

Principals as Partners with Literacy Coaches: Striking a Balance Between Neglect and Interference

Jacy Ippolito

Harvard Graduate School of Education

What role must principals play in order to effectively support literacy coaching efforts? This is a question that many educators have begun to ask (Burkins, 2007; Casey, 2006; Kral, 2007; Shanklin, 2007; Steiner & Kowal, 2007; Toll, 2008). Some suggest that principals can establish close relationships with literacy coaches by offering a number of structural supports (e.g., clear job descriptions, regular professional development, common planning times, and a school literacy team), as well as a number of relational supports (e.g., modeling collaboration and participation for teachers) (Kral, 2007; Shanklin, 2007). Others suggest that principals must participate actively in coaching work to better understand literacy professional development and increase teachers' sense of accountability for instructional improvement (Burkins, 2007; Casey, 2006; Kral, 2007; Steiner & Kowal, 2007; Toll, 2008). However, few research-based accounts of coach-principal relationships exist.

In response, this Literacy Coaching Clearinghouse brief presents three research-based vignettes of coaches working with principals who form a continuum of behaviors ranging from neglect to partnership to interference. The vignettes have been drawn from a recent mixed-methods study of coaches' roles and relationships in a mid-sized, urban, East Coast district (Ippolito, 2008, 2009)¹. Each

1 Vignettes have been crafted from focus group, interview, and observation data collected from a purposeful sample of 17 coaches working at the elementary, middle, and high school levels in a mid-sized, urban East Coast district. Fifty-seven coaches (78% of those employed in the district during 2007-2008) completed initial surveys about their coaching roles and relationships. Based on contrasting demographic characteristics and survey responses, 24 coaches were invited to participate in follow-up focus groups, interviews, and observations. Seventeen coaches agreed to participate (5 elementary, 6 middle school, and 6 high school coaches). Semi-structured focus groups were held once each for the elementary, middle, and high school coaches. Based on contrasting focus group descriptions of coaching relationships, 9 coaches were then invited to participate in semi-structured 90-minute individual interviews and observations of two coaching sessions with teachers. Ultimately, 8 coaches agreed to being interviewed and observed (3 elementary, 3 middle, and 2 high school coaches). Data was collected between January and June of 2008. Pseudonyms have been used throughout this brief, and some identifying details have been altered to protect participants' privacy.

vignette features a coach working at a different school and grade level; however, the three schools have similar performance profiles in terms of state test scores and annual yearly progress (AYP) measures. The brief concludes with questions meant to spark conversation between coaches and principals.

The Neglectful Principal

Emily was a second-year literacy coach working in a high school serving more than 1500 students in grades 9-12. She characterized her principal as neglectful of both her and the larger enterprise of coaching at her school:

I'm pretty sure that the thing my principal values most in me as a coach is that I don't bother him much . . . As long as [coaching is] going along, and people aren't complaining, he's okay with it. So, I don't really have any kind of backup.

Emily sympathized with the difficulty of her principal's job; it made sense to her that he was not able to spend time as an instructional leader, given the size of the school and the myriad of discipline, facility, and fundraising responsibilities he shouldered. However, although she could understand why the principal's schedule might have prevented him from focusing on coaching, she was quite clear that the principal's directive for her to work with all teachers, combined with his expectation that teachers did not need to participate in coaching if they did not want to, resulted in a coaching environment where relationships with teachers were difficult to establish. Emily highlighted three specific principal expectations and behaviors that compromised her work.

First, the principal expected Emily to coach 77 content area teachers in grades 9 through 12. In order to support this many teachers, Emily predominantly met with teachers during large content-area team meetings typically involving 12 to 20 teachers. Although Emily believed that one-on-one and small-group meetings with a fewer number of teachers would be more effective than large-group meetings, the principal did not agree. He also balked at establishing routines to help teachers observe one another as part of coaching work.

Furthermore, the principal did not regularly attend large-group coaching sessions or ask for updates on the work, making it difficult to determine whether or not the large-group sessions were effective.

Second, the principal signaled to teachers that coaching was not a priority. During one large-group meeting, for example, in which Emily was guiding 16 Language Arts teachers through an analysis of students' state test results, the principal appeared at the door and asked if he could talk with the teachers briefly. Emily consented, and the principal addressed the group, explaining that he had given permission for four teachers to miss the remaining five coaching meetings (out of a total of ten) in order to spend time preparing students for the upcoming state high-stakes test. Then, with a nod to Emily, he said that he was sure the absent teachers could make up the coaching meetings somehow. Several teachers were quick to respond, "That's okay, they shouldn't have to make it up." The principal thanked the teachers, agreeing that the teachers should not make up the meetings, and then left the meeting promptly. Afterward, Emily expressed her disappointment. This was only the second time the principal had visited a coaching session that year, and Emily had invited him to attend, in part, because she wanted him to encourage the teachers to reach out and include those who would miss the remaining five coaching sessions. Instead, the principal did not participate in the larger session, and he reinforced the notion that other school efforts (i.e., test preparation) were more important than coaching.

Third, while Emily's responsibilities also included helping teachers in their classrooms, the principal made it clear that teachers didn't "have to allow a coach in their classroom." This contributed to a culture of "closed doors" in Emily's opinion. As a result, Emily was only able to form a few one-on-one coaching relationships with teachers who actively reached out to her for individual help, or who went out of their way to invite her into their classrooms.

For these and other reasons, Emily felt that the principal was "not an instructional leader," and that he missed multiple opportunities to support coaching work. Emily believed she did not have the "backup" she needed from her principal to promote coaching with the teachers. As a result, she viewed her own coaching work as largely ineffective. Not only was it hard for her to meet with individual or small teams of teachers, she was not able to establish routines in which teachers could observe

one another's work and collectively reflect on particular instructional strategies — what some consider the core of literacy coaching work (Neufeld & Roper, 2003).

The Partnering Principal

Barbara was a fifth-year literacy coach in a 6th-8th grade middle school with over 600 students. Having been a teacher and reading specialist at the school prior to becoming a literacy coach, Barbara felt very connected to both the school and wider community. Barbara described her principal and assistant principal as working together as a cohesive team, and during the spring of 2008, Barbara reported that she had been having "frequent and ongoing conversations" with both her principal and assistant principal nearly every day. Two factors made such frequent communication possible: 1) Both administrators spent the bulk of their time walking through classrooms, observing instruction, and participating in teacher team meetings; and 2) Every week, both administrators met with Barbara and other specialists in the school's literacy center (also Barbara's office) to discuss schoolwide literacy instructional efforts. By making themselves available to Barbara and many of the school's teachers and specialists on a daily and weekly basis, the administrators demonstrated both a willingness and aptitude to act as instructional leaders.

Barbara took great pride in her administrators' decisions, praising their support of coaching work as part of larger efforts to establish and support professional learning communities (PLCs) within the school. She emphasized that the principal saw coaching and PLCs as the most efficient way to build teacher capacity:

He really felt as though [coaching and PLCs were] going to enable people to work up to their potential, to allow people to do what they do best, and not either wait for somebody to tell them to do something, or feel as though they can't do something.

As part of this agenda, the principal spent the first part of every school year interviewing teachers, parents, and specialists to determine what the community wanted to focus on instructionally for the year. After surveying the community, the principal wrote a brief vision document that was distributed to teachers and the community, describing which aspects of teaching and learning would collectively be highlighted that academic year. Barbara praised such moves as supporting her coaching work and allowing the principal to influence the community by focusing attention on a joint mission:

The leadership of the school has been very strong, in setting out with teachers a common vision and mission. So that a kind of distributed leadership can take place, where the principal doesn't have to be in on every cluster meeting to still have an impact on [teachers].

The community's collective sense of purpose was evident during observations of Barbara's daily meetings with her administrators, as well as during meetings with grade-level and content-area teams of teachers. For example, Barbara began one day by meeting briefly with both the principal and assistant principal before school started. The trio had arrived early to meet with the parents of English language learners over breakfast to discuss strategies for supporting the students during the upcoming state test. After the meeting, Barbara chatted with both administrators quickly about her goals for the week with grade-level teams of teachers, including her goal to help the teams clarify instructional activities for an upcoming interdisciplinary math-literacy event. The administrators listened carefully and then asked Barbara to keep them informed of how the meetings unfolded, and what directions the teachers decided to take.

During the three subsequent teacher team meetings that day, Barbara used brief agendas and discussion protocols to move the teams through a brainstorming and consensus process. From the way that teachers took notes on one another's ideas, politely disagreed, and helped one another stay on topic, it appeared that the teams of teachers were accustomed to collectively making decisions alongside both Barbara and the administrators. Time was shared equally among the teachers and Barbara in all three meetings, and facilitators rotated responsibility for taking notes on chart paper or in notebooks.

Later in the day, the assistant principal briefly stopped into the literacy center to follow-up with Barbara to see how the meetings had progressed. He asked what new ideas emerged in the meetings, and how he could assist with preparations for the math-literacy event. After listening to Barbara's brief report, he turned the conversation to state-testing, and asked Barbara how she and the teachers were thinking of adapting their schedules during state testing in order to maintain instructional consistency. Barbara gave a few quick ideas, and then signaled that she needed to prepare for her next team meeting. She and the assistant principal agreed to revisit the conversation by the end of the week.

During their frequent, informal interactions with Barbara and the teachers, the principal and assistant principal modeled partnership and collaboration, behaviors

that were mirrored by the faculty. Partly as a result of the partnering stance taken by the administrators, distributed leadership seemed to be the norm at this school. Barbara reported that her teachers did not view literacy coaching as something onerous or separate from their daily work. Instead, consistent with the goals of the principal, the teachers participated in cycles of coaching work, under Barbara's guidance, as part of their common planning time and professional responsibilities. Moreover, the teachers seemed eager to work with Barbara, who worked hard to present herself as a facilitator — not as an intruder demanding change. Barbara attributed much of this culture of collaboration and professional learning to the partnering stance of the administration.

The Interfering Principal

Lorraine was an eighth-year coach working in a K-5 elementary school with less than 300 students. She was primarily responsible for working with kindergarten, 1st, and 2nd grade teachers. Lorraine described her principal as a young, enthusiastic, and knowledgeable former teacher who had a good understanding of “daily classroom work, and what [teachers] are supposed to be doing, because he has done it himself.” Lorraine and the principal met frequently to “brainstorm together” about how to help teachers improve their literacy instructional practices. The focus of the 2007-2008 academic year was improving guided reading practices and managing student behavior in small groups. From Lorraine's initial accounts, and observations of the principal visiting classrooms with Lorraine and sitting-in on teacher team meetings, the principal seemed supportive of Lorraine's work as a coach.

However, despite early evidence suggesting that the principal was operating primarily from a partnership stance — staying abreast of Lorraine's work, supporting her by participating in coaching sessions, and consulting with her on literacy-related decisions for the school — Lorraine was quick to point out how the principal could not “let go” of the professional development work that she had been hired to conduct as a coach. Lorraine went on to characterize her principal as occasionally interfering with her coaching work by commandeering her meetings with teachers. For example, during a 1st grade cluster meeting with three teachers, Lorraine was suddenly (and unexpectedly) joined by the principal. Lorraine and the teachers welcomed him, and began to discuss their focus for the meeting: book introductions and note-taking during guided reading groups. Before Lorraine could move to the second item on her agenda,

the principal interjected, saying that because the teachers had brought their guided reading notes along with them to the meeting, he wanted to hear reports of reading levels for all students in their classes. This request, despite a few raised eyebrows, was hastily fulfilled. Each teacher, in turn, reported the last recorded reading level for each of their students. To his credit, the principal was able to comment on almost every student, noting great progress, or lack thereof, as he marked reading levels on his own chart. He made specific instructional suggestions, at times arguing for more letter identification assessments to be used, or more instruction on blending sounds. At one point, the principal turned to Lorraine (who had been sitting quietly) and asked her to work with the teachers around letter identification assessments.

Lorraine praised her principal's knowledge of literacy instruction, the students, and the teachers' work. He took his role as an instructional leader seriously, and he knew enough about early literacy instruction to make specific, concrete suggestions to teachers. However, by participating so heavily in coaching sessions, he unwittingly undermined Lorraine's authority and ability to work with the teachers. Lorraine described it this way: "He really means well, and he was a teacher of kindergarten and first grade, so he's grounded in practice at this level. But he has a hard time releasing the role of providing professional development to me." She indicated that the principal took over many of her group meetings with teachers; he saw that coaching time as "his time with them." He ignored agendas that Lorraine had collaboratively designed with teachers, and he often offered instructional suggestions and professional development ideas that were not entirely in line with what Lorraine and the teachers had been doing. For example, when he asked for the reports of student reading levels during the 1st grade meeting, he was asking teachers to do the same thing Lorraine had asked them to do the previous week. Lorraine described how the principal's behavior caused confusion for her and the teachers:

The hard part is that the teachers, in the past, have looked to me to . . . set that nitty-gritty [instructional] stuff with them. And they trust me, and I have a good relationship with them on the whole. The tricky part is, [now] it's not just me setting the instructional course of the school . . . [The principal] sees it as his role to provide the professional development to the staff. . . And I'm like "That's why I'm here." [laughs] But it's hard for him to let go.

Ultimately, Lorraine worried that the principal's behavior was undermining her work with the teachers. She report-

ed that the teachers were uncertain of whose instructional guidance they should follow at any one time, since mixed messages from Lorraine and the principal had become the norm. Although the principal's enthusiasm for literacy-focused professional development was clear, his behavior was interfering with Lorraine's coaching work.

Promoting Coach-Principal Partnerships

These vignettes of coach-principal relationships represent extremes; most principals likely fall somewhere in-between the polar opposites of neglect and interference. However, it is hoped that these vignettes will serve as conversation starters for coaches and principals who want to form successful partnerships. Reflecting on these vignettes, there are several questions coaches and principals (as well as researchers) may want to consider.

1. *How frequently should coaches and principals meet?*

The daily contact Barbara had with her principal and vice principal may be impossible for most coaches and principals to replicate, particularly in large schools. However, if coaches and principals agree to hold regular formal meetings (once a week, or once every two weeks), and then seek to meet more often informally, collaboration and collective decision-making may become the norm.

2. *How, and how often, should principals participate in coaching sessions?*

Although Lorraine's principal had the right idea — that principal participation in coaching sessions with teachers highlights the importance of the work — it may not be the case that the principal should attend every coaching session. Coaches might do well to invite principals to attend every other meeting, or one meeting per month. Ideally, principals should attend often enough to stay connected to the work, but not so often as to undermine the coach's authority. Moreover, using a clear discussion protocol that asks teachers and principals to rotate roles (e.g., note-taker, facilitator) may help principals participate equally and productively.

3. *What can coaches and principals do to form and maintain partnerships?*

Surely there is no single, definitive answer that will work across all school contexts. However, clear and constant communication is one key. Literacy coaches and principals who want to form productive partnerships must find ways to talk with one another about their shared vision for literacy instruction and

professional development. Coaches must spend time reaching out to their principals, letting them know how they understand their coaching roles and what supports are needed. Principals must take time to understand the intricacies of both literacy instruction and onsite professional development. Perhaps reading and reflecting on vignettes of coaches and principals working together can be a first step for coach-principal pairs to consider the possibilities and pitfalls involved in partnering for success.

References

- Burkins, J. (2007). *Coaching for balance: How to meet the challenges of literacy coaching*. Newark, DE: International Reading Association.
- Casey, K. (2006). *Literacy coaching: The essentials*. Portsmouth, ME: Heinemann.
- Ippolito, J. (2008, December). Understanding responsive and directive relationships in literacy coaching work. Roundtable paper presented at the annual meeting of the National Reading Conference, Orlando, FL.
- Ippolito, J. (2009, April). How do literacy coaches balance responsive/directive relationships with teachers? Research paper presentation at the first annual National Literacy Coaching Summit, Corpus Christi, TX.
- Kral, C. (2007). Principal support for literacy coaches. Literacy Coaching Clearinghouse Brief. Retrieved April 23, 2009, from <http://www.literacycoachingonline.org/briefs/PrincipalSupportFinal3-22-07.pdf>
- Neufeld, B., & Roper, D. (2003). Coaching: A strategy for developing instructional capacity—Promises and practicalities (Prepared for The Aspen Institute Program on Education and The Annenberg Institute for School Reform). Cambridge, MA: Education Matters. Retrieved April 23, 2009, from <http://www.edmatters.org/webreports/CoachingPaperfinal.pdf>
- Shanklin, N. (2007). What supports do literacy coaches need from administrators in order to succeed? Literacy Coaching Clearinghouse. Retrieved April 23, 2009, from <http://www.literacycoachingonline.org/briefs/LCSupportsNSBrief.pdf>
- Steiner, L., & Kowal, J. (2007). Issue brief: Principal as instructional leader: Designing a coaching program that fits. Washington, DC: The Center for Comprehensive School Reform and Improvement. Retrieved April 23, 2009, from <http://eric.ed.gov/ERICWebPortal/contentdelivery/servlet/ERICServlet?accno=ED49925>
- Toll, C. A. (2008). *Surviving but not yet thriving: Essential questions and practical answers for experienced literacy coaches*. Newark, DE: International Reading Association.