The Impact of Adult Learning Theory And Literacy Coaching

Susan Swift and Christopher Kelly

In the past century, professional development has played a key role in educational reform with a great emphasis on life-long professional learning. There are a wide variety of organizations and businesses presently that use professional development for improving professional competence, for organizational enhancement, or to comply with regulations set by industry and government. The No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001 requires that states ensure the availability of "high-quality" professional development for all educators (No Child Left Behind Act, 2001). However, NCLB does not overtly define high-quality professional development or how it should be delivered to educators (Borko, 2004). Professional development strategies currently employed in education include: short or long-term training related to a specific discipline or instructional technique, supervision, book studies, professional learning communities, mentoring, consulting, and coaching. In this manuscript paper, we will discuss adult learning theory, and how knowledge of it can enhance professional development in the field of education. We argue that one specific practice, literacy coaching, can result in successful, productive professional development as it pertains to teachers as adult learners. We will also address the issue of the inconsistent delivery of the K-12 coaching model in education today, and steps that can be taken to resolve it.

Adult Learning Theory

Until the mid-1900s, research in academic psychology was relied upon by those who educated adults in a professional setting for a basic understanding of how adults learn. The research was behavioristic by design and often was based on research that involved how children learn, or situations where adults participated in the same studies as children (Merriam, 2001).

Adult learning theory, or andragogy, emerged in the 1960s with the work of Knowles. Andragogy focuses on the learning strategies of adults. It is often defined as the process of engaging adult learners with the structure of learning experiences. Having a sound understanding of adult learning theory is beneficial for anyone providing professional development in education. There is a mosaic of theories, models, sets of principles, and explanations that, combined, compose the knowledge base of adult learning (Merriam, 2008).

In the field of education, teachers learn by their experience with individual children, by groups of children, each group having its own needs, and by instructional successes and failures. Honoring the characteristics of adult learners in education can guide professional development to be thoughtful, relevant, and connected to what teachers know and bring to a learning situation.

The concept of adult learning started to take form early in the 20th century as many theories were developed. Notable leaders in the field of adult learning theory are Knowles, Maslow, Kohlberg, and Perry. Looking at work of Knowles and Perry, as well as the current research of Smith, provides us with a broad overview and with an understanding of the similarities and differences among thinking of leading researchers in this field. Knowles was known for his influence in the development of the Humanist Learning Theory and constructed several basic assumptions about adult learners. The first involved motivation. Adult learners are motivated by their immediate needs and interests, or actual problems that need to be solved (Knowles, 1990; Merriam, 2001).

Next, learning is a life-long experience. Most adults continue to grow and learn throughout the course of their lives and careers. Third, Knowles highlighted experiential learning as the main source of adult learning. Adults learn through

personal and "on the job" experiences. Next, adults prefer to be self-directed in their learning. That is, they have specific learning styles and interests as learners, and like to have input into their learning experiences. Finally, individual differences should be acknowledged and learning should be differentiated for each learner. By respecting and incorporating these principles into learning activities, adult learners will feel that their ideas and presence are "accepted, respected, and supported" (Knowles, 1990, p.5; Merriam, 2001).

An understanding of various models of adult learning theory can be benficial to those who provide professional development within academic settings in offering effective, sustainable professional development activities. Four learning theories, identified by Trotter, specifically impact professional development models. The first, *age theory*, contends that as people age, they do not stop learning. Learning is something that continues throughout the life cycle. As we grow, we engage in the world and are changed by it. Thoughtful professional development programs take into consideration the knowledge and background of educators, yet provide affirmation and feedback for their continued learning. The second, *stage theory*, focuses on distinct qualitative differences in modes of thinking at various points in development. Professional development that provides differentiation for adult learners honors the personal and professional experience of each learner.

Cognitive development is the development of conceptual levels with degrees in abstractness and interpersonal maturity. Perry's research of cognitive development asserts that adults move from concrete to abstract thinking, and operate from internal rather than external criteria. Therefore, the "stand and deliver" model often used for working with adult learners is often unsuccessful and fails to yield changes in instuctional practice. More appropriate professional development is hands-on, with experiences that immerse learners in relevant content and method. Finally, *functional development* contends that instructors and textbooks should play a secondary role with the learner being the primary focus in adult education. Often professional development is filled with lecture and a one-directional delivery method. When adult experience, background and interests are respected,

it lead to powerful educational learning as well as produce positive professional change or growth, which affects student learning. A thorough understanding and appreciation of each of these theories can help increase both the relevance and quality of professional development offered to educators (Trotter, 2006).

Along a similar vein, Smith (1985) identified six characteristics that make learning meaningful for adults. Adult learning, according to Smith, is life-long, personal, involves change, is part of human development, involves experience, and is partly intuitive. His theory also promoted the ideas that adult learning should be both non-threatening and should involve or recognize various learning styles. The coaching model, as will be described in this paper, incorporates these beliefs and honors the unique needs of adults.

There have been many theories in the twentieth century that were developed regarding adult learning. It becomes more critical to put in place effective practices that support adult learning as we move further into the twenty-first century. Educational institutions that put theory into practice will stay competitive in the global market. When providing professional development, the needs of adult learners should be addressed. Adults, like children, should receive instruction that is differentiated based on their learning needs, be provided a variety of concrete and relevant experiences, be honored for the experience they bring to their professional development situation, and it should incorporate their ideas and topics of interest.

Adult Learning in the Field of Education

There are several effective strategies that can be applied in order to effectively reach the adult learner. The issue of adult learning has generated much research in the field of education in the past three decades. In 1980, Oja (1980) cited several key "ingredients" for successful adult learning. The first involves using or creating concrete experiences. Often, for teachers, the "make it-take it" workshops are very successful because they provide the adult learner the opportunity to apply what they are learning. Professional development where instructional techniques are modeled and practiced also give teacher a concrete experience and the

confidence to transfoer their new learning to instruction. Coaching allows for this modeling to occur in an authentic, natural way.

The second strategy is to be open and available for supervision and advising (Oja, 1980). Education is known for its one-stop, or "drive-by" workshops, at which an "educational expert" comes, provides professional development, and leaves. There are essentially no systems in place for supporting teacher's questions, concerns, misunderstandings or to celebrate their successes. As with children, if frustration builds, new practice will be abandoned and replaced with a previously mastered instructional technique, although it may not be appropriate or considered to be "best practice." Addtionally, if accountability is built into the equation, either from a colleague or an advisor, teachers are more likely to implement new learning into their instruction. Coaches build relationships with teachers and provide the element of accountibility and support that many teachers need in order to move from learning to implementation (Knight, 2009).

Oja (1980) suggested that trainers and coaches need to provide encouragement and opportunities for adult learners to take on new and complex roles. In some cases, providing opportunities for action research, self-study, and teacher leadership roles can yield high results with adult learners (Oja, 1980). Often, encouragement from a coach or advisor and acknowledgement of good practice is all that is needed to encourage leadership.

The final "ingredient" for successful adult learning is through the practice of support and providing feedback when implementing new techniques (Oja, 1980). This is where job-embedded strategies, such as modeling and coaching, can be highly effective. If teachers are given opportunities to work with a coach in a collaborative, non-judgmental context, to have someone with whom to discuss their concerns, change is more likely to occur (Knight, 2009). A drawback to this method is the cost associated with it, although the return on investment is much higher than it is with other forms of professional development. Making the effort to incorporate these ingredients will assist educational institutions in providing quality professional development to teachers.

In 2009, the National Council of Staff Development recently completed and reported on one of the largest studies to date regarding professional development in the field of education. The study higlighted current professional development practices in the United States, how other, high-achieving countries conduct and implement professional development activities, and what research says about best practices for effective professional development. Among the findings: Sustained and intensive professional development for teachers is related to increased student achievement. Ultimately, the goal of any professional development is to change or improve instructional practice or other school-related issue in order to increase student learning (Darling-Hammond et al, 2009).

Another key finding was that professional development that occurred over an extended period of time and allowed for teachers to practice, discuss, adjust, and reflect, resulted in the greatest change in instructional practice and in student achievement. Professional development activities connected to teacher practice such as content area and school initiatives was determined to be more effective than professional development that was not. Teachers responded positively to professional development that focused on their specific academic content and concerns. Additionally, when it was also related to school-wide programs or initiatives, professional development helped to build strong working relationships among the entire staff.

In other words, collaborative approaches to professional learning can promote school change that extends beyond the classroom. The report concluded by stating that by strengthening the capacity of educators, by building learning communities, and by developing more systematic approaches to professional learning, educators will be more productive and effective in instruction, which will result in student gains (Darling-Hammond et al., 2009). The concept of coaching, specifically as it applies to literacy, incorporates these key findings into its structure.

Literacy Coaching

Understanding adult learning theory and best practices within the field of professional development can influence approaches related to literacy coaching. In the past decade, there has been a shift from the role of reading professionals as "reading specialists" to "literacy coaches." While a reading specialist's primary role is to support literacy within the school setting by working with children, a literacy coach's primary role is to work with teachers, helping them to recognize their core knowledge and strengths, to assist them in strengthening and improving their abilities, and to support them as they grow and learn professionally (Mraz, et al, 2008; Toll, 2005). Whereas a reading specialist focuses on student support, frequently providing direct instruction to and evaluation of students, the literacy coach's primary role is to support teachers, as well as to be a school's literacy leader. They may work with students when modeling or demonstrating for teachers, but much of their professional time is spent working with teachers, thereby building the capacity of their literacy staff and building a professional learning community within their school (Mraz, et al, 2008).

The International Reading Association has also recognized the importance of the coaching model in regard to literacy instruction and learning. According to the *IRA Standards for Reading Professionals* (2003), a literacy coach is someone who provides professional development for teachers, gives support to teachers as need to implement various instructional programs and practices, and provides leadership for the school's literacy program. The IRA asserts that by improving the skills of teachers, literacy coaches more effectively impact a student population than by working with individual students or even small groups of students all day long.

The Effectiveness of Literacy Coaching

Researchers in the past decade support the effectiveness of coaching (Knight, 2009; Matsumura, et al, 2009; Toll, 2005). Some of the benefits of coaching, according to this research, can include that literacy coaching impacts school culture in a positive way, supports change in practice, promotes teacher reflection and incorporates their input and decision making, honors the characteristics of adult learners, and has been shown to lead to student achievement (Toll, 2005). Literacy coaching, by nature, encourages collaboration among professionals, which can promote trust and better working relationships. Because literacy coaches encourage collaboration, reflection, and making decisions based on experiences and data, change can be both significant and sustainable (Toll, 2005). Coaches endeavor to promote reflective practice by establishing relationships based on mutual respect, trust, and common goals. However, the teachers do most of the "work" by thinking, implementing new instructional strategies, and talking about their practice. A strong coach gives teachers the opportunity to do this in a supportive environment, as research supports reflection of practice a strength of the best teachers. In a recent study that examined the roles and perceptions of literacy coaches, teachers favored this type of relationship wiht a coach and cited the collaboration and co-teaching as benefits (Mraz, et al, 2008).

Literacy coaches honor each adult learner as an individual, whose needs and interests are respected and incorporated into the coach/learner relationship. Teacher learning style, learning needs, and input are important in the dynamic of the relationship. Finally, and most relevant for the current accountability-oriented educational climate in which educators live, coaching is an effective practice in improving student achievement. Research completed in the late 1980s was among the first to make a positive correlation between coaching and student achievement gains. Additional studies that focused solely on literacy also reached the same conclusion (Knight, 2009; Matsumura et al., 2009; Toll, 2005)).

Bush (1984) examined the rate of transfer from learning into practice in several different delivery models of professional development. Bush found that teachers who had participated in a workshop, modeling, practice, feedback, and peer coaching had a 95% rate of transfer. The next most successful model, which involved workshop, modeling, practice, and feedback, had only a 16-19% rate of transfer (see Figure 2). The impact of coaching is significant in relation to the of transfer to classroom practice as compared to the other forms of professional development (Knight, 2009).

RATE OF TRANSFER INTO CLASSROOM PRACTICE following peer coaching professional development

TEACHER TRANSFER RATE

TYPES OF PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

- Workshop — 10%
- Workshop and modeling — 12-13%
- Workshop, modeling, and practice — 14-16%
- Workshop, modeling, practice, and feedback — 16-19%
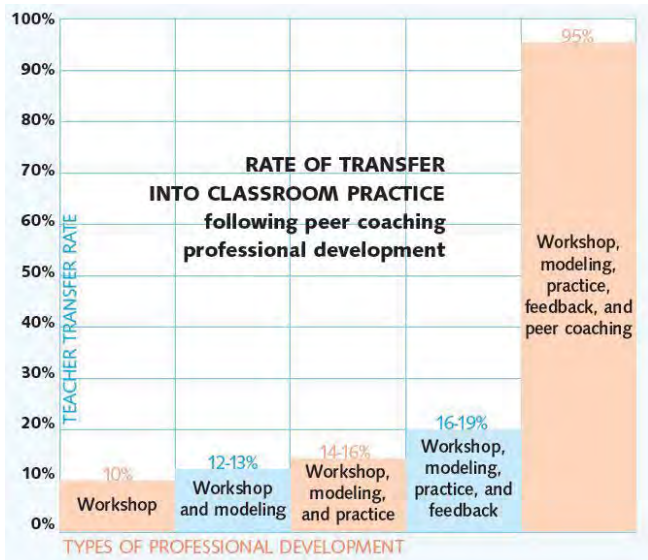- Workshop, modeling, practice, feedback, and peer coaching — 95%

Figure 2 This chart measures the impact of various professional development techniques and their impact on instruction. Knight, J. (2009). Coaching: The key to translating research into practice lies in continuous, job-embedded learning with ongoing support.

In another study, teachers who were coached on a specific instructional routine implemented it at a 90% rate. Those who were not coached implemented the routine at only a 30% rate. The relationship that can exist between coaching and transferring learning into practice after coaching is highlighted in these examples (Knight, 2009).

Elements of Effective Literacy Coaching

If literacy coaching is a successful model of reaching adult learners in the field of of education, what are the specific elements of an effective coaching model? Common themes among types of successful coaching were examined by Knight in 2009, including literacy coaching. Coaching should first focus on instructional practice. Teachers are more engaged and motivated if professional learning relates to their teaching and their content area. Next, coaching takes place in classrooms, or is "job-embedded." Teachers and coaches work together with the children that teacher works with every day. Teaching is modeled and reciprocated, co-teaching and planning may happen, reflection on teaching and learning occur, all of it accomplished within the classroom setting that is authentic for each teacher, not a hypothetical situation or vignette (Knight, 2009).

Literacy coaching is intensive and on-going, meaning it is individual and lasts for an extended period of time. In order for teachers to put into practice what has been modeled or learned, they need to be given time. Additional time is allowed for discussion between the coach and the teacher, reflection of lessons, adjustments, and mastery. During the coaching process, there is an equal partnership is established between the teacher and coach, where the teacher assumes some control and choice in the learning. This is not only an effective element of adult learning, but creates a professional relationship that engages both parties involved (Knight, 2009).

The coaches' role in the relationship is not evaluative, although there can be cross-observation, discussion, and reflection. It is important that teachers understand that a coach is there to provide support and guidance in a collaborative way, not to monitor for observation and purposes of evaluation. That confidentiality is maintained between the coach and teacher is also in establishing trust and building the partnership between teacher and coach (Knight, 2009).

Finally, the importance of open communication is paramount for a successful coaching experience, where both the coach and teacher are respectful of each other. When coaches and teachers can communicate with each other in a professional, non-threatening way, they can confront real instructional issues or challenges honestly. The common threads between adult learning and best practices in literacy coaching weave a tapestry of powerful learning, related to practice and therefore, student learning (Knight, 2009).

There are *additional* conditions for a successful coaching relationship, factors that can make a difference as to the overall success of the coaching, and which need to be considered thoughtfully before implementing this type of professional development. In a study completed between 2005 and 2008 at the University of Kansas Center for Research on Learning, researchers there worked with coaches, teachers, and administrators in schools and districts in over thirty five states. The data they gathered also included administrative support and a positive school climate as conditions

for success. For many teachers and coaches, these are not variables within their control. However, establishing clearly the role of a literacy coach within a school setting and communicating clearly and frequently with administrators can build relationships between teachers, coaches and administrators within the school. Postitive coaching experiences, which lead to improved teacher efficacy, can result in an improved school climate and additional administrator support (Knight, 2009; Matsumura, 2009).

Complexities of Literacy Coaching

While some research has shown the coaching model to have a positive correlation with implementation of learned instructional techniques and student achievement, one of the problems associated with it is the lack of continuity in how it is implemented. Because of this variability, the amount of coaching a teacher receives and the structure of the coaching relationship, the influence of coaching on student learning and instructional strategies has resulted in mixed results regarding overall effectiveness in some research (Matsumura, et al, 2009). Many coaches strive to implement instructional reform through this process, yet there are political and organizational issues within schools and districts that can impede their progress. Additional obstacles include the variability in qualifications of a coach, how the role of the coach is defined by administrators, teachers, and coaches, administrative support for the concept of coaching, the organization or structure of the coaching relationship, as well as school culture and climate (Knight, 2009; Matsumura, et al., 2009; Mraz, et al 2009).

Throughout school districts and states, there is variability in the requirements needed to be a coach. This is an area that the IRA has addressed in their position statement on literacy coaching: "Reading coaching is a powerful intervention with great potential; however, that potential will be unfulfilled if reading coaches do not have sufficient depth of knowledge and range of skills to perform adequately in the coaching role" (IRA, 2004c, p.4).

In another recent study, a principal's views and overall endorsement of the coach showed a positive impact on how teachers received the coach and coaching overall. Teachers responded to the instructional leadership of their administrators (Matsumura, et al., 2009). Teachers who work in a learning community where they are respected and encouraged to take risks are more likely to collaborate with others, such as a coach (Knight, 2009).

An additional issue that impacts coaching is the cost associated with it. It is perceived to be far more economical for schools and districts to implement staff development in a one or two-day workshop, where a large group of participants receive a small amount of training, than it is to invest in individual teachers over an extended period of time. However, to bring about change takes time and intense, on-going support, and literacy coaching is a model that can accomplish this (Darling-Hammond et al., 2009; Knight, 2009).

Conclusion and Research Implications

Although literacy coaching has shown a positive effect on the reading achievement in several studies, there is still not a large body of research regarding literacy coaching (Mraz, 2008, Matsumura et al., 2009). More research needs to be done in this area, as well as in the behavior of effective literacy coaches, as evidenced by instructional change and student achievement. What, specifically, do effective coaches do that support and help teachers to improve reading and writing instruction in their schools? How closely are these behaviors tied to the characteristics that support adult learning? These studies should involve mixed methodology, both qualitative and quantitative data. In an era of educational accountability, an effort to obtain more quantitative data in this research should be a consideration.

A clearly defined model of literacy coaching and its implementation, created after research has been synthesized, would provide continuity in how it is understood and used within schools. Looking to best practice in professional development, successful coaching data, and student achievement will help create a more standardized model that can then be shared with literacy coaches.

Professional development has played a key role in educational reform in the past century. Research indicates specific practices that can result in successful, productive professional development as it pertains to adult learners. Research in academic

psychology in the mid-1900s brought a better understanding of how adults learn, and established that having a sound understanding of adult learning theory was essential for professional development in the field of education. By incorporating various models of adult learning theory into professional development, schools and districts are more likely to provide effective, sustainable professional development for teachers.

Both adult learning theory and research within the educational community suggest that professional development should be on-going, related to personal needs, reflective, involve change, understand human development, and honor intuition and learner experience. As we move further into the twenty-first century, it is important to implement effective professional learning experiences that support adult learning. By making the effort to apply these practices, we are investing in our educators and our students. Incorporating these strategies will result in more effective professional development and ultimately improve instructional practice and increase student learning in literacy.

The past decade has brought about great change in professional development related to literacy by employing literacy coaches to build teacher capacity. Research has shown that literacy coaches can effectively impact a student population by improving the skills of teachers. Literacy coaches who encourage collaboration, reflection, and making decisions based on experiences and data support adult learning research. Literacy coaches who honor each adult learner as an individual, whose needs and interests are respected and incorporated into the coach/learner relationship can help to positively influence the climate and culture of a professional learning community. Research shows that the rate of transfer from learning into practice is higher for coaching verses other delivery models of professional development, and while the research done at this point in time is encouraging, more qualitative and quantitative research needs to be conducted in the area of qualities of effective literacy coaches, as well as coaching and how it affects student achievement. There is inconsistent delivery of the K-12 coaching model in education today, and steps need to be taken to resolve it. Additionally, there needs to be more uniformity in the way that the coaching model is implemented, as well as in the qualifications of a literacy coach, to ensure that the highest standards are in place for our students and our teachers.

References

Borko, H. (2004). Professional Development and Teacher Learning: Mapping the Terrain. *Educational Researcher, 33(8), 3-15.*

Darling-Hammond, L., Wei, R.C., Andree, A., Richardson, N., Orphanos, S. (2009) *Professional learning in the learning profession: A status report on teacher development in the United States and abroad.* Dallas, Texas: National Staff Development Council.

International Reading Association (2004). *Standards for reading professionals revised, 2003.* Newark, DE.

International Reading Association (2004). *The role and qualifications of the reading coach in the United States.* Newark, DE.

Knight, J. (2009). Coaching: The key to translating research into practice lies in continuous, job-embedded learning with ongoing support. *The Journal of Staff Development, 30(1), 18-22.*

Knowles, M. (1990). *The adult learner: A neglected species.* (4th Ed.) Houston: Gulf Publishing Company.

Matsumura, L. C., Sartoris, M., Bickel, D.D., & Garnier, H.E. (2009). Leadership for literacy coaching: The principal's role in launching a new coaching program. *Educational Administration Quarterly, 45(5), 655-693.*

Merriam, S.B. (2008). Adult learning theory for the twenty-first century. *New directions for adult & continuing education, (119), 93-98.* doi:10.1002/ace.309

Merriam, S.B. (2001). Andragogy and self-directed learning: Pillars of adult learning theory. *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education, 89, 3-13.*

Mezirow, J., and Associates. *Learning as transformation: Critical perspectives on a*

theory in progress. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2000.

Mraz, M., Algozzine, B., & Watson, P. (2008). Perceptions and expectations of roles and responsibilities of literacy coaching. *Literacy Research & Instruction, 47(3), 141-157.* Doi:10.1080/19388070802059076

No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001, 20 U.S. c. 9101 et seq. (2003)

Oja, S. (1980). Adult development is implicit in staff development. *Journal of Staff Development. 1*(2), 1980:7-56.

Smith, R. (1982). *Learning how to learn: Applied learning theory for adults.* New York: Cambridge Books.

Toll, C. (2005). *The literacy coach's survival guide.* Newark, DE: International Reading Association.

Trotter, Y.D. (2006). Adult learning theories: Impacting professional development programs. *Delta Kappa Gamma Bulletin, 72(2), 8-13.*