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## The Individualization of Instruction among Literacy Coaches

Elissa Mitchell  
*St. John Fisher College*

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The Individualization of Instruction among Literacy Coaches

By

Elissa Mitchell

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Dr. Gloria E. Jacobs

Ralph C. Wilson, Jr. School of Education

St. John Fisher College

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## INDIVIDUAL INSTRUCTION AMONG LITERACY COACHES

**Abstract**

This action research looks at how literacy coaches can individualize instruction for both teachers and students. Educational theories support the importance of individualized instruction for students and previous research re-enforces the importance of individualized instruction in literacy coaching. This study involved interviewing practicing literacy coaches and literacy coaching candidates as well as first-hand experiences with literacy coaching. The findings show that the three primary ways that literacy coaches can individualize instruction is by focusing on student needs through working with students, teachers, and the school. Literacy coaches need to focus on the needs of students through working directly with classroom teachers while being aware of the needs of teachers as well.

### **The Individualization of Instruction among Literacy Coaches**

Each student within a classroom has unique and varied educational needs especially in regards to literacy. These needs are driven by the student's experiences in acquiring literacy before coming to school as well as their cultural and linguistic backgrounds (Gee, 2001; Goodman, 2001). According to Goodman, "children discover and invent literacy as they participate actively in a literate society" (p. 316). However, too often schools and the curriculum they are asked to implement are part of the dominant culture or dominant discourse and do not take into account these varied individual needs. The dominant discourse is that of the majority group, or the social group with power, prestige, and status. The dominant discourse is usually the group that determines what is read and learned in schools (Gee, 2001).

Students are often met by teachers and a curriculum that may, consciously or not, have preconceived notions of a student's ability based on their dialect, culture, and background (Heath, 1982; Meier, 2003; Wolfram, 2002). Students who use different dialects and have varied cultural backgrounds often times attend schools that "lack access to rigorous work" and offer narrow uses of literacy (Moll & Gonzalez, 2001, p. 157). As teachers try to reform students' language and disregard their cultural backgrounds, the students come to see this as a rejection of their identity and the attempts of the teacher "come to be viewed as acts of oppression" (Kucer, 2005, p. 83). This can lead to a distrust among students of teachers, the school system, and education in general, and can also potentially lead them to eventually drop out of school altogether.

Therefore, it is crucial that teachers break through the idea that students with different dialects and cultural backgrounds must conform to the dominant group. Teachers must be aware

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of their students' strengths and weaknesses in regards to literacy in order to determine the best strategies for literacy acquisition. Children carry with them to school culturally-rich experiences that impact their learning (Meier, 2003). Teachers should be aware of these experiences as well as what Moll and Gonzalez describe as "funds of knowledge" which are the "historically accumulated and culturally developed bodies of knowledge and skills essential for household or individual functioning and well-being" (Moll & Gonzalez, 2001, p. 160). This responsibility does not solely fall on the teacher, but also on the support that teacher receives from other staff members and administration.

The role of a literacy coach in a school is to be of support and guidance for teachers in the area of literacy curriculum knowledge and implementation. The International Reading Association provides a summary of the role of a literacy coach according to Poglinco, Bach, Hovde, Rosenblum, Saunders, and Supovitz:

"Coaching provides ongoing consistent support for the implementation and instruction components. It is nonthreatening and supportive – not evaluative. It gives a sense of how good professional development is. It also affords the opportunity to see it work with students" (2003, p. 42 as cited by International Reading Association, 2004).

A literacy coach's job is not simply to disseminate the curriculum mandated by the school to teachers through professional development, but to guide the teacher on the best ways to teach that curriculum to his or her students based on those students' needs.

Literacy coaching is a relatively new topic for researchers as the job of a literacy coach has only been implemented in schools over the past several years. In fact, though the International Reading Association has given literacy coaching a definition and determined

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specific qualifications for the position, most schools are still trying to understand the role of a literacy coach. Even the job title itself is still used interchangeably with other titles including reading specialist, reading coach, literacy facilitator and instructional specialist (Mraz, Algozzine, and Watson., 2008). According to Mraz, et al. (2008), “the jobs literacy coaches fill in schools are as varied as their titles” (p. 142). Researchers are now currently trying to understand what job duties make up the title of a literacy coach and how these duties could be boiled down to one set of general, but universally accepted position responsibilities.

According to the International Reading Association’s (IRA) position statement regarding reading coaches, the definition of reading coaching is described “as a means of providing professional development in schools” (2004). Professional development is a part of the greater task that literacy coaches have to guide teachers through their literacy practices. According to Walpole and Blamey (2008), a literacy coach’s “goal is to build teacher knowledge and skill so that children’s literacy achievement will be increased” (p. 222). Professional development, according to Walpole and Blamey, is not just a dissemination of information, but a process of providing the information, demonstrating how to use it in the classroom, allowing for practice by teachers, and gaining feedback from teachers in order to reflect and adjust methods as needed with the primary goal of enhancing student learning in mind.

Whatever the final noted responsibilities of a literacy coach become, if there is a general consensus, a part of the occupation that will not change is the need for coaches to be conscientious of students’ individual needs. As literacy coaches fulfill their duties as reading specialist, mentor, literacy curriculum leader, or whatever their defined role is by their school, and work with teachers, these literacy coaches must provide students with individualized instruction to be sure that the students’ specific needs are met. This goes for teachers as well,

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who also need individualized instruction from literacy coaches in order to focus on the needs of the classroom

Often times, in order to fully address students' needs, literacy coaches must demonstrate to teachers the best way to implement curriculum or help teachers to find different ways to reach their students. As a result, literacy coaches directly affect the strategies that teachers implement through guidance and coaching and must be aware of the specific needs of the teachers they coach and their students. The literacy coach must take into account students' cultural backgrounds and variations in dialect when modifying instruction in order to best teach those students not only from an educational perspective, but also from a cultural perspective. It is the responsibility of all those who affect a student's learning to be aware and sensitive to that student's individual strengths and weaknesses in order to help them attain educational success.

Based on this connection, literacy coaches must train teachers in a manner that helps those teachers to individualize instruction. Through direct implementation in working with teachers and their students and through reflection of this practice, this action research project will look at ways in which literacy coaches can be of most help to teachers in addressing the specific needs of students. Various strategies were implemented and evaluated over the course of several weeks in order to determine the best ways a literacy coach can reach teachers in order to contribute to the educational success of their students.

### **Theoretical Framework**

According to Gee, literacy is defined "as the mastery of or fluent control over a secondary discourse" (Gee, 2001, p. 529). Secondary discourses include the behavior, thinking, reading, writing, and beliefs of different social groups that represent their way of life. Literacy

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acquisition, especially within the educational system, is often thought of in terms of the dominant discourse, or as a representation of the culture of the majority dominant group. The cultures and backgrounds of minority groups therefore often go ignored or are dismissed by educators because they are seen as less important or unnecessary. This is often to the detriment of many students in their acquisition of literacy, especially of critical literacy and other forms of higher thinking literacy.

Children initially become part of the social group they are closest with when they are first learning to communicate and interact with others, including family, close friends, and peers, or their primary discourse. In becoming immersed in their primary discourse, children learn how to behave in this group, not through direct instruction but through socialization (Gee, 2001). Therefore a child's first experiences with literacy are through their primary discourse and the experiences they have at home.

As children get older they begin to interact with and learn behaviors of other groups they come in contact with, or the secondary discourses. These groups can include those within school, church, community organizations and the like; any group that an individual interacts with and becomes a part of outside their primary discourse. While becoming part of these secondary discourses, children learn how to behave and socialize within these groups in order to communicate effectively and be accepted. The acquisition of literacy is learning to have control over the primary and secondary discourses (Gee, 2001).

A child's cultural background and linguistic variation plays a significant role in their acquisition of literacy and "the culture children learn as they grow up is, in fact, 'ways of taking' meaning from the environment around them" (Heath, 1982, p. 73). A classroom that includes

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students from varied cultural backgrounds will therefore require a teacher to be cognizant of these cultural differences and how they may affect those students' learning (Heath, 1982; Moll & Gonzalez, 2001). According to Moll & Gonzales, "the role of the teachers is to enable and guide activities that involve students as thoughtful (and literate) learners in socially and academically meaningful tasks" (p. 157). In support of teachers, literacy coaches will also need to be aware of teachers' specific needs for their students.

Children begin to acquire literacy as they become immersed in language and through their visual surroundings. From a necessity and desire to become literate, "children discover and invent literacy as they participate actively in a literate society" (Goodman, 1984, p. 316). The development of literacy is a multifaceted process influenced by social and environmental elements that include the acquisition of both oral and written language. Children's literacy is affected by and "grows out of their experiences, and the views and attitudes toward literacy that they encounter as they interact with social groups" (Goodman, 1984, p. 317). This literacy is developed not only through children's literacy practices, but also through interaction with their environment. Therefore children bring with them wealth of prior knowledge related to literacy that both teachers and literacy coaches should tap into and use for instruction.

Children initially start to acquire literacy through an interaction with their parents. They listen and watch the way the adults in their lives communicate with each other and with themselves and use this as a guide in their learning to communicate. Children begin to participate in literacy events, such as reading bed time stories, or listening to orally told stories, and "as children interact with the literacy events and implements in their culture, they grow curious and form hypotheses about their functions and purposes" (Goodman, 2001, p. 317). It is the job of educators to foster and grow the curiosity of students with regards to literacy.

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Children's literacy acquisition is also affected by their cultural experiences. The literacy events and practices that a child engages in are distinctive to their culture and experiences. This includes the use of dialects, or "patterns in the way people use language" (Wolfram, 2002, p. 225) other than the socially-preferred standard dialect used by the majority in a society. Therefore, each child brings to school with them a unique set of experiences with literacy and ways of speaking dependent upon their home experiences. These experiences may not fit in with the dominant discourse views of literacy acquisition or the traditional methods of schooling, but all students bring with them some form of literacy. The literacy skills that children acquire are unique to their culture and experiences. Therefore, teachers and those who guide these children need to look for these unique skills as they come to school, recognize them, and be explicit in their instruction on the uses of literacy within the school environment. This is true not only of a student's experience with literacy when they are young, but also as they get older and continue to experience new forms of literacy within their primary and secondary discourses.

Indifference towards a child's cultural background in the classroom does not only come from the teacher, but also often stems from the direction that teacher receives from the district, the principal, and through the literacy coaches in the school. From my own teaching experiences and observation, mandated curriculum is presented to teachers as required and is often done so quickly and can be changed on a regular basis. Often classroom teachers are little prepared to take on a new curriculum and may not know how to implement these new strategies in the classroom to accommodate for students' individual needs. Due to time constraints and other responsibilities, it is neither the district nor the principal that will have the most impact on a classroom teacher and his or her students, but the mentors that are closest to that teacher, namely the school's literacy coaches.

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Therefore, a literacy coach must take the time to not only instruct teachers on new curriculum and strategies, but also work with the teacher one on one if needed in order to help them modify these strategies to fit the needs of their students. The introduction of new curriculum may require the use of multiple strategies to effectively reach some students. Through working one-on-one with classroom teachers, literacy coaches must become familiar with the cultural backgrounds and variations in dialect that affect the way the students they work with acquire literacy. Together with classroom teachers, literacy coaches should be able to identify the individual needs of students, especially of those students in need of additional support.

### **Research Question**

The importance of individualized instruction for students is clearly demonstrated by the educational theories that support how children best acquire literacy. Therefore, in their approach to educating teachers on new strategies and best practices, literacy coaches must be sure to take into account the individual needs of their colleagues' students. When literacy coaches are mandated to teach a specific curriculum or theory, this action research project asks how literacy coaches can individualize their instruction of this curriculum or theory for the specific needs of teachers and their students.

### **Literature Review**

Literacy coaches have varied roles and a coach's job duties are usually dependant on the school in which they work. The specific role and responsibilities of a literacy coach are still being defined. According to Walpole and Blamey (2008), a literacy coach's "goal is to build teacher knowledge and skill so that children's literacy achievement will be increased" (p. 222).

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This is achieved through professional development workshops for teachers, and working with teachers and students one-on-one in order to accommodate for individual needs. If the specific needs of teachers and students are not addressed in all duties that are preformed, a literacy coach is not offering a service that will be truly beneficial to the student population.

### **The Role of a Literacy Coach**

The role of a literacy coach is one of varied activities and can very much depend upon how the responsibilities of the role are defined by the school in which a coach works. According to the International Reading Association, an agreed upon definition of a literacy coach or reading coach has not been clearly determined, though the association positions reading coaching “as a means of providing professional development for teachers in schools” (2004). This position statement specifies professional development not as a onetime event, but an on-going process that provides additional support and guidance for teachers with the goal of positively influencing student learning.

Though specifically defined qualifications for reading coaches have not yet been reached, the International Reading Association does identify minimum requirements for these coaches, including:

- “Are excellent teachers of reading, preferably at the levels at which they are coaching
- Have in-depth knowledge of reading processes, acquisition, assessment, and instruction
- Have expertise in working with teachers to improve their practices
- Are excellent presenters and group leaders
- Have the experience or preparation that enables them to model, observe, and provide feedback about instruction for classroom teachers” (2004).

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These minimum qualifications usually mean that the literacy coach or reading coach will have significant teaching experience and knowledge of reading programs and curriculum.

In having this extensive teaching experience and familiarity of reading programs, literacy coaches are therefore often also regarded as the reading specialist within the school. According to the International Reading Association and their position on reading coaching, “reading coaches frequently act as reading specialists when they provide leadership for school-, district-, and state-level reading programs” (2004). This leadership includes the coaching of teachers in order to play a significant role in the improvement of reading achievement among all students of the school.

A study conducted by Mraz et al. looked at the perceptions of literacy coaches among teachers, principals, and literacy coaches themselves (2008). In this study all three groups interviewed felt that a literacy coach is the coordinator of a school’s reading program and making sure this reading program is implemented correctly. In addition, all three groups agreed with the importance of literacy coaches acting as a resource to classroom teachers. In being a resource, literacy coaches observe teachers’ lessons and offer feedback for improvement, model lessons within the classroom, and gather materials for use in the classroom among other tasks (Mraz et al.).

Principals often think of literacy coaches are part of the management staff and that a key part of their job is to work with mandated programs to ensure that they are implemented correctly (Mraz et al., 2008; Walpole & Blamey, 2008). However, there is dissention among principals as to whether literacy coaches should be working one on one with students. In the study conducted by Mraz et al., in general, principals believed that literacy coaches should

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primarily work with teachers and not directly with students. In contrast, in a study conducted by Walpole and Blamey, principals' thought that literacy coaches should be working one-on-one with students as needed, specifically when assisting struggling teachers to act as mentor and directly demonstrate methods to the teacher for interacting and addressing the individual needs of these students.

The literacy coach's role does require a unique balance between working with teachers while also answering to and supporting the principal and district goals (Blachowicz, et al., 2010; Blamey, Meyer & Walpole 2009, Mraz et al, 2008). In their role, "coaches are often asked to serve as a liaison between district and state-level administration, communicating policy, data, and implementation progress clearly" (Sturtevant, 2003; Toll, 2006 as cited in Blamey et al., 2009). Literacy coaches must therefore find a balance among working as an administrator of the school, but also as a colleague among teachers.

This unique position of a literacy coach can cause a struggle of power among the coach and teachers within the school; one that the coach must learn to overcome in order to succeed. According to a study performed by Rainville and Jones (2008) regarding the struggle for power in literacy coaching, "conscious and strategic self-positioning by a coach as a learner or coparticipant is not only possible but can also open up spaces in which teachers feel they can take control of their professional development and experiment with ideas that could change their practices" (p. 447). The ability for a coach to act as both administrator and colleague is very possible, but requires a delicate balance. Blamey et al. (2009) state that "coaches must draw from an arsenal of personal attributes, including good communication skills, a sense of humor, and trustworthiness" (p. 311). These attributes will help a literacy coach to maintain the positive relationship with teachers required in order to be successful in their role.

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Generally, literacy coaches do share a common set of responsibilities in their role. Literacy coaches act as a mentor to teachers in the school, encouraging teachers, but also offering “constructive criticism without offending teachers” when an area for improvement is identified (Walpole & Blamey, 2008, p. 227). The literacy coach also acts as the manager of literacy curriculum at the school and coordinator of the reading program used within the school (Mraz et al., 2008; Walpole & Blamey). The activities associated with this responsibility might include evaluation of curriculum materials, dissemination of these materials to teachers, ensuring that teachers are properly implementing mandated curriculum, coordination of a shared book room, and also providing teachers with professional books and articles regarding the curriculum used (Walpole & Blamey).

The literacy coach also works within the classroom modeling lessons and activities for students as well as working directly with students in the classroom as needed (Mraz et al., 2008; Walpole & Blamey, 2008). This includes providing individualized instruction for both the teachers and students. Lessons modeled to teachers through professional development should be relevant to their practice and lessons modeled for teachers directly to students should be planned in accordance with those students needs (Mraz et al, 2008; Steckel, 2009; Walpole & Blamey, 2008). Steckel (2009) found, however, that literacy coaches felt they “should fade back as teachers became more adept at matching instruction and instructional materials to the diverse needs of their students” (p. 22). This is understandable as it is important to have teachers know that they are in charge of their classroom, though literacy coaches still need to offer support and encouragement to these teachers.

Another key area that literacy coaches are involved in is the assessment of students and ensuring that literacy testing is properly implemented (Mraz et al., 2008; Steckel, 2009; Walpole

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& Blamey, 2008). However, it is important that literacy coaches balance the task of evaluating assessments along with their other duties in order not to spend too much time on the administrative side of the task. Instead, once assessment is complete and has been evaluated by teachers, literacy coaches should focus on helping those teachers “to formulate interventions for students who struggled to meet the state reading standards” (Mraz et al., p. 149). Literacy coaches are therefore more involved with the strategic planning for reaching those students based on assessment.

Although the literacy coaching role is still being defined and lacks consistency among school districts, there is a strong effort to rectify this disparity and provide the literacy coaching profession with a clear and universal characterization. Bean (2004) states, “coaches are not part of a ‘remedial’ effort, but rather provide what has been lacking so long in education; support for thinking about what has occurred in the classroom, and how to grow as a teacher of reading” (p. 15). As more studies are done on the literacy coach’s role and the impact on literacy coaching, a clearer consensus will arise among professionals and schools on what the literacy coach’s responsibilities include. Further studies should also enhance the data that already exists that literacy coaches make a positive impact on schools’ primary focus, the students.

### **The Role of Professional Development in Literacy Coaching**

Professional development is defined as “those processes and activities designed to enhance the professional knowledge, skills, and attitudes of educators so that they might in turn, improve the learning of students” (Guskey, 2000 as cited in Bean, 2004, p. 12). Professional development is an essential component of ongoing teacher education and is especially important in the area of literacy, a primary focus of schools as directed by the No Child Left Behind Act. As described by Taylor and Gunter (2009), “professional development, respectful of the adults

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and their learning needs, is essential for literacy leaders in assisting others to become expert in literacy infusion” (p. 20). There is new information regarding literacy practices all the time and professional development activities are an important way to impart this information.

The role of teachers as professional development leaders in literacy has been established for decades, though often these leaders have primarily been seen as teachers and not necessarily mentors and guides in a particular subject area. The practice of professional development has changed over the years and it is now primarily run by those who are experts in the area being taught. Therefore, a key component of a literacy coach’s responsibilities includes professional development. It is important to note, however, that the role of professional development in literacy coaching is not confined to one-time workshops, but is better defined as that of the ongoing support of teachers (Blamey, Meyer, & Walpole, 2008; Joyce & Showers, 2002 as cited in Walpole & Blamey, 2008).

Not just for new teachers who need support and guidance, professional development is also for experienced teachers who need to continue their learning. (Bean, 2004; Taylor & Gunter, 2009). This is especially true “as the knowledge base about reading instruction and assessment increases and we learn more about effective reading instruction” (Bean, p. 13). Studies are continually being done on new methods for reading instruction as well as evaluation of current methods and it is key that teachers have a source for learning this new information, its validity, and if deemed valid, how to effectively implement it into the classroom. Part of a literacy coach’s role is to sort through the most recent and relevant information with regards to reading programs and impart this information to teachers so that it aligns with teachers’ and students’ specific needs while also following the mandated curriculum of the school.

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Professional development is not only the dissemination of information, but also the act of following up on the implementation of the information provided and the impact on student learning. According to Putman, Smith, and Cassady (2009), “key features of effective professional development are increasingly recognized to include reflective practice, immediate classroom applicability, creation of ‘safe’ environments to attempt unfamiliar new practices, and clear means of assessing the impact of new practices on student learning” (p. 208). An important component of this statement is the idea that professional development is a reflective practice and one in which the impact on student learning is monitored. Without this, professional development for teachers becomes virtually meaningless.

The literacy coach’s role includes being a leader of professional development in the area of literacy. As described previously, this professional development does not stop with a one-time workshop, but instead is ongoing to support and assess teachers as they implement current and new literacy initiatives. According to Joyce and Showers (2002), “literacy coaches serve teachers through ongoing, comprehensive professional development consistent with a system of theory, demonstration, practice, and feedback” (as cited in Walpole & Blamey, 2008, p. 222). Professional development is the overarching driver of the activities in the role of a literacy coach.

Professional development should be thoughtfully constructed with the ultimate goal of reaching students. It should be a method of imparting new information regarding literacy methods to teachers to help them improve their instructional practices. According to Taylor and Gunter (2009), “properly designed professional development aims to make changes in instruction with integration of literacy and technological knowledge into their curriculum, and most importantly to improve student achievement and skills in literacy” (p. 21). Improving student

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achievement is at the very core of why professional development for teachers is designed and implemented.

In order for professional development to make a difference, teachers need to be engaged and motivated to learn. As Putman, et al. (2009) describes, “successful school improvement requires that teachers need to *want* to expand their knowledge base and improve their methods as well as be willing to put into practice the steps necessary to do so” (p. 210). Without teacher buy-in to a professional development program, any information provided to them will most likely be seen as irrelevant to their practice and be disregarded.

Therefore, it is important that professional development of teachers be focused on their needs and the needs of the students in their classroom. Professional development should be focused on teachers’ specific goals and “agendas for professional development, such as inquiry group topics and specific coaching activities” should be “guided by the request of participating teachers” (Steckel, 2009, p. 18). When literacy coaches listen to the requests of teachers with regards to professional development, that professional development will then be more focused on the needs of the students and ultimately make a positive impact on their learning.

### **Individualized Instruction for Teachers and Students**

The need for literacy coaches to individualize instruction for teachers is essential (Rainville & Jones, 2008; Bean, 2004). According to Rainville and Jones (2008), “literacy coaching also involves figuring out how to draw out the best in individual teachers and how to inspire them to make changes in their thinking and teaching” (p. 440). This individualization of methods used for teachers will trickle down to students in the classroom, thereby in process also helping to individualize instruction for students.

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Creating individualized instruction for students is just as important as individualizing instruction for teachers. As noted by Rainville and Jones (2008), “teachers... become more knowledgeable about literacy instruction and act in ways that are responsive to the individual needs of children within diverse learning context” (p. 443). Literacy coaches were found to have a direct positive impact on teachers and students through individualized instruction as opposed to relying solely on materials and curriculum distributed to teachers with no support (Rainville & Jones). This notion of support is a key point for literacy coaching instruction. Information disseminated without additional guidance and support will most likely be lost among teachers. However, if reading curriculum ideas and lessons are geared towards the needs of teachers and then further supported by literacy coaches through individual help and modeling in the classroom, the instruction that literacy coaches provide is more likely to be successful in developing positive change in student achievement.

With regards to the importance of individualizing professional development, a key component of a literacy coach’s role, according to Bean (2004) “there is a need to consider the individual goals of teachers” and “without ‘teacher buy-in’ and an understanding that the activities and experiences will help them develop professionally, there is less chance that the ideas being presented will be implemented thoughtfully and appropriately” (p. 13). This again supports the idea that teachers need to be engaged with and motivated by literacy coaches for a literacy coach’s role to be truly successful.

It is therefore important that literacy coaches take the time to get to know the teachers they work with one-on-one and develop a relationship with them to gain trust and respect. The literacy coach must act as a leader among teachers, but also must be careful not to be seen as an administrator who may be viewed as working against them. According to Rainville and Jones

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(2008), “power and positioning are always operating as a literacy coach engages with a classroom teacher... the coach and teacher use language (verbal and nonverbal) to wield power and position themselves in various ways: as friend, colleague, authority, expert learner, and so forth” (p. 441). This is supported by Blamey et al. (2009), who state, “when working with teachers, successful coaches know how to maneuver between colleague and expert, walking a delicate line between the two” (p. 311). Developing a good relationship with teachers and getting to know them and their classroom is crucial for literacy coaches in being able to provide those teachers with individualized support.

Teachers need to feel that any change going on within the school is going to benefit them and their students. In a study performed by Steckel (2009), she found that “if change is forced upon teachers from the top down, the change will lack substance” (p. 19). Literacy coaches first need to focus on teachers’ needs based on the needs of their students and then work within the mandated curriculum of the school to ensure that the goals of all, teachers and administrators, are met. A participant in the study by Steckel stated, “the best way to arouse teachers’ interest and willingness to learn was to show them evidence of improvement in their students’ writing or reading comprehension” (p. 19). If teachers understand that the information that literacy coaches are providing will ultimately have a positive impact on their students’ performance, they will be much more likely to be interested and engaged.

When individualizing instruction, and working with different teachers, literacy coaches must be aware that different teachers will require different support. This can be based on numerous factors including a teacher’s experience, confidence, expertise, the classroom population of students, and much more. According to Bean (2004), “coaches must understand that they will work in different ways with individual teachers; that how one works with the

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novice teacher may be very different from working with the seasoned veteran” (p. 15). While new teachers may need more support in getting up and running with mandated curriculum, experienced teachers will also still need guidance in support with new reading and writing initiatives and to learn about the most recent research and studies regarding literacy that could positively impact their instruction.

When teachers become engaged with literacy coaches on an individualized level, it can have a positive impact on their students. In a study conducted by Steckel (2009), it was found that both teachers and principals reported a significant change in literacy instruction due to literacy coaching. One of the most significant changes included “matching of materials of the instructional needs of individual students” (Steckel, p. 17). The study found that teachers were able to focus instruction to the needs of students using workshop based instruction provided by literacy coaches.

While literacy coaches take into account the individual needs of teachers and students, they must also be culturally sensitive and relevant. This is true in the way they approach teachers and students on an individual level as well as with the books and materials they recommend using in the classroom. In a study done by Blachowicz et al. (2010), the inclusion of multicultural literature and instructional materials in diverse schools is essential for success in reaching teachers and ultimately students in those schools.

The role of a literacy coach will only become more student-focused as the student is the ultimate beneficiary of literacy coaching. A model of Student-Focused coaching has been introduced by Hasbrouck and Denton (2007) to help address this need for individualized instruction for students in literacy coaching. Their model incorporates three primary roles for the

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literacy coach including that as facilitator, described as “assisting and supporting the work of teachers;” as teacher/learner, described as “providing and participating in professional development;” and as collaborative problem solver, described as “systematically addressing school-based concerns about individual or groups of students or systematic issues such as curriculum or scheduling decisions” (Hasbrouck & Denton, p. 690). This model is designed to focus on the needs of students through their teachers.

According to Hasbrouck and Denton (2007), in a Student-Focused coaching model, “coaches and teachers work together to overcome obstacles to students’ progress; together they focus on the needs of students” and “coaches learn from observing students’ responses to interventions and instructional strategies developed collaboratively with teachers” (p. 691). Student-Focused literacy coaching is destined to become even more important as the role of literacy coach is further defined and solidified. The ongoing individualization of instruction to both teachers and students will only help to make literacy coaching truly student-focused.

Literacy coaching is still a relatively new position in many schools. There are still some schools that lack a distinctive literacy coach position and the responsibilities of the role are placed on others within administration or not provided to school staff at all. The lack of a literacy coach within a school places those schools at a disadvantage with regards to literacy curriculum and the achievement in reading and writing among the student population. It is hopeful, however, that the role of a literacy coach is being studied more frequently and that further information regarding the benefits of a literacy coach is becoming available. There are now several books and resources available for literacy coaches to help them become even more skilled and practiced at their position. The International Reading Association has several resources regarding literacy coaching available for use by literacy coaches.

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As an additional resource for literacy coaches, the *Literacy Coaching Clearinghouse* ([literacycoachingonline.org](http://literacycoachingonline.org)) is a venture between the International Reading Association and the National Council of Teachers of English to collect the most recent information and research regarding literacy coaching in order to assist literacy coaches and others in understanding a literacy coach's role, increasing a literacy coach's knowledge base, and assisting in the development of policies and standards regarding literacy coaching. Literacy coaches will find a wealth of information regarding literacy coaching including a list of books, events, and tools for use in literacy coaching practice. It is also a place for literacy coaches to come together and discuss their roles and relevant topics.

Among all information currently available regarding literacy coaching, one thread that can be seen throughout is the clear need for individualized instruction for students by literacy coaches. Research has shown the importance of individualizing instruction by teachers and ultimately by literacy coaches. Though many agree on the importance of this individualization, how literacy coaches' best achieve this with students is still being determined and requires further study. Some of the questions still lingering include: What is the best way for literacy coaches to reach students on an individual level? How can literacy coaches' best work with teachers to help them reach the needs of their students? These questions and more are looked at in the following study regarding the methods literacy coaches can use to individualize their instruction to meet the specific needs of teachers and students.

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### **Method**

#### **Context**

Research for this study occurred primarily at St. John Fisher College, located in Rochester, NY. The research took place during a tutoring practicum course and a literacy coaching course; both part of the Graduate School of Education Literacy program. The research performed at St. John Fisher consisted of formal interviews with four prospective literacy coaches regarding their literacy coaching experiences in the literacy coaching course. Research also contained self-reflection on my own experiences with literacy coaching within the literacy coaching course and interaction with the teacher candidate I worked with during that time. This included regular reflections regarding discussions, observations of teacher and student interactions, and observation of teacher reaction to literacy coaching initiatives. Additional research for this study was done through formal phone interviews with two teachers currently in an active literacy coach role within their respective elementary schools in the Rochester, NY area.

#### **Participants**

The four prospective literacy coaches that were formally interviewed were all part of the St. John Fisher Graduate Literacy program. They were all working toward obtaining their degree in literacy to be certified birth through grade twelve. Though they may not all become literacy coaches, they have all completed required courses to work in the position. The prospective literacy coaches were enrolled in a literacy coaching course working with teacher candidates that are part of a tutoring practicum course, also in the Graduate Literacy program.

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The two currently practicing literacy coaches that were formally interviewed work in local Rochester schools. These coaches each had several years of teaching experience before becoming a literacy coach. One of the literacy coaches I interviewed, Sarah, (all names are pseudonyms) has been teaching for over 40 years and doing literacy coaching in some form for over 20 years. The other practicing literacy coach I interviewed, Mary, has been teaching for eight years and is in her first year working as a literacy coach.

An additional participant in the research was the teacher candidate I was directly coaching, Cara, as part of the literacy coaching practicum. I directly observed Cara's work with her tutoring practicum students, in the second grade. During the course of the study I recorded notes based on our interactions as well as collected any artifacts related to literacy coaching. These artifacts included the work produced by the students when I participated in a model lesson for my teacher candidate. The artifacts also included a copy of the formal report of assessments and recommendations developed by Cara for her student. In addition, I also used copies of my own notes regarding interaction with Cara and the formal observation reports I completed after observing her teaching. In this regard, I was also a participant of the study.

### Researcher Stance

In this study, I not only took on the role of a researcher, but also as participant. I acted as a literacy coach working directly with a teacher candidate who was working with two second grade students. My own experiences with literacy coaching also played an important role in researching my topic of study. I presently have a graduate degree in teaching obtained through an alternative teacher certification program in New York City, as well as two years experience teaching kindergarten and as a substitute teacher in grades pre-kindergarten through six. I am

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currently enrolled in the St. John Fisher College Graduate Literacy program to obtain my certification in Literacy Education.

### **Data Collection**

In executing research for this study I gave two sets of formal interviews. Each formal interview was designed to address the experiences of the group I am interviewed as question relevancy differed for each. The first formal interview was done with the four literacy coaching candidates regarding their experiences with literacy coaching within their literacy coaching practicum as part of the literacy graduate degree. This interview consisted of multiple questions focusing on literacy coaching candidates' experiences working with teacher candidates and their students.

The second formal interviews were done with two currently practicing literacy coaches. These interviews focused on the literacy coaches' experiences in working with teachers within their respective schools as well as the students in the school. Practicing literacy coaches were asked several questions specifically designed to tap into their first hand knowledge of working as a literacy coach.

The questions for the formal interviews were pre-developed focusing on trying to learn more about the role of literacy coaches and to help answer my research question of how literacy coaches can individualize instruction. The questions varied depending on the group I interviewed; literacy coaching candidates and practicing literacy coaches. The questions for each group were specifically designed to gather as much relevant information as possible on the topic. Both sets of interview questions can be found in Appendix A.

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In addition to formal interviews, I also used my own observation as a literacy coach for this study. I took notes when reflecting on my interactions with the teacher candidate I worked with as part of my literacy coaching practicum. I observed the teacher candidate providing lessons to her second grade students and provided her feedback with the goal of improving future lessons. I also demonstrated a model lesson based on feedback I gave to the teacher candidate during an initial lesson observation. In addition, throughout the literacy coaching class I provided the teacher candidate with several ideas for instruction and monitoring the use of those ideas that were implemented.

The primary method of data collection for this study was formal interviews. As described, there were two separate interviews given. The first set of interviews was conducted with four literacy coaching practicum students currently working with teacher candidates. The second set of interviews was conducted with two practicing literacy coaches in elementary schools. The other method of data collection included personal reflection and notes regarding my own interaction with a teacher candidate as part of the literacy coaching practicum in the St. John Fisher Literacy graduate program. In addition, the artifacts I collected were revisited and analyzed.

### **Quality and Credibility of Research**

When performing this research I worked to make sure of the quality and credibility of the study. Credibility, or the ability of a research to take into account the complexities that present themselves in a study and to work with patterns not easily explained, can be monitored in several different ways (Mills, 2007). As Mills suggests, I did peer debriefing in which I discussed my research with a colleague for feedback and to aid in my own reflection. Working with a

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colleague proved to be helpful in identification of my topic and determining how to best implement my research. I also practiced triangulation in this study, in order to compare a variety of data sources and different methods with one another to cross-check data (Mills). This means that I collected information in many ways. During my study, I collected information through formal interviews, observation, and personal reflection. I also collected any relevant artifacts as part of my research.

During my research I also practiced transferability. This is the idea that everything studied during research is context bound and that the goal of the work is not to develop statements that can be generalized to larger groups of people (Mills, 2007). In order to ensure transferability I collected detailed, descriptive data and a detailed description of the context that could be transferred to other possible contexts.

Dependability, which refers to the stability of the data, will also be part of this study (Mills, 2007). In order to include dependability with the research, I used multiple methods of data collection so that if there is weakness in one method it can be compensated by the strength of another (Mills). I also established an “audit trail” for my research in which I had a colleague review my process of data collection, analysis and interpretation including any artifacts obtained in the process.

Finally, I made sure that my study also has confirmability. Confirmability is defined as the neutrality or objectivity of the data collected (Mills, 2007). The practice of ensuring confirmability included triangulation, in which I used a variety of methods of collecting data in order to cross-check findings. I also used reflexivity where as part of my research I reflected on

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the data I gathered in order to reveal any underlying assumptions or biases I may have had with regards to my research question.

### **Informed Consent and Protecting the Right of the Participants**

Prior to conducting the formal interviews of the study I obtained informed consent from each of the six interview participants in order to protect their rights. In addition, I also obtained informed consent from the teacher candidate I worked with as a literacy coaching practicum student. Each consent form explained the purpose of the study and asked for permission to interview along with a signature. Participants were asked to choose a pseudonym in order to maintain their confidentiality. In addition, for any artifacts obtained and used during the study, all identifying marks were removed. All names will be changed to protect confidentiality and anonymity.

### **Data Analysis**

The data was analyzed by initially reviewing the notes from the interviews conducted with the four literacy coaching candidates and the two practicing literacy coaches. When reviewing these notes, I looked for themes that were common among all of the interviews to develop my findings. In addition to the interviews, I also looked at my own notes regarding my experience in working with the tutoring practicum teacher candidate, Cara. This included my regular interaction with her and her students, and notes regarding formal observations, a model lesson, and a co-taught lesson. I also reviewed the formal observation reports I completed and Cara's final literacy report regarding her students' evaluations and recommendations.

In reviewing this data, I found that I could classify my findings under the three primary themes of literacy coaches working with teachers, students, and with the school as a whole. In

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each of these themes I found several ideas common to all the data I had gathered. Each of these data points proved to be important in my determination on how literacy coaches can individualize instruction for students and teachers.

### **Findings**

Through the formal interviews conducted with literacy coaches, my own work in literacy coaching, and my observations of literacy coaching, I discovered many common themes with regards to how literacy coaches can individualize instruction for teachers and students and literacy coaching in general. Each method of gathering data in my research provided me with a different perspective with regards to how literacy coaches can be most effective in reaching students. These findings can be broken down into three major themes with regards to the role of a literacy coach: Literacy Coaches Working with Teachers; Literacy Coaches Working with Students; and Literacy Coaches Working within the School.

#### **Literacy Coaches Working with Teachers**

Working one-on-one with teachers is a crucial part of a literacy coach's role that requires balance and perseverance. One of the primary topics that appeared in every interview conducted was the importance of literacy coaches building a positive relationship with the teachers they work with regularly. Almost all literacy coaches interviewed, from those who were just beginning to those with years of experience, indicated that building trust was important and that there was a delicate balance between giving teachers' guidance, but not acting as a superior. In regards to the responsibilities of a literacy coach, Sarah, one of the practicing literacy coaches stated that coaches need to be "willing to share" and that they need to have "people skills" including "being patient with building trust." Mary, the other practicing literacy coach indicated

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that literacy coaches need to “work on establishing relationships” and that teachers need to “see literacy coaches as someone they can trust; as a colleague to help out.” In addition, literacy coaching candidates said, “it’s difficult to tell teachers what to do” and it’s hard to critique teachers.” This was also true in my own experiences in working one-on-one with a teacher. I felt that in order to most effectively reach Cara, the teacher I was working with and have it make an impact on the work she was doing with her student, I needed to come from the perspective of being a helper or an assistant and not act as though I knew more than her in regards to teaching or her students. I did this by approaching her from a perspective of someone who had been in her role before and offering her help and suggestions in her tutoring endeavors. Specifically, I often asked if she needed any specific help, I provided her with activities she could use that would help to meet the goals developed for her students, and I often spoke of her strengths in teaching before addressing an area of need.

Another area that emerged within my data was the importance of literacy coaches understanding that each teacher has unique needs and that instruction for these teachers must be modified according to those needs. According to Sarah, a literacy coach with over 40 years of experience, even “the most experienced teacher may need a lot of assistance” depending on the area of need being addressed. The other practicing literacy coach, Mary, also mentioned that you may use the same lesson to introduce to multiple teachers, but how you present that lesson to the teacher will need to be modified according to what the teacher already knows and in which areas they need assistance.

This need to modify instruction for teachers also emerged within the interviews done with literacy coaching candidates interviewed and within my own experiences in literacy coaching. Literacy coaching candidates found that they could be most effective in working with

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their teacher candidates by determining what teaching areas these teachers were already effective in and what they needed assistance with from a coach. These needs were more clearly defined through formal observation reports in which both areas of strength and areas of need for the teacher candidate were identified. In my own experience, beginning discussions with Cara regarding her observation, it was important to focus on the strengths first and then discuss areas of need.

In reviewing my first observation report with Cara, I initially discussed with her two of the strengths I identified in that observation including good classroom management skills and the use of effective student assessments (Appendix B). I followed with an area of need that I identified in the delivery of her assessments. I began by explaining that the assessment was “comprehensive and effective,” but then identified something that she could have changed that might have made the assessment go more smoothly. By presenting feedback in this way, Cara seemed more receptive to recommendations from me on how she could improve.

The other important area I identified through my research in literacy coaches working with teachers was the modeling and co-teaching of lessons. According to Sarah and Mary, the two practicing literacy coaches, modeling is one of the primary ways of introducing a new concept or strategy to a teacher. Both Sarah and Mary suggested that in modeling, a coach needs to take into account ways to differentiate for a specific teacher based on their strengths and areas of need. Through modeling, literacy coaches can also demonstrate how to individualize instruction for the students as well when they are directly working with those students. Teachers can then see exactly how a concept can be used within the classroom for their own students. After a concept or strategy has been introduced by a literacy coach, a teacher may still need further assistance with implementing it effectively into the classroom, and co-teaching can be

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helpful in reinforcing the best methods for teaching the concept, especially to the needs of that teacher's students. According to Sarah and Mary, modeling may be done several times in a month and as mentioned, the exact instruction for that lesson may differ based on the needs of the teacher.

Modeling and co-teaching were also done by the literacy coaching candidates including myself during the literacy coaching practicum. In the interviews I conducted, the literacy coaching candidates all felt that modeling a lesson was helpful in addressing the specific area(s) of need as identified in a formal observation of their teacher candidate. This was also true in my own experience in modeling and co-teaching a lesson. Within the lesson I modeled and in the one that was co-taught I was able to focus on an area of need I identified in an observation to help my teacher candidate, Cara, see first-hand what I was recommending for her to modify so that she could use it on her own.

Through follow-up observation of Cara, I could identify that in some cases she used suggestions I had provided. Specifically, after one of my observations of Cara, I had suggested that she be prepared with more vocabulary options for her students in case the words she chose for an activity were too easy or too hard. During one of the following observations, I noticed that in on particular activity she had several vocabulary words available for use which proved to be helpful as her student was able to easily identify several of the words, but Cara had several others that were more challenging, which helped her lesson to go more smoothly. In addition, in another observation report I did for Cara, I had recommended breaking up the activities she presented so that the student did not become restless and unengaged. In a follow-up observation I noticed that her lessons were more broken up and the student was much more engaged in learning.

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However, a point brought up by both practicing literacy coaches, Sarah and Mary, was that many times literacy coaches have to hope that teachers carry over the individualized instruction they provide to teachers through modeling and co-teaching on to their students. As a literacy coach, you are not with a teacher or their students all the time and therefore may not always know what the teacher is presenting to students. I also found this to be true in my own literacy coaching experience as I do not know for sure if Cara, the teacher candidate I worked with consistently used strategies I recommended. The real determination on whether a literacy coach has been successful becomes evident when there is identifiable improvement among students.

### **Literacy Coaches Working with Students**

In addition to working with teachers, literacy coaches also spend a lot of their time working directly with students. One of the data points I found among practicing literacy coaches is that they are often directly involved in student assessment. Many times literacy coaches will give initial assessments and then follow up on those assessments regularly. In the case of the two practicing literacy coaches I interviewed, Sarah and Mary, each of them was tracking a specific group of students and then recommendations were based on the needs of those students. This was done to more clearly identify the needs of students within the school. Based on assessments given, goals were identified and these goals are re-evaluated every five weeks and adjustments are then made if needed.

In my own experience working as a literacy coach and in the experiences of the other literacy coaching candidates interviewed, we did not perform assessments with students. However, I found that the literacy coaching candidates interviewed did discuss initial

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assessments with their teacher candidate, specifically in order to develop a model lesson and in developing a co-taught lesson. In addition, literacy coaching candidates discussed that through their direct observations they were also able to identify areas of need. This was true for me as well as I discussed with Cara the goals she identified for her students based on assessments given and was also able to identify areas of need in my observations. Cara's primary goals for her students included the use of various reading strategies to aid in fluency and comprehension, to develop overall reading fluency, and to set a purpose for reading to also aid in comprehension. The model lesson I developed focused on the reading strategy of using context clues and the co-taught lesson that Cara and I implemented together focused on increasing reading fluency for better comprehension. A review of final assessments as compared with initial assessments was also be done by myself and the other literacy coaching candidates in order to measure progress made.

In addition to directly helping teachers, the modeling and co-teaching of lessons also impacts students. One of the practicing literacy coaches, Mary, identified that she does "a lot of modeling of lessons." The other practicing literacy coach, Sarah, also mentioned that "co-teaching and modeling" of lessons was a "primary responsibility of a literacy coach." In modeling lessons, literacy coaches work directly with the students in class and therefore they get to know them and their needs. This is true of co-teaching also in which a literacy coach works with the teacher directly with students in the classroom. Each of these methods allows literacy coaches to get a first-hand look at how students are responding to new concepts and strategies that are being introduced and make modification as needed.

Having modeled and co-taught a lesson myself with my teacher candidate, Cara, and her student, I was able to experience the benefit this can have on identifying student needs. In my

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modeling and co-teaching of lessons, I focused on using strategies that helped to meet the goals set by Cara for her students. In the lesson I modeled for Cara, I focused on the reading strategy of using context clues to help the students identify words and the meaning of those words for increased comprehension (Appendix C). The use of reading strategies and specifically using context clues is one of the common goals that Cara had identified for her students. For the lesson that Cara and I co-taught we focused on increasing fluency through using expression when reading (Appendix D). Increasing fluency was another of the goals set by Cara for her students. Modeling and co-teaching of lessons was also done by the literacy coaching candidates interviewed who found that this was a great way to see if strategies or concepts recommended worked with the student or if they needed to be modified in any way.

According to the two practicing literacy coaches, Sarah and Mary, a primary concern of a literacy coach is whether or not students are benefiting from coaching. Coaches have to determine whether or not students are improving in their identified area of need and if not, they need to re-evaluate the strategies they are using. This is done through both formal and informal assessments. Formal assessments are given at the beginning, middle, and end of the year, and informal assessments are given throughout the year. In the case of the both the practicing literacy coaches, they re-evaluated their goals every five weeks through informal assessments including running reading records, observations, and work produced by students.

This was also confirmed by the literacy coaching candidates I interviewed and by my own experiences in coaching. Though as literacy coaching candidates we did not perform any formal assessments, we continually did informal assessments during each formal observation and also during the modeled and co-taught lessons. Based on these informal assessments the feedback provided to the teacher candidate was individualized based on the students' needs. In

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addition, as literacy coaching candidates, we reviewed the formal pre- and post-assessments done by the teaching candidate we worked with to review progress made.

### **Literacy Coaches Working within the School**

The final theme that emerged from my research was literacy coaches working with the school as a whole in order to reach students. Working with the school as a whole includes the implementation of professional development as well as meeting with principals and specialists in regards to student needs. In my interviews, one of the practicing literacy coaches, Sarah, also brought up the importance of evaluating whether students are meeting the goals of the prescribed curriculum of the school.

One of the focuses for literacy coaches is the creation and implementation of professional development workshops. According to the two practicing literacy coaches, Sarah and Mary, professional development can come in many forms including school-wide workshops, grade-level workshops, and specialty-focused workshops, for example, workshops for only special education teachers, etc. In my own experience with literacy coaching, we did two types of professional development workshops, one for all teacher candidates, and one focused on specific grade levels of the teacher candidates' students.

The topics for professional development can range from being driven by teacher need to being driven by the administration. According to Sarah and Mary, practicing literacy coaches, professional development topics should be relevant for teacher use, but this may not always happen if there is a mandate from the district. Sarah specifically spoke of professional development sessions being "building driven" in which the topic presented is one that the school and the district are asking them to provide. This could include subjects such as training on a new

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reading program the school is implementing or a new method for introducing writing concepts. In the case of my own experience with implementing professional development workshops and the experience of other literacy coaching candidates, our topics were based on perceived needs of the teacher candidates for their tutoring practicum including the implementation of various assessments, guided reading, running reading records, and more. The assessment professional development workshops attended were specifically chosen by the teacher candidates. In addition, as literacy coaching candidates, we also tried to focus on topics that would have had interest to us as former tutoring practicum students.

Another area that literacy coaches engage in school-wide is collegial circles. One of the practicing literacy coaches, Sarah, mentioned that as a literacy coaches she has implemented many collegial circles and what is read is dependent upon the needs of the teachers which is often based on the needs of those teachers' students. Sarah discussed that collegial circles are primarily used to discuss the latest research and could involve reading related books or articles. In my own experience with literacy coaches we also conducted collegial circles for several of the practicum teacher candidates. We were able to choose from a list of books what we read and during the collegial circle we discussed various chapters of the book and how they related to our own experiences in teaching and what we learned from them.

Finally, a smaller, but equally important component of literacy coaching is working with principals and other specialists to help meet students' needs. This was an area that I only had data on from the practicing literacy coaches and therefore needs further research. However, one of the practicing literacy coaches, Sarah, specifically discussed the point of working with administration and within the boundaries of selected curriculum. She talked about the importance of working with the principal and other leaders in the school including various

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specialists – reading, speech, etc. - to make sure strategies recommend and used with teachers and their students are in accordance with the overriding principals of the school-wide curriculum and based on any student needs identified by the specialists. Sarah also noted that all interactions with teachers are logged for reference. Though not specified by Sarah, this log could also be used by administration to review the frequency and types of interactions among literacy coaches and teachers. The important finding here is that although necessary to stay within these boundaries as determined by the district, it is still very feasible to introduce concepts and strategies that will help to reach specific student needs.

### **Implications**

The findings have many implications for literacy coaches and the job of literacy coaching. Educational theories support that individualized instruction for students is essential for student success. And, as the literature indicates individualized instruction for both teachers and students is important in the role of a literacy coach. However, this study looks at how can literacy coaches do this most effectively.

Based on my data and analysis, when literacy coaches are working with teachers they need to take into consideration what the teacher currently does effectively within the classroom and what the teacher needs additional support with, in the classroom. A literacy coach should act proactively to build relationships with the teachers they work with in order to gain their trust so that recommendations provided by the literacy coach are implemented with earnest by the teacher. A mutually respectful relationship is vital for building this trust and in order for the teacher-literacy coach relationship to be beneficial for students.

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According to several interviews conducted and personal experiences, literacy coaches are also a key part of the assessment process. If literacy coaches are not implementing assessments themselves, they need to be fully aware of the assessments used by teachers and the results of those assessments. It is the results of assessments that will drive the concepts and strategies that literacy coaches provide to teachers.

In addition, both the literature reviewed and research conducted supports that literacy coaches need to model and co-teach lessons on strategies that can then be further utilized by the teacher. These modeled and co-taught lessons should be developed in accordance with the students' needs within the classroom. Through this modeling and co-teaching, teachers should be able to effectively teach the strategies provided. The literacy coach will need to evaluate whether the teacher understands the concepts presented in implementation and if not, will need to provide further support in that area.

The research also found that when working with students, literacy coaches need to take a hands-on, proactive role getting to know these students and their needs as much as possible so that suggested concepts and strategies can be geared toward benefiting them. This will primarily be done by the literacy coach through modeling and co-teaching lessons in which the literacy coach will be working directly with students. This may also come in the form of performing assessments with students.

According to the research and my own experiences, literacy coaches must always be cognizant of whether or not their recommendations and instruction is reaching students. This presents itself in the form of continually re-evaluating students on a regular basis to find out if they are benefiting from strategies presented or if modifications need to be made.

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Finally, when it comes to professional development, both the literature review and research finds that literacy coaches need to be aware of the topics they present to make sure they are relevant to the teachers they are working with on an on-going basis. The topics should be relevant to overall areas of need that a literacy coach may see coming up regularly with teachers. The topics may also focus on a new strategy or the most recent research on a strategy that will help teachers to meet their goals. Unfortunately, from what I found in my research, this may not always be possible because topics may be mandated by the administration. However, in general, literacy coaches can usually construct professional development workshops to meet the needs of teachers and ultimately the students.

Overall, based on the literature reviewed, the research conducted, and my own experiences, literacy coaches have many opportunities to reach teachers and students in an effective and beneficial manner. One of the first steps to being an effective literacy coach and individualizing instruction for students and teachers is to build relationships with those two groups so that the literacy coaches can get to know student and teacher needs and design instruction around those needs. In addition, literacy coaches also need to build relationships with principals and specialists so that they can help mold curriculum in a manner that will best reach students and foster their academic success.

### **Conclusion**

This action research project looked at how literacy coaches can provide individualized instruction for teachers and students. The educational theories reviewed support that students need individualized instruction in order to be most successful. When children acquire literacy they are initially immersed in their immediate surroundings which can differ for every child.

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Every child therefore comes to school with different strengths and areas of need. Teachers have to focus on these areas of need and work off of strengths to most successfully reach a student.

Literacy coaches working with teachers and students need to be aware of these needs and individualize instruction provided. This can be done through a variety of strategies and methods such as assessment, modeling, co-teaching, providing professional development, and working with school staff.

As a researcher and future literacy coach, I would have liked to have had the opportunity to talk with more currently practicing literacy coaches or even be able to follow one or two literacy coaches for the day to better understand the role. I would still like to find out more about how literacy coaches can influence professional development, and further, how the literacy coach role might vary from school-to-school. As a teacher and possibly future literacy coach, I believe that the implications from this research are important for both teachers and literacy coaches. As a teacher it can help me understand how to best work with a literacy coach in a manner that will most benefit my students. And, as a literacy coach, it helps me to know where I need to focus in order to help make students and teachers successful.

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**Appendix A – Literacy Coach Interviews****Literacy Coaching Interview I (for practicing literacy coaches)**

How long have you been a certified teacher?

How long have you been in a literacy coaching role?

Did you have any special training to become a literacy coach?

How did you get to be a literacy coach? (apply, appointed, etc.)

What school do you work at/what grades do you work with? Do you only work at that school, or do you have to go between schools?

What responsibilities are included in your position as literacy coach?

How often do you interact with teachers?

How often do you interact with students?

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Do you individualize instruction for teachers? If so, how?

Do you individualize instruction for students? If so, how?

Do you think individualized instruction is important in literacy coaching? If so, why?

How do teachers react to your literacy coaching?

How often do you do group professional development workshops?

How often do you meet with teachers one-on-one?

How do you measure success?

What do you like most about literacy coaching?

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What do you like least about literacy coaching?

**Literacy Coaching Interview II (for literacy coaching candidates)**

How long have you been a certified teacher?

How often do you interact with the teacher candidate you are working with?

How often do you interact with the teacher candidate's student(s)?

Do you individualize instruction for teachers? If so, how?

Do you individualize instruction for students? If so, how?

Do you think individualized instruction is important in literacy coaching? If so, why?

Has your teacher candidate been receptive your literacy coaching initiatives?

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How do you/will you measure success?

What do you like most about literacy coaching?

What do you like least about literacy coaching?

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**Appendix B – Literacy Coaching Teacher Observation Report**

## Observation Report



XXXXXXXXXX  
Tutoring Candidate Name

Elissa Mitchell  
Coaching Candidate Name

St. John Fisher College  
Coaching/Tutoring Practicum

Assessment  
Lesson

X Week 3  
\_\_\_\_\_ Week 7  
\_\_\_\_\_ Week 11

Second  
Grade Level(s)

**Overview of Lesson:**

XXXXXXXX, when I arrived to observe you working with your students, you were seated and working one on one with XXXXXXXX doing the site words section of the BRI while your other student, XXXXXXXX, was quietly working on cutting pictures to paste on his writer's notebook. Once you finished doing the site words with XXXXXXXX, you used the level determined in doing this assessment to move on to the BRI reading passages. You had XXXXXXXX read two stories after which you asked him comprehension questions. You asked XXXXXXXX to read a third story with which he struggled, so you stopped him from reading early on in the passage. While you were giving XXXXXXXX the assessment, XXXXXXXX, did interrupt several times and XXXXXXXX became distracted.

When you finished the BRI assessment with XXXXXXXX, you began XXXXXXXX's BRI assessment while XXXXXXXX worked on cutting out pictures to paste on his writing notebook. You began XXXXXXXX's assessment with a review of site words as you had done with XXXXXXXX. XXXXXXXX showed resistance in reading the site words, but with some encouragement from you, began to read them. XXXXXXXX struggled with the site words and looked to you for help. Because it was an assessment, you could not help him with the words, but you did encourage him to continue to try. XXXXXXXX was able to identify some site words and made some personal connections with some of the words while doing this. While you were working with XXXXXXXX, XXXXXXXX worked quietly on his own.

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**The following represents elements of effective instruction I observed:**

**Classroom Management**

XXXXXXX, you were able to keep both students engaged with the lesson while working one on one with each student. While you were assessing one student, the other was working independently to cut out pictures for his writers' notebook. By having an engaging activity for the student working independently to focus on, you were able to complete the assessment as planned with the other student. Considering the length of time each assessment took, this activity was very effective in keeping the students motivated and connected.

**Student Assessment**

XXXXXXX, you effectively implemented the BRI assessment for both students in your group. The BRI is a good assessment for determining students' reading levels. You were able to get through the site words portion of the BRI quickly, but effectively. You encouraged your students to read the words, but did not provide them with any hints or help. Once each student read through the site words they could identify, you quickly used this information to determine the reading passage to begin assessing reading and comprehension. Students read the passages that they were able to read through successfully and then answered comprehension questions. You were able to implement a thorough assessment in a short amount of time that allowed you to gain quite a bit of information regarding your students' literacy strengths and weaknesses.

**The following represent recommendations to consider incorporating into future lessons:**

**Instructional Delivery**

XXXXXXX, while your assessment lesson was comprehensive and effective, the students seemed to become fatigued after the first ten minutes of the assessment. While you were having XXXXXXX read passages, he was becoming easily distracted by XXXXXXX trying to talk with him. By the time you gave XXXXXXX the third story to read, he seemed to be tired and unfocused. Perhaps when you have an assessment that you know will take longer than ten or fifteen minutes, break this assessment up into two parts. In this case, you could have completed the site words portion of the assessment then stopped to do another quick activity such as a read aloud or quick writing activity. You could then go back to having the students read the passage(s) aloud and follow up with comprehension questions.

**Conclusion:**

XXXXXXX, overall I found this lesson to be a comprehensive and effective assessment piece. I was impressed with the management of your students and the rapport you have established with them in just a few weeks. In the upcoming weeks, I encourage you, and can assist you, to find activities to help motivate your students while working with them. I understand that, XXXXXXX has proven to be difficult to engage and it will be important to work on finding activities that will help him to open up and be accepting to learning. Finding

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engaging activities of interest will also be beneficial for XXXXXXXX. I am looking forward to working with you this semester!

**Sincerely,**

**Elissa Mitchell**  
**Practicum Coach**

## Appendix C – Literacy Coaching Modeled Lesson Plan

### Model Lesson Plan

#### Rationale:

In the lesson I observed with XXXXXXXX, Instructional Delivery was an area of need I identified during that observation. Therefore, in development of this model lesson for XXXXXXXX, my primary goal was to demonstrate a lesson that encourages student involvement and engagement. I am looking to actively engage students in the activities of the lesson through the use of a brief mini lesson, students working on their own, then the teacher reviewing individual work done with the student.

I specifically chose to work on context clues with XXXXXXXX's second grade students as that was an area of need identified by XXXXXXXX through her assessments. Based on the assessment during the lesson, I can provide XXXXXXXX with areas that may need additional reinforcement so that she can plan further lessons surrounding this topic. I can also then provide XXXXXXXX with other materials that might help her to reach these goals with her students.

#### Objectives:

- Student will match context clues with unknown words to aid in comprehension.
- Student will determine the meaning of unknown words on their own using context clues.

#### Materials:

- Large sheet of paper
- Markers
- Sentence worksheets
- Pencils

#### Procedure:

- The teacher will show students the nonsense word: kliper and ask volunteers to define the word.
- When no one is able to define it, the teacher will introduce the idea of context clues and that if a reader comes to a word that he or she is not familiar with; the words surrounding that word can be used to determine its meaning.
- The teacher will write the following sentence on chart paper: The kliper was barking loud so I put him in his cage.
- The teacher will ask the students to guess what the word kliper means based on the use in the sentence.

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- The teacher will then try another nonsense word with the students. This time the nonsense word will be twip.
- The teacher will again ask the students if they know the meaning of the word twip. When students say no, the teacher will then use the word in the following sentence: I like to drink twip on a hot summer day because it is so refreshing.
- Students will then speculate on what the word twip could mean (could have multiple answers).
- Review that sometimes sentences contain clues for words that we may not know and we can figure out the meaning based on other words in the sentence.
- Students will then be provided with a worksheet that has four sentences and will be asked to try to figure out the meaning of the word underlined on their own. The word underlined will be an actual word, but a difficult word to figure out. Once students have had a few minutes to try and figure out the words, the teacher will review with each of the students the words they have come up with using the context clues.

**Assessment:**

The students will demonstrate their ability to determine overall meaning of a word based on context clues. The teacher will review the students' ability to determine word meaning based on the context of the sentence.

## Appendix D – Literacy Coaching Co-Taught Lesson Plan

### Co-Taught Lesson Plan

#### Rationale:

One of the goals identified for XXXXXXX's student, XXXXXXX, is to increase fluency. Throughout her lessons with him, XXXXXXX has been focusing on using various reading strategies to aid in comprehension and fluency. In this lesson, together XXXXXXX and I will be focusing on teaching XXXXXXX the importance of reading with expression for both comprehension and fluency.

XXXXXX will be able to hear fluent reading with expression and practice this on his own. Based on the assessment of this lesson, we should be able to identify how well XXXXXXX is using reading strategies already introduced to him and their affect on his overall fluency.

#### Objectives:

- Student will listen and speak for literary response and expression.
- Student will read at appropriate speed, accuracy and expression.

#### Materials:

- Chart paper
- Markers
- Poem – “Shadow Wash” by Shel Silverstein from:  
*Where the Sidewalk Ends*

#### Procedure:

- The teacher will put the poem, “Shadow Wash” on chart paper.
- The teacher will explain the importance of reading fluently and reading with expression and how it helps us to understand the text better.
- The teacher will read the poem out loud to the student. The first time the poem is read, it will be read without expression.
- The teacher will then ask the student what he noticed about the reading (sounded the same, no voice changes, etc.); responses will be written down on chart paper.
- The teacher will then read the poem again, this time using expression.
- The teacher will again ask the student what he noticed about the reading (voice changed, sounded better, etc.); responses will be written down on chart paper.
- The teacher will ask the student which reading sounded better and reinforce that reading with expression helps us to understand the text better.
- The student will then try reading the poem on his own. He will read the poem once out loud for practice and then again to try using expression.

**Assessment:**

The student will demonstrate his ability to read fluently and with expression when reading the poem on his own. The teacher will review the students' ability to read the poem with fluency and using expression, taking notes on areas that may need to be addressed at a future time.

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