Full Length Research Paper

Can Literacy Coaching Provide a Model for School-wide Professional Learning?

*Sharon D. Kruse¹ and Belinda Zimmerman²

¹The University of Akron
²Kent State University

* Corresponding Author’s Email: skruse@uakron.edu, Tel.: (330) 972-8177 (P), 330-972-2452 (F)

Abstract

This paper examines the potential for literacy coaching to foster school-wide professional learning within the larger context of school reform. Employing qualitative analysis we argue that instructional improvement, the quality of teacher talk, relationships between teachers, and student-learning outcomes can be enhanced by the purposeful adoption of a literacy-coaching model within elementary and middle school settings. Adoption of the literacy-coaching model does not, in and of itself, guarantee any of these outcomes. School leaders must provide strong support and be actively involved with coaching efforts for the model to have broad and lasting effect.

Keywords: Literacy Coaching, Educational Leadership, Professional Learning

INTRODUCTION

Over the past several decades, researchers of school improvement have focused their attentions on two distinct but complimentary foci. The first, prompted by a focus on increasing student-learning outcomes, are studies that look at specific innovation efforts (i.e., literacy and numeracy programs, formative assessment and alternative pedagogies) (Burch and Spillane, 2003; Crespo, 2006; DiPaola and Hoy, 2007; Ermeling, 2010; Lai and McNaughtin, 2009; Leithwood and Mascall, 2008; Murphy, 2005; Spillane, 2005; Timperley, Annan and Robinson, 2009). This literature focuses broadly on what teachers and other school personnel do with students that increases student success. The second is the literature that concerns itself with the ways schools organize and function to produce more effective outcomes. This literature addresses how schools increase those factors such as trust, teacher dialogue, professional learning and community, which are posited to be foundational to lasting improvement and change (Bottery, 2003; Bryk and Schneider, 2002; Cosner, 2009; Honig and Hatch, 2004; Little and Curry, 2009; Tschannen-Moran, 2004).

While there has been some unavoidable overlap in these literatures and studies have attempted to look both at content attainment and at the outcomes of innovation for the larger school organization (Cosner, 2011; Murphy and Meyers, 2008; Smylie, 2010), little has been done to investigate if schools deliberately seek to coordinate and learn from their improvement efforts. Few studies exist that seek to learn if school personnel view innovations and improvement actions as complementary and mutually informing (Cosner, 2011; Murphy and Meyers, 2008; Smylie, 2010). Most schools do not adopt a single improvement focus (Bryk, Sebring, Kerbow, Rollow and Easton, 1998; Bryk and Schneider, 2002). More often, multiple uncoordinated improvement efforts are simultaneously adopted (Goldenberg, 2004; Matsumura, Sartoris, Bickel, and Garnier, 2009). Recent literature (Murphy, 2002; Smylie, 2010) has suggested that unless reform activities are coherent and integrated, potential positive outcomes for student learning are diminished.

One of the most popular content-focused adoptions has been literacy coaching. It has been asserted that literacy coaching can assist school personnel in reaching ambitious outcomes for literacy instruction and student learning (Dole, 2004; NRTAC, 2010; Roller, 2006). While recent studies (Dole, 2004; Dozier, 2006; Kise, 2006; L’Allier, Elish-Piper and Bean, 2010) have pointed to the
power of literacy coaching, little of that research has focused on the broader outcomes of the model for school improvement (Matsumura, Sartoris, Bickel and Garnier, 2009). Instead, much has been written about how coaching should be enacted and what content is best addressed by literacy coaches (Alverman, Commerayas, Cramer and Harnish, 2005; Roller, 2006). A smaller but growing body of literature addresses the gains in student achievement made as a result of literacy coaching (Lockwood, McCombs and Marsh, 2010; NRTAC, 2010; Rosemary, Roskos and Landreth, 2007).

The issue we are seeking to understand is whether or not school leaders and teachers generalize the processes and skills they have learned through their literacy coaching work to other areas of school improvement. At the crux of this question is to learn if participant teachers, literacy coaches and school leaders have recognized that the process of coaching can be transferred and used as a tool for school change and improvement.

The literature is scant concerning studies that look at the potential for an innovation to influence school-wide practices in ways not directly tied to the core goals of the initial reform effort. This study seeks to inform the literature concerning the ways school personnel might recognize and transfer the knowledge and skills developed by literacy coaches to other areas of the school.

This paper addresses the following research questions:

Do school leaders and teachers credit literacy coaching with contributing to improved practice in the school?

In what ways do elementary and middle school leaders and teachers transfer the process of coaching to other school improvement efforts?

Literature Review

To explore the manner in which school personnel might generalize learning from one innovation to other areas of school reform we explore two literatures. The first concerns literacy coaching and offers an overview of how the coaching model functions. The second examines professional learning in schools. In specific, we review the professional learning literature to identify how professional learning can affect both teachers and the broad school organization. We conclude by highlighting how literacy coaches have the potential to affect the professional learning of teachers.

Literacy Coaching

Since the early part of the last century, it has been argued that the ability to read and write well is necessary for a democratic society to thrive (Dewey, 1915/2009; Freire, 1970). An educated populace has long been considered a cornerstone of a literate society (Allington, 2009; Bean, 2004; Pressley, 2006). That schools have struggled to address comprehensive literacy outcomes for graduates has been well documented (Flesch, 1955; NAEP, 2010; National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983).

The educational community has worked to increase literacy in two ways. The first has been the creation of a variety of instructional programs and assessments designed to provide teachers knowledge about the kinds of instruction students require (Gambrell, Morrow, Neuman, and Pressley, 1999). The second has been to provide support to classroom teachers in implementing new pedagogies and administering assessments (Casey, 2006; Walker, 2010). These two responses have not been without their critics. The efficacy of any particular reading program or approach has been hotly contested, as has the worth of traditional professional development (Sparks, 2002). More current research has asserted that neither approach when implemented alone can ensure student achievement and success; the research suggests that classroom practice is best changed when efficacious programs are paired with on-going support for teacher professional learning (Schmoker, 2006; Smylie, 2010, Sparks, 2002).

Literacy coaching pairs best practice with classroom-based teacher support for instruction and assessment. Focusing on improved instructional practices, literacy coaches provide support and resources to teachers so that they can become more thoughtful, knowledgeable, and intentional about instruction. Literacy coaching can trace its roots back to the 1920s (Cassidy, Garrett, Maxfield and Patchett, 2009; Hall, 2004) when remedial reading teachers intervened with struggling students. Throughout the decades the role of the reading specialist has shifted away from direct work with students to work that supports teachers’ literacy practices (Casey, 2006; Lockwood, McCombs and Marsh, 2010).

Most recently the term literacy coach has replaced the reading specialist title in some regions of the nation (Dole, 2004). While the roles reading specialists play (and now literacy coaches) have changed over time, the primary goal of their work has not. Improved student learning has always been the principal objective of these efforts.

Historically, literacy coaching has taken on several forms (Casey, 2006; Moran, 2007). The first includes coaching that focuses on the development of technical skills, including instructional strategies related to phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary and comprehension. The second form of coaching emphasizes observation and reflection among peers with the goal of increasing reflective discussion among colleagues. Third is coaching that extends discussion to include instructional analysis led by an independent coach. In each of these cases, the coach provides prompts to enhance learning and critical thinking on the
part of individual teachers (Stephens, Morgan, DeFord, Donnelly, Hamel, Keith, Brink, Johnson, Seaman, Young, Gallant, Hao and Leigh, 2011). The role of the literacy coach has evolved to include a broader focus on instructional leadership within the school (Allen, 2006). In this example, the coach serves as content knowledge specialist, professional development designer and trusted mentor. The literacy coach may model or co-teach a lesson, locate instructional resources, design and facilitate professional development, evaluate students’ literacy needs, and provide on-going opportunities for teachers to learn from and with each other (Casey, 2006; Moran, 2007; Rainville and Jones, 2008). A fundamental goal of this form of coaching is to assist in altering teachers’ mental models of literacy instruction, thinking, and practice. Thus, teachers may develop a vigorous theory of reading that transcends traditional programs and practices in favor of research-informed, evidence-based pedagogy.

Inherent in this form of coaching is the notion that changes is continuous and teachers must not only continue to learn new pedagogies, they must also work collaboratively with colleagues to ensure the on-going success of students (Blachowicz, Obropta and Fogelberg, 2005). Integral to this form of literacy coaching is the concept that support extends beyond reading teachers. Coaches support the development of high quality literacy practices across multi-disciplinary contexts, broadly supporting student achievement and learning. Coaches act in a variety of roles. As resource providers, literacy coaches collaborate to plan lessons, mentor new teachers, model new strategies and lead professional development. As liaisons, they work with the principal to make professional development decisions, assist special educators to offer instructional support and play lead roles in problem solving on intervention assistance teams. As program coordinators, literacy coaches can help teachers develop curriculum, pilot and select new materials, and obtain and disseminate professional resources for teachers. In assessment roles, they coordinate testing, develop and select assessment tools, assist teachers in conducting assessments, and help interpret results. As instructors, literacy coaches work with small groups of struggling readers; model and help teachers plan differentiated instruction, and provide feedback to teachers concerning student progress (Bean, Swan, and Knaub, 2003).

The literature also indicates that there are numerous ways literacy coaches enact their roles depending on the context (Rainville and Jones, 2008). Although coaching models have different procedures and measures they propose, inherent in each is the need for coaches to have extensive, expert knowledge in curriculum, instruction and assessment (Rosemary, Roskos and Landreth, 2007). Regardless of the model, collaboration is an integral element of coaching (Irwin and Farr, 2004).

Recent empirical studies of literacy coaching suggest that coaches can be effective in changing elementary teachers’ beliefs and practices (Kinnucan, Rosemary, and Grogan, 2006; Stephens et al, 2011), increasing student achievement in middle school students (Lockwood, McCombs and March, 2010), and in fostering increased efficacy on the part of principals through classroom observation and coaching (Matsumura, Sartoris, Bickel and Garnier, 2009). Other studies have suggested that literacy coaches promote school structures that support teaching and learning (Irwin and Farr, 2010) and that social resources such as trust, influence teachers’ willingness to collaborate with others in improving classroom practice (Matsumura, Garnier and Resnick, 2010). In sum, these studies bridge the gap between focusing solely on training and implementation and the ways literacy coaches affect the wider school culture and community.

Professional Learning

A long-term concern for researchers and educators has been how to ensure that learning happens as a result of an act of teaching (Argyris, 2002; Eisner, 2003; Tyack and Cuban, 1995). As evidenced in the discussion above, a good deal of attention has been focused on developing processes and procedures to ensure that teachers are equipped to understand and implement best practices in their classrooms. This best-practice focus seeks to identify how to effectively teach disciplinary knowledge and processes. Due to the preponderance of literacy coaches in schools, we center our attentions here on literacy; however similar efforts have been mounted in mathematics and other subjects/pedagogies (Crespo, 2006; Dexter, Louis and Anderson, 2009; Scribner, Cockrell, Cockrell, and Valentine, 1999).

What is common to all these efforts is that they focus on two distinct avenues for the development of professional knowledge within schools. Namely, they employ professional development for individual teachers who are then supported by coaching, mentoring or other forms of support and monitoring. In this way, professional knowledge and skills are taught to teachers and then supported through implementation and use.

Here, the focus is on individual implementation of new ideas with fidelity and consistency (Argyris, 2002). The learning challenge is for individuals to operationalize newly acquired practices. Employing a term well known in the educational leadership literature, this focus on individual knowledge and skill is referred to as single-loop learning. In single loop learning, (Argyris and Schön, 1974), the emphasis is on the effective use of the practice (e.g., comprehension strategies). As a result of these efforts, teachers engage in formal and informal discussion about the use of new methods (Argote, Ingram, Levine and Moreland, 2000). However,
discussion and reflection about the ideas are directed toward institutionalizing strategies in individual classrooms.

It has been argued that single-loop learning is problematic for organizations such as schools for several reasons (Easterby-Smith, Crossan, and Nicolini, 2000; Elkjaer, 2004; Yeo, 2006). First, the ability to transfer knowledge within the organization relies on individual openness, goodwill and trust. If teachers do not talk with one another, either through a lack of a culture or supportive conditions that encourage sharing, knowledge becomes stuck within individuals. While this may not be problematic the first year of an innovation (since it can be assumed that all teachers would have received initial training) after several years an organization's ability to transfer knowledge (e.g., to new members) can become difficult.

In the case of literacy coaching, to some extent, the concern for knowledge transfer is narrowed. The model itself assumes that the coach, as part of his or her assigned role, transfers knowledge throughout the school. However, the presence of the coach cannot ensure against other single-loop learning problems. Inherent to the single-loop model are concerns for fragmentation and stagnation of knowledge (Crossan, 1999; Leithwood and Louis, 1998; Petrides and Zahra Guiney, 2002).

As new ideas and knowledge are employed within the school, they become filtered through the past practices and understandings of individual teachers. In turn, knowledge of the practice becomes altered (Markus, 2001; Olivera, 2000). Over time, these alterations become part of the individual practices of teachers resulting in an idiosyncratic application of the original practice. The outcome of multiple individual alterations for a school is knowledge fragmentation, where teachers may not retain a clear sense of the original understandings (and theory) that underscore the practice (Baker, 2004).

Thus, individuals within schools employ techniques and practices not because they understand the purpose for doing them. Instead, they do them out of rote compliance or conformity. The result of fragmentation and stagnation is an inability of teachers to use knowledge in a consistent fashion that informs sound educational decision-making (Weick, 2001). Ultimately, as practices fragment over time they become abandoned and replaced by newer ideas, which in turn, fall prey to similar instructional outcomes (Argyris, 2002; Petrides and Zahra Guiney, 2002).

Numerous reports (Darling-Hammond, Wei, Andree, Richardson and Orphaos, 2009; Jaquith, Mindich, Wei and Darling-Hammond, 2010; Yoon, Duncan, Lee, Scarloss and Shapley, 2007) suggest that high-quality professional learning is a key component for improving classroom practice. High-quality professional learning, with the potential to positively affect student learning, is defined as having three significant levels. The first level, enhancement of professional teacher knowledge and skills, is marked by sustained, intensive and content-focused opportunities for teachers to engage with new ideas and practices. In the second level, high quality learning is evident when assessment and evaluation of teaching demonstrates that new ideas and practices are implemented with fidelity and reliability. High quality professional learning is evidenced in level three by sustained attention to high-intensity, job-embedded, collective learning on the part of teachers.

The first two levels of the professional learning model exemplify single loop learning by focusing individual practice. However, single-loop learning cannot satisfy the third level of high quality professional learning, that of joint collective or collaborative effort across the school. It has been hypothesized that a focus on double-loop learning can safeguard against these problems (Elkjaer, 2004; Yeo, 2006).

Again borrowing from the literature on educational leadership, double-loop learning theory posits that collaborative learning occurs when members of the organization ask not only how to do something new (single-loop learning) but whether or not what they have chosen to do fits within a larger framework of learning and understanding within the school. Double-loop learning leads to insights about why new practices are better than older ones for meeting school-wide goals (Argote, Ingram, Levine, and Moreland, 2000). It is marked by collective inquiry and action.

In double-loop learning, members attend not only to the processes and procedures of new practices, they also seek to understand how new practices affect the larger school organization. To engage in double-loop learning, members of the school must participate in communal reflection. However, reflection must evolve beyond questions of effectiveness and explore how new ideas can inform the work of the larger school organization. Double-loop learning is thought to enhance a school's ability to learn through the social construction of new ideas in active practice (Argyris, 2002; Weick, 2001).

What sets double-loop learning apart from single-loop learning is school-wide attention to identifying patterns of action and inaction, resistance and acceptance. In the case of literacy coaches, single-loop learning would occur when coaches help teachers to understand how to execute a new practice. Double-loop learning would occur when the processes of the coaching relationship were examined and employed elsewhere within the school to address a new or different problem. Double-loop learning, while thought to enhance organizational effectiveness by focusing on problem-solving and decision-making as learning tools (Elkjaer, 2004; Scribner, Cockrell, Cockrell, and Valentine, 1999, Markus, 2001), is not without critique. For communal effort to occur, a culture of collaboration and trust must be present within the school. Double-loop learning is
reliant on the social constructions of knowledge within an organization.

Double-loop learning may be undermined in places where teachers are not able to speak freely and honestly or to question long-standing practices or procedures. Furthermore, as with single-loop learning where individuals may alter knowledge in unproductive ways, full organizations can err, developing shared misconceptions (Blackman, Connelly and Henderson, 2004). Double-loop learning cannot ensure that mistakes will not be made, nor does it substitute for access to external expertise. However, it can increase the probability that the school organization can learn and be enhanced by communal reflection upon practice (Crossan, 1999; Elkjaer, 2004; Leithwood and Louis, 1998; Markus, 2001; Petrides and Zahra Guiney, 2002).

In conclusion, the model of collective professional learning within the school follows assumptions which suggest that professional learning takes place in groups and cannot be reduced to the random accumulation of individuals’ knowledge (Hargreaves, 1994). Thus, it is within a framework of systematic collection and focus on information that professional learning occurs. In the school setting, the technical knowledge base—inclusive of content information, teaching methodologies and innovations in both areas—provides the structure and context for deeper understandings to be generated. In schools focused on professional learning, teachers collaborate, discuss, and critique new ideas so that all members can understand and apply them. Therefore, the professional learning perspective suggests that the collective, regular processes of teachers and administrators working together around issues of practice and professional knowledge will provide schools with the capacity for change and development.

**Literature Conclusions**

Literacy coaches play a key role in establishing a culture of change and learning in schools (Fullan, 2001). Although reflection upon practice and public discussion of teaching are still relatively rare in many schools, the literacy coach can be a pivotal resource in establishing discussions about teaching and learning within a school (Rock, 2002). In turn, professional learning that is established in the context of literacy can extend to other efforts and relationships between and among teachers (Bottery, 2003). As leaders within the school, literacy coaches can support faculty and student learning. When faculty learning extends beyond the individual and becomes a feature of school-wide collaborative practice, the opportunity for lasting change is enhanced (Allington, 2009; Casey, 2006; Hall, 2004). Our contention is that in schools where literacy coaching is firmly established, an opportunity exists to enhance collaborative, professional, school-wide learning.

**Methods**

As a response to NCLB, the State of Ohio implemented a continuous improvement planning model (OIP), which requires schools and districts in Academic Watch and Academic Emergency (the two lowest rankings) to create focused plans that specifically address student success and need. One resource the OIP model provides is literacy coaches. OIP’s use of literacy coaches differs from that of other coaching models in that its coaches are not embedded in the school nor are they school or district employees. Assigned to schools with poor academic performance as measured by state achievement tests, the coaches are content area experts focusing on best-practices for literacy education in high-need elementary and middle schools.

Coaches are trained by the state to have strong knowledge and skills focused on the improvement of reading and writing (e.g., decoding, fluency, and comprehension theory, strategies and pedagogies) across the full K-8 spectrum of grades. When initially hired, coaches must have prior teaching experience as well as advanced coursework in literacy. Literacy coaches serve as resources to schools and help to focus the efforts of leadership, faculty and staff toward school-wide improvement. To direct their support of teachers, literacy coaches utilized research-based tools that included Classroom Instruction that Works (Marzano, Pickering, and Pollack, 2001), the Comprehension Toolkit (Harvey and Goudvis, 2005), and Words Their Way (Bear, Invernizzi, Templeton, and Johnson, 2008) as well as employing modeling teaching, co-teaching and walkthrough exercises for feedback. Coaches chose instructional strategies based on their fit with identified student needs and their classification and recognition as best-practice learning. Additionally, coaches read books on literacy coaching by Allen (2006) and Casey (2006) to assist them in carrying out their work as coaches.

A second goal of the coaching model is to develop within the faculty and staff the capacity to serve as resources for one another as a means to improved practice in teaching. Coaches received monthly training in mentoring school improvement efforts, data collection for and analysis of student literacy learning and developing professional learning targeted at achieving these results. In this way, professional learning was targeted at the immediate gaps in the skill-sets of students in each building while offering teachers a wider variety of literacy practices that would address student needs over time.

**Sampling and Participant Data**

In this study, we employed purposive sampling (Merriam, 1988), focusing on two elementary and two middle schools that had evidenced progress toward academic goals over a two-year period. Purposive sampling is predicated on the supposition that the researcher(s) are
seeking to “discover, understand, [and] gain insight” and must therefore select samples from which the most can be learned (Merriam, 1988, p. 48). By studying schools that had already evidenced progress toward student achievement as reflected in state report card rankings, our thinking suggested that understanding what happened in those schools would advance the improvement effort. Progress was defined by improvement on all aspects of the academic data as tested by the state achievement tests and presented in the state report card and internal formal measures of summative assessment (e.g., grades on student summative testing, pre-and post-tests in literacy and increased attendance.)

Our data set included principals, state-assigned literacy coaches and teachers from schools that had demonstrated improvement within the past two years. This study relies on data from representative participants in our targeted schools. Table 1 shows the arrays contextual data and state report card improvement rankings concerning the participants.

### Table 1. Participant data

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School</th>
<th>School Level and State Ranking</th>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Participant Role</th>
<th>Years Coaching or Leadership Experience/Years in Education</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ash Elementary</td>
<td>K-5 Academic Watch upgraded to Continuous Improvement</td>
<td>E. B.</td>
<td>Principal</td>
<td>3/17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>T. F.</td>
<td>Former Literacy coach/Teacher</td>
<td>10/20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>J. M.</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td>0/8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>J. H.</td>
<td>Literacy Coach</td>
<td>5/19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maple Elementary</td>
<td>K-4 Academic Emergency upgraded to Academic Watch</td>
<td>S. F.</td>
<td>Principal</td>
<td>6/18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>R. J.</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td>0/7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>M. G.</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td>0/11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>D. T.</td>
<td>Literacy Coach</td>
<td>6/23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cedar Middle</td>
<td>6-8 Academic Watch upgraded to Continuous Improvement</td>
<td>T. K.</td>
<td>Principal</td>
<td>3/19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>R. H.</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td>0/20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>A. B.</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td>0/6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>D. B.</td>
<td>Literacy Coach</td>
<td>9/20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elms Middle</td>
<td>5-8 Continuous Improvement upgraded to Effective</td>
<td>R. G.</td>
<td>Principal</td>
<td>6/12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>G. S.</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td>0/29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>S. C.</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td>0/14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>J. C.</td>
<td>Literacy Coach</td>
<td>1/23</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Interviews and Data Analysis

The study used a range of predetermined questions, which were informed by the literature of professional learning and literacy coaching. However, questions were applied flexibly and modified to reflect the particular circumstances of the school. The questions served as a guide to conversation about school improvement through literacy coaching rather than as a formal orally adminis-tered survey (Yin, 2009).

Interviews lasted about an hour and occurred over a period of several months. In some cases, formal follow-up interviews were held. In others, informal interviews were scheduled for clarification on a particular point or idea. In all, over three-dozen hours of interviews were completed, averaging two one-hour interviews per participant (N=32). Interviews were conducted using Live scribe technology, allowing us to take notes while recording the interview, and upload the notes and the recording prior to transcription.

Interview items were designed to mirror one another to ensure that teachers, literacy coaches and principals all answered similar items. For example, teachers were asked, “In what ways has literacy coaching affected your classroom practice?” likewise, principals and literacy coaches were asked, “In what ways has literacy coaching affected classroom practices in your school?” Probes included items about curriculum planning, instructional practices, student assessment and evaluation of the efficacy of the coaching model. Questions such as, “How has your participation in literacy coaching affected your relationships with other teachers at your grade level?” were asked in parallel formats.

In addition to interviews, all four coaches were observed working with teachers either individually or in small groups for three full sessions (N=12). Observations were followed by discussions about role enactment, professional resources and support, and the place of the literacy coach within the school context. Field notes were completed after each observation session and provided a context for interviews.
Analysis was approached with the goal of discerning patterns across all of the collected data (Miles and Huberman, 1994). Data were first coded for material directly related to the foundational literature for the study. Examples of codes used in the first round of analysis included, student learning, progress and achievement, trust, safety and power within the coaching relationship, openness to improvement and change, and the value of professional development opportunities. This allowed us to locate specific instances in the data where existing literature could be used to explain the ways participants described their experiences.

A second set of codes focused on the ways the data were linked to each other (Miles and Huberman, 1994; Yin, 2009), targeting how literacy coaches and school leaders talked about teachers' learning within the school, school culture, transfer of learning to the teaching process, processes of collaborative learning and working relationships with other faculty. Finally, data were reviewed for evidence that offered stories of professional learning within the school setting and the ways change was fostered or impeded. Here we looked for stories that encompassed several related coding themes. In these cases, codes included stories of improved teaching in which teachers observed direct evidence of improved student learning as measured by formative and summative classroom measures and state testing results and stories of how coaching refined or honed professional practice that generated unexpected results.

### Findings

As our analysis developed, we identified three interrelated layers of findings. We begin by addressing our first research question: Do school leaders and teachers credit literacy coaching with contributing to improved practice in the school? First, we present findings related to changes in classroom instruction. Second, we identify findings that offer insights into the ways school leaders supported the goals of literacy coaching. Third, we identify the ways teacher talk changed as a result of adopting a literacy-coaching model. Findings from the data on school leadership and teacher talk offer insights into how literacy coaches can affect the ways school reform is accepted and developed in schools.

We then address the second research question that guided the study—in what ways do elementary and middle school leaders and teachers transfer the process of coaching to other school improvement efforts. Here we present findings and draw conclusions about the state of individual and professional learning within these schools. Finally, we offer insights into the ways this study can inform the literature on coaching and professional learning.

### Coaching and Instructional Improvement

Participants credited the literacy-coaching model for an “improved” school-wide vision for literacy learning and were able to identify specific ways literacy teaching had developed. Responses suggested that in each school the presence of the literacy coach contributed to the growth of a school culture that focused on learning for teachers and students. Teacher learning was generally related to innovative instructional practices. Participants’ defined student learning as increased fluency, decoding skills, comprehension (all foci of the professional learning sessions by the coaches) and “more students on grade level.” Participants noted that the presence of literacy coaches created a “teaching culture that focuses on evidence” for “what works” and “how kids are really doing.” These findings echoed the coaching focus on proven strategies with the potential to positively affect student-learning outcomes (Marzano, 2001) in conjunction with formative assessment data to inform future teaching decisions.

When discussing how literacy instruction had improved, participants credited both modeling and co-teaching as most important. As Ash Elementary School literacy coach J. H. described it, I’m always careful to first model how instruction should look. Then I discuss what I did with the teacher and work to help them to understand what aspects of the lesson they should be learning from. Then we co-teach several lessons. There I can be sure that the teacher is using the new skills and they understand what students should be doing. If kids aren’t responding like I think they should, I let the teacher know and help them figure out [next steps].

J. H.’s description highlights two additional benefits of the literacy coach to improved instruction—follow-up support and the development of an instructional inquiry model where teachers look to student achievement/progress to inform instructional choices. The ability of the coach to engage in on-going classroom-level interventions where teachers received “specific and immediate” feedback concerning their teaching practice was credited as “expand[ing] my understanding of what I do as I am doing it.”

Data from the middle schools suggested similar findings. In fact, we expected to find differences between the ways middle school literacy coaches described their work, since literacy in the middle grades differs significantly from that of early readers. Instead, the instructional themes suggested by middle school coaches echoed those of the elementary coaches. They too, commented on increased attention to formative assessment, the collection of classroom level evidence of student learning and best-practice pedagogical skill sets.

As D. B., literacy coach at Cedar Middle School noted, “The added benefit is that we can use best assessment
practice and provide immediate formative feedback to teachers on their teaching." She added, “When a literacy coach poses a reflective question it’s far less of a gotcha. When I ask how they know kids are learning, it’s an easy shift to a discussion about classroom level evidence.” As R. G., principal at Elms Middle School remarked, One of the added gains is the fact that when my teachers meet in team meetings, their discussion is better informed and they feel good about working together to solve all the kinds of [classroom] problems that they face.

Literacy coaches “made safe” the discussion of effective classroom practices. Early in the process, teachers looked almost exclusively to the literacy coach for assistance. Later, teachers began to look to each other for help in addressing instructional problems and concerns, and developed a stronger school-wide learning culture.

**Instructional leadership roles**

School leaders established, communicated, connected and supported individual learning of classroom teachers. Within these roles, principals were observed providing positive feedback for research and evidence-based practice, focusing on identifying areas of need and support, helping to develop a shared vocabulary for discussions concerning literacy practice and supporting content and instructional expertise. Ash Elementary School principal E. B. shared, “My job is to support the work [the literacy coach] does”. When teachers do what’s expected of them I praise it. When they fail to implement activities and ideas that they should I hold them accountable. I ask why they haven’t used that technique or why they keep doing something like round robin reading. I expect them to talk about the activities so that others know what they mean and so that others are aware that at Ash we work together to improve. I’m very clear that it is an expectation that our teaching improves in every classroom every day.”

Teachers we observed and interviewed reinforced this focus. As J. M., an Ash teacher, discussed, “My principal acts like one of us. Sort-of. I mean, [she] knows what we’re trying to do in our classrooms and when we do it, she’s really there for us”. Like at meetings she gives awards for trying new activities and stuff. Also, she’s around a lot, she ‘walks the talk’ and even will co-teach. So we know that when she says she understands how to do something or how hard something is, it’s not like she’s bs-ing. It makes me feel like this is something I should work hard on to get right.

Another role principals assumed, was one of interpreter or “go-between” in service of improved literacy instruction. School leaders, with the assistance of literacy coaches, were described as central to the development of coherent school-wide best practices. Leaders provided resources while supporting the slow process of learning by focusing on steady, rather than immediate, improvement(s). Ash literacy coach J. H. stated, “No matter how you look at this, it takes time for teachers to learn new things. When I can work with the principal so that he or she understands that change can’t happen overnight and that improvement won’t happen if only the second grade does this well, it’s better. The other thing that matters a lot is helping everyone understand that this isn’t about learning a few new tricks, this is about changing the way we approach literacy instruction. Things aren’t going to turn around overnight, teachers really need to learn new ways of thinking about how reading and writing are taught and then, talk with each other about their classroom work so that they can support each other.”

The Cedar Middle School principal echoed this notion stating, “I’ve learned that if I want this to last and have impact, I need to keep my attention on these ideas. If I drop the ball and expect that it’s gonna keep going because it should, I’m not living in the real world. I’ve been doing this a long time and one thing I’ve learned is that getting people to keep doing good things takes support…. My job is to help them along the way to let them know that I’m behind them and that we want our successes to build on each other and not just for the scores to shoot up and then drop again.”

Much has been made of the importance of supportive leadership if change efforts are to be successful. The introduction of the literacy coach in the school provided principals a compass for their improvement efforts. When the two worked in concert the school leader found it far easier to “stay the course” of instructional improvement.

**Teacher talk**

A central feature of the literacy-coaching model was a focus on developing an inter-classroom, grade-level/team literacy conversation. Given that learning outcomes spiral over time, the development of teacher conversations about literacy was essential to the institutionalization of the literacy-coaching model. OIP sponsored coaches’ leave the school after a state determination the school is no longer a concern. Thus, coaches understood that internal capacity had to be developed for on-going improvement to be maintained. In essence, a key goal for literacy coaches was to develop a model for professional (double-loop) learning in these schools.

Teachers’ conversations fell into two main areas. The first was informed by the sharing of “new” ideas and practices. This conversation was technical in nature. Teachers talked about what they learned and tried. Elms Middle School teacher G. S. described, “We get together and share ideas. I [share] how I used something new and then they tell me something that worked in their room... We offer suggestions like, next time when I do
Principals were not immune to this concern either. As they pushed them to be better, it's all still too nicey nice. Classroom practice, but they are not sufficient to sustain practices are necessary to jump-start changes in what we do. That's all good. It's not enough. I've grown a lot. Our culture has changed. We talk more about what isn't going well. Those conversations, literacy coaches questioned whether enough instructional detail or specificity was present to support learning after they left. As J. C., Elms Middle School literacy coach stated, "We'd really like to see teachers doing more encouraging of alternative practices when evidence suggests other pedagogies are less effective. We'd like to see them talking with each other, looking at their formative data and using it to make decisions about instruction. They're not there yet. That concerns me because we'll be out of here once their scores improve. I worry that they'll wind up stuck again. That they'll plateau before they become really expert."

Similarly, Maple Elementary literacy coach D. T., expressed, "That they're talking is a good thing". It's better than when they all closed their doors, but it's not enough. They need to be able to challenge each other, to push them to be better. It's still too nicey nice. Principals were not immune to this concern either. As Ash Elementary School principal E. B. stated, "We've grown a lot. Our culture has changed. We talk more about what we do. That's all good. It's not enough. I need to kick the conversation up a notch and get them talking about what isn't going well. Those conversations have to happen. We need to learn how to make them happen."

That the school leader and coach were able to identify that teacher-to-teacher conversation had not yet reached the depth it might have been an interesting finding. It suggests that in the introduction of new research based best practices are necessary to jump-start changes in classroom practice, but they are not sufficient to sustain continued growth. In this way, the importance of ongoing support of and accountability for the implementation of new practices is underscored.

Coaching and Professional Learning

In this study we sought to determine if the introduction of the literacy-coaching model had the potential to increase professional learning in schools. Here we address our second research question—In what ways do school leaders and teachers transfer the process of coaching to other school improvement efforts? We discuss the ways the adoption of coaching influenced other areas of pedagogical practice within the school and the ways coaching affected the school's broader improvement efforts. Our findings are organized into two categories. The first targets the relationships among members of the school community and how those relationships affect school-wide professional learning. The second addresses the elasticity of the coaching model's potential to improve student-learning outcomes.

Relationships

It has been long understood that relationships matter for school improvement efforts to be effective (Crespo, 2006; Cosner, 2011; Hargreaves, 1994; Little and Curry, 2009; Tschannen-Moran, 2004). We identified four prevalent kinds of professional relationships—coach/teacher, principal/coach, teacher/teacher and principal/teacher—that strongly affected the ways work is accomplished and new ideas are adopted. Coach/teacher relationships were characterized as mentoring relationships. Using a combination of small group and individual meetings, coaches provided the largest amount of new information and feedback on improvements to teaching efforts. Coaches were widely viewed as, "knowing best-practice" and "being here to help." Principal/coach relationships were the most variable. Some principals worked closely with coaches to learn literacy content as deeply as the teaching staff. Others allowed the coach to provide external expertise and supported the effort (e.g., providing time for teachers to work together.) In these cases, principals were not threatened by the presence of the coach and welcomed the additional support. Literacy coach D. B. described the principal/coach relationship at Cedar Middle School, "Together we figure out what the plan is. Then it's my job to be sure the teachers get the goods. [The principal] supports me in making sure those strategies get used." In Maple Elementary, third grade teacher M. G. described the relationship as supportive. "If they disagree they do it behind closed doors and we don't know about it. But I don't think they disagree. I think [our principal] knows that we're lucky to have [our coach] and really wants to get as much as we can out of her."

Teacher-to-teacher and principal-to-teacher relationships evolved most across the study. As evidenced in other research (Bryk and Schneider 2002, Dexter, Louis and Anderson, 2009; Scribner et al, 1999), the development of trust broke down older patterns of isolation and cynicism. As teachers learned about literacy instruction and became adept at talking about "what works," and basing those conversations on the kinds of practices the literacy coaches stressed, they became more likely to
share ideas and work together. However, our primary interest concerned what was learned and how it was used across the school setting. Coaches, principals and teachers alike reported that the model contributed to improved instruction in most teachers’ classrooms. In all four schools, teachers were better able to use professional language in discussing their practice and identifying specific interventions with the potential to address student-learning concerns. As Maple Elementary Principal S. F. reflected, “I can just hear it when they talk… it’s like we are finally speaking the same language. We know what a miscue is and when somebody talks about one we all get it.” Furthermore, individual learning was evidenced in team meetings. Teachers reported that, they “shared thinking,” “talked more than ever,” and “used our meeting time to do ‘real’ work.” When pressed to define “real work,” teacher A. B. from Cedar Middle School stated, “You know, talking about kids and teaching, learning and what we do when we teach, or asking if someone could come and watch me and tell me what I could do better.” In these ways, teachers evidenced that they were employing the ideas they were learning from the coaches related to classroom formative assessment and subsequent responsive instructional choices and were engaging in dialogue with each other about what was learned and how it was used in their classes. Certainly, slight improvements cannot mitigate overall poor student performance nor can fragmented or inconsistent adoption assure student success. However, when vigorous attention is paid to the consistent use of best-practice literacy strategies, student-learning results can be attained. Where we were less encouraged was in the ability of school personnel to generalize what they had learned from the coaching model and apply it in new ways to the other problems they faced.

Professional learning

In probing for evidence of double-loop learning, we concluded that it is less likely to occur in schools where reflective practice models and trust are not already in place. Positional power is a concern. Our analysis suggests that these literacy coaches lacked the systemic positional power to encourage broad learning in the absence of on-the-ground encouragement, time and structures for such learning to occur. Without more consistent assistance to develop a culture where professional learning is a high-priority goal, it appears unlikely to be generated on its own. Our data suggest that collaboration and dialogue beyond technical conversation remains weak. Inasmuch as the literacy coach was provided to primarily address the technical aspects of instructional practice, this is not remarkable. Additionally, the literacy coaches we interviewed viewed themselves as triage specialists, focusing energy on the development of specific practices and evidence of student learning rather than on working to help teachers examine their own practice in meaningful ways. In part, coaches lacked time to develop more subtle understandings and practices among teachers. As D. B. a middle school literacy coach stated, “I think part [of the problem] is time, which is hard for me to accept, I want everything to be perfect for our students right now… I think there’s a culture we are slowly building, again it’s not as fast as I’d like it to be, but we’re getting there.” In other words, although one of the stated goals of embedding coaches in these schools was to develop capacity for teachers to learn to address their own problems of practice, it was difficult for coaches to help teachers reach this goal.

To engage in critical conversations about pedagogical practices, teachers and school leaders appear to require assistance beyond understanding content knowledge. Time is often identified as a limiting factor to school success. In these cases, coaching conversations created an awareness that current practice needed to shift. However, teachers lacked adequate time to resolve and fully address problems as they surfaced. Our conclusion is supported by Schon (1987, 1988), who contends that reflective practice is a craft that must be learned and practiced in order for it to mature and produce effect.

Coaching as an elastic model

Repeatedly, we found that these schools were looking for one-to-one matches between problems and solutions. We concluded that the coaching model was less elastic than was hoped. As Elms Middle School coach J. C. suggested, “Even though we focus on literacy content we are supposed to help these buildings to learn how to teach kids [more effectively] no matter what. The literacy content is supposed to get them started learning how to learn. We’re just not there yet.” In each of these settings, we discovered that not only were literacy coaching efforts less likely to be braided to other improvement efforts, these other efforts were less likely to be linked to each other as well. Teachers, even those who were enthusiastic about the progress both they and their students had made, often didn’t see linkages between the improvements initiatives present within the school. As R. H. a seventh grade history teacher at Cedar Middle School remarked, “I get how my kids are doing better since I started using the reading and writing ideas [our coach] told us about. I get that when I talk with my team about the kids we are all on the same page and that help ‘em. What I don’t understand is how all this other stuff fits in. It seems like we are just getting good at this one thing and now we’re supposed to do all this other stuff. I just don’t get it.” High-quality professional learning requires that
individual learning permeate the school in ways that inform the assumptions and beliefs on which practice is based. As school-wide behaviors and actions are examined, change is fostered when more efficacious models replace less useful patterns. Teachers in this study were passionate about the ways incorporating literacy could serve their students. However, they were unable or unwilling to move beyond learning these new practices to thinking about other equally pressing areas of need.

While we did not observe direct resistance to examining the beliefs on which the school operated, we did observe a lack of imagination concerning what the school might become. In each of these four schools, the ways teachers and principals sought to compartmentalize, rather than expand their new practices, struck us as counter-productive to their stated goals. As S. C., a teacher at Elms Middle School, asserted, “I get that we have to improve on all fronts. I’m hoping they have a math coach next year. Then I could really start working with my kids!” She went on to add, “We’ve done so well talking about literacy, and I think we’ve met that goal, but we need time to focus on other subjects if we’re going to stay effective.” S. C. was not alone in this thinking. Other teachers made similar comments. Particularly telling was a comment from M. G., a teacher at Maple Elementary, “I like all this time to talk with [other teachers] about what I’m doing, but I kind-of miss the days when I could close my door and be left alone.” Ironically, his principal was strongly in favor of instruction. She asserted, “I get that we have to improve on all fronts. I’m hoping the teachers see the value in collaborative time. I pressed on this point, the principal’s response was, “I’m a teacher at Maple Elementary, “I like all this time to talk with my kids!” She went on to add, “We’ve done so well talking about literacy, and I think we’ve met that goal, but we need time to focus on other subjects if we’re going to stay effective.”

Furthermore, these comments were instructive as a lesson for other schools using a coaching model to increase teaching effectiveness. Even though Marzano’s strategies are not subject-specific, seemingly, because they were introduced as part of a literacy initiative, they were not identified as readily transferring to other subject area contexts. Our findings suggest that it is necessary to engage fully in discussions that underscore when practices are robust enough to be used across content and instructional settings.

Conclusions

While we were encouraged that the provision of literacy coaches in these settings created conditions that fostered individual content area knowledge, we were less persuaded such learning could generalize to other aspects of the school reform agenda. Specifically, even though coaches attempted to engage teachers and school leaders in conversations that included more than literacy education foci, they were less able to sustain those efforts. Perhaps this is due to the fact that coach’s attentions were focused on helping teachers to learn immediate literacy strategies. Additionally, the model examined lacked intermediate steps related to school-wide learning across multiple content areas and disciplines. Furthermore, it is possible that the agenda was too large for the amount of time coaches were placed in these schools. Another possibility is that teachers’ approaches to disciplines other than literacy may differ in subtle or major ways. This could affect what teachers talk about and how they talk about it when working together.

Our data suggests that a tension exists between developing individual learning about instruction (e.g., strategies to improve comprehension) and developing professional learning that informs the knowledge and practice of school-wide improvement (e.g., reflective dialogue concerning the purposes of developing deep student understanding.) The development of a broad school-wide learning culture, “made safe” by coaches and school leaders, has the potential to cultivate these outcomes. We suggest that the conversation concerning school improvement efforts requires another layer of discussion, one in which reform efforts are more tightly linked to broad goals for the school in tandem with specific content area learning.

We believe that schools can create the capacity to address reforms with the potential to significantly impact the learning of all members of the school community. Attention to both student and teacher learning is an important factor in attaining this goal. Adequate time, support and access to expertise, enhances the potential for schools to reach it.

References
