

LITERACY COACHING:  
PERCEPTIONS AND LIVED EXPERIENCES

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## ABSTRACT

Literacy coaches are a relatively new form of professional development that continues to be a growing field. This study examines the qualities, characteristics, successes and challenges of literacy coaches in the Chicago Public School system (CPS). The design of this research is qualitative in nature. My intention is to be able to capture a real sense of the thoughts, feelings and actions of literacy coaches and what makes them effective in their work. Data were gathered through multiple sources, in the form of interviews, self-surveys and a focus group. I then analyzed the data to look for trends or common themes. Six major themes emerged through this research and several implications are made for school and district leadership.

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## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

*Hi, remember me? I was that quiet kid in the back who never participated in class.*

The above statement demonstrates the irony of how I became a teacher and, essentially, a teacher of teachers. No, I was not one of those people who claim to have been “born a teacher.” I did not play “teacher” at my friend’s house. When I was growing up I pretty much detested school and did not want to have anything to do with it. Lucky for me, my parents were extremely hard working, always coming home late at night. When they arrived home they asked me how my day was and if I did my homework. Of course I said everything was great and that the homework was always completed.

My parents started to notice I was slipping in fourth grade. The teacher called my parents for a conference and informed them that I was not completing my work. The teacher called me a daydreamer. I nearly failed the fourth grade, but the teacher devised a plan to help me get my homework done. My parents were to sign my assignment notebook every night to confirm that I had finished my work. Looking back, it is funny to see how homework played such a big part of my academic success.

Meanwhile, my best friend, Sally, was an A+ student. There were two classes at St. Matthias Elementary School. One was the A class and the other the B class. Could they be less creative in naming those classes? Guess which class I was in. Almost failing the fourth grade had set a little fire under me. I remember feeling ashamed because the teacher warned me that all my friends were going to pass and I would be left behind with the now third graders. I remember deciding to turn my life around and put forth more of

an effort in school.

Throughout my years in grade school and high school I tried my best to catch up. I wanted to be promoted into the A group. To make a long story short, I was “tracked” throughout my schooling and I never moved into the A group—even while in high school. I went through alternate stages of giving up and trying hard during those years. I remember anticipating the final report card—not for the grades I was given, but to find out what class I would be placed in the next year. I remember thinking, “Will I be placed in the A group or the B group?” Being tracked seemingly forever in this group made me feel inadequate and reinforced some self-fulfilling prophecies of not being “smart enough” to amount to anything.

These feelings of inadequacy (not to mention the fact that I was further behind some of my A group counterparts) carried over into high school, which helped me to decide to focus on socializing and being funny rather than focusing on academic achievement. Going to college was not an option for me, although I wanted to go—not for the typical reasons like my parents demanding it, but because all of my friends were going and I wanted to have those experiences, too. Unfortunately, I was not admitted into the college of my choice because of poor grades and a low grade point average. I had to go to a local university for one year before transferring into a state university. While I was at this university, I continued to make socializing my main priority the first year. I had no idea what I wanted to study; I lacked a definitive focus. My advisor was pushing for me to declare a major. Finally, I decided to take the class Education 101 to see if this

might be something that interested me. Being the social butterfly that I was, I knew that all of my friends were education majors, why not me? The school was known for its Education Department. But who was I to go into this profession? I wasn't thrilled to become a teacher, to say the least. Why not try it out, though?

*Be the change you want to see in the world...*

Education 101 turned out to be extremely empowering for me. I will never forget my professor, Dr. Henry Tate, who inspired me to become the teacher I had always hoped to have growing up. This proved to me that when you find something you are passionate about, you continue to learn and explore that interest. Perhaps I only wanted to prove to myself I could be a good student, but I never stopped learning. At this writing I have three master's degrees and am completing my doctorate in education leadership. And in fact, the elementary education classes during my undergraduate and postgraduate years have been therapeutic. I finally found something in school that was interesting to me. I was absolutely determined to become a good teacher, inasmuch as I felt that I was lacking one in my elementary years. At about this same time the Internet had just started to boom. I could go to the Internet and search about all the different topics regarding teaching. With this knowledge, I learned to be pragmatic of what works and what does not as a teacher. I learned how important it is to differentiate instruction for students and how to help not only struggling students, like I was, but students who were higher achievers than others. After graduating, I felt I had a great deal of content knowledge and was prepared to go out and teach to make a difference.

I began my career in 1996 when I started substitute teaching on a day-to-day basis at an inner-city school. This experience was very different than those I had as a student teacher in the suburbs. The students' behaviors and conduct in this school were awful. Some of the students were disrespectful and walked out of the class. Others completely disregarded anything I said. I remember thinking that my undergrad courses and student teaching experience had not prepared me for teaching in the inner-city schools. What I had to devise was a strategy to ascertain the minimum classroom management needed in order to facilitate a healthy learning environment. I knew that I had to have superior classroom management skills in order to be productive and to not let any students slip through the cracks as I had done in my early years.

After three months I was offered my first full-time job as a kindergarten teacher in the same school at which I had been substitute teaching. I was hired the day before school started, so no time had been allotted to prepare my classroom for the students I was to meet the next day. There was nothing to prepare anyway, as there were no supplies, no kindergarten manipulatives, and all the classroom tables had been taken by other teachers. I knew the year was going to be tough, but I was determined to do a great job, not only for myself but for my students. During that year I had many conflicting feelings of joy, pain, achievement, powerlessness, love and hate (sometimes all in one day). When you choose a career in education, your heart and emotions are bound to drive you either deeper into or further away entirely from this profession. In my early years of teaching I longed for help from anyone who would talk to me. I made sure that I went to colleagues

to ask them for advice and feedback on my daily classroom routines and activities. How I wish there were coaches back then—the role in which I now serve—to help me on a more professional level! Luckily, I stumbled my way through my first few years of teaching and made a commitment to set high expectations for myself and my students.

Unfortunately, I did not know this to be true for some of my teaching colleagues. It seemed that low expectations and teaching to the middle were the status quo for some. In contrast, I always loved to learn, and I became a good self-study on best practices in the classroom.

My teaching stood out to a colleague who had been working very closely with a new principal in the district. She noticed that I continuously tried new strategies in my classroom and I was able to incorporate technology into my lessons. She recommended me to this principal to be a teacher coach. I had heard of this type of position, but I had never been coached myself. At this point I had been a classroom teacher for eight years in various grade levels. I felt confident in my teaching ability and took the risk of accepting this out-of-the-classroom position while not knowing exactly what was in store for me.

Coaching was new to me. I had never been a coach nor had any formal training to be one. I had become aware that our district had been hiring literacy coaches for a few years to this point, but it was a new frontier as far as I was concerned. I remember thinking how much coaches were needed in the schools in which I worked. So many teachers were on their own little islands in their classrooms, left to their own devices of what to teach and when to teach it and with very little monitoring. Most teachers do not

like or want anyone in their classroom; they just want to be left alone. In this age of accountability, however, going about it alone cannot and will not stand.

There are now a variety of coaches serving in our district's schools, including school-based literacy coaches, math and science coaches, curriculum coordinators and some intervention teachers. Because coaching is somewhat of a new position, there is no uniformity or consistency in the use of coaches across the district. In the 400+ schools in the district the composition of coaches, or lack of them, looks very different. Each school decides how it spends its resources on personnel such as coaches. Due to budgetary constraints many schools cannot afford to "buy" coaches. As part of a grant program, some schools may purchase a core set of reading materials that are accompanied by a freed literacy coach whose sole responsibility is to work with teachers and they are not assigned to any classroom duties. This coach is paid by the district for only one year to implement the core reading program. Other schools feel strongly about the benefits of coaching and make it a priority to allocate resources to purchase a coach from year to year.

Because of such variance it is my goal to demonstrate the effective qualities of literacy coaches in our district and promote their use in every school to elevate system wide change in professional development through the use of coaches.

#### Statement of the Problem

Literacy coaches are a relatively new form of professional development that continues to be a growing field. According to the International Reading Association (IRA

2004),

The rapid proliferation of reading coaches is one of the responses to increased attention to reading achievement and the achievement gap in the United States... Presidents Bill Clinton and George W. Bush and many state governors have spearheaded these initiatives. The Reading Excellence Act of 1998 under Clinton and the Reading First provisions of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 under Bush have allotted large amounts of federal dollars for professional development targeting improved reading instruction.

Because these dollars are more readily available for professional development in schools, many school districts have purchased a literacy coach in hopes that he or she will help to increase reading achievement. The results of the influx of literacy coaches are mixed. On one hand, there are coaches who are making an enormous impact on teaching and learning in their schools. On the other hand, there are coaches who may have been excellent classroom teachers but are struggling in their role as a coach. This study examines the qualities, characteristics, successes and challenges of literacy coaches in the Chicago Public School system (CPS).

#### Rationale

*It's not the program, it's the teacher!*

The topic of coaching is a particular passion of mine. Working in this large urban school system my whole career, particularly in high-poverty areas, I noted that there is a great need for high-quality teachers—teachers who are not only skillful at teaching

techniques but deep insightful souls who are reflective and connect with their students.

Palmer (1998) writes, “Good teachers possess a capacity for connectedness. They are able to weave a complex web of connections among themselves, their subjects, and their students so that students can learn to weave a world for themselves.”

The majority of the students in my geographic area are at risk for not only failing the grade but dropping out of school entirely. Classrooms have a wide variety of levels and personality types within them. Some teachers are extremely frustrated because of discipline issues in their classrooms. Some teachers are ill equipped to differentiate instruction for the many needs of all of their learners. A large amount of students are slipping through the cracks for a variety of reasons. To add to the problem, many teachers are unaware of what good instruction even looks like because they have never been coached or seen a model of good teaching. When teachers are shown videos of exemplary lessons, they do not believe that they would be able to implement any similar lessons with their students.

Throughout my time working in this district, I have noticed that teachers are rarely visited by principals or assistant principals. Principals are usually overwhelmed with paperwork and meetings and do not make or have enough time to go into classrooms. Assistant principals are typically dealing with discipline issues from the minute they walk in the door to the minute they leave. Without coaches in many of the buildings, teachers are not working with anyone to improve their practice unless they are self-motivated to do so, hence the need for coaches. There is a growing consensus

among educational reformers that professional development for teachers and administrators lies at the center of educational reform and instructional improvement (Elmore 2002).

The definition of a literacy coach is vague, and the position varies across the country. According to IRA (2004),

There is considerable variability in the job descriptions for...coaches. Some coaches are volunteers with no specific training in reading, while others are school district employees with master's degrees and reading specialist certifications. In some schools, tutors who work with students are also called *coaches*. These individuals have a variety of levels of training....At present, there is little consistency in training, backgrounds, and skills required for such positions, and there is little consistency in the general competence of coaches, in part because there is no agreed upon definitions or standards for these roles.

Coaching is one of the most effective ways to help shift the way we teach in our schools. Teachers need job-embedded professional development in order for real change to occur. The term "job-embedded" refers to a coach, rather than an outside professional developer, who works consistently with the teachers on staff. They observe, model, talk about the work, plan and set goals. When coaches first came into form, many believed it was their job to point out all of the faults they see in the classrooms. This type of approach left a bad taste in the mouth of principals and alienated many teachers.

As coaching becomes more prevalent, additional information is becoming

available on how to be an effective coach. Coaching as a form of professional development is catching widespread attention. The traditional one-shot approach to professional development is simply not an effective method of practice on Teacher Institute days. That type of professional development does not empower teachers with usable information because goal setting or followup rarely takes place after the presentation of information. A landmark study conducted by Joyce and Showers (2002) indicates the effectiveness of various forms of professional development. Their study shows the training components of professional development and the results produced (see Table 1).

Table 1. Training Components and Attainment of Outcomes

Training Components	Knowledge	Skill Level	Use in Classroom
Theory and Discussion	10%	5%	0%
w/ Demonstration or Modeling	30%	20%	0%
w/ Practice and Feedback in Training	60%	60%	5%
w/ Coaching in Classroom	95%	95%	95%

Joyce, B., & Showers, B. (2002). *Student Achievement through Staff Development*, 3rd ed. Alexandria, VA: Association for Staff and Curriculum Development.

Because there is a wide variance in coaching, it has been difficult to measure the effectiveness of literacy coaches in the field. Recently, Charlotte Danielson (2007) produced a framework for instructional specialists (such as coaches) to serve as a guide to performance levels from categories ranging from unsatisfactory to distinguished. The framework relays a set of standards by which a literacy coach can guide his or her practice.

## Research Questions

This dissertation explores what it is like to be in the shoes of an in-school literacy coach from the perspectives of a variety of in-school elementary literacy coaches. The primary research question is, “What are the coaches’ philosophies and strategies for working with teachers in Chicago Public Schools?” Some related questions are:

- How do personal experiences and institutional contexts shape and influence the way these coaches engage teachers?
- In what ways can the lessons derived from the work of these coaches inform the practices and pedagogy of the teachers in Chicago Public Schools?

I hope the research into these questions will be a step toward understanding the lived experiences of literacy coaches in Chicago Public Schools. The intention was to uncover what the coaches determine as effective practices while working with teachers. It also serves as a guide for educators at the university level who train literacy coaches, principals or districts that hire literacy coaches, teachers who aspire to be literacy coaches and most importantly, literacy coaches themselves so that they may become better at their craft. According to Joyce and Showers (2002), staff development and student achievement are crucially, causally linked, and this knowledge can make a difference in the lives of students. The significance of this study is that it makes the case that effective coaching as a form of professional development will help educators reach those quiet students, like I was, who slip through the cracks (as well as those who have special needs or are gifted and talented) to reach their highest potential. I am extremely passionate that

with the help of good teaching, coaching and leadership, the students in this district would have the opportunity to receive a world-class education.

## CHAPTER TWO: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

### Introduction

There are vast arrays of perceptions of what literacy coaches are expected to do during the course of their workday. Literacy coaches sometimes question whether they are pursuing the right plan of action during the course of their work. Pursuing the right plan of action is mystifying in the field because the role of the literacy coach is relatively new and since its inception the role has greatly changed and continues to evolve.

Coaching in the field of education has come to mean many different things to different people. There are a variety of titles given to people who support teachers, such as reading coach, literacy leader, reading specialist and instructional specialist, to name a few. Poglinco et al. (2003) provide an accurate description of coaching: “Coaching provides ongoing consistent support for the implementation and instruction components. It is non-threatening and supportive—not evaluative. It gives a sense of how good professional development is and it also affords the opportunity to see it work with students” (p. 42).

Job-embedded literacy coaching can improve the quality of teaching and learning. Jim Knight (2007) researched how coaches can improve student achievement by enabling what he refers to as “hi-fi teaching,” teaching that demonstrates fidelity to the scientifically proven critical teaching behaviors of the various interventions being implemented. Because teachers have different levels of proficiency, differentiating professional development through the use of a literacy coach is one of the best methods

to promote teacher change. This literature review provides a basis of the background, the theories, the challenges and the qualities that make a literacy coach successful in his or her craft.

### Coaching as a Form of Professional Development

Whole group, non-specific, professional development does not guide the way to teacher change or affect student achievement. As a classroom teacher, I remember the professional development days when someone from a publishing company would come in, serve us lunch and promote the latest and greatest program that would help our students achieve incredible gains on our state test. Because of the type of professional development, some schools have implemented so many programs that Sebring and Bryk (2000) have named them “Christmas tree schools.” These schools add whatever happens to be the hottest program, theory or approach to their school like a dazzling ornament on a Christmas tree, but often the programs end up uncoordinated and inconsistent. Frequently they have an “expert” presenter who is an outside source sell these programs and strategies, but there is rarely follow-up to the material presented. The problem is not the availability of promising programs, formats, or content; it is that they rarely reach the typical teacher in a form that maintains integrity, which causes it to lose effectiveness (Hill 2009). One of the reasons many of these programs fail involves the lack of follow-up and follow-through. It is one of the functions of a literacy coach to ensure that teachers are setting goals and moving toward them. Although coaches can be a driving force in school change, Allington (2000) notes,

Remember that in the end, it will be teachers who make a difference in children's school lives. It is teachers who will either lead the change or resist and stymie it.

The focus of school change has to be on supporting teachers to become more expert and reorganizing all aspect[s] of the educational system so that they can teach as expertly as they know how.

Frequently, principals have their hands full with paperwork, management, staff members, parents and community members so they rarely have time to follow up on any programs that they would consider implementing. As a teacher I worked in several schools where the hot program was sold to us by a professional developer or sales representative only to have it phased out or disregarded after a few months. Usually the program, strategy or idea failed because there was no further professional development and no follow through. While listening to speakers and attending meetings can be beneficial for some aspects of professional development, it does not mean these are adequate methods to *motivate* teachers toward implementation. Using a literacy coach is one of the best ways to help a teacher or a group of teachers to listen, focus and take action on professional development (Toll 2005).

Professional development, in the consensus view, should be designed to develop the capacity of teachers to work collectively on problems of practice. This should occur within their own schools and with practitioners in other settings as much as possible to support the knowledge and skill development of individual educators (Elmore 2002). One of the best ways to improve teaching and learning is through the use of coaching as

professional development. Literacy coaching is quickly becoming the preferred staff development model (Manzo 2005). This is mainly due to the fact that coaching is extremely individualized professional development that gives teachers a method to improve their own practice in a non-threatening way through the use of a literacy coach.

### History of Literacy Coaches

Dole (2004) states the role of the reading specialist actually emerged with the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) in 1965. During this time period, a reading specialist was a classroom teacher who pulled out at-risk students to provide extra assistance in reading. Unfortunately, at this time reading specialists experienced little success for a variety of reasons; for example, reading specialist and classroom teacher collaboration was extremely limited for the most part.

The lack of success of this model is documented in a study by Allington and Walmsley (1995). They found that pull-out programs that utilized separate teachers were generally unable to change the trajectory of failure. They concluded that the best way to change the trajectory of failure involved the teacher tailoring the instruction to meet the needs of all learners.

With greater demands for student achievement under the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB), districts and schools are implementing new courses of action, including the purchase of literacy coaches, in order to improve instruction.

Currently, there is a limited amount of ongoing research in terms of how literacy coaches actually impact student achievement, but there are promising indications that

literacy coaches can lead to teacher improvement (Neuman and Cunningham 2009). In a study by Poglinco and Bach (2004), the coaching model used in America's Choice Schools found that coaching was a promising approach to help teachers change their instructional practices.

### Types of Coaches in Education

As a result of increasing pressure to improve student achievement there became a need for numerous types of coaches. In addition to literacy coaches, there are several of other kinds of coaches in the education field. The following are different types of coaches found in educational settings.

An *instructional coach* does not focus on any particular content area as a literacy coach does. According to Knight (2009), an instructional coach works with teachers to help incorporate research-based instructional practices in all content areas.

Another type of coach is a *cognitive coach*. The cognitive coaching model was developed by Arthur Costa and Robert Garmston (2002) and can be described as supporting the thinking and self-directedness of teachers. Cognitive coaching directs teachers to go deep within themselves to become more self-reflective in their practice.

I became aware of *classroom management coaches* when I attended a seminar in the 2008–2009 school year. After that seminar I found it hard to deny the need for classroom management coaches. During my career at CPS as a teacher, an in-school literacy coach and an area reading coach, I can speak from experience when I say that it is difficult to deny the connection between classroom management and student

achievement. Sprick et al. (2007) suggests that one-shot workshops on classroom management are not effective. A classroom management coach helps the teacher implement both positive and negative behavior modification strategies in the classroom.

Another type of coach in today's schools is a *content coach*. This type of coach arose as a result of the standards movement and the spotlight on the professionalization of teaching (Saphier 2005). The work of the content coach stems from "accountable talk" regarding the complexities of meeting standards and ensuring that all students are learning. All discourse between the coach and the teacher is accountable to the professional community (Resnick 1995).

A *differentiation coach* works with the teacher to provide job-embedded staff development that supports teachers in implementing instructional strategies that respond to each student's unique interests, learning styles and readiness levels and that challenge each student to achieve at high levels of proficiency. The differentiation coach also looks at the teacher's strengths and beliefs to adjust his or her coaching style to find a way to meet the needs of that teacher (Kise 2006).

*Leadership coaches* stem from corporate America. A leadership coach within a school or district works with teacher leaders, principals and district office staff on an ongoing basis to discuss collective goals as well as specific challenges and successes (Reiss 2006).

The last type of coach I discuss is a *data coach*. I recently learned of the term "data coach" when the new chief executive officer of our district arrived. He had

introduced a plan mandating that all Area Offices would now employ what is called a data coach. The idea of a data coach did not surprise me because of the high demand for teachers and administrators to utilize data to drive instruction. Of course, as an area reading coach I analyze and interpret data on an ongoing basis but was unaware of someone actually called a data coach. At that point I started researching the qualifications and job description of a data coach. According to Love (2009), a data coach is an educational leader such as a teacher, an instructional coach or an administrator who is specifically trained to guide data teams through collaborative inquiry.

In order to make sense of the different coaching models, we must understand that each model serves a unique purpose. Just like student learning, teacher learning is individual to each educator. Coaching must support teachers on a continuum from their existing classroom strategies to goal-oriented strategies. Regardless of the coaching approach used, effective coaches must be highly skilled in three essential areas: building relationships, guiding a coaching cycle and providing feedback (Bloom et al. 2005). Providing coaching support, regardless of the model used, impacts student learning and the professional development structure for teachers.

### The Lonely Lane of Literacy Coaching

Coaching is not a job for everybody. There is a sense of loneliness associated with coaching. This loneliness manifests for several reasons. A coach primarily lives with one foot in the two different worlds of teaching and administration. The coach is not truly considered a teacher by her colleagues (even though most coaches technically are), yet

she is not an administrator, either. In most cases there are a great number of principals and teachers who support and cooperate with coaches in their commitment to improve teaching and learning. On the other hand, in a large school system such as Chicago Public Schools, there are a significant number of principals and teachers who would be considered “difficult” to work with, which leaves the coach in quite a predicament, especially when trying to build trust between the principals and the teachers.

As a district-level coach as well as an in-school coach I have heard from a considerable number of teachers in CPS who feel that they would love to have the job of a coach. I have personally overheard teachers discussing how “easy” they think the job of a literacy coach must be because they no longer work with students. Anyone who has been a coach or has worked closely with a coach knows this to be an erroneous belief. Other teachers feel slighted because they may not have been chosen to be the coach even though they possess more experience or seniority.

The loneliness experienced by coaches may be exacerbated when a teacher becomes a coach within the same school building. Many coaches experience rejection from colleagues who in prior times would be considered friends. Some teachers (usually the disgruntled teachers) suspect that the coach crossed over into “the dark side” of administration. If one is an effective coach, there is nothing further than the truth because ordinarily the coach is trained to be impartial to *the work* and not take sides.

On the other hand, some principals in hiring a literacy coach feel pressured to choose a coach by selecting a great teacher at the school who “comes up through the

ranks.” This practice feeds a misleading notion that because someone is a great teacher of students, he will be a great teacher of adults. When the wrong person assumes the role of the literacy coach, viewpoints and judgments by the staff begin to place a divide between the coach and the teachers as well as the coach and the administration. When principals or district supervisors are uninformed as to the role and authentic purpose of an effective literacy coach, they may expect coaches to act as a type of “supervisor” or “expert” whose role is to “fix” the teachers (Toll 2008). This remains a problem for several reasons. The coach never comes to know the teachers in order that she could help uncover their strengths because they are unable to establish a trusting relationship. More importantly, teacher professional development remains stagnant, which impacts student achievement.

Feelings of separation and division of the staff are a recipe for disaster in any school. A capable literacy coach can be someone who unifies a vision and mission for the school. To accomplish this, confidentiality and trust building are essential to both groups. This, unfortunately, leaves the coach occasionally in an awkward place without anyone in which to confide when problems arise.

When I first began my job as a coach I took my entire set of work-related problems home because there was no outlet provided for coaches to share with other coaches any of the challenges we faced. We did gather for our monthly meetings, but usually these meetings were based on literacy content and rarely provided a platform to discuss our issues. Most of the time I had to reach out to fellow coaches, my husband or

my mother to discuss the problems I faced at work.

In 2009 our district started to understand that hundreds of coaches were facing a similar problem. In response, CPS instituted coaching forums, where coaches convened every two weeks to learn about improving the craft of coaching, discussing the latest issues in literacy and learning, and discussing successes and, most importantly, the challenges they face. The latter tended to be one of the most helpful parts to some of the coaches in my group. We promoted a culture of confidentiality where coaches were free to discuss any problems they may be having with administrators or teachers in the school. This outlet was a safe forum at which to share the issues that many coaches face because of the isolation of their position. These conversations were facilitated by me, but the other coaches in the room were the best communicators and problem solvers for each other. The discourse among the coaches is the heart of where much of the learning and growing took place.

#### Qualities and Characteristics of an Effective Coach

Gloria Ladson-Billings (1994) writes, "... in most low-income communities and communities of color it is neither the national commission, the state boards, nor the local districts that affect the education of the students, it is the teachers" (p. 80). Although there are countless numbers of books on leadership in education, it is the quality teachers who have the potential to be the most powerful players in their student's lives, which directly contributes to student success. Linda Darling-Hammond (1999) writes, "research indicates that the effects of well-prepared teachers on student achievement can be

stronger than the influences of student background factors, such as poverty, language background, and minority status” (p. 39). With this in mind, many of our teachers become particularly overwhelmed with the social and moral responsibilities they encounter with teaching in large urban areas. To teach students effectively, teachers need someone already embedded in the school to talk to, learn from and collaborate with to improve the relationships, the pedagogy and their content knowledge for their students. Many principals in large urban districts do not have the time or the know-how to work closely with teachers. Moreover, because of the evaluation process, many educators are unable or perhaps unwilling to have a trusting relationship with the principal as one would have with a coach.

An effective literacy coach must be extremely skilled in order to know what types of support his teachers need. Coaching is a form of professional development that helps teachers learn about and reflect on new teaching practices. Gordon Donaldson states, “Nothing mobilizes people better than seeing how their new actions are influencing the quality of students’ experience” (p. 165). The goal of any literacy coach is to build teacher knowledge and skill so that students’ literacy skills can be increased (Blamey, Meyer, and Walpole 2008).

In recent years, more resources have surfaced that identify “best practices” of effective literacy coaches. When I began my role as a coach, I was unaware of these resources available on coaching and had to discover what worked and what did not on my own. If I had had access to these now readily available resources when I first started, I

could have avoided a great deal of mistakes. Even though mistakes are inevitable, the tools and resources that are available are effective self-evaluation tools and guideposts that coaches can use to expand their awareness on the aspects of improving coaching. Note, however, that they are not absolutes.

#### Nancy Shanklin's Framework

In order to obtain a position as a literacy coach, one must have the required credentials. Most states, including Illinois, require a prospective coach to attend a graduate-level program in the area of reading and literacy in order to obtain a reading specialist certificate. As this dissertation unfolds, however, it will show that it takes much more than a certificate to be an effective literacy coach. It also illustrates the hearts and minds behind what it takes to be to be effective at this work.

There are several authors who have written on what it takes to be effective as a literacy coach. An advisory board in the field of literacy coaching contributed to a list generated by Shanklin (2006) to define effective literacy coaching. The following sections discuss six categories of effective literacy coaches.

*Involves a collaborative dialogue for teachers of all levels of knowledge and experience*

What great coaches have in common is the ability to get the communication lines flowing and have open dialogues about teaching and student learning. Coaches have a way to bring out the best in the teachers they service. By bringing groups of teachers together, coaches are able to aid teachers in reflecting and finding their voice. I surmise that in order to sometimes fully understand something you have to study its opposite. The

contradictory coach or the ineffective coach would not open the lines of communication. This type of coach would be the “know-it-all” coach who believes she can “save” the school through her solid foundation in literacy. This type of coach mainly tells people what to do because she knows best. I have witnessed coaches on both sides of the spectrum. I maintain that most teachers can make positive contributions to education, and it is the coaches’ job to help uncover the teacher’s gifts and talents, not to tell them how to teach.

*Facilitates development of a school vision about literacy that is site-based and links to districts goals*

It is extremely important for a school to have a vision and a plan about how it intends to improve literacy at the school level and how that plan aligns with the district goals. A good coach will be able to help develop and articulate this plan to the district, the teachers as well as the community stakeholders.

*Is characterized by data-oriented student and teacher learning*

In this day and age of accountability, the effective literacy coach should have a laser-like focus on figuring out the needs of the students in the school. She should help the principals and the teachers of the school not only understand test scores, but also understand what exemplary student work at each grade level looks like. Student work provides indispensable data for understanding whether the standards have been met and also determines the effectiveness of what is being taught (Wagner et al. 2006). By looking at data the coach creates a shared vision of the students’ results. The coach

facilitates a discussion that is powerful in understanding the difference between what is taught and what is learned.

*Is a form of ongoing, job-embedded professional learning that increases teacher capacity to meet students' needs*

Effective coaching is truly differentiated professional development in that the coach customizes the work with each individual teacher. This is performed at the school during the school day and may include working side-by-side in the practice of teaching, modeling lessons and holding group meetings. The important fact is that these conversations occur within the context of their teaching. The coach poses questions for teachers to reflect on their *own* practice and their *own* students rather than using hypothetical situations. Dozier (2006, p. 10) suggests that responsive literacy coaching is structured and engaged where coaches, teachers and children interact to construct and co-construct knowledge. Additionally, building the capacity in teachers through this method of coaching is a way for teachers to become more self-sufficient in their work. In this way, ideally, the coach would work her way out of the job.

*Involves classroom observations that are cyclical and that build knowledge over time*

Observing classroom teachers over time is one of the most important ways to gather data on what the teacher and students are doing during the lesson. Shanklin (2006) suggests that working with teachers on any given strategy over several weeks in a cycle is the best way for teachers to gain independence on the practice. This is accomplished with the coach using gradual release of responsibility and teacher reflections. Teachers usually

are unable to change their practice after one suggestion; it takes a great deal of studying, modeling, discussion and practice in order for it to become part of the teacher's repertoire.

Merely observing teachers will not result in improved teacher effectiveness or student achievement. The observations of the teacher combined with the discussion around the observations are the essential component in improving the quality of teaching and learning.

*Is supportive rather than evaluative*

Literacy coaches and administrators who strive to create more effective leadership teams understand the impact of literacy coaches on their schools. It takes time, reflection and conversation with others to make real shifts in the thinking, learning and practice of teachers. This kind of ongoing close-to-practice professional development is a radical change from the ineffective "one shot" in-service currently offered in most school districts (Lyons and Pinnell 2001; Joyce and Showers 2002; Rock and Wilson 2005; Wren and Reed 2005).

The effective literacy coach is both an expert and a learner. Blamey, Meyer, and Walpole (2008) suggest that many coaches arrive on the job with expertise in a specific content area. To be effective, the coach must be committed to learning new concepts and staying abreast of ideas relevant to content area instruction. They need to have an understanding of adult learning as well as the ability to support teachers by building trusting relationships.

After building trustworthy relationships it is important that our individual compasses all face north. Collaboration and goal setting prevail as the two most important duties of a literacy coach. All parties involved must join together as a group and arrive at a consensus regarding exactly what it is that they want from each other and their students. Michael Fullan (2005) states,

Collective moral purpose makes explicit the goal of raising the bar and closing the gap for all individuals and schools. That moral imperative applies to adults as well as to students. We cannot advance the cause of students without attending to the cause of teachers and administrators. Many passionate, morally driven superintendents have failed because they blindly, even courageously, committed themselves to students, running roughshod over any adults who got in the way.

Literacy coaches usually wield a large part in the implementation, the professional development and the monitoring of both the school wide goals and the individual goals of the teacher. It is also important to ensure that all goals are in alignment with the school's main objectives. The professional development a literacy coach provides must be interdependent inasmuch as all types of professional development work toward a similar goal. They should also have synergy where all players involved are dependent on each other (McLaughlin & Talbert 2006).

I take Shanklin's characteristics of effective literacy coaching one step further. There is a sense of urgency for instructional improvement that I am not seeing as a key characteristic in the role of the literacy coach. Doing a deep dive into the data and peeling

back the layers to attempt to understand the gaps in student achievement is an immense issue and should be confronted directly by the whole school. The literacy coach needs to be exceedingly transparent and specific about the work he is doing to help perform one of the most difficult jobs in the United States—educating urban youth. Coaches need to get specific on how to help teachers improve; therefore, they need to spend an appropriate amount of their time in classrooms. In order to do that, the coach must work closely with teachers to set specific, measurable goals; provide individualized professional development; model strategies; observe the implementation of the strategies over a period of time; and revisit the goals. This cycle helps to build teacher capacity because it is specifically tailored to each teacher.

#### Charlotte Danielson’s Framework

Charlotte Danielson has become a guru in education, specializing in teacher evaluation and accountability. Until recently guidelines were non-existent in regard to the expectations of a literacy coach or any other kind of coach. Her framework for instructional specialists laid the groundwork for administrators and coaches to understand what is expected of any type of instructional coach, including a literacy coach.

Danielson developed this framework to enhance our professional practice using four domains and four levels of performance to explicitly describe the components of those domains. The four domains for instructional specialists are planning and preparation, the environment, delivery of service and professional responsibilities. These four domains are broken down into very specific behaviors and ideals that provide the

literacy coach a model on how he or she can be the best at accomplishing goals and objectives. The components of the four domains are arranged in a framework describing the work of the coach in the component from unsatisfactory to basic proficient and distinguished. These details give the administrator specific information on the effectiveness of the coach in addition to serving the coach by giving her a tool for self-evaluation.

### *Planning and Preparation*

The domain of planning and preparation is essential in ensuring a literacy coach's success with teachers. In this domain the framework emphasizes the importance of demonstrating knowledge of the current trends in the field. According to IRA's 2004 statement, literacy coaches must be excellent teachers and be able to use a wide range of instructional practices in addition to having an in-depth knowledge of the reading and writing process, assessment and instruction.

In this domain the literacy coach needs to demonstrate knowledge of the school's literacy program and the necessary skills for the educators to teach that program. It is important for the coach to be familiar with the content and supplementary materials used at the school to understand the type of professional development needed for the teachers. Just like students, teachers come with a variety of background information and theories on what works and what does not in education. In order for a coach to extend a teacher's professional knowledge base he must understand what the teacher knows and how the teacher learns (Dozier 2006).

The planning and preparation category discusses the importance for literacy coaches to establish goals for the instructional support program. Without goal setting, many coaches continue working with the various tasks thrown at them on a daily basis. Because a large portion of the literacy coaches are not tied to a classroom, a great deal of extra work gets placed on them during the course of the day. Establishing goals and being able to adhere to those goals is an important aspect of what makes a great literacy coach. A goal-setting cycle should be set by consulting the principal and colleagues. The principal is ultimately responsible for student achievement and teacher practice at the school; therefore, it is vital that the literacy coach has a strong relationship and open lines of communication with him or her (Casey 2006).

### *The Environment*

The second domain for instructional specialists involves the learning environment. In regards to the literacy coach, Danielson is not necessarily referring to the manner in which the coach decorates her space. The environment primarily refers to how well the coach creates an environment of trust and respect with all parties involved.

Creating an environment of trust and respect is an essential feature of a good coach and often is overlooked. At times some principals are too quick to hire a literacy coach that possesses a good grasp of the content. Although content is of vital importance, building trustworthy relationships is equally important. Without the trust and respect of the coach, the teachers are less likely to have a productive dialogue, much less try a suggested new strategy in their classroom.

To create such an ongoing improvement within a school requires a great deal of work and cooperation among the adults in the building. Sebring and Bryk (2000) suggest, “To achieve this state requires a strong base of social trust among teachers, between teachers and parents, between teachers and the principal, and between teachers and the students” (p. 442).

Another aspect under the domain of the environment pertains to literacy coaches establishing a culture for ongoing instructional improvement. This goes far beyond teachers merely sitting through the workshops the school provides. It actually delves into how the literacy coach can cultivate a culture of professional inquiry. Ideally the teacher would work with the coach on more meaningful professional development such as action research. Steven Corey (1953), who conducted some of the initial research in the field, suggests that teachers who are involved in the action research or inquiry process benefit from a deeper understanding of new concepts as well as providing a healthy forum for practice and reflection. The role of the coach is essential in order to support teachers in establishing this type of ongoing instructional improvement.

Danielson’s environment domain also suggests the importance for the coach to establish and maintain norms of behavior for professional interactions. Because there are very few systems in place for the training of coaches, it is left up to each individual coach to establish and maintain the norms within each school building. This takes great teamwork from the administration and the literacy coach to ensure that clear norms and mutual respect for all professional interactions are communicated and implemented.

Parker Palmer (1998) eloquently states,

There are no formulas for good teaching, and the advice of experts has but marginal utility. If we want to grow in our practice, we have two primary places to go: to the inner ground from which good teaching comes and to the community of fellow teachers from whom we can learn more about ourselves and our craft.

(p. 141)

Furthermore, when the literacy coach helps to build this type of culture in the school, the implications for student achievement are beyond measure.

#### *Delivery of Service*

Because many literacy coaches are not actually teaching, Danielson titled the category for the third domain the delivery of service. A literacy coach should follow the protocols of best practices from the International Reading Association, which is the recognized expert membership organization in the field.

In IRA's (2004) statement on the roles and qualifications of the literacy coach, it discusses the importance of the coach having expertise working with teachers. IRA also maintains the importance of the literacy coach being an excellent presenter.

One component in this framework recommends the literacy coach collaborate with teachers in the design of instructional units and lessons. This is one of the major charges of a literacy coach. It is not effective for teachers to be their own little islands of success. Classroom doors must become open and teachers need to work with their colleagues, coaches and administrators toward a common curriculum. Marzano's (2003)

meta-analytic work formalized the importance of a guaranteed and viable curriculum. This requires a common, high-quality curriculum that is assembled with teacher teams. It is important for the leadership of the school to arrange time for teachers and coaches to collaborate in order to map out the curriculum (Schmoker 2006).

Another component of the framework under delivery of service is that the coach engages teachers in learning new instructional skills. Coaches have the important role of working with teachers to engage in new professional learning.

### *Professional Responsibilities*

The last domain for instructional specialists under Danielson's framework is titled professional responsibilities. This domain is comprised of a framework for the coach to improve her practice by reflecting on her work, coordinating with other specialist and district office support, showing professionalism and participating in a professional learning community.

The first component in this domain requires the reading coach to be extremely reflective on her practice. This coach would be reflective yet results driven and pragmatic. She would be capable to plan alternatives to any activity that is not productive. A coach rated as distinguished in this domain, would take on a proactive disposition and be a problem solver. Danielson (2007) states,

Reflection on practice is a natural activity by all professionals. They know that in the course of their day they have made hundreds of decisions; they wonder whether any of them, if made differently; could have yielded better results....

However, although reflection on practice is a natural activity for all professionals, doing it *well* is a learned skill. (p. 92)

Additionally, to be a great literacy coach, it takes a sizable amount of arduous work to become knowledgeable about his teachers' needs. Mastery of the content, knowledge of the best pedagogical practices and awareness of how to help teachers go within and reflect are essential characteristics of an effective literacy coach.

Another major component of this domain requires the coach showing professionalism, including integrity and confidentiality. Confidentiality is essential because one must have the trust of all parties involved. Many coaches make the mistake of overextending their effort to be friends with the teachers and getting the teachers to like them. Danielson (2007) suggests the literacy coach should be "counted on to hold the highest standards of honest any integrity and [take] a leadership role with colleagues in respecting the norms of confidentiality" (p. 121).

### Summary and Conclusions

Literacy coaching has grown and developed since its inception. The field of coaching has expanded into other types beyond literacy coaching. There are a wide variety of coaches in schools today, from a differentiation coach to a classroom management coach.

The number of literacy coaches and their roles has significantly changed throughout the years. Major organizations in the field such as the International Reading Association have developed a set of standards, roles and responsibilities of a literacy

coach to shore up previously vague expectations. Nancy Shanklin and Charlotte Danielson created roles and expectations that are required of effective coaches. This literature review, in addition to discussing the frameworks for effective coaches, serves as a resource for some of the questions I used in interviewing the participants of this study. I gathered data based on the resources presented in this literature review through interviewing various groups of literacy coaches.

Both the Shanklin and Danielson characteristics of effective literacy coaches are notable to have as a literacy coach, but it is important to be reminded that if coaches seek to progress into becoming a *great* literacy coach they will need to go beyond what the frameworks suggest. An overview chart of Shanklin's and Danielson's frameworks is located in Appendix A. Rodgers and Rodgers (2007) argue that a key element missing from the aforementioned characteristics is the disposition of the coach. The emotions of the teachers and the coach have a direct impact on the teachers' implementation of what gets taught. This includes having a sense of humor, showing compassion toward colleagues and having a sense of passion and urgency about the work.

Coaching teachers is not meant for every great literacy teacher. It is a matter of finding the right person for the job. Many times administrators become concerned about the qualities and abilities of their coaches. Although many teachers and principals are generally satisfied with coaches as far as their knowledge of the subject is concerned, there is some apprehension about their ability to work with adult learners (McCombs & Marsh 2009). Working with adults involves a very different skill set than working with

students. Although a sufficient amount of experience helps the coach relate to teachers, coaches need to become leaders of learners to both students *and* adults.

These lists of characteristics serve as a guide for principals to put the right people “on the bus” and also serve the literacy coach for self-reflection. But in order for one to become an effective literacy coach, he must be able to articulate the heart and the passion behind the work he creates to obtain a shared vision of good teaching. These combined factors are at the heart of coaches’ work and impact their ability to be successful change agents and leaders of learners.

## CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

### Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to outline the design and data collection methodology I utilized for my qualitative study in order to address the research questions. I explored the literacy coaches' perceptions about their role as well as their thoughts and feelings pertaining to the effectiveness of their work with teachers. Specifically, the study revealed the common themes coaches experience working with teachers in Chicago Public Schools. It was my intent to capture the success stories, the celebrations, the challenges as well as the incredible demands they face.

### Research Questions

This dissertation analyzes what it is like to be in the shoes of an in-school literacy coach from the perspectives of a variety of in-school elementary literacy coaches. The primary research question is, "What are the coaches' philosophies and strategies for working with teachers in Chicago Public Schools?" Some related questions are:

- How do personal experiences and institutional contexts shape and influence the way these coaches engage teachers?
- In what ways can the lessons derived from the work of these coaches inform the practices and pedagogy of the teachers in Chicago Public Schools?

### Methodology Used

The design of this research is qualitative in nature. My intention is to be able to capture a real sense of the thoughts, feelings and actions of literacy coaches and what

makes them effective in their work. Data were gathered through multiple sources, in the form of interviews, self-surveys and a focus group. I then analyzed the data to look for trends or common themes. The information was then categorized based on the common themes extracted from these discussions.

This study did not evaluate quantitative variables such as student growth in the area of literacy, resulting in the qualitative nature of the research. Qualitative research is one of the best ways to understand the subject's feelings, viewpoints and experiences (Kvale & Brinkmann 2009). The research method used is phenomenological in the sense that there is attention to perceptions of the players involved in the work: the coaches themselves. Phenomenology is the study of the experience from the perspective of the individual. This type of research allows the researcher to study the participants in their natural setting and enables them to make sense of or interpret the data through the perspectives the subjects bring to them (Denzin & Lincoln 2005). This is a type of ethnographic research that is typically conducted by gathering data through observations and interviews. This methodology fits with my research because my job is to essentially coach the coaches. Creswell (2008) states, "Researchers recognize that their own backgrounds shape their interpretation, and they position themselves in the research to acknowledge how their interpretation flows from their personal, cultural, and historical experiences" (p. 8). The background knowledge of having been an in-school literacy coach in the past and of my current job allows me the opportunity to be embedded in working with literacy coaches and making sure they are fully supported and as effective

as they can be in their schools.

### Setting

The Chicago Public School system is the third largest school system in the United States. There are a total of six hundred and sixty six schools within the district with twenty three thousand teachers and over four hundred thousand enrolled students. Of those students, 84.3% are classified as students who come from low-income families. Each year, assessment results in reading have risen steadily. CPS currently has 67.8 % of its students meeting or achieving standards as measured by the 2009 Illinois Standards Achievement Test (ISAT) (Chicago Public Schools 2009).

Currently, there is no information available on the number of teachers serving as literacy coaches. School budgets are extremely limited at the time of this writing, and to some, having a teacher as a freed coach is a luxury. Many of the current coaches in CPS are tied to several grant-funded programs, so their positions are funded through those monies.

### Participants

The participants of this study include literacy coaches who work in Chicago Public Schools. After reviewing the list of literacy coaches named for a specific program in the district, I selected fifteen participants by asking the literacy coaching community, such as district supervisors, Area Office literacy coaches, principals and teachers, who were the most effective literacy coaches in the system. Many of the district leaders and Area-level coaches made recommendations based on the coaches' content knowledge of

literacy, their ability to work with teachers and most importantly the impact they have made as a result of their coaching. Of the fifteen participants I was able to purposefully select 10 coaches who agreed to participate for a follow-up, in-depth, qualitative study in this research (Creswell & Piano Clark 2007). Ten in-school literacy coaches who coach teachers of various grade levels were invited to participate in this study. The participants were chosen based on the literacy community's recommendation and my personal knowledge through working with some of them at different stages of my career.

My current role as an area instructional data coach allowed me the opportunity to observe, survey, coach and interview the literacy coaches. I was able to observe and work closely with them on a biweekly basis. The participants used in the study are known to be some of the best coaches CPS has to offer.

Literacy coaches in the Chicago Public Schools must complete a rigorous screening process by the Office of Reading and Language Arts. One of the major credentials to be considered for this position is that each coach must obtain a Reading Endorsement on his State of Illinois Teaching Certificate or obtain a Type 10 Specialist Certificate in Reading (preferred). In order to obtain a Reading Specialist Certificate, you must complete a master's degree in reading at an Illinois state-approved university. Once you have obtained either the certificate or the endorsement you may apply for a position as a literacy coach. The interview process consists of the candidate discussing in front of a panel of Office of Reading and Language Arts personnel the essential content knowledge and personal character traits that make her qualified as an effective literacy

coach. If the reading coach is approved, she is then placed on a potential list of candidates that is given to the district school principals. Principals are then responsible for conducting their own interviews and selecting the coaches who appear to work best for their schools. At this writing there are no known data as to the number of literacy coaches in CPS. It is in my estimation that there are over 125 teachers serving in the role of the literacy coach throughout CPS elementary schools.

The purpose of this study was to gather information on what it is really like to be a coach in CPS. My aim was to capture the voices of these coaches in order to help other coaches to learn from them and become more effective in their own practice. Many of the themes derived from these interviews can be compared to some of the effective characteristics of coaches found in Shanklin's and Danielson's frameworks (see Chapter Two). This required the collection and analysis of data to demonstrate the findings.

### Research Design

The research for this dissertation began in October of 2009. I began to ask administrators and district leadership questions about the most effective literacy coaches in the district. After the coaches were selected, I scheduled a time and date where each of them could be interviewed. The interviews took place between November 2009 and January 2010. The data analysis began shortly after the data collection had begun.

### Data Collection Process

The individual coaches in this research were asked whether they would be willing to participate in the study for my dissertation. The principals of the coaches participating

were also asked for permission for their coach to participate in this research. All participants who consented were then interviewed. Each person in this survey was given a participation form that is required by the Institutional Research Review Board (IRRB). This board is responsible for ensuring no harm is committed to any person or entity in the process of conducting research. It also ensures that the researcher conducts the study in an appropriate manner. The IRRB is mainly responsible for carrying out the policies and procedures of the University for conducting ethical research with human participants.

This study focuses on the accounts and experiences of ten literacy coaches who work with teachers at various grade levels. I began by collecting demographic information to use as a springboard for gathering more in-depth data (see Appendix B). This provided information on their age, ethnic background, experience in teaching, experience in coaching, education background, and sense of efficacy and leadership characteristics. After reviewing the demographic information collected, I began to gather more information on the participants through individual interviews.

The interviews took place either in the home school of each literacy coach or a central office location and were captured with a digital voice recorder. This was done so I was able to capture their actions, their interactions and the relationships they hold throughout their school building. I also took notes of their language toward teachers, administrators and students as well as their non-verbal cues to see if there was consistency between what they told me they do in the interviews and how they are represented in reality of their work life.

Interviews and focus groups were the prevailing form of data collection for this study. I consider interviewing in qualitative research to be the preferred method of producing knowledge. Kvale and Brinkmann (2009) state, “[In interviews] there is an alternation between the knowers and the known, between the constructors of knowledge and the knowledge constructed” (p. 2). Although the exchange of information took place in a relaxed, conversational environment, the data produced through these interviews shed light on the perceived effectiveness of literacy coaches not only for me and the interviewee but also for the reader.

The participants received the demographic surveys in October 2009. After this information was collected, I began the interview process during the months of November 2009 through January 2010. I then began to analyze and sort the data as soon as it was collected. The survey and interview questions are listed in Appendix B and Appendix C, respectively, of this dissertation. The demographic information of the coaches as well as their schools is listed in Appendices F–H. An example of one of the transcripts is also included in this dissertation (see Appendix I).

#### Data Analysis Process

The analysis of the information collected during and after the data collection concluded was categorized and coded to look for common themes among the interviewees. Before and after the interviews were recorded, field notes, perceptions, reflections and interpretations were documented in a journal to capture that which was not captured digitally. All data were transcribed, and constant comparison was used in a

recursive analysis process on the responses (Glaser & Strauss 1967; Strauss & Corbin 1990; Tierney 1991). The data were then categorized to determine the ways the participants are similar and different in their roles as literacy coaches in Chicago Public Schools.

### Limitations

There are two main limitations to this study. The first limitation is the use of the ethnographic research approach: the majority of the data gathered was merely based on *perceptions* of the participants. As a participant in this study, the coach's current behaviors and perceptions may have been affected by how they reported the characteristics of their job in comparison to their "lived reality." Regardless of the outcome the information gathered through this research, it is a noteworthy way to make those in education more self-reflective in their daily practice.

The second limitation is the sample size of this study. It is very small in comparison to the number of coaches in Chicago Public Schools. With only ten participants, this study is not completely representative of all of the literacy coaches in the district or, in fact, throughout the country. Again, these participants were chosen based on the recommendations from colleagues as well as the convenience and the practicality of my ability to meet with them. Although the sample size is limited, the findings are substantive and shed light on how literacy coaches in Chicago Public Schools feel about their work as a literacy coach.

One of a coach's main responsibilities is to build trust with the colleagues with

whom they are working. This holds true in the situation of collecting data for this dissertation. To ensure anonymity and as a layer of precaution, several steps were taken to ensure anonymity. As mentioned earlier, each participant signed a waiver to be a part of this study in accordance with the IRRB. Code names for all participants, including principals and the names of schools, were assigned to ensure anonymity to share this information for the purposes of this dissertation. All participants were able to view the interview transcripts for accuracy if they choose. The information collected during this process is secured at my home and will not be shared for any other purposes. Participants had the option to exclude themselves from this study at any time.

#### Summary

This research is a phenomenological study that seeks to categorize ways in which literacy coaches in Chicago Public Schools demonstrate similar exemplary qualities. Ten literacy coaches in Chicago Public Schools were used in this study. Surveys, interviews and focus groups were also used to gather data for this research during the months of October 2009 through January 2010. Instructional specialists, literacy coaches in particular, can have a great impact on student achievement if they are doing the work outlined in the Danielson and Shanklin frameworks. Highly regarded literacy coaches can help to make great teachers. And when great teachers are in place there truly is no child left behind.

## CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

This chapter presents a narrative discussion of the results of this research. The interviews and focus group present a complete picture of the research process and data interpretation of the study. The data were analyzed to search for categories, themes and patterns that emerged from each interview. The findings reflect the perceptions and lived experiences of each literacy coach. The first part of the chapter is largely descriptive, while the second part of the chapter includes analysis and comparative observations.

Denzin and Lincoln (1998) likened the analysis of the data to choreography:

Like the choreographer, the researcher must find the most effective way to tell the story, to convince the audience. Staying close to the data is the most powerful means of telling the story, just as in dance the story is told through the body itself.  
(p. 47)

As the data unfold, the voices and stories of the literacy coaches emerge to shed light on the dance of a literacy coach in Chicago Public Schools.

The summaries contain different types of literacy coaches: those who serve only primary and intermediate teachers and those who service the entire building (kindergarten through eighth grade). There is also a variety in the way they are funded. Some are bought through district initiatives, and some are bought through the school's discretionary funds. All names used in this study are pseudonyms. Following the summaries, I examine the data to determine the emerging themes. In each of the interviews and focus group transcripts, the data were analyzed in terms of coding themes,

the process where one looks through the “data for regularities and patterns as well as for topics the data covers, and then you write down words or phrases to represent these topics and patterns” (Bogdan & Biklen 2003, p. 161). The themes revealed through these interviews are discussed later in the chapter.

### Participants

The ten interview participants were initially identified by letters A–J throughout all of the initial stages of the study. For the discussions that follow, each participant was assigned a pseudonym whose first letter corresponded to the letter coding to make it easier for the reader to keep track of individuals. The assignment of the pseudonym also maintains the gender of the participant. Appendix E lists the pseudonym of each participant.

Demographic information that pertains to each coach’s profile is presented in Tables 3 and 4 (see Appendices F and G). The average age of the coaches is 42.1; the youngest coach is 30 years old and the eldest is 55. The coaches discussed in this study have a wide range of previous roles and experiences that will help shed light on the daily life of a literacy coach in Chicago Public Schools.

The ethnic composition of the coaches involved in this study, based on self-reports, was 50% African American, 40% Caucasian and 10% Hispanic. In terms of gender, 90% of the participants were female and 10% were male.

Participants were asked to share the number of years they were a teacher as well as the number of years they have been a coach. Fifty percent of the coaches had served as

a teacher for over ten years within and outside of Chicago Public Schools; 50% have been coaches for five years or more within Chicago Public Schools. Collectively, these participants have 97 years of experience as teachers and 52 years spent serving as a coach. This study contains a wide array of people who are relatively new to coaching as well as people who have been coaches for over ten years.

In the survey, participants were asked to share their highest level of education received to prepare them to be a literacy coach. One hundred percent of the literacy coaches held both a bachelor's degree in education and at least one master's degree in reading and literacy studies (Appendix G). This chart also indicates the coaches who have received National Board Certification. Chicago Public Schools requires literacy coaches to have the proper certification.

The participants were asked to share demographic information about their school. Seventy percent of the participants coached in schools where the student population was over 500 students (see Appendix H). Enrollment ranged from 325 to 1,600 students. In terms of student ethnicity, 70% of the participants' schools had a majority of African American students, 20% had a majority of Hispanic students and 10% had an equal mixture of African American, Caucasian and Hispanic students (see Appendix H). I asked the participants to disclose the number of students who received free or reduced lunch in their school. All of the coaches in this study reported that their schools contained percentages of 90% or higher of students who were eligible for free or reduced lunch (see Appendix H).

The coaches involved in this study have a variety of coaching assignments. In Chicago Public Schools, coaches may be purchased through the funding of a basal adoption where they would serve only the students in grades kindergarten through fifth grade who are using the basal program. Otherwise, the coach is bought through the funding of the individual school where they would service all grade levels from kindergarten through eighth grade. There is one school represented where the funding of the coach is purchased through a teacher incentive program.

Through interviewing the ten participants, I have uncovered many similarities and differences among the coaches, leading to a wide range of experiences and abilities. Their stories, strategies, successes and challenges in working in Chicago Public Schools are woven throughout this study. Below, I discuss each coach's perceptions and lived experiences as a literacy coach in Chicago Public Schools.

*Literacy Coach A: Alice*

Alice is a 30-year-old Caucasian female who has worked in Chicago Public Schools for eight years. She began in 2002 as a Teach for America Core member on Chicago's West Side, where she taught fourth and fifth grades. Three years later she transferred to a school on the South Side, where she taught third grade for two and a half years. During her tenure she refined her craft in teaching as well as developing a balanced literacy program. As the years progressed, she enrolled in classes to obtain her master's degree in Language, Literacy and Learning Disabilities.

Alice's passion for literacy began early on when her grandfather, a college

professor of reading, would send her books and teacher's guides. She grew up working hard to improve the literacy skills of the students she worked with. Her college studies even furthered her practice. It gave her a solid understanding of how to work with small groups of students and also provided a strong knowledge base of problem solving and helping struggling readers.

She became a literacy coach in 2008 and has coached at two different elementary schools in Chicago. In the first school, on the West Side, she was a coach only to fourth through eighth grade students. Presently she works in a school on the North Side, where she services all teachers in grade levels kindergarten through eighth grade. She works in a school that enrolls approximately 800 students. A large Hispanic population attends the school, and many of the students are learning English as a second language.

Alice's passion for literacy is contagious. She is extremely knowledgeable about best practices in the field of literacy and is excited to talk to her colleagues about the subject. Alice takes pride in her efforts toward writing. Last year on the state exam more than 80% of the students were meeting or exceeding the standards on the writing test. Alice feels that it is important to continue her coaching around writing as well as helping teachers move forward in best practices in reading as well. She plans to accomplish that using differentiated coaching to help each teacher reach his individual goals.

*Literacy Coach B: Betty*

Betty is a 42-year-old African American who has been working for Chicago Public Schools for fifteen years. She spent nine years as a classroom teacher and another

five years as literacy coach. During her years as a teacher she worked in several CPS locations. Prior to becoming a literacy coach at her current school, she was a third and fourth grade teacher at the same school. She was recognized by her principal and other staff members as being one of the best literacy teachers in the school.

Betty's school is located on the South Side of Chicago and has a student population of 580 students, all of which are African American. The school building itself moved from an older building to a brand new building in 2003. This school has steadily focused on improving instruction through a balanced literacy approach, and Betty has helped move the school from 39% to 80% at or above grade level over the course of five years.

Betty was chosen to be a demonstration classroom teacher in the balanced literacy approach to reading at her school. Because she has a passion for the instruction of reading and writing and because she was learning a great deal by being a demonstration classroom teacher, she decided to enroll in a master's degree program in Reading. While in school for the master's, she continued to improve her craft within the classroom. When a position for the literacy coach surfaced, she was asked to take the job and she gladly accepted the challenge. Her transformation in becoming a literacy coach was applauded and well respected among her colleagues.

Betty is currently continuing her role as the literacy coach at the same school. When she first began, there were two literacy coaches in the building. Betty worked with the primary grade teachers and her partner worked with the upper grades. Because her

partner moved on to a different assignment and for budget reasons, the school decided to reduce the funding from two coaches to one who services the whole school. Betty now works with all of the teachers in the building in grades kindergarten through eighth grade. Her primary approach is to work individually with each teacher by utilizing the coaching cycle (pre-observation, observation and debrief). She also works closely with her teachers by conducting grade-level meetings each week where together they study new strategies or look at data to improve instruction. One of her goals is to work with teachers to help them become more reflective practitioners at their craft.

*Literacy Coach C: Carole*

Carole is a Caucasian female who is 43 years old and has been a teacher for approximately eighteen years. She spent thirteen years as a classroom teacher and during the last five years she has served in the capacity of literacy coach. Carole has not only taught children but also had a job teaching in the City Colleges of Chicago teaching adult education. She feels that her teaching experience with both children and adults helped her to become the coach she is today.

Carole's path to becoming a literacy coach is interesting. As a classroom teacher, Carole started to notice that she was bored with the way she taught reading. She thought that if she was bored, then surely her students judged her reading classes to be boring as well. So being the proactive teacher that she is, she enrolled herself into a master's program in Reading. While taking classes, Carole began to improve her techniques while increasing student achievement and engagement in reading and writing. When she

completed her degree she felt more comfortable being an advocate of literacy learning. At that point she applied at her current school to become the literacy coach. There had been two coaches who held that position prior to her arrival.

Carole's school is located on the South Side of Chicago and has a student population of 400. Most of the students enrolled at her school are African American, with the exception of a few students who are Hispanic. When Carole began her assignment at her current school she had another literacy coach as a partner. Carole worked as the primary literacy coach and her partner served as the intermediate/upper coach. Like Betty's school, this school was forced to cut back to just one literacy coach position, so currently Carole serves the teachers in the entire building in grades kindergarten through eighth grade.

Carole stated that most of the teachers in her school want her support and welcome her into their classrooms. She describes her approach to coaching as a being a person who is learning right beside each teacher. She does not presume to be able to fix the teachers or make them Golden Apple Winners, but she supports them by assessing their comfort level and helping them move beyond that with the help of her coaching support. She stays current in this role by reading a substantial amount of professional literature and being a part of her coaching support network.

*Literacy Coach D: Denise*

Denise is a 40-year-old African American literacy coach who has worked in Chicago Public Schools for thirteen years. She was a classroom teacher for nine years

and for the last four years has served as a literacy coach in two very different schools. She started her career by working in the capacity of a sixth, seventh and eighth grade literacy teacher in a school on the South Side. Like Carole, Denise found herself unable to reach all of her students while teaching reading because of the varied reading levels among her students.

While she was a teacher the principal included her in the internal walkthroughs at her building. Being focused on her own classroom, she had no idea how much help some of the other teachers needed to improve instruction in their classrooms. She decided to go back to school to get a master's in Reading to enable her to help her own students as well as other teachers in her building. She then wanted to begin her coaching career to effect change in a larger capacity at the school level.

Denise obtained her first job as a coach in a school on the South Side of Chicago. The principal was so impressed with her interview that Denise was hired right on the spot. The position at her first school closed due to budget cuts. Fortunately for Denise, an opportunity opened up at another school—a school where she is extremely passionate about the work they are creating as a team. Unlike her first coaching position, she has established a great working relationship with her current principal. There are approximately 370 students who attend the school where Denise works. All of them are African American and all are eligible for a free or reduced lunch. Her principal is extremely skilled and knowledgeable about best practices in literacy instruction but allows Denise to demonstrate her craft as well. Denise feels that the principal serves as

her own coach and is mentoring her to grow even further into her profession as a literacy coach.

Denise stated that she has formed great relationships with teachers to the extent that teachers feel comfortable bouncing new ideas off her and trying new things in their classrooms. One of her goals is to build the capacity of teachers by allowing them time to collaborate. In many schools teachers rarely receive the opportunity to share their ideas because of their busy schedules and the pace of the school day. She feels that there are many people on the staff who can learn from each other, so she frequently provides the opportunity for the teachers to present their ideas to each other. She also feels that it is critically important to listen to teachers. They have a great deal to say, and by listening to them, a coach is better able to help them determine their goals. Denise stated that it is also important to know that every teacher is coachable. It is imperative to get to know teachers and build on their strengths to figure out what works and what does not for each individual teacher.

*Literacy Coach E: Ethan*

Ethan is the only male included in this study. He is Caucasian and 55 years of age. He has a variety of experiences in teaching, from elementary school to high school. He also spent seven years as a high school teacher at a private Catholic school teaching business and computers. He had a twenty-year lapse before he started teaching at the elementary level again. He found teaching computers no longer appealing to him, but he did have a desire to learn more about teaching literacy. He decided to become a literacy

coach because he saw an article in the *Chicago Tribune* indicating that coaching was projected to be one of the hottest fields in education. He enrolled in a master's program in Reading and started to improve his craft in the classroom.

Currently Ethan is a literacy coach who serves the teachers in grades kindergarten through fifth grade. His school is located on the South Side of Chicago and is composed of approximately 540 students. The student population is mixed, with 33% who are African American, 33% Hispanic and 33% Caucasian. This school was the first school in which he served as a literacy coach, and he has been there for three years. When he got first got hired at the school, he served as a Reading First coach where he only worked with the teachers in kindergarten through third grade. As the years progressed and the Reading First coaching position ended, he expanded his role by coaching the teachers in grades kindergarten through fifth. Although he does not have a partner for the upper grades, he does his best to assist them as much as possible. The school has two structures: a primary building and an upper building. Ethan spends most of his time in the primary building.

Ethan allocates his time working with teachers one on one, presenting professional development at the school, conducting grade-level meetings and working with small groups of students. When he attends professional development himself, Ethan is sure to bring the professional development he learns back to the teachers at his school. During grade-level meetings, he allows teachers to collaborate and discuss data for their classrooms. He also helps teachers to set goals and make decisions based on their

classroom data.

Ethan's strategy for working with teachers is to show them that he is a real person who is trustworthy and considers himself a reflective practitioner and a lifelong learner. He stated that it is extremely important to make sure he never talks down to people and remains accessible to their needs. He does this by getting to know his teachers' strengths and building trust with them as well as the principal.

*Literacy Coach F: Faye*

Faye is a 40-year-old African American who has worked in the Chicago Public Schools system for twelve years as a teacher and a literacy coach. She was a classroom teacher for eight years, during which she taught a range of students from kindergarten to eighth grade. Like many of the other coaches, her principal started to see her potential in the teaching of reading to her students. She was encouraged to take on the role of becoming a literacy coach. She received her master's of Reading and Language Arts and started her first coaching assignment at a school on the Far South Side of Chicago. During her first coaching assignment she began to realize how influential the coach's position can be in creating change at the school level. She commented on how exciting it was to actually see strategies she used with the teachers being translated to the students in the classroom and feels that this is the work that really counts.

Due to program funding changes, many literacy coaches, like Faye, are forced to move to different schools from year to year. In the 2009–2010 school year Faye is working on the Near South Side in a school with a population of approximately 325

students. All of the students are African American, and 95% of them are eligible for free/reduced lunch. The school in which she works is vibrant and colorful and has a welcoming, artistic atmosphere. The school is known to be one of the higher achieving schools in the area.

In Faye's role as the literacy coach she works with her teachers side by side on a daily basis. Even though Faye was hired through the funded program to only work with kindergarten through fifth grade teachers, she makes sure to support the teachers in the upper grades as well. She collaborates, co-teaches and models strategies for the teachers in her building. She also conducts grade-level meetings and professional development for the entire staff on best practices around literacy topics and using data to drive instruction. One of the goals she is working on with the staff is aligned to the School Improvement Plan. She is working with teachers to use data and effective strategies to move more kids from the "below" to "meets" and from the "meets" to "exceeds" categories on the state test.

*Literacy Coach G: Gail*

Gail is a 40-year-old Caucasian who has been in the teaching profession for nineteen years. She started as a teacher in the Chicagoland suburbs for ten years, but then she decided that she needed a challenge and took a teaching position in CPS on the South Side of Chicago. She taught for one year in the classroom at CPS before a position opened up that allowed her to be pull-out teacher to help other teachers remediating students. The next year a literacy coach position opened up and she was placed into that

position. She went back to school to get her master's degree in Reading and Language Arts for the role. She has been coaching at the same school for eight years.

Gail's Near South Side school has 838 students and over 40 teachers. The school has a diverse student population, with 85% of the students Hispanic, 15% African American and 1% Caucasian. Gail's school has a bilingual program as well as a few dual-language classrooms.

Over time, Gail's beliefs and practices began to shift as she has grown into the role. When she first started as a coach, many teachers wanted her to come in to "teach their class" while the teachers sat in the back of the room grading papers. That has changed over the years because of what she has learned as well as the change in the philosophy of the teachers as well as the focus of the school. One of her goals as a literacy coach is to work with each teacher on setting their own goals in the beginning of the year and helping them accomplish those goals. She has also worked diligently on organizing and articulating the school's goals. The school is working on making sure everyone is on the same page by setting benchmarks and aligning the curriculum throughout each grade level. Gail is the only literacy coach in the building, so she tries to spend her time working smarter by clustering people and working with them in groups by grade level or goal so that she can make sure she builds capacity through coaching.

*Literacy Coach H: Helene*

Helene is a Hispanic 49-year-old who works as a literacy coach on the Near Northwest Side of Chicago. She spent thirteen years as a classroom teacher, and the

2009–2010 school year marks her ninth year as a literacy coach. The Hispanic area in which she works is highly populated and has many overcrowded schools. Her school contains 1,600 students and over 60 teachers and only houses students from kindergarten through fifth grade.

Unlike my background, Helene was one of those people who always wanted to be a teacher. She had always taken her job as a teacher seriously, and members of the administration started to notice. They began placing student teachers in her classroom and she mentored them. Being the cooperating teacher, Helene was given credits to use toward a college degree. She had such a passion for literacy and a desire to help her students better that she took on a master's in Reading for the sole purpose of improving her craft in the classroom. The university professors also took notice and began giving her extra mentoring assignments. She enjoyed discussing the reading strategies she learned in school with her mentees, and she found it rewarding working with adult learners.

After a maternity leave Helene finished up her master's degree in Reading and began her career as a literacy coach. Helene's reputation had already been established with the principal and some of the teachers at her school because she had mentored some of the new teachers through the university partnership. The principal's goals as well as her goal for the school were to create a balanced literacy program that incorporates English as Second Language (ESL) strategies not only during the reading block but throughout the content areas. However, this task was not going to be easy. Many teachers

were used to teaching by following the teachers guide as closely as possible. It took several years to break the walls of resistance and help teachers to become better at their craft and improve instruction for their students. She spends most of her time as a coach by providing professional development, planning instruction and modeling for teachers. She is continuing her work with teachers and the principal on incorporating ESL strategies into the content areas and ensuring the students are given time for independent reading and writing. One of her strategies for working with the teachers is to get to know the learning curve of the teacher. She works with them on their strengths and helps to build their abilities by setting attainable goals.

*Literacy Coach I: Isabel*

Isabel is an African American who is 43 years old. She has been employed by Chicago Public Schools for the last 14 years. This was her second career, so she started in the system by substitute teaching. She became a permanent substitute in one of the schools as a classroom teacher as well as a librarian, and the principal began to notice her talents working with students and her colleagues. She grew to love teaching and decided to get a master of arts in Education so that she would be able to earn her teaching certificate. Soon after she became a full-time teacher, a cohort master's degree program in Reading was established and held at her school, so she jumped at the chance to be a part of it. She initially started the master's particularly because she wanted to learn more about what she can do with her students who were non-readers. When the need for a literacy coach arose at her school, her principal immediately selected Isabel for the

position. Isabel has served in a coaching capacity at two different schools.

Isabel's current school is located in the Englewood neighborhood on the city's South Side. There are approximately 500 students who matriculate at this school. One hundred percent of these students are African American and are eligible for free lunch. This neighborhood is known to be one of the most challenging neighborhoods in the city. Isabel and her principal were new to the school in the 2009–2010 school year after the prior principal had been removed. Isabel admits that it was a challenge in the beginning of the year because many of the teachers saw her as the principal's "extra pair of eyes."

Even though there have been rough patches this year, Isabel continues to remain focused on the work of improving literacy instruction throughout the whole school. She stated that this school was very different from her last school. At the prior school, she was not able to spend most of her time coaching teachers; instead, she spent her time doing administrative tasks and helping the principal at the principal's request. In her current location, she is treated as the professional that she is and is allowed to work with the teachers by conducting grade-level meetings, coaching teachers one on one and observing classrooms. Her goal this year is to work with teachers to improve the quality of instruction. She is doing this by helping teachers become more reflective and changing the teachers' hearts and minds about the way they teach.

*Literacy Coach J: Jackie*

Jackie is 39 years old and African American. She has worked in Chicago Public Schools for twelve years in the West Englewood neighborhood of Chicago. Her current

school is composed of roughly 700 students and approximately 4 teachers per grade level. All of the students who attend her school are African American, and the majority of them are eligible for free/reduced lunch.

Jackie became a literacy coach by chance. In her years as a teacher, Jackie held the title of grade-level chairperson. Her former principal saw potential in her as she taught in the classroom as well as her interactions with her colleagues. As the position for the literacy coach opened she decided to enroll in a master's program to earn a degree in Reading and Language Arts, which is a state requirement for literacy coaches. Jackie knew her teachers well, so the transition from teacher to literacy coach was fairly smooth. Teachers respected her because they knew that she had talent as a classroom teacher and demonstrated her leadership capabilities while serving as the grade-level chair.

The school in which Jackie coaches is part of a teacher incentive program that uses merit pay as a means to reward teachers for using best practices and increasing student achievement. It is very difficult to become a coach for this program, as it includes an extremely arduous interview process. Once you become a coach there is a great deal of ongoing training that is necessary. Her goals as a coach align with the goal of the school, which is to increase student achievement in reading comprehension by 10%. There are three other coaches in the building; Jackie works with the teachers in kindergarten through third grade around best practices in literacy. She does this by presenting particular literacy strategies, modeling for teachers and field testing them in the classroom and providing time to help teachers develop plans on how to implement the

new strategy. She regularly holds cluster meetings and supports her teachers through coaching on a daily basis.

### Major Themes Emerging from the Data

Following the review of all data collected during the interview process, six major themes emerged based on the evidence from these findings. Each theme is discussed in this section.

#### *Who, Me, a Literacy Coach?*

The first theme to emerge was the idea that being a literacy coach in Chicago Public Schools is not one of the jobs the majority of them sought. As it was stated in Chapter One, coaching is fairly new to Chicago Public Schools. Within the last ten years coaching has grown and scaled back due to lack of funding. Roughly five years ago, there were up to two literacy coaches in each building, but now there is generally one, if any at all. At the time when literacy coaches began to emerge, many teachers did not have the required credentials it takes to become a coach. Ethan stated that he read an article in the *Chicago Tribune* that reading was expected to be the hottest field in education, and that inspired him to get the required credentials. A few others interviewed went to get a master's degree in Reading just to improve instruction in their classrooms without knowing that they would soon be called upon to be a coach. For example Denise declared,

I realized I just was not fit to teach reading, because my children's reading levels were so varied and I just had basal readers as a resource. So, I went back to school

and got my master's in Reading, just for the sole purpose of being able to understand how to help those readers, and teachers, so I could best meet their needs.

The majority of the coaches interviewed stated that their principal encouraged them to fill the position. For example, Faye stated that her

...principal apparently saw the potential in me working with students in the primary, intermediate and upper grade levels. They actually offered me the position to work side by side with the teachers to help develop the reading program at the school where I worked. So I was really motivated to move to this level by administrators who saw my ability to teach reading.

Faye's statement is parallel to several of the coaches interviewed for this research. Many of the coaches in this study tell the story of their somewhat reluctant leadership where their principal noticed their potential and guided them through the process of becoming a literacy coach. Betty's and Jackie's examples are similar. The both stated that as classroom teachers their respective principals noticed the work they were doing within the classroom and as grade-level chairs and encouraged them to fill the position of the literacy coach.

With the exception of Carole and Helene, none of the coaches had experience working with adult learners prior to becoming a school literacy coach. Many of the coaches had to learn and are still learning the hard way that being a good teacher of literacy does not always translate into being an effective coach. I discuss the challenges

that some of them face later in this chapter.

### *Building Teacher Relationships and Trust*

Trust and relationships was another theme that almost all of the coaches mentioned during the interviews. It is extremely important for coaches to consider the emotions involved in learning and create supportive contexts around the work. Because of prior experiences and the institutional context of Chicago Public Schools, working with the teachers on something as “personal” as the teacher and their classroom can be extremely frustrating if not approached in a proper manner.

An effective coach is aware that relationship building is one of the key factors to helping teachers reach their goals. Faye stated that coaches “should develop a relationship with people. You get a lot more from the teachers when you do.” She continued by saying, “Because when you, like, build that relationship with teachers, the teachers will work so much harder for you.” At Faye’s school she reports that her teachers really want the support and help from her, and they actively seek her help.

Many of the coaches reported that it is important to be a good listener as well as get to know the strengths of each teacher. Helene spoke about getting to know the learning curve of each teacher and not delivering professional development through coaching as a one-size-fits-all approach.

### *Effective Teacher Collaboration*

The idea of teachers being able to close the door and teach as a way of teaching is long gone. The new ideas are that teachers are actually working together to deepen their

understanding and practices in their classrooms. The coaches interviewed in this study shared a common theme around effective teacher collaboration. Some coaches felt they had better collaborative dialogue with their teachers than did other coaches. When the lines of communication are closed there is a lack of trust; it can be difficult for a coach to do his job. For instance, Ethan stated, “I walked into a situation where I was the new guy on a very veteran staff. And that proves to be difficult, because a lot of people look at me as the principal’s tattle-tale, I’m called.” Ethan turned his situation around by working diligently since the beginning of the current school year to win the trust of the teachers.

Jackie spoke in depth during her interview about how one of her successes this year has been ensuring that teachers are provided time for collaboration. She meets with the group every week on specific literacy strategies. This is different than a typical grade-level meeting because she is not the only one presenting information. The teachers as well as the coach are all involved in the learning.

Gail shared one of her successes in our interview: “Moving most of my staff from not wanting to meet in grade-level teams to actually meeting on their own. Having literacy leaders, teacher-leaders who will emerge from the teams, I guess after having those meetings and facilitation modeled for them, they’ve now become advocates for their teams, for those other persons.” She continued, “And they’ll hold one or two extra meetings a week, just to make sure that they connected. And *that’s* cool!”

As a literacy coach, I always told the teachers in the school that I was actually trying to work my way out of the job. Part of the critical function that we hold is to

empower the teachers to become better acquainted with the content and pedagogy of their practice. Jackie described one of her roles: “Actually, we are partners. We are partners, and I am able to empower the other teachers to become teacher-leaders.”

Jackie’s and Gail’s type of collaboration meetings and true partnerships are not typical in some Chicago Public Schools. All of the coaches interviewed were responsible for holding grade-level meetings but the majority felt that more teacher collaboration was necessary.

### *Principal Support*

Principals play a key role in the effectiveness of the literacy coach. Isabel actually exclaimed, “[Principal support] can either make you or break you!” Many of the coaches interviewed seemed content with their current principals, but some told accounts of the lack of principal support.

Alice expressed that this school was very different from another school where she was a coach. At the previous school, Alice felt that she was not supported by the principal. She was regularly pulled from her schedule to substitute for teachers who were absent. She felt that the principal did not value the position and that teachers were a lot more resistant to her coaching.

Denise commented,

I’m sure I speak on behalf of quite a few coaches, another big challenge, and it really hinders us from being effective, is when you and the instructional leader do not see eye to eye. When you’re working with someone as a coach, you’re

responsible for literacy in your building, you're responsible for creating lifelong readers and you're responsible for teachers giving high-quality literacy instruction, and when you don't have the principal on your side, it's a challenge. Even having a principal who wants to be on your side but does not *know* what good literacy instruction looks like. ...Or when that principal doesn't even know the value in a literacy coach. ...Or how to use you in the building to improve instruction, to enhance student learning—probably one of the *biggest* challenges! And when it's hard there, it seems that everything else falls apart, too. So, when you face the challenge of having a principal to support you, and you face the challenge of having the teacher that will support you, then you face the challenge of moving forward in the school. You face the challenge of not being able to set goals and achieve them. It seems that everything falls apart. And I have experienced working with a very resistant principal. It made my job very difficult.

Denise's statement is similar to the others interviewed, and it sets the case for how important it is to have a principal who is supportive of the coach. Fortunately for Denise, she is now in a school where she is a co-creator of the literacy plan with her principal as well as the teachers. She expressed that her principal is also her coach and pushes her to do her best.

Alice's principal is also very supportive. When asked about the support given at her school, Alice stated that her current school is very supportive of her role as a literacy coach. The principal allows her the opportunity to make suggestions as well as gives her

freedom in the directions she needs to take with individual teachers. The principal at this school has also purchased a great deal of the materials needed to implement a balanced literacy program.

*Professional Knowledge of Content and Expertise Working with Teachers*

To understand what the teacher knows and how the teacher learns is another common theme demonstrated through the interviews. In order to extend what the teacher knows, the coach must be well versed in literacy. The majority of coaches interviewed had similar day-to-day tasks, such as Faye's day in the life as a CPS literacy coach. She recounts:

I work side-by-side with teachers. My job encompasses modeling strategies in the classroom, helping teachers identify strategies that work best with students based on their needs. I sit down with teachers to collaborate and plan lessons together. I do classroom observations, and those observations ... basically [serve] as a diagnostic to find out the individual needs for each classroom. I also provide professional development, so that any strategies that teachers need, I am able to demonstrate those strategies in the training. I facilitate grade-level meetings as well. And those are very powerful because we have the opportunity to look at our data to determine what's working, or maybe some of the teachers share some of the strategies they are doing with their student with some of the other teachers who need support. [With all of this support,] we really do have the means necessary to meet the needs of all students. So our day is a bit like the day in the

life of a school teacher.

In my career as a coach, I have my own personal accounts of how glamorous some teachers think our lives are because we do not have our own classroom. As Faye's account suggests, it is an extremely busy and fast-paced job. It is also very demanding and carries a lot of pressure to help teachers perform better. In order to do that, coaches must be able to understand the content as well as understand each teacher and how to differentiate professional development for them.

Nearly every coach in this study spoke about the desire to get to know each of the teachers along with their strengths and challenges through coaching and observation. Carole said, "I like to assess their comfort level. And I've been lucky here, because these teachers are open to just about anything, I know by helping [the] teacher[s] and giving them that freedom, they may try something new—these teachers are pretty good about it."

Betty also followed the theme by stating, "You're going to have different personalities in your school. And by working *with* them, you are going to have to learn to invite the different personalities in. And then it helps to balance your style." This speaks to the coaches making informed decisions on each individual and how to approach each teacher's learning curve.

Denise stated, "When you observe and talk with teachers you are thinking 'What does this teacher need me to be, and what do I have to do to accomplish it?' and 'What are the goals for this teacher?'" By knowing what their needs are, and just having the

knowledge, skills and expertise to address those needs. So, one of the strategies I use often is coaching in the hypothetical. Another strategy is to just *listen* sometimes. You can learn a heck of a lot from listening. You do less talking and listen to teachers. They really have a lot of things to say. You want to coach around that and listen.”

### *Time and Organization*

A common theme among the coaches was the idea of the importance of time and organization. Take into account the amount of time and planning in the following scenario.

*In her role as a literacy coach, Alice developed a balanced literacy implementation plan for her school where she set up ten demonstration classrooms. The teachers at this school volunteered to receive intensive coaching by Alice. In these classrooms she followed an observation cycle where she asked each teacher about a goal he or she would like to work on before an observation, and then objectively record what the teacher is saying/doing and what the students are saying/doing. After the observation, she would look over her data, think of a plan and have a debrief session with the teachers.*

*Alice’s goals for working with the teachers are for them to feel confident in implementing new practices. She would also like for the teachers to obtain an in-depth understanding of balanced literacy practices. She has seen many positive results in several of the district literacy assessments within her time at this school and feels proud of the work she has accomplished with the teachers. She hopes to attain this goal by*

*working one on one with teachers and goal setting with teachers.*

To be an effective literacy coach, preparation and planning are essential characteristics for survival. In fact, one challenge many of the interviewed coaches felt was that they actually needed more time. Isabel stated, “[In order to do all of the things I need to accomplish,] there needs to be two of me.”

#### Coaching Next Steps: Focus Group Discussion

After the initial interviews had taken place and the data were analyzed, I conducted a focus group to uncover further information about the life of a literacy coach in Chicago Public Schools. Six of the ten coaches were able to attend.

As the moderator, I asked the group to comment on what it is like to be a coach when you are not really an administrator and you are not really a classroom teacher. Alice said, “It’s lonely sometimes, like you’re the only person in the school, and you have to keep a lot of secrets. You have to keep secrets from two different sides—the principal trusts you to keep administrative secrets, and the teachers trust you to keep secrets from the administration.”

Helene then added, “Exactly! And principals expect you to inform them of what’s happening or not happening, but it’s hard because sometimes you have to build trust. But you have to weigh things out because you have to keep in mind what your role is. You are also not there to be anybody’s friend or their secret keeper.”

Jackie chimed in to add that she sometimes likes being the “middle man” because she has built a great deal of trust from both parties. Everyone in the group agreed that

they like their position, but Alice added that when you have a lot of people crying to you about different things, you have to be there to listen to them. On the other hand, when coaches are seeking someone to commiserate with, they lack a type of built-in support system and have nobody in which to confide.

Another topic seemed to emerge from the previous topic. The coaches started to ask each other whether they had some resistant teachers in their school. They were tapping into each other's knowledge base as to how to work more effectively with those types of teachers. Isabel stated, "Teachers can sometimes be as stubborn as the students, but working with some of these adults is worse!" Everyone agreed. Ethan added that what is worse is when teachers are passive-aggressive. He explained how frustrating it is to spend large amounts of time and make very detailed plans with teachers without the plans being implemented.

As the moderator I wanted to expand on the topic of professional development in our one-on-one interviews. I asked the group the following question: "In our one-on-one interviews, many of you commented on how you support teachers. I was wondering, what do you feel is needed to support you in your growth as a literacy coach?" Many of the coaches began to talk with excitement all at once. Alice stated, "I think it is important that we attend conferences so that we can keep ourselves abreast of the latest trends in literacy education. I also think that we need to meet regularly in groups with other literacy coaches because we can learn so much from each other."

Ethan added, "Last year we had coaching forums that I thought were really

beneficial because we had a chance to vent but we also learned about strategies to become better at coaching.”

In addition, Betty commented on the fact that it was not helpful to be grouped in with the teachers during literacy professional development because the coaches received that training as part of the master’s program. She agreed that having coaching forums and attending conferences were ideal forms of professional development for coaches.

I asked the coaches if they feel that CPS provides enough support around coaching. Even though CPS provides forums for some of the coaches, there is not a great deal of support for all coaches. The support depends on how each coach is funded. Many of the coaches explained that they did feel supported by their principal but they did not necessarily feel supported by CPS in general.

### Conclusion

Interviewing the literacy coaches provided a wealth of information on what it is like to be a coach in the Chicago Public Schools. Many of them believe that it is not an easy task and that there is a great deal of pressure but not a lot of support in place to help them grow as professionals. Each of the coaches interviewed has a wealth of knowledge on literacy coaching, and I was grateful to have them share their stories.

## CHAPTER FIVE: IMPLICATIONS, RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSION

*The power of our mentors is not necessarily in the models of good teaching they gave us, models that may turn out to have little to do with who we are as teachers. Their power is in their capacity to awaken a truth within us, a truth we can reclaim years later by recalling their impact on our lives. If we discovered a teacher's heart in ourselves by meeting a great teacher, recalling that meeting may help us take heart in teaching once more.*

—Parker Palmer

Whenever I read Palmer's words, I picture many of the teachers, coaches and principals I had the pleasure of working with over the years. I cannot quantify the impact many of them have made on my life and my career. Each person I came in contact with has a unique gift in teaching. I believe it is the job of a coach, as Palmer says to awaken a truth within every teacher. Each person serves as a guide, or someone to learn from in every experience—even the negative experiences. The significance of the findings in this research has broad implications for district leadership, administrators, coaches as well as teachers. In this final chapter I seek to highlight my personal journey through this research process and discuss what is necessary for the next legacy of literacy coaches.

### Rationale

This phenomenological qualitative study was completed to better understand the role of literacy coaches as well as to discuss the potential implications for the more appropriate use of coaches within schools. Coaching has the potential to be one of the

most effective ways to help shift the way we teach in our schools. Many teachers require job-embedded professional development in order for substantive change to occur. Fullan (2005) suggests, “Changing school cultures is difficult but not impossible. Some of this can be done through capacity-building training that fosters and embeds professional learning communities” (p. 60). The term “job-embedded” refers to a coach working consistently with the teachers on that staff, not an outside professional developer. They are observing, modeling, talking about the work, planning and setting goals. When coaches first came into existence in schools, many believed it was their job to point out all of the faults they observed in the classrooms. This type of approach left a bad taste in the mouth of principals in addition to alienating many teachers.

As coaching becomes more prevalent, additional information is becoming available in regards to being an effective coach. Coaching as a form of professional development is becoming widespread. The traditional one-shot approach to professional development is simply not an effective method of practice on Teacher Institute days. That type of professional development does not empower teachers with usable information because there is rarely any goal setting or follow-up that takes place after the presentation of information.

### Research Questions

In this dissertation I explore the experiences of being in the shoes of an in-school literacy coach from the perspectives of a variety of practitioners. The primary research question was, “What are the coaches’ philosophies and strategies for working with

teachers in Chicago Public Schools?” Some related questions are:

- How do personal experiences and institutional contexts shape and influence the way these coaches engage teachers?
- In what ways can the lessons derived from the work of these coaches inform the practices and pedagogy of the teachers in Chicago Public Schools?

### Summary of Findings

The paradigm shift from one adult teaching mode to another in any particular school district holds the potential to bring about positive change and can be achieved through job-embedded literacy coaching. The following is a summary of the six major themes that emerged through this research.

The first theme to emerge was the sense that most of the coaches began as reluctant leaders. They were recommended into the position by a principal or another mentor. Some coaches did not know the implications and the difficulties working with resistant teachers before they began their role.

This theme of reluctant leadership provides some answers to the secondary research question, “How do personal experiences and institutional contexts shape and influence the way these coaches engage teachers?” All of the coaches interviewed had experience working in CPS classrooms, and many of them stated that it helped them relate to the teachers better. The coaches were able keep in mind what it is like to be a teacher in Chicago Public Schools, which assists in shaping and influencing teachers.

Personal experience helps engage teachers from an institutional context because many teachers are leery of outsiders who have never taught within the system and sometimes find it hard to take advice from people who are outside of the system.

Building trust and relationships with teachers and administrators was another theme that almost all of the coaches mentioned during the interviews. It is highly important for coaches to consider the emotions involved in learning and create supportive contexts around the work. While trust is a precursor to reshaping the culture of a school, alone it will not change teaching and learning (Killion, 2010).

The theme of building teacher relationships and trust helps to answer all three research questions, including the primary research question, “What are the coaches’ philosophies and strategies for working with teachers in Chicago Public Schools?” Building relationships and trust was one of the most common strategies the coaches utilized to work with teachers. Without trust, the coaches felt they would not be as productive in helping teachers improve classroom instruction. This theme also helps to answer the third research question regarding lessons derived to inform teacher practices. The theme of building relationships and trust serves as a reminder that it does not matter how well versed one is in the content; if trust is missing, teachers will not feel comfortable implementing new strategies with the coach.

The coaches interviewed in this study voiced a common theme around effective teacher collaboration. Some coaches felt they had a more collaborative dialogue with their teachers than did other coaches. The connectivity of teachers and the sharing of

ideas in teams seemed to be one of the common themes throughout. It is necessary to establish the culture and climate and work toward common goals and a common understanding. The dialogue is important for teachers to become more self-reflective of their own practice.

The theme of effective teacher collaboration answers all three research questions. Providing time for teachers to collaborate is one of the effective strategies these coaches used to work with teachers. It also serves as a lesson for principals and district leaders to ensure that coaches and teachers are provided the necessary time to work with each other.

Principals play a key role in the effectiveness of the literacy coach. This theme was discussed by many of the coaches who felt that without the proper principal support, their work could not be accomplished effectively.

Principal support was a theme that was interwoven throughout the interviews. Many of the participants felt that the support of the principal has a direct impact in the success of the coaching program. This theme also responds to all three research questions. In particular, it speaks to how important the institutional context is in shaping the way the coaches influence teachers.

To understand what the teacher knows and how the teacher learns was another common theme demonstrated through the interviews. In order to supplement what the teacher already knows, the coach must be well versed in literacy. Ensuring that coaches establish professional knowledge of the content as well as understanding how teachers learn were important characteristics that emerged through the data gathered in this

research.

This theme addresses all three research questions. Understanding the content and being able to provide professional development and answer teachers' questions is an important strategy in working with teachers. Personal experiences have also played a role and influence the way many coaches work with teachers. Being aware of the content as well as understanding the nuances of working with adults is something most of these coaches had to learn while on the job, and this understanding continues to develop as they work with teachers.

The final theme among the coaches involved was the idea of the importance of time and organization. Preparation and planning are essential characteristics for survival to be an effective literacy coach.

Time and organization is also a theme that addresses all three of my research questions. The participants learned through experience that coaching requires just as much planning and preparation as teaching. It also answers the third research question by serving as a reminder of the importance of being well prepared when working with teachers.

### Implications

This dissertation provides potential implications on three major ways in which this research can be used. First, it contributes to the knowledge base of the field of coaching by providing detailed, descriptive data on coaches and how a number of them are used in Chicago Public Schools. Chapter Two of this study presents a basis of the

background, the theories, the challenges and the qualities that make a literacy coach successful in his craft. Second, this research offers the participating school district as well as other districts a basic foundation for evaluating their coaching program. The data gathered during this study will help guide district- and school-level administrators hire as well as guide the direction of the coaches in their schools. An effective coach in a school could also serve as a principal's critical friend or thought partner. Third, it will assist principals and district-level staff in determining how to provide the best possible professional development needed for the coaches in their schools. It is imperative to have a support structure in place for coaches because they, too, are in need professional learning.

### Recommendations

When schools or districts lack a solid infrastructure for their coaching program, they depend too heavily on chance for results. The summary of the results from the experiences of these participants exemplifies the complexity of undertaking the instructional coaching process. These recommendations stem from the discussions brought forth from the focus group, one-on-one interviews and literacy coaching research and my own professional experience. Below are the recommendations that are necessary to ensure the effectiveness and sustainability of any literacy coaching program.

#### *Clarity of Roles*

A noted gap in much of the coaching literature is the variation between the role and function of a coach. The time has come for school districts to examine how schools

can provide context-specific support that builds in flexibility and opportunities for teachers to participate in coaching that supports both *ways of doing* as well as *ways of being*. The proper use of people, including coaches in their building, should not be left to interpretation. When the role of the coach is not clear and properly articulated, many coaches are left completing administrative tasks or being used inefficiently. I have seen firsthand how some coaches have been used as assistant principals or co-administrators. The instructional leadership work of coaches needs to be clearly separated from the evaluation work of administrators (Katzenmeyer & Moller, 2001).

#### *Coach Preparation*

Many of the participants interviewed basically underwent on-the-job training to become a coach. One recommendation I suggest is for university programs or school districts to include an internship program for coaches. Currently the only type of internship for literacy coaches is embedded in the master's program and includes administering different types of reading assessments and working with students who are struggling under the supervision of a professor. Supervision in working with teachers is quite a different state of affairs. It is necessary that coaches in training learn through practical applications using case studies as well as actual experiences with the nuances of adult education. Coaches must be able to respect teachers' learning curves. When districts or universities provide authentic leadership and socialization experiences with coaches, they demonstrate the value of coaching and its requirements, and as a result talented educators seek the literacy coach position. This internship might also incorporate training

on inclusion, diversity and different types of adult learners. In considering the characteristics of the role of a coach, Sweeny (2007) contends that a prerequisite for school-based coaches is a deep understanding of the research around high-quality instruction. They are informal leaders in their schools and, in the end, are measured by how well they have influenced both teacher and student learning (p. 39).

### *Learning to Work with Adults*

Another recommendation is to have coaches in training practice working with adults. Even though the nuances of working with adults and students can be quite different, in actuality, adults learn in a very similar fashion to children. Lyons and Pinnell (2001) suggest, “Adults, like children, bring their knowledge, beliefs, perceptions, and assumptions to new experiences and construct new knowledge or refine previous understanding to gain meaning.” It is our job as instructional coaches to work with teachers on making meaning and helping them to problem solve.

Discovering the thinking of the teachers is the coach’s essential resource. As stated earlier, it is important that coaches respect the learning curve of each teacher. It is equally important to ensure that all learning is relevant to the work of the teachers. Many teachers may be reluctant to learn a new strategy when they do not believe it can work with their student population. Working with adult learners can be practiced by reading case studies, observing and discussing live coaching or videos of coaching in action, and role-playing coaching scenarios.

### *Ongoing Learning for Coaches*

Coaches, like teachers and administrators, should also participate in ongoing learning. As stated in Chapter Two, being a coach can be considerably isolating. Having coaches participate in monthly or bimonthly forums on both the content involved as well as the process of literacy coaching can be a determining factor in coaching effectiveness.

Topics in these forums could vary based on the needs of the coaches involved as well as the district. One topic might include exposure on how to deal with resistance and navigate change. Change is a complicated process that does not happen in isolation or by accident. Rather, it requires conscious effort made over long periods of time. Le Fevre and Richardson (2002) highlight this idea, noting that “deep reform in teaching practice requires a considerable period of time and that the participants require different but continuing forms of support throughout the process” (p. 36). When implemented successfully, coaching can provide a continuing form of support for teachers as they apply new strategies and practices in their classrooms.

Another topic for ongoing learning would be to look at successful coaching models in Chicago and outside of Chicago. The culture of Chicago Public Schools can also be isolating. It is important for our coaches to spend a considerable amount of time studying other successful models of how districts utilize coaches.

During coaching forums it is important that time is provided for coaches to discuss the successes and issues they face in their role. Because their role is so isolating, they need opportunities to collaborate with other coaches who will help to solve problems

they may face in their schools.

Goal setting and making professional development meaningful for teachers by using humor, changing the pace and using active engagements are all techniques that could also be built upon in the professional development of coaches. By incorporating these topics, the coaches will have a better impact on improving teacher quality, which in turn leads to increased student achievement.

### *Principal Support*

The statements derived from the participants in this study make the case for how important it is to have a principal who is supportive of the literacy coach. I advise district leadership to provide principals with clear-cut job descriptions as well as professional development as to how to utilize and collaborate with the coaches in their building.

McCombs and Marsh (2009) suggest,

School administrators play a pivotal role in enabling coaches to work effectively in their schools. As such, leaders should continue to provide education and training for administrators not only on the proper role of the coach, but also on literacy more broadly, to build a common understanding about coaching as well as literacy goals, basic principles and best practices.

Without the principal's training and support, coaches are unable to demonstrate expertise in their interactions with teachers and principals. Likewise, principals are unable to properly support their coaches.

### *Accountability for Coaches*

With No Child Left Behind, the idea of accountability is on the forefront of all education personnel and community stakeholders. Because coaching is relatively new in many districts, a system of holding coaches accountable has generally fallen short in many circumstances. Ideally, coaches would have clear guidelines of effectiveness such as Charlotte Danielson's framework of professional standards for instructional coaches or the International Reading Association's description of literacy coaches. It is important for coaches to be observed as well as be coached by someone in the field such as a lead coach. The role of a lead coach is important because she has been specifically trained to work with coaches. Having someone other than the principal to impartially observe the coaches and provide feedback is essential. This process can help them grow and develop to better implement new strategies, and it can be one of the best ways to improve the coaching program.

### *Involvement in Professional Organizations*

Coaches, like administrators and teachers, should be members of and become involved in professional organizations. It is through these organizations that educators stay abreast of the latest research in the field. It is also an excellent way to network and share ideas among educators across districts. The National Staff Development Council and the International Reading Association as well as its state and local chapters have great publications that help coaches increase and refine their knowledge and proficiency of coaching. Associating with the people and participating in the events these

organizations provide assist in keeping a coach grounded in the research of best practices in the field of coaching.

### Final Thoughts

In concluding my analysis of ten literacy coaches in Chicago Public Schools, I recognize that this research represents a small example of a larger population. As such, I know my findings are not inclusive of all literacy coaches around the country. However, this study will inform district administrators, principals, coaches and teachers on the effectiveness of literacy coaches and how to utilize and support them in bearing collective responsibility for student learning. Moreover, it allows the reader to be aware of the experiences, successes and challenges the literacy coaches' experience in Chicago Public Schools and other districts around the country.

I am grateful for the time and attention that was given to me by the literacy coaches in this study. I also appreciate that they found time to answer my questions when I called for clarification about a response. As a former in-school literacy coach I share many of the coaches' successes and concerns. This study has given me insight into the need to provide the appropriate amount of ongoing support for coaches in Chicago Public Schools and beyond. The role of a literacy coach is never easy, and it requires a great deal of content knowledge, interpersonal skills, reflection and the wherewithal to be the best in the world at getting things done. The coaches interviewed can identify one or more people in their lives who influenced them and helped them become the coach they

are today. It is my hope that in the future these coaches serve as mentors to the entire learning community in which they serve.

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## Appendix A

Table 2: Overview of Shanklin’s and Danielson’s Framework

Nancy Shanklin’s Characteristics of Effective Literacy Coaches	Charlotte Danielson’s Framework for Instructional Coaches
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Involves a collaborative dialogue for teachers of all levels of knowledge and experience</li> <li>2. Facilitates development of a school vision about literacy that is site-based and links to district goals</li> <li>3. Is characterized by data-oriented student and teacher learning</li> <li>4. Is a form of ongoing-job-embedded professional learning that increases teacher capacity to meet students’ needs</li> <li>5. Involves classroom observations that are cyclical and that build knowledge over time</li> <li>6. Is supportive rather than evaluative</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Planning and Preparation               <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Demonstrating knowledge of current trends in specialty area and professional development</li> <li>b. Demonstrating knowledge of the school’s program and levels of teacher skill in delivering that program</li> <li>c. Establishing goals for the instructional support program appropriate to the setting and the teachers served</li> <li>d. Demonstrating knowledge of resources, both within and beyond the school and district</li> <li>e. Planning the instructional support program, integrated with the overall school program</li> <li>f. Developing a plan to evaluate the instructional support program</li> </ol> </li> <li>2. The Environment               <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Creating an environment of trust and respect</li> <li>b. Establishing a culture for ongoing instructional improvement</li> <li>c. Establishing clear procedures for teachers to gain access to instructional support</li> <li>d. Establishing and maintaining norms of behavior for professional interactions</li> <li>e. Organizing physical space for workshops or training</li> </ol> </li> </ol>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>3. Delivery of Service<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>a. Collaborating with teachers in the design of instructional units and lessons</li><li>b. Engaging teachers in learning new instructional skills</li><li>c. Sharing expertise with staff</li><li>d. Locating resources for teachers to support instructional improvement</li><li>e. Demonstrating flexibility and responsiveness</li></ul></li><li>4. Professional Responsibilities<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>a. Reflecting on practice</li><li>b. Preparing and submitting budgets and reports</li><li>c. Coordinating work with other instructional specialists</li><li>d. Participating in a professional community</li><li>e. Engaging in professional development</li><li>f. Showing professionalism, including integrity and confidentiality</li></ul></li></ul>
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Appendix B

Literacy Coach Demographics Survey

1. Name\_\_\_\_\_
2. Age\_\_\_\_\_
3. Number of years as a teacher\_\_\_\_\_
4. Number of years as a literacy coach\_\_\_\_\_
5. Degrees held\_\_\_\_\_
6. Your ethnicity\_\_\_\_\_
7. Name of current school\_\_\_\_\_
8. Number of students\_\_\_\_\_
9. Demographics of students (ethnicity/% free reduced lunch\_\_\_\_\_
10. Grade levels of teachers with which you currently work\_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix C

### Literacy Coach Interview Questions

1. Please give me a brief introduction of who you are, how many years have you been a teacher and where.
2. How and why did you become a literacy coach?
3. Can you please describe the literacy coaching program at your school?
4. What are some of the goals of the literacy coaching program at your school?
5. What does \_\_\_\_school hope to accomplish through literacy coaching?
6. What are some of the critical functions you fulfill at \_\_\_\_\_school?
7. How was your literacy coaching role communicated to the faculty?
8. How has the faculty responded to your presence?
9. What are some of your philosophies and strategies for working with teachers in your school?
10. How do personal experiences and institutional contexts shape and influence the way you engage teachers?
11. Does the culture of the school play a role in the work you do with teachers?
12. Tell me about some of the challenges you face in your role as a literacy coach.
13. Tell me about some of your successes you've had as a literacy coach.
14. Is there anything I have not asked that you feel is important?

## Appendix D

### Focus Group Questions

1. Can any of you describe what it is like to be a coach when you are not really an administrator and you are not really a classroom teacher?
2. In our one-on-one interviews, many of you commented on how you support teachers. I was wondering, what do you feel is needed to support you in your growth as a literacy coach?

Appendix E

Table 3: List of Pseudonyms

Participant Code	Corresponding Pseudonym
A	Alice
B	Betty
C	Carole
D	Denise
E	Ethan
F	Faye
G	Gail
H	Helene
I	Isabel
J	Jackie

Appendix F

Table 4: Demographic Characteristics of Coaches

<b>Participant Code</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Ethnicity</b>
A	F	30	C
B	F	42	AA
C	F	43	C
D	F	40	AA
E	M	55	C
F	F	40	AA
G	F	40	C
H	F	49	H
I	F	43	AA
J	F	39	AA

AA = African American, C = Caucasian, H = Hispanic.

Appendix G

Table 5: Professional Experience of Coaches

Participant Code	Years as a Literacy Coach	Years as a Teacher	Education	National Board Certified Teacher
A	3	5	B.S., M.Ed.	Yes
B	5	9	B.S., M.Ed.	No
C	5	13	B.S., M.Ed., M.Ed.	No
D	4	9	B.S., M.Ed.	Yes
E	3	12	B.S., M.Ed.	No
F	8	5	B.S., M.Ed.	No
G	8	11	B.S., M.Ed., M.Ed.	No
H	9	13	B.S., M.Ed.	No
I	3	11	B.S., M.Ed., M.Ed.	No
J	4	9	B.S., M.Ed.	No

Appendix H

Table 6: Characteristics of Coaches' School

Participant Code	Coaching Assignment	School Characteristics
A	Kindergarten–8th	800 students 75% Hispanic, 25% African American 90% free/reduced lunch
B	Kindergarten–8th	580 students 100% African American 95% free/reduced lunch
C	Kindergarten–8th	400 students 99% African American, 1% Hispanic 100% free/reduced lunch
D	Kindergarten–8th	370 students 100% African American 100% free/reduced lunch
E	Kindergarten–5th	540 students 33% African American, 33% Caucasian, 33% Hispanic 92% free/reduced lunch
F	Kindergarten–5th	325 students 100% African American 95% free/reduced lunch
G	Kindergarten–8th	838 students 84.8% Hispanic, 15.0% African American, 1% Caucasian 99% free/reduced lunch
H	Kindergarten–5th	1,600 students 100% African American 85% free/reduced lunch
I	Kindergarten–8th	500 students 100% African American 98% free/reduced lunch
J	Kindergarten–3rd	700 students 100% African American 97% free/reduced lunch

Chicago Public Schools (2009).

## Appendix I

### Example Transcript from Interviews

#### *Transcription of Interview with Alice*

Interviewer: Ok, if you would, please give me a brief introduction of who you are, state your name, and how many years have you been a teacher, and where.

Alice: I am Alice Jones. I've worked in Chicago Public Schools for eight years. I started in 2002 as a Teach for America Core member at Sunfair Academy, in the city's West Side, and then I was a 4th and 5th grade teacher there. And then I taught 3rd grade for like 2½ years at Colton Academy on the South Side. And then for 1½ years, I was a literacy coach at Devale Elementary School. And now I'm at Mentor Elementary School, and I'm a literacy coach, and this is the beginning of my second year at Mentor.

Interviewer: Ok, how and why did you become a literacy coach?

Alice: I think that, that I really love reading, and I love teaching reading, but I really believe that (name) came to me, and that's why... My grandfather was a professor of reading at Martin Luther University, and he would send me all kinds of stuff. And I just knew I wanted to be a teacher, but I love teaching reading. And when, I guess, I feel like it's what I should do, and what I should always do, because as I got my master's at DePaul, I just wanted to use it. I worked hard for it, and I feel like I could benefit, you know, students, and I like working with other teachers.

Interviewer: So, you mentioned you went to DePaul. How well do you think, how did that prepare you for your role?

(2:26) Alice: I think DePaul prepared me really well. I'm really happy with the education I received there. I think that practicum experience, and the assessment practicum, the diagnostic practicum, they prepared me to work with small groups of students, and I have a really, I think, solid knowledge base of problem solving and helping struggling readers in a school. Because from a reading specialist standpoint, I was very prepared, and the program was for reading specialists. Now, I took one course on being a reading specialist, the role of a reading specialist, as far as that's called, as well as assessment courses, you know, and those about reading. And that catches into the literacy coach role, which is different from the role of a reading specialist. So, but I think that I got more professional development on being a literacy coach through practice. The first school, where I was a literacy coach, they had America's Choice, and they gave me a lot of training, and plus, at that time the Office of Literacy had more training, and the area office was giving more training than they currently are, and I was reading a lot of books. And I did not rely fully

on other people to communicate my role as a literacy coach. Because I felt very prepared as, for the role of reading specialist, which in the IRA Position Statement they do state that a reading specialist should oversee the work of literacy coaches, due to the fact that literacy coaches might not necessarily have their Reading Specialist Certification, but I do.

Interviewer: That was one thing I was going to have you elaborate on, is the difference between a literacy coach and a reading specialist.

Alice: Ok, traditionally a reading specialist works with a group of students, and kind of advocates for their needs, probably follows the RTI model or will use problem solving. A literacy coach will meet with those groups of kids or co-teach with teachers in classrooms, and the reading specialist role is a lot more of working with students and coaching the teachers. And there is some overlap, I'm not gonna say there is no overlap in a clear definition, but a literacy coach doesn't necessarily work with students. We're mostly coaching teachers, so that teachers can develop and better help their students' success. As a literacy coach, you can't work with every student in the whole school. We want to make sure everybody in the whole school is a good reading teacher through coaching them.

Interviewer: Good. So, speaking of literacy coaching, what are... can you describe the literacy coaching program at your school?

(6:08) Alice: Well, currently, I'll tell what it was last year, and what we made it this year. last year, I was new to this school, and I wrote a literacy plan for the school, where I was setting up ten general station classrooms, because the principal wanted all balanced literacy practices, which is directed by a new thing called, if she really does want to provide balanced literacy, and what she means by balanced literacy are components of reading and writing workshops, so we actually volunteered, because in my previous experience as a literacy coach at Devale Elementary School, I had some resistance to balanced literacy practice, because people were kind of "Do this or leave." But from here, I advised the principal and the other teachers that's probably not the best way to develop. You want to have the most buy-in from everyone. What the principal wants is, you know, a coach that is suitable to meet all the needs of the students and to help support you, especially until it's... We had to ask for volunteers, more than ten people signed up, but I knew that already, that I was gonna split myself in two. That I was gonna have to find one coach at a K-6 school. That I would have to have an A week and a B week, and have two different schedules, and last year I focused my coaching on just ten teachers, and I did them all year. It doesn't mean I ignored the rest of the staff, but they just did not get as intensive of coaching or professional development as those ten teachers who ultimately got to the demonstration classes. So, with them, I followed Observation Reading Cycle, something that I designed in my role as a core member advisor with Teach for America,

and I would come into the room, and I would write down very specific notes, word-for-word, what the teacher's doing, what the teacher's saying, what the students are doing and saying, and then we try to look for trends and I kind of put you on wondering, then there's a debrief conversation, and I'll initially schedule between the teacher and I. And then we come up with a goal, so the next action, what are you gonna do to try to improve your practice? There are some recommendations that I may have that may work, and we'll just talk through it and set a goal for the next observation. So, that's how it works.

(9:06) Interviewer: And is that still continuing?

Alice: This year, the goal within the ten demonstration classes this year is to allow me to focus on primary, 'cause it's just so happened that all it was all 3rd through 6th grade teachers who signed up. So, there is a lot of independence right now in 3 through 6. The teachers feel very confident in reading and writing workshops practices, for the most part, because so many teachers—ten teachers out of like fifteen—were coached very closely on this, so if someone needs help with something, and I'm not around the 3 through 6 area in the building, there are plenty of other people to ask, and they're at least one demonstration teacher on every grade-level team who can offer support and advice for their meeting that week. And this year, since the principal wants everyone to... and last year it wasn't everyone had to implement balanced literacy, it was this group that had to implement it with high-level support, while everyone else got professional development about it, and could try things out at their own research. Well, and this year, it's more teaching, but my coaching is first semester is, first quarter is kindergarten and first grade teachers, second quarter is second and third grade teachers, third quarter is fourth and fifth grade teachers, and fourth quarter is sixth grade teachers. And I'm facilitating observations, debriefing in that cycle, with everyone on staff. But I'm starting with primary, because they need the most support from me. And they got a lot of PD, but they never tried it, and a lot of them, and we gave a lot of surveys, which indicated that a lot of them are saying, you know, I feel so much more confident, and we would like to do this more, and like at the observation debrief, they're like, well, because this year was successful, because in my debriefs with them, I'm not coming from a judging standpoint. I'm coming from a you're an amazing teacher, because you're stepping up and are trying things that you might not be comfortable with, but look at the great work that your students are doing," and I get a lot of comments like, I didn't know I was doing so much right, and I said yah, keep doing it. And then, if you come in from that point, it makes it easier for me to get them to a coaching point, like a teaching point, because they're already feeling really comfortable with me, and they already feel really confident, and I can then say, you know, here's this one small thing that I think you could use to refine as a good thing that you are doing, and... I've told them they only need to implement what they can handle. And sometimes other teachers are, you know, are willing to try everything. And some of them do find success, and take it higher, and some teachers are like you're making us work five days a week and you're making us do reading and writing workshops? Right. So they're like, I don't know why I'm still doing it three days

a week, but then they jump on the bandwagon. And right now, there are high levels of implementation across the whole school, and it happened really fast, and I would walk by, and I think it all had to do with coming from this standpoint of; we're not making anyone do anything. We're going through a reflective process, where we're looking at our teaching practice and making sure that we're using instructional structures that help us give great instruction, and also, there's that professional development that ensure all the teachers have some knowledge base, a foundation of reading. I tell a lot of teachers, you know, go get your reading master's, and don't be surprised at what you already know from all the professional development and reading, and journal articles, and watching special videos, and going through the Observation Reading Cycle, the reading process, the things that you already know a lot about what it takes to teach reading. So, be happy about that.

Interviewer: That's fantastic! It sounds like you have some really good things going on here. Now, what are some of the goals of your literacy coaching program? Not necessarily the program, but what are some of the goals you hope to accomplish...?

(14:15) Alice: Like the literacy plan? (Yah.) I want the teachers to feel confident implementing these practices, I guess there's three things, really. The first thing is confidence. The other thing is I want the teachers to have an in-depth understanding of balanced literacy practices. And, so, if I talk to them about interactive writing, or shared reading, or what a good lesson looks like, or what good content looks like in the writing workshop, they should give me a good... I want them to have some kind of pedagogical knowledge, I guess. I want them to have strong knowledge-speak of literacy practices and understanding. Then, I want them to feel confident that they do know what they know. So, I want them to have high self-efficacy. I want them to know that they know a lot. And then, I want their confidence to impact implementation. And a lot of teachers do say, you know, the reason I implement this practice more frequently than other practices is because I feel more confident, and I feel like I know what I am doing. So, if I can strengthen their knowledge base, use the observation and do professional development, and use the Observation Debrief Cycle to help me increase their confidence and make them feel that they know what they are doing, and that, you know, and offer them points that they can use. I know implementation will go up and then ultimately impact the students.

(15:58) Interviewer: Have you see results in anything thus far?

Alice: Yes, actually, I did get data (echoing as if walking away became inaudible). (Long pause)

Interviewer: Let me press pause.

Alice: I know that it's in here. (pause) Ok, I have the writing quarters. I have 6th grade narratives. We have more than 80% of the students "meeting" in the 6th grade narratives, which anyone knows that's a good deal. (pause)

Interviewer: Well, that's ok. (laugh) Don't worry about it. But you know that you focused on writing and...

Alice: ...Well there is progress from last year. I know, ok, 5th grade and 3rd grade writing and 6th grade writing were all better than, and I do have data on this. They were all significantly better than the last time writing was tested at that grade level.

(18:28) Interviewer: That's great.

Alice: So, I don't think 3rd grade had ever been tested before.

Interviewer: And what program are you using?

Alice: Uh, Writing Workshop, Lucy Calkins. But we're using Lucy Calkins, and Thornes, and Ralph Fletcher. (Right.) And some teachers are writing already, the demonstration classroom teachers are infusing the work of more people. (Perfect.) But reading, our reading, went from 64 meeting or exceeding to 69 meeting or exceeding percent, which is ok. (What's the 3rd grade percentage?) Third grade went down. And I tried to look at implementation, and implementation was not as high, and I'm sure we went through the debrief cycle. I'm sure it's how many teachers' implementation was not very strong in that grade. And then, in 4th grade, it stayed the same. Once again, they struggled with implementation. Then teams where, 5th and 6th grade were the those teachers, and I'm excited for this year, because you know, changing from a more traditional curriculum to a reading and writing workshop was really hard for a lot of the teachers, and a lot of the teachers were a little uncomfortable... It was an excited uncomfortable, I think, they want to learn, like you know, they questioned me. And they wanted answers about things a lot, which I guess should be that they really wanted to learn. But in 5th grade, implementation was a lot stronger, and they went from 64% meeting or exceeding to 72% meeting or exceeding. (Wow.) Implementation was its strongest in 6th grade. All four 6th grade teachers decided to be classroom demonstration teachers, and based on my observation, I would rate their implementation as high. They have levels of collaboration as well. The 3rd grade teachers struggle with collaboration; they all have these underlying issues that are affecting the data. In 6th grade, they do not have these issues, and they went from 64 to 74. (Oh my gosh.) And they had 84% in reading and writing, it was around 70 in reading and writing for 3rd grade, and up in 5th grade, I don't remember off the top of my head. But all members were above 50 meeting or exceeding, and in grades who were protected in previous years, like three years ago, the numbers were like 20 and more percent higher than they were before the writing

workshop came out. (That's great.) So it was really good. I can't remember, but it was, I was hired then.

Interviewer: That's great, that's fantastic. OK, what does Mentor hope to accomplish through literacy coaching, as a school?

(22:20) Alice: I think my principal hopes the same thing; it's the goals that we were talking about before. The teachers want to learn, and I really am fortunate in that everyone is really welcoming and open and collaborative. I really feel humbled, and we don't say anything is perfect. But for the most part, the staff is very collaborative. It's like your question...

Interviewer: What do you, what does Mentor school hope to accomplish through literacy coaching?

Alice...through literacy coaching... Increase teachers' confidence through these practices. And then increase implementation. And then have literacy increase student achievement.

Interviewer: The same as your personal goals, so that's great. (Yah.) The school goals are lined up with your goals, personal goals.

Alice: Yes, but I'm working, I'm fortunate that I'm working at a school where my philosophy for literacy instruction is aligned, which some people don't have that.

(23:51) Interviewer: Yep, that's true. OK, what are some of the critical functions you fulfill at this school?

Alice: OK, functions... So,

Interviewer: Like what do you do? What are some of the things that you really have to do, and you know, really feel are benefiting your teachers from a year ago?

Alice: OK, everything. Again, I'm really fortunate because, like I, this school doesn't hyper direct my day and my schedule is really organized, and it... I'm fortunate in that I don't get pulled to sub. And we have one duty. And I've never really been told to do something that isn't within the goal of being a reading specialist or a literacy coach. Never. I've never been told anything. So, this is what I do all day. I have grade-level meetings with teachers every other week. We either look at instructional practices, have something to learn—that content knowledge that I've been talking about earlier, and then that's ongoing growth of content knowledge for the teachers, because so many teachers

need that. So everything is ongoing. We do book studies of the two day (inaudible), and this is like our core check that we study, and there are other professional development that I copy. Again, we analyze data at the meetings. We are fortunate, once again, in that the principal has good direction, and she listens to me, and I thought we should have an assessment, a reading assessment, and so we have STAR tests for 3 through 6, and DIBELS for K through 2. We have data; we analyze data in grade-level meetings. Oh, I model lessons in classrooms. I do believe that in terms of modeling, there are different ways I can go about it. For something like guided reading, I think it's totally OK for me to come in and do one lesson, and be prepared for it. But for writing workshop, I do really feel like they benefit from me coming in and modeling a unit, one of the Lucy Calkins units, to study. Which is like fifteen lessons in its entirety. Once again, it helps to build my credibility as a teacher, 'cause as a newcomer, I have to build my credibility. People think I've never been a teacher, ever. People have really weird notions about where I came from, and what I do or what I do, or don't understand about children. So, they like to talk to me like I don't know certain things, but once that helps to build credibility, I guess, when I teach, to spend clear time in the classroom. And then the teachers get to see a unit in its entirety, taught, and then after that, I do this gradual release. And this, I only do this with teachers who are struggling a lot. I do a brief meeting, and if you do not feel confident...

I did it last year with two third grade teachers, who said across the chalkboard, that nothing works. She said nothing was working, all year. And I said, you know, let me come in and try to figure out, because from what you are saying, I couldn't figure out why it wasn't working. And so I said, can I get my hands on this class and see what's going on? It helped a lot, and the teachers saw something that I was doing that was working, that they're doing this year. So, we have one teacher who was teaching science for ten years, and now she's teaching 5th grade. So that's a change. She, I know for a fact she does not feel very confident. So me modeling, coming in, and working really close with her, it helps her.

(28:56) Another thing I do, I work with groups of students for small-group intervention, and in order to be fair, that intervention group starts after data analysis, so we'll have our first grade-level data analysis meeting, and all the teachers in the school see who the at-risk readers are. I try to take classrooms that have high percentages of at-risk readers and offer, I'll approach that teacher about what students she wants me to work with, because I know how difficult when you have a high concentration of at-risk readers in one classroom. So, I meet with them, and I have two different schedules going. I prioritize, so yah. I work with kids, I model, I do grade-level meetings, I present PD.

Interviewer: Of course, one-on-one with teachers.

Alice: Yes, I observe, I do every debrief cycle. And that also is for an extended period of

time. Whenever I work with people, I try not to have it be where I come in, I help them, and then I leave. All the people that I work with on the schedule that I work with for an extended period of time. It could be ten weeks that I am with someone, and I'm only with them and like six other people for that ten weeks. (Right.) And so, a lot of feedback I've gotten is they like that. They feel like they're always getting consistent help, consistent feedback, and I can't, I'm already stretched very thin. I can't spread myself any thinner than I already am. And, some people just need some help later, and...

(30:46) Interviewer: Yah, OK. When you first came here, how was your literacy coaching role communicated to the faculty, and how has the faculty responded to your department?

Alice: In my interview, my first interview was with the principal, and in the second interview, I realized my principal who went through many teachers to select their literacy specialist. So, once again, I had more buy-in coming in, because I am not hired from a district list. I'm not coming in to push a program, or to push a school. I was coming in because a core group of teachers wanted reading and writing workshop. And the principal did not want to buy any basal. The principal did some reading, and she wanted reading and writing Workshop. So, on my second interview, I did a PowerPoint present all about writing, how I would get balanced literacy (reading and writing workshop) instruction components going in the school, which included standards-based curriculum mapping, that's a year-long process, different professional development structures, like PD days, grade building, observation debrief cycle, workshops for parents, it's everything that I do, how I was going to establish classroom demonstration classrooms, all that, everything my coaching taught me, everything that I told the teachers up front. It was my expectations to increase the classroom library to include grade-level genre, the establishment of a literacy resource room, the core tests we were going to be working with... Which was really a change, because I passed out my PowerPoint to all the teachers on the committee, and I get this expectation. And I got the job, and then I started it like a couple weeks later, and within a week of me being here, all the materials that were in my PowerPoint had been ordered before I got set up and was here. So, uh...

Interviewer: So you think that's similar in other...

(33:04) Alice: No, I don't.

Interviewer: In other coaching roles, I guess justify some other schools...

Alice: And I said I need, I think these would be really beneficial for staff to use professional tests, and inside our guided reading room, which probably, how much was that going to end up costing you, you thought, like \$10,000 probably. (At least.) At least. I looked at the prices, and...

Interviewer: One started at \$5,000 at least, like to put it together.

Alice: OK, we have the bilingual set at well. So, that room in there cost about \$15,000. At least. And all of that was there. All this stuff was there a week into me having the job. I was shocked.

Interviewer: Was this similar to your other coaching role?

Alice: No, in my other coaching role, at the previous school where I worked, which I'm pretty sure you know, I was a district specialist. I was hired by the district initially, but then my position got cut. That's why I came to Mentor, because my position was cut. And I was being paid for by the Office of Literacy, and the role was different. They'd already had a coach for some time. I got pulled to sub a lot. It was in an area of the city is, probably has lower, er, higher poverty rates. I would bet Devale has higher poverty rates than Mentor. So teachers were absent more frequently. There's a lot of resistance, since it was a very low-performing school, and this is not an extremely low-performing school. This is probably an upper-mid-tier school, not; we're in some kind of a middle, not right here. We're not up at the top, but we're not down in the gutter either, and that school was almost to the gutter. They're really low down, and there's lot of low morale, and that was different. Teachers went through a lot of changes already, and they didn't want another mandate put on them. And that became a lot of hardship on them, and me. There was not very, there was little dichotomy, and very little choice.

Interviewer: OK, tell me about some of your philosophies and strategies for working with the teachers here.

(35:46) Alice: Ok, at this school, I like to get their feedback a lot from surveys. I like them to have a lot of direction into the PD topics that we discuss, and how we, how I deliver PD during grade-level meetings. That's, you know, the most consistent things I have. Delivering professional development really is great at grade-level meetings. And so I surveyed the teachers at the end of last school year, and they gave me feedback from grade-level meetings. At the beginning of the school year, I gave them their old survey results. And I said, look at this and tell me if it's still what you want, because you guys gave this to me at the end of last year. You know, you've had a whole summer to think about where we left off. Discuss this with your grade-level team, and, you know, let me know if this is what you want and make changes, or tell me the same. So then, I do that. Read the question again.

Interviewer: What are some of your philosophies and strategies for working with teachers at your school?

(36:46) Alice: I get their feedback a lot. I try to question, and this is something I am

constantly working on. I try to question them and push their thinking in a way that doesn't sound like I'm judging them. I need to sound like I really want an answer, even sometimes when I have a theory in my head about where I want to go with coaching, I really feel, like I feel like the answers have to come from them. So I think a lot of my philosophy in coaching, and this is not in being, I would like to be a reading specialist, but because the umbrella title for my job is reading specialist, that in my role as a coach, I work on being really positive with teachers, but not watering stuff down, I don't want to say watering stuff down, right. Like babying, or I don't know how to put it, quite put it. I want to be real with them, and what are the challenges that they face? Let's be honest about them. They also want it; want to instill in them something that was instilled by Teach for America, a sense of possibility. So, I want them to understand that even when you're struggling, we believe even if things seem totally impossible, it's possible. We have a sense of possibility that, you know, you can do this work.

(38:47) Interviewer: How do personal experiences and institutional context shape and influence the way you engage teachers?

Alice: OK, I'll answer that. So, one thing I don't do is I try not to tell people and boss people. I want to respect professional decisions, and I realize I'm gonna face that even if teachers are struggling a lot, I want to have active-based thinking, which is another Teach for America principle. I want to believe that everyone's coming from a good heart, and that they mean the best in everything they do. I have to believe that, and I can come at people in a way that isn't judgmental or bossy, 'cause I ultimately am no one's boss. I'm not your boss. So, in my case, something that's happened to me before was, you know, I had an assistant principal in my room wanting to change my bulletin boards. And I was like, how could you do this, that you want me to change my bulletin boards? And I loved my bulletin board. It was in my library. It was my check-out system. And this mean man, he kept pestering me about it. He wanted it to be a reading series (inaudible) board. It had beautiful pictures of book covers, and I hate that I came up to a block of resistance. And I kept thinking, now wouldn't it have been easier if he came up to me and came at me from some kind of compromise standpoint? Ultimately, that's what happened. I put up the reading program stuff, kept my library stuff, but I came up with a checklist. So, I learned. That's how you learn from other people, constantly all day, like either I need to be more like this person, like I'm gonna suck in every one of their genes. What are doing that's making them so special? Or, see that this person is not so special right now to other people. What are they doing that I'm not gonna do again? So, I try to pay attention to people and learn like that.

(41:16) Interviewer: How do institutional contexts, like Chicago Public Schools, being a coach in Chicago Public Schools, what... it may not necessarily be your school, but how does that shape your context of your coaching?

Alice: I'm a school-based coach, which there are two different kinds of coaches in CPS. There are the Office of Literacy, who maintains their coaching, and there are school-based coaches, so the school pays your salary. The principal ultimately wanted you. I think that when you're a district coach, you have a little less autonomy. And when you're a school-based coach, you have more freedom to make decisions and, like for example, I really like to what a reading specialist and a literacy coach is supposed to do. And then I like to do it. And I am fortunate, like I said before, that I have a principal who lets me do that. So, I think that when you're a district coach though, the district is telling you that the district coaches really are literacy coaches, not reading specialists. Although they do have their certification for reading specialist, they are acting primarily in a role as a literacy coach. They're not, and they're not supposed to work with kids. And some of them, they want to work with some kids, and some people do. And to them, they are quietly distant. And that's the same thing that happens to teachers when you get them the basal. They're quietly distant. And there are people doing best practices in their classrooms, and having to hide it, because they don't want to know. So, it's the same thing with literacy coaches, like if you put a limit on a job, and don't give them the freedom to be a professional, you are limiting their impact. I think, and some teachers, they're having a limited impact, but the professional development they're getting, a lot of what I've heard, and my brief experience when I was at Devale, was really good. I loved the PD. I loved that they brought in reading experts. We go to hear stuff. And I love the researches that I go. It was good it could be connected, because now I'm not. This coach is not connected. Really. But I, again, am fortunate that my area reading coach, who because of district changes has really tried to go over the purpose of coaches, of a reading coach, still is something that we're meeting, like I have a meeting with her next week. And the other reading specialists who are school based, we're all getting together. And it's really nice.

Interviewer: Yah, that's nice.

Alice: That should help things, because it feels like we're kind of isolated.

Interviewer: Do politics play a role in the work you do with teachers?

Alice: What do you mean by politics?

(44:44) Interviewer: The politics of the city, or the way that Chicago Public Schools are run. Or the way that, even the political systems within the school, this is not how...

Alice: OK. I think that I've been thinking about this, as I entertain your question. I think the politics of the city, and CPS, that's Chicago Public Schools; do not impact the teachers as much as they think they do. I think they have more autonomy than they think they do, because sometimes I think better teachers have left for a region. You know we don't have regions anymore. We have areas. And we say, well the region told us that we

have to do this, so we're still doing this. And I said who's mandating that from you? Has anyone told you, and they're like, "but the region," and I keep asking that questions. I say, well, who is really checking up on that? I know I'm not checking up on that. Is the principal checking up on that? I can ask her. I don't think she's checking up on that. Like weird paperwork things, or just certain things, and I really the teachers to feel that, at least in this building, you really do have more freedom than they are thinking they do. So I think maybe it's because of maybe past literacy coaches. In my surveys I ask them about experiences in the past, and they did say that is a district policy, not a role as a coach. So, I know about politics, then fun politics of reading politics come into play a lot. We talk about our developing philosophies of reading instruction, and how, you know, we have a handful of teachers who are, who think a certain way, and we have a handful of teachers that think a different way, but, and there's a lively discussion that would go down to, you know, is this coming from your philosophy of reading instruction? And we can have those lively discussions, and they're really great.

(47:05) Interviewer: That kind of verifies my questions, but sometimes there is like a culture where teachers can't share, or something they have to just go along with the program...

Alice: Yah, and we're doing reading and writing workshop specifically, but we're using, like the work of Stephanie Harvey and Debbie Miller, and other people who also write about reading workshops. And so, we've had really great conversations with teachers about, like teachers coming up to me and saying, like, I was reading a chapter about writing workshop, and I wanted to blah, blah, blah, and there's something different in it than Lucy Calkins, and I'm like yah, this is (A) nothing new, and this is old, that we think is new, but it's not. And a lot of people have been writing about it for a long time, and different people have different philosophies. You have [to] use their views on literacy as your own. So, I guess...

Interviewer: You're just lucky enough to have them here.

Alice: Yah.

(48:52) Interviewer: Alright, tell me some of the challenges you face in your role as a literacy coach, and it doesn't have to be like happy dreamland. Like what are some of the biggest challenges you face.

Alice: OK, challenges.

Interviewer: The main point of this interview is to really try to get the heart of what is it like to be a literacy coach in CPS.

Alice: OK, there are teachers who I know do not have strong content knowledge. They don't understand what they're talking about, and at grade-level meetings, like let's say there's four people on a team, and there's one teacher in each who is a veteran, who starts talking about stuff. Like today, we were talking about, oooh, it was a first grade meeting, and the other three teachers there are relatively, you know, they have a strong understanding of writing workshop. So we're watching this video, and from someone's standpoint in a writing workshop, they can color their pictures. And in Lucy Calkins, they don't color their pictures, because she wants more writing, and coloring the pictures is like publishing. And so they were talking about that, these first grade teachers, and the teachers who have very little understanding of writing workshop and have read her book, and who on a survey on knowledge of writing workshop rates herself really high, when I know she doesn't know what she's doing, started talking about, oh yah, I tell my students they have to use the yellow boring pencils, then they when it's time for publishing, they get to use the pretty pencils. And they're like what, everyone's trying to be all polite and cordial, and no one calls anyone out on anything. And so, we just move on with an understanding that different people develop at different rates. And I think that people have that understanding, that another teacher, you know, the other one who was just in the room, horrendous classroom management, yelling at the kids, feeding them all the time, always says something to me and to everybody, and but it makes it really hard to work with her, there's no coaching with her. I don't know what to do. Then there's a challenge with kindergarten. There's half-day kindergarten, whole-day kindergarten teachers who are here all the time. One kindergarten teacher is also in charge of the after-school program, and instead of going to grade-level meetings, she'll like organize papers for after school program.

Interviewer: And that's what he's getting paid extra for, to do that work *after* school, right?

Alice: Yah, and I brought it up to the principal, and he said that he'd talk to her about it. So, she's missed stuff, because it's after school, and I don't think it's fair. And like grade-level meetings, even at PD, she can never follow an agenda. Here's something that's a problem. It really bugs me that you can never follow an agenda. And there's also a risk behavior... Am I going into too much?

(52:18) Interviewer: No, go ahead.

Alice: Also there is a difference between primary and upper, because this building has an annex. Primary's in the annex, and they call the annex the suburb. And they call this original building the city. The city and the suburbs. And the teachers have this, the primary teachers, the average years of experience in the primary department is nineteen, nineteen average year's experience. I would, I've not done an average on the upper

grades, but I bet it's like eight to ten, might even be less. So, if you think about that, and they've been teaching primary forever, forever. And so they don't think that the 3rd through 6th grade teachers have an understanding of primary, so when 3 through 6 approached primary about, I think your kids should be able to do something, they say oh, but you don't know primary. The kids can't do that. And 3rd through 6th teachers are frustrated, and they tell me, you know, I don't know what to do. And I say, you know what? It takes time. Well, we'll just start from a coaching standpoint of it takes time, but eventually I do start making friends with the principal. Eventually, it comes, and last year it came at the end of the year, but I was like, I see that this is what is happening in the classroom. And she asks them all the time and I've been in there. I've tried to coach her all year. With, like, this is my bottom line, like my end of the rope is I have not told the principal about this all year, because I want to maintain a good coaching relationship, and at the end of the year I feel beaten. I can't, hopefully next year will be better. Maybe you are [a] good teacher, and maybe I need more support from you, telling her that I'm mandating stuff from her. The principal doesn't like to mandate stuff from people. Unless she has to, but there's a handful of staff that she really needs to start mandating things. Like, you don't have a choice.

Interviewer: Yah, OK, so...

Alice: I have one teacher who told the bilingual teacher and the first grade teacher that it was her turn for the observation debrief cycle, and she, she got really paranoid, and she thought I was going to be judging her. And she was telling the principal everything, and I do not, I just made clear, that I have to be at the end of my rope. It does not take much to get me at the end of my rope with someone. Like, I'll hold on and be patient with you. But she signed up for her observation on a Friday, and she was out of seven different opportunities we had, she rescheduled five times. And she told this other lady that she did that on purpose. You know, let's move on to another question. (laugh)

(55:44) Interviewer: OK, so, I've heard a whole lot of your successes as far as like, high implementation rates, and really great results on your tests, both the writing and the reading, and it looks like you have goals for DIBELS, and I'm looking around the room, and you have high expectations and goals for your STAR test results, which is a reading test that the students take. Would you like to discuss any of the other successes you've had as a literacy coach?

Alice: I feel like I've been breaking down some walls of teachers who were kind of resistant before, but now. There was a lot of resistance in primary, and I actually cried in meetings. And I cried because I was really frustrated, and I was also kind of scared to bring up observation debrief with them, 'cause observation debrief was easy with the demonstration classroom teachers, because they were signing up for it. And that was a part of the deal, and they were all for it. But these teachers, because years of experience

can do a lot, their, I guess I should give them the right to be paranoid, because it's, apparently it's an evaluation year, and I during this year... I kind of like it when people come and observe me, so it's weird for me. Like in my classroom, like when I was a classroom teacher, I liked it when other people came and like, watched me teach. It made me feel like oh, yay, people want to see what I'm doing. They do not feel that way. They feel like it's coming from a judging place, and there might be some bad experience. So, I started with kindergarten and first, and they were, like, really paranoid. But comfort, once what I did to break down their wall is, I just gave them articles from Literacy Coaching Clearing House on the role of a reading specialist, and a literacy coach, actually. And then I cleared the decks for them, and the principal actually backed me up, which was huge. And the principal even told them, "What she evaluates doesn't even come to me." And the principal told them she doesn't even look in the notebook of the things I do every day. She steps back, and she doesn't even look at it. Even though she makes me keep a notebook. She doesn't look at it. She wants to have it there, but after the fact, after your seven weeks of the observation debrief cycle with the kindergarten and first grade teachers, they were all really happy. And the[y] loved having me. And they, four of them were sad it was their last observation. (Awww.) Like, they said, oh now, what are we gonna do? What, this is the last month? I thought it was all year. And I said no, I have to move on to other people. I can't spend the whole time with you, 'cause there's twenty-nine other teachers. And they said oh no. But they also said a lot of things, that it helped them feel more confident. They feel like they're doing things better. (That's great.) So, that was how a lot of walls broke down.

Interviewer: That's a huge success. The last question. Is there anything I have not asked you that you feel is important for the world to know about the role of a literacy coach, and what it's like, and...

(59:29) Alice: Lonely sometimes, like you're the only person in the school, and you have to keep a lot of secrets. You have to keep secrets from two different sides—the principal trusts you to keep administrative secrets, and the teachers trust you to keep secrets from the administration. OK, you're constantly trying to control things. And people come and cry at you a lot. A teacher yesterday, like, stopped me in the hallway and started crying. People come to you and they cry a lot, 'cause they're stressed out. Not because of you, but because, and they'll say I'm crying because the principal yells at me. I'm crying because I feel like crap. I'm crying because yesterday... You know, half of everything people come and cry to you about, because you smile and are perfect, and you say I'm gonna do anything I can to help you. Like they'll look at your schedule and find an opening. But then, I don't have anybody to cry to. Like, when I'm sad. Like, when I'm frustrated. When I feel sad, instead I'll go burst out crying in a meeting when I'm about to do something I'm really nervous about. (laugh) Like, giving teacher the Observation Debrief Cycle to teachers I think are going to be really rude with it, who ended up really not being, which I think had a lot to do with my demeanor with them, in trying to really

be gentle by coming at them a different way. But that it's lonely. You're all by yourself, even if you have a beautiful room.

Interviewer: I know it is a beautiful room. Is there anything else, or do you feel there's anything else we should know about the role of a literacy coach that I haven't asked you?

(1:01:09) Alice: I do a newsletter.

Interviewer: We definitely need to know about that.

Alice: You have to be really organized if you are going to be successful. Like, it's almost obsessing me. Is that a word, obsessing me? It's like you're in their classroom. These teachers have to put up with some stuff, and you have to prepare ahead of time. Be prepared for anything to happen. Your backup, I have copies of stuff for teachers sitting on my front table, as like backup stuff, and I have copies of stuff for students sitting over there. Then, at any given time, I'm ready for a group of students to walk in here, and I'm also prepared for a group of teachers. Because I don't know what's going to happen to my schedule, because you know its school, and stuff happens.

Interviewer: That's true.

Alice: Yes, it is.

Interviewer: And that's the end. Well, thank you so much for this interview. I really appreciate your time.