

# Exploring the Role of Literacy Coaches: A Case Study of Three Schools in Ontario

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*This paper explores the role of literacy coaches in Ontario schools. This case study uses qualitative research methods to provide a picture of what literacy coaching looks like in practice in three schools. The literacy coaches had three main roles: to act as school literacy organizers, literacy leaders, and to provide support to teachers and principals. Unlike the roles of literacy coaches presented in the literature, the coaches in this study did not generally participate in observation and demonstration lessons and spent the majority of their coaching time performing organizational tasks. This study makes recommendations for future research and provides suggestions for school boards regarding implementing literacy coaching.*

*Cet article explore le rôle des formateurs en alphabétisation dans les écoles de l'Ontario. Cette étude de cas repose sur des méthodes de recherche qualitatives et offre un aperçu pratique de la formation en alphabétisation dans trois écoles. Les formateurs en alphabétisation jouent trois rôles principaux : agir comme organisateurs de l'alphabétisation dans l'école, être chefs de file en alphabétisation et appuyer les enseignants et les directeurs. Contrairement aux formateurs présentés dans la documentation, ceux dans cette étude n'avaient pas tendance à participer aux observations et aux leçons pratiques. La plupart de leur temps était passé à accomplir des tâches organisationnelles. Cette étude offre des recommandations quant aux études à l'avenir et des suggestions pour les conseils scolaires en matière de la mise en œuvre de la formation en alphabétisation.*

Within the last decade, a new type of literacy specialist, the literacy coach, has appeared in schools across Canada. In fact, in the province of Ontario, literacy coaches are now a common fixture in schools as a model of professional development to improve both teaching and student learning. Despite its popularity, there is limited research on literacy coaching (Casey, 2006; Dole & Donaldson, 2006; Rodgers & Rodgers, 2007). Russo (2004) stated, "most immediately, better school-based coaching research is needed" (p. 24). While research on literacy coaching over the past few years has increased, there is little research in the Canadian context about the role literacy coaches play in Canadian schools.

To address this gap in the research, a qualitative study on literacy coaching in Ontario was designed and conducted. The complete study examined the role of the literacy coach, the relationships among the players in literacy coaching programs, and the successes and barriers in implementing coaching programs. The study used observations, interviews, and document and artifact collection to explore literacy coaching in three schools in one school board in northern Ontario. In this paper, a portion of the longer research study, the role of the literacy coach, is reported to shed light on literacy coaching in Ontario. While not a complete representation of all

literacy coaching in Ontario, and while limited by the small number of schools and coaches, this case study helps illuminate literacy coaching in the Canadian context.

## **Exploring the Role of the Literacy Coach**

### **Defining the Role of Literacy Coaching in Ontario**

The literacy coaching position in Ontario evolved from lead literacy teachers, a role outlined in the document, *Early Reading Strategy: The Report of the Expert Panel on Early Reading in Ontario* (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2003). Lead literacy teachers were “to improve reading achievement by working collaboratively with teachers to deepen their understanding of the reading process and to extend their repertoire of instructional strategies” (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2003, p. 58). In 2004, the Ontario Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat was created within the Ministry of Education to increase student achievement in literacy and mathematics (Ontario Ministry of Education, n.d.) and has since published a number of documents supporting literacy coaching in Ontario schools (e.g., Campbell & Fullan, 2006; Numeracy and Literacy Secretariat, 2006b). In *Improving Student Achievement in Literacy and Numeracy: Job-Embedded Professional Learning*, the Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat (2006a) defined coaching as:

A relationship established between two parties to meet a particular learning goal. Coaching involves two teachers in processes in which they collaborate, refine, reflect, conduct research, expand on ideas, build skills and knowledge, and problem solve in order to improve student learning and achievement. (p. 3)

Literacy coaches were to work with teachers to improve their teaching practice with the ultimate goal being to improve student outcomes.

### **Defining Literacy in Ontario Schools**

In, *The Ontario Curriculum Grades 1-8 Language*, the Ontario Ministry of Education (2008) stated:

Literacy learning is a communal project and the teaching of literacy skills is embedded across the curriculum; however, it is the language curriculum that is dedicated to the instruction in the areas of knowledge, skills—listening and speaking, reading, writing, viewing, and visually representing—on which literacy is based. (p. 4)

While this definition of literacy is broad and encompasses a variety of literacies, at the time of the study, the Ministry continued to focus on a more narrow definition of literacy based on literacy as only reading and writing. For example, in explaining the rationale for the Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat, the Ministry (n.d.) wrote, “the Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat was established in 2004 to help boost student achievement. Highly skilled and experienced educators (known as student achievement officers) work directly with schools and school boards to improve our students’ reading, writing, and math skills” (para. 1). The Ministry also continues to administer the Education Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO) tests, which attempt to evaluate student achievement in reading, writing, and mathematics. In addition, the Literacy

and Numeracy Secretariat reports, which describe the success of literacy in schools (e.g., Campbell & Fullan, 2006), tend to focus on traditional views of literacy, reading, and writing. Thus, while literacy can be a broad and encompassing term, literacy coaching in Ontario tends to focus on literacy as predominantly reading and writing.

### **The Role of the Literacy Coach in the United States**

The role of literacy coaches in the United States is described similarly to that of their Canadian counterparts. Based in the United States, the International Reading Association (IRA) (2006) stated that the literacy coaching role may include tasks such as, “facilitating the work of ongoing collaborative teacher groups, centering the collaborative work on shared instructional challenges, promoting demonstration lessons and cross-classroom observations, and developing opportunities to inspect students’ performance on tests and in-class assignments so as to inform instruction” (p. 36). Coaches may also be responsible for organizational tasks, such as organizing and ordering student resource materials and tracking student data (Burkins, 2007; Walpole & Blamey, 2008). As in Canada, American literacy coaches work primarily with teachers rather than with students, encouraging teachers to change teaching practices with the ultimate goal of increasing student learning and achievement (Dole & Donaldson, 2006; Rodgers & Rodgers, 2007; Toll, 2005). The job description of a literacy coach is not static, since coaching changes as teachers’ needs and instruction change (Casey, 2006; Kent, 2005; Swafford, 1998) and should also be developed locally to suit the specific needs of schools, students, and teachers (Casey, 2006; Coskie, 2004; Robinson, 2004).

The IRA (2004) stated, “it is the in-class coaching that distinguishes the role of the reading coach” (p. 3) from other reading specialists. In-class literacy coaching is most often described in the literature as the demonstration and observation of lessons (e.g., Bean, 2004; Casey, 2006; Dozier, 2006). For example, Bean (2004) recommended literacy coaches plan demonstration lessons with the teacher, then the coach and the teacher meet to discuss the lesson. The last step of the demonstration lesson is for the literacy coach to observe the teacher teach a similar lesson because observation “helps to ensure that the teacher has actually learned from the demonstration lesson and can implement a strategy correctly” (Bean, 2004, p. 100). Hasbrouck and Denton (2007) presented a different model of one-on-one coaching which emphasizes student achievement instead of changing teaching practices. In this model, the literacy coach and the teacher work together to create action plans and then the teacher implements the plan with the coach providing support. After the plan has been implemented, the coach and the teacher evaluate the plan to see if the goals have been met and to determine the next steps.

### **The Qualifications of Literacy Coaches**

The IRA (2004) has published international recommendations regarding the qualifications of literacy coaches. They recommended literacy coaches meet five criteria: be excellent classroom teachers; have an in-depth knowledge of reading, assessment, and instruction; have experience working with teachers in professional development; possess excellent presentation skills; and have the experience necessary to model, observe, and coach. However, there are no set qualifications for Canadian literacy coaches, and generally school boards in Ontario set their own standard for the hiring of coaches.

There have been many reports and research published in the United States concerning the

qualifications of American literacy coaches. For instance, Bean (2004) and Dole (2004) stated literacy coaches must generally have solid knowledge of student learning and literacy instruction. Being able to work with adults (Bean, 2004) and the ability to coach other teachers are skills that literacy coaches also need to have in order to fulfill the coaching role (Burkins, 2007; Poglinco & Bach, 2004; Rodgers & Rodgers, 2007). Leadership skills are also cited in the literature as a requirement for literacy coaches (Walpole & McKenna, 2004). A leader is a person who “invites and inspires others to ‘buy into’ a vision” (Vogt & Shearer, 2003, p. 266). In the leadership role, a leader “influences the interpretation of internal and external events, the choice of goals or desired outcomes, organization of work activities, individual motivation and abilities, power relations, and shared orientations” (Hoy & Miskel, 2001, p. 394). While principals are the instructional leaders in schools and are in charge of literacy initiatives, “principals who share the responsibility of leadership are much more successful at creating positive change for teachers and students” (Booth & Rowsell, 2007, p. 15). Sharing the leadership role with the literacy coach and giving the literacy coach some power can be an effective accelerator to creating change in schools (Booth & Rowsell, 2007). However, while literacy coaches are leaders, they do not have administrative authority over teachers and are still teachers themselves (Burkins, 2007). In fact, literacy coaches are often said to lead from behind since they support teachers who then work with students (Vogt & Shearer, 2003).

Because literacy coaching is a new initiative, many within the American research community are also fearful that unqualified teachers may be hired to fill literacy coaching positions (Fisher, 2007; Frost & Bean, 2006; IRA, 2004; Roller, 2006). The IRA’s survey of literacy coaches found that literacy coaches are very confident in their abilities to perform their job (Roller, 2006); however, Roller (2006) stated that this is an area of concern because most literacy coaches are not reading specialists, and while they may feel confident to coach certain activities, they may not have the depth of knowledge necessary to be an effective coach.

### **What Literacy Coaching Looks Like in Practice**

While policies outline the roles of a literacy coach, research into what literacy coaches actually do in their day-to-day jobs as school literacy coaches is limited and most extant research is about American literacy coaches. For instance, the IRA reported that American literacy coaches spend the most time, approximately five hours per week, in assessment and instructional planning activities and two to four hours per week planning and conducting professional development sessions (Roller, 2006). The IRA (2006) also reported that coaches spend two to four hours per week “observing, in demonstrating, and in discussion of lessons taught” (p. 2) and approximately one hour or less on “developing curriculum, facilitating teacher study or inquiry groups, and conducting professional development for administrators” (p. 2).

In a Florida study, Moxley and Taylor (2004, cited in 2006) reported that literacy coaches spent the greatest amount of time (29.8%) doing assessment or data management. The literacy coaches also spent 15.5% of their time doing “other,” 14.6 % of their time attending workshops or meetings, 13% providing workshops, 7.4% coaching intensive intervention teachers, 6.6% meeting with administration, 6.5% coaching content teachers, and 6.5% doing in-class modeling (Moxley & Taylor, 2006, p. 89). Morgan et al. (2003) indicated that in South Carolina, many of the defined coaching roles are not fulfilled and many coaches act as consultants or simply as additional teachers, and are assigned a variety of non-academic responsibilities, such as lunch and bus duty. Deussen, Coskie, Robinson, and Autio (2007), also found that literacy coaching in

practice looks different than the job description. In a large-scale report for the U.S. Department of Education, Deussen et al. reported that literacy coaches spend only 28% of their time working with teachers, despite the fact that *Reading First* mandated that 60-80% of the literacy coaches' time be devoted to working with teachers. Finally, Walpole and Blamey (2008) found that literacy coaches had dual roles, working both as directors and mentors. Literacy coaches were mentors, working collaboratively with teachers and modeling instruction, and literacy coaches were also directors performing in leadership roles, such as managing curriculum and resources and training teachers to promote consistency of curriculum and assessment.

While there are some anecdotal accounts of literacy coaching in Canada (e.g., Snow, 2007) and reports produced by the Ontario Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat (e.g., Campbell & Fullan, 2006), there appears to be only one research study published about the literacy coaching role in Canada. Lynch and Ferguson (2010) interviewed 13 literacy coaches in one urban school board in Ontario to explore their perspectives on their roles as coaches. In their coaching role, the Ontario coaches performed a variety of activities including: demonstration, observation, and debriefing of lessons, presenting workshops to teachers, and examining student assessment data. Lynch and Ferguson also reported that there was role ambiguity among coaches and that many coaches felt uncertain about their role; a finding also supported in the research about American literacy coaches (Blamey, Meyer, & Walpole, 2008/2009; Poglinco et al., 2003). Coaches in the study also felt that their role was changing and evolving with time.

### **Research Question**

While Lynch and Ferguson's (2010) work is the first of its kind to research Canadian literacy coaches and their role, it is limited in that no observations of literacy coaching in situ were undertaken. This paper explores the theme of the role of literacy coaches in Ontario that emerged from Lynch and Ferguson's earlier work, but is a different study with different research questions and with participants from a different school board in Ontario. Little is known about literacy coaching in Canada and what literacy coaches actually do in their day-to-day jobs. Therefore, the research question attended to in this paper is: what does literacy coaching look like in practice? This paper explores literacy coaching in practice and presents descriptive data about what coaches do in their roles.

### **Theoretical Framework**

For Vygotsky (1981), learning is a part of culture, particularly social relationships. Vygotsky (1981) wrote, "it is through others that we develop ourselves" (p. 161). Vygotsky (1981) asserted that social relationships are key components of learning: "functions are first formed in the collective as relations among children and then become mental functions for the individual" (p. 163). Vygotsky's (1978) zone of proximal development is key to learning. The zone of proximal development is "the distance between the actual development level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving and under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers" (p. 86). Again, Vygotsky's (1978) view that learning is social in nature is evident because interacting with another person is an important element of the zone of proximal development; without the adult guidance or the more capable peer, there is not the opportunity for what Vygotsky calls "good learning" (p. 89), that being learning which will advance development. Wood, Bruner, and

Ross's (1976) concept of *scaffolding* is a helpful concept when discussing the zone of proximal development. According to Wood et al. (1976), scaffolding "enables a child or novice to solve a problem, carry out a task, or achieve a goal which would be beyond his unassisted efforts" (p. 90). In essence, the more capable peer scaffolds within the learners' zone of proximal development in order for the learner to complete the task.

Thus, as a form of professional development and learning, literacy coaching can be seen through the lens of social constructivism, as exemplified through the writing of Vygotsky (1978, 1981) and Wood et al. (1976). The coach is the more capable peer who helps guide teachers' learning by scaffolding in teachers' zones of proximal development. This scaffolding may include a number of coaching activities, such as observation and demonstration of lessons. Working with the literacy coach allows teachers to develop new skills that teachers may not be able to demonstrate on their own but can with the assistance of the literacy coach. During coaching sessions, a literacy coach may "nudge" (Dozier, 2006, p. 76) a teacher to develop new skills, thus advancing the teacher's zone of proximal development. In traditional forms of professional development, teachers are usually passive listeners, and thus this type of professional development is often deemed by researchers to be ineffective (e.g., Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 1995; Joyce & Showers, 1982). Literacy coaching, however, is a type of professional development that is social and collaborative, and teachers are participating in their learning by co-constructing new knowledge with the literacy coach.

## Methods

### Participants

Schools were selected for the study using reputational sampling, which uses "the recommendation of knowledgeable experts for the best samples" (McMillian & Schumacher, 2001, p. 402). The district literacy coaches in one northern Ontario school board were asked to nominate three schools with exemplary literacy coaching programs, not with the aim to evaluate their programs, but rather to select literacy coaching programs that were well-developed and that might provide rich data. All three schools that were nominated agreed to participate and the schools knew that they were nominated for having exemplary coaching programs. In each school, the literacy coach, principal, and primary teachers (kindergarten to grade 3) participated. Because literacy coaching was new for junior/intermediate teachers (grades 4-8), the school board asked that the research focus on literacy coaching in the primary grades, who had been participating in literacy coaching for three years. One of the three schools was also a dual-track school, meaning it had both English and French Immersion programs.

One literacy coach in the study worked halftime as a district literacy coach at the board office and halftime as a literacy coach in one school. The other two literacy coaches were *embedded literacy coaches*, meaning that they were classroom teachers and were also literacy coaches in their respective schools. These two embedded coaches taught in the classroom for approximately two thirds of the school day and coached for one third of the day, and still taught literacy to their own classes. All three literacy coaches were female and experienced classroom teachers and two of them possessed additional qualifications in reading; a reading specialist qualification from the Ontario College of Teachers. The two embedded coaches were approached by their principals to take on the literacy coaching role. Principals explained that they selected the coaches based on their exemplary teaching practices and expertise in literacy. The fulltime

literacy coach had asked the school board for leadership opportunities in literacy. The board then had the fulltime coach attend the training on the *Early Reading Strategy* (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2003) with the expectation that she would provide professional development for other teachers in the board upon her return. She did so and the board then asked her to apply for the position of district literacy coach. Training for the literacy coaches consisted of the coaches attending Ministry of Education workshops on literacy as well as board-wide literacy coaching meetings held throughout the school year.

### **Data Collection**

In order to answer the research question and gain a holistic picture of literacy coaching in practice, qualitative research methods were appropriate. These included observations, interviews, and the collection of artifacts and documents as described by Merriam (1988). The researcher shadowed the three literacy coaches, observing them during their regular literacy coaching time block and other times when they were working in a coaching capacity, such as at meetings and family literacy night. In order to ensure a variety of situations in each school, the days of the week for observations were rotated in each school. Detailed field notes and observer's comments were taken during the observation period and over the eight-week period of the study and over 110 literacy coaching hours were observed. By the end of the study, the observations had reached saturation (Flick, 2006).

In order to gain further insight regarding the role of the literacy coach, literacy coaches, principals, and primary teachers were interviewed using a structured opened-ended format once during the observation period. To make the participants as comfortable as possible, they were given a copy of the interview questions prior to the scheduled interview. A total of 27 interviews were conducted. These were taped and later transcribed, or written notes were taken, depending on the participants' preferences. Informal unstructured interviews also occurred throughout the study and were spontaneous informal conversations to clarify or provide insights into observations. Artifacts and documents were also collected and the researcher was given copies of all meeting agendas, handouts, and minutes. In addition, all three schools provided copies of their literacy evidence binders, which contained documents such as meeting agendas and minutes, photos, literacy school improvement plans, and special literacy events.

### **Data Analysis**

The researcher created a case record for each school that contained interview transcripts, documents and artifacts collected, and transcribed observations. These case records provided an organization system to locate data quickly and efficiently during the data analysis. Following the steps outlined by Bodgan and Bilken (1998), the researcher read through all interviews, observations, and artifacts, making comments and notes in the margin. All data were read through again, and the researcher made further comments in the margin and made a list of preliminary categories, which were based on themes and key words that emerged from the data itself. Next, the preliminary categories were examined, and the researcher collapsed categories that were similar, made new categories, and also made sub categories. Coloured highlighters were used to sort data on the hard copies and Microsoft Word to cut and paste raw data into a new document sorted by category. During this extensive coding process, a constant comparative method was used. This allowed the researcher to continually compare data and their

characteristics so that the data could be placed into appropriate categories (Gay & Airasian, 2000). After having a final set of data that were coded and sorted into categories, the researcher hypothesized and speculated about the meaning of the data in order to explain the findings (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998; Merriam, 1988; Patton, 1990).

## **Findings**

As previously stated, this paper is based on a larger study and only the findings about the role of the literacy coaches are presented. While literacy coaches took on a number of roles in their schools, all three literacy coaches worked extensively as school literacy program organizers, school leaders, and providing support to their schools. In this section, these three major roles of the literacy coaches are presented.

### **Literacy Coaches as School Literacy Program Organizers**

Organizational tasks proved to be a large part of the literacy coaching role, consuming at least half of the coaching time. Participants felt that if the literacy coach did not perform these organizational tasks that the literacy programs would become unraveled because no one else had the time or was willing to perform these tasks. These tasks included following up with Ministry personnel by e-mail and corresponding with school board administrators. Literacy coaches also spent time organizing and updating the school evidence binders, a collection of documents pertaining to the literacy program in each school. In two of the schools, the literacy coach was the primary organizer for a family literacy night. At one school, students and their parents rotated through different activity stations related to a different literacy genre. The teachers and principals valued the completion of these tasks. As one teacher stated, “even if it’s just sheer organization and keeping us organized, the literacy coach is extremely valuable.”

The literacy coaches were observed spending at least a portion of their daily coaching time organizing the book room. As one literacy coach explained, “I organize the book room continually.” The book room is a literacy coach’s office, a place for teachers to meet, the resource room where literacy materials are kept, and the place where student assessment data is displayed on the walls. Coaches were observed cataloguing new books, sorting books to ensure resources were in the correct place, reorganizing resources and furniture, consulting with teachers about ordering new resources, and completing purchase orders for new resources. The participants viewed an organized and up-to-date book room as a necessity in facilitating teachers’ implementation of board and Ministry of Education initiatives.

### **Literacy Coaches as School Leaders**

Literacy coaches were observed in leadership roles, and during interviews, teachers, principals, and literacy coaches referred to the importance of this role. One principal said, the literacy coach “is the literacy expert and the leader of this group.” One teacher explained that literacy coaches were leaders, “keeping everyone on the same page.” This leadership role was important to the success of the adoption of the new initiatives; as one teacher stated, “I honestly think we think we need someone to lead the way. Otherwise people go off in different directions.” The key leadership roles of the literacy coaches included conducting professional development sessions for teachers and leading professional learning communities (PLCs).

**Conducting professional development for teachers.** Literacy coaches were often the first teachers in the schools to receive new information and training from the Ministry of Education and the school board. They were the first teachers in the schools to implement these initiatives and share their experiences with their peers. This was especially true with the two embedded literacy coaches who were still classroom teachers and taught the literacy to their own classes. This was important to the coaches, as an embedded literacy coach explained, “I need to do it first, implement it, and then talk. Not just preach something because I’ve read it.” All three literacy coaches in the study were also observed giving workshops to teachers. For example, the coaches attended a reading conference in Toronto and then shared the conference information at a board professional development day. In another instance, two of the literacy coaches went to a Ministry training session, and then in the following weeks, trained teachers on the new Ministry initiatives at PLCs.

**Leading professional learning communities.** The number of PLCs per month at each school varied significantly: one school had eight per month, another had six, and the third school had two. PLCs were time consuming to plan, conduct, and follow-up on, and coaches were observed creating handouts, preparing agendas, and creating presentations. During the PLCs, the literacy coaches led the groups through the items on the agenda, introduced new topics and initiatives, and gave presentations on the new initiatives. The PLCs were dialogue driven and during this dialogue, the literacy coaches facilitated and guided conversations, prompted further discussion, and provided literacy expertise when necessary.

### **Literacy Coaches as Support**

The three literacy coaches in the study stated that they felt that providing support was a key component of their role. Literacy coaches provided support in two key facets: supporting schools with content knowledge and resources, and providing affective support.

**Supporting with content knowledge and resources.** To support teachers, the literacy coaches in all three schools acted as a content knowledge resource person. Teachers often consulted informally with the coaches in the hallways or in the bookroom, asking clarification questions, inquiring about assessments, and seeking advice about lessons and students. Teachers explained that it was valuable to have someone to “bounce ideas off of” or to consult with, and they valued the literacy coach’s expertise. Teachers stated: “you could ask her any literacy question; she’d know,” “when she talks, I listen,” and “she’s the literacy guru.” The new teachers particularly valued this support. As one new teacher with two years of teaching experience explained, “It’s incredibly helpful especially for a newer teacher...Especially if you’re a new teacher coming in out of teacher’s college and you don’t have that much background.” Support to teachers also included providing teachers with practical resources, such as books, resources that could be photocopied, and professional reading materials.

When the two embedded coaches met one-on-one with teachers it was usually for organizational purposes, such as ordering books and resources. The fulltime coach, however, met with teachers individually to provide instructional support, which usually focused on creating goals and strategies for students or planning lessons or units. For example, in a one-on-one session observed, the fulltime literacy coach sat side-by-side with a teacher, examining the running records of three students. They discussed the running record and the coach suggested some practical strategies for the teacher to try. At the end of the session, the teacher told the coach, “Thank you, I like getting these strategies. It’s like, ahhh [sigh of relief].” The fulltime

literacy coach also had one-on-one sessions with teachers to co-plan lessons and units. Even a very experienced teacher with 34 years of experience met to co-plan a literacy unit with the coach.

The literacy coaches also supported principals by providing content knowledge because the principals generally did not consider themselves literacy experts. One principal stated, "I'm not the expert. She's the expert." Principals felt that the coaches were experts based on their training by the Ministry and the board, their additional qualifications, and their classroom experience. The principals valued the content support given to them from the literacy coach; one principal stated, "We need that support piece too." Principals consulted with the coaches about aspects of literacy and sought their professional opinions about various literacy related-topics.

One form of support that was not observed, but cited in the literature as a key component of the literacy coaching role, is demonstration and observation of lessons (Bean, 2004; IRA, 2006). When asked about demonstrations and observations, the participants generally felt that this type of support was only needed when initiatives were new. One teacher explained, "When we were first starting, I had the shared reading lesson modeled ...that was three years ago. It was when all the stuff was new." Another teacher repeated this sentiment by saying, "You know it's now far beyond the demonstration mode," indicating that modeling and observation were not a form of support the teachers generally needed anymore because after three years of implementing the initiative, they could perform those tasks independently.

**Affective support.** Literacy coaches were in-school cheerleaders for teachers by providing them with affective support. All three literacy coaches were observed encouraging teachers, praising teachers, and thanking them for their time and efforts. The coaches' thought very highly of the teachers in their schools and the work the teachers were doing. One coach explained during an interview, "If you [the teachers] could see how great you are through my eyes, you would be fine." Teachers also valued the support and positive feedback from the literacy coaches. As one teacher said, "It's nice to have a coach come in and say, wow, you're really doing [well], oh way to go! ...So it's affirmation that way."

## **Discussion**

Overall, the roles of the literacy coaches in this study were similar to those described in the existing literature regarding both American and Canadian coaches. For instance, they organized resources (Burkins, 2007), met with teachers informally and formally to support their teaching (Poglinco et al., 2003; Toll, 2005), were a resource for classroom teachers (Mraz, Algozzine, & Watson, 2008), conducted professional development sessions for teachers and facilitated meetings (IRA, 2006; Casey, 2006), acted as community literacy liaisons (Mraz et al., 2008), and encouraged teachers by providing affective support (Vogt & Shearer, 2003). They performed both the roles of mentor and director, as coaches worked collaboratively and collegially with teachers but also provided literacy leadership within the school (Walpole & Blamey, 2008). The coaches and the principals shared the leadership role since the principals did not feel that they were experts on literacy (Booth & Rowsell, 2007). The three literacy coaches also performed all of the roles as described by the Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat (2006a).

The literacy coaches were also generally knowledgeable in literacy and able to provide suggestions and strategies to their peers and principals. This expertise is documented in the literature (Dole, 2004; Toll, 2005) as a requirement for the literacy coaching role. All coaches

were experienced classroom teachers, and two of them possessed additional qualifications in reading and literacy. Despite the fact that the other did not have any additional qualifications in literacy, she did have the respect of her peers and principal due to her practical experience and exemplary teaching. The IRA (2004) has outlined recommended qualifications for literacy coaches in the United States; however, there exists no such document in Ontario, and the Ontario College of Teachers and the school board do not offer or require specific courses to become a literacy coach.

In their role as coaches, the literacy coaches in this study supported the Vygotskian principle that teachers learn through collaborative social relationships (Vygotsky, 1981). This socially co-constructed learning took place through a number of coaching activities, such as at PLCs, during informal conversation with the teachers, and one-on-one sessions with teachers. Literacy coaches supported teachers as they learned within their zones of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978). Scaffolding most often occurred during group sessions, particularly in PLCs, as coaches presented new initiatives, helped teachers plan, reflected with teachers on student learning, and facilitated discussions. This study also corroborated the work of Rodgers and Rodgers (2007), who reported, the goal of literacy coaching is “to support the way teachers teach so that a teacher is able to work with increasing flexibility and independence from the coach’s help” (p. 18). However, the initiatives implemented by the schools, literacy coaches, and teachers were initiatives that were *top down*, meaning these initiatives were being driven from the Ministry rather than from schools themselves. While the teachers and the literacy coaches co-constructed new knowledge, this knowledge was not generally used to create new initiatives or projects; rather, they relied on the Ministry and the school board for directives and feedback.

The role of the literacy coaches, however, did significantly differ from most definitions as described in the literature in one specific facet: demonstration lessons and observations of teaching (Bean, 2004; IRA, 2006; Lynch & Ferguson, 2010). No in-class demonstrations or observations of teaching were observed over the eight-week period of the study. In the literature, it is generally stated that the role of literacy coach should change and evolve in order to meet the needs of the teachers (Casey, 2006; Kent, 2005; Swafford, 1998). This change may be expected since as Toll (2005) states, “literacy coaches are in the change business” (p. 14). Despite the fact that literacy coaches act as change agents, there are no longitudinal studies that document this evolution of the literacy coaching role, nor are there any models of coaching that take the changing role of coach into account. It was not the purpose of this study to document the implementation of literacy coaching within the schools over the three years. However, the role of the coach had reportedly changed over time, resulting in no demonstrations and observations. It is important to consider why this occurred, particularly when comparing the role of the coaches in this study to the role of the Ontario coaches as presented by Lynch and Ferguson (2010).

In Lynch and Ferguson’s (2010) study, where literacy coaching was in its first year, observation and demonstration were common practice. But in the present study, literacy coaching was in its third year, and following the gradual release of responsibility model, literacy coaches no longer needed to scaffold (Wood et al., 1976) in-class instruction using demonstration and observation as they had in the past. With the exception of novice teachers, the practical how-to of the new initiatives were no longer in the teachers’ zones of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978). Most teachers said that they were now comfortable teaching literacy and could implement the new initiatives without the support of the literacy coach. This change of role does, however, support the work of Lynch and Ferguson (2010) who found that the coaching role in Ontario was evolving and changing with time. Thus, phasing out of

demonstrations and observations is perhaps a natural and even ideal occurrence for successful literacy coaching programs, as it may indicate that teachers have internalized the new teaching practices. Literacy coaches used an overarching gradual release of responsibility model of literacy coaching which took place over a number of years. Teachers now felt confident and comfortable with the shift in teaching practices; as one teacher told me, this year, “It’s like a release year.”

Another possible explanation for the change in the coaching role is that literacy coaching in the board has been influenced by the Ministry of Education, whose initiatives at the time of the study aligned more with Hasbrouck and Denton’s (2007) model of student-focused coaching, instead of the demonstration, observation, and feedback model. During the study, the Ministry was emphasizing student outcomes and increasing student achievement. This appears to be a shift from the years following the publication of *Early Reading Strategy* (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2003), when changing teaching practices was a focus area for the Ministry. While the school board did not give directives to schools or coaches about the coaching role, it was understood that implementing Ministry initiatives was a priority. For example, the Ministry endorsed PLCs, which were a focus of literacy coaching and followed Hasbrouck and Denton’s (2007) model of student-focused coaching. At assessment PLCs, the literacy coach and teachers would look at student work and set goals for particular students. They would decide on a strategy as a plan of action for a specific student and then, at the next PLC, see if that student’s goals had been met. The literacy coach facilitated the discussions, provided the teachers with further resources and content knowledge, and organized and tracked the data.

There are also other possible explanations for the declined use of demonstrations and observations. For instance, the embedded coaching model may hinder in-class collaboration because literacy coaches were busy during the literacy block teaching literacy to their own classes and, therefore, it was more difficult to collaborate with their colleagues. French Immersion teachers also stated that they would have liked more demonstration lessons but this was problematic because the literacy coach was not fluent in French.

Finally, a narrow definition of literacy may have contributed to phasing out of demonstration and observation of lessons. The role of the literacy coach in Ontario appears to be centered on improving the traditionally viewed skills of literacy, that being reading and writing. Literacy coaching in all three schools worked towards helping teachers improve their strategies and knowledge in reading and writing, rather than expanding their definition of literacy to include other dimensions of being literate. Many teachers, principals, and literacy coaches felt that they had moved “beyond the demonstration mode.” Once teachers felt they mastered the reading and writing teaching strategies mandated by the school board and Ministry, teachers believed that they no longer needed the high levels of support of demonstration and observation from the literacy coach. Coaching in terms of demonstrations and observation appeared to have an end goal of mastering particular strategies from the Ministry of Education within traditional views of literacy. If the definition of literacy is broadened, coaches could continue to introduce new initiatives based on multi-dimensional views of literacy, such as critical literacy, digital literacy, and multi-modal literacy.

In the literature, there is some concern that there may be role ambiguity for literacy coaches (Blamey et al., 2008/2009; Lynch & Ferguson, 2010; Poglinco et al., 2003). However, the literacy coaches in this study felt they had a clear role and were also never at a loss for things to do during their coaching time and they always had more to do than time allowed. While the coaches’ literacy initiatives were mandated to them from the board and Ministry, in terms of

how they perform in their day-to-day role as coaches, the role of the literacy coaches were locally determined (Coskie, 2004; Lynch & Alsop, 2007; Robinson, 2004). It is significant to note that the roles of the coaches in all three schools were similar and this is possibly because all literacy coaches were under pressure from the board and the Ministry to be implementing the same initiatives. In addition, the three coaches knew each other and were often in communication with one another. At literacy coaching meetings and professional development sessions, coaches discussed and shared what they did in their day-to-day professional roles as coaches.

All three literacy coaches spent approximately half of their coaching time or more organizing literacy in their schools, mostly preparing for and following up on PLCs, and maintaining the book room; this supported previous research that found that coaches spend more time on organizational and managerial tasks than working with teachers (Deussen et al., 2007; Moxley & Taylor, 2006). The issue of devoting so much time to organization is like a double-edged sword. Someone must organize the meetings and perform mundane tasks for the literacy program to run smoothly, but the literacy coaches' time could be spent in a more productive way, such as working one-on-one with teachers. However, the literacy coaching time during the day was limited and participants felt the need for someone to "take charge." Teachers said that they were too busy and if they had to do it on top of teaching their regular classrooms, they would "find excuses not to" and principals also felt overwhelmed with other tasks and felt that literacy was not their area of expertise. The fulltime coach, however, did engage in more one-on-one work with teachers than the two embedded coaches, likely because she had more time to coach and also had more flexibility to meet with teachers at their convenience. If the embedded coaches had more time and flexibility to coach, they may have likely participated in coaching activities that focused more on directly supporting teachers. One of the embedded coaches explained that she could not perform other coaching activities because organizational tasks often needed to be completed immediately and took up most of her coaching time, bumping other items off of her daily "to-do" list.

### **Limitations of the Study**

While this study presents new information about the literacy coaching role in practice, generalizing of the findings should be done with caution. The scope of the study was small and using the case study design, literacy coaching was examined in three schools in only one school board, and it is possible that conducting research in a different school board would produce different results. Also, the three schools in the study were selected through nomination, likely impacting the results. Administrators approached all of the coaches to take on the coaching role and all of the coaches were female, with only two of them having additional qualifications in literacy. Literacy coaches who were not nominated as being a part of an exemplary program or who have different characteristics and training may perform differently in their roles. The notion of comparing the coaches in the study may also be challenging since coaching may be tailored to meet the needs of individual schools. The participants may also have been subject to a social desirability bias (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2003), and an observer effect (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998). To reduce these effects, the researcher ensured confidentiality and created rapport with the participants so they felt comfortable being a part of the study.

### **Directions for Future Research**

Continued research on literacy coaching in Canadian contexts would certainly add to the relatively scant literature on coaching and deepen our understanding of literacy coaching in practice. Research in other provinces is needed in order to present the larger picture of literacy coaching in Canadian schools. More longitudinal studies would also shed new light on how coaching unfolds and how the role changes as schools and teachers change practice. More research into how coaches can broaden their definitions of literacy and use the co-constructed knowledge created with teachers to create locally developed initiatives would provide guidance for literacy coaches about how their role could change and evolve over time. In addition, large-scale studies that focus on student achievement are needed; at the time of the publication of this paper, there was no Canadian study which directly linked literacy coaching to improved student achievement. Finally, research is needed to study whether literacy coaching should be a permanent initiative. It is also unclear if school board and Ministry of Education budgets can sustain the position of literacy coaches for the long term.

### **Implications for Practice**

As previously stated, generalizing the results of this case study to all literacy coaching programs should be done with caution. However, there are implications for practice based on the findings of this study that may be suggestive for those implementing literacy coaching programs. First, it is suggested that school boards consider how to organize the coaching time. The embedded coaching model was problematic, as teachers were not supported during the literacy block because coaches were busy teaching and overwhelmed from having to perform both the coaching role and the role of a classroom teacher. A coaching model that has coaches working full-time in the coaching capacity without the added responsibility of a classroom might be preferred. It is also suggested that the more time that can be allotted to literacy coaching the better. The literacy coach in this study who coached halftime was able to provide more support to teachers and participate in more coaching activities than the other two coaches who only had one-third of the day to coach.

Based on this study, it is also important that literacy coaches and principals have the ability to develop both the roles of the coaches and literacy initiatives at the school level in order to meet the needs of their schools. This would include an evolving vision of the roles and responsibilities of the literacy coaches as needs change over time, and developing their own literacy initiatives using the co-constructed knowledge of teachers and literacy coaches. This would make literacy coaching have a more context-specific and grassroots focus, rather than a top-down approach. Literacy coaches need to be given some power to make the changes they feel appropriate for their school contexts and not rely solely on, or feel bound by, the Ministry and the school board for the newest initiatives. While teachers, literacy coaches, and principals did not see the need for continuing demonstration and observation lessons, there are other dimensions of literacy aside from reading and writing that could be implemented as new change initiatives. Other forms of literacy, such as digital literacies, might be new to teachers and they would likely benefit from demonstration and observation lessons in these areas. As the definition of literacy continues to evolve, the initiatives the coaches implement also need to change. Coaching should continually move forward, rather than coaching toward one particular goal.

Although the coaches in the study were viewed as literacy experts, literacy coaches need professional development that goes beyond training on specific literacy initiatives. Faculties of

education are one possible outlet for professional development in literacy coaching, and there is the potential of creating partnerships between literacy coaches and universities to support coaches and their work, such as creating additional qualification courses certified by the Ontario College of Teachers in the specific area of literacy coaching, since there is currently no such formal qualification. Literacy coaches could also be encouraged to take courses at the graduate level to further literacy knowledge of literacy research and expand their definitions of literacy.

### **Conclusion**

This research study presents significant findings about literacy coaching in Canada not yet presented in the literature. Literacy coaches in this case study provided support and were leaders, but were mostly organizational coaches and employed a student-focused coaching model instead of a coaching model based on demonstration lessons, observation, and feedback of teacher lessons. The role of the literacy coaches has also changed and evolved over time, supporting previous research on Ontario's coaches (Lynch & Ferguson, 2010). Based on the findings of this study, the role of the literacy coach in these three schools has evolved to be defined as a literacy program organizer, a literacy leader, and a literacy support person.

All participants in the study believed that literacy coaching had been a positive experience, but it was not known whether or not the school board would be continuing literacy coaching the following year. This often became a topic of conversation during interviews as the participants were concerned about the future of school literacy programs without the coaches, stating many of the new initiatives "would go by the wayside," and that "the momentum would be lost." Some teachers felt that literacy coaching could be "cut back" for the primary grades and instead could focus more on the junior and intermediate grades, which were still in the process of adopting new teaching practices. However, no one was eager to take on the additional workload of the coaches and losing the literacy coach position was seen as a detriment. For now, literacy coaches remain a fixture in Ontario schools and the literacy coaching model is proving itself to have the potential to impact teaching practices and student learning, and is worthy of continued support from principals, school boards, and the Ministry of Education. As one teacher said, "I definitely do feel a change ...without a literacy coach would I have the same confidence?" No, was her answer.

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