

MENTORING NOVICE ELEMENTARY TEACHERS

IN RURAL ALASKA

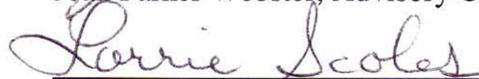
By

Natalie Ann McBrayer

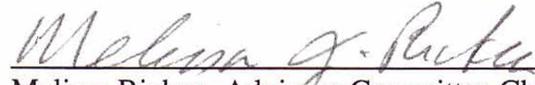
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Melissa Rickey, Advisory Committee Chair

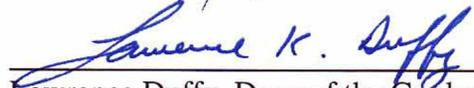


Allan Morotti, Department Head
School of Education Graduate Program

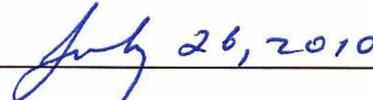
APPROVED:



Eric Madsen, Dean, School of Education



Lawrence Duffy, Dean of the Graduate School



Date

MENTORING NOVICE ELEMENTARY TEACHERS

IN RURAL ALASKA

A Thesis

Presented to the Faculty
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By

Natalie A. McBrayer, B.S.

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Abstract

This study investigates the impact of a literacy coach on novice teachers' reading instructional practices. Coaches are used to support teachers in their classrooms in districts across the country to improve student achievement. At this time, the tie between coaches, teachers and student achievement in research is limited. This qualitative study explores the impact of a literacy coach on three novice teachers' and their reading instructional practices.

Data was collected using field notes, interviews, collaborative logs and observations. Analysis indicates that teachers relied on the coach to support them in five main areas. Those areas were; teacher request for support in ordering supplies, organizing the classroom, etc.; classroom practice that included working with classroom aides, on going assessment, etc.; teacher learning that had to do with teaching specific skills, professional reading, etc. The last two areas were student improvement and impact of the coach.

The results of this study indicate that a literacy coach does have an impact on novice teachers reading practices, which in turn raises student achievement. Test scores, students' daily work and passing levels, indicate evidence of the achievement. More research is needed in the area of teacher mentoring and how it affects student achievement.

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Chapter One

Introduction

Teacher quality and student achievement have been scrutinized by the federal and state government with the federal No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB) guidelines. Teacher quality is an important component in improving student achievement. Novice teachers are in need of professional development from the very start of their careers to insure that they receive the chance to become the highest quality teachers possible. NCLB puts further pressure on these teachers to raise student-reading achievement by requiring that all children read at grade level by the end of grade three. Mentoring can help novice teachers improve their practice and then reflect on the effectiveness of their instruction (Holloway, 2001).

In their first years of teaching and because they lack experience, novice teachers may focus on survival instead of student achievement (Feaster, 2002). In addition, many novice teachers are placed in schools with the greatest need and in challenging classrooms with little or no support and are expected to perform as well as experienced teachers. Mentoring is an effective way to provide support and professional development for novice teachers (Robbins, 1999). In the report *No Dream Denied*, the authors state that new teachers with no induction program that includes mentoring are twice as likely as mentored teachers to leave in the first three years. It goes on to say that new teachers that are mentored also do not have to learn by trial and error so they become competent teachers more quickly (National Commission on Teaching and America's Future

(NCTAF), 2003). If we provide new teachers with effective supports at the beginning of their career, we can diminish teacher turnover and really focus on student achievement.

The Federal Reading First grant, which came out of No Child Left Behind legislation, is a grant awarded to states that in turn award sub-grants to Local Education Agencies (LEA's). Rod Paige the former Secretary of Education (2003) stated in a press release, "The basic elements of Reading First are clear: diagnose and address reading difficulties early; base instruction on what works; give teachers the training they need; constantly assess progress; and develop a state infrastructure to see it through" (¶ 2). Alaska conducted its own sub-grant competitions, which targeted the neediest and most under-resourced, and under-performing districts and schools in reading at the primary grades. The state identified which schools could apply for the grant. Districts and schools then completed an extensive grant application, a selected state committee reviewed. Schools that received Reading First funds were mandated to use scientifically research based reading programs, practices and assessments. Districts and schools were also required to provide professional development targeting improved reading instruction as one of the components of the grant. Many states, including Alaska chose to fund literacy coaches as one way to provide that professional development.

Currently, literacy coaches are to work with all kindergarten through third grade teachers providing ongoing professional development along with other duties. Some of those duties include; testing students, holding team meetings, modeling reading lessons for teachers, helping teachers plan their reading lessons, observing teachers and providing feedback on reading instruction. The research on the effectiveness of literacy coaches is

limited; however more studies are currently being conducted. Poglinco, Bach, Hovde, Rosenblum, Saunders & Supovitz (2003) found that there was “no research that provided evidence of the relationship between coaching and student learning” (p. 4). Northwest Regional Education Laboratory (2006) is currently conducting research in five states that focuses on Reading First literacy coaches and how they perceive and fulfill their roles (p. 11). The New Teacher Center in Santa Cruz is conducting “a series of studies to examine the effects of mentoring and induction support on student achievement” (Strong, 2006, p.4). Alaska Statewide Mentoring Program began research in 2004 and is continuing that research to look at teacher retention and the impact of mentoring on student achievement. Mentoring can only be effective if mentors are trained in much the same way as new teachers are trained. They must have ongoing training about mentoring, using formative assessments to document their work, collecting classroom performance data and using data to inform instruction (Moir, 2003). Joyce and Showers (1983) work shows that teachers learn new skills and new approaches but they do not transfer all the skills to their active repertoire and use them regularly unless a coaching component is added. When the coaching component is effectively implemented, the new skills will be added to the teachers’ active repertoire.

The purpose of this study is to explore the following essential question: What is the nature of the impact of a literacy coach on novice teachers’ reading instructional practices? The following subsidiary questions will explore some of the aspects of literacy coaching that are generally thought to result in positive outcomes for novice teachers and their students’ learning.

- Do novice teachers implement and use the new practices they learn through coaching? Why or why not?
- Do novice teachers see that their instructional practice has a positive impact on their students' reading development? Why or why not?
- What evidence do novice teachers provide to document positive impact or lack of progress?

By examining the coaching relationship between three novice teachers and their literacy coach, it is hoped that this study can provide insight into the positive impact literacy coaching can have on novice teachers' understanding of reading development, on their reading instructional practices, and most important, their students' learning. Through studies such as this, administrators, teachers and government officials can gain a better understanding of the importance of coaching as a professional development activity that can improve teacher quality along with teacher retention rates. They will see the positive impact coaching can have on teachers' practices as they relate to student achievement.

Definitions of Terms

The following definitions are provided as a guide to the terms used in this thesis.

Mentor

The Merriam-Webster Dictionary (1997) defines mentor as “a trusted counselor or guide” (p. 461).

According to the New Teacher Center (2003), a mentor is a learner, trusted listener, teacher, resource, problem solver, advocate, facilitator, coach and collaborator.

A mentor is someone who has been where you are going; they share their experience, knowledge and wisdom about a particular occupation or workplace in general. A mentor is much more about a person who asks questions and suggests multiple options than one who imparts their own wisdom. Many teacher induction programs contain a mentoring component. The mentor works with novice teachers for one to three years helping them along the way. Robbins (1999) states that the mentor “provide the newcomer with support, guidance, feedback, problem-solving guidance, and a network of colleagues who share resources, insights, practices and materials” (p. 2). Mentor teachers collaborate with novice teachers in all aspects of teaching. These include co-developing lessons or curriculum units, problem solving issues, analyzing student work together, gathering materials or ideas for the novice teacher to use, and facilitating the new teachers’ thinking and problem solving in order to become reflective of their own practice.

Literacy Coach

Webster’s New Universal Unabridged Dictionary (1979) defines the term coach as “to act in the capacity of coach; as, he coaches at Harvard; also to receive special instruction from a coach; as, he will coach in mathematics” (p. 1412). The International Reading Association (2004) views “reading coaching as a means of providing professional development for teachers in schools” (p. 2). They are usually non-evaluative and serve as a trusted colleague who supports teachers in their learning of instructional

practices or programs. Cathy Toll (2004) sees the coach as someone very positive; they are people who help teachers see what they already know and can do, how to improve in those areas, and support them in new learning. Coaches can fulfill both the roles of teacher mentor and literacy program advocate.

The organization of this thesis is as follows: In chapter 2, I review the literature in relation to teacher quality and student achievement, teacher retention, teacher mentoring and literacy coaching. In chapter 3, I provide the methodology, which includes data gathering, analysis of the data and the findings. In chapter 4, I present my findings. Lastly, in chapter 5, I discuss my findings providing the conclusions, implications, and limitations of the study.

Chapter Two

Review of the Literature

Teacher Quality and Student Achievement

The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 set the important goal that all students be taught by a "highly qualified teacher" who holds at least a bachelor's degree, has obtained full state certification, and has demonstrated knowledge in the core academic subjects he or she teaches. NCLB states that all teachers must be highly qualified by the close of school year 2005-06. Teachers can demonstrate they are "highly qualified" by passing a state content assessment, holding an undergraduate or graduate degree in the subjects they teach or by completing their states' High Objective Uniform State Standard of Evaluation (HOUSSE) procedure (U.S. Department of Education, 2004).

In the state of Alaska teachers who were teaching prior to the 2002-2003 school years could build a HOUSSE. Federal law allows each state to set its own requirements for its HOUSSE. The state of Alaska requires that teachers gain a score of 100 total points to be considered highly qualified. Areas in which teachers can gain points include years teaching in their content area, holding an endorsement in their teaching assignment, holding a graduate degree, doing college level course work, engaging in professional development, and contributing service to the profession and to content area (Alaska Department of Education & Early Development, 2006).

Starting in the 2007-2008 school year the HOUSSE could only be used for secondary teachers in rural Alaska (A. Trout, personal communication, April 13, 2007).

Elementary teachers hired after the 2002-2003 school year need to pass one of two Praxis II tests identified for elementary teachers. Secondary teachers need to hold a major in their content area, or have an advanced degree in their content area, or advanced certification in their content area or take the Praxis II test in their content area. If teachers have endorsements, they can become highly qualified in that area if they have thirty hours of content classes in that subject. Classes that are just about pedagogy do not count toward the thirty classroom hours (A. Trout, personal communication, April 13, 2007). Teachers can take that Praxis II for any subject area in which they would like to be highly qualified.

The federal government's definition of highly qualified says nothing about the art of teaching or the importance of studying child development (Hurwitz & Hurwitz, 2005). The Southeast Center for Teaching Quality (2004) found that teachers and administrators had concerns about the federal definition of "highly qualified." They heard from teachers that while content knowledge is an important part of teaching, there is much more beyond content knowledge that makes a teacher highly qualified. Both veteran and novice teachers stated that:

Highly qualified teachers communicate content-related concepts to a classroom full of diverse learners; understanding the developmental stages of learning and of children; and use of multiple types of student assessment data to revise instruction on a daily basis. (p.1)

U. S. Department of Education, Office of Postsecondary Education (2005) states that in addition to meeting the NCLB definition of highly qualified teachers must also be able to:

- Demonstrate subject matter expertise as defined by NCLB and use proven research-based strategies appropriate to their content area of expertise;
- Interpret data, including assessment data, to make instructional decisions;
- Adapt and individualize instruction for diverse learners;
- Be prepared to teach in high-need schools; and
- Use 21st-century skills. (p.6)

Teacher preparation programs, whether traditional or alternative, are responsible for producing successful teachers with the above skills.

The state of Alaska has changed its requirements for teacher certification; it now includes a Teacher Performance Review. Alaska has a three-tiered, performance-based system that consists of Initial, Professional and Master certification. Teachers must demonstrate their content knowledge as well as their ability to deliver content knowledge to students. Teachers may also go through The Alaska Teacher Performance Review to move to or renew Master Certification, earn public recognition or earn highly qualified status (Alaska Department of Education & Early Development, 2006).

The Alaska Teacher Performance Review is required of all teachers initially certified September 1, 2006 and beyond who seek Professional certification. The Alaska Teacher Performance Review consists of a 45-minute videotape and the Supporting Documentation for the videotape. Teachers subject to the performance review requirements in regulation

must submit two performance reviews to Teacher Certification prior to the end of their second year of Initial certification in Alaska. (Alaska Department of Education and Early Development, 2006, p. 4)

Alaska teachers and administrators trained in the review process review and score the videotapes. The reviewers cover a variety of geographical areas of the state, endorsement areas and grade levels.

We can have every teacher in the United States be highly qualified but if we are not able to retain teachers in the profession over an extended period, the schools will still be in danger. In the next section, I will discuss teacher retention and the impact it has on schools.

Teacher Retention

Teacher retention plays a large part in the picture of having highly qualified teachers in every classroom. There has been much talk as to whether a teacher shortage exists or not. Smith and Ingersoll's (2004) work "found that effective support for new teachers was strongly and significantly related to teacher turnover" (p. 685). They looked at "movers," teachers who move to a different school after their first year and "leavers," teachers who leave teaching at the end of their first year. Many leavers left because they felt ineffective and isolated. Smith and Ingersoll (2004) found that "teachers participating in combinations of packages of mentoring and group induction activities were less likely to migrate to other schools or to leave teaching at the end of their first year" (p. 706). There is a teacher shortage in some respects in this country, with student enrollment increasing and the staffing problems that come along with teacher turnover. However,

there is a bigger problem of teacher recruitment and retention particularly in high poverty and rural schools. Research shows that forty to fifty percent of new teachers leave teaching by the end of five years (Ingersoll, 2001). Alaska has made some improvement in the retention of teachers. The average teacher turnover for the period between 2000 and 2004 was 11% for the five urban school districts and 24% for the rural districts. The average turnover by 2007 was down to 10% for urban districts and 22% for rural districts. Turnover between 1999 and 2007 for new Alaska teachers (one year or less experience) was 24% for all districts with 33% for rural districts and 17% for urban districts (Hill & Hirshberg, 2008). Alaska's Statewide Mentor Project has shown retention rates of first year teachers who were mentored at 89% for rural teachers and 100% for urban teachers during 2007. The retention rates for all teachers statewide during 2007 were 67% for rural teachers and 83% for urban teachers (Adams, 2008).

A study conducted by The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) found that nationwide eight percent of the public school teachers studied who were teaching in 2003-04 had left the profession a year later and eight percent had moved to another school. That same school year, teachers who were younger than thirty left teaching at the rate of nine percent and moved schools at the rate of 15 percent. About a third of those teachers moved because they had an opportunity for a better teaching assignment. Some of the teachers who left continued in the education field but not in a K-12 classroom. (Marvel, Lyter, Peltola, Strizek & Morton, 2006).

In the rural district where I work, teacher retention is an issue we deal with on a regular basis. Over the last four years we have had an average of 31.25 % of teachers

leave our district each year. Our highest teacher turnover was 43% and the lowest was 25% in the last four years. Some of the reasons for the turnover include desire to move to a larger school, isolation, the high cost of living in a rural community, lack of outside opportunities, wanting to meet someone to date, and no longer wanting to teach in a classroom with such a large age span (S. Atwater, personal communication, July 2007).

Teachers leave schools and the profession for many different reasons; unless we find ways to retain teachers for more than a few years our education system will continue to struggle. We need to find ways to support novice teachers so they are not giving up on the profession before they become the best teacher they can be. In the next section, I will discuss the stages teachers go through in their first year and throughout their career.

Stages of Teachers' Development

Ellen Moir of the New Teacher Center (NTC) wrote a chapter about the Stages of First-Year Teachers (1999). In the chapter, she outlines the phases the NTC have observed after working with nearly 1,500 novice teachers go through in their first three years of teaching. These stages were presented to all new mentors during their training through the New Teacher Center. I had the opportunity to receive the New Teacher Center training through the State of Alaska mentoring project. The first stage is the anticipation phase, which begins during student teaching and continues through the first few weeks of the new teaching position. The closer they come to getting their first job the more excited and anxious pre-teachers become about their first teaching assignment. They have an idealistic view of how they will accomplish goals and have a great commitment to making a difference in students' lives.

Next is the survival phase, which takes place during the first and second month of school. Teachers are very overwhelmed with all they have to learn and do. They are struggling to stay afloat and have very little time to reflect, let alone stop and think about anything but day- to- day teaching. Many teachers at this phase work an inordinate amount of hours just to be prepared every day. They keep their commitment, energy and enthusiasm up during this phase.

Novice teachers then enter the disillusionment phase in which they become disenchanted. This phase will have a different intensity and length for each new teacher. This phase is the toughest one they will go through during their first year. During this time, they will have school events such as back-to-school night, evaluation by their administrator, their first parent teacher conferences and they will usually get sick. They may be dealing more with the management and discipline of the classroom than with the curriculum, which may make them frustrated. Friends and family may add to their stress by demanding more of their time and wanting to know why they do not see them more. New teachers will question their competence and commitment to the profession during this phase.

The fourth phase is rejuvenation, which generally begins after winter break. New teachers have had time to rest, relax, exercise, eat and be with family and friends. During winter break, they may also have spent some time organizing their classroom and curriculum and making new goals for the rest of the school year, they have renewed hope. After going through the first half of the school year, they now have some coping strategies and skills that they can fall back on to reduce or prevent problems in the second

half of the year. Near the end of this phase, they may question whether they have done enough for their students and whether or not the students will pass the required assessments.

The last phase is reflection. This phase usually begins in May and is an invigorating time for novice teachers. During this time, they begin to make plans for next year thinking of changes they will make in their classroom management, their teaching strategies and curriculum improvements. The end of their first year is in sight, they are almost done with maybe their most difficult year (Moir, 1999).

Fuller and Brown (1975) suggest three stages of concern in the development of novice teachers. The first stage is the survival stage in which new teachers focus their concerns on their own adequacy and survival. Will they have control of the class, will their students like them, do they know enough about the content they are teaching, will their administrators approve of them and how will they feel about being observed and critiqued? This stage focuses on personal feelings.

The second stage is teaching situation concerns. These concerns focus on the teaching situation such as time pressure, lack of materials, too many students, and other non-instructional duties. These are still teacher focused rather than student focused. The last stage is concerns about students. Teachers focus on “concerns about recognizing the social and emotional needs of pupils” (Fuller & Brown, 1975, p. 37) as well as meeting individual needs and fairness to students. Teachers may not be able to attend to students needs because they are still trying to control the classroom.

Understanding these phases, along with knowing stages teachers go through throughout their whole career, is important for administrators and mentors to know so they can support and assist colleagues in order to reduce teacher attrition and improve student achievement. Understanding the stages also helps in the planning of quality professional development for teaching staffs.

Mentoring

Mentoring/coaching is one model of professional development that provides ongoing non-evaluative support for teachers. It provides them with long-term support in learning new teaching strategies that provide high quality instruction to their students (Poglinco, et al, 2003). Coaching provides time for reflection, in-class demonstrations, and observations with supportive feedback. Coaching can help new teachers move beyond focusing on management and control of their classrooms to new ways of seeing their students so they can provide the instruction that the children need.

Holloway (2001) states, “mentoring played a significant role in the professional growth of the new teacher” (p. 86). Mentoring provides growth for the mentor teacher as well. Holloway (2001) adds, “A focused, systematic mentoring program has a positive influence on the performance of new teachers” (p. 86). Mentoring programs should also lower attrition rates because the novice teachers have support as they face new challenges for which they may feel unprepared. They have a guide to help them reflect on their practice and then are able to improve that practice.

The Santa Cruz New Teacher Project (NTC) “piloted research on student literacy development (that) has shown that student achievement in the classrooms of participating

new teachers matches that of students taught by veteran teachers” (Moir, Gless & Baron, 1999, p. 110). The NTC provides mentors with ongoing professional development that supports their learning. They can continue to learn new skills or refine areas they need to in order to support the new teachers they are mentoring. As new teachers, with the support of their mentors, look at student work to improve their practice mentor, coaching partners look at each other’s work to strengthen their practice.

Susan Black (2001) states, “With mentor support and guidance, new teachers focus on student’s learning sooner – a factor that contributes to schools’ overall students’ achievements” (p.1). She goes on to say that, there is room for improvement in mentor programs. Each program needs to be well organized, not just a pairing of novice and veteran teachers, as a poor program may do more harm than good for both the novice teacher and the students. An organized mentoring program starts out with a clear job description then carefully choosing the mentors and giving them full release from their classroom teaching jobs. They need to be trained in the processes and tools they will be using, and what is expected of them to help a novice teacher reflect on their practice. Mentors need ongoing training, support and opportunities to reflect by themselves and with other mentors (Holloway, 2001; Moir, Gless & Baron, 1999; Neufeld & Roper, 2003).

Literacy Coaching

Teacher coaching in literacy has become a focus for our school district, as a part of the Reading First Grant the district has received. Poglinco, et al (2003) provides this definition of what coaching does:

Coaching provides ongoing consistent support for the implementation and instruction components. It is non-threatening and supportive—not evaluative. It gives a sense of how good professional development is. It also affords the opportunity to see it work with students. (p. 42)

What the research is concluding now is that coaching/mentoring has a positive impact on student achievement and that coaching can help teachers think and reflect on their own practice. Duncan (2006) states, “The purpose of coaching is to support teachers as they extend and refine their knowledge and application of effective instruction. As a result, student learning increases” (p. 54). It is important that coaches be trained to work with adults and have in-depth knowledge of teaching and the subject matter. Coaching, controversy, consensus (2004) states that “coaching can, if done well, broadly raise the skill levels of teachers and widely raise students’ reading skills as a result” (p. 1) It goes on to say, “Coaching can help teachers think and reflect on their practice” (Coaching, controversy, consensus, 2004, p. 18). Coaches need their own professional development sessions to be able to continually train and reflect on their own practice in order to provide support to improve a novice teachers practice which in turn will have an impact on student achievement.

One group that has trained coaches is the Reading Success Network (RSN). RSN started at the Southern California Assistance Center. It spread to all 15 U.S. Department of Education funded assistance centers across the country. It is a process that helps strengthen K-3 reading programs by providing training, materials and ongoing assistance to reading coaches and teachers. They have trained coaches to work with kindergarten

through third grade teachers and their results have shown that when teachers practice change students experience growth in key reading skill areas. Slack (2003) points out that “teachers now routinely examine student data, monitoring student progress on a regular basis.” (p. 46). Students across RSN sites have improved their reading through this change in teacher practice.

Summary

Teacher retention and teacher quality are the main ingredients for improving student achievement. Research in the areas of teacher retention, teacher quality and coaching/mentoring are showing that coaches can have a positive impact on teachers. This impact can then be transferred to the students so they can experience growth in key academic areas. Coaches provide professional development that is not just a fly-by but rather ongoing support that can improve teacher practice.

Chapter Three

Methodology

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the mentoring relationship of a group of rural Alaskan teachers in regards to the novice teacher's practice of teaching reading skills and strategies. I wanted to discover if a traveling mentor teacher could have a positive impact on novice teachers and their reading instructional practice. During this study the questions I investigated included:

- Do novice teachers implement and use the new practices they learn through coaching?
- Do novice teachers see that their instructional practice has a positive impact on their students' reading development?
- What evidence do novice teachers provide to document positive impact or lack of progress?

Design of the study

To answer these questions, I designed a multi-case study (Bogdan and Biklen, 2003), in which I examined the topic of coaching and instructional practice through individual cases of three novice teachers working at three different rural school sites. I also used inquiry as stance as a part of my design. Cochran-Smith and Lytle (2009) "regard inquiry as stance as a grounded theory of action that positions the role of practitioners and practitioner knowledge as central to the goal of transforming teaching, learning, leading and schooling" (p. 119). The reason for this type of multi-case design

was to describe unique cases while looking for themes across them. The other reason to use the multi-case study was that I was a traveling mentor. I did not live in the same rural village as all three teachers; instead, I got on a five-to-nine passenger plane most Monday mornings and flew to one of the seven villages I serviced for our district. It took anywhere between an hour and twenty minutes to two hours depending on how many villages the plane stopped at to drop off and pick up mail, freight and passengers. I would arrive at the schools any time in the afternoon between twelve thirty and three o'clock.

When I traveled to the villages I traveled with all my food, clothing, bedding and other supplies I needed for the week. I had to be self-sufficient once I arrived at the school site so I did not burden the teachers that were living at that site. In some of the villages, there were itinerant apartments. If there was not an apartment available, I slept in the school and showered in the locker room. I was able to fly home on most Thursdays, although if I was visiting two sites during the week, I changed sites on Wednesday and flew home on Friday. There were other itinerants in the district so we had to coordinate our travel so no school site had multiple itinerants at one time who needed to work with the same teachers or students in a given week. Each of the seven schools I worked at had between eleven and thirty-five students from grades kindergarten through twelve.

Along with being the south area coach, I was also the district librarian, the coordinator for Reading First and Battle of the Books, and a professional development presenter for the district. My job as a mentor was non-evaluative; I was a support for the teachers and was on a teacher contract the same as any other teacher. The relationship

between the novice teachers and me was confidential and collaborative. I did not report to the principal; rather, the administrator in charge of instruction was my supervisor. After mentoring visits, I gave the principals and my supervisor a general synopsis of what I worked on with the novice teacher. I did not share areas of concern or specific conversations I had with the teachers to the principals or my supervisor.

All three-novice teachers came from unique backgrounds. One teacher graduated from our school district and student taught in the district. The second grew up in rural and urban Alaska and student taught in an urban district. The third teacher grew up and student taught in an urban area of another state; this was her first time in rural Alaska. Looking at the differences and similarities of these three situations while conducting the case study allowed for generalization as well as comparing and contrasting results across the cases (Bogdan and Biklen, 2003).

As the researcher, I was a participant observer, in that I was taking part in the activities along with observing at the study sites (Creswell, 2005). I was conducting action research with inquiry as my stance. Cochran-Smith and Lytle say that:

Inquiry as stance is grounded in the problems and contexts of practice in the first place and in the ways practitioners collaboratively theorize, study, and act on those problems in the best interests of the learning and life chances of students and their communities. (p. 123)

Overall, my participation was required as the coach of these three novice teachers, but I was able to be just the observer at times in their classrooms. The participants

in the study knew what I was researching but the students in their classes or other teachers in the district did not know I was conducting the study.

Participants

Three novice teachers that worked in our rural district and who were assigned to me as their coach agreed to participate in this study. Seeking a small number of participants using maximal variation sampling allowed me to thoroughly describe and analyze individual cases (Creswell, 2005). This sampling strategy focuses on individual cases with different characteristics or traits while looking for common themes or patterns. I had worked with both veteran and novice teachers before I decided to concentrate my study on novice teachers.

I had worked almost a year with the first teacher who agreed to be a part of my study before I asked him to participate. The other two teachers I worked with for about a month before I asked and they agreed to be a part of the study. There was one other teacher I asked who declined to take part. The study took place over a two-year period with two teachers and one year with the last teacher.

I will introduce each of them individually in order to give a clear picture of who they are, what their background is, and each of their school settings.

Paul

Paul (all names are pseudonyms in this study) was a novice teacher at a very remote school site. The population at the school is 100% Alaska Native with a free and reduced lunch rate of 100%. There were three teachers at this site; there was also an

itinerant administrator who traveled to the site for one year and then was placed at the site the following year. Paul attended school and graduated from our school district. Paul came to our district as a student when his mother accepted employment here and they moved from another state. He went to college in state and student taught in a number of our villages. Paul taught kindergarten through fourth grade and he had eight to ten students during the three years I mentored him.

Sandy

Sandy, who I also mentored for three years, worked in a village that is very close to two other villages. The population is 98% Alaska Native and 95% free and reduced lunch rate. Sandy attended school in rural and urban Alaska. She attended college in state and student taught in an urban school. She had a husband and young son with her, and she was the main breadwinner of the family. There were four teachers at the school and an itinerant principal. Sandy taught grade kindergarten through fourth or fifth depending on the year. For the two years I mentored her for the study she had between eight and twelve students and during the second year, her son was in her class.

Ann

Ann taught in the village where I had previously taught. She and her husband were the two teachers at this site; an itinerant principal came about once every six weeks. Ann taught grades kindergarten through sixth and had between six and eight students during the year I mentored her. The school was 100% Alaska Native and 90% free and

reduced lunch. Ann attended school and student taught out of state in an urban area; this was her first time in the state of Alaska.

Data Collection Methods

I collected data over two years with two teachers and one year with the last teacher. During the last year, all three teachers were working with me as their mentor teacher. I worked with each of the teachers at their site at least four days every six weeks. I flew to the novice teachers' villages to mentor, work with them and to gather the data for the study. We also communicated by phone and e-mail since I did not live in the same villages as the novice teachers. I gathered the data through interviews, collaborative logs, and observations. Collaborative assessment logs were filled out each time the novice teachers and I met face to face, observation data was gathered when visiting their classes and field notes were taken when the novice teachers were interviewed along with telephone conversations. I used collaborative log assessments, mentoring sessions, interviews and observations of the classroom during the process to see if changes were happening in the teachers' instructional practice.

Interviews were the first source of data for this study. The interviews were semi-structured so that I could be confident in getting data that I could compare across the novice teachers (Bogdan and Biklen, 2003). The semi-structured interview is a more rigidly structured protocol than in a conversational interview so I could include the topics and specific areas I wanted to cover with all participants. I largely conducted these semi-structured interviews at the beginning and end of the school. There were nine interviews

conducted in total. I interviewed Paul four times, Sandy three times and Ann two times. Samples of interview questions are provided in Appendix A.

Conversational interviews were also conducted during each mentoring visit. These interviews had open-ended response type questions that allowed the novice teachers to voice their unique experiences without any constraint from me (Creswell, 2005). These conversational and semi-structured interviews were very natural and usually flowed during the collaborative assessment log and throughout the onsite visit.

Collaborative assessment logs were used as a guide for conversations with the novice teachers. We used them to reflect on what was working, what were areas of concern, what were the next steps for the teachers and what would the teachers like support with from the coach. Using this form allowed for a conversational interview and was a jumping off point for further discussion. Once the form was filled out both the novice teacher and coach had copies to provide accountability for both parties and to remind them to complete their tasks. Samples of the collaborative assessment log are included in Appendix B.

The last source of data I collected was through observations. I took field notes during these observations. Field notes, as stated by Bogdan and Biklen (2003) allow the researcher to “record ideas, strategies, reflections, and hunches, as well as note patterns that emerge” (p. 110). I observed teachers instructing students in both large and small groups, interacting with other teachers, and working with classroom aides. These notes focused on the teachers’ instruction with the students and the interactions that occurred between the novice teachers and their students along with interactions with their

classroom aides about the instruction. The observations took place every time I was at the teachers' sites. I was at each site approximately every six to eight weeks. I was at Paul's site nine times, eight times at Ann's site during the two-year period and at Sandy's site four times in one year of this study. Samples of the field notes are found in Appendix C. All three data sources, interview notes, collaborative logs, and field notes were transcribed and coded for analysis.

Data Analysis

After the data was collected, I took a step away from it in order to give myself some distance so I was able to go back and look at all the data with fresh eyes. I did not transcribe any of the data I had collected, it was all hand written and I did not use a computer program to analyze it. I made copies of all my field notes, collaborative logs, and interviews before the coding process began. This allowed me to create a filing system so I could go back to the original data if needed and easily find it.

When I went back to analyze the three types of data, I approached all three types in the same way. First, I read through the data a number of times underlining or circling words that were standing out and making notes in the margins such as supplies needed, areas needing help, and notes about students' needs. Next, I looked at the types of words I had marked or used in notes and starting making lists of words that fit together. Codes emerged in all three types of data as I collapsed and categorized my original notes into single words or phrases. Table 1 has a sampling of the coded data. Then, based on the frequency of codes, central themes emerged (Bogdan and Biklen, 2003). I identified five major themes: teacher request for support, classroom practice, teacher learning, student

improvement, and impact of coach. Appendix D contains the list of codes that I used and the themes that emerged from them.

Table 1 Sample of codes with examples

Codes	Collaborative Logs	Interviews	Field Notes
Management	The kids are not getting their work done when I am teaching another group.	I am getting more work done with groups because you helped me with a management system.	Not all the kids pay attention during read aloud they just are playing.
Learned during modeling	I have tried out some of the signals you showed me when you modeled the last time you were here and they worked.	I felt like I could understand what you were talking about when you modeled the think aloud.	Ann asked the students to think pair share when asking students questions about the story (I modeled this last visit)
Scores	Their reading assessment scores have gone up.	Most of the kids did well on their level tests.	You guys did great! Everyone scored well on his or her unit test.
Lots of ideas	I need more ideas for working on comprehension.	She gave me many ideas and let me pick which I wanted to try.	We are going to try something Natalie (coach) taught me.

Throughout the data analysis process, I used both manifest and latent content analysis. Berg (2004) describes manifest content as “those elements that are physically

present and countable” (p. 269). I used this content during the coding process that was explained above. Berg (2004) describes latent content analysis as “the analysis, [which], is extended to an interpretive reading of the symbolism underlying the physical data” (p. 269). I used this type of analysis during the interpretation of my results addressed in the next chapter.

Chapter Four

Findings

This mentor investigated the impact of a literacy coach on novice teachers' and their reading instructional practices. During this investigation, I discovered five major themes. These included the following: teachers request for support; classroom practice; teacher learning; student improvement and the impact of the coach. Below the themes are described along with examples from the research illustrating how they developed.

None of the novice teachers had worked with a mentor before and was not sure how our working relationships would develop. During my first visit with Paul he said,

” I need you to help me when I do not know what to do. I guess I am relying on you to be direct and tell me what I am doing wrong and then let me know how to fix it or what to do instead. I want you to come as often as you can, maybe once a month?”

With this statement and question, Paul let me know that he was relying on me for my support, along with him viewing me as an expert observer to find areas where he needed to improve in his instruction.

Ann told me she was very excited to work with me as her mentor, especially since I had taught in her village. I met her at new teacher in-service and she asked how soon I would be coming to her school. She asked additional questions about the students,

families and classroom aides. Her questions were very thoughtful and perceptive; she did not seem like a novice teacher.

Sandy was not as comfortable as Paul or Ann with the mentoring relationship. It took longer to build my relationship with her than with the other two. I had to go very slowly with her, building trust as we went along. During our first visit, I asked her about her expectations of working with a coach. “What can I do to support and assist you in your classroom?” I asked. Sandy hesitated, “I’m not really sure since this is so new to me but I think I would like you to just watch and give me suggestions.” I spent the first half of the school year doing as she requested. This developed a trust relationship.

Teacher Request for Support

The ways the novice teachers requested support varied along with their types of requests. They asked for supplies, additional books, or help in ordering materials. They also had questions about who to talk to in the district office when they needed information or to send things in. In many cases, I was the person they connected with first in the district and they relied on me to answer their requests and questions. They knew I was there to provide support rather than to evaluate them so they were very open with me. As a literacy mentor, I did not just deal with literacy but with any area where they needed help. If I could not provide them with the support they needed I would put them in contact with a person that could.

Organizing reading material for students.

For these teachers knowing which books were appropriate for their students' reading abilities was something with which they had no experience. They relied on me to provide the support they needed instead of just floundering on their own. All three teachers had attended workshops I presented to address the importance of making sure independent reading materials matched the reader so student growth can happen. However, attending workshops on the subject was not enough. Below are three examples of how I demonstrated, modeled and discussed how to set up books and book boxes for their students.

A request from Paul concerned the materials and resources in his classroom. Paul needed help to figure out what books were in the classroom and school that fit his students' reading abilities. He said, "I don't know what all of the books are on those book shelves. Could you go through them and let me know what I need to keep in here?" He had shelves of books but did not know which ones were appropriate for his students. "I need books that students can read," he stated. That afternoon we started to create tubs of books for each of the reading groups. By creating tubs of books for each group, the children would not be wasting time looking for books they could read. We discussed that if we have books that the students can read they will improve their reading skills. If students read books too far beyond their reading ability, they may become frustrated and discouraged because they cannot comprehend what they are reading.

Sandy had a similar request about books, "I need help setting up book boxes like we talked about on the phone. The kids are not reading, they are just looking at the

pictures.” I asked Sandy to tell me more about her concerns. “The kids spend most of their independent time choosing books. They pick a book, look at it for a little bit and then go and pick another one.” I asked Sandy, “Have you taught the children how to choose books?” “I just told them to pick books they wanted to read and could read. Everyone in my class can read.” To help Sandy with the book boxes I explained that by teaching the children how to pick books, they could read while Sandy observed. I did a similar activity with Ann’s students with her working side by side with the students and me. Ann asked, “I would like the students to have books that support the social studies and science topics they are working on, is that OK?” She went on to say, “I want them to go to their book boxes all day long not just at reading time but whenever they are finished with their work.” “That is a great idea!” I said. Ann’s students spread across five grade levels so they needed independent activities to do through out the day. She tried to use the same type of activities all day long.

Ordering supplies.

The teachers had to order supplies at different times of the year. All of them requested my help. “I have two hundred dollars to spend for my classroom before the end of the month. Can you help me with the order?” asked Ann. We discussed what subject areas she felt she needed more materials for the students or herself. We then looked through the preferred catalogs for the district. Once she decided what to order, I showed her how to fill out the requisition form and who to submit it to in district office.

Towards the end of each year, teachers did the major ordering for the upcoming school year. There were different categories of supplies ordered from February through

April. During a visit with Paul, he requested that I help him with his general supply and library order. Sandy also requested help with her orders during the district order cycle. I was able to help them complete their orders and get them submitted on time.

Center ideas.

Novice teachers, especially at the beginning of each school year, requested more information about center ideas and creation of games for the centers. They did not have a wealth of resources or the experience to come up with different center ideas. Paul told me, “The kids are not working independently when they need to. The stations are working but I need more ideas on how to change them. I need more center ideas; the kids are not doing them like they did in the beginning.” I created independent game based activities for Paul’s reading centers. We also discussed other ideas for independent center time so the students could practice skills they were learning during reading instruction.

Sandy had other issues with her centers. During reading instruction, the centers needed to focus on language arts activities and Sandy was having the students do art activities. Sandy came up with some center ideas herself and asked if I had any books about reading centers. I also created games for her students use to practice reading skills.

Ann needed help with the activities she came up with but did not work for all of her students. We worked together on ways she could differentiate the activities for the different levels of her students. We also consulted the resource books she had in her classroom to create more multi-leveled independent centers.

Classroom Practice

Classroom management, on-going assessment, engaging learners, modeling how to teach using the reading series or a specific reading skill, working with classroom aides, and observing lessons are all areas that fell under classroom practice in my coding. This is the heart of what coaching is about-- to improve classroom practice so that all the children are meeting their full potential. Novice teachers are putting together everything they have learned in school, which is mostly theory, into practice for the first time. All three of the novice teachers had six weeks to two and a half months of student teaching experience.

Working with classroom aides.

The novice teachers had classroom aides in their rooms during reading instruction times. Working with the aides effectively was something that all struggled with. This was something that was not included in their teacher preparation classes or in their student teaching. The majority of the classroom aides had been working in classrooms much longer than the novice teachers. Ann stated, "Working with the aide, she has so much experience and is always telling me I'm not doing things the way the teacher before did." During a phone conversation with Ann, she told me that the aide was undermining her in the classroom when they were working in small groups. I had to intervene with the aide as I had worked with her before when I taught in the school. After talking with the aide, her behavior improved for a while but she continued to provide roadblocks in the classroom. I encouraged Ann to talk to her principal about the difficulties she was having with her aide.

Paul had similar problems with his aides. He said, "I'm not sure what to do with the aides. They give the kids the answers and they favor the kids in their family." At another time he stated, "Now that I have more reading groups I need help with the aides. I have asked them to teach parts of the lesson but they are not getting it. Could you work with them during the reading time?" During his second year Paul brought up another aide issue, "I get frustrated when I see the potential in students but it gets hindered by the parent who is my aide. She gives the answers to her son and others so they shut down when I won't give them the answers." Paul had up to four aides in his classroom at one time during his reading block and it was a struggle for him to determine what activities and tasks he could assign each of them. Working with classroom aides was an area we continued to work together on during our mentoring relationship. The novice teachers did not receive any pre-service training on how to work with classroom aides. In the training I received as a mentor, working with classroom aides was not a topic of discussion. I used my own experience of working with classroom aides in order to help the novice teachers. We discussed what centers they could oversee, what parts of the reading lessons they could teach and what assessment data they could gather. As a district, we do not provide enough training for our aides so as a support for the novice teachers I conducted specific training in reading for the aides. Since I provided training for the aides, the novice teachers were able to find other ways to use their aides more effectively in the classroom.

On-going assessment.

On-going assessment was another area that the novice teachers struggled to complete. They were required to progress monitor, which is to assess students to see if the instruction is working and if the student is making progress, using the Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS) assessment. DIBELS is a formative early reading assessment given to students in Kindergarten through sixth grade that is a series of short tests used to screen and monitor progress in learning the necessary skills to become successful readers. How often they needed to progress monitor each student was dependent on the student's DIBELS instructional recommendation. Sandy voiced a concern, "I'm worried about my son; he is now by himself because the other two kindergartners moved away. I am not sure if he is making the progress he should be. His one score in DIBELS is really low." I worked with her son by conducting his reading lesson, playing literacy games and reading with him along with giving him another progress monitoring assessment. After I completed the tasks I was able to share with her that her son was right on track. She was not administering one of the DIBELS assessments correctly. We went over the instruction manual for the assessments again and marked them so she could quickly review them before she gave further assessments.

Paul and Ann struggled with giving assessments at the correct times for varied reasons. Ann stated during one visit, "My kindergartner is missing lots of school days and I haven't been able to do progress monitoring with her." "I don't always find time to get the progress monitoring done. Could you remind me by e-mail the weeks I should be doing it?," asked Paul. I made checking the DIBELS web site a part of my weekly routine

to see if scores needed to be added and to remind the teachers that their scores were not in and to assess the students if needed. Each time I visited a school I offered to give the assessments if needed. I gave the assessments for all three of the teachers during my visit to their sites. It did not happen every time for every teacher, some times a teacher would ask that I teach the class while they gave the assessment. I was happy to do that for them, then they had more practice giving the assessment and they had instant knowledge of how the student was improving or not.

How to teach using the reading series or a specific reading skill.

Modeling lessons was a major focus of my work with teachers. After workshops and in-service sessions conducted by the literacy coach in the north area of our district and me, I modeled lessons for the teachers. During one of my visits with Sandy, I modeled a reading program lesson and had her observe and take notes. We talked after school about what she had questions about or noticed.

Sandy: “How did you choose what parts of the lesson to do?”

Coach: “Remember at training we let you know that you could not get though everything in the reading program lesson and these are the areas we wanted you to focus on.”

Sandy: “I remember something about that but I guess not all of it. There was a lot to remember from that training.”

Coach: “We can go over that again if you want.”

Sandy: “I guess what I did when I taught wasn’t right then.”

Coach: “I wouldn’t say it was right or wrong rather it was what you

chose to work on with your students.”

Sandy: “Can we just go over the parts I’m supposed to teach again?”

There were times that I did not model the lesson myself but rather co-taught the lesson with the novice teacher. I did this with Ann when she said the following, “I have made some changes because of the training a few weeks ago. I want your input as to what you think about them. Some of the templates don’t seem to be working right so I need help with them.” We decided that the next day we would co-teach the lesson with her taking the lead. After school, we discussed the importance of following the lesson maps for all three reading groups in her room. We went over the places where I jumped in to help her with the templates. I gave her suggestions such as keeping a small white board nearby so she can work on the words they need to figure out and using the cues and hand signals she had learned. Co-teaching happened with the novice teachers at various times to help them improve their teaching skills.

Classroom management.

Paul struggled with scheduling and management in his classroom, “I need some help with my schedule, how much time do I need to give everything?” he asked me. Another time he stated, “I can’t get all of the reading groups done, there are too many levels and the lessons are too long.” When talking further with Paul, I found that he did not have a management system in place. The independent activities were very vague and did not give the students much direction. In his words “They need to finish their worksheets and workbooks, when they are done, they read books.” During my

observation of Paul teaching reading he followed the lesson and taught the sections that were required, but could not get through it in the scheduled time. Many times, he would have to stop the lesson and deal with behaviors or answer questions from the students who were supposed to be working independently, even though there were two aides in the room. Paul and I debriefed at the end of the day by going over my observations. I let him know that I could see the struggles he was having and we would work through them so he and the students could be successful. Paul and I brainstormed and came up with a management system that he thought would work for him. He decided that students would earn points for correct behaviors such as completing work, staying on task, following the rules and helping others. The students could save the points earned or use them to purchase small items at the classroom store at the end of the week. Through the next few months, he made refinements that worked for him and his students. Paul changed the earning of points to earning money. This way the students were also practicing how to count money. He also took away money if the students were not following rules.

Teacher Learning

The teacher learning theme came out of the data that I coded when novice teachers talked about things they said they didn't know, specific skills they gained through workshops, in-services or observations, how to work with multiple levels of students, how to conduct parent teacher conferences, and professional reading they did.

In our district, we strive to instill the expectation that the students will become lifelong learners. Often, new teachers can become overwhelmed with their jobs and may

not realize how much they are learning. As part of my role, I became their cheerleader to acknowledge how much they were learning and changing in their classrooms.

Skills gained during observation.

Many times, I was modeling for one reason, such as how to teach a specific lesson in the reading series but other learning came out of it. For example, one day during a lesson demonstration, Paul noted when he saw something he wanted to ask a question about. The first comment Paul had when we debriefed the model was, “I liked how you set up reading time. You told the kids what you expected of them when you were teaching a group. You also let the aides know what they were responsible for, by telling the kids who would be at each station. Did you put the schedule up for you, the aides or me?” I told him “I put up the schedule for all of us to keep us on track and to let everyone know what their job was during the whole reading block.” I also said, “I was changing quite a bit this morning and knew there maybe questions. It was a reference that all of us could use to remember.” Paul also noticed that I did not use the examples in the book for the “think aloud” section and wanted to know why. I told him, “The example is that, only an example. I still did the think aloud; I just did one of my own. You can do the same thing; they are only examples. You can change them if you want.” In addition, he wanted to know how much time I took to prep for each group. I let him know that it took about forty-five minutes for each group because this was a new program for me too. I wanted to be sure I knew the flow, I also pre-read all the stories the students would be reading or that I had to read to the students. The model I did for Paul allowed him to see much more than how to teach the specific type of lesson.

Teaching specific skills.

Comprehension was a specific skill that all the teachers were working on with their students. Sandy emphasized at the beginning of her first year, “I want to help the kids keep improving in their reading skills. I really want to focus on comprehension.” During one of my models, Paul observed that his older students read the words correctly but did not really comprehend the story. He wondered if “that was the reason they don’t understand parts of the lesson and I think that means they are not paying attention.” The other thing Paul commented on was that I did a second think aloud using the skill of prediction when the kids were not able to do it on their own when asked. We talked about the importance of doing multiple models and having the kids try predicting during other subjects instead of just during reading instruction. Paul questioned, “Is that why you had the kids predict when you did the read aloud?” I told him that it was important that we show the kids how to use their reading skills in any type of reading that they do.

Ann wanted to beef up her vocabulary work with the students since she felt that was affecting their comprehension. We talked about introducing the words as she was doing before the students read, but to add a few more steps. Instead of just giving them the definition and using it in a sentence, she would use it in three or four sentences. She then should ask the student if that was the correct way to use the word. Other days she could have the students’ try and make up their own sentences. I pointed out that that may be hard for them at first so be sure to model and support them by creating the sentences together first.

During my next visit, Ann shared how they were doing with vocabulary.

- Ann: “I started keeping vocabulary notebooks with the kids. When they are reading and they come across a word they do not know they write it in their book. During the day, I find time to go over each of their words and we discuss what they mean. Then they write a sentence in their notebook using the word.”
- Coach: “What books are the words coming from, their lesson story?”
- Ann: “No, during the lessons I’m introducing the words and doing them like we talked about before break. Defining them, using them in sentences and they tell me if it is the correct way to use it in the sentence. Some times I mix it up and use the other techniques we learned at the training in February.”
- Coach: “Wow that is great you are really putting to use what you are learning. So those are the lesson vocabulary words. Where are the other words coming from?”
- Ann: “Their independent reading books. When they come to a word they don’t know they write it down. I can’t get to all of the words during the day but I do try to fit as many in as I can.”

Professional reading.

Working with Paul for multiple years allowed me to have time to focus on professional reading with him. I was not able to do this with Sandy or Ann. I brought up to Paul that doing professional reading and discussing it would help him work on comprehension strategies with his students. He and I decided to do a book study. The next week I called Paul to let him know I was sending *Reading with Meaning* by Debbie Miller (2000) to him and that we would independently read chapters one through five before my next visit. We discussed the chapters we had read and brainstormed ways he could use what he had learned in his classroom. The process of reading chapters in between my visits and then discussing them while on site continued for a full year. During the second year of working together, we continued to reference the book as Paul was still working on comprehension strategies with his students.

Parent teacher conferences.

Parent-teacher conference time was another area the novice teachers had questions about and needed support. Paul and I discussed parent teacher conferences, how to talk to parents about reading that need to be done every night at home. Paul and I came up with an easy reading log that he could give out to parents during the conferences. He would explain how to fill them out and return them each day. During the second year Paul shared how well parent conferences went, “Parents’ comments had all been positive when I met with them during parent conferences,” Paul replied. “Some of the parents have even asked me to tutor the older kids.” This was a real boost to Paul’s confidence; parents were noticing how much support he was giving his students.

Ann had a problem with one of her students, “My kindergartner is missing a lot of school days or she comes in when reading block is almost finished so she is not learning what she needs to.” I asked her if she had let her principal know about the situation. She told me that she had, but he told her to call the parents. If there were not an improvement in the attendance then he would intervene. “I’m not sure how to talk to them about this,” she replied. Ann and I role-played the conversation so she would be as comfortable as possible when she called the parents.

Student Improvement

There was a variety of ways teachers knew their students showed improvement. The teachers talked about students working on their own, how the students enjoyed school or were involved in activities. How they asked questions, improved assessment scores, and parents made positive comments on their child’s growth. All were indications of improvement. The teachers were excited each time I visited to share with me how their students had improved.

I asked Paul, “Name some ways you show that the kids are improving in reading.” Paul was able to show me some of their workbooks and unit tests. He also asked me to listen the next day to certain kids read since they were reading much better. Paul and I took time to compare the new results of DIBELS to the results of last year. We noticed that a majority of the students had dropped down in their scores. Paul stated, “I know the kids did not do much reading during the summer so that is probably why.” He went on to say what he observed during teaching the first few weeks, “I see that the kids really do

remember prediction. Some of them still need help with retelling and picking out the main points, especially the new ones, so I know I need help with that.”

During a later visit Paul explained, “The students’ reading is really improving. I’m getting in a lot of reading instruction all during the day.” I asked him to tell me more about their improvement. “Their fluency and comprehension is getting better; they understand more of what they read.” “How do you know that,” I wondered. “Look at their DIBELS scores, they have gone up.” he replied.

At my last visit of the second year I asked, “Tell me what you find most rewarding as a teacher so far?” Paul replied, “The development in reading for my kids. I know I get frustrated, but if I think about the two years, I have taught them, most have really made great improvement. Now you’re going to ask what evidence you have.” He went on to say, “Their assessments show the growth in both level assessment and DIBELS. They are reading more at home and their parents tell me they are happy with what is happening at school. I know they comprehend more.”

Sandy had many ideas of how her students were showing improvement. After working with Sandy and a particular girl she had in her class over period of time she shared with me,

“Paula is really improving and I think we are going to stop doing the pre-teaching of the lessons. A few days when she has been late, we have not been able to do it and she is able to keep up. With the group being smaller than last year and they are more at the same level now it is great. All of the middle group’s scores are going up, they are improving.”

After co-teaching the popcorn technique with the students during a visit, Sandy said, “The kids had fun reading that way.” She went on, “More kids were answering so I think it helped them pay attention to the story.” Later I asked her to tell me about the evidence she had that the students were improving.

“The kids are making lots of progress. They are passing standards and we are moving through their books. Comprehension is improving in reading; the kids are getting their workbook questions and practice sheets done by them instead of always working together. When we check them most everything is right. I have been reminding them of the comprehension strategies when we read for other subjects so I think they are using them more.”

Towards the end of the first year, Sandy said to me, “The girls in the middle group are improving on their expression. Thanks for going over that with me during in-service since I was sick your last visit. She went on to talk about her older students. “I think the older kids are as ready as I can get them to move up next year. I am anxious to see their scores on the state test.” I asked her to tell me more about how she knew they were ready.

“Well, they are reading harder books and comprehending them. I have been having them write summaries of the chapters of the books they read during independent time. They are able to do that well, you can read them if you want.” All of their reading seems smoother, not so many struggles,

less questions and things like that. They have been working on their end of level reading test and they are passing each section as we go along.”

I visited Ann shortly before winter break, which was a very busy time for her. Ann shared with me that benchmark testing for DIBELS showed improvement and that made her happy. The students were reciting poems for the Christmas program so they were practicing them. She felt the poems highlighted their reading improvement because they had to read poems and pick out the ones they wanted to present. Each student chose two or more poems.

During another visit, Ann was very happy with her students. She wanted to share the progress she was seeing in their DIBELS and work. “Their scores keep going up, they are passing their unit tests. When I ask them to read and respond during science and social studies, their improvement in comprehension is really showing up,” she said in front of her students. I was impressed that she shared this news with me in front of her students. They just glowed as she was speaking.

Towards the end of the school year, I asked Ann about her students and their achievements.

“My kids have done so well. All except one passed their reading level.

The one who did not was because she missed too much school. She now knows most of her letters and sounds, a few words and is sounding out parts of words, but not enough. We did a lot of vocabulary and comprehension work and that has really helped all of the students. They

do not just read the words. They are using the strategies and asking what words mean. I wish I could have done more.”

Impact of Coach

Words that I coded that fell under the theme of impact of coach were; support, would not have made it, did not judge, lots of ideas and never thought of. During interviews or at the end of the school year, the teachers made comments when I was asking specific questions about working with a coach.

Working with a coach.

Ann had very positive things to say about having a literacy coach.

“I liked working with you. You always had ideas to share and I could bounce my own off you. You brought my attention to little things I could do to help the students learn. All the training sessions you gave were useful. I thought you did not come to site enough but I was able to work with you during the training sessions you presented and I attended. These past few months have been tough for my husband and I, you have been a support for us. I cannot tell you how much that means to me. I felt I could talk to you about anything. “

Ann told me that she hoped she had a coach in her next district.

I interviewed Paul about the process we had gone through during the year so I would gain an understanding of what coaching meant to him. I must say that what he had to say about having a mentor was powerful.

“I would have been frustrated if I didn’t have you to talk to. There is no one else in the school who teaches little guys so they really didn’t help me. I would not have improved or knew what I needed to improve if I did not have you to work with. At the beginning of the year, your trips were changed or canceled too much. I needed you to be here more often and for a longer time. My evaluation by my principal said I met the standard in every area. I know there are things I need to work on but the principal did not help me with that.”

I asked Sandy how she thought the first year had gone while working with a coach.

“At first I was really nervous because I didn’t know what to expect but as the year went along I liked it.” She went on to say, “You pushed me to try new things and made sure I did what I was supposed to. Especially with Paula, I did not know what to do but working with her before school has really been good. She is not struggling as much and her scores are going up. Her behavior has really improved too.”

Change in reading instruction because of coach.

When asking Paul to tell me how he thought his reading instruction had changed he stated,

“You really showed me what to do with a book. I do not just pick a book off the shelf when it is time for read aloud, I prepare for them now. The kids can now retell stories and not just the ones that have good memories.

They are learning vocabulary before the story so they can understand it and I do not have to stop all the time and explain. The other day I was going to read a book but I did not, I held off because I had not prepared for it and I was just trying to fill time. Instead I reread a book the kids had already heard.”

The last comment was not a comment but rather a question “You’re going to work with me again next year right?”

During my interview with Sandy, she had some interesting answers. I asked her, “What do you see as some of the biggest hurdles in teaching your students to read?” She replied,

“How much I didn’t know. If you would not have been helping, I am not sure I would have gotten the kids as far as I did. You helped me see what parts to focus on depending on what the kids need. Because of our multi-levels, we could not do the complete program so we have to pick and choose. The training sessions we went to were a big help too.”

“What changes do you feel you have made to your instruction that you will continue to use?” I asked. “Lots, how to look at what the kids are doing and change things as needed. Just all the different reading skills and ideas of how to practice or teach them.” When asking about having a mentor and to tell me the positive and negatives she said,

“It worked out; I had a tough time at first because I thought you were watching to judge me. I found out that you were really just coming to help me. You helped me with more than just teaching reading; ordering the

supplies I needed, giving assessments, working with behavior problems and other staff members, and other things like that. I think a negative is that this year you did not come very often. There were times when I wanted you here but it did not work out. This visit is too late in the year, school is almost over, but we are talking about next year so that helps.”

Sandy is a quiet person, she did not say a whole lot but I had seen her grow so much in her instruction so I let her know that.

In the next chapter, I will discuss my findings as they relate to my research questions along with impact and limitations of this research project.

Chapter Five

Discussion

This study explored the essential question, what is the nature of the impact of a literacy coach on novice teachers' reading instructional practices? I asked the following subsidiary questions in order to explore some of the aspects of literacy coaching that are generally thought to result in positive outcomes for novice teachers and their students' learning.

- Do novice teachers implement and use the new practices they learn through coaching? Why or why not?
- Do novice teachers see that their instructional practice has a positive impact on their students' reading development? Why or why not?
- What evidence do novice teachers provide to document positive impact or lack of progress?

By examining the coaching relationship between three novice teachers and their literacy coach, it was hoped that this study could provide insight into the positive impact literacy coaching can have on novice teachers' understanding of reading development, on their reading instructional practices, and most important, on their students' learning. In this chapter, I discuss the three subsidiary questions in light of the themes and my findings, followed by study limitations and closing thoughts.

Findings and Implications

Do novice teachers implement and use the new practices they learn through coaching? Why or why not?

All three teachers implemented and used literacy practices they learned through coaching. Reading comprehension and vocabulary practices were two minor themes that came through very clearly in the data. Some of the vocabulary and comprehension skills and approaches were introduced during training sessions the coach provided or the coach modeled in the novice teacher's classroom. Ann put the practices in place almost immediately and used them on a regular basis. Paul and Sandy took longer to make them a part of their everyday practice. They required more instruction or modeling by the coach to transfer the skills or approaches to their daily practice (Joyce & Showers, 1982).

The novice teachers commented on how much growth they themselves made because of the coach's support (Holloway, 2001; Moir, Gless & Baron, 1999; Poglinco, et al, 2003). Sandy stated, "If you would not have been helping, I am not sure I would have gotten the kids as far as I did. You helped me see what parts to focus on depending on what the kids need." Sandy's statement directly relates to the research that states a coach can help a novice teacher become a competent teacher more quickly so student learning increases (Duncan, 2006; NCTAF, 2003). Paul and Ann had similar thoughts about working with a coach. The major themes that showed whether what the novice teachers implemented what they learned from their coach were: classroom practice, teacher learning and impact of the coach. The data in these themes clearly illustrate that the novice teachers did in fact make changes or add to the instruction they were providing to

their students. Which directly relates to the essential question, what is the nature of the impact of a literacy coach on novice teachers' reading instructional practices?

Do novice teachers see that their instructional practice has a positive impact on their students' reading development? What evidence do novice teachers provide to document positive impact or lack of progress?

The novice teachers could see that their instructional practices had an impact on student learning. They were able to articulate how their students were improving and the evidence they had to back up the improvement. The novice teachers mentioned scores on DIBLES, passing level assessments, and students getting their work done correctly as evidence. Moving the focus away from teacher survival to student achievement is difficult for a novice teacher (Feaster, 2002) though these novice teachers were able to do that with the guidance of their coach. Under the major themes of student improvement and teacher learning, students' reading development was evident. Having the ability to make changes to instruction based on assessment data is a skill of highly qualified teacher (U. S. Department of Education, 2005). Novice teachers are able to focus on student learning and achievement sooner when working with a coach (Black, 2001). Near the end of the year, the three teachers noticed that their students had improved their comprehension with science and social studies texts. The novice teachers were reflecting on their own practice by looking at their student improvement (Holloway, 2001; Coaches, controversy, 2004). Sandy was able to articulate the lack of progress with one of her students by talking about the child's behavior and how that may have been caused by the skills the student was lacking.

What is the nature of the impact of a literacy coach on novice teachers' reading instructional practices?

Literacy coaches do have an impact on novice teachers' reading instructional practices in time. The novice teachers entered into the coaching relationship because it was a requirement of the district's Reading First grant. From their initial interviews, I found that Paul and Ann were comfortable right from the start. Paul had his parent's input, letting him know that having a coach was a good thing, and he already knew me from working in the district. Ann was a very open and mature first year teacher. She came to the district very well prepared—not seeming like a novice teacher. Sandy had more reservations and needed time to build a trusting relationship with me.

A minor theme that came through at the start of our work together was that they were not able to articulate specific areas of need for instructional support. They talked in very general terms; they were not sure what to have me observe, rather just to watch everything. Many of their questions and challenges had to do with how to use the reading program and work with many groups in the beginning. During their first year, all of them requested support in structuring their reading block schedule. All those themes tie back to the stages of development that new teachers go through (Fuller & Brown, 1975, Moir, 1999).

Another minor theme that emerged was the fact that the novice teachers stated that there were too few on-site visits by the coach. The visits did not happen every six weeks as planned so there were large gaps of time with no on-site coach support. Coaching visits did take place shortly after training sessions and that was positive. The

coach could model what had been presented, reintroduce a technique or talk with the teacher to see what they were going to practice that they learned in the training (Joyce & Showers, 1982).

Teacher retention

Even though teacher retention was not the focus of my study, I want to report that all three teachers are still in the education field at this date. This supports the research of Smith and Ingersoll (2004) that shows when novice teachers who have induction programs that include mentoring they are more likely to stay in the classroom. Paul and Sandy continue to work in our district, one in the classroom and the other with student activities and administrative duties. One moved to a different school after four years, the other moved to two different schools. I continued to coach them while they were at their original schools.

Ann moved to another school district in Alaska the next year. She contacted me and asked that I work with her over e-mail, as her new district did not have coaches. I did work with her via e-mail by answering questions, suggesting professional reading books, and letting her bounce ideas off me. Ann and her husband moved out of state after two years in Alaska, they wanted to be closer to family. She is currently teaching at the middle school level in another state.

Limitations

What is the nature of the impact of a literacy coach on novice teachers' reading instructional practices? This study cannot completely answer the question due to its

limitations. First, the study only looked at three novice teachers in one school district with one coach. All three novice teachers were volunteers; a fourth novice teacher declined to participate. The teachers may have felt obligated to take part in the study but that was not the intention. This was a non-evaluative study; the coach had no administrative duties concerning the teachers. Samples of the consent and re-consent form are in Appendix E.

Second, I was the coach and the researcher so my participation may have influenced the data collection or the results of the study. I approached the work with inquiry as my stance to look at my practice as a coach and my work with the novice teachers. When collecting the data especially during the interviews I wrote down exactly what the teacher said. In this way, I was not interpreting what the teacher was saying until I began writing my findings.

Closing thoughts

More studies are needed to fully answer my research question. Since mentoring/coaching is continuing to be a focus of school districts even in these tough economic times further research is needed to determine if and how coaches are raising student achievement. The new federal grant, “Race to the Top”, which awarded its first two grants this spring, addresses highly effective teachers. In their description of highly effective teachers they state, “Supplemental measures may include, for example, multiple observation-based assessments of teacher performance or evidence of leadership roles (which may include mentoring or leading professional learning communities) that increase the effectiveness of other teachers in the school (U.S. Department of Education,

2009).” The states of Delaware and Tennessee were awarded grants during the first phase of awards. In both of their applications, they said that they would provide developmental coaches, instructional coaches and mentors (Delaware, 2010; Tennessee, 2010). They did not say how they would show the effectiveness of all the coaches and mentors. Delaware (2010) did outline a plan on how the developmental coaches from outside agencies who would be providing training for administrators about the evaluation system would be evaluated. They included peer evaluations, observations, and other metrics yet to be decided. Because coaching and mentoring are part of the new federal grants we can say that they are not going away but a way to evaluate their effectiveness is much needed.

Our district continued to fund the literacy coaching position after our Reading First grant expired. Our superintendent stated to me, “I feel that your positions are vital for our new teachers. I will do what I can to keep those positions as a part of our teaching staff (personal communication, T. Mase, May 2009). Across the nation if coaching/mentoring, continues to be a part of the landscape of education, there needs to be more research about their effectiveness and impact on student learning.

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Appendix A

Interview Questions

The following is an example of the questions that will be asked during the interviews.

1. What is working in your classroom?
2. What is a concern in your classroom that I could support you in?
3. What are the next steps that you feel you need to take to improve your instruction?
What next steps do you want me to take?
4. How are your students doing? Do you have evidence of that improvement or lack of improvement?
5. Last month I modeled a lesson, where you able to implement any of the techniques you observed during the model? How did it go when you tried them? Do you think there is a way we can work to make what you tried more meaningful for the students?
6. What do you see as one of the biggest hurdles in teaching your students to read?
Could we narrow that down a little bit?
7. What changes do you feel you have made to your instruction that you will continue to use?
8. How do you feel about having a mentor teacher? In what ways did you feel supported?
9. What were the negatives you saw in having a mentor teacher? How could I have improved what I did to support you?
10. Overall was this a good experience for you? Would you encourage the district to continue to use of mentors for new teachers?

Appendix B

Collaborative Log

Teacher: _____

Date: _____

Mentor: _____

+ What's Working**Δ Current Focus: Challenges/Concerns****Teacher's Next Steps:****Mentor's Next Steps:**

Appendix C

Field Notes

- 8:45 T reminds students what to do during independent work time. Points to the chart where the tasks are listed. Reminds students how much class money they will earn if they get all of their work completed.
- 8:49 First group comes up for their lesson with T. Not all students bring everything they need, workbook, textbook and pencil. T sends them back to get them.
- 8:53 T “Great let’s start.” T does two template practices, card 3 and 10. Follows the routine and corrects group (or student) right away when needed.
- 9:04 T “You guys did a great job way to go. We are starting a new story today so we need to look at our vocabulary words.
- The first word is celebrity, what word, spell celebrity. A celebrity is someone who is famous. What is a celebrity?.....Yes someone who is famous.
- Who can use celebrity in a sentence?”
- Other words T introduces:
- Rodeo
- Exhibition
- Experts
- Ceremonies
- Performers

Appendix D

Themes and code

Teacher Request for support

- | | |
|--|-------------------------|
| -supplies | -modeling |
| -make resources to use (charts, games, etc.) | -books |
| -schedules/lesson plans | -not related to reading |

Classroom practice

- | | |
|----------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| -management | -how to teach specific reading skill |
| -modeling how to do lesson | -observe lesson |

Teacher learning

- | | |
|------------------------------|---------------------------|
| -I don't know this | -learned from observation |
| -multiple levels of students | -professional reading |
| -specific skills | |

Student improvement

- | | |
|-------------------------|-----------------|
| -on their own | -questions |
| -scores | -parent comment |
| -enjoy school, involved | |

Impact of coach

- | | |
|-------------------|------------------------|
| -support | -wouldn't have made it |
| -didn't judge | -lots of ideas |
| -never thought of | |

Appendix E

Consent Forms

Dear

I am attending University of Alaska, Fairbanks to complete my Masters in Reading. One of the program requirements I have is to complete a thesis. I have chosen to do my thesis on reading coaching with novice teachers and how it affects student learning.

I believe this study is important because all students are taught with a novice teacher at one point in their education. Reading is such a vital area in all students' education. I am requesting that you participate in the study, which will take place between 2004-2005 and 2006-2007 school years.

The study is confidential. I will be using my notes of our conversations, observations and communications that have taken place while I have worked with you. Your name and the name of the school or district will not be used in the written report. I do not foresee any risk to you or your students. If you have any questions concerning the research, please call or email me at any time.

Please sign this form and return it to me in the enclosed envelope.

Sincerely,

Natalie McBrayer, Reading Coach
[REDACTED] School District

Phone: [REDACTED]

Email: [REDACTED]

____ Yes, I will participate in your study

____ No, I will not participate in your study at this time. I need more information.

Signature

Dr. Melissa Rickey
Graduate Reading Endorsement Program Coordinator
Thesis Chair Person
University of Alaska School of Education
(907) 474-6133

Dear

I am attending the University of Alaska, Fairbanks and am in the process of finishing my thesis, which will likely be published soon. As you may remember, I asked you to be a part of my research where I was studying novice teachers, reading coaching and the effects on student learning. The data I gathered was all hand written in the form of the collaborative logs, notes from my observations, emails and short interviews we did.

In the write up of the research, I did not use your name or the location of the school. I used pseudonyms for your name and did not include the name of the school district or village. I am writing you to ask for your re-consent to use the data I gathered while working with you. The inclusion of your responses for data analyses is voluntary and your choice to allow its use or not will have no bearing on your current employment in the district.

If you allow me to use the data I gathered while working with you, I would be happy to share the findings with you. Thank you in advanced for your re-consent in use of the data.

Please sign this form and return it to me as soon as possible.

Sincerely,

Natalie McBrayer
Literacy Coach
[REDACTED] School District

Phone: [REDACTED]
Email: [REDACTED]

_____ Yes, you may use the data you gathered while working with me.

_____ No, you may not use the data you gathered while working with me.

Signature

Dr. Melissa Rickey
Graduate Reading Endorsement Program Coordinator
Thesis Chairperson
University of Alaska School of Education
(907) 474-6133