Chapter 3

Advancing Instructional Coaching with Teacher Formative Assessment and Input

Adam J. Lekwa
Rutgers University, USA

Linda A. Reddy
Rutgers University, USA

Elisa S. Shernoff
Rutgers University, USA

ABSTRACT

With increased attention to teacher quality and accountability, instructional coaching has emerged as a popular form of teacher support and professional development in literacy and other areas of instruction. Despite significant interest from school personnel, researchers, and federal funders, there remains a lack of consensus around the key components and activities of instructional coaching. To that end, studies that use quantitative and qualitative methods can offer valuable information on the development and validation of coaching practices. This chapter briefly describes the Classroom Strategies Assessment System Coaching Model that draws on the adult learning and formative assessment literature. We offer key observations of educators’ knowledge of and experience in instructional coaching from focus groups conducted with teachers in high-poverty, urban elementary schools. Directions for practice and research are discussed.

INTRODUCTION

Literacy skills are a crucial foundation for academic and personal growth throughout a child’s P-12 experience, and on into adult life. The development of the skills and knowledge we use to read and write...
begins early in life, yet so too begin skill deficits that affect later learning and opportunities. Children from families living in poverty may start their formal educational experiences with substantially lower exposure to, and development of language (Hart & Risley, 1992) or early literacy skills (Chatterji, 2006). Literacy gaps allowed to persist over the first years of schooling are associated with a range of subsequent risks, including an increased risk of failure to graduate high school on time (Hernandez, 2011). Classroom teachers thus have a critically important mission—particularly those of students in the elementary years from traditionally underserved populations.

Teaching is a complicated profession, and effective teaching requires specialized skills and knowledge. Teachers must know what to teach and they must be aware of the specific skills students need to learn, and how these skills are associated and develop. Moreover, teachers must be skilled in the management of classrooms and the delivery of instruction. As with other highly specialized professions, attaining the knowledge and skill necessary to achieve or maintain proficiency in these areas requires more time and support than pre-service teacher education programs can offer. Teachers’ needs for ongoing professional development in literacy teaching might include gaining awareness of literacy standards, increasing understanding of the interrelationships between reading subskills, or the how specific instructional strategies interact differently with students’ acquisition of skills at different stages in learning development. Each of these areas for development represent important aspects of literacy instruction. Thus ongoing professional learning is a necessity for teachers, yet gaining new knowledge and skill for teaching can be a challenge. The success of professional development may be limited by factors such as the match between teachers’ needs and training offered, constraints imposed by the format of the training (i.e., workshops outside the classroom or school building), and the extent to which knowledge or skills obtained by teachers translate into improved student learning.

Research on professional development for teachers has been conducted to some degree since the mid-twentieth century, yet the attention given to this important aspect of teachers’ work was limited until the 1990s and 2000s (Borko, 2004; Wilson & Berne, 1999). Early work by Joyce and Showers gradually produced evidence that lasting improvement in teaching practice could be achieved, and would require a mixture of training, practice, and follow-up (Joyce, Showers, & Bennet, 1987). As a result of these efforts, interest in job-embedded professional development increased and a variety of new programs or models inspired by their findings have appeared—giving rise to the now popular term “instructional coaching.” Coaching as a form of professional development (for literacy instruction in particular) has seen increased interest in educational legislation, from literacy coaching prompted by elements of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB, 2001), to recent funding initiatives for the development and implementation of coaching in the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA, 2015).

The science of coaching as a form of professional development for teachers is emerging; there is a need at this time for additional examination of the ways in which components and activities of coaching are associated with specific teacher and student outcomes. This is particularly true in the domain of literacy instruction. Our scientific knowledge of the development or acquisition of literacy skills is arguably greater than that for development of other academic skills (e.g., mathematics, science, writing), yet historic gaps in literacy achievement persist (Kena et al., 2015). The challenge is to identify ways in which ongoing professional development can best support teachers’ acquisition and application of best practices in literacy instruction.

In this chapter we describe current gaps in this area of research with respect to the components and activities of coaching, and how these relate to teacher and student outcomes. To that end, we describe the literature on adult learning and teacher formative assessment and introduce the Classroom Strategies