

Running head: LEADERSHIP IN LITERACY

Leadership in literacy: Reflections on literacy coaching theory and graduate student impact

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Abstract

Literacy leadership and coaching are complex processes that require a valid theoretical foundation and a useful operational framework. This article describes the activities and outcomes in Arkansas State University's graduate course *Leadership in Literacy* that is a part of the Reading Master of Science in Education program. In this course graduate students—who also serve as in-service teachers in Northeast Arkansas schools—explore the coaching theories and models of McKenna and Walpole (2008) and employ them while engaging in a detailed analysis of their native school's reading program. Using district data, curriculum structure, and additional self-assessment insight, they present their findings to colleagues and conduct professional development in support of identified goals for literacy improvement. Their collective experience and results, as they further grew their skills in literacy leadership and coaching, suggest useful implications for the implementation of theoretical models, for the teaching of advanced graduate program candidates, and for educators who serve as literacy leaders in their schools.

Keywords: Literacy Leadership, Coaching Models, Data, Professional Development

Leadership in Literacy

Leadership in Literacy, the second of two practicum courses, is a required element of Arkansas State University's MSE Reading degree, and helps direct candidates to endorsement as a reading specialist. Typically, candidates in the program are in-service teachers who employ the course methodology in their native classroom and school district. The course consisted of nine graduate students, all female, nearing completion of their degree. The *Leadership in Literacy* graduate students quickly begin examining theory and seeking ways to apply it to their grade level. They amass a great deal of school district data and conduct a complex analysis to identify the current status of literacy education in their school district and the "next step." Graduate students must conduct the first of two rigorously planned meetings where they share the results of their program analysis with key colleagues. These colleagues are typically classroom teachers of the same grade level, others in the building, principal and other building administrators, and possibly an established reading specialist or literacy coach. The final required meeting in the field is a professional development session designed to begin implementation of this "next step." Graduate students must anticipate problems, provide answers on the fly, perhaps analyze additional data, set future goals, build necessary infrastructure, and ultimately build the collegiality to sustain their work into their next school year and beyond. *Leadership in Literacy* as a course ends with a full report of the school's literacy program analysis, and a genuine reflection on the professional development session.

A Theoretical Model

McKenna and Walpole (2008) offer guidance for building an understanding of literacy coaching models. They suggest four models that vary in intensity, suggest different levels of

classroom teacher action, and increasing level of systemic reform. They also include flexibility, adding that “there is no one right coaching model for all settings, *and* there are models that would be poor choices” (p. 1). Of lesser demand and intrusiveness, the Cognitive Coaching model carries a need to “mediate the invisible thinking that guides a teacher’s work” and facilitates self-directed action (p. 5). The Peer Coaching model employs a specific aim to target the implementation of professional development via teacher practice in the classroom. This model needs administrative support, modeling by an expert colleague, and “engages the entire school staff to implement the strategy” (p. 7). Their Program-Specific Coaching model has external goals, is “targeted and outcome oriented,” and “is designed to equip an individual to implement a new program” (p. 10). This model is meant for initial implementation of new goals. Finally, the Reform-Oriented Coaching model backs a targeted, financially supported, literacy reform. The model must “evolve and change as student data dictate” and requires the management of highly trained literacy specialists (p. 12). Graduate students bear in mind that, despite the rather clearly defined models, it is safe to “see whether a particular model is attractive to you and appropriate for your school or whether you should construct your own” (p. 15) through a fusion of the traits of multiple models.

The authors offer equally crucial guidance allowing them to begin tailoring their chosen coaching model to their native grade level. The authors place their models of literacy coaching in hypothetical context to illustrate a typical approach that one might find at that grade level. The authors use Kindergarten to illustrate ELL student needs in literacy; they suggest a Peer-Coaching model of strategy development with colleague support (p. 129). Their example emphasizes the need for the coach to build collegial relationships and focus on effective one-on-one and small group interventions (p. 135-136). In First Grade the authors examine a classroom

situation where the coach must guide a teacher in the use of assessment measures aligned with curriculum, with instruction planned accordingly (p. 103-104). Third Grade carried the tone of a coach needing to facilitate systemic change in order to support stronger achievement on standardized testing (p. 136). This coach needed to be mindful of prior trends in achievement and support further ones in later grades. In a Fourth Grade example the coach conducts a rigorous analysis of data in a variety of categories, and identifies specific goals for testing categories that struggle (p. 112-113). The coach specifically targets writing skills and works with a teacher on necessary instructional change to support the goal.

Their Sixth Grade example (in a middle school setting) has the coach reforming the professional development in a school failing to make AYP (p. 144-145). In a Seventh Grade example the coach finds an established digital data management system; the coach must confront personal discomfort in criticizing an established system and impartially assess its potential (p. 120). The coach then adjusts the system to reveal more accurate analysis and subsequently clearer decisions for improved instruction. In shifting to the more content-specific middle grades as a whole, the authors point to the content guidance of key literacy organizations (such as the International Reading Association, National Council of Teachers of English, etc.) and seek improved planning, time management, and use of resources (p. 149-151). Focus on adolescent literacy standards is essential. Ultimately, the authors indicate that middle grade coaches are “skillful evaluators of literacy needs” who guide faculty in the identification and use of proper learning tools (p. 152). These grade level examples helped *Leadership in Literacy* graduate students see the four coaching models with a bit more clarity. Though they didn’t necessarily agree with the authors’ hypothetical take on their grade level, they connected with the models and were able to focus more on their native grade level as they planned their next steps.

Leadership in Literacy Results

The graduate students typically began this journey analyzing several separate data sets in search of their “big picture.” They started with current curriculum and its standards, goals, and benchmarks. Graduate students worked from McKenna and Walpole’s (2008) view that “curriculum was the overall system of goals, strategies, and resources that are garnered to support student achievement” (p. 45). The cornerstone data was from their current program: various sets of test data representing student achievement. In most cases these achievement data sets were in the form of benchmark testing, standardized testing, and other data used in focused interventions. *Leadership in Literacy* graduate students met varying degrees of success at accessing district data. Fortunately, the collegial victories far outnumbered the absence of district data. Another necessary set of data was an understanding of the current professional attitudes among their colleagues. The Literacy Coaching Clearinghouse’s (2007) *Self-Assessment for Elementary Literacy Coaches* and *Self-Assessment for Middle and High School Literacy Coaches* proved useful for most; in some cases additional instruments via www.surveymonkey.com were used.

They then set about using this data to inform their coaching decisions. Graduate students attempted to triangulate the findings of their literacy program analysis, though some did struggle with gaps in district data, or inaccessible data. Triangulation was fruitful enough that it gave them the credibility necessary to confidently enter their program assessment meeting. Ultimately, they triangulated their analysis of their school and district’s literacy program with three key families of data: district assessments, district curriculum and program structure, and survey or teacher self-assessment. They used this collective insight to articulate their impression of the status of literacy in their district, identify the next step, and ready their findings for

presentation at their first meeting with colleagues. These meetings were the first dedicated visits made by their professor to observe them in action. Their program analyses each suggested a “next step” that, for some, was merely to stay the course and continue with the next major goal in progress for their building or district. Some engaged in collaborative discussion to select one from a short list of “next steps.”

Professional development sessions, the second dedicated visit made by their professor to observe them in action, typically lasted about an hour. The scheduling of colleagues during a busy school year is an extremely demanding task, but these graduate students navigated those waters very successfully and all found equilibrium between the pressure of the school year, the desire to include as many colleagues as they could, and the need to meet when the program analysis was fresh. McKenna and Walpole (2008) suggest three levels of professional development: one-on-one (which these graduate students accomplished on their own, behind the scenes and on their own time), with small groups (which, if it happened, was typically with fellow grade-level teachers), and the large group setting (p. 23). Since their professional development sessions did not necessarily include all faculty members, but did include participation beyond their grade levels and into multiple tiers of administration, this allowed the structure of their professional development to fall within this large group setting framework.

Delivery of their professional development sessions was very much like the program analysis meetings. *Leadership in Literacy* students made use of the logistical means suited to their classroom, and a delivery style desired by their colleagues, in three typical types of meetings. Some were dedicated strategy or concept development sessions with available resources that facilitated discussion on the identified “next step” in their program (such as, improved writing skills, spelling, phonics interventions for struggling readers, etc.). Some

dedicated their session to collaboratively building infrastructure in order to continue their program momentum (e.g. development of a data tracking system to monitor reading interventions). Others analyzed additional data consistent with their current program in order to better understand what impact their efforts were creating and to further predict results (e.g. use of a writing assessment at regular intervals to monitor progress toward benchmark goals).

Literacy Leadership Impact

These graduate students followed a theoretical model for literacy leadership and coaching that is very clear about a process that requires data, careful planning, and a great deal of effort. In this case, they compressed an experience with the process into a significantly shorter timeframe than is typically the case. The results of their efforts in their schools affirm the theoretical perspective that useful, yet flexible, models must be in place to guide the work, and that a rich presence of data is vital to informing decisions. Furthermore, the results of their efforts highlight several essential aspects of literacy leadership and coaching that emerge when this practice is put into motion.

This process, at its heart, must be data-driven. By using a careful process of data analysis, they were able to articulate a firm understanding of their school's literacy program and make an informed decision on what should come next in their professional development. Data, the critical look at student achievement, demand focused analysis—still, student achievement data alone is not enough. *Leadership in Literacy* graduate students were most prepared for their program assessment meeting when they minimized “gaps,” expanded circles of data to other areas, and included teacher self-assessment insight. The rich data, after all, guide strategic decisions about coaching models, use of data, scheduling of professionals, engagement with

colleagues, and making conclusions that challenge current agendas. Graduate students, as must any literacy leader or coach, made these decisions in genuine ways that preserved collegiality and loyalty to their school and district.

Two other aspects of this process strike a much more personal chord and only further highlight the energies *Leadership in Literacy* students invested in this work. As McKenna and Walpole (2008) note, this practice places the literacy leader or coach and their initiative on center stage (p. 26). This work requires a kind of professional courage, stepping outside a comfort zone, and taking risks in full view of colleagues—the relationships with whom have been forged and maintained over years. Conducting a program analysis meeting before the professional development session provides a chance to refine approaches and attitudes, build momentum with colleagues, and offer a dedicated setting to showcase valid data analysis. This work also, without question, requires a professional passion shared by all educators: the desire for student success. Regardless of any struggles within their professional spheres or differences between the roles of paraprofessional, teacher, reading specialist, or administrator, all professionals in this circle share a common passion. This thread binds them all together and any of them can contribute to a district mission in literacy when invited to the table. *Leadership in Literacy* graduate students very admirably tapped this shared passion—a testament to their professionalism—while engaged in this complex, demanding work in their schools.

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