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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION: LAYERED COACHING

This is not work for the faint-hearted. To do it well requires a calm disposition and the trust-building skills of a mediator combined with the steely determination and perseverance of an innovator.

—ELLEN GUINEY

I AM

Who am I? What am I? I have read all of the definitions of reading coach, literacy specialist, and reading apprentice. I am reluctant to define myself as anything but a teacher. What I can do is tell you about myself, and share my stories about becoming a literacy leader.

I am fast talking, fast walking, and full of life. I spring out of bed each morning ready to tackle new challenges, and flop into bed at night depleted of all energy. My mind is always at work, churning with new ideas and thinking. I am a listener, a partner, and a subtle agent for change. I work with teachers, Title I reading technicians, parents, literacy specialists, administrators, and students. My work is multilayered. It begins at the district level on the leadership team, collecting and analyzing data to determine district needs, plan initiatives, and set goals. From here it moves to the school level, where my responsibilities branch out in many directions: Title I coordinator, staff developer, and developer of curriculum and assessment.

The next layer is in the classroom, where I work with teachers and students. I support school initiatives by providing professional development for all staff. I provide opportunities for teachers to pursue new learning and deepen knowledge through participation in study groups.

I have worked as a licensed literacy specialist for grades three through five since 2000. Before that I taught third grade for nine years. I entered my current position as literacy specialist without a job description. The district had redirected its focus on literacy for grades K–5 because the results of state testing indicated that our students were struggling to meet the standard in reading and writing. I was hired to “support literacy.” There had not been a literacy specialist in my position for eight years. I have had the luxury of creating my identity as a literacy support person and establishing a partnership with the K–2 literacy specialist. My identity as a literacy leader has developed and evolved over the last fifteen years.

WE ARE

We are a K–12 school district. We have four large schools. The George J. Mitchell School serves students in kindergarten through grade three. There are approximately thirty classroom teachers and six hundred students, plus support staff. Students then move to the Albert S. Hall School, which serves grades four and five. This school has roughly twenty teachers and a little less than three hundred students. After fifth grade, students move to the junior high school for sixth through eighth grade and then to the high school for ninth through twelfth. I work at the George J. Mitchell School (working with third-grade teachers and students) and also at the Albert S. Hall School (grades four and five).

The school district is in a small city in Maine. The free and reduced-price lunch population is over 60 percent, and we have a yearly transient rate of 33 percent. By tracking students over a three-year period, we have found that our transient rate increases to more than 50 percent. Students come and go and come back. When I wrote the first edition of the book, our city was a hub for a regional hospital that employed medical staff, but now, nine years later, a new centralized hospital has been built in Augusta, Maine, twenty miles away. We do, however, have a new homeless shelter, which sleeps about sixty people and is in the process of being renovated to increase capacity. In my twenty-five years in the district, I’ve never seen so many new students registered with a shelter as their primary residence. In this same town, we have two private colleges that employ many professors. The children of these well-educated professionals are thrown into the mix of our struggling community—a community that once housed prosperous paper mills.

SHARED LEADERSHIP

It feels awkward to write this book using the word *I*. I find myself typing the word *we* only to delete it and replace it with *I*. I am part of a team, and it is through this shared leadership team that I support literacy. I collaborate with principals, literacy specialists, teachers, librarians, support staff, and parents. We work together to achieve goals that we have set as a district.

My journey as a literacy specialist included my partner Rose Patterson, the K–2 literacy specialist for the last fifteen years, and will now include my new partner Kim Carey. Although the stories I share reflect my personal experiences in becoming a literacy leader, my overall literacy journey includes collaborating with Rose, grade-level leaders, and building administrators. Since 2000 we have worked together to generate new ideas, process new learning, and ensure that the literacy curriculum and student learning is streamlined for students in kindergarten through grade five. We work to ensure consistency between grade levels and across buildings within the district.

The district is committed to providing high-quality in-house professional development with a focus on increasing the quality of instruction. By working in-house supporting teachers in literacy, I am able to respond to teachers' needs and provide modeling and follow-through support. Literacy support is delivered in the natural setting of the classrooms in which the teachers work. Professional development opportunities within the district have been designed to meet the standards put forth by the US Department of Education, Common Core Standards, and Learning Forward (formerly the National Staff Development Council) and incorporate the latest research on providing high-quality professional development. The position of literacy specialist as reading coach supports these standards for providing in-house professional development opportunities.

UPDATED THINKING

The upside of writing a new edition to a book is that I get to update my thinking. There are three ideas that I would like to emphasize as foundational understandings to my work as a literacy leader: layered leadership, making meaning together, and rowing in the same direction as a school community. Rewriting this book gives me a second chance to share my perspective on how literacy leaders have the opportunity to build capacity within schools.

LAYERED LEADERSHIP

I am now fifteen-plus years into the job. I have lived through change and the constant flipping of initiatives at both the national and state level. The constant curriculum work and changing of assessments would have anyone in a tailspin. In the last five years alone, our state has changed state assessments from Maine Learning Results to NECAP to Smarter Balance, only to ditch that assessment after a year. No wonder teachers are apprehensive about new initiatives. Through all the change, however, our district has stayed the course in terms of its commitment to literacy leadership. Our guiding question for our work has and continues to be, “If this all went away, would we be working to support best practice?” How lucky I am to work in a district that has stayed committed to literacy leadership amid constant change.

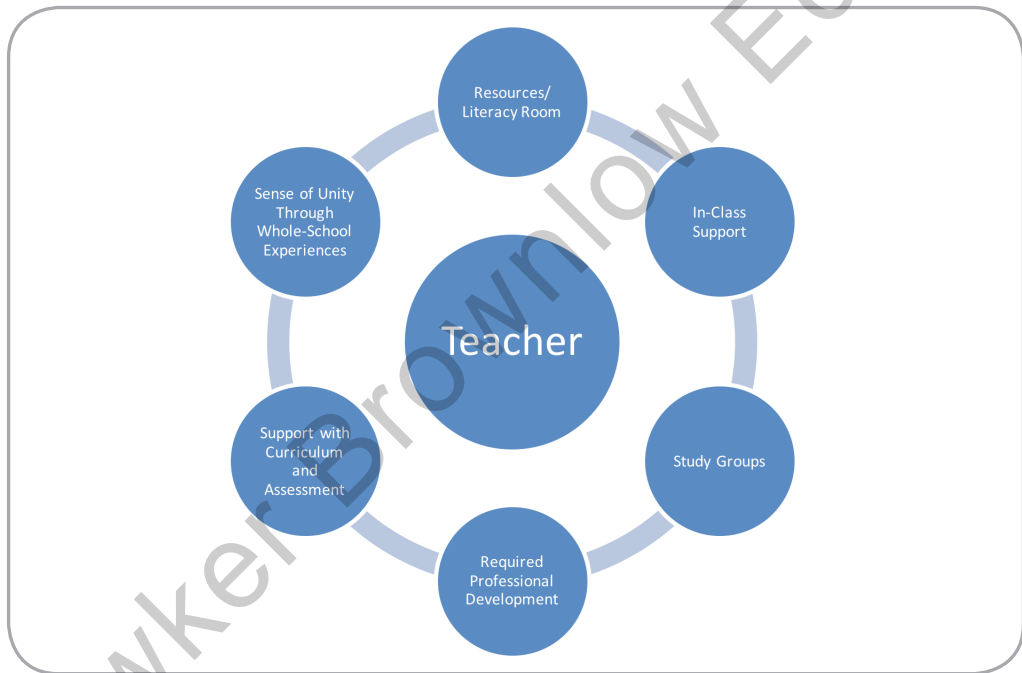
Because we have stayed the course, I have been given the gift of time to work through the literacy leadership model that we have implemented. I can finally articulate the purpose and intention behind the multitude of supports that we have in place for teachers; I have come to think of them as “layers.” These layers, when planned out with purpose and intention, can support learning and change within schools. I had my own aha moment a few years ago when I realized that each chapter in the first edition was really a different coaching layer (see Figure 1.1). Since then, I often share at workshops that if I were to rewrite my book, I would rename each chapter to reflect this.

Figure 1.1

VARIED LAYERS OF SUPPORT THAT COACHES CAN IMPLEMENT WITHIN A SCHOOL
• Being a Resource
• Designing Required Professional Development that Includes Voice and Choice
• Facilitating Study Groups
• Coaching in Classrooms
• Supporting Curriculum and Assessment
• Designing Structures to Support Kids on the Bubble
• Creating Unity through Whole School Experiences
• Cultivating Teacher Leadership
• Maintaining the Nuts and Bolts of Literacy Programming within the School

Not all teachers will access all layers of support. A new teacher may access all the layers (literacy room, in-class support, study groups, required professional development, team meetings, and one-on-one support with curriculum and assessment), while a veteran teacher may access only a few layers depending on the year (e.g., study groups, required professional development, and team meetings). The model is designed to differentiate for the needs of teachers. The power of layered leadership lies in the layers of support working together within a school community to deepen learning for students and teachers alike (see Figure 1.2).

Figure 1.2



How the Coaching Layers Work Together to Support Teachers

MAKING MEANING TOGETHER

If you are a Red Sox fan, then you know that between the eighth and ninth inning of every home game they play the song “Sweet Caroline” by Neil Diamond (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Bf3vIH0gDGI>). When my son Ben was around eight years old, we went to a Red Sox/Yankees game. At the end of the eighth inning,

the song started to play and the crowd went wild singing along. As we hit the refrain, I was immediately drawn to the lyrics that Ben was singing. Instead of “Sweet Caroline,” Ben was singing something else. Immediately, I asked him what he was singing. He replied, “Hit it straight down the line.” In my horror, I screamed above the crowd, “It’s ‘Sweet Caroline!’” His confused response to me was, “Why would we be singing about Caroline at a baseball game?”

Warren Bennis states, “To make dreams apparent to others and to align people with them (requires not just) more explanations or clarification but the creation of meaning” (1989, 20–21). It is through shared experiences that meaning is made and a shared understanding and interpretation is developed. When we do not have a common understanding, we tend to make our own meaning, just as my son Ben did with the song “Sweet Caroline.” It is this shared understanding of practices, curriculum, and assessment that will move our work forward. This requires creating ongoing opportunities for shared experiences and conversations among staff. As a literacy leader, I have learned this lesson the hard way. Working alone on initiatives or curriculum does not create shared meaning; rather, it builds curriculum around a person and not a school. Now I work to create opportunities that bring people together to make meaning together. This approach takes time and can be slow going, but I believe it leads to sustainable change and shared ownership.

ROWING IN THE SAME DIRECTION

It is important that the work of literacy leaders is interconnected and aligned to the goals of the rest of the school. Although literacy coaches often talk about being in a “no-man’s land,” it is essential that literacy leaders are well-connected within the school community and to the administration. As Peter Lencioni writes, “If you could get all the people in an organization rowing in the same direction, you could dominate any industry, in any market, against any competition, at any time” (2002, vii). This doesn’t mean that every staff member is going to buy into the vision or direction set forth by the district. But it does mean that the leadership team needs to be clear and explicit on goals set for the school and that resources need to be aligned and working together to meet these goals.

MY STORIES

One of my greatest challenges has been learning to balance the demands of the job while keeping an eye on alignment with district initiatives. Because the role of literacy specialist as reading coach was relatively new when I started, I have traveled an interesting road in defining and shaping my role as a literacy coach.

This book is a reflection of my journey, my stories of becoming a literacy leader. They are my stories, the moments that have guided my own learning. I tend to learn the most from my failures. It is my hope that by sharing my stories, others will be inspired to continue and persevere through their own journeys, for regardless of our official position, we can all be literacy leaders, rowing in the same direction to move our schools forward.

