Chapter 7

The Literacy Coach’s Role in Supporting Teachers’ Implementation of the Common Core State Standards in Writing

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this chapter is to report on the findings of a writing survey with elementary classroom teachers (n=39) who attended graduate programs at two four-year colleges. In this study, the authors examine teachers’ perceptions of their Professional Development (PD) in the implementation of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) for writing and describe their PD needs. The chapter concludes with recommendations and suggestions about how literacy coaches can best implement multiple levels of support in writing instruction including school-wide and grade level PDs as well as coaching and in-class support.

INTRODUCTION

The International Literacy Association (ILA, formerly IRA) states that the preparation of literacy professionals needs to focus on their own professional learning and leadership roles in the areas of both reading and writing (IRA, 2010). Specifically, ILA states that literacy professionals should model literacy practices in both reading and writing, seek answers to unknown questions about reading and writing instruction, and provide professional development opportunities in both reading and writing. Although reading instruction has been the primary focus of literacy instruction for many years (National Commission on Writing in America’s Schools and Colleges, 2003), recently, with the implementation of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS, 2010), writing has been given more attention. As a result,
teachers need support in interpreting the goals for CCSS in writing, integrating writing into their literacy and content-area curricula, and delivering high-quality writing instruction for all students. Further, since many teachers report that their teacher-preparation programs did not adequately prepare them to teach writing (Cutler & Graham, 2008; Gilbert & Graham, 2010), support from experts in this area is even more pressing. According to ILA, literacy coaches will need to play a key role in supporting teachers through this change. Specifically, the ILA standards state that reading specialists and literacy coaches should “Demonstrate an understanding of local, state, and national policies that affect reading and writing instruction” (IRA, 2010, standard 6.4) and should “Collaborate in, leading, and evaluating professional development activities for individuals and groups of teachers. Activities may include working individually with teachers (e.g., modeling, coplanning, coteaching, and observing) or with groups (e.g., teacher workshops, group meetings, and online learning)” (IRA, 2010, standard 6.3).

The purpose of this chapter is to share the results of a survey study that examined elementary teachers’ perceptions of the professional development experiences they had regarding implementation of the CCSS in writing. In addition, the survey provides information about teachers’ perceptions of the instructional challenges they face in teaching writing under the CCSS and their suggestions about what support would be most beneficial to them in the future as they work to implement the CCSS in writing. The survey results provide useful insights and considerations for literacy coaches as they plan professional development (PD) and other support in the area of writing.

BACKGROUND

Educational Policies and Writing Instruction

Thirteen years ago, writing was dubbed the “neglected R” of America’s education system (National Commission on Writing in America’s Schools and Colleges, 2003). Unfortunately, this reality still remains today. Historically, the foci of major educational policies illuminate this neglect. Since 2001, with the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB, 2002) the focus of instructional attention primarily shifted to reading. This focus on reading was further emphasized in 2004 with the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 2004), which called for data-based instruction and response to intervention (RTI) models. Teachers were supported in applying evidence-based reading instruction, and RTI models were applied and evaluated in their schools. Overall, it is not clear if writing received the same attention as reading did through these years, and if teachers received support on the inclusion of evidence-based practices in their writing instruction.

Unfortunately, students’ writing performance on national assessments suggests that students in the United States lack writing proficiency (e.g., Persky, Daane, & Jin, 2003; NCES, 2012), and this can potentially be explained by a lack of focus in schools on writing instruction. Students’ responses to the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) reveal an unchanged pattern of weakness in America’s classrooms. Specifically, in 2003 only 2% of 4th, 8th, and 12th graders performed at an advanced level on the NAEP (NCES, 2003). This trend in poor performance continued on the 2011 NAEP assessment (NCES, 2012); only 24% of both 8th and 12th graders scored at a proficient level and only 3% scored at the advanced level. Most recently, the NAEP pilot conducted with 4th graders in 2012 to examine their ability to type their responses, indicated that they produced short texts when working on the computer versus when they were writing on papers (NCES, 2012).