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Wading Through It: Balancing Opposing Tensions via Effective Literacy Coaching

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As with many schools nationwide, the school in which I teach has undergone numerous paradigm shifts in the past five years. First we adopted the America's Choice reform model, and then abandoned it three years later. Around the same time, the state began its shift from outcome-based to performance-based standards for student learning. Throughout these dramatic and often unexpected shifts over which teachers had little control, it would have been easy for us to shut classroom doors and continue with 'business as usual.' Fortunately, my school's kindergarten through second grade (K-2) literacy coach, Ms. Jacobs (pseudonym), has helped teachers wade through the uncertainty by facilitating teacher dialogue and guiding our professional learning in order to help us make sense of the new standards. If these standards simply had been handed to us, they would have been meaningless, and therefore, forgotten. Instead, our literacy coach helped us balance these centripetal forces, these orders from above, by helping us transform them into effective curriculum that embodied our knowledge of best practice and our beliefs about students.

Literacy coaches have become increasingly common in elementary schools throughout the nation. As teachers like myself navigate complex performance based standards for student learning, administer comprehensive curriculum assessments to younger and younger students, and bear the burden of ensuring our schools make Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP), literacy coaches play a vital role in supporting us teachers to maintain not only our passion for students, but our commitment to one another as members of a professional learning community. Although much has been written about the duties and responsibilities of literacy coaches, not much has been said about their role in normalizing the tensions teachers can sense between implementing curriculum mandates and standardized tests, and their own teaching philosophies. In the school where I have taught first and second grades in for the last four years, I have worked closely with Ms. Jacobs, who has helped us do just that.

First hired during the years when our school was an America's Choice school, she has led us through implementing the America's Choice model, transitioning to state performance-based standards, creating and using rubrics for evaluating student work, and designing curriculum to help raise student performance on standardized tests. For this piece, I reflected on how my work with Ms. Jacobs has impacted my teaching, as well as my thinking about curriculum, standards and testing. Our work together has helped balance the pressures I feel between state and district directives that seek to 'standardize' our curriculum and assessments and my own desire as a professional to assert my beliefs about students and learning in my classroom.

Framework for Literacy Coaching within Learning Communities

One of the most crucial responsibilities of a literacy coach is the creation and nurturing of a professional learning community within the school in which she works. Renowned training expert Robyn Peterson (1992) claims that the most important discovery she ever made about teaching was that “community in itself is more important to learning than any method or technique” (p. 17). As Ms. Jacobs has said, “Once you have that, you are 90% there.” In this article I apply a framework I developed (Pintaone-Hernandez, 2002) for community in classrooms to make sense of the complexities of a literacy coach’s job. This framework combines the Hermans and Kempen’s (1993) notion of polymorphic identity with Bakhtin’s (1981) notions of centripetal forces that unite groups with centrifugal forces that honor individual voices.

Bakhtin (1981; 1986) wrote that languages, in order to survive, must have opposing forces. The centripetal tendencies unify speakers of a given language by providing constants for communication. Conversely, centrifugal forces occur as speakers of a language adapt that language to describe their lived experiences, and those with varying experiences adapt their language accordingly. We use our language to express thoughts, but these thoughts are only communicated as far as other individuals understand them. A language must be dynamic enough to adapt, in order to describe the thoughts and experiences of its speakers. As Bakhtin (1986) states:

Quests for my own word are in fact quests for a word that is not my own, a word that is more than myself; this is a striving to depart from one’s own words, with which nothing essential can be said. (p. 149).

In turn, our identities are shaped by how we perceive others’ understandings of ourselves.

In schools, state performance standards and standardized assessments can be understood as centripetal forces that aim to unify students and teachers by requiring conformity with what is taught, how it is taught, and how it is assessed. In light of this, the job of literacy coaches to create nurturing and supportive professional learning communities becomes paramount to their work. It is within this supportive community, facilitated by the literacy coach, that teachers shape their professional identities by finding a balance between the tensions created by these mandates and their own beliefs about teaching and learning.

Our notions of language, identity, and community are intimately connected: “A person is a personality because he belongs to a community, because he takes over the institutions of that community into his own conduct” (Mead & Morris, 1934, p. 162). Community is subject to the dialogic centripetal and centrifugal tendencies found in language and identity (Pintaone-Hernandez, 2002). Loosely defined, community is a “many turned into one without ceasing to be many” (Rousseau, 1991, p. 3). The notion of “many” here are the individual identities, which are comprised of individual languages and also embody the centrifugal aspects of community. These prevent a community from becoming a “melting pot,” where individuals lose their unique identity and language for the sake of the community. If we consider schools communities, then state performance standards, though intended to benefit student performance and teacher accountability, seek to create this ‘melting pot’ in all schools by requiring teachers to teach the same set of standards and students to attain the same level of performance regardless of individual differences in learning style, social class, or resources.

Although the centripetal tendencies are necessary to provide unity and common purpose, they also call into question the rights teachers have to make decisions about what is best for their

students. Teachers counterbalance these centripetal tendencies by engaging in dialogue with others, often facilitated by a literacy coach, to articulate how these mandates may or may not support their own beliefs about teaching and learning. Relating this notion of community to schools, a literacy coach establishes and maintains a balance between these opposing forces – the centripetal forces imposed on teachers from the state and district level, and the centrifugal tendencies which allow teachers to teach in ways that align with their beliefs.

In order to be effective, all teachers, like all students, need to feel as though they are a member of a community which is both united in a common purpose and individualized to honor the ideas of all. They need to be “living and learning in a place outfitted with opportunities to learn, a place where we can fumble and make mistakes without being scorned or laughed at” (Shockley, Michalove, & Allen, 1995, p. 17). My literacy coach facilitates these learning opportunities by building trusting relationships with teachers, including myself. She positions herself as a co-learner while in our classrooms, and always keeps the shared goal of improved student learning at the forefront of her observations and reflections.

Literacy Coaching Within a Professional Learning Community

In my conversations with Ms. Jacobs, she has compared the essential responsibility of any literacy coach to the goal of an effective guided reading lesson. As in guided reading, the ultimate goal of a literacy coach is to help the teacher develop a self-extending system, with a balance of support and challenge in order to foster individual growth. This self-extending system, applied to teachers, needs to be an environment for professional learning and growth, a community of sorts whose focus is on the improved academic performance of students. Ms. Jacobs defined ‘professional learning community’ as a group who *enjoy* collaboration, are always seeking more information, and view themselves as continuous learners. Our community of K-2 teachers directly impacts our teaching by shaping our teacher identities (Mead & Morris, 1934). By helping us attune the centripetal tensions we feel while being forced to implement mandates such as state performance standards and standardized testing, and our centrifugal tendencies which give us our unique teaching identities, our work together as a community of teachers, guided by our literacy coach, has directly impacted our approach to curriculum and standards, as well as our view of standardized tests.

One of the most compelling examples of how our work together has normalized these tensions as well as impacted our curriculum is the process we engaged in ‘wading through’ and implementing state language arts performance based standards, which I described in the opening of the piece. Much of this work occurred during monthly after-school literacy workshops, facilitated by the literacy coach. These workshops focused on enacting the state language arts performance standards in authentic classroom curriculum that honored the individual philosophies, teaching styles, and resources of teachers. If one considers these state standards as language, it is possible to see how what we were doing as a faculty highlights the centripetal and centrifugal tendencies of both our professional learning community and our curriculum. As a community, we forged through the performance standards and translated them into ‘Curriculum Maps,’ which gave teachers a quarter-by-quarter and week-by-week guide for how our numerous curriculum resources were useful in teaching the standards.

By using these resources available to create curriculum maps that directly correlated with performance standards, we were balancing the centripetal and centrifugal forces of bringing these multiple resources into a common language and curriculum for teachers to use with

students. This created a unifying language for us as teachers, one that took into account our knowledge of sound practice and our state standards, which served to facilitate our talk around student work as well as professional learning.

In my own classroom, I found that as I engaged in this process of reflecting on the standards with the literacy coach and my colleagues, I was better able to communicate this centripetal ‘standards language’ to my students, making them an important part of our classroom discourse. I began using this ‘standards language’ explicitly with my first grade students. As a result, students were able to articulate the standard we were working on and describe whether or not their work had met it. Not only was I more reflective on the curriculum, but I saw my students reflecting more and taking increased ownership of their work because they clearly understood what the standard was.

Once we had our curriculum in place, a curriculum which both fully enacted the state performance-based standards and fit our beliefs about best practices, we assumed that student achievement would meet and exceed these standards, and perhaps more urgently, be demonstrated in their performance on the state’s standardized test. Unfortunately, we were disappointed year after year when our students’ scores on standardized tests came in. Fearing our school would soon fall into the “Needs Improvement” classification, we set out over the last school year to find a way to, again, strike a balance between another centripetal reality in schools, standardized testing, and the centrifugal tendencies that were apparent in our curriculum and our students.

This school-wide effort, under the name “Show What You Know,” provides another crucial example of how, working with our literacy coach, we were able to find a key balance between the oppressive, centripetal nature of standardized testing and the centrifugal tendencies of our unique curriculum and students. What set our “Show What You Know,” effort apart from other test preparation models in which students take countless practice tests was its emphasis on contextualized assessment related to our curriculum. Each team of teachers, facilitated by our coach, looked at their curriculum map to determine key standards and strategies to focus on for a week or so, e.g. nouns and finding the main idea. Over the next several days, through various inquiry-centered approaches, we taught those throughout our language arts block, including readers and writers workshops and skills (phonics). Finally, we wrote a multiple-choice assessment modeled after the standardized tests which focused directly on the standards and strategies taught. Friday mornings were dedicated to “Show What You Know,” and we administered the assessments and celebrated the successes of our students. Another important distinction between our “Show What You Know” model and other test preparation programs was that immediately after each test, students graded their own assessments and engaged in dialogue, facilitated by the teacher, around the strategies used to arrive at each answer. This crucial step allowed students to understand the importance of using thinking strategies to answer questions. Students learned ‘what good test takers do,’ so that no matter what content would be on the real test, they would have strategies to help them think about their answers.

The “Show What You Know” program at my school illustrates another way in which working with a literacy coach helped the K-2 teachers at my school come to terms with some of the opposing forces all teachers feel. Standardized testing represents a formidable centripetal force imposed upon teachers and students which has the potential to force students and teachers to conform to uniform formulas of curriculum and assessment without taking into consideration the unique strengths and needs of individual students and schools. Our school’s “Show What You Know” initiative represents one effort to neutralize this force by preparing students for

standardized tests through guided practice in demonstrating their knowledge of our unique curriculum and strategies.

Wading Through It

Perhaps the most crucial role of a literacy coach is to facilitate dialogue and professional learning that allows teachers find balance between the tensions they feel as increased mandates for curriculum standards and assessments are placed upon them, and their unique philosophies, teaching styles and knowledge. Working with a literacy coach for the last four years has helped me become a better teacher because this work has forced me to reflect on my own beliefs about teaching and learning, and more importantly, how to enact those beliefs in a climate where conformity is often valued over individuality. This means that Ms. Jacobs is accomplishing her job, as she describes it. In our discussions, Ms. Jacobs talks about successful literacy coaches as professionals whose primary responsibility is to support teachers and help them wade through state and district mandates, standardized tests, and performance standards.

As a member of a professional learning community, guided by a literacy coach, I have had numerous opportunities to find a balance between the centripetal and centrifugal tensions by participating in curriculum development, implementing performance standards, designing rubrics, and creating new ways to prepare students for standardized tests. In times like these, teachers, more than ever, need to feel as though they are not alone; that they are members of a professional community from which they can draw support and encouragement as they find their own sense of balance between these opposing forces.

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