

Literacy Coaches! How Do You Ensure Professional Growth?

By Lenora Forsythe | Categories: Professional Learning

Several years into my eight years as an elementary literacy coach I began to settle in and feel somewhat comfortable. I always appreciated the various demands and challenges that came along with the position; however, I often found myself very aware of the isolated nature of the role and how it might be impacting my own professional learning.

Literacy coaches are often alone at their school site, or their content area focus is different from other coaches, making each on-site coaching role unique. In education, we recognize the benefits of student-to-student collaboration for improved academic and social learning outcomes. We recognize the benefit of teacher-to-teacher collaboration and often engage in the Professional Learning Community (PLC) model to protect this time and ensure all teachers can participate. But what about literacy coaches? This blog considers the need for collaborative professional learning opportunities that will support literacy coaches in building their literacy knowledge and coaching expertise, and perhaps even provide a bit of moral support!



Literacy coaches need other literacy coaches. In the International Literacy Association's (ILA) most recent (2017) Standards for the Preparation of Literacy Professionals, I am drawn to the implications of Standard 7: Practicum/Clinical Experiences. While these standards are designed for the training and preparation of coaching candidates, I can't help but think of how they apply to in-service coaches.

Specifically, component 7.3 states the need for ongoing, authentic, school-based experiences that include opportunities for networking and mentoring among coaches. You may be wondering, what might this look like in practice? In some ways, it's similar to what we already do as coaches: we talk on the phone with another coach to work through an issue or question and we learn together at meetings and conferences. The words *authentic* and *school-based* really resonate with me, though, particularly when I think about what we can do as coaches to advocate for our own learning. To make professional learning more personal and meaningful, why not visit a coach at a different school for a day, and walk the same path together? If a visit is too complicated geographically, consider how technology might support a virtual visit! Be intentional about planning your visit; treat it like a coaching cycle: What are your goals? What data will you collect? What action steps will you take (observation, side-by-side coaching, engaging in PLCs, etc.)? What is the anticipated outcome? Reflections?

The one-on-one thought partnership between coaches that can occur at several points throughout the visit (planning, during, and reflecting afterward) is mutually beneficial. Both coaches can gain insight into various dynamics, including coaching expertise and literacy knowledge, that will help move their individual coaching practices forward.

Component 7.4 ensures that coaches are supervised for the purpose of receiving feedback from "supervisors who understand coaching processes and tools, have literacy content and pedagogical knowledge, understand literacy assessment, and have coaching experiences." This component is a bit more difficult to fulfill. It is not uncommon for the person responsible for evaluating the coach (most often the principal) to have minimal coaching knowledge or literacy expertise—and that's ok! When I think about the experiences that helped push me forward as a literacy coach, they all have one thing in common: a knowledgeable person who provided regular feedback. As literacy coaches, we need to seek out people who understand the unique role and have literacy expertise, and request their ongoing feedback. Be vulnerable; invite an expert in and ask to be observed as you provide professional learning, facilitate a PLC, or engage in a coaching cycle. Not only will you grow professionally, you will earn the respect of your colleagues as they see you benefit from coaching, too!

Side-by-side coaching and feedback have the potential to cultivate coaching expertise and literacy knowledge, while reducing the isolated nature of the role. How might you infuse coach-to-coach collaboration to build your professional learning practices?