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Book Review 3

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Burkins, J. M. (2007). *Coaching for balance: How to meet the challenges of literacy coaching*. Newark, DE: International Reading Association. 240 pp. ISBN 0872076172, \$24.95 (paperback).

With No Child Left Behind in the United States' educational forefront, the Reading First agenda has dominated most of our attention in elementary classrooms. As part of this agenda, literacy coaches have been sent into the trenches as a line of defense. Many of them, however, have entered the position lacking an accurate job description—if given one at all—and unsure of where they fit into the school community. In *Coaching for Balance: How to Meet the Challenges of Literacy Coaching*, Jan Burkins addresses the struggles she encountered in her personal experiences as a literacy coach. She describes her own challenges and discoveries while presenting insights into surviving the trenches. Burkins has divided her book into four sections with chapters in each section relating to the theme of balance. Each chapter ends with a final thought from Burkins, and a summary in what the author terms “Souvenirs.”

Section one, “The Job: The Many Hats of a Literacy Coach,” addresses the need for the coach to create a personal working philosophy that supports her professional position as a literacy coach and physical wellbeing in her personal life. Burkins explains that finding a balance between coach — as expert, facilitator, teacher, and researcher—and the many roles one may have at home is imperative to success in both places.

Within this section, the author also asserts that an effectual literacy coach should find a balance among four characteristics: content expertise, management skills, relationship competence, and reflection. In clarifying these characteristics, Burkins uses the term ‘content expertise’ instead of ‘content knowledge’ because she believes that while people can gain knowledge from a book, they must actually practice what they have learned in order to become experts. Management skills refer to organization, without which it is nearly impossible to be an effective literacy coach. The third characteristic, relationship competence, is also crucial because literacy coaches work with an array of persons within and outside a school community. While Burkins primarily focuses on the literacy coach and teacher relationship, she does discuss the relationship dynamics of the literacy coach and administration. Finally, the author holds reflection as the most important quality because she feels that it shapes the other three characteristics.

Although Burkins briefly addresses each of the four characteristics in the first section, she only expands on one of them—relationship competence—later in the book, in section two entitled “The People: Building Relationships.” That Burkins almost exclusively focuses on relationship competence may be a disadvantage for readers looking for support in the practicalities of literacy coaching. Likewise, because the book takes more of an emotional approach to supporting coaches, it may be more helpful for veteran rather than beginning literacy coaches looking for specific pointers on logistics. Instead, Burkins offers general rules of thumb for developing working relations that foster community within schools. For example, in chapter four, “The Organism and the Organization: Working with Individuals and Groups,” the author offers sound advice for communicating with teachers in a school setting. Throughout this chapter, she suggests tools and personal examples for becoming an active listener and speaker.

Burkins then moves into the critical and often overlooked issue of time and its effects on relationships, providing a helpful list of questions she asks herself when faced with decisions on where to put her time and energy. This author-generated list is one of the few tools offered to address the logistics of literacy coaching; at the same time, she has tied it nicely to the emotional side of coaching and the importance of creating relationships.

Another idea presented in chapter four relating to relationships is that literacy coaches should assume goodwill. As a literacy coach, Burkins believes that she must assume goodwill in regard to teachers and their commitment to working with students. She provides a measured list of what she refers to as givens with teachers. Burkins suggests that communicating these givens with teachers will help foster relationships. This list includes the following: Teachers want to be better at their jobs; Teachers care about children; Teachers want to learn; and Teachers have the most difficult jobs in education. These givens should be hung in school faculty offices and classrooms as one reminder of the importance of teachers in education.

In the last chapter of section two, “Taking Risks: The Necessary Discomforts of Change,” Burkins discusses change as it relates to literacy coaching. She identifies instruction and community as two areas where changes in a school are likely to occur and where one can actually see this change transpire. These changes, she says, begin with the literacy coach’s *vision of literacy*, which must be shared with the entire faculty with understanding and enthusiasm. Burkins addresses resistant teachers, stating that if we remember that they are first of all human and secondly teachers, it may help us to better understand their reasoning for not joining the school-wide vision of literacy. She also reminds the reader that it is not the literacy coach’s job to ensure that everyone is participating in the change; that is something better left for the administration to monitor and address.

The actual logistics of literacy coaching are concentrated in the third section, “The Work: Stretching Ourselves.” Within this section, Burkins offers many ideas and resources to assist literacy coaches in a variety of situations. Chapter six, “Teaching Toward Independence: Teachers as Professional Learners,” addresses teacher professional development, a central responsibility for all literacy coaches. Burkins breaks down professional learning into phases, with in-depth descriptions subsequent to a table of comparisons between the different phases. Alongside the descriptions, the author offers helpful guidance for literacy coaches working with teachers throughout each phase.

In chapter seven, “Developing Trust: The Language of Classroom Visitation,” Burkins addresses the dynamics of visiting classrooms as a literacy coach. She reflects on her own experiences of entering classrooms, sometimes invited and sometimes not. The author makes recommendations from her own experiences on how to tactfully and successfully perform

observations, focusing on creating thoughtful feedback for teachers as follow-up to classroom visits. As a further resource, Burkins includes a sample classroom visitation feedback form. She stresses the importance of word choice when giving written or verbal feedback to teachers, due to the nuances associated with certain words. And while Burkins believes that it is important to offer thoughtful feedback, she believes that the literacy coach's ultimate goal should be for teachers themselves to become reflective in observing their own strengths and weaknesses. It is through this self-reflection that teachers will ultimately refrain from depending exclusively upon the feedback provided by the literacy coach. Within this same chapter, Burkins offers ideas concerning the logistics of visiting all teachers. She includes a sample classroom visitation record, created from her own experiences of working through the sometimes overwhelming job of observing all teachers equally.

The final chapter of this section, chapter eight, "Assessment Literacy: Learning to Make Sense of Data," includes information on using qualitative and quantitative data in literacy coaching. Burkins describes how to collect and distribute results throughout the school community and concludes the chapter by promoting the evaluation of self, meaning that literacy coaches need to celebrate their own progress, no matter how small, and be reflective of where they have been and where they are heading. She suggests that literacy coaches should also examine the informal, unsolicited feedback that is oftentimes overlooked. She also charges literacy coaches to develop a strategic way of collecting feedback using a literacy coach feedback form, which appears in the appendices of the book. The feedback form focuses mainly on the relationship between literacy coach and teacher, because as seen throughout the rest of the book, this relationship is what Burkins considers to be one of the most important aspects of literacy coaching.

The final section of the book, "The Reasons: Why Coaching Matters," addresses two unrelated issues, with the first being prejudices. The author makes a case for including this chapter concerned with racial and socio-economical prejudices, but the connection to literacy coaching is not explicit. Nonetheless, the information that Burkins includes is valuable and something that the general public should consider. The final chapter in this section, "The Emotions of Coaching: How Does It Feel to Be a Literacy Coach," encompasses the emotions associated with being a literacy coach. While this chapter does bring the reader back around to literacy coaching, it is written like some church guides, with headings like: Harboring Hope, Finding Faith, Pursuing Joy, and Love in Unlikely Spaces. Here the author provides final thoughts on the relationships needed in order to be an effective literacy coach and the emotions associated with such relations. She ends the chapter with a reference to an earlier metaphor of trying to balance a seesaw, reinforcing the importance of balance in effective literacy coaching.

The information presented in Burkins' book would best benefit an experienced literacy coach since the book offers only limited support for a new literacy coach looking for the logistics of coaching and setting up this position in a school. The new literacy coach may not yet understand the struggles that Burkins examines throughout the majority of the book. A literacy coach of a year or more may better relate to the author's experiences at a personal and emotional level, and in relating, may have the schema required to glean insights from Burkins' advice and suggestions. This book would also provide support to a literacy coach who is struggling with the emotional weight of the position or with building relationships, which is so crucial to the position.

In all, Burkins addresses many of the issues that arise as literacy coaches are working in the trenches. *Coaching for Balance* offers the support and rejuvenation that may not be available

to individual literacy coaches, since they are usually in the only position of their kind in the school. And while literacy coaches can definitely be found in other schools, the day-to-day battles and work of a literacy coach may limit this interaction among coaches. More books like Burkins' are needed as literacy coaches are quickly becoming a fixture in schools and will continue to be around as long as No Child Left Behind remains at the center of educational reform.