

From Expert to Coach: The Changing Role of the Reading Facilitator in a School with a Scripted Reading Program

by LeAnne K. Robinson

School districts often question how they can successfully integrate a reading coach into a highly structured literacy program. One school in a medium-sized suburban district shares how the role of the reading facilitator was enhanced when coaching principles were used and the focus was put on peer support and student learning.

Author's Note: The use of scripted materials is a hotly debated topic. Listservs are full of concerns and complaints from excellent educators who feel constrained and restricted by such programs or materials. But once a large financial investment has been made in any program or materials, those responsible for its implementation are very reluctant to change. Often teachers do not have the option of leaving a school when they philosophically disagree with the direction that the literacy program is taking. This particular overview is meant to provide frustrated reading teachers with a glimmer of hope as they see how one particular district has spent time examining how to move beyond the literacy script and effectively use the reading facilitator as a coach.

Making the decision to use literacy coaching in a particular school is an interesting and multifaceted process. There are many avenues that schools follow in searching for a model or practice that meets the school's needs and fits within their culture. One school district in western Washington demonstrates that an ongoing professional development process combined with a commitment to understanding literacy has transformed teachers' reading instruction. What initially began as a top-down, highly structured approach to literacy instruction evolved to become a highly reflective program that includes a dynamic coaching component.

History

In 1998, the six elementary principals in a mid-sized school district began meeting regularly over an informal Sunday breakfast to discuss school-wide change. Their conversations were prompted by the availability of substantial state-funded School Improvement Grants for schools willing to participate in education reform efforts. Teachers and administrators alike were concerned by both low reading scores on standardized assessments and by the number of struggling readers in their schools. As a starting point, the principals read *Beginning to Read: Thinking and Learning about Print* (Adams, 1990). They invited a local educational consultant to join the conversations, which focused on research and key elements of quality literacy instruction.

One of the six principals had recently adopted a "comprehensive and structured school-wide approach" to literacy. The staff from this school were excited about the new program; they felt that they finally had an approach to reading instruction that was making a difference in student achievement. As they shared their enthusiasm for their approach, teachers in the remaining elementary schools became more interested in examining a scripted program. By the end of 1998, teachers from the first school had been invited to share at faculty meetings in all of the other schools. This was an opportune time for an increased interest in literacy, as the district's reading materials were up for adoption.

By 1999 each individual school had gone through a decision-making process, the result of which was a school improvement plan. Each of the schools elected to adopt the scripted model. This influenced the district reading adoption committee's decision to select the K-6 basal series Open Court, which could be used with the scripted materials. Although the total package represented a huge financial investment, the district, including both teachers and members of the school board, felt that this was necessary to move the instructional program forward.

Type of Approach

This particular program is marketed as a comprehensive reading restructuring program. It involves multiple components, such as intensive early intervention and tutoring, cooperative grouping, and an emphasis on the integration of phonics and meaning-focused instruction. It also includes the use of scripted materials and a reading facilitator. When this program was initially adopted, the reading facilitator at each school (generally an existing school staff member) was released from the responsibilities of a regular classroom. He or she assisted in monitoring the implementation of the program, which included overseeing assessment, interpreting assessment results, and scheduling students. In addition, the reading facilitator was available to assist staff members with instructional challenges. Initially the reading facilitators were primarily concerned with program implementation, as the structure and expectations were clearly laid out through initial training sessions in which using the materials as prescribed was paramount. Teachers had varying perceptions of the role of the facilitator during the early years of the adoption, sometimes describing the facilitator as "an expert in the program" or "expert in literacy." At times, the line between peer support and "administrator" became blurry, creating tension and challenges in teacher-facilitator interactions.

Within a few years, the teachers had become familiar with the processes and concepts involved in the program, and the facilitators and administrators found themselves less concerned with the fidelity of implementation. Teachers were using the program in the way they had been trained, but they found themselves wanting to build on what was working to develop deeper understandings of literacy and continue the steady improvement of reading scores. It was at this point that the role of the reading facilitator began to change: facilitators developed collaborative partnerships with their peers and their role came to include that of coach.

Current Practice

This school district's scripted program has been in place for over six years now. During that time, the facilitator's role has shifted from that of the expert to the role of a peer-coach, utilizing reflective practices. In the early years, the reading facilitator focused heavily on program implementation, making sure that the program was being used correctly, that students were being assessed, and that the assessment was responsible for student placement in reading groups. In some instances, this role became problematic. Some teachers felt they were being watched and evaluated, but not necessarily supported. As a result of these concerns, district administrators and school staff spent a lot of time redefining the role of the facilitator. What they found was the need for a clear distinction between the evaluation responsibilities of an administrator and the coaching role of the reading facilitator.

Now the facilitator works in a collaborative partnership *with* the teachers, not necessarily *for* the principal. The reading facilitator will process an instructional situation with a teacher and serve as a resource, perhaps covering a class so that the teacher can observe a colleague or finding a professional development opportunity for something that the teacher has identified as a need. When asked how this new role matched with what the program requires, the facilitator commented,

It is based on student need. It started scripted, but you don't know what you need to change until you start to change. Our model is constantly changing.

This particular facilitator went on to explain that as a school, they are finding that the program is not necessarily meeting the needs of the English language learners. They know this by examining the assessment information. But instead of trying to determine where the program was not being implemented appropriately, staff are actively seeking professional development related to meeting the needs of their targeted population and planning on incorporating best practices during the upcoming school year. These changes are not part of a script. They are identified by the teachers as additional instructional needs. After six years, teachers in this district are able to have deep conversations on literacy and assessment, and are willing to actively seek opportunities to self-assess instructional practices.

How did this change occur? An influential factor was the ongoing professional development for district staff. One such opportunity was a cognitive coaching training program (CCC, 2004) that made reflective practice and coaching principles key components of an overall literacy program. Coaches (facilitators) continue to assist with assessments; however, there is a clear distinction made between the role of evaluator and the role of peer coach. Facilitators assist teachers in finding solutions to instructional problems, including the identification of peer supports and professional development resources.

One teacher described how much more empowering the cognitive coaching component has made the literacy program. She said that initially the reading facilitator might come into a classroom and tell the teacher what to do with a student who was having a challenge. Now, instead of the facilitator approaching the teacher, the teacher approaches the facilitator, who will listen to the problem and ask the teacher what he or she thinks needs to happen. Generally the teacher is able to identify an intervention or needed support and the reading facilitator then serves as an additional resource.

In one particular school recently, 78.7% of the students passed the reading section of Washington's Assessment of Student Learning (WASL). Six years earlier, less than 29% of students passed the WASL. It should be noted that the majority of students are from lower income families, and there is a large portion of English language learners.

Suggestions for Getting Started

The decision to implement a scripted program in any school or district is not without controversy. An administrator in this district, who has been involved with the development of the reading program from the beginning, discussed common misunderstandings about some

scripted programs. Realizing that there is often the perception that there is only one way to appropriately use a program he explained,

This is *our* reading program. We have moved well beyond the initial script, but the changes have been worked in *with* the support and help of the Program staff... We have flexibility... We evolve instruction and strategies by looking at student performance, we think and grow the program, ... and what you focus on in year one versus year five or six should be different things.

The use of cognitive coaching is one of those changes that has enhanced this district's program.

After six years of experience, this school district has several key tips for the successful use of reading facilitators, or coaches. First, the role of the coach must be clearly defined. They learned that even though responsibilities for the facilitator are laid out by the program, there needs to be a curtain between peer support and the evaluative role that is played by the principal. Because the reading facilitator's position is full time, there is the potential for time to be diverted to administrative duties that are not focused on literacy. This is especially true in the initial years of implementation.

Second, the role of the reading facilitator must be held by a staff member who is trusted and respected. One administrator shared that although a background in literacy is beneficial, it is far more important that the facilitator be a trusted colleague. Any necessary literacy skills can be developed through professional trainings, which should be offered regularly and as needed. The person filling the facilitator's role should also be someone who enjoys working with adults and loves learning. Finally, districts that decide to use scripts and reading facilitators need to recognize that professional development needs will change over time. Processes and supports are not static. The support for the coaches that was initially provided in 1998 looks radically different today, and the administration realizes that it will look different tomorrow. As teachers' skill sets develop and classroom practices change, the role of the reading facilitator must continue to evolve. Using a highly structured program does not mean that teachers and coaches can't work together, or that instructional practices can't be altered to meet the needs of individual learners. This district believes that the ongoing commitment both to their program and to additional professional development has been worth the investment.

References

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