

# Efficacy of Professional Development: Extended Use of Focused Coaching on Guided Reading Instruction for Teachers of Grades One, Two, and Three

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## Abstract

This mixed-methods study investigated the impact of a multilayered approach to coaching that combined on-going coaching with a six hour professional development session. It examined the effects of coaching on the reading progress of students whose teachers received only staff development to teachers who received staff development and coaching in the use of Guided Reading. Reading progress was measured by 1<sup>st</sup>-3<sup>rd</sup> grade students' Benchmark Assessment System (BAS) scores and running records.

Results provided evidence to suggest that teachers better retain what is learned during training when they receive focused coaching cycles. Additionally, coaching significantly impacted student reading scores when teachers experienced both professional development and coaching sessions with a focus on prompting as compared to teachers who experienced professional development with no follow up coaching sessions.

**Keywords:** reading instruction, primary grades, professional development, reading achievement, guided reading, effective coaching

The quality of public education has been at the forefront of political debate for decades. Approximately 30 years ago the National Commission on Excellence in Education sparked heated controversy with its 1983 report, *A Nation at Risk*. In this report, Secretary Terrel Bell stated,

We report to the American people that while we can take justifiable pride in what our schools and colleges have historically accomplished and contributed to the United States and the well-being of its people, the educational foundations of our society are presently being eroded by a rising tide of mediocrity that threatens our very future as a Nation and a people. (p. 5)

This highly publicized report served as a catalyst for a movement toward educational reform and a focus on increased academic standards that are still present today (Guttek, 2013).

In 2010, the Common Core Standards (National Governors Association Center of Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers) were released to schools with the intent to sequence and organize instructional content primarily in literacy and mathematics. The Common Core Standards were not prescriptive in mandating instructional strategies, programs, interventions or assessment. Instead they state, "Teachers are thus free to provide students with whatever tools and knowledge their professional judgment and experience identify as most helpful for meeting the goals set out in the Standards" (p.4). Teachers are to build on their present effective instruction through implementation of best practices that result in students being college and career ready. Simply stated, teachers are free to choose instructional methods such as guided reading to ensure that students can accurately read and comprehend text upon graduation.

## 1. Guided Reading Instruction

Many school districts have adopted the research-based guided reading approach in an effort to provide effective reading instruction (Fountas & Pinnell, 1996; Ford & Optiz, 2008; Iaquinta, 2006; Knox & Amador-Watson, 2002). Guided reading provides explicit instruction targeted at the individual needs of students and has been deemed to be

effective in supporting early readers in developing and maintaining grade level reading achievement (Avalos, Plasencia, Chavez, Rascon, 2008; Fountas & Pinnell, 2012; Iaquinta, 2006; Fawson & Reutzel, 2000).

Effective reading teachers continually assess progress and respond to student needs (Afflerbach, 2007; Blair, Rupley, & Nichols, 2007; Knowles & Brown, 2000; Lipson, Chomsky-Higgins & Kanfer, 2011; Wixson & Valencia, 2011). In guided reading instruction, teachers utilize weekly running records to assess the effects of recent instruction and to determine the strengths and ongoing instructional needs of their students (Fountas & Pinnell, 1996, 2012).

Another salient feature of guided reading is that it targets small groups of students with similar instructional needs. Teachers select leveled reading texts that include language and concepts familiar to a particular reading group in order to support them during the reading process. Selected texts include new challenges that necessitate problem solving (Fountas & Pinnell, 2012). These challenges include an increased number of pages, increased complexity of sentence structure, reduced support through pictures, expanded variety of words, and exposure to new types of text structures such as dialogue, as well as new forms of punctuation. In addition, teachers expose children to more complex characters and plot structures as reading skills increase (Fountas & Pinnell, 1996).

Each guided reading lesson is broken down into three distinct components: before reading, during reading, and after reading. Before reading, the teacher typically begins each lesson by introducing new text through a conversation with the group. During the course of conversation, support is provided, such as introducing challenging vocabulary, drawing on students' prior experiences, exploring unfamiliar text layout, explaining important concepts, and introducing unfamiliar language patterns. Students are typically asked to consider a question to think about while reading the story. Most importantly, the book introduction draws the students into the story (Fountas & Pinnell, 1996).

During oral reading, students read independently and the teacher closely monitors the reading, observing students' use of word solving and comprehension strategies. Teacher observations of student strategy use are recorded in writing to be analyzed after the lesson (Fountas & Pinnell, 1996). Throughout reading, teachers may also *prompt* students to use specific strategies that could help them through areas of difficulty. Prompting refers to the teacher's use of brief, strategic responses to a student who encounters difficulty when reading. Prompt strategies are focused on maintaining efficient decoding and error correction, and using problem-solving strategies to understand unfamiliar words.

After reading, another instructional conversation occurs. Students discuss events that occurred in the text and share their impressions and reactions. This conversation expands students' comprehension of the text. The teacher then provides feedback to the group regarding evidence of strategy use observed during the reading process; this feedback reinforces the future use of strategies (Clay, 1991; Fountas & Pinnell, 1996). The purpose of this study is to investigate the impact of professional development and sustained coaching on teacher prompts and feedback around identified strategies utilized during guided reading instruction.

### *1.1 Effective Implementation of Guided Reading*

Researchers generally concur that the most important factor in student achievement is a highly effective teacher (Allington, 2002; Gordon, Kane, & Staiger, 2006; Haycock & Crawford, 2008). Researched-based student improvement programs fall short if they are not implemented by well-trained teachers who are responsive to the individual needs of their students (Allington, 2002; 2011). It has been suggested that the achievement gap would disappear altogether if schools only ensured that the highest quality teachers were assigned to the most at-risk students (Haycock, 1998; Carey, 2004). However, most school districts cannot meet the challenge of finding effective, high quality teachers for every classroom, particularly in low income schools (Carey, 2004; Ingersoll & Smith, 2003, Onchwari & Keengwee, 2010).

In spite of this lack of effective teachers, many campus leaders are realizing that less successful teachers can become more effective with high quality professional development and professional coaching (Carlisle & Berebitsky, 2011; Hirsh, 2005). There is a large pay-off in providing professional development that can equip teachers with content knowledge as well as instructional strategies and methods necessary to ensure success for all children. A recent study indicated that when teachers received 50 hours or more a year of high quality support, test scores increased by 21% (Wei, Darling-Hammond, Andree, Richardson, & Orphanos, 2010). These results were corroborated by Long's (2012) research demonstrating that student achievement was enhanced when teachers received between 49 and 100 hours of focused professional development.

Teachers in the United States, however, often lack opportunities to participate in effective professional development (Joyce & Showers, 2002; Wei et al., 2010). Other countries, including Finland, Denmark, Switzerland, Singapore, and South Korea, have made teacher development a priority and are experiencing significant positive results. Teachers in these competing nations are assuming responsibility for improving education, are staying in the profession longer, and showing more satisfaction with their work (Darling-Hammond, Wei, Andree, Richardson, & Orphanos, 2009).

Unfortunately, too often U.S. teachers teach in isolation and professional learning opportunities are delivered in “one shot” doses of disconnected workshops (Darling-Hammond et al., 2009; Hirsh, 2009).

The consensus is that high quality professional development should be intensive, ongoing, and connected to practice (Desimone, Porter, Garet, Yoon, & Birman, 2002; Darling-Hammond et al., 2009). According to the National Staff Development Council (2009), professional development has to focus on student learning and align with school improvement goals. Research supports that effective professional learning opportunities supports teachers to participate as a community of professionals who come together to study curriculum and instructional initiatives that are successful in improving student learning (Joyce & Showers, 2002; Dufour, 2004; Darling-Hammond et al., 2009).

### *1.2 Melding Guided Reading Instruction with Professional Development and Coaching*

Providing sustained professional development around the implementation of the instructional practice of guided reading enhances the effectiveness of teachers’ reading instruction for early readers. Numerous schools have shown great interest in providing professional development and support for teachers through the utilization of teacher leaders in a coaching role (Knight, 2009; Rennie, 2011). Onchwari and Keengwe (2010) concluded that professional development activities supported by mentor-coach initiatives enhance teacher instruction and lead to gains in learners’ academic performance. Neuman and Cunningham (2009) define coaching as “a collaborative relationship between an expert and a practitioner, who may have been working in the field for many years, to develop specific knowledge and skills related to instructional practice” (p.538). Instructional coaches typically support teachers by modeling lessons for other teachers; assisting teachers in planning, observing peers and providing feedback; facilitating learning teams; and, building strong relationships (Knight, 2009). Coaching is useful in supporting teachers’ ability to keep up with the demands of educational reforms that result in new instructional practices. In addition, a knowledgeable instructional coach can positively impact the reflective practices of teachers, which can have a positive impact on student learning (Onchwari & Keengwe, 2010). According to Onchwari and Keengwe, professional development is most effective when teachers are supported in personal, ongoing relationships with a coach-mentor.

The purpose of the present study was to explore the impact of a multi-layered approach to coaching on teachers’ use of guided reading and its influence on their students’ literacy skills. The multi-layered professional development approach was rooted in instructional coaching cycles and also included training for campus leaders and literacy coaches. The following research questions are addressed in this study:

Q1: Does coaching teachers after staff development increase their use of reading prompts when compared to teachers receiving staff development without coaching?

Q2: Do students whose teachers receive coaching have significantly higher reading BAS spring scores when compared to students whose teachers receive staff development only?

### *1.3 Setting*

This study was conducted at Garfield Elementary (pseudonym), one of 26 elementary schools in a large south Texas suburban school district. Oak Independent School District (pseudonym, OISD) is a large suburban school district that serves over 40,020 students and is growing by approximately 600 students per year. There are currently 45 campuses including 26 elementary schools, 10 intermediate schools, five comprehensive high schools, one early college high school, one alternate high school for at-risk students, and an alternative school for students with disciplinary infractions.

The Garfield campus opened in 1976 and served 753 students in grades Pre-K through 5<sup>th</sup> grade during the research year. According to Texas Education Agency (TEA) 2012-13 Texas Academic Performance Report, the population was 12% African-American, 34.1% White, 16.6% Asian, 32.6% Hispanic, and 4.5% two or more races. Garfield is a Title I school that recently experienced rapid changes in demographics. The number of students qualifying as economically disadvantaged rose by 17% over the last five years, with 42% of students designated as economically disadvantaged. Thirty percent of Garfield students were at-risk, and 16.5% of students were English language learners. The campus became eligible for Title I funding in 2010.

## **2. Methodology**

### *2.1 Participants*

Garfield Elementary has a relatively young staff; 54.1% of teachers have five years or less teaching experience. In this study, there were a total of 10 teachers: four first grade teachers, two second grade teachers, and four third grade teachers. The campus employs three instructional coaches that support teachers in literacy, math, and science. Campus-based professional development opportunities are offered for teachers through an instructional coaching

program. Coaches support teachers through modeling lessons, facilitating planning sessions, and directly providing professional development to teachers. Teachers also have opportunities to participate in one-on-one coaching sessions.

Teachers in this study were voluntary participants. All teachers at Garfield teaching grades 1-3 received information regarding the study and could choose to either participate or not. A total of ten teachers agreed to participate. Participants were randomly assigned to either a control or experimental group. Participants who taught grades 1-3 were ideal for the study because the campus literacy coach observes, coaches, and delivers professional development to them. Also helpful was the fact that the first-third grade teachers had recently attended a common professional development session on prompting for strategic action at the beginning of the school year.

This sample of teachers represented a diverse array of experience and expertise in their grade level. The most experienced teacher had taught for 17 years, and the least experienced teacher had taught for two years. All teachers were female and all held a Bachelor's degree as the highest degree earned.

## 2.2 Professional Development

Both experimental and control teachers attended a professional development session offered by a consultant with extensive training in guided reading. The six-hour professional development was entitled *Utilizing Effective Prompts* and was held the week before school started in August 2013.

Following the professional development session, teachers in the experimental group received three individual coaching sessions with their campus-based literacy coach. These coaching sessions consisted of: (1) a pre-conference where teacher and coach planned a guided reading lesson together, (2) coach observation of the teacher's guided reading lesson and collection of data regarding the usage of prompts, and (3) data debriefing session with the teacher. The three coaching sessions took place between August and December. The teachers in the control group attended the professional development session but did not receive individual coaching sessions following the training.

## 2.3 Data Collection

A variety of data sources were used to answer the research questions. The first question addressed was:

Q1: Does coaching teachers after staff development increase their use of reading prompts when compared to teachers receiving staff development without coaching?

In order to address this question, two guided reading lessons of teachers in both the control and experimental groups were observed at the beginning of the fall semester and after completion of the first semester. Data regarding the components of the guided reading were recorded on the *Developing Language and Literacy Teaching Rubric System* for guided reading. The lessons were also audio-taped and transcribed. Researchers collaborated with the district language arts coordinator (LAC) to analyze the recordings and the rubrics to determine fidelity of implementation of the guided reading lessons. Each of the five components of the lesson was ranked on a scale of 1-4, with 4 being the highest quality. Agreement between researchers and LAC was 85% or higher. Pre- and post-observations were compared to determine if there was improvement in the observation scores over time.

In addition to analyzing the degree of fidelity of guided reading lessons, the guided reading transcripts were analyzed by researchers and the LAC to determine the type of support—teaching, prompting, or reinforcing—offered to students when they encountered difficulty during the reading process. Lesson transcripts were analyzed a second time to determine the strategic actions of students that teachers attempted to support. Close attention was given to the following reading strategies: early reading behaviors, searching for and using information, solving words, monitoring and correcting, maintaining fluency, and problem solving. Prompts from the lessons at the beginning of the semester were compared to the prompts from the end of the semester and descriptive statistics were calculated.

Running records were collected three times during the semester from teachers in both the control and experimental groups. A running record is a record of an individual student's reading performance. Teachers typically capture a transcript of an oral reading sample and analyze the accuracy of the reading, as well as the self-correction rate of the reading sample (Clay, 1993). Reading levels for students in both the control and experimental groups were calculated, and descriptive statistics were also calculated.

In addition to analyzing reading levels, teacher anecdotal notes from the running records were collected and analyzed to determine if teachers incorporated any specific language used in the professional development *Utilizing Effective Prompts*, which was held the week before school started in August 2013.

Language from the running records was categorized into two distinct categories: actions teachers took to support students, and strategic actions teachers attempted to support. These two categories were selected for coding because they were an integral part of the professional development session. These same categories were also aligned to the *Guided Reading Prompting Guide* (2009) that was distributed to all teachers at Garfield Elementary School.

At the end of the study, the researcher administered an end of year reflection survey to teachers in both the control and experimental groups (Appendix A). The survey attempted to determine how the six-hour professional development session impacted teachers' practice and whether it impacted the reading achievement of their students. The survey also asked if the new learning from the workshop faded over time. Teachers in the experimental group were asked to provide reflections regarding whether coaching sessions supported them and how.

The next question addressed was:

Q2: Do students whose teachers receive coaching have significantly higher reading BAS spring scores when compared to students whose teachers receive staff development only?

To answer this question, students' reading data were collected through the administration of the *Benchmark Assessment System* (BAS) developed by Fountas and Pinnell (2004). This assessment is aligned with the Fountas and Pinnell Text Gradient System adopted by OISD, which assigns students a reading level on a gradient of A-Z. This same Text Gradient System applies to the texts teachers in OISD use for guided reading. The BAS is a formative assessment that can be administered individually to students in grades K-8. The assessment measures decoding, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension. The purpose of the BAS is to support teachers and reading specialists in determining students' developmental reading levels to identify instructional goals and document reading progress (Fountas & Pinnell, 2004).

The BAS was administered to all students in both control and experimental groups in the fall and again in the spring with the exception of one 3<sup>rd</sup> grade teacher who did not administer the assessment in the spring. BAS pre- and post-data were analyzed and descriptive statistics were calculated. A one-way analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) was conducted to determine the effects of coaching on reading scores when teachers received both training and coaching sessions as opposed to teachers who received training but did not receive coaching sessions.

### 3. Results

#### 3.1 Quantitative Analysis

In this first analysis of teachers' use of effective reading prompts, more teachers in the experimental group demonstrated an increase in the variety of strategic actions supported as compared to teachers in the control group. Four out of five teachers in the experimental group showed an increase as compared to one out of five teachers in the control group. Conversely, three out of five teachers in the control group decreased the use of strategic actions prompted as compared to one teacher in the experimental group who decreased in the variety of strategic actions prompted. Table 1 shows the differences between the control and experimental groups in terms of teacher change in usage of effective prompts between fall and spring semesters.

Table 1. Group summary of effective use of prompts

Teacher C=Control E=Exper.	Freq of Actions (T,P,R) Fall	Variety of Strategic Actions Supported Fall	Freq of Actions (T,P,R) Spring	Variety of Strategic Actions Spring	Difference in Variety of Strategic Actions
C1	12	4/6	8	3/6	-2
C2	5	1/6	*	*	*
C3	11	5/6	31	4/6	-2
C4	19	5/6	8	2/6	-4
C5	24	4/6	25	6/6	+2
C Mean Summary	14.2	3.8/6	18	3.7/6	-1.5
E6	41	3/6	14	4/6	+1
E7	10	3/6	12	2/6	-1
E8	9	2/6	7	4/6	+2
E9	9	3/6	12	4/6	+1
E10	12	3/6	10	4/6	+1
E Mean Summary	32.4	2.8/6	11	3.6/6	.8

\*Teacher did not have students read aloud during the observation so no data were collected.

Guided reading transcripts were analyzed alongside the classroom observation notes to determine fidelity of implementation of guided reading lessons. The *Developing Language and Literacy Teaching Rubric System* for guided reading was used for this analysis. Results from the September observations were compared to the results of the January observations to determine if there was a difference in the fidelity of the lesson delivery or the quality of the lesson components between control and experimental groups. As can be seen in Table 2, there were no discernable patterns or trends in the change in quality of guided reading components between the control and experimental groups.

Following the analysis of guided reading observations, 578 running records were examined. Running records were divided into three time periods: beginning of semester, mid-semester, and end of semester.

All of the teachers' written notes were entered into a spreadsheet and these notes were examined for evidence of parallel language introduced during the August workshop. The workshop directed teachers to notice and support students to think in three broad ways during the reading process: *within* the text, *beyond* the text, and *about* the text. Three code charts of parallel language were created for each of the wide-ranging ways of thinking employed during the reading process. Language from running records was then compared to language from the coding charts to determine the extent to which the workshop influenced teacher observations of their own students. Table 3 summarizes examples of the language that was used to analyze the anecdotal teacher notes.

Table 2. Change in quality of guided reading components for all teachers

Teacher Con or Exp	TS	Change in Quality of Guided Reading Components				
		TIA	TIB	DR	ARA	ARB
1 Con	0	0	0	1	-1	1
2 Con	*	0	1	*	*	*
3 Con	0	-1	-1	0	-1	0
4 Con	0	0	0	-1	0	-2
5 Con	0	1	0	-1	1	-1
C Means Summary	0	0	0	-.025	-.025	-0.5
6 Exp	-3	-1	-2	-2	-1	-1
7 Exp	1	0	0	-1	0	-1
8 Exp	-1	-1	-1	0	3	-2
9 Exp	0	0	-1	3	0	-2
10 Exp	-1	0	0	0	-2	0
E Means Summary	-0.8	-0.4	-0.8	0	0	-1.2

\*Teacher #2 did not have students read aloud during the second observation so no data were collected in these areas.

Table 3. Results of the ANCOVA Test for all students

Source	df	Mean Square	F	Sig	Partial $\eta^2$
Experimental/Control	1	6.08	16.759	.000	.092
Error	165	2.07			

Language indicative of the workshop declined over the semester in the running records of all five teachers in the control group, with the exception of Teacher 2 who did not write any anecdotal notes in running records. This decline was evident both at the end of the semester and at the mid-semester point. With the experimental group, language usage increased over the semester in three out of five teachers' running records. This trend was evident at the mid-semester as well as at the end of the semester. Of the two experimental teachers not showing growth, running records still indicated usage of language at the end of the semester, with Teacher 8 indicating ten examples, and Teacher 9 indicating six examples. Overall, there were two teachers who did not make any anecdotal notes in their running records at the beginning of the semester; one in the control group and one in the experimental group. With coaching sessions,

Teacher 10 in the experimental group indicated language indicative of the workshop five times by the end of the semester.

Teachers were surveyed at the end of the study to determine the perceived impact of the staff development session they attended in August. Teachers responded to the survey via an electronic form in January at the conclusion of the study. They were asked to indicate their agreement to statements using a Likert scale with a range of 1-4. A score of one indicated strong agreement and a score of four indicated strong disagreement. The statements were as follows:

Q1: Immediately following the training session, I incorporated learning from *Prompting for Strategic Action* training into my practice.

Q2: Over time, what I learned at the *Prompting for Strategic Action* training slipped away.

Q3: I feel the *Prompting for Strategic Action* training impacted the reading achievement of my students.

Q4: The *Prompting for Strategic Action* training impacted my teaching practices.

Q5: I feel that I need more training on *Prompting for Strategic Action*

Nine out of 10 teachers indicated that they immediately incorporated new learning from the workshop into their practice. The one teacher who disagreed was in the control group. This finding is supported by the evidence of teacher use of language in running records at the beginning of the semester. Eight out of ten teachers showed between nine and 33 examples of language used in the workshop.

Survey question 2 yielded surprising results. Four out of five teachers in the experimental group indicated that over time what was learned in the workshop *Prompting for Strategic Action* had slipped away. This was reported in spite of the focus on the training during instructional coaching sessions and evidence of language from the training in running records throughout the semester. Conversely, three out of five teachers in the control group did not feel the learning from the training had slipped away over time. This contrasts with the analysis of language in running records indicating that all five teachers who did not receive coaching cycles decreased usage of language indicative of the workshop.

Student reading accuracy levels as determined by the BAS were collected in the fall and spring. Each reading score was categorized as either below level, on-level, or above level. In addition, the reading level itself was collected. The BAS assigns a reading level using letters A-Z, with "A" representing the beginning level of reading. The BAS does not yield a numerical raw score. Each alphabetic level was converted to a corresponding number. For example, reading level "A" was converted to "1," level "B" was converted to "2," and so on.

A one-way analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) was conducted (Table 3). The independent variable was instructional coaching and included coaching cycles or no coaching cycles. The dependent variable was the spring BAS reading scores and the covariant was the fall BAS scores before the coaching cycles. A preliminary analysis evaluating the homogeneity-of-slopes assumption indicated that the relationship between the covariate and the dependent variable did not differ significantly as a function of the independent variable,  $F(1, 164) = 0.39$ ,  $MSE = 2.07$ ,  $p = .84$ , partial  $\eta^2 < .01$ . The ANCOVA was significant,  $F(1, 165) = 16.76$ ,  $MSE = 2.06$ ,  $p < .01$ . The strength of relationship between the coaching cycles and the spring BAS reading scores was weak as assessed by a partial  $\eta^2$ , with the coaching cycles accounting for 9% of the variance of the spring BAS scores.

### 3.2 Qualitative Analysis

Coaching log notes, observation records, and an end of semester survey were analyzed using the constant comparative method (Glaser, 1965). The purpose of this analysis was to determine possible themes that might add value to understanding what contributed to the positive outcome of the study. The analysis started by carefully reading through all 10 teachers' comments from the end of the year survey, as well as teachers' comments taken from the literacy coach's personal survey. An interpretational approach was selected to examine verbal data to discover constructs, themes, and patterns for explanation of the phenomenon studied (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2007). Each comment was read individually and then participant responses were categorized into themes. Finally, the comments from coaching logs were analyzed until saturation was reached and no new themes emerged. After final analysis, the major themes to emerge were *focused*, *reflection*, and *efficacy*. However, these three themes were closely intertwined. The ability to focus long-term on a specific, narrow goal resulted in perceived student success. In addition, coaching cycles provided opportunities for reflection on teacher practice, which resulted in greater teacher confidence and self-efficacy.

#### 3.2.1 Theme I: Focused

The *focused* theme had two related connotations: *focus* as the ability to attend to a narrow, specific goal; and *focus* as the ability to remain consistent over time. Teachers who received instructional coaching cycles expressed that it

supported their instructional ability of Prompting for Strategic Action. They reported having greater clarity of focus with regard to this component of guided reading. Several teachers noted that before the coaching they “went through the motions” of the guided reading components without really stopping to consider the impact of each on their individual students. One teacher’s comments were illustrative: “I feel like I was doing too much before and now I feel like I am more efficient and focused” (Teacher A, Survey, January, 2014). Another teacher corroborated, “My goals were fresh in my brain and I was able to better focus on smaller, more specific goals” (Teacher B, Survey, January, 2014). The literacy coach echoed this idea of positive impact of focus in supporting a narrow, specific goal. When asked if the coaching sessions impacted reading achievement (Appendix B), she responded, “I do in the sense that because it was on prompting, and that is something so specific” (Literacy Coach, Interview, January, 2014).

The theme of focused was also present in the idea that remaining consistent over time on a specific goal resulted in a positive impact on teaching practice and student achievement. The literacy coach indicated that in the past teachers determined the direction of coaching cycles, but they did not typically have a long-term, clear goal. According to the coach,

Typically the teachers are in charge of what we are coaching on, so during the pre-conference I am asking, “What do you want me to look for?” And I think in general that teachers are not making long-term goals. They were making goals of what they are not comfortable with at the time. They want to fix something so we work on it one time and the next time they would think of something else to work on (Interview, January, 2014).

Teachers appreciated consistency of the coaching cycles and the fact that the goal remained consistent over the semester. One teacher declared, “I like this consistent coaching. I like having to look at myself and be reflective” (Teacher C, Coach Survey, January, 2014). Another teacher echoed this sentiment: “I thought it was beneficial to be able to meet with my coach every month. I was able to track my goals and get immediate input about ideas and strategies” (Teacher D, Coach Survey, January, 2014). One teacher shared that having the coach work with her supported her because the coach became aware of her students’ strengths and needs. This knowledge equipped the coach better in recommending strategies.

While coaching with a specific goal or focus appeared to provide support to the teachers in this study, the literacy coach also reported that narrowing her focus to a smaller group of teachers impacted her as well: “A big take away for me is that I think my coaching was more effective by narrowing my focus to a smaller group of people” (Literacy Coach, Structured Interview, January 2014). She went on to say that she perceived pressure to support all teachers on the campus equally. However, doing so resulted in working with teachers at a surface level. “You can spread yourself too thin and hit the surface with everybody, or you can dig deep with a smaller number of people. But I do feel like I took much bigger strides with the people I was working with” (Literacy Coach, Structured Interview, January, 2014).

### 3.2.2 Theme 2: Reflection

The theme of *reflection* was also evident during interviews and teacher surveys. According to the International Reading Association (2010), a major responsibility of a literacy coach is to work with classroom teachers in an effort to build reflective capacity to improve student learning. Through participation in coaching cycles, teachers in the experimental group were provided opportunities during the school day to reflect on their goals. This opportunity for reflection impacted teachers positively and also enhanced their ability to remain focused on their goals.

All five teachers in the experimental group expressed appreciation for the opportunity for reflection. This was exemplified in one teacher’s remarks: “The coaching sessions did support prompting in guided reading groups. I became more familiar with the prompting guide and was able to reflect (with a colleague!) on what was going well and what needed improvement. It was helpful to have a specific block to review, reflect, and plan my prompting” (Teacher 9, Survey, January, 2014). Teachers also indicated that time to reflect helped to maintain their focus on their goals. When asked if there were benefits to the coaching cycles, one teacher responded, “It helped me be more reflective of my teaching. I was in charge of my goals and what I felt like I personally needed to work on” (Teacher E, Coach Survey, January, 2014).

As stated earlier, the three themes of focused, reflection, and efficacy were all related. A narrow, focused goal that was explored consistently over time resulted in perceived improvement in reading instruction. The opportunity for reflection helped teachers to maintain focus on their goals. Through reflection, teachers had the opportunity to consider the impact of their instructional decisions on the reading achievement of their students. Teachers were able to connect their strategic moves to student success. As a result, the final theme of efficacy emerged.



### 3.2.3 Theme 3: Efficacy

Teacher *efficacy* has been defined as “teachers’ judgments about their abilities to promote students’ learning” (Hoy & Spero, 2005, p. 343). Teachers’ sense of efficacy has been linked to student achievement, motivation, and also to their own students’ personal sense of efficacy (Hoy & Spero, 2005). Research indicates that teachers with high levels of efficacy are more likely to implement innovative instructional programs (Ross, 1992).

In this study, teachers who received both professional development and coaching experienced increased levels of confidence and efficacy as indicated by surveys and observations of their literacy coach. Teachers described an increased comfort level with the new reading techniques and, as a result, more confidence. One teacher observed, “I am more comfortable with my prompting during their reading. I feel that I am giving higher level prompts instead of just word work prompts” (Teacher A, Coach Survey, January, 2014). Another teacher indicated, “I feel much more confident that any given lesson is meaningful for the kids” (Teacher B, Coach Survey, January, 2014).

The literacy coach also shared during the structured interview that she believed teacher confidence had increased. “A lot of the teacher feedback to me was that they feel more confident in what to teach the kids when they are at the table[...]. That has got to lead to reading achievement” (Literacy Coach, Structured Interview, January 2014). One explanation for the increased confidence could be consistency in the coaching cycles. The literacy coach described a success story:

I would say one of my biggest (success) ones was a teacher who has been here all five years that I have been here. She does not like people observing her, which most teachers don’t. I don’t either, but she just has a really big fear of it. I have been trying to tell her the only way to be more comfortable is to just have people do it. Just let me come sit and watch in a non-threatening way. I won’t even bring a clipboard or a pen. You know, I think that consistency, being in her room every time, she had the most visible “ah ha” moments. I have heard her say, “Now I get it. I have heard you say that three times, and now I get it.” I created a survey for them to fill out, and her feedback talked a lot about confidence, which for me is more important than any of the reading work we were doing.” (Literacy Coach, Structured Interview, January 2014).

## 4. Discussion

OISD has struggled to find a solution to the lack of adequate reading progress with students in grades 1-3 and attempted to address the problem by combining an explicit instructional method (Guided Reading) with professional development that included focused coaching for teachers in the district. Results provided evidence to suggest that teachers better retained what was learned during the Prompting for Strategic Action professional development when they received follow-up coaching cycles. This is based on the observed decline in the use of instructional language in teacher running records associated with the training session when teachers did not receive follow up coaching support. In contrast, when teachers received follow up coaching cycles, language indicative of the workshop increased in three out of five teachers’ running records. Of the two experimental teachers not showing growth, running records still indicated usage of language associated with the training at the completion of the study.

The results also indicated that overall student growth in reading as measured by the BAS was significantly higher in classrooms taught by teachers that experienced both professional development and coaching sessions with a focus on prompting as compared to teachers who experienced professional development with no follow-up coaching sessions. Students identified as at-risk also achieved significantly higher student growth in reading as measured by the BAS in the experimental classrooms indicating that professional development when combined with ongoing coaching improves teacher discourse and reflection and positively impacts student learning.

The qualitative component of the study shed light on underlying themes present and added value in understanding the outcomes of the study. The themes: Focused, reflection, and efficacy emerged in relation to teachers’ perceptions of reading instruction after an analysis of teacher surveys, interviews of the literacy coach and principal, and the analysis of coaching logs. The ability to focus long-term on a specific, narrow goal resulted in perceived student success. In addition, coaching cycles provided opportunities for reflection on teacher practice, which resulted in greater teacher confidence and self-efficacy.

The principal at Garfield Elementary recognized that “one shot” professional development opportunities do not normally result in sustained change in practice. This study confirmed that when teachers receive a one-shot workshop, the strategies learned tend to erode over time. The consensus is that high quality professional development should be intensive, ongoing, and connected to practice (Desimone, Porter, Garet, Yoon, & Birman, 2002; Darling-Hammond et al., 2009). According to the National Staff Development Council (2009), professional development should focus on student learning and align with school improvement goals. Perhaps more importantly, it should foster strong,

collaborative relationships between teachers (Darling-Hammond et al., 2009). Campus leaders should heed this research and provide focused opportunities for teachers to learn together, receive timely feedback, and reflect on data related to specific goals. Leaders should especially ensure that there are relevant connections between the various professional learning opportunities so that a clear focus is maintained.

The goal of coaching is to improve the way teachers deliver instruction and, in turn, improve student learning (Knight, 2009). Coaching is not a “one-shot” training session; rather, coaches specifically design their interactions with individual teachers to meet their unique needs (Knight, 2009). Coaches are charged with supporting teachers in identifying personal goals, and then supporting them in reaching those goals.

While many school districts have adopted a coaching model to support teacher development, this study revealed the value in maintaining a specific focus or goal over time. Teachers in this study gained confidence and increased their sense of efficacy because all professional learning opportunities were focused on utilizing strategic prompts during guided reading. Teachers found value in receiving consistent coaching support throughout the semester focused on this specific teaching strategy.

Coaches can serve many different roles on a campus. Learning Forward has identified ten specific roles: mentor, learning facilitator, instructional specialist, catalyst for change, data coach, resource provider, classroom supporter, school leader, learner, and curriculum specialist (Killion, Harrison, Bryan, & Clifton, 2012). Each role serves a valuable purpose on a campus. However, instructional coaches should work with the campus principal to clarify and prioritize their role (Frank, 2010; Petersen, Taylor, Burnham, & Schock, 2009). Attempting to serve equally well in all roles can lead to diluted results.

There are many roles that a coach can play on a campus and many teachers to support. Coaches in OISD feel it is their duty to serve all teachers equally, which can result in limited support for all. This study similar to studies by Carlisle and Berbeitsky (2011) revealed that students’ progress is significantly improved when teachers spend sustained time focused on a specific practice and received individual support through coaching cycles. School districts should work with campus leaders to utilize data to identify specific instructional goals. Data could include assessment results, walk-through feedback data, and teacher and student surveys. These data should be utilized to determine the roles that the coach will serve and the teachers who will be supported. This study provided additional evidence that indicates teacher knowledge and student academic performance is improved when coaching is provided to support school wide professional development.

## 5. Limitations

This study occurred on one campus and examined the effects of one coach working with five teachers. It would be worthwhile to replicate this study to determine if similar results are obtained with other coaches. In the case of this research, there was no attempt made to determine the preexisting skill set of the coach assigned to Garfield Elementary School.

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## Appendix A

## REFLECTION SURVEY

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Earlier this year you attended a training session called “Prompting for Strategic Action”.

Please indicate your level of agreement to the following statements.

1=Strongly Agree

2=Agree

3=Disagree

4=Strongly Disagree

Circle the number that best describes your response.

1            2            3            4            5

The “Prompting for Strategic Action” training impacted my teaching practices.

1            2            3            4            5

Immediately after the training session I incorporated new learning from the “Prompting for Strategic Action” training into my practice.

1            2            3            4            5

Over time, what I learned at the “Prompting for Strategic Action” training slipped away.

1            2            3            4            5

I feel that the “Prompting for Strategic Action” impacted the reading achievement of my students.

1            2            3            4            5

I feel that I need more training on “Prompting for Strategic Action”.

1            2            3            4            5

Did you receive individual coaching sessions to support prompting for strategic actions?

Yes \_\_\_\_\_

No \_\_\_\_\_

If you answered yes, please complete the following questions:

Did the individual coaching sessions support you in prompting for strategic action? If so, how?

## Appendix B

## LITERACY COACH SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW

- This semester you have worked with five teachers to coach them in prompting for strategic action. Talk to me about this experience.  
(Probe for successes, failures)
- What did you learn from this experience?
- If you were to do this again, what would you do differently?
- Do you feel that the coaching sessions impacted reading achievement? Why or why not?
- How did this experience impact your role as a coach on this campus?