

Professional Development, Expectations, and Coaching: One School’s Approach to Strengthening Balanced Literacy Instruction

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In 2014 the Nunavut Department of Education announced the adoption of a balanced literacy approach and in 2015/2016 a Learning Coach position was added to each school to help “teachers improve their literacy instruction” (Sponagle, 2015). Research suggests that while professional development may increase teacher knowledge, it does not necessarily result in changes to teacher practice. This paper will describe how one school combined ongoing professional development, administrator expectations, and support from a coach, in their efforts to strengthen the use of balanced literacy practices.

Situating Myself

Researchers in indigenous communities must acknowledge that they bring their subjective self to the research (Atkinson, 2001, p. 10 a cited in Wilson, 2008, p. 59). I am a white, unilingual English-speaking teacher who has lived in Nunavut for the past sixteen years. During this time, I’ve held roles both in the Department of Education and at the school level.

Context

According to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, Inuit were spared the same degree of severity that other aboriginal groups across Canada experienced (2012, p. 55). Since the creation of Nunavut, the Education Act and guiding legislative documents have indicated a desire that Inuit Qaujimagatugangit

(traditional knowledge, values, and beliefs) and Inuktitut be the foundation of the education system.

The K-6 school that is the focus of this study is located in a remote community of 1279 (Statistics Canada, 2012). 43% of the population in this community speaks Inuktitut as a first language, but 85% report that English is the language spoken most often at home (Statistics Canada, 2012). Early immersion was chosen as the language of instruction model in an attempt to revitalize the Inuktitut language.

Methodology

Action research was selected as the methodology for this study because the supports implemented were done so independent of the existence of a research study. Data were collected and analyzed, and changes were made immediately in an attempt to continually improve how teachers were supported. The Learning Coach was interviewed and documents such as coaching logs, coaching request forms, and in-service handouts were reviewed.

Professional Development

During the 2015/2016 school year staff received a two-day in-service from regional school operations staff focused on Daily 5, flexible groupings, and guided reading. They also provided 45-minute presentations on word walls and classroom libraries that were delivered by the Learning Coach.

The staff also participated in twelve half-day in-services on literacy topics. The topics of these included independent reading, classroom libraries, guided reading, word study centres, word walls, writing centres, buddy reading, classroom design, and implementing Daily 5.

A literacy study group met Monday's after school. In the fall this was limited to beginning teachers and focused on a book study

of *Spaces & Places: Designing Classrooms for Literacy* by Debbie Diller. In the winter, these sessions were open to all staff and focused on how to teach reading strategies using read alouds and shared reading

Administrator Expectations

At the start of the year, the teacher evaluation process was linked to literacy and the expectation that teachers were to be working towards implementing balanced literacy strategies. Each school literacy in-service was linked to expectations that teachers needed to meet with deadlines. For example, after the in-services on classroom libraries and independent reading, teachers were required to have a classroom library in their room and students were expected to have time each day to read independently.

In January, the regional school operations office implemented a ‘Classroom Environment Checklist’ that was to be completed by teachers, the Principal, and the Superintendent. This looked for a word wall and classroom library, student writing, planning for a daily literacy block, and assessment folders. From this one-time assessment, a monthly evaluation was created for teachers at this school that also included school literacy priorities. For example, where the assessment required “students have access to books that are at their level”, this was expanded to include that the books were sorted into categories and placed in labelled baskets – expectations that were placed on staff following the school in-service on classroom libraries. A small next step was provided for each teacher each time this assessment was completed

Coaching

The Learning Coach had scheduled one-on-one meetings two to four days a week for thirty minutes with each beginning teacher on staff. Her purpose was to mentor them as first-year teachers, to introduce them to new literacy resources, and to support them in meeting literacy expectations.

In January a Coaching Cycle Request Form was developed, and classroom release time was made available to encourage all staff to participate in coaching cycles. Although only three teachers reported participating in a coaching cycle with the Learning Coach, many teachers sought her help informally, during their prep time and after school.

The Learning Coach reported that her main activities included:

- Organizing the literacy resource room.
- Introducing teachers to new literacy resources.
- Helping the Principal with goal-setting and professional development planning.
- Finding and creating resources to support Inuktitut literacy such as labels to help organize classroom libraries and word wall cards.
- Interpreting administrator and regional literacy expectations for teachers and helping them understand how to meet them.
- Organizing a daily cross-grades English guided reading program for students in grades four-to-six, and
- Collaborating on a daily cross-grades Inuktitut word study program for students in kindergarten-to-grade 3 and a theme-based Picture Word Induction initiative to support Inuktitut vocabulary development school-wide.

Findings

School staff were surveyed in May 2016 to gather information about staff knowledge and use of balanced literacy. This data revealed that staff felt more knowledgeable about balanced literacy. The Learning Coach believes that staff are feeling more confident and comfortable with the vocabulary. Aspects that were directly linked to administrator expectations showed growth over the course of the year, whereas aspects that staff received professional development or coaching on, but that were not linked to expectations, showed less implementation. The sense from the Learning Coach is that staff are beginning to feel as though balanced literacy is something they can do, and they are starting to be more engaged in their language arts planning and interested in trying out new strategies.

Recommendations

Relevant literature and the experience of this school suggest a number of recommendations that other schools may wish to consider.

1. Teacher, Coach, Administrator, and regional goals need to be aligned and communicated.

Ippolito (2010) discusses the need for “teacher, coach, and administrative goals” (p. 169) to be aligned. This school’s goals were adapted from regional goals and clearly articulated to staff at each school in-service.

2. Additional professional development aligned with school goals combined with follow-up support from a Coach must be provided. Neuman & Wright (2010) found that “professional development coursework alone did not lead to improvements in either teacher knowledge or practice” (p. 78). However, when professional development was combined with coaching there were “significant

increases and educationally meaningful changes” in both teacher knowledge and practice (Neuman & Wright, 2010, p. 66). It is important for schools to consider the needs of their staff in terms of meeting school goals so that additional, sustained professional development that is combined with on-going coaching support can be provided.

3. Professional development must be linked to expectations for changes in teacher practice.

One study found that “teachers actively engaged in coaching tried new instructional practices learned in traditional workshops more often than teachers who did not participate in coaching” (Matsurma, Garnier, Correnti, Junker, & Bickel, 2010, p. 37). Coaching provides not only follow-up support but also an accountability component (Neuman & Wright, 2010, p. 81). The beginning teachers that had assigned meeting times with the Learning Coach seemed more actively engaged in implementing new strategies and resources, but this may have been that as beginning teachers they did not have established practices of their own to fall back on.

Literacy criteria were highlighted in the teacher evaluation and were the focus of those discussions, which meant that all teachers were held accountable for meeting minimum expectations for implementing strategies taught in school in-services.

4. The role of Learning Coach must be clearly defined and linked to school goals.

Smith found that coaches who “assumed multiple roles” were less effective than those with clearly defined roles and responsibilities focused on their core goal of improving teacher practice (p. 63 as cited in Pomerantz & Pierce, 2013, p. 103). The Learning Coach and I checked in with each other periodically to evaluate whether

we were trying to accomplish too much and to re-establish our priorities.

5. Administrators and Learning Coaches must collaborate in their use of responsive and directive coaching methods.

The relationship aspect inherent in coaching makes it challenging for coaches to balance supporting teachers to reach personal goals, with district initiatives and student needs (Ippolito, 2010, p. 169). The idea of responsive vs. directive coaching is an area where the Principal and the Learning Coach blurred traditional Principal/Coach role descriptions. According to Ippolito (2010):

Responsive relationships are those in which coaches focus on teacher self-reflection, thereby, allowing teachers' and students' needs to guide the coaching process. Directive relationships are those in which coaches assume the role of expert and are assertive about what instructional practices teachers must implement. (p. 165).

The Principal of this school played the directive coaching role, delivering school in-services and setting expectations for changes in literacy practices, leaving the Learning Coach to fulfil a responsive coaching role.

6. Time must be provided for teachers to implement new strategies. Teacher participation in coaching tends to be voluntary and many teachers feel they have neither the time, nor the need to improve their practice (Maturma, Garnier, Correnti, Junker, & Bickel, 2010, p. 53). Beginning teachers were given additional prep time to be used to work with the Coach and release time was available for any teacher who wanted to participate in a coaching cycle. Although this was not widely used, it eliminated any excuses about a lack of time.

7. The Principal must be supportive and knowledgeable about literacy and be willing to address school culture issues.

Principals who were considered knowledgeable about literacy practices were found to be more supportive of coaching efforts. This ranged from understanding the need to purchase resources (Pomerantz & Pierce, 2013, p. 111) to “connect[ing] coaching efforts to larger observation, evaluation, and school improvement goals” (Ippolito, 2010, p. 179). The most important role of the principal is to intervene in school culture to minimize and eliminate aspects of teacher behaviour that have been found to “undermine coaching efforts” (Donaldson et al., 2008 & McKenna & Walpole, 2008 as cited in Ippolito, 2010, p. 165). All staff at this school are clear about what the expectations are and that meeting them is not optional.

Conclusion

This paper described how one school combined on-going professional development with administrator expectations and support from a Learning Coach. Research indicates that when professional development is combined with coaching it tends to be more successful in impacting teacher practice. This school went one step further and added specific administrator-directed expectations for changes in teacher practice. This combination resulted in a supportive environment for teachers to try new strategies with the clear understanding by all staff that these were non-negotiable expectations. Other schools may be able to adopt some of these strategies as they work towards implementing the literacy initiative.

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