Preface/ Invited Guest Manuscript

LITERACY COACHING: NAVIGATING A TRANSITIONING LITERACY TERRAIN

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In 2001, President George W. Bush signed into law the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act (Rush & Scherff, 2012). This pivotal legislation emphasized four premises: stronger accountability for schools and teachers, increased school choice options for families, more local management of federal funding, and a prioritization of recognized research-based instructional and assessment practices within classrooms. This law also ushered in an increase in the number of literacy coaches, to improve teaching pedagogy and promote greater student achievement (Ciampa, et al., 2023; Kissel, et al., 2011). Following the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Legislation in 2001, several classroom teachers and small group interventionists transitioned into Reading Specialist and Literacy Coaching positions (Shaw, 2009). After the enactment of the NCLB Legislation, it was expected that Reading Specialists not only be able to instruct students but must also be skilled Literacy coaches able to guide and support classroom teachers.

As a former Literacy and Math Interventionist, (later Reading Specialist, and Reading Recovery Teacher) like many of my transitioning peers following the passage of the NCLB legislation, I also eventually took on additional responsibilities which included mentoring new teachers, planning and implementing professional development experiences, assisting teachers in analyzing and making sense of data as well as direct classroom literacy coaching. During the formative years of what could be called the "coaching movement", much of our training for these newly assigned responsibilities occurred on the job. We were in essence building our plane while flying it. Some of us were fortunate enough to attend coaching professional development sessions, expanding and refining our knowledge and skillsets regarding effective instructional coaching. Alternatively, several of us relied on trial-and-error, learning primarily through self-study, without the benefit of receiving more formal training opportunities.

While I am no longer a part of the K-12 public school system, my current position as an undergraduate and graduate literacy professor, in which I monitor and guide the clinical experiences of those seeking a Texas Reading Specialist Certification, sustains my connection to the realities of literacy coaching and intervention within the public schools. As a result of observations and candid discussions with pre-service and in-service teachers, I am convinced that the overall landscape of literacy education is once again experiencing significant shifts and transitions that are, in my estimation, far more consequential than the fluctuations that took place in the early stages of the literacy coaching movement after the passing of the NCLB legislation. These substantial changes now require so much more from classroom teachers, teacher literacy leaders, and Reading Specialists or Literacy Coaches. Moreover, this increasingly complicated and dynamic literacy terrain has caused many university programs, especially at the graduate level, to reimagine the type of content and experiences necessary to equip current and future literacy coaches and other campus and district literacy leaders with the knowledge and skill sets needed to effectively lead and execute systemic literacy changes on their campuses and beyond.

The purpose of this article is to uncover and highlight distinct features of this transitioning literacy terrain, offering literacy coaches and other literacy leaders a survey of new challenges that must now be identified, understood, and navigated to affect student achievement positively.

General Roles and Responsibilities of Literacy Coaches or Reading Specialists

Irrespective of their titles and varying responsibilities across schools and districts, literacy coaches, reading specialists, or other specialized literacy professionals work with teachers and/or students who may require literacy guidance and support (Shearer, et al., 2019). Specifically, instructional coaches, regardless of their content areas, are viewed as experts in their field and provide ongoing, individualized, time-intensive, and purposeful mentoring for several weeks, months, or even years within a specific context (Kraft, et al., 2018). Under the coaching model, teachers' professional development experiences move from the traditional one to three-day conference environments to guided and ongoing learning within teachers' classrooms (Kissel et al., 2011). Coaching is an in-service professional development (PD) designed to improve classroom instruction through reflective and professional dialogue, observation, and other coaching techniques and strategies (Ciampa et al., 2023). The International Literacy Association (2018) determined effective coaching includes observing, modeling, conferencing (providing feedback), and coteaching with peer teachers. Effective coaching involves collaborating with teachers to select and/or adapt appropriate instructional methods. It involves planning and facilitating campus-level workshops and presentations, leading book studies, and sharing current and relevant research findings. The foundational principle of coaching can be traced to Vygotsky's zone of proximal development, where the learner receives guidance from a more capable peer or a more knowledgeable other to acquire and internalize new knowledge and instructional techniques (Vygotsky, 1978).

Social, Cultural, and Political Shifts and the Centering of The Science of Teaching Reading

While the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Legislation brought attention to the need for more literacy coaches, it also greatly changed the landscape of instruction and learning in the classroom (Cawelti, 2006). To meet testing accountability goals, the curriculum narrowed, focusing mainly on testable concepts, skills, and topics. As a result, teachers experienced disappointment at the loss of their teaching autonomy in selecting classroom learning topics and were discouraged as a result of the increasing emphasis on their students' test scores.

Nevertheless, almost two decades later, we have entered a new era, initiated by another major legislative action— House Bill 3 (HB 3) at the state level, signed in 2019. This legislation mandated K-3 teachers including Special Education teachers, and principals to attend a literacy learning and achievement academy that focused on early literacy development and instruction based on select Science of Teaching Reading concepts called the Texas Reading Academy (Texas Education Agency, n.d.).

Additionally, pre-service teachers were required to complete the Science of Teaching Reading Certification exam to become a Texas-certified teacher. This training and new certification practices solidified a more intense introduction of the Science of Teaching Reading in Texas schools.

Only a few years after HB 3 was passed, the three-cueing system was banned under House Bill 2162 (BillTrack*50*, n.d.), leaving many classroom teachers unsure of how to fully measure student performance on traditional continuous text progress monitoring assessments and forcing classroom literacy teachers to learn more phonetically driven ways of scaffolding students' attempts to identify unknown words during the reading process. Furthermore, a myriad of social, political, and cultural concerns continued to fester during this time as America came face-to-face with issues of racial injustice, immigration, book banning, and the intricacies of AI in the classroom. Additionally, classrooms became increasingly more diverse, even as teachers and other literacy specialists worked to get students back on level following the COVID-19 pandemic. These very significant events shifted and are still shifting the literacy terrain—spurring literacy leaders, Reading Specialists, and Literacy coaches to (once again) assume novel responsibilities. These responsibilities required them to expand their existing knowledge and skillsets, and to develop new knowledge and skillsets. The ideas below describe specific actions that literacy leaders, specifically Literacy Coaches must engage in to navigate the shifting literacy terrain as they support teachers and students.

Embrace STR While Maintaining Proven Authentic Literacy Instructional Practices

The Science of Teaching Reading (STR) or the Science of Reading (SOR) is an accumulated body of knowledge examining how children become literate. This body of knowledge is based on research from a variety of disciplines such as linguistics, education, neuroscience, and developmental and cognitive psychology (Parsons & Erickson, 2024). In keeping with the National Reading Panel's Report, it addresses the five pillars or essential literacy components: Phonemic Awareness, Phonics, Fluency, Vocabulary, and Comprehension (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2000). As previously stated, the Science of Teaching Reading has become a pervasive presence within Texas school districts as well as across the nation. Unfortunately, perceptions of its emergence have been quite polarizing with some balanced literacy advocates resisting some of its ideas, while many science of teaching advocates attributing poor student literacy achievement outcomes to ineffective balanced literacy practices (Burkins & Yates, 2021). Unfortunately, teachers have found themselves in the middle, trying to make sense of the unfamiliar or unclear curriculum and assessment expectations.

Therefore, Literacy Coaches are needed more than ever to help teachers connect the Science of Reading theories and research to effective literacy practices. It is essential to support teachers in identifying, planning, and implementing instructional strategies that reflect current research (Paige et al., 2021). In this era of intense scrutiny from school administration, parents, and the general public, Literacy Coaches must make sure that teachers not only understand what they are doing but also make sure that they can articulate their decision-making rationale in relation to the evidence-based principles undergirding both STR and authentic teaching practices. They must expose teachers to sound research perspectives and resources instead of sensationalized or accusatory blogs, media sites, thus allowing teachers to reflectively grow in their craft and in their ability to successfully serve all students. Riley wisely states, " Remember, science should inform—not dictate—practice (p. 22, 2020)." It should add to teachers' mental conceptions of how children learn to construct text meaning, allowing educators possibly with peer assistance to decide what pedagogical strategies are warranted (Riley, 2020). Literacy

Coaches should serve as guides and even co-learners as teachers evolve in their understanding of how to blend STR ideas with the art of teaching effectively and authentically.

Guide Teachers in Incorporating Culturally Informed Literacy Instruction

In a recent conversation with my Reading Specialist Practicum course students, who are training to be Literacy Coaches, it was revealed that they had a very limited understanding of how to help teachers "select and use instructional materials and strategies that reflect cultural diversity" in various components of literacy; a required competency that is repeated several times within the Texas Reading specialist standards (Texas Education Agency, n.d.). Theoretically, most educators acknowledge the importance of recognizing and including diverse cultural experiences. However, because it's not emphasized within most literacy curriculum programs, and it is not specifically addressed on benchmarks or high-stakes literacy assessments, specific knowledge of how to teach with children's culture and language backgrounds in mind is given little attention.

To better understand culturally informed literacy practices, it's important to note that there are different perspectives and iterations of these practices (Kelly et al., 2021; Kelly & Djonko-Moore, 2021). Gloria Ladson-Billings is known for the principles of Culturally Relevant Teaching (CRT), which emphasizes building connections between children's backgrounds and new learning, affirming the child's cultural identity. Geneva Gay added to Ladson-Billing's approach within what is often called Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT) which emphasizes how teachers could more strategically integrate children's cultural prior knowledge into curriculum. Django Paris's model, Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy (CSP) builds on and expands both Ladson-Billings and Gay's iterations of culturally informed pedagogies, by acknowledging the complexity of children's culture such as their language and intergenerational family and community connections, practices, and beliefs as well as their social struggles (Paris & Alim, 2014). Researcher, Zaretta Hammond looks at culture and learning through the lens of science and brain research (Hammond, 2015). Brain research is at the center of the Science of Teaching Reading. She proposes that children are neurologically hardwired to process information differently based on their cultural influences. Hammond proposes that culture shapes how individuals think, learn, and express their learning. As a result, educators should seek to align classroom literacy learning methods with children's cultural ways of constructing, storing, and expressing new knowledge.

Considering, the various culturally informed principles, and perspectives, Literacy Coaches should guide teachers in planning, selecting, and implementing literacy learning experiences that acknowledge and give a voice to students' unique ways of being, thinking, and learning—which are often based on their home and community culture and linguistic experiences.

Lean Into New Ways of Incorporating Technology in Classroom Literacy Experiences

There was a swift transition to online education during the COVID-19 pandemic. This also accelerated the use of AI technology within our educational system. It is projected by 2025

that about half of all work tasks will be completed by automated systems (Leopold et al. 2018). It was also projected that by 2024, 47% of all learning management tools will have some level of AI capability (Schmelzer, 2019). These statistics alone show the necessity and urgency of the need for educators to increase their digital competencies.

Teachers must learn to select appropriate AI-driven tools related to their content area and learn how to facilitate instruction using specific digital tools in their classroom in what could be called AI literacy (Echols, 2023). AI literacy includes information, digital as well as media literacy skills. AI technologies consist of tools such as chatbox, automatic marking systems, student performance prediction platforms, and responsive tutoring systems (Chiu et al, 2023). In the realm of literacy, AI equips students with the ability to navigate, evaluate, and analyze information digitally, creating projects and portfolios that reflect the type of cognitive processing needed for future professions. AI can also cause educators to be more efficient, assisting them in creating lesson plans and providing more immediate corrective student feedback, to name a few. Literacy Coaches must encourage teachers to move out of their comfort zones, while they also push themselves to try out various digital tools that can be used to enhance students' literacy learning experiences. While Literacy Coaches may not feel like experts in this area, they should again, position themselves as co-learners with their teacher mentees, setting goals to gradually learn and apply new digital and AI concepts.

Concluding Thoughts

Educators, especially Literacy Coaches, are not strangers to the shifting terrain of literacy education. More seasoned educators are quite familiar with the changing philosophical paradigms within the field. Therefore, many are not surprised when the theoretical approaches that were once unpopular suddenly become encouraged an even even required. Nevertheless, regardless of the shifts, both classroom teachers and literacy coaches must continue to navigate mutable and evolving literacy terrains.

Likewise, regardless of the terrain, in order for all students to become literate, they need targeted, evidence-based learning experiences that reflect their cultural and personal learning strengths. Additionally, they need exposure and opportunities to use technology in authentic ways as they develop literacy proficiency. As a result, literacy coaches must continue to guide and partner with classroom teachers, remaining open-minded, flexible, and collaborative learners.

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