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Introduction: Coaches as Intellectuals

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Introduction: Coaches as Intellectuals

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The intellectual always stands between loneliness and alignment.
—Edward Said (1996, p. 22)

Walpole and McKenna (2008) defined literacy coaching as “a strategy for implementing a professional support system for teachers, a system that includes research or theory, demonstration, practice, and feedback” (p. 1). They contended that sometimes literacy coaches are positioned as “middle managers” in schools or districts as they negotiate boundaries and policies. We also recognize the middle-ness of literacy coaches and believe that such in-between-ness can be taken up in managerial ways and also in powerful, transformative ways.

Postcolonial theorist Edward Said (1996) offered a subject position of intellectual we find useful for reimagining the literacy coach as someone who “stands between loneliness and alignment” (p. 22). This intellectual/literacy coach would be constantly negotiating the treacherous fields between classrooms and administrative offices, between children and teachers, between teachers and administrators, between school and community, between theory and practice. In other words, within this precarious and powerful position—the never complete insider, never complete outsider—we believe literacy coaches can stand up and be the important intellectuals we so desperately need in our schools. Those intellectuals/literacy coaches would belong, from Said’s perspective, on the side of the weak and underrepresented.

We argue that in the context of literacy teaching and learning in contemporary United States, the weak and underrepresented includes generations of youth who have been underserved or completely marginalized by and

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through language and literacy in the classroom. In addition, the weak and underrepresented may be many of their teachers who feel powerless under current federal and state mandates. Therefore, our hope is that literacy coaches and other teacher leaders can and do engage themselves as intellectuals working side by side and on the side of those pushed to the edges of social, economic, and political power in educational institutions.

A LOOK BACKWARD TO THE RATIONALE FOR COACHING

Writing about literacy coaching has been largely concentrated on practice and has only recently been studied systematically (Sailors & Shanklin, 2010). The rationale behind funding literacy coach positions in schools emerged from research and theory advocating for long-term, ongoing professional development that provides teachers with the support they need to be successful literacy educators. The field of practice, then, has emerged in opposition to a traditional approach to professional development focusing on one-time “sit-and-get” learning opportunities that often have little impact on teacher understanding or practice (American Educational Research Association, 2005; Anders, Hoffman, & Duffy, 2000; Hirsh, 2001; Sykes, 1996). One presumably powerful aspect of literacy coaching, then, is that teachers are a part of ongoing professional development within their own schools and classrooms that is responsive to the situated context in which a teacher works. Literacy coaches, in theory, are positioned to enact sustained professional development that has the potential for both teachers and students to experience and live literacy differently inside the classroom.

Schools and districts approaching literacy-focused professional development from a coaching perspective often believe that investing time and resources in the people who work with students of all ages will better position individual teachers to meet the needs of diverse students in literacy classrooms (Neufeld & Roper, 2002, 2003a, 2003b; Sailors & Shanklin, 2010). When these funding initiatives and policies meet daily practice, however, literacy coaching comes down to one adult working with another or a group of adults coming together to focus on their own—and their students’—growth through literacies. And although growing, the research focused on literacy coaching is minimal and points to both potential benefits (Biancarosa, Bryk, & Dexter, 2010; Elish-Piper & L’Allier, 2007, 2008; Matsumura, Garnier, Correnti, Junker, & Bickel, 2010; Smith, 2007; Stephens et al., 2007) and complications (Ippolito, 2010; Rainville & Jones, 2008; Smith, 2007). Most of the literature published widely includes individual accounts of coaching and focuses more on the day-to-day work of individual coaches and narrative reflections of practice, with little attention focused on theoretical or ideological orientations of coaching or the pedagogical impact on marginalized youth.
Literacy coaching is situated within a broader context of adult learning, adult literacies, and learning across the lifespan among other scholarly fields of inquiry. A significant body of research and practice that is not typically cited as “literacy coaching” exists, with some described as professional development (Ball, 2009; Cahnmann-Taylor, Wooten, Souto-Manning, & Dice, 2009; Lieberman & Miller, 2001) and others as teacher learning communities (Allen, 1999; Lyons & Pinnell, 2001; McLaughlin & Zarrow, 2001; National Staff Development Council, 2001; Rogers, 2009; Rogers et al. 2005). We hope to redraw the lines of literacy coaching scholarship to include teachers, teacher leaders, and faculty facilitators who are conducting research on practices of empowering literacy educators and youth. In other words, we join colleagues in work that aims to not colonize minds, bodies, or practices in school settings based on top-down mandates or methods assumed to work best with certain kinds of students. In this issue we circle around broad theories and pedagogies that can teach us how to be more responsive and responsible with educators and youth who find themselves in vulnerable positions in society and school.

This themed issue of Reading & Writing Quarterly includes 17 scholars from the intersecting fields of literacy coaching, new literacies, new literacy studies, early literacy, adolescent literacy, and critical literacies. Each of these scholars is intensely committed to issues of equity and justice, entering that work from multiple and creative vantage points. To facilitate dialogue, two scholarly responses have been crafted to accompany each full-length article—one response from a scholar (or scholars) who does research in the field of what is typically defined as literacy coaching, and one from a scholar (or scholars) who is more situated in the broader field of literacy studies. Readers will be informed and inspired by the authors’ collective wisdom for reimagining the literacy coach as the intellectual and who “cannot be mistaken for an anonymous functionary or careful bureaucrat” (Said, 1996, p. 13). Our hope is that readers will find the issue both intellectually stimulating and practical.

Coaching for Change: Generating Dialogue About Power, Literacy, and Learning is anchored with four full-length articles, each followed by two scholarly responses. The issue begins with Stephens and Mills’s “Coaching as Inquiry: The South Carolina Reading Initiative,” chronicling a statewide initiative in reading and preparing literacy coaches. In their scholarly responses, Morrell and Cahnmann-Taylor applaud the South Carolina Reading Initiative and imagine what other practices might have opened up for coaches, coach educators, classroom teachers, community, and youth.

“Creating a New Literacies Coaching Ethos,” by Skinner, Hagood, and Provost, presents a study of two professional learning communities focused
on new literacies in the middle grades aimed at engaging youth in multiliteracies necessary for the 21st century. The authors argue for a literacy coaching ethos grounded in openness, collaboration, the sharing of ideas, colearning, and cocreating among coaches and teachers. In response, Dozier and Vasudevan consider the complexities of mandatory professional development and engage the challenges faced as presented in the article as well as those often observed in the politically charged sociocultural contexts of schools working to control bodies and minds of youth.

Rogers’s “Coaching Literacy Teachers as They Design Critical Literacy Practices” focuses on a graduate course in which Rogers coaches and documents future literacy specialists’ and coaches’ growing understandings about critical literacy and how to engage the most vulnerable elementary students for enhanced literacy learning. In the two scholarly responses, Rodgers and Tate call attention to issues around children’s experiences of reading the world and word as well as the existing frameworks used for literacy coaching as they both argue for higher quality and more intense learning experiences versus more coaching.

In “Flowing Toward Understanding: Suffering, Humility, and Compassion in Literacy Coaching,” Jones and Rainville introduce three distinct approaches to understanding power and use the approaches to analyze moment-to-moment interactions between literacy coaches and teachers. They argue for more nuanced analyses of literacy coaches’ work and advocate for compassion and humility in their positions. Hall and Campano applaud the insertion of an Eastern philosophical ethic in teaching and learning and draw from human rights activism in their own work and across the globe to examine the importance of humility and compassion under conditions of suffering and of coaches and researchers resisting temptations to control ideas and people. Reilly responds by expanding the metaphors at work in the article and suggesting the literacy coach as rhizome.

CHANGING FOR COACHES: PUSHING RESEARCH TO INFORM POWERFUL PRACTICE

Before literacy coaching emerged and expanded, Hargreaves and Dawe (1990) cautioned that administration-supported teacher development in the form of peer coaching

may in many instances not be empowering teachers towards greater professional independence at all, but incorporating them and their loyalties within purposes and structures bureaucratically determined elsewhere. They may be fostering training, not education, instructional closure rather than intellectual openness, dispositional adjustment rather than thoughtful critique. (pp. 228–229)
Hargreaves and Dawe’s call is a political one aimed at a deeper professionalization and intellectualization of teachers and teaching. These processes might be provoked and informed by literacy coaches but certainly not technocrats working on behalf of ideological institutions. The articles and responses in this issue move forward in demonstrating that when literacy coaches position themselves as intellectuals in their in-between-ness, they can encourage, nurture, and participate in collaborative cultures that work on the side of the weak and unrepresented.

As Said (1996) stated about the intellectual:

At the bottom, the intellectual, in my sense of the word, is neither a pacifier nor a consensus-builder, but someone whose whole being is staked on a critical sense, a sense of being unwilling to accept easy formulas, or ready-made clichés, or the smooth, ever-so-accommodating confirmations of what the powerful or conventional have to say, and what they do. Not just passively unwillingly, but actively willing to say so in public. (p. 23)

Readers know that there are many injustices facing teachers and students in literacy classrooms, and coaches are particularly well positioned to fight against such injustices. We hope readers of this issue will join us in our stance that literacy coaching must be a field that resists easy formulas or clichés and that it must be willing—actively, not passively—to announce its position.

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