

Citation

Van Cleave, J. & Dailey, L. B. (2007). Entering the conversation: The literacy coaching special issue. *Journal of Language and Literacy Education* [Online], 3(1), 1-5. Available: http://www.coe.uga.edu/jolle/2007_1/editorial.pdf

Jessica Van Cleave
Co-Editor, *JoLLE*

Leslie Bottoms Dailey
Co-Editor, *JoLLE*

The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) of 2001 (Public Law No. 107-110) caused a considerable shake-up of public education. Educational policy consequently requires new language because it resides in a new structure, a new discourse. This discourse has caused educational leadership positions to shift, producing a kinder, gentler administrator—the coach. The very word ‘coach’ evokes images of teamwork and collegiality rather than surveillance and punishment. The most striking example is the literacy coach, a school-based administrator charged with improving literacy education, a goal similar to that of the reading specialist. However, the purpose of a literacy coach, as determined by NCLB, is to provide in-depth, practical, collaborative professional development to teachers throughout the school year. The thinking is that providing ongoing professional development *within* schools leads to better teachers, which ultimately raises student achievement.

For the literacy coach, teachers are the conduit to the student; therefore the focus is on supporting the teacher to develop better strategies for literacy instruction. The position of literacy coach has taken hold in U.S. schools, but the widespread adoption of the literacy coach begs a number of questions: What challenges for theory, policy, and practice are brought about by the emergence of literacy coaching? How are literacy coaches trained and hired? And perhaps more to the point, what *is* a literacy coach? Ambiguity exists as to how a literacy coach should act, what one’s responsibilities are, where one should be placed, with whom one should work.

The International Reading Association (IRA) has pointed out some of the difficulties associated with the lack of a clear definition of literacy coach. In its 2004 position statement, *The Role and Qualifications of the Reading Coach in the United States*, IRA states:

At present, there is little consistency in the training, backgrounds, and skills required for such positions, and there is little consistency in the general competence of coaches, in part because there are no agreed upon definitions or standards for the roles (p. 2)

In an era when “highly qualified” teachers are mandated, it seems unusual that similar expectations are not spelled out for the literacy coaches charged with supporting and developing these teachers. Competency of students and teachers are measured and evaluated, so how will the effectiveness of literacy coaches be assessed? Is this a necessary goal, one that will come about as the position of literacy coach evolves, or does the absence of standards for literacy coaches represent an opening, an opportunity within the present schema for instructional discretion by literacy professionals at the school level?

More than two years after the IRA position paper, Dole and Donaldson (2006) still determined that “quality and quantity of research on the role of the reading coach is almost

nonexistent. Therefore, it is impossible to go there for the answers to the questions that reading coaches may have about their specific roles and responsibilities” (p. 486-487). This does not mean that there is a lack of professional literature for literacy coaches, but rather that what exists, for the most part, does not address or endorse a specific, one-size-fits-all picture of a literacy coach.

This may seem problematic because so much has been put forth in support of literacy coaches -- money, personnel, and hope that student achievement gains will be met. A good deal is riding on the “success” of literacy coaching. Many teachers now look to literacy coaches to give them ideas and instructional assistance. Some teachers even seek to fill literacy coach vacancies themselves as the next logical step in their careers. Universities are developing programs and spending money to train literacy coaches. These developments represent a lot of movement and funding to endorse a still nebulous concept, and this uncertainty may make people uncomfortable, particularly when weighing reform efforts or negotiating budgets. The very ambiguity itself may question the stability and permanence of literacy coaching. Are literacy coaches a flash in the pan, like many past reform initiatives, or are they here to stay?

Yet, in the ambiguity of literacy coaching, there is opportunity. When the position is not thoroughly cast, legislated, or dictated by a literacy-coaching norm, flexibility exists to make the position what it needs to be in various environments—different definitions for different contexts. Educators frequently argue for more autonomy, and literacy coaching may offer a good shot at getting it, at least for now. How coaches go about their duties varies in interesting ways, although some key commonalities exist, as we intend to examine in the articles that follow.

Framing the Special Issue

It is our belief that literacy coaching is an important and timely topic to the field of language and literacy research. As such, we have devoted this special issue of the *Journal of Language and Literacy Education (JoLLE)* to exploring how literacy coaching can and can't work. The selected pieces explain some of the advantages and disadvantages of coaching today, from a variety of perspectives.

In January of 2007, we invited scholars in the field of literacy coaching to contribute to *JoLLE*'s first special issue. Given that literacy coaching can look very different from place to place, we realize that there is a wide range of entry points for discussing this topic, so we asked authors to address the following:

- Historical background of literacy coaching: policies and practices
- Narratives of literacy coaches
- Narratives of teachers who actively work with literacy coaches
- Research: current trends, theories and practices in literacy coaching
- Preparing literacy coaches: implications for theory and practice

Some invited authors were unable to contribute because of other commitments, but to *JoLLE*'s good fortune, scholars who opted not to write for this issue did review manuscripts. As a result, the overall contributions benefit from input offered by many experts in literacy coaching -- those who are involved in creating and implementing policy, as well as those who must negotiate those implementations. We would like to thank all of our contributing authors and reviewers, whose generous time and talents have served to create an issue that we believe will serve as a significant resource for people involved in all aspects of literacy coaching. To this end, we have attempted to put together an issue that speaks to and hears from these various points of

view—researcher, university professor, literacy coach, teacher, and graduate student. Additionally, we seek to provide both broad views of literacy coaching as well as practitioner experiences with coaching.

Our issue begins with a piece that provides a strong framework for literacy coaching. Situating his piece within the policy created by and for IRA, Michael Shaw explains how these IRA policies came about, implications for educating literacy coaches, and examples from his own program at St. Thomas Aquinas University. He also addresses how these policies play out in practice to produce reading specialists and literacy coaches who can be effective agents of change in their schools. Following Shaw is a piece by Kathy Froelich and Enrique Puig that discusses various elements a literacy coach must take into consideration in order to create a happy marriage of assessment and professional development. Working from personal coaching experiences, Froelich and Puig take an ethnographic approach to literacy coaching, invoking the language of ethnography (i.e. artifacts, participant observation, triangulation) to illustrate their understanding of a continuum of coaching. Jan Burkins and Scott Ritchie take an even closer look, exploring not only their own experiences with literacy coaching but also with coaching each other as a personal professional development plan. They demonstrate this process as they perform the complex job of coaching each other in order to better coach the teachers in their schools. Rounding out our feature articles, Phyllis Blackstone provides a unique approach to understanding the process of literacy coaching—storytelling. Using an exemplary story, Blackstone makes real life connections in order to make coaching accessible through the familiar.

The next section of our issue, *Voices from the Field*, features literacy coaches, teachers, and students in graduate literacy coaching programs discussing their experiences with/in/through literacy coaching. Allison Niedzwiecki opens the section with a discussion of some of the barriers to effective literacy coaching at both the district and school levels. She describes some of the ways literacy coaches can be change agents and how institutional policies and circumstances can stand in the way of this progress. Andrea Neher then describes how the literacy coach in her school created a professional learning community and how it has resulted in teachers being able to better balance their love for teaching and their accountability to state and federal mandates. Finally, Tonia Paramore explains her experience “testing out” the coaching role through research conducted in a graduate degree program. She outlines pitfalls and successes that may be common to literacy coaches in training.

Although the experiences of our authors and their perspectives vary widely, there are several themes that run through this issue. Perhaps the most striking of these themes is collaboration. Whether authors collaborated on their articles, spoke of the importance of collaboration between teachers and literacy coaches, or discussed the need for institutional collaboration, all seemed to agree that literacy coaching is based strongly in effective and ongoing collaborative processes.

A second theme that runs through the issue is challenge. No one thinks literacy coaching is easy, and it is this demanding role, whether initiated by federal mandates with the accompanying requirements and surveillance or by a school’s own identification of the need to better serve its students in literacy education, that has provoked so much conversation and analysis. The challenges are far-ranging, sometimes overwhelming, and the authors in this issue provide striking accounts of substantial obstacles and their successes and failures in confronting them.

Possibly the most interesting theme to be found in the issue is that of hope. Even in the face of mandates that seem counter to what educators know about good teaching and successful learning, barriers to effective implementation of literacy coaching, interpersonal misalignments between coaches and teachers, and the slippery term literacy coach itself, the authors speak of their belief in literacy coaching. They speak of a commitment to teachers and to students, to professional development, and to schools—even those that others may have given up on.

Reading through the issue will undoubtedly provide a sense of this thing called literacy coach, in all its forms and functions. To expand on this even further, the issue closes with three book reviews on recently published guides to literacy coaching. The three books reviewed, *The literacy coach's desk reference: Processes and perspective for effective coaching* (2006), *The literacy coach: Guiding in the right direction* (2007), and *Coaching for balance: How to meet the challenges of literacy coaching* (2007), provide a sampling of the new literature on literacy coaching, which is flourishing.

The *Journal of Language and Literacy Education* is grateful to all the authors and reviewers who have contributed to our special issue, encouraging us to think more deeply and broadly about what it means to be a literacy coach. To be sure, literacy coaching is a worthy and exciting topic for discussion; this issue of *JoLLE* is our entrance into the conversation.

Jessica Van Cleave and Leslie Bottoms Dailey are doctoral students in the Department of Language and Literacy Education at the University of Georgia.

** We would like to offer special acknowledgement to Cheryl McLean, without whom this issue would not be possible.*

References

- Burkins, J. M. (2007). *Coaching for balance: How to meet the challenges of literacy coaching*. Newark, DE: International Reading Association.
- Dole, J. A. & Donaldson, R. (2006). "What am I supposed to do all day?": Three big ideas for the reading coach. *The Reading Teacher*, 59 (5), 486-488.
- International Reading Association (2004). *The role and qualifications of the reading coach in the United States: A position statement of the International Reading Association*. Newark, DE: International Reading Association. Adopted May 2004.
- Puig, E. & Froelich, K. (2007). *The literacy coach: Guiding in the right direction*. Boston: Allyn & Bacon.
- Toll, C. (2006). *The literacy coach's desk reference: Processes and perspectives for effective coaching*. Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English.