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Key points

• Coaching for teachers is a method of professional development that aims to improve student achievement by enhancing teachers’ knowledge and pedagogical skill in specific areas of instruction.

• Coaching models emphasize the importance of collaboration, reflection, sustained support for teachers, and providing classroom-based, practice-oriented instructional guidance.

• Coaches are experts in specific areas of instruction and typically work one-on-one with teachers to educate and train them in a school-based setting.

• Recent research suggests a positive impact of coaching on various measures of teacher efficacy, as well as a positive, significant relationship between coached teachers and student achievement.

Introduction

During the past several decades of school reform and improvement initiatives, coaching for teachers has become an often-used model for the induction of new teachers and the support and enhancement of classroom teaching practice. Although a variety of models and approaches to coaching have been developed, all share similar goals and common elements. This brief discussion describes the nature of coaching as used in PreK-5 classrooms and the existing evidence regarding the efficacy of coaching as an approach to professional development.

What Is Coaching?

Coaching provides teachers with sustained, school-based professional development that aims to align teacher practices, beliefs, and knowledge with research-based evidence, pedagogical theory, and best practices (National Reading Technical Assistance Center, 2010). Coaches work one-on-one with teachers to facilitate teacher learning that is job-embedded, collaborative, focuses on specific areas of instruction, and provides teachers with ongoing support and timely instructional feedback (Bean, Draper, Hall, Vandermolen, & Zigmond, 2010). Some coaching programs are broader in scope and focus on a variety of subject areas. For example, the Strategic Coaching Model...
developed by the Florida Institute of Education focuses on improving PreK teaching skills across multiple subjects including emergent literacy, mathematics, science, social studies and the arts. Other coaching programs have a more narrow focus, specializing in only one subject such as literacy, mathematics, or science. This paper will discuss research primarily pertaining to coaching teachers in the area of literacy instruction (i.e., literacy coaching), as it is one of the most widely used and researched areas for coaching (Elish-Piper & L’Allier, 2011).

The ultimate goal of coaching is to improve student success in the classroom by improving the effectiveness of teachers. The rationale behind coaching is underscored by decades of research indicating that effective, well-trained teachers are one of the best predictors of student success in the classroom (Stephens et al., 2007). Furthermore, research tells us that it is possible for teachers to learn good teaching practices and that teacher learning requires a supportive framework for “collaboration, reflection, and inquiry about curricular and instructional decisions” (Flint & Howerton, 2011). Coaching represents an effective strategy for meeting these goals. Hence, schools often adopt coaching as a method of bringing under-qualified teachers up to acceptable teaching standards, improving and strengthening teaching practices (particularly for new teachers), and aligning teacher practices and beliefs with a specific model of quality instruction. This typically involves a multi-pronged approach that focuses on professional development for teachers both in and out of the classroom. This is implemented by the coach, who is responsible for training and educating teachers in best practices through supplemental reading groups and/or coursework, lesson planning consultation, classroom observation and feedback, student assessment, and providing support for teachers in the classroom with techniques such as co-teaching and modeling instructional methods. Most research to date evaluated the efficacy of coaches working in-person with teachers in schools and classrooms. However, some research has also assessed computer-based interventions like the Targeted Reading Intervention (TRI), which involved literacy coaches providing support remotely via webcam during teachers’ tutoring sessions with struggling readers. Interestingly, TRI study evaluation data revealed that struggling readers in intervention schools significantly outperformed struggling readers in control schools (Vernon-Feagans, Kainz, & Ginsberg, 2013).

Schools often recruit coaches from outside the school via federal or state grant funding (e.g., the No Child Left Behind Reading First initiative) or select experienced
teachers within the school to split their time between teaching, professional development, and coaching less experienced teachers (i.e., peer-on-peer mentorship). Some coaching programs, such as the South Carolina Reading Initiative, also include a coach-to-coach support structure where coaches periodically consult with and are trained by higher-level coaches in their field. This adds a level of accountability and ongoing learning for the coaches who work directly with teachers (Stephens et al., 2007).

Coaches generally assume the role of the expert, facilitating teachers’ learning through scaffolding teacher knowledge and working collaboratively with them in the classroom. To this end, high-quality coaches possess a mastery of content-related knowledge and pedagogy, as well as significant experience teaching in the classroom. Many literacy coaches hold a master’s degree in an education-related field, have a reading teacher endorsement (approximately 24 credit hours of reading coursework), or have a reading specialist certificate (approximately 32 credit hours in reading coursework).

Notably, standards for these qualifications vary by state, and schools often do not require these higher-level credentials. Research suggests, however, that classrooms supported by literacy coaches holding at least a reading teacher endorsement show greater gains in student reading achievement than classrooms supported by coaches who have no advanced qualifications (L’Allier, Elish-Piper, & Bean, 2010). The following sections will highlight research regarding characteristics and conditions associated with effective literacy coaching.

**When is Literacy Coaching Effective?**

The question as to whether or not coaching is effective is widely debated. One reason for this is that, until recently, high-quality empirical research investigating the impact of coaching has been scarce (Biancarosa, Bryk, & Dexter, 2010). However, growing interest in coaching as a model for improving education has incited a number of comprehensive empirical studies.

When researchers evaluate the effectiveness of coaching programs, they often focus on several measures of student and teacher success in the classroom. Some of the most common measures include student achievement scores and the following teacher factors: grasp of content-related knowledge, beliefs about how to best educate children, use of best teaching practices, and perception of the value of

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coaching. Recent research evaluating these measures is discussed in the following sections.

**Evidence for improved teacher outcomes.** Growing literature suggests a positive impact of literacy coaching on teachers’ education beliefs and practices (e.g., more alignment with research-based standards; Stephens et al., 2007; Vanderburg & Stephens, 2010; Walpole, McKenna, Uribe-Zarain, & Lamitina, 2010), teacher’s grasp of domain knowledge and pedagogy (Brady et al. as cited in Sailors & Shanklin, 2010), and teacher’s perceived value of literacy coaching (Bean et al., 2010; NRTAC, 2010; Vanderburg & Stephens, 2010). Additionally, evidence suggests that these programs may be especially beneficial for inexperienced teachers, struggling teachers, and teachers with less formal education (the latter of which are especially prevalent in early learning centers and pre-schools; see Neuman & Cunningham, 2009; Sailors & Shanklin, 2010).

Furthermore, there is a growing consensus that literacy coaching is most effective when out-of-classroom professional development for teachers (e.g., coursework) is combined with ongoing, in-classroom support (L’Allier et al., 2010; Neuman & Cunningham, 2009). In fact, some evidence suggests that professional development for teachers is ineffective without practical, in-classroom coaching (L’Allier et al., 2010; Neuman & Cunningham, 2009). Additionally, several studies cited the importance of coaches who build collaborative relationships with the teachers and serve as experts who facilitate rather than dictate (L’Allier et al., 2010; Stephens et al., 2007). Building this relationship increases teachers’ willingness to learn and implement new teaching strategies (Vanderburg & Stephens, 2010).

**Evidence for change in student outcomes.** Burgeoning research suggests a positive, significant relationship between coached teachers and student achievement (Biancarosa et al., 2010; NRTAC, 2010; Sailors & Shanklin, 2010; Stephens et al., 2007). To this end, it appears that it is particularly important for coaches to allocate plenty of time working directly with teachers and engaging in practices such as modeling, co-teaching, and conferencing. Several studies have found that classrooms supported by coaches who dedicated higher percentages of their time toward working with teachers in the classroom demonstrated the greatest gains in student reading achievement (Bean et al., 2010; Elish-Piper & L’Allier, 2011; L’Allier et al., 2010). This suggests that teacher interaction should be given priority over other coaching activities, particularly extraneous administrative tasks (Bean et al., 2010; L’Allier et al., 2010). Furthermore, research suggests that students
identified as at-risk and/or struggling readers may benefit most from teachers supported by literacy coaches (Bean et al., 2010; Stephens et al., 2007).

Conclusion

In summary, research on PreK-5 literacy coaching suggests that this can be an effective method for increasing teacher efficacy and student literacy achievement. Generally, successful programs tend to share the following characteristics:

- Coaches who hold advanced reading teaching qualifications; are open and accessible; cultivate sustained, collegial, and collaborative teacher learning environments; have a responsive and non-judgmental relationship with teachers; demonstrate mastery of literacy knowledge and pedagogy; and emphasize the use of practice-oriented teaching strategies for teachers within the context of their classrooms.
- Effectively provide ongoing support for teachers, including frequent observation and immediate instructional feedback.
- Have supportive, cooperative school and school district environments, as having leaders who support coaches and teachers is critical for successful program implementation and outcomes.
- Demonstrate a positive impact on children’s learning.

Questions for Consideration

1. How can coaching programs ensure that coaches are adequately prepared, and have the resources and cooperation they need from school administrators and teachers?

2. How can the highest-need teachers and students be given the opportunity to benefit from coaching programs?

3. What steps can be taken to make sure coaches prioritize coaching activities that are shown to be most effective?

4. What challenges might be anticipated during the implementation of a coaching program?

5. What efforts will be made to overcome these challenges?

References


