

Using a Practice-based Hiring Process Supports Coaches to Support Teachers

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Are you considering using coaches, mentors, or other teacher leaders with the hope of improving the quality of teacher learning communities, professional development, instruction, and student learning? The Institute for Learning has been working with districts on these goals for over a decade. Recently, a three-year experimental study in a large urban public district in Texas compared our Content-Focused Coaching® (CFC) model with existing district coaching by measuring the impact of each on reading comprehension at 4th and 5th grades. Researchers found our CFC coaching program had a positive influence on teacher engagement with coaches, on the quality of teachers' facilitation of rigorous meaning-making approaches to text discussion, and on the amount and quality of student talk about texts. English language learners, some of the lowest performing students, showed increased performance on reading comprehension as measured by the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS) (Matsumura, Garnier, Bickel, Junker, & Resnick, 2010; Matsumura, L.C., Garnier, H.E., Correnti, R., Junker, B., & Bickel, D.D., in press).

Additional articles / manuscripts / presentations about the CFC model:

The Content-Focused Coaching® model is part of a theoretically-informed and research-based systems approach to district design, school reform, and instructional improvement to impact student achievement within content areas (see Bickel & McCarthy, 2010; Staub, West & Bickel, 2003; Swift, Artz, & Bickel, 2010; Young, 2007).

For details regarding research design, setting, participants, measures, procedures, results for different cohorts, discussion and the principal's role in supporting a coaching initiative. See Matsumura, Santoris, Bickel, & Garnier, 2009; Matsumura, Garnier, Bickel, Junker, & Resnick, 2010; and Matsumura, Garnier, & Resnick, in press, which focus on impact of CFC on teachers and students.

Bickel and McCarthy (2010) discuss how CFC coaches were prepared and supported to enact their role and identify factors critical for coach success: clear coach role; focus on and within content; support to provide professional development; apprenticeship in community of practice; tools, routines, and structures; creating conditions for district and school support of coaches; and assessing learning and implementation.

The impact of coaching initiatives depends in part on how the coach role is defined and how coaches are selected and trained (Coburn and Russell, 2008). To help you consider how to best use coaches to support teacher learning, our article will, as the song says, "start at the very beginning." We will define the role of the CFC coach, identify the components of our practice-based hiring process, describe criteria used to assess candidates, and discuss benefits of using such a process (McCarthy, K., Huckabee, D., Wren, S. & Bickel, D.D., 2009, April).

CREATING A CLEAR RESEARCH-BASED ROLE FOR THE LITERACY COACH

The first step in effective use of coaches to impact teacher and student learning is to clearly define the role of the coach. Even though organizations including the International Reading Association (IRA, 2004) and the Literacy Coaching Clearinghouse (Frost & Bean, 2006) have published guidelines on this topic, districts often hire coaches to enact a role that seems ambiguous and complex (Russo, 2004; Taylor, 2008).

Research documents that teachers need opportunities to study goals, curricular topics, misconceptions, student thinking, and pedagogy within subject matters (Hiebert, 1999) and that professional development focused on specific content helps teachers design instruction to improve conceptual understanding (Garet, Porter, Desimone, Birman, & Yoon, 2001). There is increasing agreement that the core role of a coach is to build capacity of teachers and schools to improve student achievement by working with teachers on matters of instruction and learning (Mangin and Stoelinga, 2008).

The goal of the CFC model is to build collaborative professional learning communities that use reflective habits of practice and evidence-based reasoning to develop and use pedagogical content knowledge in order to provide improved learning opportunities for students. The CFC coach works directly with teachers to increase the instructional capacity of teachers and schools. CFC coaches have four main functions:

1. Teach students in order to model rigorous literacy instruction for teachers
2. Lead teacher learning groups to study rigorous literacy instruction
3. Confer with individual teachers to increase rigor in their literacy instruction
4. Work with principals to support teacher learning

CFC program developers worked with district leaders to create a job description for this new position of CFC Elementary Literacy Coach. This description included specification that, depending on the size and needs of the school, half to all of coach time would be targeted for work to improve literacy—especially comprehension—at 4th and 5th grade.

USING A PRACTICE-BASED HIRING PROCESS

To better understand what our coach hiring process looks like, think “less interview, more audition.” We constructed the hiring process as practice-based professional development (Ball & Cohen, 1999) that engages learners with the authentic practices of the designated professional community. We wanted to see our candidates do some of what CFC coaches do. Candidates read and wrote about a professional article, submitted and discussed a literacy lesson plan they had used in the past to teach students, analyzed and planned a lesson for an assigned children’s text, and observed and analyzed video of a literacy lesson.

A team of 2-3 interviewers including an Institute for Learning (IFL) program developer and district literacy leaders pressed candidates to clarify, elaborate, or support their thinking as they engaged in these tasks. They also asked general questions about a range of topics and scenarios related to candidates’ own experiences, adult and student learning. Figure 1 describes the practice-based hiring process in detail. It

lists each component and provides some of the criteria used to assess candidates for each component.

COMPONENT	CRITERIA FOR ANALYSIS
<p>Submit online application: resume, references from someone who observed teaching & coaching, literacy lesson plan. <i>Decide who will interview.</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Depth and range of experience • Focus, rigor, support in lesson plan for students
<p>Prior to arriving at interview: Candidates read a professional article and come prepared to discuss it; they write an essay responding to a question relevant to their future role, such as:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What should be the nature of the relationship between the literacy coach and the school principal? • What elements of the coaching role are most critical for assisting teachers? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ability to construct gist of professional text • Ability to articulate, support and challenge ideas • Ideas of coach role, assisting teachers • Writing and communication skills
<p>Upon arrival at interview, candidates analyze children’s book and sketch lesson including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Key ideas reader should include in retelling of gist • Misconceptions or difficulties students might have with text • Ways to actively construct meaning from this text • How one would assess student understanding 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Depth/range of knowledge used in text analysis • Amount/types of ideas in retelling • Reasons given for potential student difficulties • Rigor, questions, engagement, use of talk and writing, scaffolding for diverse students • Multiple opportunities for assessment
<p>During interview: Respond to a set of panel questions, read and discuss a children’s text, analyze and discuss a video of classroom practice, discuss a professional article that has been read in advance:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What do you understand from the literacy coach job description about how you would be spending your time day to day in this role? • What interests you most about this position and why? How would the opportunity to be a literacy coach fit with your long-range career goals? • What would you want to get as a teacher from working with a coach? What reservations might you have about working with a coach? • What strengths do you bring to this role? With which aspects of the role will you need support? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • View of coach role, motivation, self-assessment • Evidence of effort-based, reflective stance as a learner • Evidence of collaborative interpersonal skills • Honesty and reflection regarding past experiences
<p>During interview: Analysis of video of literacy lesson</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Observe, take descriptive notes, record comments and questions • Briefly retell or summarize what happened in the lesson • For students and teacher: Identify strengths with evidence, next steps to advance learning, rationale, benefits 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Notes: Observational not evaluative, specific, accurate, include teacher and students, shifts in activity, quotes, actions, groupings, charts, etc.) • Focus on lesson vs. what interviewee “would do,” on substance vs. style, on impact for students • Ability to link evidence of action with effect • Capacity vs. deficit view of teacher and students • Inquiry stance, recognize what they don’t know

Figure 1. Practice-based Coaching hiring process.

After reviewing the candidates' materials, actions, and comments, each interviewer scored each candidate on a scale of 1 (low) to 3 (high) for each of three categories of evidence: (a) pedagogical content knowledge about effective teaching of rigorous literacy; (b) habits of effort-based reflective practice (including evidence-based observation and reasoning, professional discourse, and the ability to engage in cycles of planning, enacting, reflecting on, and refining instruction); and (c) collaborative interpersonal skills. Interviewers provided evidence for their ratings. Interviewers looked at the total combined score but also examined whether any one category was particularly low. Candidates were informed of committee decisions. Data from the interview was used to inform school placement decisions made by the literacy leaders, associate superintendents who supervise principals, and IFL leaders.

BENEFITS OF USING A CLEAR COACH ROLE AND PRACTICE-BASED HIRING PROCESS

The Process Accomplished Our Purposes

The past lesson plan helped us select whom to interview from many online applications. Activities were varied and complex, and candidates were pressed to engage in rigorous thinking and tasks that replicated the nature and intensity of the coach role. We were able to assess differences between candidates in terms of knowledge, habits, and beliefs and thereby to select a set of coaches. Areas of strength, need, or concern were reasonable predictors of future learning and performance. Information gained was invaluable for making decisions about placement, ongoing professional development, and support. The process created clear expectations for coaches, thus supporting retention.

The Process Provided Opportunities for Apprenticeship

A key theory underlying the CFC work is cognitive apprenticeship (Collins, Brown, & Holum, 1991; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Tharp & Gallimore, 1988). Cognitive apprenticeship occurs where members of a community of practice engage in joint productive activity to help novices develop the complex knowledge, skills, and identities that lead to expertise in a field. Students learn to read, teachers learn to teach, coaches learn to coach, and principals and others learn to lead by engaging in those very practices with the support of tools, routines, and structures. Learners move from watching and analyzing models to trying practices out with support, and finally to using practices on their own.

By creating a clear definition of the role of coach and using a practice-based process to engage candidates in aspects of that role, the interview process began an apprenticeship process in the following ways:

- District leaders were apprenticed to develop and communicate the role of CFC coach through the process of creating and posting the job description.
- Coaches engaged in tasks linked to core functions of the role of CFC coach and in a level of professional discourse that would surround their coming work.
- District leaders observed IFL staff lead initial interviews as they modeled how to probe candidates to elaborate their thinking, then discussed their observations and any questions; district leaders took over leadership of interviews as time went on.

- In the first year, district leaders conducted a second round of interviews.
- In the second year, district leaders and coaches interviewed additional coaches.
- In the third year, the literacy department adapted this process for hiring primary literacy coaches, and other departments were influenced by process as well.
- Over time, many coaches became involved in the process of interviewing teacher candidates at their schools and drew on these experiences.

The Process Supported Coaches To Support Principals and Teachers In Schools

Because the tasks were rigorous and elicited much information about the knowledge, habits, and beliefs of the coach, we could select coaches likely to succeed in the role. Because principals learned about the definition of the CFC coach role and the nature of the selection process, they were better able to position the coach for success. Because the process helped coaches begin to construct their understanding of the role, coaches were more likely to enter into schools with a sense of purpose. Because the interview process emphasized taking a stance of learning and inquiry, coaches were more likely to enter schools not as experts, but as those *leading by learning*. The most important benefit is that the process of hiring, training, and supporting these coaches improved interactions with coaches, the rigor of text discussion, and student ability as readers. Teacher growth and retention may be linked to awareness of possibilities on the career ladder. If this process helps teachers perceive clear and valuable roles for coaches, they may consider this as a career goal.

CFC COACH PERCEPTIONS OF THE INTERVIEW PROCESS

CFC coaches were asked to complete a survey regarding their experiences during the interview. Here are a few representative comments:

- *The CFC hiring process differed from any previous interview and was much more in depth and rigorous.*
- *Even before the interview, you have to show evidence of your practice as a teacher and philosophy on coaching through your responses to the article.*
- *If you had absolutely no idea what a coach did and were basing your knowledge solely on what you were asked to do in the interview, you could still get a pretty fair idea of what you were expected to do.*
- *You could not make it through everything if you didn't have the language arts content knowledge needed to do the job ... the process begins to outline some of the basic duties of your role as a coach. The lengthy interview tasks involving quite a bit of critical thinking are a good representation of your daily life (as a coach).*

IMPLICATIONS FOR YOUR DISTRICT

Experts (Frost and Bean, 2006) plead that “literacy coaching, and its potential for improving student learning, is too important to place individuals into the position who do not have the qualifications to handle its roles and responsibilities.” As you design or refine your current process for hiring coaches, teacher leaders, or mentors (maybe even principals or others), consider the following questions: How will you clearly define and communicate the role based on research? What kinds of tasks might engage candidates in talking on aspects of this role? What authentic activities and artifacts might you use? How will you assess knowledge, habits, and beliefs of candidates during the process? How might the process serve as an apprenticeship for those involved? How will you use data from the process to inform selection, placement, and planning for continued training and support? How will you build capacity within your district by implementing new roles and policies regarding coaches and introducing practice-based hiring processes?

Based on our experience using this process, a kit now exists entitled Performance-based literacy coach recruiting and hiring kit: Using the Content-Focused Coaching® model that supports others to implement this process. For more information and a description of the kit go to institutelearning.org.

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