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Book Review

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Puig, E. & Froelich, K. (2007). *The literacy coach: Guiding in the right direction*. Boston: Allyn & Bacon. 144 pp. ISBN 0205491677, \$32.99 (paperback).

Literacy, for good reason, is the hot topic in publications and school initiatives across the nation, but equally as hot, as explained in *The Literacy Coach: Guiding in the Right Direction*, is coaching, the preferred theoretical and research-based method of professional development (Joyce & Showers, 1995). Within the opening chapter of this book, authors Enrique Puig and Kathy Froelich couch the act of coaching within the history of educational professional development. The contrast between previous approaches to professional development (i.e., trainings and mentoring) and the current coaching model clarifies the role and vision for educational coaches within schools. In the previous approach to professional development, a teacher's education seemed to finish with her degree or upon completion of a course, and professional development during her teaching career was just more ideas to add to the repertoire of teaching techniques. The coaching model, in contrast, is about continuous learning through reflection and research—not only because of the demands of students and literacy, but because of the nature of learning and improvement.

It is within this historical and theoretical context that Puig and Froelich explore the functions and demands of coaching. Each of their chapters concludes with a realistic scenario for the reader's reflection. For example, in one of the scenarios, tempers flare at a faculty meeting when the new literacy initiative is introduced. The literacy coach must convince a nearly hostile room of teachers that this professional development experience is going to be different from their previous experiences. In another scenario, a newly-hired literacy coach needs to approach the school's principal, who wants a different friend and colleague to have the position. It is obvious that Puig and Froelich have "been there" and that their ideas, though based in theory, have been put into practice and have been proven to work within the context of literacy coaching.

In chapters three and five, Puig and Froelich provide a description of the new coaching framework and accompanying observational lenses through which coaches can see teaching and learning differently. In "Chapter 3: Observational Lenses," the authors encourage coaches to strive for decisions based on the triangulation of empirical evidence. The authors offer three categories of data that can be triangulated: artifacts, observations of teachers, and participant observations (own experiences). The authors' description of evidence broadens the possibilities within each category and clarifies the effectiveness of triangulation. Puig and Froelich especially emphasize participant observations, highlighting the increased credibility coaches receive when

they share their personal connections to teaching and the instruction of literacy. The chapter concludes with a continuum of professional development activities the coach may engage in with teachers. This continuum allows the coach to match teacher needs to coaching possibilities. Descriptions of these various activities are included in another chapter, though they could have used more attention here within this context.

“Chapter 5: Three Major Categories for Coaching” begins with a particularly strong analogy comparing the viewing of a painting, its overall effect and the artist’s technique (brushstrokes, line and form) to observing teaching and coaching teaching. Puig and Froelich suggest that after an observation, coaches reflect on the evidence gathered and organize their notes into three categories: theoretical, craft, and procedural. Theoretical items refer to the teachers’ “root of understanding” or the concepts teachers “believe from the heart and support from the brain” (p. 68). Coaching within this category involves, the authors explain, being “adept at asking the right questions but being cautious of ‘the’ right answers” (p. 68). Craft or aesthetic coaching, on the other hand, guides the teacher to become more reflective in order to refine her teaching practice within the context of the school and personal literacy program. The final category, procedural, involves notes regarding organization and time -- in other words, the management practices that allow for teaching and learning to occur.

Puig and Froelich suggest that a coach consider the category to which the observation notes lean and then approach the teacher within that single category with a single message. “This creates the ability to economize the coach’s attention” and reduces the possibility of overwhelming the teacher with too much information (p. 65). As described in an earlier chapter, there is an incredible amount of activity going on in a classroom and within a teacher’s mind: “Classroom teachers have to juggle and make time for teaching students, working with colleagues, interacting with parents as well as planning and gathering the necessary materials to create powerful teaching/learning experiences” (p. 9). Feedback on every aspect of teaching would be unhelpful. The authors also remind the coach that these are “your perceived coaching points and not necessarily the teacher’s” (p. 67), and that a teacher may not be ready to hear some feedback. Coaches and teachers are reminded that they may feel the disorder or chaos naturally associated with learning within the process (Malone, 2001). However, the chapter does not have specifics as to how to move a teacher to a place of readiness or how to balance the three categories.

These kinds of specifics are generally lacking in the book. For instance, the three levels of field notes described in “Chapter 4: Noting Observations” lack the kind of clarifying effect found in the previously mentioned chapters. It is possible that Puig and Froelich did not want to provide rigid checklists or evaluative rubrics, thereby limiting the observation, but rather they intended to encourage the observer to be immersed in the classroom and to take in all that is happening. However, without more direction, the field note section is not as helpful as it could be. For instance, the purpose and use of each of the three levels of field notes is hinted at by the use of the word “novice” to describe those who might use the primary observation guide and “level of expertise of the teacher” for the tertiary guide. When and with whom to use the primary, secondary, or tertiary levels is not clear and has to be inferred.

Chapter two is another part of the book that could also be expanded and clarified. It covers the recommended literacy knowledge-base for a literacy coach and places the learning of literacy within the context of learning theory. The authors, however, emphasize learning theory to the exclusion of a discussion of literacy instruction. Puig and Froelich contend that a literacy coach’s effectiveness “hinges on the literacy coach’s knowledge of learning as a process” (p. 13).

The actual direction regarding the coaching of reading or writing instruction per se is scanty. The only information about literacy is introduced in this chapter with the caveat, “Reading is a complex process and our aim is not to make it seem simplistic” (p. 27). The authors then spend only one page and one graph on reading instruction and two pages and one graph on writing—elementary through secondary—and then only mention the National Reading Panel findings towards the end of the chapter. This information provides the literacy context for the rest of the book, which concerns coaching in a more general sense. In a book on literacy coaching, however, one would expect more focused attention on literacy and the aspects of coaching which have specific application to literacy practice.

Finally, if teaching is a complex job, as Puig and Froelich have well-depicted it, then literacy coaching is even more multifaceted. The authors, however, in their attempt to address the overwhelmingly broad range of professional development in such a compact book, have been forced to merely mention some very critical aspects of a coach’s job such as working with the principal and school personnel. These and other aspects could be more developed.

For these reasons, this book is recommended for study groups of practicing literacy coaches who have a strong background and experience in literacy instruction. Some may assume that because the book is about the practice of literacy coaching that it is pragmatic in nature; however, literacy coaching is taking place across the country in varying contexts and a book of specific “to do” lists would not satisfy all needs. In contrast, Puig and Froelich have written a book to guide coaches to become flexible, independent thinkers. It offers a framework and lenses that will aid working literacy specialists in refining their coaching practices. Aligned with the authors’ philosophy of coaching, the book does not provide “the” answers, but rather raises critical questions and brings to the forefront of the coach’s mind the concepts that need consideration.

The most pragmatic helps in this book include the time schedule offered at the beginning of the book and the final chapter which gives an actual 36-week outline of activities of a literacy coach. The most theoretical section is “Chapter 8: Literacy Coaching Revisited: Essential Principles,” wherein the authors list 35 guiding principles from advice to dispositions, including the advice to temper assessment with common sense, to have a sensitive sense of urgency about literacy and improvement, and to look for patterns and relationships with teachers. Literacy coaches would benefit from the study of just this chapter for a year of scaffolded meetings. These guiding principles could be the content of the authors’ next book.

With these frameworks, lenses and principles, teachers can learn to become coaches and coaches can refine their practice. The purpose of this book, identified by Puig and Froelich, is to guide in the “right” direction, which they explain is effective and efficient practice. The authors meet this lofty goal by providing the reader with tools to increase efficiency and concepts to consider to increase effectiveness. Puig and Froelich conclude, “Throughout the book we’ve shared experiences, research, theories, schedules, and questions that are to serve as food for thought” (p. 117). This concluding statement aligns with their belief that the job of a coach is to serve as “a guide to support, scaffold and encourage the transformation” of teachers, and their goal to do the same for readers (p. 4) is realized in this book.

References

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