



The following is original research that practitioners may find useful in exploring coach-teacher relationships.

# THE VALUE *of* COACHING

**COLLABORATIVE  
RELATIONSHIPS SPUR  
PROFESSIONAL GROWTH**

**By Grace Y. Kang**

**C**laire Gibbons and Noelle Taylor are friends. They meet regularly, share common interests, work on projects together, and hold similar goals. Not only are they friends, they are also colleagues who teach together: Gibbons is a literacy coach, and Taylor is a 3rd-grade teacher. Usually they collaborate on literacy once a week, often meeting in Gibbons' office, but, at times, these

collaborative sessions take place in the school hallways or even on a Saturday over lunch at a local restaurant.

Teachers don't simply want resources given to them. They often seek out relationships from more knowledgeable or experienced colleagues to ask advice, model lessons, or start an inquiry group. Establishing relationships within collaboration is essential for learning and knowledge development (Putnam & Borko, 2000).

## METHODS

This study's goal was to unpack the nature of collaboration that took place between a literacy coach and teachers. The research questions revolved around the notion of collaboration and how it was enacted in teacher practice and instruction. To examine the coach's collaboration with teachers, the research questions were:

- How were partnerships in collaboration created?
- How was the collaboration with teachers enacted?

The study site is an elementary school in a small, urban community in the Midwest with a diverse student population. The participants were the literacy coach (Gibbons) and two teachers (Tamara Jones and Taylor).

## DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

This was a two-month qualitative study of the collaboration that took place. The primary form of data collection was observation of collaborative sessions (e.g. conversations with Gibbons, co-planning lessons with teachers, grade-level collaboration meeting, and small-group instruction). Semistructured interviews were also conducted with the participants.

I read and analyzed the data inductively through a sociocultural perspective, emphasizing teachers' collaboration as a social activity (Vygotsky, 1978).

During analysis, I observed consistent valued tenets of open collaboration (many of which were recurrent themes) among all participants in the study, which was meaningful specifically to the nature of collaboration (see box at right).

## FINDINGS

### VALUED TENETS IN OPEN COLLABORATION

The valued tenets in collaboration were recurrent ideas and topics that were consistent in study participants.

**Relationship capital.** Putnam and Borko (2000) highlight that teachers developing relationships with a literacy coach is an integral component for learning and knowledge development. Gibbons' relationships with the teachers were integral to the collaboration that took place.

**Reciprocal/co-planned.** Vanderburg and Stephens (2010) reveal that, when asked about their beliefs and practices, teachers did not focus on a list of particular practices, instead focusing on how they re-envisioned themselves as teachers. Gibbons



### VALUED TENETS IN OPEN COLLABORATION

**Relationship capital:** The quality of interpersonal connections and relationships is integral to the collaboration.

**Reciprocal/co-planned:** All participants create goals and content of sessions.

**Constructed/organic:** Authentic meaning making occurs when participants create appropriate lessons, sessions, and units for the situation.

**Job-embedded/sustained:** On-the-job learning opportunities are contextualized and apply throughout the school day.

did not lead the sessions with teachers. Instead, she waited to see what interested teachers. During the collaborative sessions, Gibbons and the teachers co-planned, and teaching and learning were reciprocal.

**Constructed/organic.** This tenet talks back to traditional models of professional development, including one-size-fits-all presentations to teacher audiences in one-shot workshops with no follow-up support, which have been shown to be ineffective

(Hawley & Valli, 1999). In contrast, the collaborative sessions in this study provided an opportunity for tailor-made professional learning that was constructed and organic for specific and individualized contexts.

**Job-embedded/sustained.** Job-embedded professional learning is becoming more prevalent as criticism of traditional forms of professional development emerges (Parise & Spillane, 2010). Gibbons and the teachers engaged in job-embedded and sustained professional learning in the unplanned nature of collaboration.

### COACH'S COLLABORATION WITH TEACHERS

**“An extra set of eyes.”** Across varied collaborative situations in which the coach worked with teachers, these valued tenets were also infused in their sessions. Whether Gibbons modeled a lesson, observed a classroom's structure, or was in a grade-level collaboration meeting, the elements of what was meaningful and valuable in collaboration stayed consistent among participants.

Jones initiated a relationship with Gibbons a year after Gibbons began teaching students who qualified for additional reading support. This was a common mode of entry for Gibbons: As she worked with students in different teachers' classrooms, she slowly started collaboration sessions with the teachers. The development of **relationship capital** was salient, and, once she established that relationship, teachers were open to collaboration.

Jones also noticed that other teachers who had worked with Gibbons demonstrated a distinct difference in their practice and classroom routines. Gibbons began the collaboration with Jones by observing her in the classroom.

In an interview with Jones, she said that Gibbons' observation of her classroom set-up, routines, order, and student engagement was invaluable because it offered her “an extra set of eyes.”

“It's valuable to just have ... feedback, even when she just comes in to sort of observe what's happening,” Jones said. “... She can see things that are working that I may not necessarily see. I may be focusing on my group or on other things at the time.”

These observations allowed Gibbons to offer individualized advice to teachers, taking literacy support from a text and refining it to meet each teacher's specific needs. Moreover, these observations were **organic** and **constructed** specifically for Jones' classroom setting.

After the two initial observations, Gibbons brainstormed some ideas and thoughts for Jones to implement and experiment with. In the next few weeks, they discussed next steps and determined what was most essential and where to start.

Within a week of the second observation, Jones had made dramatic changes in her classroom. She implemented a writing station with all the necessary materials (i.e. pencil, lined paper,

St. Patrick's Day themed paper, prompts, and pictures to spark writing). She also made a handwriting corner, where only one student could work with a white board, and cursive charts that students made that were posted along the corner walls.

We walked past the book boxes on top of their cubbies, which Gibbons had suggested as usable spaces that were at students' fingertips. In the reading corner, she divided her books by genre into separate baskets in a bookcase that showcased current and themed March books. As we observed the change in structures, we noticed that students had already made use of this corner and searched for books in the genre baskets.

These changes were made in the span of a week, and it all began with Gibbons' willingness to meet Jones in her classroom to make sense of students' meaning making throughout the day. Jones said that she found Gibbons' observations helpful and the most meaningful form of collaboration: “The first time she came to observe what I was doing and took notes on the physical aspects of the class, how the kids were moving about, where the materials were. ... I thought that was helpful. ... When she pointed it out and I moved stuff around, that really made sense.”

This notion of **job-embedded** literacy support was monumental for this change to take place because these structural and routine changes would not be possible without on-the-job professional learning.

**“It's developed into a friendship.”** Taylor initially started collaborating with Gibbons because when Gibbons was hired, she didn't have an office and her temporary location was a makeshift corner of the hallway near Taylor's classroom. Although not ideal, the proximity presented many advantages, including literally having an open-door — actually, no-door — quality, where teachers could approach her freely.

Taylor had always struggled with writing and saw it as an area of weakness, so she approached Gibbons for assistance. After two years of collaboration, Taylor felt stronger in teaching writing and attributed this change in comfort level to collaboration with Gibbons.

Taylor and Gibbons continued to collaborate almost weekly because Taylor set up the meetings and was proactive in the relationship. In these sessions, Taylor had autonomy and agency to guide the meetings. Gibbons followed her lead and didn't come with an agenda, but wanted to accomplish whatever it was that Taylor needed help or guidance with. Often, Taylor came with a stack of books, papers, and materials that she wanted to use to **co-plan organic** lessons with Gibbons.

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These sessions expanded on the idea that when there is openness and willingness to invest in a collaborative relationship, teachers tend to have more depth in the collaboration sessions and more time spent in the classrooms for co-teaching and modeling by the coach. Taylor emphasized **relationship capital** and the importance of friendship: “I think being able to have a friendship helps because we always make sure we’re on the same track,” Taylor said.

The data revealed that it takes time and effort to build rapport and trust in collaborative relationships. Additionally, although collaboration involved a lot of work from both parties, in the end it was well worth it.

“**Revolving door.**” Borko (2004) describes various contexts for learning that can take place in a hallway conversation or classroom. In the same vein, Gibbons said that collaboration didn’t necessarily take place in a standard meeting. Instead, teachers would often drop by her office, stop her in the hallway, or pull her aside before or after a meeting. She referred to these unexpected moments of being ready to collaborate with a teacher as a “revolving door.”

For example, Molly Carleton, a teacher with whom Gibbons had worked, walked into Gibbons’ office unplanned to show Gibbons a paper. Carleton said she was surprised that a student scored highly on a spelling inventory because it didn’t match his performance in the classroom. Although Gibbons was working at her computer when Carleton walked in and told Carleton that she was about to meet with another teacher, Gibbons did not appear rushed or agitated and, as Carleton left, Gibbons said, “I’m glad you stopped in.”

In the interview, Gibbons validated this notion of the “revolving door” and said she was glad that teachers were interested in collaborating with her, but, at times, she had to negotiate her response to unexpected visits. She had to follow her schedule for the day, yet she also had to be sensitive to a teacher’s needs.

Gibbons said the “revolving door” often provided spontaneous connections and unplanned sessions that led to meaningful collaboration. However, it came at the cost of Gibbons’ flexibility and the time necessary for these unplanned sessions. This illustrates how Gibbons’ collaboration was a means to **job-embedded** professional learning: Throughout the school day, and even before and after school, teachers were able to receive help and seek assistance.

## IMPLICATIONS

Literacy coaches serve teachers through ongoing, comprehensive professional learning consistent with a system of the-

ory, demonstration, practice, and feedback (Joyce & Showers, 2002). Literacy coaches offer a form of job-embedded, ongoing, and contextualized professional learning. This study focused on how collaborative relationships between participants were created and enacted.

This study reveals that a literacy coach’s collaboration with teachers can result in professional growth and collaborative relationships. One of Vygotsky’s (1978) key components of social constructivism is scaffolding, where a more able peer provides assistance throughout learning in order to advance learning. Scaffolding played an important role as Gibbons interacted with teachers to build independence for new teaching practices and ideas.

Gibbons’ relationships with teachers embodied strong relationship capital, reciprocal learning, organic construction, and job-embedded work to create a strong culture of collaboration in this building. The valued tenets in the nature of open collaboration across the sessions among study participants were consistent. Furthermore, this study suggests that a literacy coach can be a means for more job-embedded professional learning, and it is worth allocating time and opportunities for teachers to collaborate.

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