You attend an amazing literacy conference in June, but when school begins months later you realize that because you couldn’t implement the new practice right away, you’ve forgotten how to get started. Or you attend an afternoon workshop during the school year, when readers’ workshop is already in full swing. You tell yourself that you’ll try the new strategy after the next unit, but before you know it, the year has passed. Think of the professional books on the bookshelf behind your desk in which the first few chapters are dog-eared, highlighted, and covered in sticky notes. Now think of those that have never even been cracked open.

Yes, we’ve all been there.

But have you ever had professional development regularly embedded throughout the school year? Does someone in your school come to your classroom to demonstrate a lesson with your students? Do you have a colleague to bounce ideas off and plan a lesson with? Is someone available to assist you with progress monitoring and using data? Is there a colleague you may e-mail or call with questions about lessons, student work, and assessments?

Well, that’s where I come in. I’m a literacy coach in Saint Paul, Minnesota. My days are filled with different ways of supporting teachers in the ever-evolving practice of literacy instruction. Need a video on an oral language lesson? I’ll find it. Want to see how to initiate a reciprocal reading intervention with your students? I’ll demonstrate it. Want more teacher moves for your guided reading groups so that students are actively thinking and talking about text? Let’s plan a lesson together.

What Is Literacy Coaching?

Each time people outside education ask me to describe my job, I come up with a different response because my job has several different components. I usually say that my job entails working with teachers in the classroom and through professional development in literacy instruction. Coaches work with teachers one-on-one, in small groups, and in large groups. The literacy coach may use a gradual-release approach in which he or she introduces a practice, demonstrates a lesson, coteaches with the teacher, observes the teacher, and sees the practice sustained (Casey, 2006). Or a coach could do a stand-alone demonstration or observation of a lesson with a brief conference before and after.

The Saint Paul Public Schools’ coaching model includes five components: walk-throughs, literacy team meetings, formal coaching opportunities, professional learning communities, and weekly meetings with the principal.

Walk-Throughs

Walk-throughs are a way of getting into classrooms regularly for approximately 10 minutes to observe instruction. The process is not evaluative but is a way to notice trends in the school. Generally the observer will be looking for a few specific things during a walk-through. These may have to do with the focus of the lesson, opportunities for students to talk or write about text, ways that the teacher models instruction, or how the teacher monitors students’ progress. The trends that the coach notices provide ideas for professional development. In addition, walk-throughs are a way to see what practices from previous professional development sessions teachers have implemented.

I usually have a three-week rotation for walk-throughs, which means I am in each classroom once every three weeks. My goal is to have the principal with me for one or two walk-throughs each week. The principal and I can then talk about what trends we are seeing and start developing ideas for additional teacher support.
Literacy Team Meetings
All classroom teachers meet regularly in small groups to discuss a literacy practice that they can apply immediately in their classrooms. The topics may include shared reading, guided reading, phonics, oral language, reciprocal reading, or data analysis, each based on the current curriculum (Crévola & Vineis, 2008). More specifically, if the topic is guided reading, team meetings might involve analyzing student data, creating guided reading groups, planning a guided reading lesson with a particular focus, planning teacher strategies for promoting student conversation, watching a classroom video to determine whether students mastered the objective of the lesson, or using a focus sheet for progress monitoring.

Literacy team meetings occur at least twice a month for 45–60 minutes at a time, usually before school, during prep, or after school. I’ve found that a combination of multigrade and individual grade-level teams is effective. Including multiple grade levels provides a diverse perspective for discussions about videos and articles, whereas meeting with teachers of individual grade levels is more efficient for analyzing grade-specific data or planning lessons for a particular reading developmental level. At one of my schools, I gave teachers the option of attending a Wednesday morning or Thursday afternoon meeting. In some cases, the sessions covered different topics. Teachers could select the time, day, and topic that worked best for them.

Each meeting consists of a reflection from the previous literacy team meeting, an activity or resource to activate thinking about a new strategy, a way to apply the new strategy, and a synthesis or action plan for teachers to implement in the classroom. The takeaway may be something that everyone from the group is going to try, or it may be differentiated for individual teachers, with each teacher taking a different approach to the strategy.

Formal Coaching
Many times, literacy team meetings lead to formal coaching opportunities. Teachers who are unsure how to initiate an instructional strategy may ask me to demonstrate it in their classrooms or come watch them implement it. This could be a gradual-release process (Casey, 2006) or a stand-alone experience. Either way, the goal is for the teacher to be able to use the new instructional strategies on his or her own.

Formal coaching gives teachers an opportunity to work alongside another educator to plan, teach, and reflect on instructional processes. Some of my biggest “ahas” as a classroom teacher came from experiences where I received formal coaching and reflected on my practice. Now as a literacy coach, I often feel like I am learning as much as the teacher I am coaching.

Professional Learning Communities
A professional learning community (PLC) is an ongoing collaborative process in which teachers focus on improving students’ academic achievement (Dufour & Eaker, 1998). In St. Paul, teachers create a SMART (specific, measurable, achievable, realistic, timely) goal related to an academic need and use research-based methods to inform instruction.

All of our schools’ PLCs have a literacy or math focus. Some have used data to focus on a particular strand from our standardized tests, such as comprehension of narrative or informational text. Others have focused on aspects of our word-study curriculum in which many students perform below benchmarks, such as long and short vowel sounds. Still others have used reciprocal reading to work with students who are fluent...
Coaching gives teachers the opportunity to work alongside another educator to plan, teach, and reflect on instructional processes.

Weekly Meetings with the Principal
Collaboration between the principal and the literacy coach is crucial. The principal is the instructional leader for the school, and the message that I convey to teachers must reflect district expectations and the vision of the principal. Without this cohesiveness, many colleagues could be confused by mixed messages. This time I spend with the principal helps me to understand the principal’s expectations so that I can better communicate them to teachers.

In our weekly meetings, we analyze data, complete walk-throughs, plan literacy team meetings, and discuss next steps for professional learning communities. For example, while completing walk-throughs to observe guided reading lessons, we noticed that few teachers were using a progress-monitoring system to document student progress during the lesson. This became a focus of a literacy team meeting. On another occasion, when examining midyear reading data, we noticed that a couple of grade levels had students who were below benchmark in some assessments and needed phonics or oral language instruction. I then did some coaching with teachers on these topics.

Coaching in Action
During a data analysis literacy team meeting, two 3rd grade teachers, Erika and Beverly, noticed that a number of students were at benchmark for fluency but had low comprehension. When the teachers reread their notes on the students’ performance on reading assessments and guided reading, they discovered that these students plow through unknown words and ideas without understanding them.

When I asked about whether students have instruction in comprehension monitoring or opportunities to practice checking their understanding of what they read, the teachers responded that they had taught comprehension strategies but that they hadn’t modeled comprehension monitoring much this school year. At that point in the year, comprehension monitoring only appeared one day on the 3rd grade pacing guide.

The teachers thought it was appropriate to do more modeling of comprehension monitoring. They also pondered having more wait time, using shorter texts, using a genre the students are familiar with and find engaging, and incorporating more discussion about the text—all elements introduced at a previous literacy team meeting. Erika and Beverly decided they would like to see a demonstration lesson that incorporated all of these components.

The next day, I came to Beverly’s class to demonstrate a small-group lesson with a short piece of nonfiction. Both teachers observed the lesson, and we debriefed our findings. We all agreed that the levels of discussion and comprehension of the text increased, but more work needed to be done. The following day, both teachers informed me that they had started implementing strategies from the demonstration lesson—specifically, using cards containing short amounts of nonfiction text to help students practice their comprehension (Crevola & Vineis, 2008).

Two weeks later, I led a literacy team meeting about reciprocal reading instruction. My thought was that reciprocal reading, in which student pairs and small groups engage in questioning, summarizing, clarifying, and predicting over a shared text, could help Erika and Beverly improve students’ comprehension. A 6th grade teacher I had formally coached a couple of months earlier gave his seal of approval to the process, but I wasn’t sure what the rest of the staff thought.

I was pleasantly surprised two days later when Beverly caught me in the hallway and exclaimed that she had...
tried reciprocal reading in her classroom. Her students were using the reciprocal reading strategies in a small group and talked about using them for independent reading. Weeks later, I saw during my walk-throughs that Beverly and Erika were still using reciprocal reading. Word began to spread throughout the school, and I was asked to do formal coaching on reciprocal reading with other grade levels.

Beverly and Erika initially latched onto this strategy because they hoped it would meet the needs of their students. The combination of literacy team meetings, formal coaching, and walk-throughs enabled them to explore this new instructional strategy together while having rich, reflective conversations about teaching.

A Model That Works
The power of coaching is in creating the balance and seeing the connections among walk-throughs, literacy team meetings, formal coaching, professional learning communities, and meetings with the principal.

Over time, some of these components may be refined or modified in response to research, budgets, and changes in instructional practice. For now, however, I believe that the Saint Paul Public Schools coaching model provides the best possible ongoing professional development and continuous support for literacy instruction.

References

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