

JoLLE@UGA

JOURNAL OF LANGUAGE & LITERACY EDUCATION

Volume 9 Number 2

Fall 2013

Editor
Stephanie Anne Shelton

<http://jolle.coe.uga.edu>

Review of *The Literacy Coach's Handbook: A Guide to Research-Based Practice*

Walpole, S. & McKenna, M.C. (2013). *The literacy coach's handbook: A guide to research-based practice* (2nd ed.). New York: Guilford Press.

ISBN 978-1-4625-0770-2

Pages: 252

Thea Yurkewecz Tayurkewecz@albany.edu
The University at Albany, State University of New York

Please cite this article as:

Yurkewecz, T. (2013). Review of the literacy coach's handbook: A guide to research-based practice. *Journal of Language and Literacy Education* [Online], 9(2), 144-148. <http://jolle.coe.uga.edu/>

“What is a literacy coach?”

“What is a literacy coach?” This is the opening question posed by Sharon Walpole and Michael C. McKenna in the second edition of their celebrated book, *The Literacy Coach's Handbook: A Guide to Research-Based Practice* (2012). While almost a decade has passed since Walpole and McKenna initially asked this question in the guide's first edition (2004), the importance of, and need for, literacy coaches remains.

To Walpole and McKenna, a literacy coach continues to fulfill an evolving role. As defined by the International Reading Association (IRA, 2010), literacy coaches are specialists with leadership skills and literacy knowledge who instruct and support teachers. Walpole and McKenna (2012) clarify: “A coach is a teacher's teacher” (p. 1). They work to enhance teachers' understanding of literacy practices, such as reading and writing instruction to improve student learning.

This second edition to *The Literacy Coach's Handbook* is timely. Today, literacy coach positions encompass a wide range of roles and responsibilities to meet the ever-changing needs of schools. This new edition recognizes the need to revisit the duties of coaches working with pre-kindergarten to fifth grade students. The authors describe an increase in expectations for student learning and assessment outcomes in today's college-and-career readiness era. The purpose of this book is to further inform and provide support for people in this position.

In their prior research, Walpole and McKenna focused on a range of issues such as school-wide reforms, informative assessments, and struggling readers. They still highlight these topics, as they remain active issues for literacy coaches. The new edition welcomes current and future coaches' new strategies and research to become more responsive to the growing needs of today's teachers.

Staying a Learner

In the opening chapter, Walpole and McKenna explicate six roles of literacy coaches. These roles include: learner, grant writer, school-level planner, curriculum expert, researcher, and teacher. They emphasize how these roles represent the realities of education in schools today. Providing a more detailed analysis, Walpole and McKenna align these six roles to the IRA (2000) standards and performances for literacy specials/literacy coaches. Although each of these roles is instrumental, to Walpole and McKenna the most significant role of a literacy coach is that of learner. They stress the need for literacy coaches to stay current with research on not only literacy instruction, but also on professional leadership and support.

The initial chapters focus on the knowledge and responsibilities that coaches should acquire in establishing and coordinating a coherent schoolwide design. This design may involve choosing reading assessments, instructional schedules, or materials. It is not until the end of the book that the real work of coaching teachers is described. Their reasoning for the structure of this book was for coaches to understand the importance of building a collaborative learning community for all teachers. Walpole and McKenna explain:

That is because no system of professional development, observations, coaching, modeling, or study groups will make a difference to teachers and children unless it directly and specifically supports a well-articulated, evidence-based, schoolwide program. A coach must make sure that everything that teachers are asked to learn and do is coherent. (p. 215).

This structure may also offer new insights for literacy specialists who may not have responsibility for establishing a coherent schoolwide design, but who could work with coaches to get support in establishing such designs.

In their second chapter: *Research on Literacy Coaching*, Walpole and McKenna discuss what is still being learned about the effectiveness of literacy coaches. This role was designed to create change, but factors such as school district budgets and resources impact how changes are made. The authors offer readers ten “take-home messages” gathered from a small number of studies on literacy coaching. Each take-home message reveals how literacy coaches can successfully make an impact. The IRA (2010) describes a literacy coach as someone who positively influences and increases the knowledge of literacy instruction. Walpole and McKenna advocate that in order for coaches to influence instruction, they must also be engaged in designing research and recognizing the effectiveness of the professional development that they provide.

Keeping up with changing times and schools

In their new chapter, *Finding and Applying Reading Research*, the authors emphasize the importance of peeling back the layers of both scientific and evidence-based research on reading instruction. Walpole and McKenna state: “It is important that a literacy coach become a prudent *consumer* of research literature, even while engaging as a *producer* of findings about the effectiveness of a particular school-wide program” (p. 56). Using examples from the National Reading Panel (NRP, 2000) and the National Early Literacy Panel (NELP, 2008) reports, they describe how conclusions from these studies have resulted in trends and a “one size fits all” model of instruction. Walpole and McKenna state: “We believe it is the job of a literacy coach to understand the findings of these research reviews as they relate to instruction, and to develop strategies to keep up with new findings” (p. 89). Literacy coaches may be asking, “How can we keep up with the current research?” Walpole and McKenna address this by directing readers to specific resources on recent summaries and findings. This chapter helps prepare any education professional to use a critical eye when examining literacy research; the underlying theme present is to understand the need to apply research to better inform instructional decisions.

Responsibilities and Support

A literacy coach position often involves multiple responsibilities. Although not all of these duties are represented within this handbook, the authors describe the major obligations that come with the position. Chapter five focuses on the most time-consuming job of literacy coaches: the role of choosing, administering, and analyzing reading assessments. Walpole and McKenna describe coaches as testers, interpreters, profilers, cheerleaders, and boosters. They provide questions for coaches to consider when selecting assessments, such as: “What sort of training will be needed to administer (an assessment) effectively?” (p. 105). They also direct readers to a cognitive model of reading assessment adapted from McKenna & Stahl (2009). This model is a

framework for coaches to strategically question and use to provide evidence of students' literacy skills. While Walpole and McKenna do address the Common Core State Standards in regards to assessment, they do not go into detail on other popular topics that schools are facing such as Student Learning Objectives (SLO's) or Annual Performance Professional Review (APPR). The terms in this handbook may not apply to some state policies, but many literacy coaches are being impacted by these mandates.

Walpole and McKenna offer literacy coaches a new lens through which to reflect on their other major responsibilities. For example, they provide models of daily class schedules and routines in Pre-K through fifth grade. These models are options to consider when designing reading blocks with administrators and teachers. The authors review the background and research on specific instructional approaches, content, and programs. Walpole and McKenna argue: "Literacy coaches must be informed consumers themselves, and they must be creative and responsive leaders through the very difficult tasks of addressing student and teacher needs by selecting materials likely to support both" (p. 157). This suggests that literacy coaches must take on the responsibility of not only providing professional support, but also seeking out their own answers to stay informed.

The future of literacy coaching

What the future holds for literacy coaches depends upon the amount of support coaches provide to teachers. Walpole and McKenna conclude in their handbook that leadership is needed to impact change. The closing chapter states: "We began this book with an overview of the roles, some of them quite new, that literacy coaches are creating and assuming. Taken together, these new roles constitute a radically different definition of instructional leadership" (p. 216). This new definition is defined in this chapter at three levels: within the district, within the building-level administration, and within the faculty. Each level includes an overview of how coaches need to negotiate their membership as part of leadership teams. Literacy coaches can use this as a reflective tool to identify how they are positioning themselves at each level. This chapter may help coaches to reflect on how they are being utilized, and where support is needed to build literacy knowledge and practice.

While this text is a specific resource for current or future literacy coaches, it is also recommended to administrators and teachers who are trying to understand what the literacy coach position entails. Current and future literacy specialists will also find this handbook useful, as their position overlaps with many of the roles and responsibilities of coaches. The last pages are filled with literacy coaches' personal accounts of their work, reflecting on successes and challenges. These testimonials may offer comfort to other coaches who feel isolated in this evolving position. Sharon Walpole and Michael C. McKenna's second edition to *The Literacy Coach's Handbook* captures not only the various roles and responsibilities of coaches, but also the sustaining value of, and need for, the position.

References

- International Reading Association (2010). *Standards 2010: Issues in reading education that affected standards development*. Retrieved December 1, 2011, from: http://www.reading.org/General/CurrentResearch/Standards/ProfessionalStandards2010/ProfessionalStandards2010_Issues.aspx
- McKenna, M.C., & Stahl, K.A.D. (2009). *Assessment for reading instruction* (2nd ed.). New York: Guilford Press.
- Walpole, S. & McKenna, M. C. (2004). *The literacy coach's handbook: A guide to research-based practice*. New York, NY: Guilford Press.