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Joyce Fine
joyce.fine@fiu.edu

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An Innovative Design for Peer Mentoring: Tiered Cognitive Coaching

Joyce C. Fine, Ed. D.

Florida International University, Miami, Florida

E-mail: Joyce.Fine@fiu.edu

Abstract

Preparing Coaches to support teachers' literacy instruction is a critical role for faculty in Literacy programs. The curricula design of the method used to enhance the preparation of literacy coaches I describe in this article presents an innovative model to incorporate the authentic experiences of doctoral candidates to support master's candidates participating in a practicum. While supporting the master's degree candidates, the doctoral candidates also met the new standards from the International Literacy Association for the preparation of Literacy Coaches.

An Innovative Design for Peer Mentoring: Tiered Cognitive Coaching

Designing curricula for literacy courses and programs is a collaborative effort among faculty to enhance teaching and learning for candidates. It involves faculty using their knowledge and experience to bring the latest research-based ideas to create courses and course content. At a university where we prepare both undergraduate and graduate students, we recognized there is additional expertise available from graduate candidates who come with insights from their experience they can share. This perspective motivated us to develop an innovative design for peer mentoring using a tiered cognitive coaching model. In this article I share the model of doctoral candidates mentoring master's degree candidates in a supervised clinical setting using a modification of Cognitive Coaching (Costa & Garmston, 1994). The model provides a way to achieve the new Literacy Coaching Standards from the International Literacy Association (ILA, 2017). I will also share the reflections of the doctoral candidates from this experience.

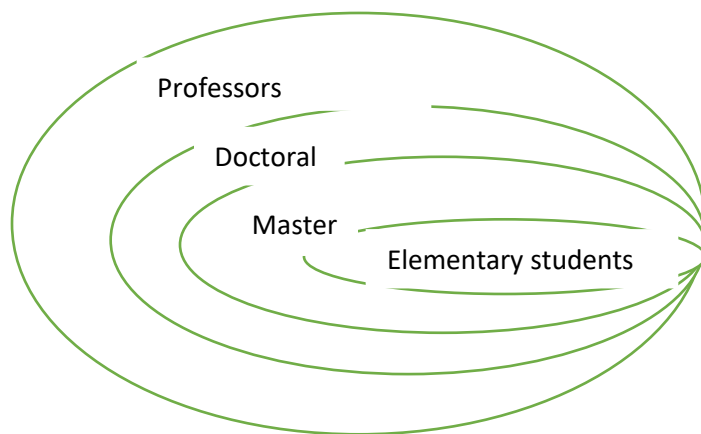
A socio-cultural theoretical perspective (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), states there are concentric levels that affect students' development. Following this perspective, we decided to incorporate the expertise of our doctoral students into our summer practicum course.

Design of the Tier-Coaching Practicum

The practicum consists of an integration of two courses, Diagnosis of Reading Difficulties and Programs of Remediation. The Master of Science in Reading/ Literacy Education program candidates work one-on-one to diagnose elementary students and to create lessons targeted to

their needs in two-hour sessions daily for two and a half weeks. Groups of four candidates and their students work in separate communities in different classrooms. The master's degree candidates keep both Assessment Journals and Diagnostic Teaching Journals with their assessments and teaching plans in the respective journals. These are reviewed by the doctoral candidates daily. During the tutoring sessions, there was a rotating opportunity for the master's degree candidates to tutor a differentiated lesson to all the students in the community. Two professors conducting the courses supervise all the communities, adding another level. The master's degree candidates, doctoral candidates, and professors met for an hour before tutoring and two hours after tutoring. See figure 1.

Figure 1. Levels in the Tiered Cognitive Coaching Model



The Cognitive Coaching model by Costa and Ganston (1994) features three steps: 1) a planning conference in which the teacher tells the coach the goals and objectives of the lesson; 2) a lesson observation in which the teacher teaches a lesson and the coach observes, gathers data about the lesson, and looks for evidence of student learning; and 3) a reflecting

conference in which the teacher shares his or her impression of the success of the lesson and self-assesses. The coach summarizes the data from the rubric and mediates the process using “gentle” language to offer suggestions of ways to improve the lesson. Gentle language is language with suggestions from one’s own experience or from other teachers, without imposing directives to change pedagogical methods. Together, the coach and the teacher summarize the comparison of the lesson plan and the performance. It is the master’s degree teachers’ decision to make any changes.

A Comparison of Regular Cognitive Coaching and Tiered Cognitive Coaching

The problem with the regular Cognitive Coaching model for coaching literacy instruction lies in **who** is coaching and **what** is gained. The coach needs to be a knowledgeable, highly skilled literacy teacher who knows students’ needs, teacher’s abilities, available resources, and has experience coaching literacy teachers. Often, an administrator, who is not experienced in teaching literacy and does not know the learning needs of students, completes the observation. At best, this type of coaching, which might take place once a year with little or no follow-through, results in modest improvement for the teachers or students.

How this Peer Mentoring: Tiered Cognitive Coaching Meets the New Standard

Recognizing this situation in which coaches observe and evaluate, the International Literacy Association (ILA) has included standards for Literacy Coaching (2017). Literacy Coach Standard 5: Learners and the Literate Environment states the following:

- Coaches support and facilitate colleagues’ ability to **meet the developmental needs** of all learners: **Use a variety of digital and print materials** to engage and motivate all

learners: **integrate digital technologies** in appropriate, safe, and effective ways: **foster a positive climate** that supports a literacy-rich learning environment.

- 5.1 Candidates guide colleagues to **meet the developmental needs** of all learners, taking into consideration their physical, social, emotional, cultural and intellectual factors.
- 5.2 Candidates facilitate the **use of a variety of digital and print materials** to engage and motivate all learners.
- 5.3 Candidates lead the **integration of digital technologies** in appropriate, safe and effective ways and assist teacher in these efforts.
- 5.4 Candidates support stakeholders to **foster a positive climate** that supports a literacy-rich learning environment.

Peer Mentoring with Tiered Cognitive Coaching is one way in which teacher preparation programs might meet the new ILA standard because it offers a means of preparing literacy coaches steeped in literacy knowledge gained from their literacy programs and their classroom experience, who have had a chance to observe master's candidates and evaluate the assessment of students and the detailed lesson plans made to target the students' needs. Additionally, there is continuous support, as the observations are also made twice a week for a total of 4 times during the practicum. This situation provides much more contact with someone who is knowledgeable about the students and can provide more feedback to foster a positive learning experience.

The doctoral candidates enroll in a Supervised Field Experience course which is designed to provide opportunity to perform supervisory duties appropriate to the students' professional goals. This supervised, on-site practicum provides the setting for each doctoral candidate to supervise a small community of master's degree candidates and their students working in different rooms. Both doctoral students have the experience and prior knowledge of tutoring in a practicum. The objective for them is to develop adaptive expertise, the ability to use

knowledge to solve problems with the tutors when diagnostic skills are needed to support student learning. They use two types of feedback, soft and hard. The doctoral students offer soft feedback when the master’s degree candidates teach what the students need to be taught, but the master’s degree candidates could not explain the theoretical reasons for teaching concepts. The doctoral students offer hard feedback when the master’s candidates need suggestions about what to teach and the theoretical reasons why those concepts are critical to developing student’s literacy. The doctoral candidates keep detailed fieldnotes about each of the master’s candidates in their community using the following format:

Figure 2. Format for the Fieldnotes

Doctoral Coach: _____

Masters Candidate: _____

Date	Focus of the Observation	Observation Notes	Reflective Conference Notes: MC’s response to How did the lesson go?	Reflective Conference Notes: DC’s feedback.	Reflective Conference Notes: MC’s comments.

During the Planning Conference, the doctoral candidate and master's degree candidate discuss the tutoring session's plan and collaboratively decide which part of the agenda the master's degree candidate wants the doctoral candidate to observe. Both agreed that the observation session should be in an area the master's degree candidate self-identifies as an area for professional growth so that the observations, feedback, and conferences are more meaningful and relevant for the master's degree candidate's needs. The doctoral candidates want the master's degree candidates to perceive the observation experiences as stress-free, relevant, and meaningful professional development. The observation session begins after identifying the focus of the observation.

Each doctoral candidate observes each master's degree student for one hour and makes fieldnotes about what was observed about the focus of the lessons.

Results of Implementing the Model for Tiered Coaching

For most master's degree candidates, the observation session seemed to be intimidating, even though the observation sessions were pre-arranged and focused on what the master's degree candidates self-identified. The doctoral candidates noticed writing notes after, rather than while conducting the observation, was less intimidating for the master's candidates.

During the reflecting conference, doctoral candidates gave feedback to the master's degree candidates based on what was observed, keeping in mind the pre-arranged focus of the observation. Master's degree candidates had opportunities to brainstorm ideas for improvement of their teaching and shared them with their doctoral candidate coach. Doctoral candidate coaches guided discussions and provided opportunities for the master's degree

candidates to think critically about what might be done. They used “gentle” language and professional behaviors to make suggestions to solve any issues or problems that arose.

The master’s candidates reflected and responded to the suggestions. The conferences followed the guidelines for soft and hard coaching. The hard coaching always happened following the master’s degree candidates’ request for suggestions and recommendations. Doctoral candidate coaches, who had been tutors in the practicum in a prior year, explained the rationale of their thinking. Other areas for growth identified during the tutoring experiences were also discussed at the end of each session.

Insights from Doctoral Coaches Fieldnotes

Three main themes emerged from a review of the doctoral candidates’ field notes using a constant comparative procedure (Glaser, 1992). These related to 1) the master’s candidates’ assessment of the students, 2) the time constraints that the master’s degree students felt during both the assessment and the remediation lessons, and 3) the decision-making process during teaching regarding the use of materials.

The doctoral coaches indicated the master’s degree candidates were sometimes confused about the purpose and procedures for assessing even though each of the assessment instruments had been explained in textbook readings and with instruction and discussion in class. Master’s candidates said they did not know when to stop the assessments based on the students’ performance. They were guided with soft feedback by the doctoral candidates to remember when to stop assessing based on when students had reached frustration on assessments, and the importance of understanding how and why they were assessing. When

necessary, the doctoral candidates used hard feedback to explain that knowing the instruments well before implementing them would help them to feel confident in using them and would lead to producing more accurate results. This finding indicates that, in the future, the professor needs to instruct the master's candidates at what point an assessment should stop.

The second theme was the pressure from the time constraints that the master's degree candidates felt during both the assessment and the remediation lessons. The master's degree candidates tutored two hours a day. They had prepared plans and timeframes to help them plan the amount of time for each activity. Some of the master's degree candidates said they felt rushed to complete the assessments and diagnostic teaching activities. The doctoral candidate coaches explained that careful planning and organization of materials would help them to eliminate wasted time so there would be more accurate assessment and meaningful instruction. This feedback suggests the professor might reduce the number of assessments during the practicum in future courses.

The third finding was that while teaching, the master's degree candidates commented on the difficulty of making on-the-spot decisions if materials were too difficult or too easy, or if students seemed to lose interest. The doctoral candidate coaches emphasized that they needed to use the data gained from diagnosing the students to make decisions about their instructional levels, areas for growth, and interests. If students were losing motivation, they needed to be sure to incorporate the students' interests and to make the instructional content relevant to them and more interactive. This finding suggests to the professor that the master's degree candidates need to be encouraged to use more interactive manipulatives and technology to increase student engagement.

The discussions between the doctoral candidates and the master's degree candidates during the cognitive coaching sessions contributed to the quality of the tutoring program. The small number of master's degree candidates each doctoral candidate coached provided an opportunity to closely monitor the development of the knowledge, skills, and dispositions of each master's candidate. The doctoral coaches also met the highest standards for literacy coaches as described by ILA. The doctoral coaches' fieldnotes showed ways to improve the courses for future terms. As a post-script, one of the coaches continued to coach one of the master's degree candidates when she started teaching at his school the following year. The two had a beneficial professional relationship that resulted in the master's student being recognized as the Rooky Teacher of the Year at her school and the Coach being recognized as an Impactful Teacher by the state Department of Education's Commissioner. Such recognition is not the main goal, but the learning by everyone seems to indicate that this model of Tiered Cognitive Coaching is worth implementing!

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