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**To cite this article:** Kathleen McGrath & Mary Ellen Bardsley (2018) Becoming a Literacy Leader in the 21st Century: Fieldwork that Facilitates the Process, *Literacy Research and Instruction*, 57:4, 351-368, DOI: [10.1080/19388071.2018.1487490](https://doi.org/10.1080/19388071.2018.1487490)

**To link to this article:** <https://doi.org/10.1080/19388071.2018.1487490>



Published online: 18 Jul 2018.



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## Becoming a Literacy Leader in the 21st Century: Fieldwork that Facilitates the Process

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### ABSTRACT

This study describes and analyzes a field experience that has provided advanced literacy specialist candidates the context for advancing their understanding of professional leadership through the lens of a literacy coach. The field experience described was born out of the ongoing work of teacher educators at a small, independent, liberal arts university and a collaborative effort between the university and a neighboring urban school district. First, we situate our conceptual and pedagogical understandings of literacy coaching in a body of theoretical work on which we have relied to craft the field experience. Then, we analyze the impact of the field experience through the lens of the literacy coaches. Finally, we discuss implications these findings have for our advanced literacy specialist program.

### KEYWORDS

Clinical experience; literacy coaching; teacher education; literacy specialist education

As America's schools seek to meet the challenges of the 21st century, the traditional role of the literacy specialist has broadened. Although literacy specialists function in many roles, including remedial teacher, staff, developer, and mentor, in many districts the balance of their activities has shifted away from providing direct instruction for struggling readers toward providing professional development and district leadership. Consistent with this shift is the International Reading Association (2000) position statement entitled: "Teaching All Children to Read: The Roles of the Reading Specialist," which describes the three main roles of a literacy specialist to include assessment, instruction, and leadership. More than ever, school districts across the nation are turning to the literacy specialist to provide leadership and many are adopting a literacy coaching model to undergird this process.

Recognizing this paradigm shift, the 2010 revision of the International Reading Association's *Standards for Reading Professionals* combined the two positions of reading specialist and literacy coach into one role called readingspecialist/literacy coach. As a result of the greater emphasis on leadership and the acknowledgment of the shifting role of the reading specialist, many advanced literacy specialist programs have embedded into coursework fieldwork opportunities that develop the dispositions and technical skills necessary for nurturing literacy leaders.

Seven years later, the International Reading Association, now known as the International Literacy Association, is in the process of revising the 2010 *Standards for Reading Professionals*. As part of this revision, professional preparation standards for nine roles have been organized in five categories including Specialized Literacy Professionals

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(reading/literacy specialists, literacy coaches, literacy coordinators/supervisors), Classroom Teachers (pre-K/primary, elementary/intermediate, middle/high school), Principals, Teacher Educators, and Literacy Partners (International Literacy Association, 2017, Standards for the preparation of literacy professionals). For the purpose of this article, the category of Specialized Literacy Professionals, and specifically, the standards undergirding the preparation of reading/literacy specialists, will be the focus. These standards continue to reflect the commitment to professional learning, reflective practice, and leadership, specifically in Standard 6. Mastery of this standard requires candidates to

demonstrate the ability to be reflective literacy professionals, who apply their knowledge of adult learning to work collaboratively with colleagues; demonstrate their leadership and facilitation skills; advocate on behalf of teachers, students, families, and communities. (ILA, 2017, Standards for the preparation of literacy professionals, p. 40).

While leadership is emphasized in the field's professional standards, there is not one consistent model for literacy coaching, in part because the coach's role may vary across contexts (Calo, Sturtevant, & Kopfman, 2014; Cornett & Knight, 2008; Elish-Piper & L'Allier, 2011; Stevens, 2010). Despite this tension, many literacy coaching guidebooks recommend that literacy coaches function in their schools as teacher leaders (Calo et al., 2014). This is a tall order; developing the technical and interpersonal skills necessary to be an effective teacher leader takes time and practice.

As university faculty concerned about the education of tomorrow's teachers and literacy specialists, it is of particular concern to address the growing expectation that literacy specialists will be required to assume leadership responsibilities. As such, we seek to craft learning experiences that give aspiring literacy specialists opportunities to develop these professional abilities in authentic settings. One crucial element of this preparation involves field experiences in which candidates may support and facilitate teachers in their work with real learners with real literacy needs.

The goal of this article is to describe a field experience that has provided our advanced literacy specialist candidates the context for advancing their understanding of assessment, instruction, and professional leadership through the lens of a literacy coach. The field experience we describe is born out of the ongoing work of teacher educators at a small liberal arts university and a collaborative effort between the university and a neighboring urban school district. First, we provide an overview of the literature on literacy coaching and implications for teacher education programs. Then, we situate our conceptual and pedagogical understandings of literacy coaching in a body of theoretical work upon which we have relied to craft the field experience. Last, we report on a study in which we analyze the impact of the field experience through the lens of the advanced literacy specialist candidates, who function in the role of literacy coaches, and discuss implications these findings have for our advanced literacy specialist program.

## Related literature

Over the last century, the American educational system has shifted and evolved as a result of myriad reforms to educational policy and law. In many ways, literacy coaching has been a facilitative response to this evolution. For example, although literacy coaching movement can be traced back to as early as the 1930s (Bean & Wilson, 1981), it was a result of

the No Child Left Behind Act (2002) and specifically federal monies allocated for the improvement of reading programs through the Reading First initiative that many districts across the United States began utilizing the literacy coaching model to support literacy instruction and student achievement (Hathaway, Martin, & Mraz, 2016). More recently, Response to Intervention and the Common Core State Standards have resulted in an increased demand for literacy coaches (Toll, 2014).

However, despite the proliferation of literacy coaching, confusion exists about what coaching actually *is*. In fact, Toll (2014) sites a range of differing definitions collected from the field including “helping teachers do better,” “improving instruction,” “ensuring that teachers are all on the same page,” and “collaborating with teacher teams to analyze data.” In addition to this confusion, studies have found the coach’s role may vary across contexts (Calo et al., 2014; Cornett & Knight, 2008; Elish-Piper & L’Allier, 2011; Stevens, 2010), and that roles and responsibilities of literacy coaches might be understood differently by school administrators, teachers, and the coaches themselves (Mraz, Algozzine, & Watson, 2008).

Two national surveys have been conducted to analyze the literature and research about the role of the literacy specialist, as well as the self-reported perceptions of what literacy specialists actually do in their day-to-day roles. The first study, commissioned by the International Reading Association, was reported in two articles in the *Reading Teacher* (Bean, Cassidy, Grumet, Sheldon, & Wallis, 2002; Quatroche, Bean, & Hamilton, 2001), and resulted in the position statement: “Teaching all Children to Read: The Roles of the Reading Specialist” (IRA, 2000).

In 2015, a second national study was conducted to flesh out potential changes to the roles of literacy specialists since the previous study (Bean et al., 2015). Although there were many similarities in responses across the two surveys, several important differences were illuminated in 2015 and are important for teacher-educators to consider. For one, literacy specialists reported an increased expectation for assuming leadership responsibilities. Second, respondents reported an increased expectation for collaboration with other educational professionals including reading specialists, teachers, and other specialized professionals. Third, a larger percentage of self-identified literacy coaches exist at secondary level than reported in the first study. Fourth, respondents reported an increased assumption that they fulfill multiple roles. For example, many reported working with students, supporting teachers, and facilitating professional development. Finally, an increased number of respondents expressed the need for practical training in working with adults, collaborating with other educational professionals, and facilitating the change process in schools.

For teacher educators and specifically, educators of literacy specialists, these results raise the question, “How best to educate literacy specialists to meet 21st century challenges and adequately prepare them for their future roles as literacy leaders?” As university faculty concerned about the education of tomorrow’s teachers and literacy specialists, we are particularly interested in ensuring that our candidates embody the important characteristics and professional competencies necessary to meet the current challenges in schools. We want our candidates to graduate effectively empowered to help their students develop literacy competencies, become leaders in the field, and make a powerful difference in the communities in which they teach. Yet, this remains a formidable task; developing the technical and interpersonal skills necessary to be an effective literacy leader takes time and practice.

Moreover, incorporating coaching experiences into the programmatic curriculum can be challenging. Shaw (2007) described some of the challenges programs face that he

observed as co-chair of the International Reading Association's Professional Standards and Ethics committee:

I review reports for institutions seeking IRA national recognition and have witnessed how difficult it has been to incorporate coaching experiences into the curriculum. This is because teacher educators are having a difficult time finding ways to address a number of important concerns. First, they believe that many graduate students lack the knowledge and experience to coach other teachers. Second, they question whether more senior teachers will accept coaching from neophyte educators. Third, they feel that graduate students are already overburdened by existing requirements and they fear adding more assessments. Finally, they are not sure what types of coaching experiences to include. (p. 8)

Thus, the very experiences critical to nurturing both the technical skills necessary for the job and the leadership skills that will undergird their efficacy, are typically not embedded into most teacher-education programs (Danielson, 2007).

More than a decade later, as the field continues to grapple with these issues, we too have been confronted with the challenge of providing learning opportunities and practical fieldwork experiences with a greater emphasis on the development of leadership skills, particularly as our program advanced the 2010 *Standards for Reading Professionals* and readies for implementation of the 2017 revision. One of the results of our work to better position our candidates for meeting the requirements of Standard 6: Professional Learning and Leadership was the development of a literacy coaching course. In developing this course, we gave consideration to theoretical and pedagogical principles that would serve as its foundation and created a context that we believe affords our candidates with the powerful and crucial practical experiences to effectively prepare them for the leadership expectations of 21st-century literacy specialists. Further discussion of these elements follows.

### **Theoretical and pedagogical principles**

The principles of constructivism undergird the framework of the literacy coaching course and provide the theoretical rationale for our fieldwork development. Constructivism has a long and well-documented history, although many different perspectives coexist within it (e.g., Bruner, Goodnow, & Austin, 1986; Freire, 2000; Piaget, 1951; Vygotsky, 1978; Wells, 2000). In fact, Phillips (1995) identified six distinct views of constructivism; however, according to Fenwick (2008), all views share one central premise: "a learner is believed to construct, through reflection, a personal understanding of relevant structures of meaning derived from his or her action in the world" (p. 10). Coexisting with constructivist theories are those from a social constructivism perspective (Vygotsky, 1978), in which social experiences and interactions shape the ways of thinking and interpreting the world.

Rooted in the constructivist paradigm are the phenomena of reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action (Schön, 1983). Schön describes reflection-in-action as that reflection that takes place while it can still benefit the situation; alternatively, reflection-on-action involves reflecting on how practice can be developed, changed, or done differently in the future. According to Fenwick (2008), both types of reflection emphasize the ongoing learning of professionals whereby "practitioners learn by noticing and framing problems of interest to them in particular ways, then inquiring and experimenting with solutions," (p. 12). In this way, reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action are rigorous professional

processes involving reflection on one's practice that lead to a "legitimate form of professional knowing" (Schön, 1983, p. 69).

Reflective practice is seen by many teacher educators to be at the core of effective teacher preparation programs. For example, Loughran (2002) writes,

It is through the development of knowledge and understanding of the practice setting and the ability to recognize and respond to such knowledge that the reflective practitioner becomes truly responsive to the needs, issues, and concerns that are so important in shaping practice. (p. 9)

Moreover, in experiential learning contexts, reflection, supported by guided practice and feedback (Paris & Paris, 2001), provides a foundation for knowledge construction (Conway, 2001) that results in the self-directive process of self-regulation (Boud, 2007). For adult learners, self-regulated learning strategies undergird habits of lifelong learning as well as the "important capacity to transfer skills, knowledge, and abilities from one domain or setting to another" (Shuy, 2010, p. 1).

Together, these elements are actualized through the experiential learning context created for the literacy coaching course that affords advanced literacy specialist candidates opportunities to link theory with instruction, assimilate new learning through instructor guidance, self-reflect, and work through problems collaboratively, as they acquire essential knowledge, skills, and dispositions of literacy leaders. To this end, Darling-Hammond and Bransford (2007) note that several elements make a difference in the design of a teacher education program, including (a) content of teacher education (what is taught and how it is connected), (b) learning process (the extent to which the curriculum builds on and enables candidates' readiness), (c) context (the extent to which teacher learning is situated in contexts that allow the development of expert practice). Each of these elements were considered as we developed the literacy coaching course and subsequent fieldwork.

### **Course content**

The literacy coaching course was developed by the first author in response to informal feedback from advanced literacy specialist candidates during their formal program portfolio process. Many expressed that while they felt very well prepared to provide evidence of not only meeting but exceeding expectations for the *Standards for Reading Professionals* 1 to 5, they did not feel as well prepared to exceed expectations for Standard 6. The literacy department began systematically addressing this issue throughout the courses in our program by embedding assignments and fieldwork experiences that would nurture professional leadership; however, given the trend we observed of area school districts adopting a literacy coaching model to support literacy instruction and achievement and perhaps more importantly, hiring literacy specialists to act in this role, we began seriously discussing developing a course that would not only lay the foundation for developing knowledge, skills, and dispositions necessary for literacy leadership, but prepare our candidates to secure these types of positions.

The resulting literacy coaching course is situated near the end of our Advanced Literacy program, with the following reading methods courses as prerequisites: Literacy: Birth-grade2, Literacy: Grades 3-8, Literacy in the Upper Grades, and Reading Difficulties: Identification & Intervention. While all courses in our program are undergirded by the 2010 *Standards for Reading Professionals*, in the literacy coaching course, there is a

particular focus on Standard 6: Professional Learning and Leadership that presupposes advanced understandings of Standards 1 to 5. In other words, because a literacy coach must embody the technical skills necessary to guide assessment, instruction, and professional development, the literacy coaching course is better situated within the program when these skills have been learned.

In addition to course readings and embedded field work, course assignments include (a) performing a Needs Assessment, (b) providing professional development training in the administration and interpretation of the Developmental Reading Assessment (Beaver, 2006), (c) keeping a log of how and in what ways instructional planning and delivery is supported, (d) developing and delivering a mini-professional development workshop that is based on results from the Needs Assessment, (e) facilitating the whole-group, daily debriefing that includes literacy coaches, preservice teachers, and course instructors, and (f) ongoing reflections.

### ***Learning process***

Framed within the gradual release model (Pearson & Gallagher, 1983), the literacy coaching course has two components, completed across 8 weeks during the summer, and is taught and facilitated by the first author. The first 6 weeks includes a comprehensive examination of literacy coaching, through course readings, as it has historically evolved and is practically employed across American schools in the 21st century. Candidates read the required texts, then meet with the course instructor to discuss the evolution of their understandings of literacy coaching. During this meeting we also discuss what the candidates may expect as they begin their fieldwork experience where they will have hands-on opportunities to apply concepts they have, up until this point, only read about and discussed.

The last 2 weeks of the course is the field experience where candidates apply theory to authentic practice and takes place over the course of a 2-week summer reading camp. The camp involves 40 to 50 primary-age children from a nearby urban district and 10 to 15 graduate level, preservice teacher candidates (PSTs) who are responsible for working directly with the children. The advanced literacy specialist candidates act as literacy coaches, providing support for assessment, instruction, and professional development for the PSTs.

### ***Learning context***

The summer Primary Enhancement Program (PEP) camp is an outgrowth of a collaborative effort between our small liberal arts university and a neighboring urban school district. The program provides field experiences for graduate level PSTs and advanced literacy specialists (literacy coaches), while serving the literacy needs of primary struggling readers.

The PSTs are enrolled in a three semester program leading to initial certification. Many of the PSTs are career-switchers; thus they tend to be older than the literacy coaches as the literacy coaches typically enter the program upon completion of their undergraduate education. This creates an interesting dynamic between the PSTs and their respective literacy coach as often the PSTs have more life experience; however, the literacy coaches have more specialized knowledge about literacy assessment and instruction and are further along the teacher preparation continuum. This is also a dynamic sometimes faced by practicing literacy coaches.

The course aligned to this fieldwork experience for the PSTs is situated at the beginning of their program and follows the PSTs' Foundations of Literacy course. The second author regularly teaches this course and facilitated the fieldwork aligned to the course during this study. The purpose of the fieldwork is to provide the PSTs with opportunities to explore components of balanced literacy including interactive read-alouds, guided reading and writing, and independent reading and writing, as well as instructional techniques for developing oral language and listening skills.

Typically, 40 to 50 primary-age, struggling readers, representing all elementary schools in the district, are invited to participate in the PEP camp; student selection is facilitated by the district's coordinator for Response to Intervention. Parents drop their children off at one common bus stop, then the bus takes the children to the university. Once the children arrive, they meet as a whole group for a welcome activity and snack, and then are divided into small groups for 90 minutes of instruction. Small groups include four to five children and two PSTs. Depending on the number of small groups, each literacy coach works with one or two small groups. Following small group instruction, the children meet as a whole group for an interactive read-aloud provided by a guest reader from the university or community. The day concludes with another whole group activity or game.

Because the student enrollment is ethnically, culturally, socioeconomically, and academically diverse, PSTs are encouraged to differentiate instruction, explore multiple instructional approaches and work through paradigmatic barriers and personal bias (Cochran-Smith et al., 2009). This process is supported by the literacy coaches and results in an organic, dynamic experience, contextualized within authentic practice, which allows for social interactions, as described by Lambert et al. (2002), between novice (preservice teacher) and expert (literacy coach).

The hour following the instructional sessions is a structured debriefing, facilitated by the literacy coaches, which affords opportunities to engage in reflection-on-action (Schön, 1983). The debriefing is a balance of PST-led discussions on the challenges and triumphs discovered during the instructional session, sharing of effective instructional techniques, whole-group brainstorming on a particular student or issue, and literacy coach-led discussions or presentations on relevant theoretical and practical implications. Inevitably, a lively, collaborative conversation ensues where PSTs and literacy coaches work as a team to problem-solve issues raised during self-reflection. This deliberate reflection provides a process to develop professional judgment and is necessary because, as Casey (2014) notes:

new professionals cannot rely on intuition or "gut" in the same manner as an expert. While the seasoned professional integrates seamlessly thought and action, the new professional must de-couple the action from the thinking about the action; the new professional must consciously activate a process to guide the rendering of professional judgment. (p. 321)

Thus, the collective experiences of the group, coupled with the expertise of the literacy coaches, result in much richer problem solving and development of instructional resolutions. In sum, the debriefing discussions provide the socially mediated learning experiences that research substantiates as critical to teacher learning (Darling-Hammond & Bransdorf, 2007).



## Methods

To date, 15 advanced literacy specialist candidates have participated in the literacy coaching course over the last four summers. Candidates included 14 White females and 1 White male. Because of this dynamic, and to protect their anonymity, gender-neutral pseudonyms have been assigned. All participants fell within the 22- to 25-year-old range. Most had completed their undergraduate studies at Niagara University and went directly into the Advanced Literacy program. Their reasons for continuing their graduate studies at the same institution included: “I had a great undergraduate experience,” “I love the atmosphere at Niagara University,” “professors are so responsive and really care about their students,” and “after considering other options, this program stood out for its practical experiences.” All of the participants had obtained at least one initial New York State teaching certification and most held multiple certifications. Areas of certification included: Elementary Education, 7 to 12 English, 7 to 12 Social Studies, and Special Education. While completing their graduate studies, 3 of the 15 were working as classroom teachers, 2 had graduate assistantships in the College of Education, and the others were working as teaching assistants or full-time substitute teachers.

Reflective data was collected (a) at the beginning of the course, in the form of a one to two-page written reflection, to probe individual’s initial understandings of literacy coaching prior to completing course readings, (b) after the course readings, in the form of a two to three-page written reflection on how the individual’s initial understandings of literacy coaching evolved with the exposure to theory. These reflections were then used to anchor a focus group meeting where initial understandings were more deeply probed, and (c) at the end of the fieldwork, in the form of individual written reflections, to probe how and in what ways the practical experience might have enriched candidates’ understandings of literacy coaching. For the final reflection candidates were asked to “Reflect on the fieldwork experience. How has your understanding of Literacy Coaching evolved as a result of this experience? What ‘lessons’ most resonate with you?” In sum, these exercises in reflection became opportunities not only to scaffold critical thinking (Korthagen, 2004) but also provide a window into how participants evolved in their understanding of literacy coaching.

For the purpose of this study, the reflections captured at the end of the fieldwork, from the 15 participating candidates, have been examined.

Reflective data were analyzed using the constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1990) including *open*, *axial*, and *selective* coding procedures. Our interpretive process was abductive (Agar, 1996) in that we moved iteratively through cycles of inductive and deductive analysis. During all levels, coding was informed by our theoretical and pedagogical principles, as well as the reflective questions asked of our participants.

During the first level of coding, open coding, the two researchers and research assistant independently reviewed raw data by line, sentence, and paragraph. Key phrases were underlined and substantive labels, as well as *in vivo* codes, were written in the margins. Although agreement on open codes was high, disagreements were worked out through discussion until 100% agreement was achieved. Through the constant comparison of open codes, similar codes were further defined and relationships between those evolved.

During the second level of coding, axial coding, the two researchers identified categorical relationships in relation to our reflective questions: *How has your understanding of literacy coaching evolved? What lessons most resonate with you?* Subsequently, core concepts that described these relationships were developed.

During the final phase of coding, selective coding, axial codes were connected and consolidated. Categorical relationships were compared and validated. As each theme was solidified, and no new insights were obtained, it was clear that theoretical saturation, as described by Bowen (2008), was achieved.

Verification procedures included triangulating the data through intercoder agreement, as well as reviewing and resolving disconfirming evidence (Creswell, 1997; Creswell & Miller, 2000; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Miles & Huberman, 1994). In addition, member checking as a verification procedure was employed. Based on the availability of current contact information, 8 of the 15 participants were invited to take part in this process; they were asked to review results for accuracy and “resonance with their experience” (Birt, Scott, Cavers, Campbell, & Walter, 2016, p. 1802). In this way, participants were given “an opportunity to consider whether any of the experiences or perceptions of others applied to them,” (Harvey, 2015, p. 30), thus adding to the credibility of the results of this study.

Feedback from the member checking process indicates that the findings align with participants’ perceptions of the experience; thus providing confirmation of the themes. This is illustrated by comments from three member checkers: “The findings hit the nail on the head!”; “Overall, I think this captures perfectly my experience coaching”; “I think this is all great! Yes, this describes my experience.”

In sum, the iterative process of coding and analyzing triangulated data resulted in the evolution of one main theme: *Reflection on action: Constructing new understandings of professional collaboration* and three secondary themes: *cultivating relationships*, *sharing the problem-solving process*, and *balancing multiple roles*. These findings will be elaborated on in the section that follows.

## Findings

Across data, the resounding theme was that the fieldwork component provided opportunities for the literacy coaches to (a) more deeply explore theoretical concepts introduced across the course readings, (b) connect that theory to practice, thus experiencing issues, in a personal and authentic way, as described in our course readings, and (c) engage in reflective practice. Together, this resulted in the construction of *new understandings of professional collaboration and literacy coaching*. To this end, Addison reflected, “The readings provided some level of understanding, but the real-life experience has been invaluable. ... PEP Camp created a microcosm for what we read about happening in the real-world.”

With regard to constructing new understandings of professional collaboration and literacy coaching, participants specifically described learning new ways for (a) *cultivating relationships*, (b) *sharing the problem-solving process*, and (c) *balancing multiple roles* within this “microcosm for the real-world.” These themes will be explored in the section that follows.

### ***Cultivating relationships***

As might be expected, there was wide variation across the PSTs in their dispositions toward professional collaboration. Some were open and very willing to collaborate, while others needed time to warm up to this idea. Still others, albeit very few, remained completely closed off to the idea of professional collaboration. Nevertheless, as literacy coaches would do in the real world, our literacy coaches had to figure through ways to build relationships as a first step in the collaborative process. In fact, according to the literacy coaches, this was one of the most critical lessons learned during PEP camp: *good relationships are the foundation for successful literacy coaching*. River described it in this way:

The biggest thing that stuck out to me about being a literacy coach is that relationships are key. ... I came to realize that the relationship between a coach and almost everyone else in the building affects how well they are able to do the work of their role. ... [Y]ou have to be relationship genius!

However, even understanding that strong relationships are at the heart of effective coaching, the literacy coaches experienced firsthand how building relationships requires a toolbox of collaboration skills, not the least of which is the ability to cue into individual needs. To this end, Kendall noted:

Each relationship made with teachers is different. Some teachers may only want to consult with me on their own time.... Some teachers may want to be coached intensely and take up all of the coach's time. Others may not like the coach, but see the resources they have as valuable enough to look at them on their own time. ... It can be challenging to balance teacher needs.

Perhaps most challenging is the potential for any professional relationship to break down; a phenomenon that has occurred in one form or another every summer. For example, Taylor was posed with this less than ideal situation:

Fortunately, and unfortunately, depending on how you look at it, I was able to work with a PST who was not receptive to my coaching, help, or guidance. I quickly learned how difficult it is to try to help someone who is closed off to the process. ... [F]iguring out the right balance while developing effective relationships is tricky.

The literacy coaches in this program tend to be very motivated, strong students who are accustomed to academic success. Although the course readings discussed challenges literacy coaches face, particularly when teachers are closed off to the idea of collaboration, these candidates needed to experience this tension in order to better understand the many levels and facets of professional collaboration and specifically nuances of relationship-building. This is a leadership skill that is needed but difficult to gain without experience (Danielson, 2007). Indeed, according to Dettmer, Knackendoffel, and Thurston (2012), "One of the most overlooked but crucial factors in teacher preparation is the ability to relate constructively to others, including colleagues, by responding to their preferences and needs with emotional maturity" (p. 62). The fieldwork experience became a powerful context for nurturing these abilities and for developing emotional maturity.

## Sharing the problem-solving process

Professional collaboration involves many skills that these coaches are just beginning to discover and explore professionally. For example, for some of the coaches, learning to effectively collaborate necessitated a mind shift in their approach to problem solving. Instead of individually solving immediate problems as many of them were accustomed to, they learned that effective collaboration involves a shared problem-solving process. For example, Blaine expressed:

For the first time in my graduate career, I was placed in a position that required me to take a different approach than I am used to. ... I am accustomed to being in a leadership position where I am forced to create solutions and at times that means that there is no team collaboration. ... This experience showed me that others can and do have ideas that I may never have thought of. ... One of the most powerful lessons that I learned this summer was the need to sometimes “keep my mouth shut” and see what happens... . Solutions are not a “one size fits all” process, and they should not be treated as if they are.

The coaches also learned that taking the time to understand and value differences among adults in terms of their orientations toward the world, and their styles and preferences for processing information, goes far in advancing collegial relationships and facilitating the problem-sharing process. When differing perspectives are expected and embraced, they can become positive opportunities to maximize talent to best serve students. For example, Cassidy noted:

[Although] teachers are at varying points in their career and have different teaching styles and personalities, and the coaches all have different approaches to coaching and the activities and viewpoints that they bring to the table, we learned that the important thing is for all of us to stay focused on the students and their instructional needs.

To this end, several coaches came to the realization that effective professional collaboration and sharing the problem-solving process does not necessarily involve thinking alike but thinking *together* for the benefit of the children. For example, London wrote:

Problem-solving is not only talking about what’s going on and offering suggestions, but also listening and reflecting on the group’s meetings and learning. Just because it’s not the way we might handle a situation doesn’t mean it’s the wrong solution...

On the other hand, for some of the coaches with gentler personalities, it was important to learn to distinguish times when it was necessary to push forward in order to facilitate the problem-sharing process. For example, Addison noted:

I have learned that not all of my colleagues will be accepting of the advice that I have to offer them. I have also realized just how important it is to be flexible and understanding of others’ wants and needs. [However], it is important to remember not to give up on what I believe in. Staying strong and remaining confident in what I have to offer will prove to my colleagues that I am there to help them and the students with whom we collectively work...

Another layer to sharing the problem-solving process took place during the daily debriefing that occurred the hour following the instructional sessions. Facilitated by the literacy coaches, the debriefing afforded opportunities for the literacy coaches and PSTs to engage in reflection-on-action (Schön, 1983). Many of the coaches expressed that the debriefing

sessions were a rich context for discussion and collegial problem solving. For example, Logan noted:

As a literacy coach, I learned how powerful discussion is to the problem-solving process. After PEP camp each day, there was a thirty-minute debriefing session. The coaches and cohorts were able to reflect and open up about their day. Together, we discussed the strengths and weaknesses of the lessons the cohorts planned. We were also able to see if the cohorts needed any resources or help for the next day.

While the literacy coaches and PSTs talked through triumphs and challenges, they utilized the collective experiences of the group to solve instructional problems. In this way, the debriefing sessions offered structured time for socially mediated learning to occur. As noted earlier, this is a critical component in teacher learning (Darling-Hammond & Bransdorf, 2007).

The debriefing sessions also offered an opportunity for the coaches to witness firsthand what Casey (2014) described as the difference between the seasoned professional's ability to seamlessly integrate thought and action to the new professional's need to de-couple the action from thinking about the action. As noted earlier, even though these literacy coaches are new to coaching and teaching, they are farther along the teacher-preparation continuum than the PSTs. The literacy coaches had much to offer in relation to instructional strategies and techniques and therefore much to offer to the problem-sharing process. As the literacy coaches shared suggestions and strategies for instruction that actually proved to be very effective, the PSTs began to view them as an important resource to working through instructional issues. In this way, the confidence of the literacy coaches, in relation to their own professional skills, soared. Logan noted:

... after the literacy coaches led a couple of the debriefing sessions I was able to practice providing professional advice to the cohort students. Our sessions were always intended to allow our cohort students to walk away with a reflection of their teaching as well as new thinking they may have gained from our discussions or their students from that day. Some of the debriefing sessions brought tears to my eyes because it was amazing to hear how much the teachers were helping the students improve their reading skills in such a short amount of time.

Logan's emotion had everything to do with the realization that this reading growth stemmed from the sharing of her own expertise and competence relative to literacy assessment and instruction and that her expertise was a valuable contribution to the problem-sharing process.

### ***Balancing multiple roles***

As noted by Bean et al. (2015), today's literacy specialists report an increased assumption that they fulfill multiple roles, including working with students, supporting teachers, and facilitating professional development. Our literacy coaches also experienced this multiplicity, as well as the tension that accompanies it. They, too, were charged with supporting instruction, providing professional development, and at times, working directly with students. Gabe described the multiplicity of the role in this way:

I now understand that being a literacy coach is a multifaceted job including cheerleading, instructing, training, gathering, counseling and accepting. ... Successful coaching requires

working with students and with teachers. You are a cheerleader for the teacher and an instructor for the students. If you are doing your job correctly, you are the most valuable resource a teacher could have.

Further, the literacy coaches reported the need to “wear many hats” as they provided more than instructional support and professional development for literacy instruction. For example, many of the PSTs had issues with behavior management. Cassidy explains:

After the first few days of camp, the cohorts were asking for help with literacy strategies, modeling, and behavior management. I was surprised with how many questions there were about behavior management. Initially, I thought I would only be there to help with literacy instruction. However, I learned quickly that the cohorts also needed a lot of assistance with behavior management in their small groups. In a few situations, it was hard to sit back and let the cohorts handle the behaviors themselves. However, it was beneficial to have them deal with the situation on their own, then discuss during debriefing other ways to solve the behavior problem. It was amazing watching the cohorts improve their behavior management skills in only two weeks.

To this end, Cassidy evidences responsiveness to the immediate need: behavior management. Even though this seemed outside the realm of her definition of the duties and roles of a literacy coach, the management issues had to be dealt with before effective instruction could ensue. Mraz, Salas, Mercado, Dikotla, and Thoghda (2016) point out that “responsive literacy coaching requires literacy coaches have mixed roles of technician, service provider, and professional developer” (p. 25). The context of the PEP camp allowed the literacy coaches to experience all of these roles.

The ability to be responsive also requires an understanding of adult learners and the balance, as Blaine put it “between being an authority on reading, being a coach to help other teachers improve their skills as teachers of reading, and not coming across as a superior.” For some of the literacy coaches, this meant letting go of control. Logan explains:

During this experience, I also learned how to let go of the control when it comes to teaching, management, and planning. As a teacher myself, this was a hard thing for me to learn to do. ... I have my own way of going about things, planning, and working with children ... but I had to learn the right way to go about it. ... One cannot barge into a teacher’s lesson or planning period and tell them how something should be done. A literacy coach needs to learn how to approach each situation, offering guidance and suggestions, along with proof and examples to demonstrate how something can be done and why it should be. If a teacher feels threatened or intimidated by a literacy coach, then that teacher will shut down and may not want the literacy coach’s help, which would be detrimental to this partnership and to student learning.

When the right balance is struck, successful literacy coaching creates the conditions that facilitate teacher growth and the enhancement of instructional practice leading to increased levels of motivation and self-confidence (Mraz et al., 2016). As a result, a respectful, reflective, and mutually supporting community of learners is created.

## Discussion

Data reveal that the learning context created through the fieldwork component of the literacy coaching course provided participants with authentic experiences by which to link theory with practice, assimilate new learning through instructor guidance, self-reflect, and work through problems collaboratively as they continue to develop the essential knowledge, skills, and dispositions of literacy leaders. Specifically, their construction of new

understandings of professional collaboration included learning to cultivate relationships, share the problem-solving process, and balance multiple roles. Acknowledging that these skills will take many years and much experience to fine-tune, the students involved in the literacy coaching course are taking away a valuable framework from which to view and to continue to learn about literacy coaching.

With particular regard to the issues reported by current, practicing literacy coaches (Bean et al., 2015), these findings are important. For example, practicing coaches reported an increased (a) expectation for assuming leadership responsibilities, (b) assumption that they fulfill multiple roles, and (c) the need for collaborating with other educational professionals. As evidenced by the findings of the present study, the fieldwork component of the literacy coaching course provided many opportunities for the aspiring literacy coaches to engage in authentic professional collaboration and to grapple with some of the issues that can extend from it. Second, the fieldwork provided valuable opportunities for our aspiring literacy coaches to balance multiple roles and to come to the important realization that effective literacy coaching not only involves supporting assessment, instruction, and professional development, but, as Gabe so articulately put it, “cheerleading, instructing, training, gathering, counseling and accepting.” They have learned that solid relationships are at the heart of effective professional collaboration. This surfaced again during the member checking process when one participant who has been working as a district literacy coach for 2 years reflected on her experience with the literacy coaching course, noting:

My experience with literacy coaching was truly a confidence booster as well as a steppingstone into real world professionalism. It allowed me to become more comfortable with all of the knowledge I've gained from my years of studying literacy and education. Connecting with the pre-service teacher was the most rewarding and most important part of the whole process. They trusted us!

Another member-checker noted that 3 years since her participation in the literacy coaching course, her most important take-away continues to be the importance of the relationship between coach and teacher noting:

The literacy coach cannot do all of his/her jobs effectively if a positive relationship isn't first established. The pre-service teachers needed to feel they were respected and valued in order to accept the literacy coach's help. None of the literacy coaches' multiple roles could be effective if that trust and respect was not first established.

Perhaps the most relevant finding reported by practicing literacy coaches to the present study is an expressed need for practical training in working with adults, collaborating with other educational professionals, and facilitating the change process in schools. Findings from the present study illuminate that although the fieldwork experience totaled 8 days, it was enough to move thinking and to provide a framework from which these aspiring literacy leaders can continue to learn and grow. They have witnessed firsthand that the end goal of literacy coaching is to benefit children. In our minds this is a dramatic shift in their knowledge, skills, and dispositions of literacy coaching. This was again confirmed during the member checking process when one of them noted:

I believe everyone in the program should have to take the literacy coaching course. It allows you to think outside of your natural comfort zone and to learn valuable skills you'll use your entire career.

## Implications

The findings from the present study have implications, particularly for those involved in the education of tomorrow's teachers and literacy specialists. First, because it is important to address the growing expectation that literacy specialists will be required to assume leadership responsibilities, crafting learning experiences that give aspiring literacy specialists opportunities to develop professional abilities in authentic settings is crucial. The learning context, as described in this study, may provide an intriguing model for others interested in teaching necessary knowledge, skills, and dispositions critical for leadership in literacy.

Second, as schools seek to meet the challenges of the 21st century, particularly new educational initiatives such as Response to Intervention, skilled professional collaboration has become increasingly important in facilitating student learning (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2006). Literacy specialists are expected to take an active role in professional collaboration. These skills take time and practice to develop; therefore, it is critical for literacy specialist programs to consider options for creating authentic contexts where these skills can be nurtured. The context created by the PEP camp has offered our candidates this type of learning opportunity.

Third, the model described offers a solution to some of the challenges illuminated by Shaw (2007), particularly the idea that “many graduate students lack the knowledge and experience to coach other teachers” (p. 8). The model described sidesteps this issue in that the literacy specialist candidates are farther advanced in their professional studies than the PSTs. As noted, the fieldwork experience actually increased their confidence in their own abilities as literacy specialists. In this way, the fieldwork enabled a powerful means for the continued develop of technical skills necessary for the job as well as the exploration of leadership skills that undergird their efficacy (Danielson, 2007).

## Conclusions

As suggested by Quatroche and Wepner (2008), “(I)t behooves us as literacy educators to revise our master's degree/certification programs so that it includes [*sic*] a leadership course or component” (p. 113). We believe that the literacy coaching course and its embedded fieldwork has taken important steps in this direction and has provided our candidates with opportunities for cultivating leadership dispositions and technical skills, as well as providing practice with professional collaboration.

As the field pivots to advance the International Literacy Association (ILA) 2017 Professional Standards, it is clear that professional learning, reflective practice, and leadership continue to be important expectations (see International Literacy Association, 2017, Standards for the preparation of literacy professionals, Standard 6); however, the new Standard 7: Practicum/Clinical Experiences, will add an additional dimension for the consideration of teacher educators. This standard will require candidates “apply theory and best practice in multiple supervised practicum/clinical experiences” (International Literacy Association, 2017, Standards for the preparation of literacy professionals, p.40). To this end, the fieldwork context we have developed is but one approach; however, we believe it may hold promise for other teacher educators grappling as we are, to provide effective learning contexts for candidates to link theory with instruction, self-reflect, work through problems collaboratively, and assimilate new learning through instructor guidance (McGrath & Erwin, 2015), as they acquire essential knowledge, skills, and



dispositions necessary to meet the educational challenges they will face as literacy specialists in the 21st century.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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