

# What Teachers Say They Changed Because of Their Coach and How They Think Their Coach Helped Them

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Many articles and books have been written advocating for the use of literacy coaches in professional development and/or describing what literacy coaches should do (for a comprehensive list, see Literacy Coaching Clearinghouse website: [www.literacycoachingonline.org](http://www.literacycoachingonline.org)). Some research has been conducted on the day-to-day practices of coaches, such as, how many hours they spend doing what (Alverman, Commeyras, Cramer, & Harnish, 2005; Deussen, Coskie, Robinson, & Autio, 2007; Lapp, Fisher, Flood, & Frey, 2003; Poglinco et al., 2003; Ravinville & Jones, 2008; Roller, 2006). In this cacophony of pro-coach voices, teachers—the group of people most directly impacted by coaches—have not been heard. In order to find out what teachers thought about coaches, we analyzed interviews which had been conducted with 35 teachers who had worked with a coach for three years. We specifically sought to understand (1) the actions coaches carry out that teachers consider helpful and (2) what specific coach-initiated changes teachers make in their beliefs and practices. The 35 teachers we studied were all participants in the first iteration of the South Carolina Reading Initiative, known as SCRI K-5 Phase One.

SCRI is a multi-year professional development program designed to help teachers learn about and try out research-based literacy teaching practices. For three years, SCRI K-5 Phase One literacy coaches held bimonthly, site-based study group sessions with teachers and their principals. In these study groups, coaches facilitated discussions and organized engagements which focused on research-based best practices. In addition to leading the study groups, the coach spent four days a week in the classrooms of the participating teachers helping teachers put into practice what they were learning.

## What Teachers Changed Because of Their Coach

The researchers and coaches who have written about coaching either implicitly or explicitly argue that literacy coaches should focus on specific changes they want teachers to make in their practices. In this study, however, we found that while the 35 teachers mentioned new practices they tried in their classrooms (i.e. Read Alouds, Literature Circles, Writer's Workshop, etc.), they focused more on the shifts coaches had helped them make in how they thought and acted as teachers. Specifically, we found that, because of their coach, most teachers (1) were willing to try more things in their classroom, (2) used more authentic means of assessing student needs, (3) modified instruction based on students' needs, and (4) changed their beliefs and philosophies based on the educational theory and research they read. None of these changes are observable; they were only "visible" in the interview data. Had we relied only on observational data, we would not have understood these changes had occurred. It is noteworthy that these changes were not shifts in particular practices prescribed by coaches (or by SCRI), but, instead, were shifts we associated with an increase in teacher agency.

### *Trying More Things*

All 35 teachers felt that, because of their coach, they took more risks; they tried more things than they would have tried in the past. They talked about how sometimes these new strategies worked, and sometimes they didn't work. As Matty (all teacher names used are pseudonyms), a fourth grade teacher with six years of experience explained:

*I think my whole way of thinking is like, 'Well let's just go for it, let's just do it!' and I think before I was very hesitant and now, you know, I'm just like 'Okay, well let's try this, this looks great, let's try this, let's see if this works.' And you know, sometimes they pan out and sometimes they don't. (MRI1Y2, ¶ 285)*

Another teacher, Hanna, who taught third grade and had nine years of experience, shared how she considered SCRI to be powerful because she tried out the strategies she learned about during study groups. She commented, “I read research, but actually coming out and trying the strategies and actually doing the strategies with the students and it works. This is the powerful aspect of it [SCRI]” (HHI1Y2, ¶ 62). Hanna felt that it was because of her coach that she was willing to do as much experimentation as she did.

### **Using More Authentic Assessment**

Thirty-one of the 35 teachers mentioned how they used more authentic assessments. The teachers talked about how they worked more closely with their students by conferencing or kid-watching (Goodman, 1978). Ellen, a third grade teacher with over thirty years of teaching experience talked about how she was able to learn more about her students:

*Right now I'm aware of the needs of the students more. I take time to listen to them, I mean really listen and know what they're writing about and what they're interested in as far as conferencing time for writing and conferencing time for reading....I've learned how to help the students. If you listen to the students you can help them better. (EHFIY3, ¶ 12)*

Another teacher, Helen, a second grade teacher with six years of experience, commented on the benefits of authentic assessments, “You can tell more of what they are doing and how I can help them...It was just amazing to me if you try more things [running records & conferencing], you can just do more” (HRO2DY3, ¶ 20).

### **Modifying Instruction Based on Students' Needs**

Because teachers knew their students' needs better through authentic assessments, they were able to individualize instruction. Virginia, a fourth grade teacher with 27 years of experience, explained, “I look at the children for directions to go to rather than just, ‘This is what the teacher's guide says...’ I think (I have become) confident enough to plan my curriculum based on what I know is best for that particular group of children or individuals” (VMI1Y3, ¶ 101). Some teachers talked about choosing more appropriate texts for their students, such as Ellen, a third grade teacher with more than thirty years of experience:

*With the read alouds, before I was just reading because that is what you do with read alouds. But now I am more conscious about what I pick to read*

*and maybe stopping and saying, ‘Well did you notice that, the way that they put that, or this is an animal talking here.’ Or maybe picking poetry because I know that someone is interested in poetry. So I have put more of a twist on it to meet my student's needs....*

*[In terms of self-selected reading]: I have become more conscious that a lot of kids don't pick the right books and then they end up wasting their time. So I have worked harder at helping them pick the right things and not allowing them just to waste their time. (EHI1Y2, ¶ 311)*

### **Grounding Instructional Decisions in Research and Theory**

Most of the teachers (28 out of 35) talked about how their coaches helped them learn about the research-base behind particular instructional strategies and this led to their desire to consistently use research-based practices. Some teachers expressed this desire explicitly. Hanna, for example, said she wanted to “make my teaching research based” (HHFIY3, ¶ 699). Other teachers were less direct. Henrietta, a second grade teacher who had been teaching for nineteen years, explained that she now had a “reason [for] why I do things. I don't just do things because [they're] cute” (HSIFY3, ¶ 246). Virginia, noted, “Well, I think I have gotten much better in articulating the why behind what I do (VMI3Y3, ¶ 62).

### **“Change” as Agency**

In the professional development literature, “change” is often positioned as outside others trying to make teachers do things differently than they had before. These changes are often tied to particular practices. What we saw in this study, however, was that change in SCRI was not a mirror of externally imposed mandates, but instead, change was synonymous with agency. Teachers had a new or renewed sense of themselves as professionals who took risks and who grounded their instructional decisions both in their knowledge of their students and in the knowledge of research and theory. As Donna, a first grade teacher with twenty-three years of experience explained:

*I think I know me better. I've been doing this a long time and I felt frustrations and maybe failure to some extent and I just feel like I'm starting to just kind of get into my groove, you know, that what matters to me may not matter to everybody, but as long as I believe*

*in it and I can be an advocate of it and I can show that it does work and that it's, you know, doable, I keep going back to - it's doable. I think many times we ask children to do things they can't do and that makes them frustrated, it makes us frustrated, parents are frustrated. But I think I'm beginning to know me better, what matters and to be unafraid to say 'I don't like that' and 'It doesn't matter in my classroom, that's not me, that's not important.' To be able to say to parents 'It's okay if your child doesn't make all A's, but your child is a great child and your child is learning great things.'* (DCFY2, ¶ 304)

By developing a more solid educational philosophy which led her to know herself better, Donna felt more empowered to voice her opinion. With the help of their literacy coach and the development of their new research knowledge, she and the other teachers began to see themselves as professionals who could make informed decisions about their instructional practices. The teachers also felt they could share their new knowledge efficiently to other teachers, administrators, and parents. They had more agency.

### **Coach Actions**

What did coaches do that led to this increase in teacher agency? According to these 35 teachers, the coach

- created ways for them to collaborate,
- provided them with on-going support, and
- taught them about research-based teaching practices.

### **Creating Ways for Teachers to Collaborate**

Twenty-five of the 35 teachers commented on how their coach created a space for them to have what Avery, a second grade teacher with five years of experience, called, “wonderful, professional conversations” (AHFY2, ¶ 285). The teachers valued this time for interactions with their peers where they could learn about their colleagues, share strategies they were using in their classrooms, and discuss individual students.

With the help of their literacy coach in study group sessions, the teachers felt they could talk about their tensions and triumphs. These teachers now had a place to voice their concerns, a place to work out their problems, and a place to celebrate their accomplishments. By having a space to talk and by having a literacy coach to bounce ideas off of, these teachers further developed their professional voice.

### **Providing On-Going Support**

Twenty-five of the 35 teachers talked about how their coach supported them in study groups as well as in their classrooms. Teachers spoke of how their coach encouraged their learning by helping them feel comfortable to ask questions and seek advice. For example, Sharon, a third grade teacher with twenty-seven years of experience, shared, “[My coach] is not so demanding... that you are uncomfortable. It's just a relaxed learning environment” (SSI1Y2, ¶ 190-195). The teachers felt that the coach was more like a facilitator of their learning rather than a dictator. Tina, a first grade teacher with six years of experience, illustrated this point by stating,

*My opinion of her role is that she is a coach. That she is there when we need her...during the actual SCRI meeting she is more of a facilitator. She usually does have an agenda, where she has something in mind for us to go over, but most of our time is spent pow-wowing with each other, or sharing, and learning from each other...it's not a lecture-kind of informing us....It's just a very informative, yet, 'What do you think?'-kind of setting.* (TSI1Y2, ¶ 108)

Teachers also valued how accessible their coaches were to come into their classrooms to observe or model a lesson. In addition, coaches individualized their own instruction for the teachers by providing support based on the individual teacher's needs. For example, coaches helped teachers plan lessons, organize the classroom library, worked with individual students, participated in parent/teacher conferences, etc.

### **Teaching Research-Based Practices**

The coaches helped teachers understand the research behind the teaching strategies they were learning about and trying in their classrooms. All 35 teachers talked about and spoke highly of the research they read. For example, Beverly, a first grade teacher with sixteen years of experience, commented, “The articles that we've read this year have been very meaningful, as well as the books, and have made me do some soul searching” (BHFIY2, ¶ 121). Beverly went on to explain how the “soul searching” inspired by the professional readings helped her gain a better understanding of how she viewed reading comprehension, phonics, and spelling instruction.

## Looking Ahead

These findings suggest that those of us who work with coaches or conduct research about coaching should make explicit what goals we expect coaches to have for the teachers with whom they work and then closely tie our professional development/research to those goals. It also suggests that we look closely at coach actions that teachers find helpful. As researchers, we can explore the degree to which coaches are acting in these ways; as teacher-educators, we can help coaches learn to engage in helpful actions. This is just one study which sought to understand the process and context of teacher change from the perspective of teachers. We hope there are many more. It seems critical that teacher voices be heard in the coaching conversation.

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