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The Impact of Literacy Coaches: What Teachers Value and How Teachers Change

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# THE IMPACT OF LITERACY COACHES

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## *What Teachers Value and How Teachers Change*

### ABSTRACT

In order to better understand literacy coaches' impact on teachers, the authors analyzed interviews with 35 teachers who participated in a statewide professional development effort, the South Carolina Reading Initiative. For 3 years, literacy coaches facilitated bimonthly study groups for teachers and spent 4 days a week in teachers' classrooms helping them implement practices learned in study groups. The authors sought to (a) understand what coaches did that teachers found helpful, and (b) identify ways in which teachers' beliefs and practices changed because of their coach. Patterns in the data suggest the teachers valued how the coaches created a space for collaboration, provided ongoing support, and taught about research-based instructional strategies. Teachers credited their coach with helping them try new teaching practices, incorporate more authentic assessments, ground their decisions in professional literature, and create curriculum that was more student centered.

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**L**ITERACY coaching was identified in February of 2008 by the International Reading Association as a “hot topic” (Cassidy & Cassidy, 2008). However, while dozens of books and articles have been written on the topic,<sup>1</sup> most of these works describe what the authors did as coaches themselves or what they believe coaches should be doing (e.g., Burkins, 2007; Casey, 2006; Dozier, 2006; Duncan, 2006; Lyons & Pinnell, 2001; Moxley & Taylor, 2006; Neufeld & Roper, 2003; Puig & Froelich, 2007; Sweeney, 2003; Toll, 2005; Vogt & Shearer, 2007; Walpole & McKenna, 2005). Indeed, we found only 10 studies conducted on literacy coaching, six of which were published in refereed journals. The topics of the 10 studies addressed three aspects of literacy coaching: how coaches spend their time, the impact of coaches on students and/or teachers, and teachers’ opinions about coaches. We found no studies about the actions taken by coaches that particular teachers considered valuable or changes those teachers reported making because of their coaches.

### **Studies about How Coaches Spend Their Time**

There were five studies that provided information about how coaches spend their time. Alverman, Commeyras, Cramer, and Harnish (2005), Deussen, Coskie, Robinson, and Autio (2007), and Poglinco et al. (2003) describe coaches in particular settings (Reading First in Georgia, Reading First in five western states, and America’s Choice schools, respectively). In a fourth study, Rainville and Jones (2008) discuss one coach in three different classrooms, and, in a fifth study, Roller (2006) summarizes information from coaches across the country who responded to an International Reading Association survey about coaching.

### **Studies about the Impact of Coaches on Teachers and/or Students**

We found four studies that addressed the impact of coaches. Two of the studies provided information about coaches’ impact on students’ reading achievement. In the first study (Stephens et al., 2007), the researchers found that (1) students who were identified as struggling readers in first grade and spent 3 years in the classrooms of South Carolina Reading Initiative (SCRI) teachers increased their text reading level more than their peers in non-SCRI classrooms, (2) students identified as struggling readers in third grade who were in the classrooms of SCRI teachers for 3 years outperformed their peers on standardized reading measures, and (3) the number of individualized education programs (IEPs) for those struggling readers was cut in half from third to fifth grade while the number of IEPs for their peers in non-SCRI classrooms remained almost the same. In a second study (Denton, Swanson, & Mathes, 2007), researchers found that the students of teachers who were coached did better on measures of phonological awareness, timed and untimed word reading, phonemic decoding, passage comprehension, and spelling.

The Stephens et al. (2007, in press) study and two other studies provided information about the impact of literacy coaches on teachers. Stephens et al. (2007,

in press) reported (based on observations, interviews, surveys, and self-report data) that the beliefs and practices of coached teachers became more consistent with best practices as defined by state and national standards. Kinnucan-Welsch, Rosemary, and Grogan (2006) reported (based on teachers' self-assessments) that coached teachers became more familiar with the core concepts being taught. Cantrell and Hughes (2008) concluded that coaching increased teachers' efficacy.

## **Studies about Teachers' Ideas about Coaching/Their Coach**

Three studies included information about teachers' perceptions of their coaches. In the Alverman et al. (2005) study, researchers reported that most of the coached teachers felt they received specific and constructive feedback from the coach after classroom observations. Most of the teachers thought the coaches were useful when they provided demonstration lessons and when they helped administer tests and interpret assessment data. Marsh et al. (2005) concluded that teachers generally felt their coaches were knowledgeable and found it helpful when the coach focused on the individual school's or teacher's needs. In the Cantrell and Hughes (2008) study, teachers reported that coaching and collaboration helped increase their sense of efficacy and implementation of literacy strategies.

While it is clear that more research is needed in each of the aforementioned areas, research is also needed on the relationship between what coaches do and what teachers change. We know a small amount about what coaches do, how their work impacts both student achievement and teachers, and how teachers view their coaches, but virtually nothing about what it is that, from a teacher's perspective, coaches specifically do that is helpful. Nor do we know what specifically teachers decide to change because of their coach.

The current study was designed to begin to fill in this knowledge gap. We sought to understand (1) the actions that literacy coaches carry out that teachers consider helpful, and (2) what specific coach-initiated changes teachers make in their beliefs and practices about teaching reading and writing. To answer these questions, we used data from case study research conducted on 35 teachers, all of whom were participants in SCRI (Stephens et al., 2007, in press). These 35 teachers participated in the first phase of SCRI, which focused on K–5 teachers (SCRI K–5 Phase 1).

## **South Carolina Reading Initiative**

SCRI is designed to help teachers learn about and try out research-based literacy teaching practices. For 3 years, SCRI K–5 Phase 1 literacy coaches participated in a statewide professional development (PD) effort referred to as State Study, which involved 27 hours of graduate coursework designed to broaden and deepen their understanding of best practices from a sociopsychological perspective. The classes were held for 3 weeks each summer and one day a month during the academic year. For these classes, the coaches were clustered into cohorts that consisted of

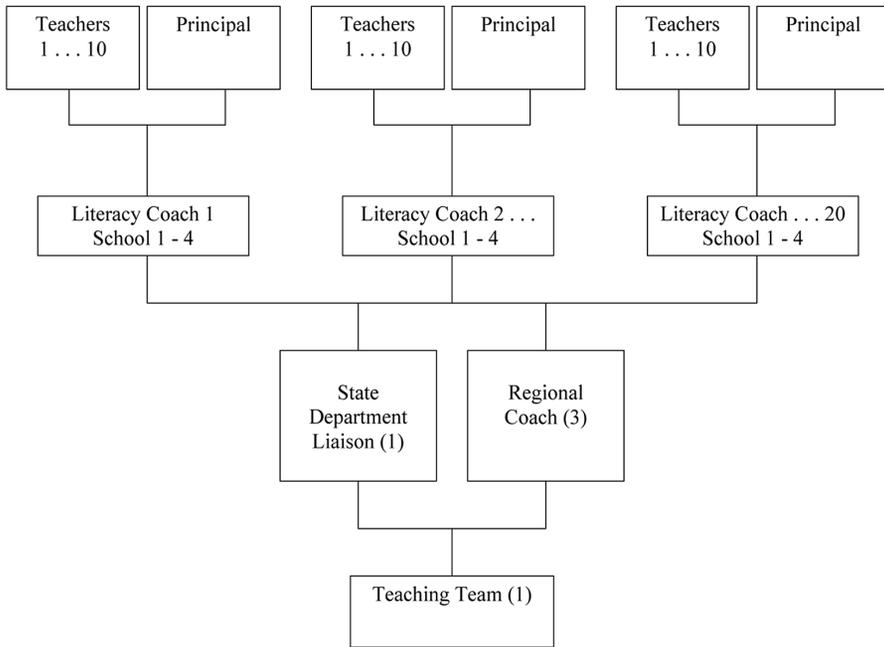


Figure 1. SCRI cohort model for professional development. In this model, a teaching-team member, state department liaison, and regional coach support the work of a literacy coach. Each literacy coach works with 8–10 teachers and the administrator in up to four schools.

21–27 coaches, three regional coaches, one State Department of Education (SDE) liaison, and a university teaching team member (see Fig. 1). During Phase 1, there were six such cohorts that stayed together for all 3 years. The regional coach was responsible for making monthly on-site visits to the 6–8 coaches in his/her region and holding a monthly regional study group. The SDE liaison was responsible for helping both the coaches and the regional coach with implementation challenges (e.g., principals who scheduled mandatory staff meetings during the days/times that the study groups were to meet). The teaching team member was responsible for ensuring that the coaches had a solid knowledge base and the coaching skills needed to help teachers grow their knowledge base. Teaching team members met the year before SCRI began and identified books and articles to use with the coaches over the 3 years.<sup>2</sup> The National Council of Teachers of English, which partnered with the South Carolina SDE on SCRI, assembled 55 articles into an *Article Packet* (NCTE, 2000a) and also created a *Participant Notebook* (NCTE, 2000b). The *Participant Notebook* contained more than 60 instructional strategies (e.g., Say Something and Save the Last Word for Me, adapted from Short and Harste's [1988] *Creating Classrooms for Authors and Inquirers*). Over the 3 years of SCRI, additional books and articles were provided to the coaches by the teaching team. The teaching team organized the graduate courses around instructional frameworks (e.g., read aloud, literature study, large and small group lessons, and workshops). They hoped that the coaches would use these frameworks with their teachers and that the teachers would in turn use the frameworks with their students.

At the same time that the coaches were attending State Study, they were holding bimonthly, site-based study group sessions with teachers and their principals. In these study groups, coaches facilitated discussions and organized engagements that focused on the research-based best practices they were learning about in State Study. While coaches had the option of distributing to teachers articles from the *Article Packet* (NCTE, 2000a) and strategies from the *Participant Notebook* (NCTE, 2000b), the content of these study groups and the use of particular materials were not prescribed. Instead, just as the field wants teachers to “kid-watch” (Goodman, 1978) and design instruction based on the needs of their students, coaches were expected to follow the lead of their teaching team member by teacher-watching and designing instruction based on their teachers’ needs. Because coaches were using teachers as curricular informants, the content of site-based study groups varied widely. In some sites, the focus in the beginning of a year might have been on classroom organization, while in another site the focus might have been on using analyses of oral reading data to form flexible small groups. In addition to leading the study groups, the coaches spent 4 days a week in the teachers’ classrooms helping the teachers put into practice what they were learning. To help coaches customize instruction, the SDE asked coaches to collect exit slips—reflective narratives that teachers wrote during the last fifteen minutes of each study group. One third-grade teacher explained: “I would leave a question for her on our exit slip about what I was wondering about. So, she’s come in and she has provided me with support and answers to my questions regarding my inquiry. She has done read-alouds for my students . . . what I ask for, she has come in and done it” (HHFIY3, ¶ 378).

## Methodology

### Data

More than 1,600 teachers and their principals volunteered to participate in SCRI K–5 Phase 1, with 1,082 teachers participating for all 3 years. Participating teachers taught preschool through fifth grade and came from 55 districts across the state. These districts were a mix of high- and low-SES districts. Some participants were new teachers, while others had more than 25 years of teaching experience. During all 3 years of SCRI, literacy coaches collected data on all of the teachers by keeping a notebook that included field notes of observations, anecdotal records, and exit slips collected at the end of each study group.

For an earlier study (Stephens et al., 2007, in press), we conducted case study research on 39 teachers who were representative of all SCRI participants and had agreed to participate in a study on SCRI’s impact. In that study, during the second and third years of SCRI K–5 Phase 1, a team of six university researchers observed the teachers two to three times a year and held debriefing interviews with the teachers after the observations. In addition, researchers conducted semistructured interviews (see App. A for an example of the interview questions) with teachers at the beginning and end of each school year. Field notes were elaborated and all interviews were transcribed. These elaborated notes and transcribed interviews were sent to participants, who were asked to comment on them (i.e., making

Table 1. Teacher Characteristics as Assessed by Literacy Coach (Population Compared to Sample)

| Teacher Characteristic | Teacher Population<br>( <i>N</i> = 1,633) | Teacher Sample<br>( <i>N</i> = 35) |
|------------------------|---|------------------------------------|
| Knowledge base:        |   |                                    |
| Consistent             | 474 (29%)                                 | 11 (31%)                           |
| Somewhat consistent    | 751 (46%)                                 | 17 (49%)                           |
| Inconsistent           | 408 (25%)                                 | 7 (20%)                            |
| Total                  | 1,633                                     | 35                                 |
| Voice:                 |   |                                    |
| Strong                 | 440 (27%)                                 | 9 (26%)                            |
| Moderate               | 980 (60%)                                 | 22 (63%)                           |
| Low                    | 196 (12%)                                 | 4 (11%)                            |
| Total                  | 1,633                                     | 35                                 |
| Enthusiasm             |   |                                    |
| High                   | 1,126 (69%)                               | 27 (77%)                           |
| Neutral                | 506 (31%)                                 | 8 (23%)                            |
| Low                    | 0 (0%)                                    | 0 (0%)                             |
| Total                  | 1,633                                     | 35                                 |

corrections, adding clarifying remarks, etc.). During the third year, researchers interviewed the coaches and the principals with whom they had worked. These interviews were also transcribed and sent to participants. In the earlier study, these data were analyzed to determine whether or not coaches were impacting the beliefs and practices of teachers.

In the current study, we used the interviews of 35 of the 39 teachers from our earlier study in order to understand the ways in which teachers considered the coaches to be helpful and to detail the specific changes teachers attributed to their coaches. The interview data from the other four teachers were not used because they were incomplete in some way. All 1,633 SCRI teachers had been rated by their coach on their knowledge base, professional voice, and enthusiasm. The data from these 35 interviewed teachers were representative of the total group of teachers who participated in SCRI (see Table 1). The earlier research team had also used SES in helping to select representativeness, with 75% of the teacher population and our sample coming from low-SES schools.

In the earlier study, interviews were conducted to understand the impact of SCRI on teachers' beliefs and practices. We intentionally did not focus specifically on the coach's role. That is, we did not ask questions about what the coach did, or what the teacher valued about or learned from the coach. We did this because coaches felt very vulnerable. They were just starting a new job and, while they knew research was needed on the impact of SCRI in general, they were uncomfortable being under the research lens. To honor their concerns, we agreed not to research the coaches but to instead research their impact on teachers and students.

When we decided to conduct the current study, this earlier concession became an advantage. We had extensive data from teachers in which they spontaneously told us about their coach. They had told us, as part of a broader conversation, about what their coach did in general, about what the coach specifically did that was helpful to them, and about changes they made because of their coach. We considered these data more authentic and more revealing than data we might have

gotten had teachers been asked directly about their coach (e.g., “Tell me what you value about your coach”). We then interrogated these data to understand the teachers’ unprompted views of their coach’s helpfulness and what changes the teachers had made because of their coach. It is important to note, however, that teachers often used “SCRI” when referring to aspects of SCRI for which the coach was responsible. For example, while talking about study group, teacher AE stated that “SCRI had a positive effect. . . . It motivated me and showed me numerous new techniques”—the “it” here referring to the coach. We believe that teachers used “SCRI” as synonymous with “coach” because the teachers’ only contact point with SCRI was their coach. Coaches led the study group, determining how it was structured, what the group read about, and what demonstrations were provided. The coaches spent time with teachers in the hallway and in classrooms and decided what kind of support to offer in both contexts.

### Data Analysis

The article’s second author helped collect and analyze data for the earlier study. She was, therefore, familiar with the interview data from that study, which were subsequently used in the current study. She, the first author, and another member of the original research team met to brainstorm broad categories we thought might be helpful in coding the data. For example, we knew that in their interviews, teachers had commented about what the coach did in the study group and classrooms. These domains were entered into qualitative research software, NVivo (QSR International, 2002), and we added additional domains and subdomains as we read through the data. For example, we created domains or subdomains such as “coaches working one-on-one with the teacher (*a*) in the classroom, (*b*) in the study group, or (*c*) in the hallway.” We utilized NVivo to sort the data by the domains and subdomains that emerged from the data. Using a constant comparative methodology (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), we used this information to construct patterns related to what teachers valued about their coaches and changes teachers attributed to their coaches.

### Negative Case Analysis

Having identified patterns in the data, we returned to the interviews and conducted a negative case analysis (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) to determine if we could disprove any of the patterns. We found only seven comments that were in any way critical of SCRI. None of these comments were critical of the coaches’ actions or what teachers had learned from a coach. Instead, the seven comments centered around two areas. Three teachers talked about how the first year, which was primarily used to expose the teachers to educational theory, was difficult to get through. Four other teachers highlighted the extra hours they had to put in to prepare for the study groups. However, all seven teachers expressed that the benefits of the PD provided by SCRI had been worth the effort required by the intensive first year and extra hours. Indeed, one veteran teacher talked about how all teachers “should be doing this, this should’ve been required of all of us. We probably wouldn’t have wanted to do the beginning part of it, but it sets the

foundation” (BHFIY2, ¶ 462). When speaking of the extra hours, another teacher said, “I’m very glad that I got involved in this, even after I found out it was 3 years and I was thinking ‘What in the world have I gotten myself into? Every other week for 3 years. How can I do this?’ It really validated what I had been doing and what I felt was right. It just gave me lots of good ideas and some names for old ideas and some twists on some old ideas and it gave us all a chance to share” (TCI1Y2, ¶ 379). Another veteran teacher explained:

Well, at the beginning of SCRI, I didn’t want to go to class. That was something else that just took away from a lot of other things that I wanted to do. I didn’t like, when it first began, I didn’t want to be there. But as time went on and I got settled in, I began to see some good things and some things that actually helped me, you know, and steer me in the right, the direction of where I wanted to go. I knew where I wanted to go but I didn’t know how to get there. So, as I began with the class, I started to see some good ideas and some of the things that I had thought of but I didn’t know exactly how to put them in place. So I like it . . . I’m not in love with it but, ’cause it’s another class to take. But I like it now and it has given me so many ideas and ways to work with my children to kind of get them . . . I’m enthusiastic more and my kids are very enthusiastic about it now. I learn so many different things. So many different strategies and those are the things that I think that has really made a difference with my children. Had I been with them all year without disruptions, it’s no telling where they would be right now. They have really learned a lot. They’ve come a long way from when I first got them. They really have. (BRI3Y3, ¶ 143)

Because none of these comments were critical of coaches’ actions nor about what was learned from the coaches, we concluded that our patterns were trustworthy.

### **Findings: What Teachers Valued about Their Coach**

I have liked the communication between the teachers. We do a community circle first thing when we get in there and it is just wonderful to hear some of the things that [other teachers are] doing in their classrooms. (TRI2Y2, ¶ 139–142)

I personally like the camaraderie, the getting ideas from different people. Different people responding to how they perceive something and how they tried it in their classroom and whether it worked or didn’t work. (EHFIY2, ¶ 227)

These comments by a first-year teacher (TR) and a veteran teacher (EH) detail one of the three major reasons that the teachers in this study considered their time with their coach to be very effective. Coaches (1) created ways for teachers to collaborate, (2) provided teachers with ongoing support, and (3) taught teachers about research-based teaching practices.

#### **Creating Ways for Teachers to Collaborate**

Seventy-seven percent (25 out of 35) of the teachers commented that they valued the interactions they had with other teachers and the coach during their study

group meetings. As one teacher noted, “We have a lot of discussions about things that are going on in our room. Normally we do one ‘Wow.’ [Our coach] calls it a ‘chocolate moment.’ The things that make you feel warm and cozy and comfortable that happened in your room” (LEI1Y3-OdiY3, ¶ 21). SCRI teachers felt that study group sessions allowed them to step out of their classrooms and be immersed in what one teacher referred to as “wonderful, professional conversations” (AHFIY2, ¶ 285). In addition to general statements about the community their coaches established, teachers’ comments about the professional study group community fell into three categories. Teachers felt that the collaborative communities established by their coaches allowed them to (a) learn about their colleagues, (b) share strategies they were using in their classrooms, and (c) discuss individual students.

**Learning about each other.** Teachers specifically commented on how the study group discussions and interactions allowed them to learn what other teachers were doing in their classrooms. This sharing process helped teachers learn more about teaching their own grade level as well as what was going on in other grade levels. Teachers’ perspectives moved beyond their own classrooms as they learned more about their school as a whole. These conversations allowed teachers to learn about what their students had learned during previous years and what would be expected of their students as they moved up in grade level.

Ultimately, the study group interactions allowed the teachers to form a stronger sense of community. Over the course of the 3 years teachers spent in SCRI study groups, teachers talked about how the interactions allowed them to move from feeling a sense of isolation to having a sense of community. One teacher shared, “Before we were just like a limb to ourselves. They were kind of doing their thing and we were kind of doing our thing . . . [this study group] is making us a community. A tighter group” (KEIFY3, ¶ 542). Another teacher talked about how the study group created an even stronger bond among an already close staff: “We really come together. We’ve always been a close staff . . . but it’s become even closer and, you know, [because of] this class that you don’t have any problem walking into somebody’s classroom and saying, ‘Could you help me with this?’ or ‘Do you have a book that goes with this?’ Everybody just is really helpful” (BEOFIFY2, ¶ 372).

**Sharing thoughts and strategies.** The study group became a place where the teachers could just “sit down and talk” (SSO2Y2, ¶ 207). Teachers mentioned that they viewed the study group as a support group or support network in which the teachers could feel safe to share their thoughts on teaching. As one teacher commented, study group was about “just getting to know each other and feeling comfortable saying what we really, really truly thought, or asking questions and not feeling like we were going to embarrass ourselves” (VMI1Y2, ¶ 99). In the study group, teachers shared their experiences related to strategies learned from study group sessions, as well as from teaching moments independent of study group. The time the teachers spent sharing what they were doing in their classrooms became a valuable source of information. After learning about a particular teaching strategy in the study group and applying it in their classrooms, teachers were able to come back to share and discuss what they had learned about applying these strategies. Teachers were able to discuss what worked and what didn’t work

as well as give each other ideas on how to improve instruction. For example, when asked how the study group directly affected her classroom, one teacher remarked, “We have ways that we share ideas. ‘What works for you and have you tried this?’ Right now, our goal is working on assessment and I was just surprised to see that so many seasoned teachers, as myself . . . are still struggling with assessment in an authentic way. So, our study group has been very beneficial . . . I can get an idea without having to travel to see a classroom . . . it comes to me” (HS1Y2, ¶ 63).

**Learning about students.** Teachers also discussed individual students and discovered how their instruction from the previous year was impacting the students in their new classrooms (e.g., if the students were transferring their knowledge to their new grade level). One fourth-grade teacher explained, “I mean, really it’s just more of a chance to share experiences, you know, with other teachers; it gives you that time that you never have. Just to say, ‘I did this’ or ‘How’s so-and-so doing?’ . . . so we can even talk about individual children” (RC1Y2, ¶ 263–271). Also, since some study groups consisted of teachers from different schools, teachers were able to connect with each other and communicate with teachers who taught their own children or who taught relocated students who they had previously taught. This gave teachers a community perspective that went beyond their school. As one second-grade teacher explained:

I’ve gotten closer with teachers at the other schools, teachers that my children have. Two of the teachers in there have had my girls and it’s helped me to see what kind of teacher they are. You build the community . . . you have friends and networks and if you have a child that has moved to another school, you can say, “Oh well you have my so and so.” Like one of the other teachers, I found out she had one of my [students] that moved over there and I said, “Oh you’ve got [student]. How’s she doing?” You just build up a sense of community. I think if you need help with something, like if somebody had done the reading test you can pass them on to somebody else and you can talk to them and you can better know, “Where’s this child reading now?” If you get children that transfer, that helps. It just helps knowing what [other teachers] are doing and what you’re doing and if you’re doing the same thing or if you’re not doing the same thing, what you can be doing. (OEIFY2, ¶ 397)

### Providing Teachers with Ongoing Support

More than two-thirds (25 out of 35) of the teachers commented on the coach’s willingness to help and support them in the classroom. Teachers’ comments about the coach’s helpfulness fell into five categories. We identified three of the categories as ways in which the coach supported teachers: (a) the coach as encourager, (b) the coach as facilitator, and (c) the coach as demonstrator. Teachers also discussed (d) the easy accessibility of the coach, and (e) how the coach helped the teachers with a broad range of tasks.

**The coach as encourager.** All the comments in this category indicated that the coach helped teachers feel comfortable enough to ask questions and seek advice. These kinds of comments were made by teachers at all grade levels and by both new and veteran teachers. For example, one veteran teacher said about her coach,

“She will find any information we need on any subject. . . . She never makes us feel uncomfortable, [it’s not] like she’s looking down or she’s judging. She’s always available to help you with anything you need. [She’s] very flexible . . . such a support, just such a support” (HMI1Y2, ¶ 967).

Teachers believed that instead of judging them, their coach encouraged, supported, and worked with them to overcome struggles. For example, one veteran teacher described her coach as “not so forceful that she makes you uncomfortable . . . [instead] she gives you so much information. . . . It’s just a relaxed learning environment” (SSI1Y2, ¶ 190–195).

When the teachers felt comfortable enough to take risks in their classrooms, the coach would provide further encouragement even if the teacher felt the strategy failed. As one third-year teacher explained, “I’ll tell her I tried something and it was horrible . . . and she’ll say, ‘Let’s do it again. I’ll come in there and I’ll see it. It can’t have been as bad as you made it out to be.’ She’s just always there for encouragement” (JSIFY3, ¶ 482).

**The coach as facilitator.** Teachers also commented on how their coach was more of a facilitator rather than a dictator. As one first-grade teacher shared:

My opinion of her role is that she is a *coach*. That she is there when we need her . . . during the actual SCRI meeting she is more of a facilitator. She usually does have an agenda, where she has something in mind for us to go over, but most of our time is spent pow-wow-ing with each other, or sharing, and learning from each other . . . it’s not a lecture kind of informing us . . . it’s just a very informative, yet, “What do you think?” kind of setting. I thought, when we first started it was going to be more of her teaching us what reading is all about, what we need to do to get the kids to write. But, actually, what she has done is, she has made me more reflective on what I’m doing, and for me to think about why I’m doing it. She’s never said, “This is the right thing to do, what you’re doing is wrong.” And when she comes in here, that’s kind of the way she handles it . . . if she comes in for an observation and she’s checking out what’s going on in the classroom, sometimes, she will say, “Well, why did you do it this way?” And it makes me reflect on my practice. (TSI1Y2, ¶ 108)

This teacher’s comments are indicative of how all the teachers in our study felt—that their coach guided them to reflect on their learning and practice. As a fourth-grade teacher explained, “She is reassuring but she’s pushing you to grow and try different things, too. . . . That’s a talent, just a people skill, of not being offensive at all, and [she] just doesn’t put herself on a pedestal above others” (VMI1Y3, ¶ 181).

**The coach as demonstrator.** SDE required coaches to model teaching strategies in study groups and go into the teachers’ classrooms to demonstrate lessons or strategies they introduced in their study groups. Teachers found this practice helpful. For example, when asked about important things the coach did to facilitate growth, one teacher commented that the coach was great at “modeling lessons” (DSIFY3, ¶ 1314–1316). As we read through all the interviews, this came up again and again. Indeed, 17 out of 35 teachers commented on how helpful the demonstrations were and how the demonstrations helped them see the strategies in action. While several teachers named the structures that the coach demon-

strated in the classroom (see App. B), it wasn't so much the content of the demonstrations that teachers were calling attention to, but rather the fact that the coaches were coming into their classrooms to give demonstrations. For example, one veteran teacher explained the process the coach went through when helping the teacher implement literature circles: "[My coach] is wonderful. . . . She came in and she helped me get literature circles started. And that is the great thing about being in SCRI, you have someone who can come and model lessons. Even when it's not a model lesson, she's helping. The first time I ever did literature circles it was wonderful to have another person in the room to just walk around and talk with them during conversation time" (BCFIY2, ¶ 231).

**The accessibility of the coach.** Teachers considered their coach to be accessible. Coaches worked in four different schools and had a regular schedule so that teachers would know when the coach would be on their campus and available to them. At least once a week, the coach would visit individual teachers' classrooms to observe, model, help the teacher plan lessons, or, as one teacher said, "just chit-chat with me to see if everything was going okay" (RMIFY2, ¶ 145).

Teachers talked about how they knew they could ask their coach for help any time. One teacher, for example, mentioned that "generally, at study group, just because we're face-to-face, I can say, you know, '[Coach], can you come in and help me out here?' So we'll go ahead and set up something or she'll tell me to drop a note in her box. Anytime I need her, I can always stick a note in her box and she always comes in" (THI1Y2, ¶ 709). Another teacher commented that the coach came "back as many times as [the teacher] wanted her to" (BEOFIFY2, ¶ 380).

**How the coach helped the teachers with a broad range of tasks.** Teachers saw the coach as a resource they could go to when they needed help with particular teaching strategies. Teachers believed that coaches customized their support based on each teacher's particular needs. For example, coaches helped teachers build on the reading-writing connection, organize the classroom library, and plan lessons.

In addition, coaches helped teachers with other teacher-related issues. For example, one teacher shared how their coach helped with individual students by observing or working with the students and then gave the teacher suggestions. Another teacher talked about how her students enjoyed the times when the coach came into their classroom to work with them. The students referred to her as their "reading coach." At other times coaches served as mediators. One teacher, for example, discussed how her coach tactfully spoke with the teacher's colleague to smooth over a problem they were having. Three other teachers shared how their coach participated with the teachers in parent-teacher conferences. Still at other times, coaches helped with classroom-based procedural responsibilities. For example, 19 teachers commented on how their coach either ordered books for them or helped them order books.

### Teaching about Research-Based Practices

In the SCRI study groups, teachers were asked to read educational theory, implement research-based teaching practices, and learn various strategies to help their students. One second-year teacher commented on how much she valued the

research-based strategies, and that being in an SCRI study group motivated her to learn more research-based techniques: “SCRI had a positive effect. It motivated me and showed me numerous new techniques, provided ways for me to apply those things, and provided opportunities for questions, opportunities to decide what we were going to learn about next” (AE02Y/2AIFY2, ¶ 712). Another veteran teacher explained, “I think I have a lot more knowledge than I ever did before, a lot of theory to base it on and I know that the practices that I’m practicing are solid” (AMI1Y3, ¶ 26). Similarly, another veteran teacher shared, “I wish I had SCRI 30 years ago because it’s such a powerful class” (CCFIY3, ¶ 197).

Teachers also talked about how their new knowledge allowed them to be better teachers because they knew the *why* behind their practices and were better able to explain their teaching practices to parents, administrators, and other teachers. One teacher talked about how she felt she could base her instructional practices on individual students’ needs: “I have the reason why I do things. . . . Now I’m more selective about the things that I choose to do with the children. I base it not only on what the district wants, but also on what the individual child needs” (HSIFY3, ¶ 246).

For some new and veteran teachers, what they learned in SCRI study groups wasn’t new knowledge. Instead, it reminded them about the knowledge and philosophies they explored while in their teacher education courses, but had neglected because of the various demands put on teachers. For example, one second-year teacher explained:

I think my children are going to learn a lot more through me participating. . . . It’s saved me from the rut and it kind of reminded me of all those ideal feelings and thoughts I had when I was in the college classroom watching videos on best practices and thinking, “I want to do that in my classroom” and then I get here and it’s like panic. . . . You’ve got to do everything else, grade all the papers, make all the parents happy . . . and then implement best practices. You let the urgent take place of the important things. And so I would say that [SCRI] reminded me of why I was going to teach. (AEIFY2, ¶ 648–652)

In their interviews, teachers made a direct link from these three coach-related aspects of the SCRI study groups (collaboration, support, and knowledge base) to changes they made in beliefs and practices. When asked which changed first, beliefs or practices, one teacher said, “I would say my beliefs would have to start shifting and then the practice would follow” (RSIFY3, ¶ 1459). As the 3-year study groups went on, teachers began to shift their practices to reflect their new beliefs. Involvement in study groups with a supportive coach helped teachers understand that whole-group instruction did not meet the needs of all students and that it was necessary to customize instruction based on the needs of the students, as a first-year, first-grade teacher explained: “Well, it’s given me different strategies I can use with the students, different ways to teach them. . . . [One practice] is not going to fit every child . . . you know, there are some students that are going to need something different. But it’s helped me to use different ways to teach. And really, it’s helped me a lot to see what differences are in my readers” (RMIFY3, ¶ 122).

## Findings: What Changes Teachers Made Because of Their Coach

“It’s kind of like apple pie. You can make it like my grandma made it, you know, the way I loved it, or you can put cinnamon in it, you can put walnuts in it. I mean, that’s SCRI to me, you know, everybody likes it, it’s just what you do with it that makes it yours” (DCIFY2, ¶ 230–239). As this veteran first-grade teacher articulated, via the SCRI structure, coaches created opportunities for teachers to make changes in their beliefs and practices. We identified four types of change: (1) teachers felt empowered to try new teaching practices, (2) teachers used more authentic assessments, (3) teachers expanded their use of educational theory and research, and (4) teachers more often based instruction on students’ needs.

### Being Willing to Try

The teachers reported that because of their coach, they felt comfortable enough to risk trying new strategies. While only 10 of the 35 teachers explicitly talked about risk taking, all 35 teachers reported actually taking the risk to try new strategies in the classroom. These strategies ranged from structures like shared reading to invitations such as memoir writing to concepts like integrating instruction. As one beginner teacher mentioned, “I try lots of different things and I know now if it doesn’t work, that’s okay. It didn’t work and it’s okay and don’t try it again, or you may have a class in a couple of years you want to try it again with” (KSIFY3, ¶ 1567). A fourth-grade teacher also talked about feeling more comfortable to take risks: “I think my whole way of thinking is like, ‘Well, let’s just go for it, let’s just do it!’ and I think before I was very hesitant and now, you know, I’m just like, ‘Okay, well let’s try this, this looks great, let’s try this, let’s see if this works.’ And you know, sometimes they pan out and sometimes they don’t” (MRI1Y2, ¶ 285).

When asked what made SCRI so powerful, a third-grade teacher commented, “I read research, but actually coming out and trying the strategies and actually doing the strategies with the students and it works. This is the powerful aspect of it” (HHI1Y2, ¶ 62). The study groups created by the coaches became a place for teachers to learn new strategies that the teachers felt they could really try out in their classrooms. Teachers then felt comfortable returning to the study group to share and get feedback.

### Using Authentic Assessments

Eighty-eight percent of the teachers (31 of the 35) mentioned that they used more authentic assessments (that they had learned about from their coach) in their classrooms. Ten of these teachers talked about how they more often worked individually with their students through conferencing, and 17 teachers mentioned how they began to use kid-watching (Goodman, 1978) as a way to learn more about their students’ learning. One veteran teacher discussed how these forms of assessment helped her get to know her students better and how to help them: “Right now I’m aware of the needs of the students more. I take time to listen to them, I mean really listen and know what they’re writing about and what they’re

interested in as far as conferencing time for writing and conferencing time for reading. . . . I've learned how to help the students. If you listen to the students you can help them better" (EHFIY3, ¶ 12). Teachers also began to use Running Records (Clay, 2000) and/or Miscue Analysis (Burke & Goodman, 1972) to gain a better perspective of their students' reading strengths and weaknesses. One second-grade teacher talked about the benefits of implementing these assessments in her classroom: "You can tell more of what they are doing and how I can help them. Not only do I do [Running Records], I talk to [the students] and try to see what they like to read and talk with them about what they are reading. Last year when we did the kid-watching, I tried to do more with reading conferences and helping a child do more with that kind of thing. It was just amazing to me if you try more things, you can just do more" (HRO2DY3, ¶ 20).

### Changing Beliefs and Practices Based on the Literature

One new practice teachers discussed was reading professional literature, including educational theory and research in books and journals. As we discussed earlier, coaches asked teachers to read articles and books about research and best practices. Eighty-two percent (29 out of 35) of the teachers commented positively on the professional literature they read in study groups. Six of these teachers mentioned that their new appreciation of professional readings inspired them to read beyond what was introduced in study groups. When one kindergarten teacher was asked if she had always chosen to read articles and books about teaching, she replied: "No, no, I do more now than I have ever done and I think it is because of SCRI. . . . In graduate courses, or courses that I have taken after that, I did it because I had to, not because I wanted to. But now I do it a lot more because I want to" (KEIFY2, ¶ 460). From these professional readings, teachers gained new insights into teaching practices, which helped them name and/or refine their teaching philosophies.

Eighteen teachers specifically discussed how their beliefs about how children learn and effective teaching practices changed based on the reading the coach asked them to do as part of their SCRI study groups. A first-grade teacher shared, "Before SCRI, I believed that all children . . . could learn and benefit from doing one thing. Now I know that no, they can't do that. You have to teach to their ability. You have to teach where they are" (DSIFY3, ¶ 1144), while a third-grade teacher described how her views of her students as learners changed: "I've learned that students are readers and writers. Prior to SCRI, I would say, 'I'm teaching reading and writing.' Since my involvement in SCRI, it's the fact and the realization that I'm teaching readers and that I'm teaching writers. . . . So I look at different approaches to how I teach readers and writers . . . my approach to teaching them has certainly been a dramatic change" (HHIFY2, ¶ 47). Another veteran first-grade teacher shared how her views of a phonics-based approach changed: "I am a strong phonics teacher, and at first I felt like [SCRI] was an attack on phonics. The more I got into SCRI, the more I realized that it was not an attack on phonics, it was a balancing act. Before I was not including all the areas that I needed to make a well-rounded reader, and a reader who would love reading forever. . . . I have slowly realized that it takes all of it to make a complete reader" (HMI1Y2, ¶ 19).

Teachers also discussed how their views of their own roles in the classroom changed. A first-year teacher shared, “I’m a facilitator. I mean I don’t have all the answers for them and I am learning from them too. I’m learning how to adapt my approach to how they’re responding to me” (TR1Y3, ¶ 225). Another teacher commented that she now wanted to “make my teaching research-based” (HHFIY3, ¶ 699).

### Student-Centered Curriculum

Forty-two percent of the teachers (15 out of 35) specifically talked about how they learned to give up control of the curriculum to their students and allowed their students to have more choice; this reflected their beliefs that they needed to become facilitators of their students’ learning. As one veteran teacher explained, “I think through SCRI I began to free myself up and I began to realize it was not all my responsibility. Their learning is not my responsibility. It’s their responsibility. I’m just here to guide and facilitate” (DC1Y3, ¶ 49). Teachers talked about how they were more flexible with their lesson plans and were more willing to go along with their students’ interests. For example, one third-grade teacher said, “You have to learn as a teacher . . . you have to change and it’s not always easy. This year has been very difficult for me because I made a lot of transitions from that authoritative, in-charge, ‘let me control everything,’ into letting go and letting my students guide me in many respects. And I’ve learned that through SCRI and I hope that I continue to go down the same path” (GRI3Y3, ¶ 322).

Even experienced teachers realized they could trust students with their own learning: “I have to keep telling myself it is child-driven and children can do this. Because we teachers are so used to being in charge, the know-all person, we just have to give that up and allow the children to have some say-so in what they want to learn” (RSIFY3, ¶ 891). Another veteran teacher explained, “I look at the children for directions to go to rather than just, ‘This is what the teacher’s guide says.’ . . . I think being confident enough to plan my curriculum based on what I know is best for that particular group of children or individuals” (VM1Y3, ¶ 101).

### Discussion and Implications

The 35 teachers who participated in the current study described the ways in which coaches were helpful to them. Coaches created ways for them to collaborate with each other, provided support, and taught them research-based practices. The finding that a professional community mattered a great deal to the teachers is not news to those who study PD (e.g., Clair, 1998; Clark et al., 1996; Gentry & Keilty, 2004; Glazer & Hannafin, 2006; Johnson, 1990; Joyce, 2004; Park, Oliver, Johnson, Graham, & Oppong, 2007; Perez-Katz, 2007; Raphael et al., 2001; Richardson & Placier, 2001; Robb, 2000; Rodgers & Pinnell, 2002), nor to those of us who spend considerable amounts of time in schools. Teachers rarely have time to talk with each other professionally, and it is clear from this study that they appreciated the opportunity to do so. However, time for teachers to talk with each other professionally was not built into most of the staff development experiences that these

teachers had previously nor was it built into the structures of their schools. These 35 teachers were accustomed, instead, to one-shot in-service sessions with little time to talk to one another. Therefore, they appreciated the opportunity to engage in professional conversations over a 3-year period. Indeed, they so valued the time to talk that the 3-year time commitment was seen by them as an advantage instead of a disadvantage.

The finding that the teachers valued the support of a peer (i.e., their coach) also seems like common sense and is supported by professional literature (e.g., Bean & Wilson, 1981; Russo, 2004; Showers, Joyce, & Bennett, 1987; Sturtevant, 2004). Yet, in most school districts, teachers have evaluators, not coaches. The typical pattern is for teachers to be formally evaluated once or twice a year and provided with feedback at that time, but not for them to receive ongoing support from someone whose job is not to judge them but to help them become better teachers. Even in schools with coaches, there is sometimes a tendency for coaches to try to get teachers to do particular things that the administration has deemed necessary and for teachers to be evaluated by their coach against those goals. In this study, coaches did not evaluate, but instead supported—they supported, encouraged, facilitated, demonstrated, were accessible, and helped with a wide range of tasks. It seems reasonable for more schools and states to consider providing teachers with this kind of support that facilitates growth.

The finding that teachers valued the opportunity to read educational research and the help their coach provided them about how to implement this research in the classroom is also something that is valued by the research community. Indeed, the decision by the SDE to implement school-based study groups was grounded in the belief that knowledgeable teachers have the biggest impact on the success of students' literacy achievement (Allington, 2002; Darling-Hammond, 1996). However, most PD providers give teachers activities and prepackaged guidelines on how to teach the curriculum, but do not help teachers build the broad and deep knowledge base on which they can ground effective instructional decisions. One of the arguments often put forth is that teachers do not want to know about theory and research, but rather they simply want to know what to do come Monday morning. This study suggests that teachers did value the research and theory; for most of them, a shift in theory is what led to a shift in practice.

When we began this study, we anticipated that the answers to our question regarding changes in teachers' beliefs and practices would most likely be a list of particular practices (e.g., read aloud, shared reading, small group focused reading instruction). We therefore were surprised that teachers focused not on what practices they had altered but instead on how they had re-envisioned themselves as teachers. The teachers felt that their coaches helped them develop a sense of agency by helping them empower themselves to take risks and try new teaching practices. The teachers developed new means of authentic assessment and used their new insights to better meet the needs of all of their students. Teachers reported shifting their philosophy of teaching and began to focus more on curriculum driven by the needs of their students rather than on a curriculum of covering. The teachers stepped back and, just as they felt in themselves an increased sense of agency as teachers, they helped their students to develop an increased sense of agency as learners. By controlling less of what they used to consider

*teaching* and making more room for learning, teachers' notions of what it meant to teach began to parallel the way in which they were being taught by their coaches; the teachers began to facilitate rather than dictate, to encourage, and to demonstrate. These are considerable and remarkable changes wrought in a few short years by literacy coaches who, in the first year, were all new at the job of coach and, over the 3 years, simultaneously learning how to do that job.

As we pen these words, however, we worry that we are creating an illusion. These coaches were very real human beings, and all of them tried things that did not work, reflected on their experiences, and tried again. Like the teachers, some of them made strides forward, while also suffering setbacks. Some coaches and teachers traveled a considerable distance in 3 years, while others did not. The overall patterns for coaches, however, are clear. Teachers valued the help they got from their coach and made changes because of their coach—changes that the teachers felt good about, and that in turn helped their students become better readers.

As the field hopefully moves away from advocating for coaches and describing what coaches ought to do and are doing, and moves toward understanding how it is that coaches can help teachers who, in turn, can help students, we hope that the voices of these 35 teachers will be heard in the ensuing conversations. These teachers all had a coach in their lives for 3 years and had clear ideas about what proved helpful and how they were changed by the process. They lived the experience most of us only advocate for or study from afar. It is these teachers who are the experts about effective coaching. We appreciate the time they gave to name their experiences and, in so doing, the major contribution they have made to the profession.

## Limitations

There are at least four limitations to this study. The first has to do with the population. The teachers in SCRI were all volunteers. In some of subsequent iterations (e.g., SC READS and SC Reading First), teachers were required to participate. We might have had different responses from a nonvoluntary group. The second limitation has to do with data collection. There were six individuals on the research team, three of whom were also teaching-team members. If the teachers knew that the researcher who visited and talked with them was a member of the teaching team (which most did not), they may have felt that they needed to report only the good news. The third limitation also has to do with data collection. While we considered it advantageous that the interview protocol did not include the specific questions we sought to understand in this study, we might have gotten different responses if we had asked questions such as, What do you consider as strengths and weaknesses of your coach? The fourth limitation has to do with the support structure of SCRI. SCRI literacy coaches had 3 years of PD from a university faculty member, were visited monthly and attended regional study with a regional coach, and had the additional support of an SDE liaison. Findings from this study therefore cannot be generalized to coaches who work in very different support structures.

## Areas for Future Research

As noted in the opening paragraph, there is a great deal of interest in literacy coaching and very little research. There needs to be more research about what specific actions coaches take when working with teachers and the language they use. We also need research that ties coaches' actions and language to teacher change and student achievement. In addition, there needs to be research on the contexts in which coaches work and on the influence of their environment on their effectiveness. Some of the administrators with whom these coaches worked were very supportive, while others were neutral, and still others took actions that undermined the coach's work. We also need to study the PD provided to coaches and investigate its effectiveness. It would be helpful if researchers were able to assess the effectiveness of coached teachers and tie those effectiveness ratings to student achievement. In such a study, it would also be helpful to include as factors the effectiveness of the coach and the supportiveness of the school context.

Many educators believe that coaching is effective. Believing that coaching is effective, however, does not provide the research-based foundation that is needed to determine whether coaches can significantly impact teachers' beliefs and practices and enhance student achievement. We found 10 studies on coaching. When there are 10 times that many, we may begin to have the data we need to form an opinion on the effectiveness of coaching and the conditions necessary for such effectiveness.

## Appendix A

### Fall of Year 3 Teacher Semistructured Interview

Part I: Any unaddressed questions from prior year.

Part II: New questions based on data analysis, summer after Year 2:

1. What were you like when you first began teaching? Before SCRI? How would you describe yourself now? What has changed/stayed the same? If there are changes, to what do you attribute them?
2. What was your classroom like when you first began teaching? Before SCRI? Now? Identify what has changed/stayed the same. If there are any changes, to what do you attribute them?
3. When you first started teaching, how did you teach reading? Before SCRI? Now? For all three time periods, how did you decide to teach it that way? Identify what has changed/stayed the same. If there are changes, to what do you attribute it?
4. When you first started teaching, how did you define reading? How do you define it now? Identify what has changed/stayed the same. If there are changes, to what do you attribute it?
5. When you first started teaching, how did you assess children as readers? Before SCRI? If there are changes, to what do you attribute it?
6. What do you think matters most now about reading/reading instruction/reading assessment? (Or) If you were to come to the university and do a session on

“best practices” in reading for the preservice teachers, what would you tell them? How did you come to decide about the importance of each of these things?

7. How close/far do you see your classroom from this ideal?
8. What would have to happen in order for your classroom to be your ideal classroom?
9. How do you think SCRI would describe the ideal classroom? With what aspects do you agree or disagree?
10. As you look back on your teaching career, what things were most challenging? What things are most challenging now?

## Appendix B

### Coaches' Classroom Demonstrations (as Reported by the Teachers with Whom They Worked)

Big books  
 Book fairy  
 Classroom management  
 Conferencing  
 Content area reading  
 Guided reading  
 Inquiry  
 Just right books  
 Kid-watching  
 Literature circles  
 Nonfiction reading  
 Poetry  
 Read-alouds  
 Reading strategies  
 Responsive teaching cycle  
 Running records  
 Shared reading  
 Struggling readers  
 Think-alouds  
 Vocabulary  
 Writer's workshop  
 Writing

## Notes

Many individuals contributed to this article. Diane DeFord, Amy Donnelly, Denise Morgan, and Diane Stephens, along with doctoral students Karen Crowder and Erin Hamel, conducted the interviews analyzed in this study. Diane DeFord and Diane Stephens, along with doctoral student Michelle Vanderburg, developed the preliminary coding system. Michelle Vanderburg,

in collaboration with Diane Stephens, expanded and refined the coding system. Michelle Vanderburg coded the 35 sets of interviews and, in collaboration with Diane Stephens, served as first author on the article. However, Diane Stephens takes all responsibility for the meaning constructed by the analysis and for the manner in which the data have been reported.

1. For a comprehensive list of such sources, please see the Literacy Coaching Clearinghouse Web site at [www.literacycoachingonline.org](http://www.literacycoachingonline.org).

2. A table of contents for both the *Article Packet* (NCTE, 2000a) and the *Participant Notebook* (NCTE, 2000b) is available upon request from the authors.

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