Chapter 12
Exploring Literacy Assessment through Teacher Leader Collaborative Inquiry

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ABSTRACT
This chapter focuses on teacher leaders’ coaching practice that fosters collaborative, inquiry-based, professional learning among classroom teachers to improve P-12 literacy assessment. The chapter reports on a research study that examines classroom teachers’ leadership and coaching experience as a required assignment of the graduate level course in the M.Ed. in Literacy program. Based on the research findings, the chapter offers strategies for initiating, implementing, and evaluating collaborative inquiries on classroom or school-wide literacy assessment. The chapter includes suggestions for effective ways to implement and evaluate coaching to improve literacy assessment. Further, an implementation model and checklist for the effective collaboration and literacy coaching created based on the study suggests step-by-step processes and techniques to be used in urban and suburban P-12 schools.

INTRODUCTION
Teacher leadership is one of the significant topics in teacher education for effective literacy instruction (Bean, 2009; Vogt & Shearer, 2011). As literacy remains at the center of many educational reforms and policy initiatives (e.g., the Common Core State Standards), leadership roles of literacy professionals to accurately assess student needs and provide appropriate literacy instruction are keys to fulfilling students’ learning potential. The International Literacy Association (formerly IRA) asserts that the preparation of literacy professionals needs to focus on their leadership roles as teacher leaders by working with and supporting classroom teachers (IRA, 2010). The IRA Standards describe distinct roles for literacy
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professionals who have expertise and knowledge to assist classroom teachers, such as reading specialists and literacy coaches. However, there is confusion among literacy coaches about their roles and responsibilities in P-12 school settings as literacy coaches are often hired to do different leadership tasks, from supporting teachers at the school site to analyzing school-wide assessment data (Calo, Sturtevant, & Kopfman, 2015). Despite the wide variability of current understandings of literacy coaches (Dole, Liang, Watkins, & Wiggins, 2006), a literacy coach is expected to have not only advanced knowledge and skills, but professional abilities to share their knowledge with other teachers to improve teaching and student learning.

One of the initial challenges that coaches would face in taking on leadership roles is that they need to gain trust from teachers (Dozier, 2008). One approach that fosters trust is based on the servant leadership model (Spears & Lawrence, 2002), which suggests that one should build trusting relationships by placing the needs of others before their own. Spears and Lawrence (2002) describe servant leadership as a long term process that builds trust through the application of several traits that include: listening, empathy, awareness, stewardship, and a commitment to growth in people. These traits may be employed by literacy coaches to build trusting relationships and share her/his knowledge with a group of teachers by initiating and facilitating a collaborative inquiry group (Bray, 2002; Culver, 2009).

The purpose of this study is threefold:

1. To explore the ways that teacher leaders use inquiry-based study groups to learn about literacy assessment;
2. To examine how teacher leaders take on a coaching role as they initiate and lead study groups; and
3. To understand the ways that teacher leaders practice literacy coaching as a required course activity.

Participants of the study are literacy coaches in training, but we believe that their coaching experience as teacher leaders is valuable for providing insights for effective implementation of literacy coaching. The study also recognizes that literacy assessment is a critical task performed by reading professionals who have the responsibility to “prepare teachers for using a variety of assessment tools and practices to plan and evaluate effective reading and writing instruction” (IRA, 2010, Standard 3, para 1).

BACKGROUND

Literacy Coaching

Although literacy coaching is a relatively new research field, it is a critical component of teachers’ professional development and reading improvement efforts in today’s schools and districts (Dole, Liang, Watkins, & Wiggins, 2006). Current research suggests that coaching is a promising method of improving teacher expertise in literacy instruction (Skinner, Hagood, & Provost, 2014). As defined by Bean (2009), a coach is “one with expertise who provides the guidance or feedback that enables someone else to become more proficient” (p. 109). With this definition of coaches, literacy coaching offers professional learning experiences in which teachers learn about new strategies and techniques and practice and receive feedback on the instructional strategies practiced in their own classroom.

Despite the promise of literacy coaching to improve student learning, few studies have reviewed and documented the effectiveness of coaching on literacy instruction and student learning. A small