

The Significance of Culturally Relevant Instructional Coaching in Literacy for Underrepresented and Marginalized Teachers

Nicole J. Williams-Hines
Chicago Public Schools

Abstract

Culturally relevant instructional coaching empowers underrepresented educators, fosters equity, and strengthens teaching. This paper examines the role of emotional intelligence, reflective practice, and advocacy in teacher growth. By investing in mentorship, professional learning communities, and equity-driven coaching, schools can improve retention and create inclusive classrooms. Grounded in research and personal reflection, this discussion highlights how culturally responsive coaching affirms diverse identities and enhances literacy instruction.

Dawn

By Paul Laurence Dunbar

*An angel, robed in spotless white,
Bent down and kissed the sleeping Night.
Night woke to blush; the sprite was gone.
Men saw the blush and called it Dawn.*

Instructional coaching in literacy isn't just about refining teaching strategies; it's about empowering educators to grow and thrive. For underrepresented and marginalized teachers, coaching provides more than just professional guidance—it fosters a sense of belonging in a system that too often overlooks their voices. When coaching is grounded in cultural relevance, it becomes a transformative experience, one that strengthens teaching, fosters equity, and builds lasting confidence.

A Personal Reflection on Coaching

Coaching, for me, is an ongoing journey—one rooted in humility, curiosity, and care. I am constantly reflecting on how I show up for the teachers I support, always searching for ways to sharpen my practice so that I can be the coach they need in that moment. Just like students, no two teachers are the same, and there is no one-size-fits-all approach. My responsibility is to adapt, to listen deeply, and to honor their experiences. Coaching is not easy. Some days you hit a home run, and other days you have to go back to the batting cage or check in with your own coach. But what matters most is that you stay on the field. I believe that when coaching is responsive, relational, and rooted in reflection, it becomes not just a tool for instructional change—but a catalyst for personal and professional growth.

While culturally relevant coaching is widely recognized for its role in fostering equity, some critics argue that its implementation is challenging due to rigid curriculum standards and accountability measures. Skeptics worry that emphasizing cultural responsiveness might detract from standardized learning objectives. However, research by Muhammad (2020) suggests that culturally relevant instruction does not replace academic rigor but enhances it—by making learning more meaningful, students engage more deeply with complex literacy skills.

Culturally relevant coaching is a method of instructional support that prioritizes the lived experiences, identities, and instructional needs of educators and students from diverse backgrounds. It goes beyond best practices; it is an act of advocacy, empowering teachers to challenge systemic barriers and ensuring that all students, particularly those from historically marginalized communities, receive rigorous, meaningful, and affirming literacy instruction. Cultural responsiveness isn't a single strategy—it is the foundation for all effective teaching, a journey we must all commit to.

The Role of Emotional Intelligence in Culturally Relevant Coaching

At its core, culturally relevant coaching is about connection, and that begins with emotional intelligence. Culturally relevant and responsive coaching is the joining of minds; it acknowledges that both coach and teacher bring gifts and talents that must be nurtured and shared for the development of each other and their students. Unlike traditional coaching methods that focus primarily on skill development, culturally relevant coaching prioritizes relationships, trust, and a deep understanding of educators' lived experiences. The most effective instructional coaches do more than provide feedback; they listen, reflect, and create safe spaces where underrepresented educators feel valued and supported.

A key component of emotional intelligence is self-awareness, particularly in recognizing implicit bias. Orange et al. (2019) emphasizes that unexamined cultural biases in teaching can lead to instructional blind spots, ultimately affecting student engagement. The study found that educators who engage in ongoing self-reflection develop stronger relationships with students and achieve more equitable outcomes. This underscores the need for coaches to facilitate structured reflection, helping teachers recognize and address biases that may unintentionally shape their instructional choices.

Similarly, fostering reflective practice within educators is essential for meaningful instructional growth. When educators are encouraged to critically examine their cultural assumptions, they become more intentional in designing inclusive learning environments. However, self-reflection alone is insufficient—true progress requires translating that awareness into purposeful, actionable changes in teaching practice. As Gorski and Dalton (2019) note, “Critical reflection enhances not only our abilities to explore our own experiences and ideologies but also our abilities to understand our positionalities relative to injustice and responsibilities to eliminate injustice” (Acquah & Commins, 2015; Garneau, 2016; Liu, 2015, p. 365). This deeper form of reflection moves beyond self-awareness, challenging educators to acknowledge their roles within systems of oppression and to act intentionally in service of equity and justice within their classrooms and beyond. This aligns with research on transformative learning, which suggests that awareness must be accompanied by shifts in practice to be truly effective.

To ensure equity in coaching, instructional leaders must engage in ongoing critical self-reflection by asking themselves:

- Whose voices and perspectives do I naturally center in my coaching?
- Am I providing objective, equitable feedback to all teachers?
- Am I unintentionally reinforcing dominant norms rather than encouraging culturally responsive pedagogy?

This process of participatory inquiry ensures that coaching is not a top-down process but a collaborative effort that fosters teacher growth through reflection, self-awareness, and student-centered decision-making. “The process of participatory inquiry, which lies at the center of the framework, engages educators in continual critical reflection, questioning their beliefs and ideals,

while acknowledging each other's agency and co-creating new knowledge and transformative actions" (Orange et al., 2019, p. 47)

A culturally responsive coach does more than provide feedback—they illuminate blind spots that may go unnoticed. Without this guidance, teachers might unintentionally overlook the identities of their students. When instructional leaders integrate reflection into coaching, educators gain the confidence to refine their literacy practices and build classrooms where every student feels valued.

Culturally Relevant Coaching in Literacy: A Tool for Advocacy and Social Justice

Coaches should guide teachers in integrating literacy instruction that:

- Engages students in critical conversations about race, identity, and justice.
- Uses diverse texts that reflect students' lived experiences.
- Empowers students to become change agents through reading, writing, and discussion.
- Allows space for the teacher to bring their lived experiences into the classroom as a member of that community.

Coaching that prioritizes cultural responsiveness is not just about best practices—it's about advocacy. "We developed a coaching framework with an explicit focus on equity to provide a high-powered lens to zoom in on a practice and deconstruct it for the purpose of disrupting and transforming inequitable practices" (Orange et al, 2019, p. 46).

One of the most impactful ways literacy coaches can advocate for equity by helping teachers select diverse texts and fostering meaningful literacy discussions. This approach ensures students engage with all pillars of reading, supporting both word recognition and language comprehension.

Muhammad (2020) emphasizes that when teachers engage students with literature that sparks critical thinking and social action, they transform literacy into a powerful tool for equity and change.

Additionally, culturally responsive coaching helps educators move away from deficit-based thinking that assumes some students are not "ready" for complex material. Instead, responsiveness means acknowledging that students are always ready to learn—it is the responsibility of educators to design learning experiences that activate prior knowledge and build conceptual understanding (Hammond, 2015). When instructional coaches guide teachers in setting high expectations, students develop both competence and confidence as independent learners.

Coaching in Action: Practical Examples

Effective coaching doesn't exist in theory alone—it must be visible in daily practices that reflect emotional intelligence, equity, and intentionality. Below are practical examples that demonstrate how culturally relevant coaching can be applied to real-life situations and support meaningful change in literacy instruction.

Vignette: Coaching Teachers to Examine the Cultural Impact of Curriculum and Use Culturally Diverse Texts

Context

Teacher A, a middle school ELA teacher, wants her students to connect more deeply with reading but has noticed disengagement during whole-group instruction. During a coaching

conversation, you learn that the materials in use are primarily traditional texts that do not reflect students' diverse interests, cultural backgrounds, or lived experiences.

You recognize an opportunity not only to diversify the texts but also to help the teacher reflect more deeply on the cultural impact of the curriculum and what we teach—not just how we teach it.

Step-by-Step Coaching Practice

1. *Begin with Reflective Conversation:* Coach: “What kinds of stories did you love as a child? Did they reflect your background or culture? Why were they meaningful to/for you?”
2. *Frame the Why: What We Teach Is Just as Important as How We Teach:* Coach: “We often coach around delivery, but what we teach shapes how students see themselves in the world. What we teach is just as important as how we teach.”
3. *Facilitate a Collaborative Content Audit:* Review classroom texts using questions like:
 - “Whose stories are being told?”
 - “Who is missing?”
 - “Are these texts mirrors or windows?”
4. *Model and Co-Plan a Culturally Relevant Lesson:* Suggested texts:
 - *New Kid* by Jerry Craft
 - *Ghost* by Jason Reynolds
 - *Genesis Begins Again* by Alicia D. Williams
 - *The Crossover* by Kwame Alexander
 - *Harbor Me* and *Brown Girl Dreaming* by Jacqueline Woodson
5. *Observe and Reflect:* Coach: “What did you notice about how students responded?”
Coach: “What new understandings did you gain?”
6. *Extend and Sustain:*
 - Encourage student choice
 - Co-create text sets
 - Facilitate PLCs on culturally responsive literacy

Coach’s Affirmation

“When we say what we teach is just as important as how we teach, we’re affirming that curriculum itself reflects values. You have the power to ensure that reflection is inclusive, relevant, and empowering for every student, every day.”

Strategy 1: The “Frustration-to-Focus” Reflection Protocol

This strategy is designed to acknowledge the emotional landscape many teachers face and the role of coaching in meeting that moment with empathy and purpose. It’s not uncommon for teachers to reach a point of frustration—when strategies feel ineffective, students seem unreachable, and the next step is unclear. In these moments, teachers may feel disheartened or even question their ability to make an impact. As coaches, how we respond is critical. Rather than jumping to solutions, our most powerful move is to pause, listen, and help teachers reflect. The goal is not to fix, but to reconnect them to their purpose and agency. The following protocol offers a way to guide that conversation with compassion and intention.

When to Use. A teacher expresses being overwhelmed, defeated, or experiencing self-doubt (e.g., “Nothing I’m doing is working.”)

Coach’s Role. Pause the problem-solving. Validate the frustration. Then, guide reflection with grounding, curiosity-based questions:

- “What do you feel your students need most right now?”
- “What part of this challenge do you feel most capable of addressing?”
- “How would you chunk this challenge into small manageable pieces to support the success of your students and yourself?”
- “What do you feel you need most right now to address this challenge?”

Why it works. It honors the emotional moment while shifting focus toward the teacher’s agency and clarity.

Strategy 2: Reframing Through an Asset-Based Lens

When to Use. When a teacher expresses frustration in ways that reflect deficit-based language or beliefs about students (e.g., “They can’t handle this material,” “These students just don’t want to learn,” or “They’re so far behind it doesn’t even matter”).

Coach’s Role. Rather than correcting or confronting, use the moment to foster reflection. Gently surface the underlying assumptions and guide the teacher to reframe their perspective through a strengths-based lens that focuses on what students *can* do or are on the cusp of doing—with support.

A Note from My Practice. In the past, I’ve used this strategy by leaning into the power of yet. I’ve found that when teachers shift from thinking “they can’t” to “they haven’t yet,” it changes everything. It opens the door to possibility, patience, and planning. It’s not about ignoring the gap—it’s about meeting students at their baseline and building a bridge to where we want them to go. When we activate the power of yet, we invite intentional reflection and co-construct a roadmap for growth.

Coaching Moves.

1. Affirm the Challenge, Then Shift the Lens

“That moment sounded tough. But let’s pause—what’s something they *did* show you in that moment, even if it wasn’t academic?”

2. Use a Strengths-Based Work Sample Protocol

Bring student work and ask:

“What’s one thing this shows us about their thinking?”

“What could this tell us about where we need to go next?”

3. Reframe Language Together

If a teacher says, “They’re low,” ask:

“What would it look like to reframe that as, ‘They’re developing in this area,’ or, ‘They haven’t mastered this yet, but they’re showing signs of growth?’”

4. Prompt Culturally Responsive Planning

Before planning, guide with:

“What do we know about this student’s strengths, identity, or interests that we can build from?”
 “If this is their starting point, what small step would move them closer to our goal?”

Why It Works. Deficit-based thinking often comes from a place of exhaustion or discouragement. This strategy validates the teacher’s experience while gently shifting the narrative. When teachers see students through the lens of “not yet,” it restores a sense of agency—for both the teacher and the student. It transforms planning from reactive to responsive and brings joy and purpose back into the work.

Strategy 3: The Power of Passive Coaching Statements

Using a core belief statement or quote may seem passive because it doesn’t demand immediate action, but in practice, it sets a powerful tone that shapes the emotional and intellectual landscape of coaching. It affirms a shared purpose, signals intentionality, and quietly reinforces your values with every interaction.

When used consistently in agendas, email signatures, coaching plans, PD presentations, hallway posters, or newsletters, these statements create a steady undercurrent that influences mindset and practice over time. They become a rhythm that teachers begin to internalize.

This subtle, values-driven approach is especially impactful for building trust, fostering emotional safety, and cultivating a reflective culture. These messages gently invite educators to examine their practice without judgment and reconnect to their purpose. But they also do something just as important: they affirm the worth, effort, and brilliance of teachers themselves. In moments of doubt, frustration, or burnout, a thoughtfully chosen statement can serve as a quiet reminder: You are seen. You are growing. You matter. It’s a strategy I return to often, and I’m continually surprised by the doors it opens to deepen relationships, spark honest dialogue, and reignite passion in coaching conversations.

Coaching Principle Statements.

- *What we teach is just as important as how we teach. Effective coaching supports both, ensuring instruction is inclusive, content is relevant, and every student sees themselves in the learning.*
- *Every text, every task, tells a story about what we value. Intentional teaching means choosing stories that reflect, uplift, and affirm student identities, especially those who are historically marginalized or made to feel unseen.*
- *You do not have to be perfect to be powerful. Every effort you make to show up, reflect, and grow, shapes a better future for your students and yourself.*
- *When we care, stay consistent, reflect, plan, and act—the change we seek will reveal itself, as long as we keep moving forward.*

Investing in Culturally Relevant Coaches

If culturally relevant coaching is to be truly effective and sustainable, schools must invest in professional development for coaches. Professional development facilitated by literacy coaches contributes to changes in teachers’ beliefs about literacy instruction (Carlisle & Berebitsky, 2011).

To ensure culturally relevant coaching becomes a long-term practice, districts should focus on:

- *Culturally Responsive Pedagogy Training* – Equipping coaches with strategies for equity-driven instruction.
- *Workshops on Emotional Intelligence* – Helping coaches build trust and navigate difficult conversations.
- *Bias-Awareness Training* – Encouraging self-reflection to maintain equitable and inclusive coaching.
- *Mentorship for New Coaches* – Providing guidance from experienced culturally relevant coaches.

By investing in the growth and preparedness of instructional coaches, schools can sustain coaching as a transformative practice rather than a temporary initiative.

Conclusion: Recognizing the Brilliance in Educators

True culturally relevant coaching is not about changing educators but amplifying their strengths. It is not enough to simply acknowledge the importance of equity; coaches must model it in their actions and decisions. Schools and districts must ensure that coaching models prioritize inclusion, elevate diverse voices, and challenge inequitable systems.

Just as Night does not transform itself but is instead recognized for its beauty, marginalized educators do not need to "fix" themselves—they need support, advocacy, and affirmation. Their brilliance is already present; culturally relevant coaching must serve as the guiding light that ensures it is seen, uplifted, and celebrated.

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Author Information

Nicole Williams has over 20 years of experience in education, serving as a Special Educator, Reading Teacher, Case Manager, Assistant Principal, and Lead Coach. She specializes in fostering safe, nurturing, and enriching academic environments.

With degrees in Special Education, Literacy, and Leadership and as a doctoral student in Curriculum and Instruction, Nicole is dedicated to empowering educators and students. Her focus includes building teacher capacity, fostering collaborative communities, and developing students in academics, creativity, and social-emotional well-being.

Nicole champions diversity, innovation, and evidence-based strategies, emphasizing collaboration, accountability, and authenticity. She believes in education's transformative power and works tirelessly to create growth-oriented spaces where collective efforts lead to limitless possibilities.