschuh, & Hubbard, 2004; Shanahan & Shanahan, 2008, 2012, 2014; Shanahan, Shanahan, & Mischia, 2011; Moje, 2015). Standards such as the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices [NGA] & Council of Chief State School Officers [CCSSO], 2010) have emphasized the key role of literacy as a means of improving academic learning. In other words, coaching is key to helping teachers across all grades and subjects take on the challenge of merging content and literacy teaching and learning. But who are these educators identified as literacy leaders, and how did they acquire their coaching responsibilities? In the following section, we discuss briefly some of the common ways that educators become literacy leaders with coaching responsibilities.

VOICES FROM THE FIELD

In 2013–2014, the district made the decision to transition the specialists into coaches. Up until that time, the reading specialist’s main role was intervention and direct service of students. When the transition was made, administration suggested a 60 percent coaching and 40 percent intervention balance; however, the coaching model has looked different at each school, and even from year to year based on budget/staffing cuts, administrative changes, etc. Currently, I spend about 50 percent of my day working with students and 50 percent coaching.

—Shauna Magee, literacy coach

Pathways Into Coaching

Some teachers are asked to serve as coaches because they have been identified as effective literacy teachers. Others, like Shauna in the preceding *Voices From the Field*, find themselves in a coaching role because of a shift in responsibilities (e.g., from instructing students to also coaching teachers). The diverse titles of those with coaching roles reflect the many different pathways of individuals who become and serve as literacy leaders. In a recent national survey of specialized literacy professionals (Bean, Kern, Goatley, Ortlieb, Shettel, Calo et al., 2015), respondents varied greatly, not just in the titles they held but in the ways in which they became coaches. Some held reading specialist certifications and were asked to coach either on a full- or part-time basis. Others were Reading Recovery teachers who taught half the day and worked with teachers during the other half. In middle and secondary schools, those who coached came from even more diverse backgrounds. Some had been reading specialists, perhaps at the elementary level, while others were teachers of the disciplines who had been selected for the position. Survey results also indicated that 75 percent of the respondents held master's degrees. At the same time, 53 percent were certified as reading specialists. Many respondents indicated the value of an advanced degree in literacy education, the importance of a supervised field experience (e.g., shadowing a coach), and coaching experiences in a school setting during their preparation programs.

Given the results of this survey and other research in the field, the International Literacy Association (2015) released a position statement titled *The Multiple Roles of School-Based Specialized Literacy Professionals*, accompanied by a research brief summarizing the rationale and evidence for three specialized literacy positions: the reading/literacy specialist, the literacy coach, and the literacy coordinator/supervisor. Although three distinct positions were identified, the documents make clear that those holding any of these positions must develop the leadership skills and abilities to work collaboratively with teachers and to support teacher professional learning and school-change efforts—that is, to coach. The position statements and research brief can be downloaded from the International Literacy Association's website (www.literacyworldwide.org).

Although reading specialist certification is one key pathway into coaching, and while we encourage all those serving as literacy leaders to enroll in such a certification program, we also recognize the existence of other pathways to becoming a coach. Some schools have asked experienced teachers to serve as teacher leaders responsible for supporting and facilitating professional learning activities for teachers. At secondary levels, where literacy leaders most frequently work with teachers of the