

Citation

Obijiofor, C. (2007). Book review. *Journal of Language and Literacy Education* [On-line], 3(1), 87-90. Available: http://www.coe.uga.edu/jolle/2007_1/bookreview2.pdf

Book Review 2

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Toll, C. (2006). *The literacy coach's desk reference: Processes and perspectives for effective coaching*. Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English. 225 pp. ISBN 0814129684, \$31.95 (paperback).

If Cathy Toll were aiming for a user-friendly resource, she succeeded with *The Literacy Coach's Desk Reference*, a book useful for both elementary and secondary levels. Each of the seven sections is preceded by a brief synopsis that frames its content. The straightforward and well-written overview section outlines the organization of the book, which has a consistent format across the chapters in each subsequent section. In an effort to make this book easily accessible, Toll breaks down the coaching process into sequential steps. However, she acknowledges that this is done for the sake of clarity since literacy coaching is complex and recursive like many other human interactions.

Toll briefly shares how she became a coach of literacy coaches and how that journey has shaped her perspective about this field. She argues that the core of teaching is the ability to identify problems and find solutions, rather than pretending that good teachers have no difficulties. She also states that effective literacy coaches support teachers by helping them to identify and build upon their own strengths. This type of support helps teachers to recognize and grapple with the inevitable problems that arise in their teaching careers and to encourage the habit of reflective practice. As teachers and coaches reflect on literacy instruction in their schools, they may recognize that their school does not engage in a full array of literacy work. In fact, Toll argues that most literacy instruction involves “strategies and skills for understanding” (p.9) and often neglects pragmatic and critical literacy. Therefore, Toll uses examples based on the realities that many literacy coaches encounter, rather than on an idealized view of potential instruction, to show how coaches can extend and expand literacy instruction.

This first section also addresses another reality. Literacy coaches are hired for different reasons, perform different tasks, and seek different outcomes. Toll describes three reasons for various roles: teacher remediation, program implementation, and teacher growth. Teacher remediation assumes that inadequate teachers are a problem in education and literacy coaches hired in this situation are supposed to “fix” teachers. Other schools hire literacy coaches to implement specific programs. Their reason for being is to monitor, model, and assist teachers who need help accurately carrying out the program. The last category, which Toll advocates, is for literacy coaches to support teachers as they seek to become more effective. She considers this

teacher growth. The distinction, according to Toll, is that the first two categories involve teacher change that is externally driven, while the latter is intrinsically motivated and initiated. Toll also identifies the various tasks that coaches perform, such as modeling, monitoring, serving, and collaborating. The emphasis of this book is on ways coaches can collaborate with teachers.

One primary difference among literacy coaches is their desired outcomes. Some aim to change the behavior of teachers while others want to make life easier for teachers as they go about their work. Some literacy coaches want teachers to be reflective about their practice. This includes using a wide variety of information to identify problems and find solutions. Others want teachers to collaborate with colleagues. Toll's position is that real change originates with each teacher and that the literacy coach should help support the process without co-opting, taking over, or directing it.

Section two delves into the intricacies of the collaboration process between literacy coaches and individual teachers. Toll covers topics ranging from how to set up conferences with teachers, to ways to support teachers in sustaining their action plans. As stated earlier, this book takes a complex human endeavor and presents it in a linear manner. The author begins with suggestions for arranging meetings, and then moves to how to have productive sessions. According to Toll, this means asking open ended questions that encourage teachers to reflect on their situations so that they examine their concerns and set goals for resolving them. The next step in the process involves the teachers creating action plans based on their goals. An idea that is woven throughout the book is the importance of the coach listening to and learning from teachers. When feasible, Toll provides sample vignettes of interactions between the literacy coach and the teacher as a way of illustrating the process. She also includes black-lined masters of useful forms.

Section three builds on the previous section and addresses how coaches can facilitate the growth of groups of teachers. The goal of increasing teacher capacity remains the same with the added intention of supporting the growth of small groups. Toll does a commendable job discussing the possible challenges of such an undertaking. She addresses issues like setting group goals, and deciding who is responsible for various aspects of the action plans. Toll also tackles issues of group dynamics such as the person who tries to dominate, the unresponsive participant, group conflicts, and more. The vignettes in this section are particularly helpful because they provide realistic examples that enable a literacy coach to visualize ways of handling potentially uncomfortable situations.

In section four, Toll discusses ways that literacy coaches may approach demonstration lessons. She makes an important distinction between a model lesson, which she characterizes as exemplary, and a demonstration lesson, which is effective, but not necessarily the best or only way. Toll advocates using the demonstration lesson because it shows teachers a valuable way of presenting concepts while maintaining the stance that the lesson can be adjusted. She distinguishes this from the model lesson which may leave the impression that it is the right way and therefore limits flexibility and critique. Her main focus is on the conversations and reflections surrounding the lessons, more than on the lessons themselves. This is another reason she prefers demonstrations. These lessons often evolve as teachers talk about their instructional goals with literacy coaches and are another means of capacity building. Teachers are told ahead of time that the demonstration is one approach, and this makes them more comfortable discussing aspects of the lesson that worked and what could have been strengthened. The literacy coach and the teacher gain insight from this reflective dialogue. The demonstration also encourages teachers to try new strategies because they realize that their lessons do not have to be perfect. Model lessons might discourage these types of conversations because by definition they

are exemplary.

Sometimes literacy coaches are asked to conduct workshops for the entire school or take a leadership role in preparing the school improvement plan. Section five speaks to these duties from the perspective of linking them to the main responsibility of a literacy coach, supporting the growth of teachers as they seek to improve student achievement. Toll cautions literacy coaches to maintain a proper balance between literacy coaching and other leadership commitments. She concludes this section with a chapter on evaluating the effectiveness of the literacy coaching program, stating that this aspect of providing services is often shortchanged. Toll's suggested evaluation guidelines seem a bit time consuming; therefore, I am not sure if overburdened educators would fully implement them. However, with some streamlining, her approach seems like an effective way to assess and improve literacy coaching.

Another service that literacy coaches are sometimes asked to provide is working directly with individual students. Although Toll separates this role from literacy coaching, she does suggest ways to link the two. For example, she proposes that the experiences gained from working directly with students be used as a commonality when coaching teachers. This commonality encourages bonding and trust, which Toll identifies as key factors in the coaching process.

The last chapter in section six discusses evaluating student learning. Toll remains true to her belief in building teacher capacity by recommending that literacy coaches share resources pertaining to literacy assessments and show teachers how to utilize them. At the same time, she argues that teachers should do the actual assessment and analysis. Finally, the concluding section is a recap of key points made throughout the book. The appendices include final thoughts about blurring the roles of coaching and supervising, along with an annotated bibliography. The bibliography is useful because Toll includes print and online resources and provides enough information to decide if further inquiry is warranted.

There were a few occasions where I found myself thinking that I would have approached a situation differently. For instance, I think using a vignette from an initial meeting rather than a follow up meeting would better help a novice coach to understand how to transition from small talk to purposeful conversation. I also think Toll's approach to helping teachers seemed too linear and neatly packaged, despite her claims that she recognized teaching as a holistic, imperfect, and recursive practice.

Overall, I found this book quite informative. I never envisioned the multifaceted nature of literacy coaching. Therefore, I gained even more respect for people who take on these rewarding, yet challenging, roles. Toll's conversational writing style made it easy for me to stay engaged even though I am a reading specialist, not a literacy coach. One of the most appealing features of the book was the way Toll addressed obstacles that literacy coaches face. Her straightforward manner and practical suggestions reveal an intimate knowledge of teaching realities. As a reading specialist, my focus is different from that of a literacy coach, because my first obligation is to teach students. However, I am asked to provide literacy training, demonstrate lessons, and act as a resource for teachers. This book helped me realize the value of discussing the lessons and trainings as a way of building everyone's capacity. It also provided guidelines for initiating and sustaining those kinds of conversations. Administrators may benefit from reading this book because it gives information regarding the strengths and limitations of the various ways literacy coaches are utilized. I would highly recommend this book for current and prospective literacy coaches.