Three Story Intellect

There are one-story intellects

Two-story intellects

and three-story intellects

with skylights.

All fact collectors who have

no aim beyond their facts

are one-story people.

Two-story people compare, reason,

generalize, using the labor of fact

collectors as their own.

Three-story people idealize,

imagine, predict—their best illumination

comes from above

through the skylight.

—Oliver Wendell Holmes



Dedicated to my family and friends for their continued faith and support.

## Lessons Learned from Experienced Specialist Teachers: Coaching Model Use to Improve Pedagogic Practice

In schools with low student achievement levels, it is critical that educators improve the literacy skills of at-risk students. The Carnegie Report authored by Biancarosa and Snow (2006), *Reading Next: A Vision for Action and Research in Middle and High School Literacy*, supports this view:

American youth need strong literacy skills to succeed in school and in life. Students who do not acquire these skills find themselves at a serious disadvantage in social settings, as civil participants, and in the working world. Yet approximately eight million young people between fourth and twelfth grade struggle to read at grade level. Some 70 per cent of older readers require some remediation. (p. 3)

With the passage of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act in 2002, public schools have been required to show progress for heretofore under-reported subgroups. Despite current attempts to raise literacy accountability, distraction, disengagement, and isolation still abound in America’s urban schools. Meier and Wood (2004) consider the following case of a high school student named Angelica:

Not only was she failing all the classes she was taking, we could not get records from her former school because of school fees she owed. While nice enough in school Angelica was not doing any work, and we were uncertain if, at age sixteen, she had ever passed a high school class. (p. 33)

In the face of stiffer federal educational mandates, and in the midst of promising school reforms, academically at-risk students like Angelica continue to be lost in the system. The issue that remains to be examined, therefore, is the apparent failure of current approaches toward improving instructional and learning outcomes among at-risk students.

# Chapter One: Research Problem and Importance

For purposes of this study, at-risk students are defined as those at the early adolescent middle school level, where literacy performance seems more resistant to reform. Classroom teachers are defined as those facing the challenge of improving performance in schools where the majority of learners remain academically at risk.

## The Rochester City School District

Located in western New York along the shore of Lake Ontario, Rochester is the state’s third largest city. It has a population of approximately 220,000 and a median income of $31,257. African Americans and Hispanics compose 60% of the population. In 2004–05, the Rochester City School District (RCSD) served approximately 1,741 Pre-Kindergarten students at 64 sites; 33,055 K–12 students at 40 elementary and 19 secondary schools, 11,555 adult students at an adult and family learning center and a program for young mothers. The 2002, 2003, and 2004 district data indicate a steady number of limited-English-proficient (LEP) students (7%, 8%, and 8% in each measurable year, respectively) and a growing percentage of students eligible for free and reduced-price lunch (81%, 80%, 86% respectively, and 88% in 2005). The average ethnic composition at the K–12 level is 65% African-American, 20% Hispanic, 13% Caucasian, 2% Asian, and 0.4% American Indian or Alaskan Native. The district’s poverty rate was 86.2% for the 2004–05 school year, which is a 6.1% increase from the previous year. Rochester is one of the largest city school districts (along with Buffalo, Syracuse, and Yonkers) identified as having high student needs relative to district resource capacity (Citi-Data.com, n.d.; Learning Point Associates, 2005; Widerquist, 2001).

Rochester is ranked 11th in the nation per capita for child poverty, ahead of New York City, Los Angeles, Chicago, and Washington, DC. Eighteen percent of Rochester’s African-American children live in extreme poverty, compared to eight percent nationally. All 59 of the RCSD schools meet the definition of “high concentration of low income students” (Learning Point Associates, 2006, p. 2).

## Research Problem

In acknowledgement of the dire need for significant improvement in student achievement, the RCSD, one of the big 5 school districts in New York State, elected to immerse a majority of its English teachers for grades 6 through 10 in professional development for literacy instruction. Central to the success of the district’s new professional development thrust was the coaching model (CM). A thorough literature review indicates that professional development for literacy should be long-term and ongoing; leadership ought to come from both principals and teachers who understand how to teach reading and writing to a full range of students.

The central focus of this dissertation, informed by a review of the literature as well as by Rochester’s approach to improving education for at-risk students, is the experiences of specialist teachers specific to their individual roles as instructional coaches. The Rochester school district chose to use coaching as a primary method for improving instruction and teaching strategies, experimenting with new teaching approaches, new techniques, new problem-solving methods, and renewed and invigorated collegial relationships. Rochester’s view of coaching frames a general approach to professional development facilitation, analysis, and interpretation.

From the late 1990s to 2005, a technical version of the CM called the “literacy coach” was widely used by the RCSD. Rochester borrowed this model from the America’s Choice School Design, now renamed America’s Choice, Inc. (AC). It was the researcher’s background experience as an America’s Choice literacy coach, and subsequently as an English Language Arts (ELA) specialist teacher, that led to the recognition of the coaching model as a potential target for focused study.

Unfortunately for the Rochester City School District, the problem of widespread poor performance among at-risk populations persists. This poor performance seems tied to some of the frustrations experienced with the coaching endeavors of those who became specialist teachers. The problem appears exacerbated by concerns raised and anxieties shared over the conflicting specialist teacher roles in RCSD middle and high schools. Eventually, district and school pressures to improve coaching capacities resulted in perceptions of a “more versus better” expectations gap for some specialist teachers.

Following the advent and popular use of the AC literacy coach in Rochester, district administration decided to build technical instructional skills in more teachers by training specialist teachers in cognitive coaching. According to Costa and Garmston (1993), “Cognitive coaching is a nonjudgmental process–built around a planning conference, observation, and a reflecting conference. Any one in an educational setting can become a cognitive coach” (p. 2).

Specialist teachers acknowledge struggling with specialized phases of the coaching model. A review of the literatures legitimizes their frustration. Moreover, once data was collected, the scope of the problem was further reinforced by common themes of both progress and frustration—testimonies of effort and anxiety.

## PDE Purpose

Recent studies show that student academic performance in Rochester high schools continues to lag behind national benchmarks. According to Learning Point Associates (2006):

On October 14, 2005, the state of New York designated the accountability status of Rochester as a district ‘in need of improvement, Year 4’ for English and language arts. . . . Overall, 2003–04 eighth-grade students did not make AMO [annual measurable objective] or AYP [adequate yearly progress] for English language arts, including the subgroups of students with disabilities, African-American and Hispanic students, LEP students, and economically disadvantaged students.. Overall, 12th-grade students in 2003–04 did not make AMO or AYP for English language arts or mathematics, including the following subgroups: students with disabilities and African-American, Hispanic, Caucasian, and economically disadvantaged students. (p. x)

With the vast majority of its at-risk learners still performing below state and national standards, the district might value a study targeting one of its key reform strategies. RCSD used a technical instructional coaching model for more than five years and then switched to a cognitive coaching model. A formal analysis of the perceptions of coaches experienced in both these models leads to valuable information for future decisions concerning how RCSD ought to continue to apply the coaching model. Indeed, uncovering critical levels of the model’s theoretical underpinnings can facilitate improvement in Rochester classroom practices by deepening the description of coaching model situational contexts, adding clarity to continued coaching model use to support teaching and improve learning.

With such insight gained, coaches can acquire better training and support and practically, realistically, and strategically maximize their potential as instructional change agents. This could in turn enable specialist teachers (STs) to provide more effective instructional support for specific problems such as those identified in the RCSD final report of 2006. Here coaches are identified as key potential change-agents for areas of challenge such as these, identified by Learning Point Associates in 2006:

* The English curriculum is not consistently being taught in a way that fully aligns with the New York state standards, curriculum, and assessments;
* At the high school level, too many students are not engaged in meaningful learning;
* Research-based best practices are not being taught consistently across grade levels.

It follows, then, that with the development of more critical understanding of coaching model use (as it has continued to evolve in the Rochester City School District) more research in this area is needed. Moreover, deepening—and in effect broadening—understanding and equitable use of district coaching practices may result in more as well as better support. Such concerted systemic effort may result in the needed growth and development of a proactive and effective coaching culture, irrespective of school site or grade level.

In a larger sense, this study supports the development of critical awareness in coaching situations and provides a means to share findings with intended audiences interested in this tool of change in RCSD classroom practices. According to Shank (2006), “Critical awareness aims not only to show us some of the things that are going on, but also to show us ways to make things better” (p. 89).

While I focus on specialist teachers as individual coach practitioners, I also discuss and analyze their experiences, perceptions, and understandings. Practitioners provided discussion and understanding including (a) the role of the specialist teacher, (b) on-going training and administrative support, and (c) coaching skills in the context of a school’s educational culture. It is also my intent

* to give voice to the perceptions of specialist teachers, especially with regard to expectations and use of coaching;
* to understand how specialist teachers perceive and respond to CM application and their ideas about how to minimize associated frustrations;
* to maximize critical theoretical understanding of coaching to improve student performance in diverse urban districts.

Compared with other work settings and professional development (i.e., theory, modeling, and practice), coaching is the most effective strategy (America’s Choice, 2007).

In the 1970s, staff development evaluations that focused on teaching strategies and curriculum revealed that as few as 10% of the participants implemented what they had learned. Rates of transfer were low, even for those who had volunteered for the training. Well-researched curriculum and teaching models did not find their way into general practice and thus could not influence students’ learning environments (Joyce & Showers, 1996). Indeed, according to Barkley (2005), it takes a culture of coaching to improve teaching and student learning.

In a series of studies beginning in 1980, Joyce and Showers (1996) tested hypotheses related to the proposition that regular (weekly) seminars would enable teachers to practice and implement the content they were learning. The seminars, or coaching sessions, focused on classroom implementation, the analysis of teaching, and, especially, students’ responses. Showers, Joyce and Bennett (1987) argued that

The results were consistent: Implementation rose dramatically, whether experts or participants conducted the sessions. Thus we recommended that teachers who were studying teaching and curriculum form small peer coaching groups that would share the learning process. In this way, staff development might directly affect student learning. (p. 1)

In addition, by 1985, as Bruce and Showers conducted the research that lead to peer coaching. Costa and Garmston developed cognitive coaching, in which principles of cognition, instruction, and supervision coalesce (Costa & Garmston, 1994).

To meet the changing demands of teaching today, teachers stand in need of support from colleagues, coaches, and mentors. Just as athletes, performers, television personalities, and business executives have the benefit of coaches to assure a quality level of performance, so it should be in teaching: it is even more important for educators to receive coaching support to do their very best for our youth (Barkley, 2005).

## Limitations of the Study

The present study has certain limitations—philosophical, theoretical, and practical—to take into account. From a philosophical standpoint, it is limited to the coaching model as a holistic tool for improving classroom-teaching practices in urban schools. Theoretically and practically, it is limited to showing the complex and constructed reality of coaching from the point of view of Rochester, New York educators. This is an interpretist paradigm focusing on particular people in a selected place and time (Schram, 2003).

Responsive interview design, a heavily interpretive constructionist approach, also brings certain inherent difficulties and limitations. Rubin (2005) acknowledged the challenge of treating cultural considerations as follows:

It is difficult for researchers to directly ask about culture. Instead they have to learn about culture by asking about ordinary events and deducing the underlying rules or definitions from these descriptions and pay particular attention to unusual usages of words and to the stories that convey cultural assumptions. (p. 28)

Another related difficulty that interviewers face is the tendency to “make cultural assumptions that influence what they ask, and how they construe what they hear” (Rubin & Rubin, 2005, p. 28). Openly acknowledging the limitation of such tendencies from the outset helps to prepare the researcher for such inherent tendencies throughout the research process. Only assumptions deduced from the data itself can provide valid assumptions.

In addition, my background needs consideration. I am a former specialist teacher in the Rochester City School District. Hence, an on-going watchfulness and acknowledgment of associated bias is essential to promote study validity.

The nature of human interaction is another potentially limiting reality for the interpretive constructionist researcher. Rubin and Rubin (2005), advise that “the interviewer has to be self-aware, examining his or her own biases and expectations which might influence the interviewee” (p. 30). Because my biases can influence both questions and responses, being a successful interviewer calls for reflective monitoring via the journal process. Over time one can train oneself to be on conscious alert to evidence of personal bias. Rubin and Rubin suggest that as this reflective, self-awareness process develops, one may learn to compensate in meaningful ways for limiting bias born of one’s own personal slants on particular issues.

Additional considerations arise in terms of the selection of subjects of the study. While English and math comprise the bulk of RCSD specialist teachers (approximately 60), this study was primarily limited to nine ELA specialist teachers with experience using more than one version of the coaching model over the last five years. Of these, four STs were assigned to individual schools and three came from the district ST cadre (and were together responsible for four RCSD schools). Data triangulation came from (a) conversations with these seven ST interviewees, (b) administrative input from the former and acting directors of English, and (c) district resource documents with required professional readings.

While no student age range was excluded from interview follow-up questions and probing, academically at-risk students provide the primary emphasis and concern. (Because the number of academically at-risk students remains large in spite of recent reform efforts, I also solicited comments about the pressures of coaching teachers trying to cope with the high stakes testing dilemma.)

Furthermore, the study is limited to that of the coach practitioner. Both the former and current directors come from the ranks of coaches and continue to practice coaching in their current roles. Other study participants were recruited on the basis of their long tenure in the position and their reputations for expertise: hence my description of them as “seasoned” STs. A final limitation is the focus on the explicit coaching model in which specialists are trained. Mentoring, while a variation of the coaching model, was not a focus in this study.

## Potential Audiences

There are several potential audiences for this study, among them

* The Northeast Regional Office of the National Center on Education and the Economy (NCEE), which is the off-site training location for America’s Choice literacy coaches;
* The Administrative Chiefs of the RCSD, the men and women responsible for RCSD direction and for the focus of district-wide professional development; and
* The RCSD program director for America’s Choice initiatives.

## Definition of Terms

According to research, “Despite the prevalence of coaching in schools and districts across the country, there is not a standard model or uniform definition of an instructional coach selection” (Kowal & Steiner, 2007, pp. 1-2). Of several district varieties, there is generally one of each of the following instructional support lead teachers in each school.

* **Specialist teachers.** In the RCSD, these are teachers on assignment to support instruction by creating and delivering data-driven demonstration lessons, professional development, and peer coaching.
* **District cadre support specialists.** There were initially seven specialist teachers, including four ELA, one reading, one science, and one math teacher, who together service four schools as a team.
* **Subject area specialist teachers.** There is usually one English Language Arts specialist and one math specialist per building in these content area positions.
* **D.I.C.A**. This the acronym for the New York State Education Departments designation for districts in need of corrective action.
* **Literacy coach.** A full-time teacher released from classroom teaching duties in order to provide America’s Choice[[1]](#footnote-1) professional development and classroom support. Because few America’s Choice contracts remain, RCSD uses this position less than it used to. Those historically serving in this capacity are the current ELA specialist teachers.

The following more general terms are worth defining for the purposes of this study.

* **Research-based instruction.** Instruction based on state content standards or on national performance standards.
* **Training.** On-going (on and off site) training is provided for specialist-coaches (formerly known as Literacy Coaches in AC schools).
* **Learning organization.** This describes a group of people continually enhancing their capabilities to create what they want to create (i.e., improved student performance) in a way that has been deeply influential.
* **Organizational culture.** This is the motivational force embodying the sanctioned values of an organization.

## Research Questions

How can the assumptions of experienced specialist teachers practicing the coaching model in the Rochester City School District inform and improve pedagogic practice? This main research question leads to a number of sub-questions:

* How do RCSD specialist teachers regard the effectiveness of coaching?
* How do specialist teachers describe the development of their coaching expertise?
* How do specialist teachers describe the influence of school culture on their relationships with the peers they coach?
* What coaching insights can be gained from understanding the experiences of specialist teachers using the coaching model in City School District high schools?
* What impacts do the assumptions of specialist teachers have on their coaching practice?

## Organization of PDE

This study is organized into five chapters. Chapter One contains a description of the primary focus of the study. It is important to note that the research question and sub-questions not only guide but also limit the process of inquiry and presentation. Chapter Two contains a review of the literature and the logical progression to and incorporation of the coaching model as a viable tool for improving instructional best practices in today’s urban educational cultures, particularly those with large at-risk student populations. Chapter Three includes definitions and explanations of the methodology and the qualitative tools and techniques needed to discern salient patterns and effects related to the perceptions and experiences of secondary level specialist teachers. Data collected from a triangulation of sources, or specialist teacher interviews, administration interviews, and district resource documents, are analyzed in Chapter Four. Finally, Chapter Five includes an analysis summary and conclusion, with implications and recommendations for future research.

If educators are not careful, they may find themselves justly indicted by the words of Jonathan Kozol (2005) in *The Shame of a Nation*, “I don’t think we’re saving time for good instruction. I think we’re stealing time from anything that actually contributes to a child’s education” (p. 329). More effective use of the coaching model (and other proven best practice professional development methods) may help to redeem the time needed for students like Angelica.

1. *America’s Choice:* Now for-profit school reforms design, initially AC operated under the auspices of NCEE. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)