

Facilitating Change: Roles of the Early Childhood Literacy Coach

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Abstract

This qualitative study sought to explicate the roles Early Childhood Literacy coaches played in a federally-funded project to improve early language and literacy instruction for preschool children. Across three Head Start sites, participants included classroom teachers, literacy coaches, center coordinators, and program coordinators. Structured interviews were conducted and analyzed to understand the roles assumed by coaches who served preschool teachers.

Keywords: coaching, early literacy coach, early literacy, early childhood education

Introduction

Research has established the predictive ability of a child's foundational literacy knowledge to forecast his or her success later in school (Adams, 1990; Cunningham & Stanovich, 1997; Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998). Therefore, the burden of responsibility for preparing young children for reading success falls squarely on the shoulders of early childhood educators. However, as the International Reading Association (IRA) and National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) acknowledge in their joint position statement on developmentally appropriate practices for young children, many early childhood educators are not "adequately prepared to teach reading and writing to young children (1998, p.5)." While teachers of young children working in public school settings are held to the

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same licensure and educational requirements that govern their colleagues teaching in public schools, most community-based programs are not in a fiscal position to hire staff with the educational background that has adequately prepared them to support their young students' early literacy instruction. Without federal licensing standards, licensing requirements for community-based early childhood programs vary by state in the U.S. most states require only a high school diploma as qualification for working with young children (IRA & NAEYC, 1998). As a result, the majority of the early childhood workforce has had no specialized training in early childhood education, let alone scientifically-based reading research or high-quality reading and writing instruction.

Proposed solutions to this crisis include a wide variety of options including changing licensing standards, extending elementary education to include a pre-kindergarten year and a myriad of professional development strategies. Among the professional development strategies the use of Relationship Based Professional Development (RBPd) is gaining attention (NCCIC, 2010). In their joint position statement on early learning standards, NAEYC and the National Association of Early Childhood Specialists in State Departments of Education (NAECS/SDE) recommend professional development for early childhood professionals through coaching and mentoring (2002). This report will focus on a specific example of what RBPd can look like through the example of an in depth exploration of the roles of an early literacy coach which is new to the field of early childhood education.

Coaching as a form of Professional development

A host of activities fall under the umbrella of RBPd including, but not limited to, coaching, mentoring, and technical assistance. These variations in title belie a variety of overlap in the types of activities and approaches used by individuals in these various positions. According to the National Child Care Information Center (NCCIC, 2010), central to all types and definitions of RBPd is the relationship between the

highly skilled and the less experienced or skilled professional. Differences in the type of RBPD are based on the type of relationship, the purpose of the activity, and how information is shared between the expert and client (NCCIC, 2010).

One area where RBPD has evidence-based benefits is in the school setting. For instance, the roles of literacy coach/reading specialist have been well articulated and studied. According to the International Reading Association (2004), the role of an early literacy coach involves a site-based professional working closely with teachers to provide professional development on effective reading and writing instruction. A growing body of literature on literacy coaching at the elementary (Toll, 2005; Walpole & McKenna, 2004) and secondary levels (Riddle-Buly, Coskie, Robinson, & Egawa, 2006; Roller, 2006; Snow, Ippolito, & Schwartz, 2006) has shown coaching to be an effective form of professional development. While researchers have discussed the potential of coaching at the early childhood level (Kent, 2005; Landry, Swank, Smith, Assel, & Gunnewig, 2006; Walpole & Meyer, 2008), little empirical work has tested the theory. The purpose of this study is to explore the roles of early childhood literacy coaches in one Early Reading First (ERF) project funded by the U.S. Department of Education. Consistent with all ERF project, this ERF project served preschool children from low-income families.

Coaching roles

The most important job of a literacy coach is to support the daily work of teachers (Bean, 2004). In order to support teachers, the literacy coach may take on multiple roles, which at the elementary setting are well-established (Bean, 2004; IRA, 2004; Toll, 2005; McKenna & Walpole, 2008; Walpole & McKenna, 2004). The International Reading Association (2004) summarizes in-class coaching as involving three key components: modeling, observing, and providing non-evaluative feedback. As modeler, the literacy coach models the use of effective instructional strategies in the classroom. She uses the techniques she asks teachers to use with their students in

order to provide a concrete example of how it can be done. Next, the coach observes as the teacher uses the same instructional strategy used during modeling. Finally, the coach provides the teacher with non-evaluative, constructive feedback based on her observation of the teacher's use of the instructional technique in order to build on strengths and improve weaknesses for future instruction. Through this three-step process, professional development moves away from the one-size-fits-all workshop model to a much more individualized, job-embedded system (Joyce & Showers, 1996).

Others working with literacy coaches have described additional roles coaches fill in elementary school reform efforts. Walpole and McKenna (2004) characterize the coaches with whom they work as learners, grant writers, school-level planners, curriculum experts, researchers, and teachers. Fulfilling each of these roles requires literacy coaches to be knowledgeable about a range of topics, including but not limited to, scientifically-based reading research, the essential components of a reading program (phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension), assessment, curriculum materials, intervention programs, the needs of adult learners, and effective leadership techniques. Toll (2005) adds personal attributes to this list that she describes as essential to effective coaching: being an expert communicator and engendering trusting relationships.

However, the roles of coaches described above are based on research with coaches working at the elementary level. The literature warns that literacy coaching is context-specific; what works on the elementary level may not necessarily work at the early childhood level (McKenna & Walpole, 2008). Unfortunately, there is very little research on literacy coaching at the early childhood level. Two projects serve as examples of this research. Landry and her colleagues (2006) describe the effects of a professional development model using literacy mentors to advise and support Head Start teachers as they implemented effective language and literacy instruction. Mentors in the project coached teachers by participating in activities such as lesson planning, examining assessment data, modeling lessons, and providing feedback

based on instructional observations. Comparing child outcomes on early literacy assessments, the researchers found that teachers who had received ongoing mentoring had students who made greater gains than students of teachers who had not received mentoring. The researchers concluded that the professional development model using literacy mentors was a successful method for preparing early childhood educators. Similarly, Neuman and her colleagues compared teacher practice and child outcomes of home-based and center-based early childcare providers who had attended a college course and received weekly coaching with those who attended the college course without receiving coaching (Neuman & Dwyer, 2006). The early childhood educators who attended the college course and received weekly coaching made impressive gains on measures of both teacher practice and child outcomes (Neuman & Dwyer, 2006). These researchers concluded that coaching plays an important part in improving early childhood educators' practice.

While the research is limited on the effects of coaching specific to literacy in early care and education, there is a great deal of data on other types of RBPD in supporting quality in the ECE setting (NCCIC, 2010), illustrating that the potential for literacy coaching at the early childhood level seems substantial, though many questions remain about implementing a professional development model focused on increasing the quality of language and literacy programming by using early childhood literacy coaches. What roles do literacy coaches at the early childhood level perform? What challenges impede the effectiveness of an early childhood language and literacy enhancement program implemented through a literacy coaching model? What are the teacher and classroom outcomes of coaching early childhood educators in language and literacy skills? The focus of this study is on understanding the roles attributed to the language and literacy coaches by the recipients that they serve. By comparing these roles with the changes to language and literacy practices in the early childhood classroom a portrait of a more specific target of relationship-based professional development can help the field further clarify the value of this service as an engine to

drive quality enhancements.

To explore these questions about early childhood literacy coaching, this study draws on the lived experiences of early childhood coaches and the teachers and administrators with whom they worked.

Theoretical Framework

Role theory (Mead, 1934; Parsons, 1951), though rarely used in contemporary research, remains a useful tool for guiding the process of uncovering and defining roles within and across an occupation. Role theory, and specifically Merton's work on role sets, is useful in helping clarify the nature and variety of behaviors individuals exhibit in a single position. To the extent that expected behaviors are socially constructed, when the actors in the situations change or the situations themselves change, the expected behaviors of the actors change as well (Merton, 1957). For instance, in their work on identity construction, Simposn and Carol (2008) point to the benefits role theory can provide to the discourse on organizational development.

Method

Overview

Participants included coaches, teachers, and administrators working to implement an Early Reading First project in a mid-Atlantic state. As the study is grounded in the context of a specific professional development project, the project is described in some detail. Then, procedures for data collection are enumerated.

The Setting

Program Sites. The project involved three Head Start centers within the same Head Start agency. Within each Head Start center, all of the classrooms (four classrooms at each center) participated for a total of 12 classrooms, with three adults (head teacher, assistant teacher, and classroom aide) supporting children's learning in each

classroom. The centers were chosen based on the Early Reading First specified selection criteria: (a) potential for the centers to become centers of excellence, (b) children from low-income families served, (c) evidenced a low staff turn-over, (d) majority of the teachers held at least an AA degree, and (e) a high child annual attendance rate. This was a three-year project; the focus year for this investigation was 2006 – 2007.

Participants

Coaches. The project adopted the criteria set forth by Hanft, Rush, and Shelden (2004) for its early childhood coaches. Therefore, the project screened applicants for the coaching positions for presence of the following desirable characteristics: Masters in Reading education; competency in Scientifically Based Reading Research language and literacy research and appropriate strategies; people skills to ask the right questions to help teachers discover new ways to integrate the new strategies and techniques into their classroom, to help the teachers discover what they do know and how to build on that knowledge, and how to help them reflect on their teaching; objective and fair, able to set aside their perceptions of the teachers in order to focus on the teachers' ideas, able to support the teachers' examination of the ideas in order to use an unbiased, evidence-based standard to guide the learner to self-discovery and compare his or her own ideas and practices to the new strategies and techniques; able to take advantage of spontaneous learning situations; genuinely caring about colleagues' development as outstanding teachers of young children, particularly language and early literacy; patient; supportive; and comfortable in providing straightforward feedback after observing colleague's practice of a new strategy or technique.

The project employs three coaches for the project. Two coaches were interviewed regarding their experiences for this study. They coached the teaching staffs in three centers, with the head teacher as the primary focus.

Teachers. Nine of the project's 12 teachers agreed to be interviewed for this study. These teachers' years of teaching experience ranged from 2 to 25. Their level

of education varied [Child Development Associate (CDA) degree (n=2), AA degree (n=3), a BA degree (n=4)].

Administrators. Five Head Start administrators were interviewed for this study, two were center coordinators (building-level administrators) and three were program coordinators (central office supervisors of the center coordinators). The center coordinators had been Head Start employees for several years. Both held Child Development Associate degrees; one was taking classes towards a bachelor's degree. The three program coordinators hold bachelor degrees.

Professional Development. The teachers participated in two kinds of professional development: day-long professional development sessions once each month and weekly classroom-based coaching. The professional development sessions focused on topics such as assessment; small group instruction; and infusing the curriculum with oral language, phonological awareness, alphabet knowledge, concepts of print, and comprehension instruction. Professional development sessions were conducted by the project directors and literacy coaches. In addition, the teachers participated in ongoing, sustained training in the classroom in the form of one-on-one work with their coach. As a follow-up to monthly professional development sessions, coaches modeled skills learned in the training session, teachers and coaches co-taught skills, and finally teachers implemented the skills on their own with the coach observing to provide feedback. Often the coach videotaped the teaching, and during the debriefing, the teacher and coach watched and discussed a portion of the tape together. This coaching cycle repeated each month with a new instructional strategy focus. Coaches also worked with teachers weekly to create lesson plans for the upcoming week. Coaches observed in each classroom each week, taking detailed observational notes on language and literacy instruction and providing teachers with feedback based on their observations.

Coach Training. Training for coaches consisted of attendance at the teacher professional development sessions. In addition, coaches participated in weekly meetings

with the project directors to discuss progress made during the week, challenges confronted, and upcoming events. During these meetings the coaches collaborated with the project directors to plan professional development workshops. In addition our project used Guskey's (1986) model of teacher change to guide how coaches should interact with teachers. In his model, Guskey (1986) theorizes that successful staff development programs first change teachers' classroom practices, which lead to changes in student achievement, thereby leading to change in teachers' beliefs and attitudes. According to the model, staff development programs that set out to change teachers' beliefs and attitudes first lack sufficient evidence from student outcomes to convince teachers of their worth. The model suggests three implications for successful staff development: "1) recognize that change is a gradual and difficult process for teachers, 2) ensure that teachers receive regular feedback on student learning progress, and 3) provide continued support and follow-up after the initial training (Guskey, 1986, 9-10)." As a result, the professional development project in this study presented new trainings gradually over the course of three years, allowing teachers ample time to experiment with new ideas and practices. The project gathered student outcome data monthly in order to share concrete information on progress with teachers. Lastly, the project employed site-based literacy coaches who provided teachers with individualized follow-up from professional development trainings.

Data Collection

Semi-structured interviews were conducted by an independent researcher, using an interview protocol (See Appendix) designed by the project directors. The protocol included four overarching sections: activities, attributes, outcomes, and challenges and evaluation. Questions regarding coaches' activities and attributes were designed to understand the roles coaches fulfilled throughout the target year. Questions concerning outcomes were asked to understand participants' perceptions of changes occurring as a result of coaching. When asking about perceived changes, the interviewer

asked about changes in instruction, teacher beliefs, and children's knowledge. Lastly, questions about challenges and evaluation provoked reflection on challenges coaches faced as a result of the project and ways in which the implementation could be improved. The interviews were semi-structured, for the interviewer had permission to ask follow-up questions as needed to pursue additional information from participants.

All interviews were conducted by the same interviewer. Each interview was tape-recorded and transcribed for data analysis. Interviews occurred individually in a private location at a time convenient for the participant. Interviews lasted approximately 30 to 40 minutes. As described earlier, coaches, teachers and the Head Start administrators were interviewed for this project. By triangulating the data across these various individuals we are able to compare perspectives and identify the roles that transcended more than one type of relationship. Because the project directors were also intimately involved in supervising and working with the coaches the validity of the findings through objective confirmation was also achieved.

Results

Data Analyses

The results presented below address the research questions concerning an in-depth exploration of literacy coaching in an early childhood setting. The entire coding process was informed by the researchers' background and familiarity with the roles identified as important in elementary education literacy coaches. (See Table 3 as well as the body of scholarship addressing relationship-based professional development.) Therefore the questions were targeted at discovering information specific to roles. While this information informed the coding process, it did not limit it. The current analysis relates specifically to the roles that the coaches played.

To analyze the qualitative data, researchers designed a multi-stage process until all researchers, including a researcher unfamiliar with the project, reached one hundred percentage agreement on the emerging codes. First, two project directors

independently coded the interviews and grouped the codes according to their relationship with the three research questions using NVivo research software (NVivo, 2008). Second, an independent researcher, unfamiliar with the project, coded the interview transcripts using Hyper Research software as a coding tool. Next, the three coders met repeatedly to read and discuss all three sets of codes in order to create a master code list. Once an initial master code list was created, the third coder returned to the codes to consolidate all the codes into the master list. Returning to the coded data with the new master code list, the researchers found that some codes only occurred in one interview; in other words, the idea was specific to a single participant and not shared by a majority of participants. The researchers decided that if a code occurred in fewer than 2 interviews, then the code was dropped from the analyses. A final master code list was created and used to recode the data (See Table 1).

Table 1. *Master Code List*

Research Question	Code	Definition	Exemplar
What are the roles of early childhood literacy coaches?	Assessor	The literacy coach as assessor uses observation and student data to assess strengths and weaknesses in the classroom and works with the teaching staff to set goals for improvement. A coach manages the student and teacher level data.	“I also feel that you have to understand data, how to collect data and how to put it in a form that is understandable to the teachers and then also be able to teach them how to use that information to effectively group children and differentiate instruction.” [Coach]
	Communicator	The literacy coach must be an effective communicator, sharing ideas with teachers and with the center coordinators.	“Just knowing that when I have a question, there is somebody I can go right to and if she doesn’t know the answer she is going to find out the answer. She is going to work with me to work it out and that is invaluable to me.” [Teacher]

(continued)

Research Question	Code	Definition	Exemplar
What are the roles of early childhood literacy coaches?	Knowledgeable Educator	The literacy coach provides ideas for activities to use during instruction. She has knowledge of literacy components and childhood education, which she uses while helping with lesson planning.	“She came in really knowledgeable of literacy, very knowledgeable of early childhood and the language and all the different concepts that went along with it.” [Center Coordinator]
	Modeler	The literacy coach as modeler implements a skill or strategy in the classroom for the teachers to observe.	“In the beginning I asked them how to do large group. So she actually came in and did a model for me and it actually helped me very much.” [Teacher]
	Observer	The coach as observer conducts formal observations of instruction and then provides feedback to the teaching staff on her observations.	“Often they [coaches] have done a lot of the teaching and the running of the pd’s ... they have done a lot of the sessions and parts of the sessions and the activities. Which I think is good because they are the people we have contact with and are comfortable with. It kind of makes it a more comfortable atmosphere at professional development. You’re not afraid to ask questions.” [Teacher]
	Resource Provider	The literacy coach provides concrete materials (dramatic play props, small group activity materials, and curriculum kits).	“She [coach] always makes sure we are setting it up just right and that we have the materials. If we don’t have the material we let her know ahead of time and she will try to get it for us.” [Teacher]
	Trusted Mentor	A coach who is a trusted mentor develops a close working relationship with the teachers and center coordinators with whom she works. She advises the teachers on activities and instruction through meetings. She supports teachers.	“The teachers know that the coaches are their mentors. They are not the supervisors and whatever they say in those meetings is going to be just between them two.” [Center Coordinator]

Once all data were coded using the final master code list, the researchers grouped the codes into overarching categories which corresponded to the research questions.

For example, all codes that involved coaches' activities, attributes, and responsibilities were categorized together in order to answer the first research question concerning coaches' roles.

To further analyze the data once codes and categories were established, the researchers reread all codes within a category looking for themes emerging across participants. Researchers reread codes independently and then met as a group multiple times to discuss themes. Themes emerging from the data are described below in relation to the research questions.

Findings

When asked about the roles the coach performed in the project, participants described activities that could be understood as reflecting eight different roles: assessor, communicator, knowledgeable educator, modeler, observer, professional developer, resource provider, and trusted mentor. Table 2 provides the frequency each code was described by participant type.

Table 2. *Coaching roles by participants*

Role	Teacher (n=9)	Center Coordinator (n=2)	Program Coordinator (n=3)	Coach (n=2)	Total (n=16)
Assessor	21	2	3	11	37
Communicator	9	7	10	14	40
Knowledgeable Educator	43	10	3	9	65
Modeler	20	5	5	12	42
Observer	33	5	1	25	64
Professional Developer	14	5	0	0	19
Resource Provider	16	4	0	3	23
Trusted Mentor	27	8	8	14	57

Assessor. Participants described coaches performing the role of assessors in two ways. First, coaches were the chief assessors of student-level data. The project re-

quired teachers to assess their students' progress monthly using a Curriculum-Based Measurement (CBM) (Burstein, Bryan, Christie, & Ergul, 2004) developed by the project directors with the project's evaluator. Following the teachers' administration of the CBM each month, the coach collected the raw data, summarized the data, and then discussed the data with teachers. Together, they used the data to make decisions about the students' needs, grouping and regrouping them for small group instruction. One teacher described her coach giving feedback based on the CBM assessments: "*[the coach] shows us all the areas that the child has strengths in and the child has weaknesses and that helps us when we go to do our lesson plans. So we say, 'Ok, well, this child needs to get more work on this'.*"

Secondly, coaches assessed the extent and quality of program implementation by the teachers in the classroom. For example, after participants attended professional development workshops on creating print-rich learning environments, the coaches evaluated the classroom environment monthly using the Early Language and Literacy Classroom Observation (ELLCO) tool (Smith & Dickinson, 2002). One coach maintained that having the ELLCO checklist helped facilitate teachers' "*talking about how they can integrate writing and how they can integrate books and have literacy in the dramatic play areas.*" Similarly, coaches used a fidelity checklist designed by the project directors to assess classroom teams' fidelity to the project. One coach described her use of the fidelity checklist as a guide for her classroom observations: "*I think for me the implementation checklist is a guide. I look at that as the components that are supposed to be in the classroom. That's what the project is expecting.*"

Communicator. As communicators, coaches provided a direct link between the project directors and the center coordinators, classroom teachers, teaching assistants, and classroom aides. Teachers described seeking out their coach on a daily basis for information about the project's expectations and requirements, effective instructional strategies, additional ideas for lesson planning, and implementing ideas from professional development workshops. Especially at the beginning of the project, teachers

viewed their coach as an invaluable resource for understanding all of the parts of the new curriculum. As one teacher explained, *“Just knowing that when I have a question, there is somebody I can go right to and if she doesn’t know the answer she is going to find out the answer. She is going to work with me to work it out and that is invaluable to me.”* Moreover, the coaches also established firm lines of communication between the teaching team within each classroom and among the teachers across classrooms. One teacher described how her coach encouraged teachers within the center to visit each other’s classrooms to find good ideas for literacy instruction, *“She would say, ‘Go look in D’s room to see what D did with her letters to see if you like it.’”*

Knowledgeable Educator. The coach’s role as knowledgeable educator was the role most frequently discussed by the teachers interviewed for this study. Teachers viewed their coaches as the person to go to for information on early literacy and language instruction, classroom management, interpreting student-level data, creating literacy-rich lesson plans, and activities for small-group instruction. Multiple teachers explained that prior to the project they had minimal training on literacy instruction, so they relied heavily on their coaches for extra support understanding what is was that the project asked of them. In addition, teachers looked to coaches for advice on special circumstances in the classroom. For example, one teacher describes a situation in which she needed the coach’s help. *“A couple of children in my class are really, really unusually high level ability for this age, and she [the coach] has just bent over backwards to find and develop small group materials that we can help those children continue to grow and improve.”* One venue for coaches to be knowledgeable educators was during the teachers’ weekly lesson planning meetings. Teachers described the coach’s input at these weekly lesson planning meetings as central to the project’s success. One program coordinator described the coach’s work as giving the teachers direction and support as they work together to plan their lessons. The coaches in this study indicated that in addition to basic knowledge of early literacy and language

knowledge, they also needed to be curriculum specialists, knowing the new curriculum inside and out in order to help with classroom implementation.

Modeler. The project's design required coaches to model instructional activities introduced during monthly professional development workshops. As modelers, coaches modeled instruction such as shared storybook reading, the project's vocabulary protocol, shared writing, and differentiated small group activities on alphabet knowledge and phonological awareness. Describing her experiences with her coach modeling shared storybook reading, one teacher explained, "*We (classroom team) were having a hard time, for example, with doing the large group. She would come in and model by actually doing a large group with the children. She would actually come in and teach it, so we could watch and get ideas of better ways to implement the curriculum.*" In addition, coaches modeled good early literacy and language classroom practices, such as engaging children in oral conversation during center or meal time. One teacher described her coach modeling oral language: "*I have had them (coaches) come in and model like playing with the kids in the house keeping and block area and showing the language ... that we can do with the kids.*" The coaches described two kinds of modeling, formal and informal. Formal modeling occurred when coaches met with teachers ahead of time to schedule a time to come into the classroom to model a specific instructional strategy. Informal coaching occurred when coaches identified an opportunity as they were observing where modeling could be effective and did so without previously discussing the topic with the teacher.

Observer. In addition to modeling, the project directed the coaches to spend one full day observing in each classroom weekly. For coaches, observer was the most frequently mentioned role (n=25); for teachers, observer was the second most frequently mentioned role (n=33). Clearly, the participants in this project saw the observer role as essential to coaching. One teacher described her experiences being observed by the coach: "*(the coach) will come in throughout the day, the whole day, and she'll just sit and observe everything that you do. And she'll make notes. She*

always starts out with a positive, ‘you did a great thing here and a great thing here.’ Then she’ll say if she’s not seeing something that should be done or seeing something that should be changed. She does it in a really great way, very positive way.” Despite the embarrassment teachers might have felt initially with classroom observations, all participants described the coach’s feedback based on observations positively. One teacher explained, *“I think it helps us see both what we are doing well and what we need to work on. It makes us feel good in that we are getting positive reinforcement which is something everybody needs. To know which parts we are doing well but it also helps us because it tells us what maybe we want to think about doing differently.”*

Professional Developer. Coaches interviewed for this study did not view themselves as professional developers; however, the teachers and center coordinators with which coaches worked did identify them as professional developers. Because modeling and observing were coded as separate roles, “professional developer” was coded as any instance when a participant discussed the coach delivering training at monthly professional development workshops. One teacher described, *“Often they (coaches) have done a lot of the teaching and the running of the professional developments … which I think is good because they are the people we have contact with and are comfortable with. It kind of makes it a more comfortable atmosphere at professional development. You’re not afraid to ask questions. You know if it is an outside person that you don’t know, you are a little bit hesitant. They are a lot more open which is a good thing because we get into a lot more discussion I think and sharing of ideas between different centers and different classrooms.”* A different teacher commented on the effect of the professional developments, *“I like the way they (coaches) teach and I like the way that they bring people in to speak with us. Afterwards we meet to do lesson plans and whatever we need to talk about. I feel very supported.”*

Resource Provider. The coach as resource provider supplied classrooms with commercial and non-commercial curriculum materials, as well as purchased goods

such as props for thematic-based dramatic play areas and theme-related books for classroom libraries. Teachers described relying heavily on coaches for additional instructional materials. One teacher commented, *“I was struggling with activities for small group because kids were getting bored, and they (coaches) came up with a binder of different activities.”* Moreover, teachers discussed coaches helping them to select materials for purchase, *“working with us in developing materials as well as ordering materials—things that we need for our classroom.”* Many participants discussed the coach’s role as resource provider in the context of preparing small-group instruction. As one teacher explained, *“To try to come up with 4 different groups, to come up with activities and materials, to be able to do that on a daily basis—that is a lot and that is something we could not possibly have done without her (the coach). It just would not have evolved and there would not be the time or resources to do that. So that is huge.”*

Trusted Mentor. When describing qualities of an effective literacy coach, teachers stressed the importance of being able to trust their coach. The teachers discussed trust in two aspects. First, teachers needed to trust that the information discussed with the coach and observed by the coach in the classroom would be confidential and not used in any evaluative sense. Second, teachers discussed trusting the coach to know instructional practices and to provide that support to the teacher when necessary. As one teacher explained the ideal coach is, *“a mentor, a person who has strong mentorship skills. Someone that the staff would feel is trustworthy—that they could confide in and talk to. Someone who is honest in their feedback, and is a team player; someone who can relate well to the classroom team and is able to offer suggestions and feedback but does it in such a way that can produce positive outcomes in the classroom.”*

Table 3 provides details of how the roles described in the research on elementary literacy coaches correspond with the roles we uncovered in this research.

Table 3. *Comparison of Elementary and Early Childhood Literacy Coaching Roles*

Elementary Literacy Coaching Roles*	Early Childhood Literacy Coaching Roles
Feedback Providers	Assessors
Communicators	Communicators
Teachers	Knowledgeable Educators
Modelers	Modelers
Observers	Observers
Relationship Builders	Trusted Mentors
School-level Planners	Professional Developers
Curriculum Experts	Resource Providers
Learners	
Researchers	
Grant Writers	

* Compiled from:

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

Toll, C. (2005). *The Literacy Coach's Survival Guide: Essential Questions and Practical Answers.* Newark, DE: International Reading Association.

Walpole, S., & McKenna, M. C. (2004). *The literacy coach's handbook: A guide to research-based practice.* New York: Guilford.

As is clear, many of the categories are the same, however there are important differences. For example where the elementary coaches play the role of researcher, these early childhood coaches more often enacted the role of assessor. There was a press from the teachers they worked with to focus on assessment data in order to chart progress and to plan small groups and lessons. Where the elementary school coaches are focused on school-wide planning, the early childhood coaches were communicators, making sure all parties understood the programming needs and concerns in the classrooms they worked with. And where the elementary coach can be a grant writer, these early childhood coaches were needed to manage the resources and materials that the teachers were trying to use the next day. The discussion to follow explores possible explanations for these differences.

Discussion

In order for children to make the gains and growth necessary for school success, they must acquire strong language and literacy skills. Waiting until kindergarten to build literacy skills has “left behind” far too many children for far too long. However, many within the current U.S. early care and education workforce lack the knowledge and skills that would support children building language arts skills, particularly in the case where literacy and language are not strongly supported in the home. In order to meet the training and professional needs of the care givers and teachers serving preschoolers, new and innovative training strategies must be instituted. In this study we sought to discover the roles literacy coaches might play in the early childhood setting.

Where there were similarities between the roles found for literacy coaches in elementary school and in this early care and education setting, differences also emerged. In the areas of planner and assessor we saw differences in scope. It is possible that these differences reflect differences in the capacity of the different settings. In the elementary setting coaches can be planners, they can be instrumental in goal setting and school management. In the early childhood setting, the needs are much more immediate. Coaches must stay focused on up-to-the-minute needs and assessments. Where an elementary school has the capacity to adopt new teaching practices that a coach may be supporting, in the ECE setting coaches may have to also provide infrastructure thereby limiting their ability to play a role in larger systems planning. On the practical side, we hope the paper can suggest effective models of literacy coaching suited to early childhood education. The researchers have described the roles of the coaches, and the differences between the elementary and the early childhood settings, but failed to make suggestions that can “refine our thinking about how best to support and deliver coaching” as the authors envision the research. (p. 20, line 6).

Another important difference is in the teacher-coach relationship. Where past

research found the elementary school coach playing the role of feedback provider, the early childhood coach is a trusted mentor. It is possible this distinction stems from the differences in professional preparation between elementary teaching staff and early childhood teaching staff. The teachers in elementary settings have by and large completed a pre-service course of study that prepared them to work with classrooms of children. There is a high likelihood that they have been given feedback on their professional practice in college-level course work that will lead them to view input from a coach as another data point to be incorporated into their professional self-reflection. The same cannot be said of teachers working in early care and education settings. While some of the teaching staff may have had college-level courses, the majority of staff will not have had the opportunity for practica or student teaching where they were given constructive feedback and support to improve their teaching. Furthermore with the coaching model utilized in this project, the ongoing supportive feedback and reflection are much more intense than would be found in many college-level methods courses. The intensity coupled with the uniqueness shape the ECE teacher-coach relationship in ways different from other settings. The relationship became highly personal and expressed more on emotive dimensions such as trust and guidance rather than the more emotion neutral description of peer-to-peer feedback found in the elementary setting.

Likewise the history and traditions of the two systems likely influenced the differences between coaching roles. The U.S. system of early care and education developed out of a need to ensure the health and safety of children while their parents worked. From its inception the field has focused on health and safety as a priority, not curriculum quality. In the past, early childhood education administrators were more likely to ensure that health and safety policies, such as hand washing after toileting, were enforced, rather than ensuring that high quality curriculum was being implemented. While hand washing is indeed critical and many a school absence could be prevented if elementary schools were held to the same health and safety standards

that govern child care, many early care and education settings are just now beginning to turn their attention to curricular issues. In early care and education settings, the coach may often be the only staff member whose charge is strictly to focus on curriculum.

As the charge to the field of the early care and education expands to include a focus on curriculum quality, particularly as it provides services to young children who may be at risk for school failure, new strategies must be implemented that can support this effort. Clearly relationship-based professional development, for which coaching is but one example, will play a vital role. However, those doing this work will have to be equipped with an understanding of the unique needs of early care and education, how it is vastly different from other settings such as the elementary school system. Because this is an area in its infancy, more research to track the various dimensions of the work is needed; effective strategies to build the capacity of those offering coaching/mentoring and technical assistance are needed. More work defining the roles involved in relationship-based professional development and then the systems that can support those in these roles is needed in order to support the development of coaches/mentors/technical assistance who can then support the development of the system.

Pros and cons of having early literacy coaches also need to be considered. There is a little doubt that having on-site coaches could be more an effective way to change practice than having a group professional development. Coaches can provide an individualized professional development to fit each teacher's needs, and thus, empowers each teacher to be more self motivated to make changes in her practice. On the less positive side, hiring coaches in the early childhood programs is cost-bearing and the institutions will need financial support and capacity. In addition, the effectiveness of coaching is based on the relationship between coaches and teachers. Therefore, the outcomes of coaching vary depending on the relationship. The qualification of early literacy coaches are also demanding. Early literacy coaches need

expertise in early literacy and early childhood education as well as expertise in mentoring and adult learning process.

As research continues to uncover new and innovative ways that quality can be supported in early care and education, the strategies used in elementary education must be examined and assessed for their potential utilization. In doing this work, we cannot rely on the roles that coaches have played. In the past, differences, both in the capacity of the organization to support coaching and in the professional development of the staff, have significant implications for how coaches themselves are supported. Expectations for the kinds of changes a coach can bring about within a teacher and across a program must be understood in context. By comparing these results with those from elementary setting we are able to refine our thinking about how best to support and deliver coaching thereby supporting quality in early care and education.

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Appendix. *Structured Interview Protocol*

Activities

What activities do you view as essential to coaching?

How have you used assessments in your coaching? What has worked well for you in using assessment data? What would you like to change?

How does a coach facilitate change in teachers?

What kinds of activities or strategies have you found to be effective in bringing about changes in teachers?

What kinds of activities or strategies have you found to be not as effective in bringing about change in teachers (If any)?

What sorts of new approaches are you thinking/considering using?

Do you think that there are features of a Head Start program that may affect the coaching enterprise differently than from other settings?

Attributes

What is a literacy coach?

What would you identify as the key attributes or characteristics of a coach?

What are a literacy coach's roles and responsibilities?

What should be a literacy coach's roles and responsibilities?

How can a literacy coach develop relationships with the staff?

What did you do and what do you wish to do more to build relationships?

What knowledge, skills, and dispositions must a literacy coach possess?

Note. The above questions will be modified in appropriate ways when interviewing teachers and administrators.

