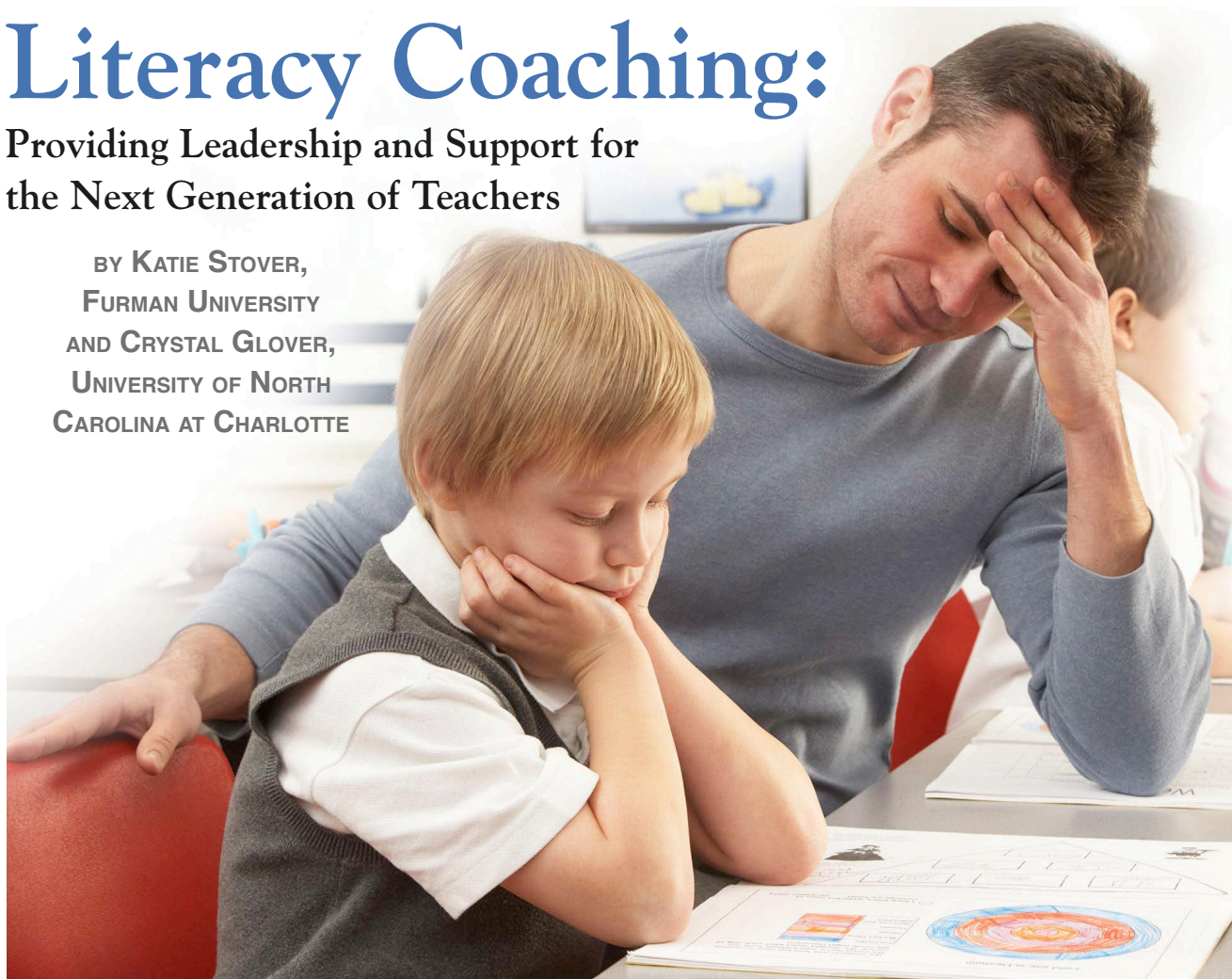


# Literacy Coaching:

Providing Leadership and Support for  
the Next Generation of Teachers

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## Abstract

New teachers face a number of challenges as they begin their careers. In fact, many leave the profession for a range of reasons including an overwhelming amount of information and responsibility, pressures of high stakes testing, and lack of support. To counter these challenges, the authors discuss ways literacy coaches can provide leadership and guidance to new teachers through building relationships, creating a climate of trust, and developing individualized support to enhance the teacher's success.

*I began my first year of teaching with enthusiasm and was excited to make a difference in the lives of my students. Ready to implement the strategies I learned in my teacher preparation program. I thoughtfully arranged my students' desks in cooperative learning groups, organized my classroom library, adorned the reading area with comfortable pillows and soft lighting and hung student work to create an inviting classroom community.*

*Yet, my attempts to foster an engaging learning environment were quickly squashed with the harsh reality of teacher accountability and the pressure from testing mandates.*

*With a population of students who scored close to the bottom percentile in the entire state, the school's administration called for a standardized and scripted instructional approach and the shuffling of students to create ability grouped classes. As the new teacher, I was given the group with the struggling learners.*

*Teaching a classroom full of students who were all below grade level left me feeling vulnerable and scrutinized when administrators relied on student test scores to judge my teaching abilities. I was expected to use a skill and drill approach to teach to the test and put all of what I learned about*

*effective and engaging teaching on hold. I was told to use data to drive my instruction and teach to the test if I wanted to see results. This left me feeling discouraged, unsupported, and second guessing my decision to become a teacher. I felt like the little mole that pops out of the Whac-a-Mole arcade game only to be whacked by the enormous, ever-present mallet just waiting to clobber me. The administrative mallet stripped me of my professional knowledge and enthusiasm for teaching and learning in an effort to create a factory-like setting of standardized test preparation. I wanted to quit. (Anne, fourth grade teacher)*

### Challenges of New Teachers

Like the teacher in the above vignette, new teachers face a number of challenges as they begin their professional careers. For 25% of first year teachers, these challenges prove too difficult and force them to abandon the profession after just one year. Almost half of all new teachers quit teaching within five years (Henke, Chen, & Geis, 2000; Ingersoll, 2003). Beginning teachers leave the profession for reasons such as inadequate pay, inadequate support from school administration, intrusions on teaching time, discipline problems, and limited input in decision making (DeAngelis, 2012; DeAngelis & Presley, 2011; Sass, Flores, Claeys, & Perez, 2012). Unlike many professions which provide new hires with an introduction period complete with on-the-job training, new teachers are often isolated and left to fend for themselves. They are frequently given a set of teacher manuals and expected to provide meaningful instruction and produce savvy test takers with little or no outside assistance.

### Information Overload

Research suggests that beginning teachers have difficulty managing the abundance of responsibilities they encounter in their first years of teaching (Chorzempa, 2011). In an effort to ensure their preparedness for teaching, beginning teachers are inundated with information. This information overload can lead to confusion and frustration for novice educators that are managing their own classrooms for the first time (Chorzempa, 2011). The massive amount of professional development and teacher training sessions leave new teachers unsure of where to place their focus. New teachers often complain of having so much information to sift through, that they neglect important aspects of their jobs (Chorzempa, 2011). In talking with four beginning teachers, the authors found that these new teachers felt unprepared to handle the expectations placed on them to manage a

classroom, communicate with parents, and implement differentiated instruction for diverse learners.

### Pressures of Standardized Testing

For many school districts, standardized test scores have considerable influence on the amount of state and federal funding schools receive. This can have a significant impact on low-performing schools or schools whose student populations come from poor or low-income families. For new teachers in these schools, the emphasis on testing adds an additional measure of stress and anxiety (Brookings Institution, 2011; Tempel, 2012). Novice teachers are often required to attend professional development designed to assist them with such things as test preparation strategies, data analysis, and assessment techniques. Yet these training sessions often leave new teachers with more questions than answers. While these professional development measures may help ensure that teachers understand the importance of using data to drive instruction, such training fails to show beginning teachers how that concept translates into practice. This missing link represents a significant challenge for beginning teachers.

### A Need for Support

The isolated nature of teaching can leave beginning teachers with feelings of doubt about their decisions to become teachers (Chen, 2012). Many new teachers feel disconnected from other teachers in the school community. Veteran teachers, whose personal experiences have the potential to benefit beginning teachers, are often busy with the demands of their own classrooms and fail to offer much-needed support to the novice teachers in their school settings. This lack of support leads to further frustration and dissatisfaction on the part of beginning teachers. In many cases, these negative feelings affect new teachers' ability to provide effective instruction to their students.

Research on the academic performance of students in classrooms taught by beginning teachers suggests the need for new teachers to receive on-the-job training and support during their initial teaching experiences (Sterrett & Imig, 2011). Early support for new teachers is crucial in order to foster a sense of confidence, develop knowledge and pedagogy, and enhance student learning. Researchers from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill found that students in beginning teachers' mathematics classrooms performed 21 days behind their counterparts taught by veteran teachers on end-of the-year assessment measures (Henry, Thompson, Bastian, Fortner, Kershaw, Purtell, & Zulli, 2010). Having the support of literacy coaches and mentors to scaffold the learning experience for novice teachers can help ease the transition into teaching and enhance the academic

performance of students in beginning teachers' classrooms.

### **Literacy Coaching Offers Leadership and Support**

To counter these challenges, it is essential that beginning teachers have a mentor or literacy coach who provides leadership and guidance as they begin their teaching journeys. Literacy coaches are commonly employed as instructional leaders within many schools. According to the International Reading Association (2004, 2006), a literacy coach works primarily with classroom teachers to improve instructional practices. However, literacy coaches wear many hats and are responsive to teachers' needs beyond instructional support. For example, they may work with new teachers to discuss classroom management techniques, strategies for differentiating instruction for diverse learners, and ways to engage and motivate students to learn. Literacy coaches also work with teachers to examine a variety of assessment options and guide them in analysis of the data to drive instruction (Blamey, Albert, & Dorrell, 2008; Walpole & McKenna, 2013). In the state of Georgia, literacy coaches are expected to be fluent in the Common Core Georgia Performance Standards and standards-based education (Stout, Jeffcoat, McSwain, Davis, Chauvin, & Throdore, 2010). Literacy coaches in Georgia are also required to have strong command of reading and writing within the content areas, Response to Intervention (RTI), assessment, the interpretation of data, differentiating lessons based on data, and selecting and implementing appropriate interventions (Stout et al., 2010). The ways in which literacy coaches support teachers is based on the strengths and areas of needed growth for each individual teacher. Building off of the teacher's strengths, the literacy coach fosters reflection and assists the teacher with goal setting. The individual needs of each teacher drive the differentiated coaching conversations (Stover, Kissel, Haag, & Shoniker, 2011).

### **Building Relationships**

In order to provide effective leadership, it is necessary for literacy coaches to foster trusting relationships by establishing rapport early on. Before the school year begins, the literacy coach should reach out to new teachers to introduce themselves and welcome them to the school. Showing the teacher around the physical space of the school building, where materials are kept, and how to gain access to supplies helps orient the new teacher to the structural aspects of the school. Planning a broad instructional timeline with new teachers to map out curriculum based on the grade-level and Common Core State Standards familiarizes the teacher with instructional goals and objectives. Topics such as classroom arrangement, management, assessment and grading expectations

are important for beginning teachers to have a clear understanding. This work is crucial at the onset of the school year in order to provide the teacher with a foundational level of familiarity and comfort with the expectations and routines of the school so they are not left uninformed and guessing about what to do. Getting acquainted to a new school and a new career for many, amidst an overabundance of information is when the most support is needed from a mentor or instructional coach.

### **Creating a Climate of Trust**

It is important in the role of a literacy coach to remain neutral. Building trusting relationships by maintaining confidentiality and support is critical to the work of literacy coaching (L'Allier, Elish-Piper, & Bean, 2010). The role of the literacy coach is crucial to providing a non-evaluative liaison between the classroom teacher and the administration and ongoing demands of the nuts and bolts of teaching. Fostering relationships where teachers feel comfortable talking openly about concerns and struggles without being judged allows the literacy coach to better meet each teacher's individual needs and create an ongoing support system. In order for the new teacher to accept feedback, they must feel valued and comfortable working collaboratively with instructional coaches. Building rapport and developing trusting relationships enhances the connection between the instructional coach and the new teacher. Fostering teachers' personal, professional, and emotional well-being helps teachers feel appreciated and supported.

### **Meeting Individual Needs**

Like the diverse students in our classrooms, the type of support teachers need varies based on each individual teacher. Stover, Kissel, Haag, and Shoniker (2011) discuss the importance of differentiating support offered by literacy coaches based on the individual needs of teachers. This is particularly relevant to the support of novice teachers. Some new teachers need development of classroom management skills while others need strategies to meet the needs of struggling learners. By meeting with new teachers on an individual and regular basis, the literacy coach can create a safe setting where the teacher will more likely share questions and challenges allowing the coach to better meet his/her individual needs.

Teachers and their students benefit from the leadership of literacy coaches. Teachers can improve their instructional practice by including higher-level thinking questions, actively engaging students, and differentiated instruction (Bean, Belcastro, Hathaway, Risko, Rosemary, & Roskos, 2008). Through collaborative partnerships between the teacher and the literacy coach, opportunities for focused self-



reflection and reflective professional development can lead to enhanced instructional decisions and improved student achievement (Stover et al., 2011; Taylor, Pearson, Peterson, & Rodriguez, 2005). It is critical that teachers are reflective practitioners in order to navigate the complex field of teaching in an era of policy mandates and teacher accountability (Moore & Whitfield, 2008). With the leadership of a literacy coach, new teachers no longer have to feel isolated within the four walls of their classroom.

### Final Thoughts

With the ongoing support and leadership of a literacy coach, new teachers can become more adept at meeting the complex demands and challenges of teaching. Literacy coaching can fulfill a vital role in helping new teachers meet the demands of teaching without succumbing to the pressures associated with the profession. If new teachers such as the one mentioned in the opening vignette of this article are to conquer the world of high stakes testing and teacher accountability, they must be armed with the tools to accomplish this task. A literacy coach can provide the much needed leadership and support necessary for new teachers to meet the wide range of needs of students in their classrooms.

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