Chapter 6
Coaches as Skillful Collaborators:
How Coaches Influence Practice in Middle and High Schools

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ABSTRACT

Coaches wear multiple hats. However, the primary service they provide is supporting administrators and teachers. Coaches are an important part of school-wide initiatives but more information is needed on how they support teaching and learning at middle and high school levels. In this chapter, the authors used the guide Standards for Literacy Coaches to examine the work of coaches in three urban schools. Further, the paper reports how coaching impacted teachers’ practice. Document and content analysis of classroom observation checklists, field notes, and professional development artifacts were examined. Results show that the coaches described here worked primarily as skillful collaborators guiding teachers in curriculum development, providing in-class coaching, and working with administrators. Coaches assisted with lessons by co-teaching, modeled lessons for teachers, met with teachers to plan units and lessons, and provided teachers with a wide range of instructional resources.

INTRODUCTION

Snow, Ippolito, and Schwartz (2006) call for more “interest in the systematic collection of data in those places where coaches are working in middle and high schools” (p. 35). They believe more “empirical research suggesting whether secondary literacy coaches are effective and what array of factors influences... DOI: 10.4018/978-1-5225-0669-0.ch006
their effectiveness” (Snow, Ippolito, & Schwartz, 2006, p. 45) is needed. In particular, more case studies of coaching, which describe the benefits of coaching to practitioners across sites, would enhance the literature (Snow, Ippolito, & Schwartz, 2006). To better prepare students for college and careers, middle and high school teachers need support in their classrooms.

At the secondary level, coaches are integral parts of job-embedded professional development because “although many middle and high school teachers understand the importance of literacy, they did not automatically see its instruction as their job” (International Reading Association, 2006, p. 2). Snow, Ippolito, and Schwartz (2006) believe that “a practice-embedded research agenda … would both improve the value of good ideas like coaching to the educational institutions that wish to implement them, and that would enable the field to learn from the experience of trying out those good ideas” (p. 46).

There is also a need for more research on how professional development impacts classroom practice. Around the world, recruiting and retaining teachers, and improving teacher quality via professional development are significant concerns (Stewart, 2010). Practitioners know that to improve the quality of teaching, educators can collaborate more and pursue professional development that enables them to reflect on their practice (Dana & Yendol-Hoppey, 2008). Furthermore, providing teachers with ongoing, job-embedded support should foster changes in practice. These changes might be instructional (e.g., differentiating and scaffolding curricular) or curricular (e.g., purposeful planning and effective use of resources). Professional development initiatives can also help classroom teachers provide students with more support for their literacy development, by showing teachers how to assess and identify literacy needs and interventions for building vocabulary, how to improve reading comprehension and writing skills, as well as to develop 21st-century skills.

Exploration of classroom practice is a particularly significant strategy because in urban contexts stakeholders are less likely to have a voice in curriculum, assessment, standards, and so on, but they are charged with enacting many of these top-down mandates. Therefore, retaining quality teachers means providing ongoing job-embedded professional development to support them while they work with diverse students to meet increasing academic expectations.

This chapter provides an overview of the role coaches play in urban schools. We begin with a discussion of professional development initiatives and the ways in which coaches serve stakeholders throughout the school community. Then we present results of case studies from three urban contexts—one high school and two middle schools—to illustrate how the job-embedded professional development (PD) initiative of peer-to-peer coaching helped teachers in the classroom. The chapter concludes with recommendations for job-embedded PD as well as future research on coaching.

BACKGROUND

An expanding body of research exists on coaching responsibilities and activities (Hanson, 2011; L’Allier, Elish-Piper, & Bean, 2010; Lowenhaupt, McKinney, & Reeves, 2014; Stephens & Mills, 2014); yet coaches still struggle to determine how to balance the many hats they wear and where to place emphasis (L’Allier, Elish-Piper, & Bean, 2010). The evidence continues to grow in support of the benefits of coaching, and coaching has gained some momentum through mandates and pilot programs (Gross, 2010). However, we need more research on the ways in which coaching models are implemented to support teachers in authentic contexts, especially at the middle school and high school levels (Gross, 2010).