Early Childhood Instructional Coaching

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Early Childhood Instructional Coaching

Qualifying Paper
Rebecca Blazar Lebowitz

May 13, 2016
**Introduction**

Recent evidence suggests a positive impact of high quality early childhood educational experiences (i.e., schooling prior to kindergarten) on children’s cognitive and social-emotional development (Barnett, 1993; Barnett, 1995; Center for Public Education, 2007). Such findings, coupled with evidence that preschool classroom quality varies widely (Howes, Burchinal, Pianta, Bryant, Early, Clifford, & Barbarin, 2008), have sparked a sense of urgency around the need to bolster early childhood education for all children. Specifically, in February 2013, President Obama announced an extensive plan for expanding access to and improving the quality of early childhood programs, including increased funding for preschool in all fifty states and continued investment in Head Start (White House Office of the Press Secretary, 2013). Such national initiatives—in concert with a growing body of literature—have drawn attention to early childhood education, which has led researchers, practitioners, and policymakers to wonder how to most effectively improve early childhood schooling.

A key lever for quality improvement in early childhood is instruction (Barnett, 2013; Neuman & Cunningham, 2009; Nye, Konstantopoulos & Hedges, 2004; RAND Corporation, 2012; Rivkin, Hanushek & Kain, 2005); and yet, at the same time, teaching quality is highly inconsistent across classrooms and schools (Howes et al., 2008). That is, early childhood practitioners’ pedagogy rarely includes the practices associated with optimal student learning. Moving forward will require a significant press on building capacity among early educators.

Among the many approaches to teacher professional development that have been employed to increase pedagogical quality, instructional coaching may be a particularly valuable lever for improving teachers’ classroom practice and student outcomes (Allen, Pianta, Gregory, Mikami, & Lun, 2011; Hsieh, Hemmeter, McCollum & Ostrosky, 2009). However, the quality of
coaching can be variable (Poglinco & Bach, 2004; Walpole, McKenna, Uribe-Zarain, & Lamitina, 2010), and little is known about the factors affecting the teacher-coach relationship and the characteristics that enable coaches to be most effective in optimizing teacher capacity (Coburn & Woulfin, 2012; Neuman & Cunningham, 2009; Sheridan, Edwards, Marvin & Knoche, 2009). Exploring the coaching process will broaden our understanding of how coaches can be successful in influencing teaching quality, and, in turn, student achievement in early childhood.

The current study addresses this gap and expands the knowledge base of coaching in early childhood education by focusing on the question of how an instructional coach constructs relationships with early childhood educators to support changes in teaching; and additionally, how the relationships between a coach and individual teachers vary, and how this variation informs the impact of such coaching. Using an ethnographic approach, this research aims to address these questions through fieldwork in two early education and care centers in a northeastern city in the United States. The study took place over a period of three months, using participant observation and interviews to explore the relationships between one instructional coach/professional learning community facilitator and twelve early educators participating in the R² professional development initiative, aimed at enhancing early childhood educators’ professional knowledge and practice in order to create classroom environments optimal for building children’s language, literacy, and social-emotional skills. Understanding how educators and coaches build and sustain relationships, and how practitioners apply learning from such relationships to practice, is key to understanding how and why coaching may be a promising form of professional development for early childhood educators.
Literature Review

Impact of early childhood educational experiences

A robust evidence base has established the impact of early childhood educational experiences on student achievement. This literature shows that high-quality early childhood education has both short- and long-term effects on student outcomes (e.g., Barnett, 1995; Barnett, 2013). For example, students attending early childhood programs that employ research-based best practices (e.g., systematic and individualized teaching, small group learning) are more likely to experience substantial gains in cognition, achievement, and social-emotional development than their counterparts who either attend poor quality early childhood programs or do not have schooling prior to kindergarten (for a review see Barnett, 2013; Center for Public Education, 2007). Furthermore, children enrolled in high-quality early childhood programs are less likely to repeat grades and to be found eligible for special education, and are more likely to graduate from high school; these findings are particularly substantial for disadvantaged children (Barnett, 2013; Center for Public Education, 2007). Of particular interest is the finding that high quality preschool can improve school readiness, regardless of childhood experiences prior to preschool (Tabors, Snow, & Dickinson, 2001). This finding indicates that access to high quality early childhood programs with robust curricula and properly trained teachers can adequately prepare all students for the demands of American schooling—and reinforces the need for universally rigorous early schooling experiences.

Relatedly, there is evidence to suggest that teachers play a central role in generating high-quality early childhood experiences. A number of studies indicate that teacher efficacy is a strong predictor of children’s school-readiness and subsequent achievement (Neuman & Cunningham, 2009; Nye et al., 2004; RAND, 2012; Rivkin, Hanushek & Kain, 2005), but that
instruction is variable within and across programs and settings, with few teachers demonstrating best practices (Howes et al. 2008; Justice, Mashburn, Hamre, & Pianta 2008). This is particularly true the case in early childhood settings serving disadvantaged students, where there is often incongruity between the skills required for optimal classroom practices and teachers’ preparation (Max & Glazerman, 2014). Addressing teacher quality is thus paramount to improving the overall quality of early childhood education.

**Instructional coaching as a lever for improvement**

As noted above, instructional coaching—conceptualized here as a strategy for implementing a professional support system for teachers that includes (a) building knowledge of pedagogical and developmental theory, (b) observing instructional modeling, (c) engaging in practice, and (d) receiving constructive critique—may be a particularly powerful means for enhancing teacher capacity. The literature identifies professional development as critical to improving the quality of early childhood experiences afforded to children (Neuman & Cunningham, 2009; Sheridan et al., 2009), and in some cases has been recommended as the primary professional development approach for improvement efforts (Walpole & Meyer, 2008 as cited in Hsieh et al., 2009).

The literature on coaching dates back over thirty years, when Joyce and Showers (1982) suggested that ongoing support and encouragement—in the form of coaching—are essential to enhancing teacher practice (as cited in Guskey, 1986). Today’s literature validates the relevance of this idea; several studies indicate that teachers who receive coaching are more likely to enact and apply desired teaching practices appropriately than are teachers receiving traditional forms of professional development (although the substance of the programs varies, making it potentially difficult to disaggregate the effects of the content of professional development and its
form) (Allen et al., 2011; Hsieh, et al., 2009; Neuman & Cunningham, 2009; Rudd, Lambert, Satterwhite, & Smith, 2009; Wei, Darling-Hammond, Andree, Richardson & Orphanos, 2009). In fact, the work of Coburn and Woulfin (2012) on the role of coaches in mediating the relationship between Reading First policy and classroom practice suggests that teachers are more likely to make substantial changes in their classroom practice when prompted by a coach than by other sources. Furthermore, instructional coaching may also be a powerful tool for increasing teachers’ self-efficacy for improving and implementing new classroom practices (Tschannen-Moran & McMaster, 2009).

Of particular interest, given the focus of the present study, are the findings from Neuman and Cunningham’s (2009) randomized controlled trial evaluating the impact of professional development on teacher knowledge and early language and literacy practices in 291 center- and home-based care settings. Professional development was delivered either as a 45-hour course in language and literacy on its own, or with an additional yearlong coaching intervention. The results demonstrated that there were statistically significant improvements in practices for teachers who participated in the coursework plus coaching condition, leading the authors to conclude that coaching may be a quality investment in early childhood professional development (Neuman & Cunningham, 2009). In a follow-up study using a similar design, Neuman and Wright (2010) confirmed the benefits of coaching as distinct from that of professional development coursework. Neuman and Wright disaggregated the effects of coaching and coursework, finding that teachers who received only coaching made statistically significant improvements in teaching practices, while those who partook only in coursework did not. These results led the researchers to conclude that coaching can be an effective form of professional development for early childhood educators (Neuman & Wright, 2010). But neither study clarifies
why it is that coaching may be constructive; therefore, the proposed study aims to explore mechanisms and characteristics of the teacher-coach relationship that may enable the coaching model to be effective.

In addition to improving teacher practices, the literature shows that coaching is related to gains in student achievement (Allen, Pianta, Gregory, Mikami, & Lun, 2011; Biancarosa, Bryk, & Dexter, 2010; Lockwood, McCombs, & Marsh, 2010; Wei et al., 2009). These gains may be most substantial for students in low-performing schools, particularly when coaching structures are sustained beyond a single school year (Lockwood, McCombs, & Marsh, 2010). In their randomized controlled trial conducted with 2,237 students in 78 schools, Allen et al. (2011) investigated the efficacy of My Teaching Partner—Secondary (MTP-S), a web-mediated approach to improving teacher quality through workshop-based training, classroom observations, and a year of personalized coaching. Using hierarchical linear modeling, the researchers found that MTP-S increased student engagement and produced substantial gains in student achievement, measured with state-issued standardized achievement assessments, the year following implementation. Similarly, in examining the Literacy Collaborative reform model, Biancarosa, Bryk, and Dexter (2010) found substantial effects of one-on-one coaching of teachers on student learning. Using a hierarchical, crossed-level, value-added effects model, the researchers found that, during their four-year longitudinal study, children in kindergarten through grade two experienced increasing and persistent improvements in literacy under the Literacy Collaborative.

While the proposed study does not address student outcomes directly, these findings are relevant in that they reinforce the notion that instructional coaching can affect student achievement by way of improving pedagogical rigor. To our knowledge, there have been few qualitative studies examining the features of successful coaching relationships (e.g., Ippolito,
2010); thus, the present study aims to expand on the abovementioned findings by utilizing ethnographic methods to examine how development of the teacher-coach relationship informs early childhood classroom practices that may promote student achievement.

**Understanding coaching mechanisms**

Knowing that instructional coaching may be an effective means to increase early educator capacity and affect student outcomes, it is important to also understand the features of the teacher-coach relationship that foster such growth. None of the studies reviewed above aimed to explore this scientifically, nor did they report findings on the mechanisms of the coaching relationship. In addition, findings regarding the characteristics of effective instructional coaching from the last three decades are inconsistent (Guskey, 2003); yet, certain themes for best practices do appear in the empirical literature including the following: instructional coaching should be focused on enhancing teachers’ content and pedagogical knowledge, grounded in data that link instructional practice with improved student outcomes, and sustained over time (Guskey, 2003; Hsieh, et al., 2009; Klingner, 2004); it is also critical that instructional coaches have pedagogical expertise (Crandall, 1983) that is employed in an interactive, hands-on manner within classrooms and used to provide technical feedback on and support with practice (Guskey, 1986; Hseih et al., 2009; Joyce & Showers, 1982; Klingner, 2004). Moreover, coaching experts have suggested that for the cognitive aspects of instructional coaching to be addressed effectively, instructional coaches must establish partnerships with collaborating teachers that are based in equity, choice, and open dialogue, and that are personalized and flexible enough to meet the needs of diverse contexts, teachers, and students (Guskey, 1986; Klingner, 2004; Knight, 2007; Joyce & Showers, 1982).
In summary, although it is clear that coaching offers the opportunity to improve the early childhood classroom experiences and outcomes of children through strengthening teachers’ skills, pedagogy, and self-efficacy, research is needed to more deeply explore the forms, processes, and effects of coaching (Sheridan et al., 2009). This is especially important given that the outcomes of coaching (i.e., effects on teacher capacity and student outcomes) are variable (Poglinco & Bach, 2004; Walpole, McKenna, Uribe-Zarain, & Lamitina, 2010). Research that is focused on the characteristics of and conditions that enable coaches to be most effective in eliciting desired qualities of practitioners (Neuman & Cunningham, 2009; Sheridan et al., 2009; Wei et al., 2009) and the coaching behaviors that lead to growth and learning among early childhood practitioners (Sheridan et al., 2009) would usefully expand the field. These data can serve as an empirical foundation for planning and implementing rigorous early childhood education programs that increase school readiness for all children. The current ethnographic study expands upon and fills a gap in the findings reviewed above by investigating how instructional coaching assists early childhood practitioners in enhancing their pedagogy. This study intends to complement the quantitative focus of the reviewed research on the efficacy of coaching with a qualitative exploration of what makes coaching relationships successful and educative for practitioners and their students.

**Research Questions and Design**

The complex task of being a coach includes both cognitive and social aspects. In the current study, the social, relationship-building aspect is the focus, as coaching is being studied within a context in which the cognitive side is addressed in the larger project. The principal questions guiding this research are as follows: How do early childhood educators perceive
instructional coaching, with regard to its usefulness for, applicability to, and impact on pedagogical knowledge, goals, and practice? Additionally, what do they report as the elements of these relationships that are most effective in driving them to strive to advance their practice? I took an ethnographic approach to conducting this study in order to holistically and inductively collect and analyze data regarding the practices, thoughts, and behaviors of early childhood educators (Fetterman, 1998) as they interacted with a professional learning community (PLC) facilitator and an instructional coach (who also served as co-PLC facilitator). In this study, data were collected through participant observation and semi-structured interviews with 12 early childhood teachers in one Head Start and one Salvation Army Early Learning Center in a northeastern city in the United States. Semi-structured interviews were also conducted with the PLC facilitator and instructional coach.

**Site and Sample**

The current research took place as part of the Rigorous and Regulated (R²) project, led by Nonie K. Lesaux and Stephanie M. Jones (Principal Investigators) at the Harvard Graduate School of Education. The R² project’s foundational theories align with the current study, and its model provides the opportunity to explore an established instructional coaching relationship as it was built on the logic that student success rests on the quality of educator practice. The overall initiative was designed to enhance early childhood educators’ self-regulatory strategies in order to create classroom environments optimal for building children’s language, literacy, and social-emotional skills. The initiative focused on developing educators’ professional knowledge and practice through a content-based 36-week set of modules that included weekly one-hour professional learning community (PLC) workshops led by two facilitators, one of whom also
served as instructional coach for participating teachers, as well as weekly classroom-based coaching and biweekly individual meetings.

PLC sessions were part of a long-term incremental professional development plan guided by learning objectives designed to foster development of R² competencies. Sessions were interactive, based on discussion and dialogue, and anchored in meaningful case examples. Each PLC was situated in a five-part framework in which educators collaboratively reflected on and identified areas of strengths and challenge, built knowledge about strategies to address challenges, planned how to incorporate new strategies, and implemented plans in classrooms. Coaching, led by one of the PLC facilitators, provided a bridge between group-based sessions and classroom practice through ongoing observation and hands-on participation in the classroom. Scaffolding, modeling, and individualized, reflective feedback were based on classroom visits and shared documents, and were anchored in a non-judgmental stance and consistent and frequent meetings (Lesaux, Jones, Givens-Rolland, Harris, & Kane, 2014). R² was implemented during the 2013–2015 academic years with 12 teachers in one Head Start and one Salvation Army Early Learning Center serving children from three to five years of age in a northeastern city in the United States (Lesaux, et al., 2014).

Participants. This study was conducted in these same early childhood education centers with those 12 teachers and one instructional coach who also served as PLC facilitator, as well as the additional PLC facilitator, who participated in the R² program, seven at Head Start and five at the Salvation Army Early Learning Center. Among the twelve participants, years employed in the field of early childhood education ranged from one-and-a-half to twenty, with an average of 12.96 years and mode of 17 years. Of the twelve participants, five described their current position as “teacher,” three as “lead teacher,” three as “assistant teacher,” and one as “co-teacher;”
years spent in that current position ranged from one to 20, with an average of 9.79 years. Participants had varying levels of post-secondary education completion: four had some undergraduate or associate’s coursework completed; three held associate’s degrees; four had earned a bachelor’s degree; one held a master’s in social work. Of those who had completed at least an associate’s degree, ten had a degree in or related to early childhood, and, at the time of the study, all of the teachers were certified in early childhood education.

All participants identified as female; seven identified as Black, one as Central American, two as Latina, one as Dominican (from Dominica), and one as Cape Verdean, with countries of birth including the United States and Puerto Rico, Jamaica, Belize, the Dominican Republic, Haiti, Ethiopia, and Cape Verde. Primary languages spoken included English, Spanish, Haitian Creole, Amharic, and Portuguese.

**PLC facilitators/coach.** Both the coach and PLC facilitator were employees of the large research institution responsible for designing and implementing the R² initiative and associated coaching, and had two and a half years of experience in the role as coach and PLC facilitator at the two early childhood centers as part of the R² initiative. By way of background, the coach had 24 years of experience in the field of early childhood education, a bachelor’s degree in human development and early education, and was licensed in early childhood education, as well as certified as a lead teacher for preschool, infants, and toddlers and director-2 qualified. The PLC facilitator had 10 years of experience in the field of education, a master’s degree in education with a focus in language and literacy, and was licensed in elementary education and as a reading specialist. Both the coach and PLC facilitator identify as White, speak English as their primary language, and were born in the United States.

**Data collection**
Observational and interview data were collected over a period spanning three months during the spring of 2015.

**Content Analysis.** Prior to beginning participant observation and interviews, I conducted a content analysis of coach-completed coaching logs for the participating teachers. The purpose of the content analysis was to determine the extent to which participating teachers were attempting to implement new strategies, as discussed during the PLC workshops and coaching sessions.

**Participant Observation.** Immersion in the culture of the centers via participant observation facilitated my ability to accurately and comprehensively describe the practices, thoughts, and behaviors associated with instructional coaching (Fetterman, 1998). I attended workshops and coaching sessions, and wrote daily field notes/memos detailing the social and interactional processes of instructional coaching, as well as its impact on pedagogy at the two centers. In writing these field notes, I gave special attention to the expressed meanings and concerns of the individual participants (Emerson, Fretz & Shaw, 1995).

**Interviews.** I conducted semi-structured interviews to collect baseline and demographic information about participants (e.g., years teaching, experiences with coaching), and also to ask questions about and address specific hypotheses regarding the coaching relationship (Fetterman, 1998). Interview questions elicited participants’ thoughts and perceptions of the coaching model (e.g., *Tell me about your experience with this program. How did this experience compare to times when other people have supported you in your classroom?*), as well as about the shared values in the early childhood community that informed behavior in the teacher-coach relationship (e.g., *Were the strategies taught in the program different from your regular teaching strategies?*). The interview was also guided by a series of questions regarding early educator
experience with the R² program and strategies (e.g., *Which strategies did you find most/least useful*?), as well as with the professional development and support components offered (e.g., *What about the workshops and coaching was most helpful to you? What do you wish had been different*?). The interview concluded with a series of four scenarios representing interactions with a hypothetical coach (see Appendix 1).

**Data analysis**

In pursuit of a derived etic approach to data collection and analysis (Berry, 1999), I considered the data both in light of the findings from quantitative research on instructional coaching, as well as the themes about how participants perceived the instructional coaching relationship and its most valuable features. Researchers have documented that effective coaches possess content expertise and experience, attitudes conducive to learning, cognitive skills for structuring the learning environment, and personal qualities necessary for relationship-building (Nettles, 1992). Taking a constructivist approach I sought to identify and then understand the specifics and examples of such positive attributes as reported by the early childhood educators themselves (Charmaz, 2000, 2006).

I audio recorded each interview and then had all of them professionally transcribed. I systematically employed techniques proposed by Boyatzis (1998) to analyze the data, beginning with inductive development of codes by first reading hard copies of all of transcripts, summarizing each piece of data in the margins. After reducing the raw information, I identified recurring patterns and themes, and subsequently created 27 codes and subcodes (see Appendix 2). I then uploaded all transcripts and my observational field notes to NVivo, a qualitative data analysis software program, and performed line-by-line coding for both. Additionally, I produced eleven memos pertaining to the themes identified in coding.
Threats to validity/Limitations

The present study has the following threats to the validity of its findings: the authenticity with which participants and their views are represented, researcher bias and participant reactivity, and generalizability. I discuss each of these in turn. To address concerns regarding the authenticity of data—and essential to data collection and interpretation processes—it is critical to use rich data to paint an accurate and comprehensive picture of study participants and their relationships (Maxwell, 2012). Therefore, in order to check and confirm my observations and inferences, I collected detailed and varied data by maintaining a sustained presence at the research site and by conducting repeated observations and interviews (Maxwell, 2012).

Researcher bias also poses a threat to validity, in that I entered the current study with my own views and notions of coaching in early childhood, which may have had an impact on the ways in which I collected and interpreted data. To reduce researcher bias, I approached the research in a constructivist manner; data collection, analysis, and validation occurred in concert with participants, understanding that the research is unique to the specific research site and context (Charmaz, 2000). In addition, I maintained reflexivity by being mindful of how my presence affected the participants and therefore the inferences that I was able to draw (Maxwell, 2012). I further aimed to eliminate bias by triangulating data across a range of individuals and by searching for and rigorously studying discrepant data and negative cases (Fetterman, 1998; Maxwell, 2012).

The third potential threat to validity is generalizability. The conclusions drawn from this study cannot be automatically generalized to other contexts, as they are specific to the unique setting of and participants in the R². Furthermore, due to the small number of participants in this study (n=12), from just two centers, external generalizations are necessarily limited. This
apparent lack of external validity is an important limitation, and I am therefore cautious when reporting findings and implications. In addition, it is important to note that the teacher-coach relationship explored in this study is not characteristic of those found in early childhood education centers, as the coach in question is from an outside organization, as opposed to being assigned internally; this unusual situation may further limit the generalizability of the present study’s findings. Even so, precautions, detailed above, have been taken in attempts to increase internal validity so that inferences might be drawn regarding coaching in the two early childhood centers.

Results

This study explored how early childhood educators perceive instructional coaching, with regard to its usefulness for, applicability to, and impact on pedagogical knowledge, goals, and practice. In addition, I investigated what early educators report to be the elements of these coaching relationships that are most salient in driving them to strive to advance their practice. The findings from this inquiry indicate that participating early educators view the instructional coach as both a pedagogical and emotional resource who promotes visible improvements in classroom practice, and that the provision of individualized support in a safe environment is foundational to such advancement in practice.

Instructional coach as pedagogical and emotional resource

Pedagogical supports. Teachers in these two early childhood centers reported viewing instructional coaching as a means by which to gain pedagogical and emotional support in the classroom. Pedagogical support, as designed for the R² initiative, came in the form of observation and feedback on practice, helping to problem-solve in the moment, and offering
needed materials and resources. During their interviews, teachers consistently cited the coach’s engagement with their classroom practice as one of the most helpful aspects of the coaching relationship. One teacher noted, “If you have difficulty, that's when I would have to ask [the coach] maybe to come in, to observe because she used to come in the classroom and she would like just give pointers.” Teachers found that the coach’s presence in the classroom also translated into a cycle of constructive observation and feedback, which promoted growth in practice. This hands-on approach “…always leaves you to think about [your practice]. She gives you an idea and asks you how it's going, keeping up and stuff like that, checking up on you. [She] always check[s] up.” Ultimately, coaching was also the means by which teachers were able to reflect on their practice; several noted that being prompted to think about what was or was not working in the classroom gave them a chance to consider how they might improve.

Interestingly enough, though, in interviews teachers noted that the actual pedagogy promoted by the coach was not novel to them; rather, the coaching relationship offered them the opportunity to better understand how to apply that which was learned previously. Representative of what many teachers noted, one said,

So, it's—we know most of the things that were already taught. I feel like it's just that we didn't know different terminologies for it and the influences of it. So, you know, you may have the background but not knowing exactly how one would use it.

And another noted, ”I learned a lot of stuff that I already do, but it's just a different way of doing it, like a different technique." In the end, the repetition and application of learning through instructional coaching was additive and reinforcing of best practices for the educators, pushing them to improve. This improvement could be seen in multiple forms—aiding teachers to be
consistent in their practice; making teaching techniques more accessible for children; applying educational theory and research to practice. One teacher commented:

[The coaching] kind of add to it…[the] things that we always did but sometimes we take it for granted. Sometimes we don't do it as much, and then doing a program like this, they really make us think that what we do, and the good things, techniques that we do, we have to keep doing it every day. So this is good, too, so they can remind us to continue, continue no matter what.

The early childhood educators also noted that the coach not only offered support with pedagogy, but also provided literal “hands-on” support with students. Teachers perceived this as “[dedication] to the needs of the teachers and the children.” One presented the following example:

Like help me with the kids. If I'm about to get beat up, try to take that kid for a walk or something. You know what I mean? Don't leave me to deal with it because, you want, because it's my job, but sometimes, you know, you feel like that, you want to walk out the door. But you need somebody to just stand there with you or just to take over while you go for a walk and then come back. Yeah. That's always the biggest part.

Overall, wishes for hands-on support appeared to be in reaction, in part, to past professional development relationships that have felt evaluative; teachers noted that they wanted a coach to “not be evaluative. Be a team. Be like it's ‘I'm here to help you. I'm not here to evaluate you.’”

**Prerequisites for coaching support.** Teachers receiving coaching noted that, in order to support pedagogy effectively in the ways outlined above, coaches needed to have teaching experience and a willingness to be hands-on. Time and again teachers underscored classroom experience as one of the most vital prerequisites for being a successful instructional coach. It
seems that this requirement stems from both cognitive and social considerations; teachers wanted a coach to carry with her the knowledge necessary to help the teachers and students and to be able to empathize with the early educator experience. Among the teachers that cited “experience,” one said,

But whoever the coach is, you want to have a coach that had that experience, being a teacher, knowing how that feels to be in the classroom or knowing what you deal with. You don't want to bring nobody in there never taught before, because they don't know how you feel. They don't know what the child was going through.

Another teacher continued with this point, remarking that the best coach was “a person with knowledge behind early childhood education…[and] who has life experience, not just the theory on the book itself.” Proof of instructional legitimacy may well be connected to teachers’ consistent requests for a coach who would offer help in the classroom, as demonstrated above.

**Relational aspects of coaching.** Despite the impression that the coaching relationship was focused largely on pedagogy, when asked what instructional coaching offered them that helped them to improve their practice, teachers also overwhelmingly cited the more relational supports offered through coaching—particularly relative to other professional relationships and assistance. Anticipating that the interaction was going to be predictably positive between the teacher and coach was motivation in and of itself:

So, anytime that she comes to talk to me, at least I know I would come out happy, not frustrated…. So sometimes I feel like my supervisors would nag and say, ‘Oh, you're not doing this. You're not doing that.’ Whereas [the coach], when she comes, it would be positive at every aspect. It's like, ‘No, don't doubt yourself,’ like trying to bring you up. And I feel that that's one thing that the supervisors here lack.
Additionally, knowing that the coach would be a reliable support and presence was also encouraging in a way that teachers had seldom experienced in other professional development programs:

-Honestly, just being here when they say they're going to be here. A lot of times, these programs that our boss finds, they say they're going to come and then they don't come. Or if they're supposed to do like a four-week series, we'll see them in one week and then the last week, so very inconsistent with coming. Even just coming into the classroom, observing, you know, staying out of our way, not criticizing or critiquing too much what we were doing, especially not in front of the kids, some of the programs did that, you know. If the kids came to them, they would direct them to go play. They would speak friendly to them and then direct them to go back to doing what they were doing, opposed to letting them climb all over them and, you know, just stay unfocused.

These findings suggest that while teachers see instructional coaching as an opportunity to gain content knowledge and improve pedagogical practice, they also acknowledge—and perhaps emphasize—the importance of the relational support it offers.

**Coaching can lead to improvements in practice, classroom environment, and professional communication**

With both pedagogical and relational aspects of coaching being addressed, coaching was perceived as leading to improvements in practice, classroom environment, and professional communication. The early childhood educators expressed the many ways in which they saw instructional coaching as applicable and relevant to their teaching, and saw links between the coaching and what they described as changes in their classroom practice and culture. In interviews, teachers noted that, over the course of the R² initiative and coaching relationship,
they were recognizing and applying best practices more often; they also reported being more attuned to and better able to attend to students’ needs and emotions because of increased interest in and awareness of student needs. One teacher said, "I think [I’m] just getting down to them and figuring out how they like to do some things, you know… I'm open to listening to what they have to say now." The PLC facilitator and coach also noted changes in participants’ practice, specifically with regard to the implementation of R²-related skills. When asked whether she, too, noticed changes in participants’ practice, the PLC facilitator agreed that she had seen increased use of best practices in reaction to the R² initiative and coaching:

We were talking at the beginning about the importance of praising kids. And before we had brought up praising, all the teachers at one point or another were looking into their classrooms saying like, "Jamie, be quiet," yelling into the classroom with a very harsh tone. And then we're talking about praise and how like if you praise the children who are following directions and like literally two minutes later, one of the teachers would just yell, Yvena, then looks into her classroom. She says, I'm totally making up these names, "Maria, good job. You're lying on your cot. Good job." So some of them would be quick like that. They would just see the chance - and it was always in the way they would talk about things. I wasn't seeing them in the classroom, so it would be - progress to me was the way they talked about kids or themselves or, I guess, interactions during a meeting.

Not only did teachers report that their practice improved over the course of PLC workshops and coaching sessions during the R² intervention, but they also reported that, in addition, they advanced their social competencies. While the aim of the instructional coaching was not directly related to improving such skills, teachers’ reported feeling more capable of communicating with parents, practicing patience with all those in the early education centers,
and recognizing the need for and performing self-care. Furthermore, they attributed these changes to the $R^2$ initiative. Many teachers observed increases in levels of professionalism in the classroom, both in their own preparedness, but also in their approaches to working with young children. For example, one teacher mentioned:

I'm doing lesson plans now, where so I wasn't doing them before. I do teaching strategies or go online and put things in where I wasn't doing that before either. Because I wasn't taught to do it. So I've grown a lot. I'm more professional than I was then.

The coach and PLC facilitator commented that they saw these changes, as well; the PLC facilitator said, “So it's these relational skills that seemed to somewhat intangibly improve.” The coach characterized this as a “professional lens change,” noting that the teachers began to “see themselves as a more competent teacher and more confident in what they were doing.”

This progress in teacher practice and mindset (reportedly because of coaching) was also thought to translate into changes in student behavior and skills. According to the teachers, over the course of the coaching relationship, students appeared more open with one another and engaged each other and the teachers in conversation more frequently. Teachers also reported that students worked more cooperatively, and the classroom became more coordinated and harmonious. One teacher explained, "They were communicating with me better, communicating with each other, better by using words, asking questions during story time, able to use everything we talked to them such as I'm sad, I'm happy, I'm mad, or understanding things much, much better, I got that." The alignment between teacher and student development not only appeared validating for the educators, but also might have been a factor motivating their persistence in trying new pedagogical strategies promoted by the coach.

**An individualized, safe environment**
Of all the potential supports that an instructional coach can provide, teachers identified individualized support, cultivating a safe space for learning, and promoting teacher voice as among the most important. Teachers highlighted the fact that it was the way in which this coach appeared to be attuned to individual early educator needs—not simply the one-to-one format—that made the coaching relationship impactful. A teacher expressed the benefit of this approach:

Like I just say, it's like they work with you as an individual. That's why for me, it's awesome, and I wish it would be long - a whole year because they give you a chance to go and reflect how you are as a teacher, and then they let you think about what you are good with and what you are bad with, and then you try to do your best.

Part of working with individuals is also acknowledging that everyone might be different. Based on her positive experience with instructional coaching in R², one teacher reported that she now had certain expectations for what a future coach might be, including being “open to get to understand everybody, that everybody might teach differently…. They force everything on you the way how they see it, but they don't give you the chance to grow, like give you the opportunity to, you know, try to do stuff on your own.”

In addition to offering individualized support, an emerging theme from the interviews was that the instructional coach was able to cultivate a safe space for learning and to promote the development and maintenance of teacher voice. That is, teachers consistently noted that “in the center, we feel like we don't have a voice. And I felt like [the coach and PLC facilitator] will [be that] for us. So I feel like they gave us the avenue to speak and have our feelings and stuff…. [W]e haven't had anybody be our voice the way they were our voice.” In addition to offering the teachers opportunities to have a voice, the coaches also offered the opportunity to be listened to and understood. One teacher noted,
They listened to us, and they understood where our frustrations were coming from, where in the past, it wasn't understood. So I think that, you know, we were able to express our needs and our wants and things we didn't like or things—it was always—she always gave us a voice. We always can speak it out. So they were very pro teachers, and we really appreciated that.

Ultimately, the provision of voice appeared to contribute to the early educators feeling “comfortable” and “safe” with the coaches and among their peers. Many teachers voiced appreciation for the opportunity to “vent” and be honest about their daily frustrations and disappointments. And this worked because “…the whole thing was that it was a place where you felt safe to talk because sometimes you bring up stuff in meetings, formal meeting settings with the other staff and then you feel like you're judged because they don't identify. But because we built a community, we felt safe." Another teacher aptly noted that feelings of security also led to problem solving: "...[I]t was a safe environment so we'd use that opportunity to talk about issues that may be happening in the program and where we could see, we say improve. If we could not change it, what could we do to relieve ourselves the stress?" In the end, the safe space for learning laid the foundation for all subsequent openness to learning and attempts at instructional improvement, making it the foundation of the instructional coaching relationship.

In addition to the specific supports identified above, in interviews teachers also asserted wanting a coach with an open, kind, and supportive mindset. The educators used many different terms to describe this mindset, and ones that surfaced multiple times included “reliable,” “trustworthy,” “patient,” and “non-judgmental.” When asked what they might now look for in a future coach after having experienced instructional coaching through R², one teacher noted that she would want a coach that “is supportive, very encouraging to the teachers, opened-minded,
not being judgmental,” while another requested “a person who's kind [and] able to listen.” A third teacher aligned this mindset with exceptional “communication skills.” Overall, it is interesting to note that while teachers expressed the desire for assistance in the classroom, they overwhelmingly described the ideal coach’s relational capabilities, as opposed to the cognitive skills and support that she might bring to the position. One might infer that the teacher-coach relationship in R² impacted the teachers’ perceptions of who an instructional-coach could be and what she could provide cooperating teachers.

**Discussion**

This study was designed to explore, using an ethnographic approach, how early childhood educators perceive instructional coaching, with regard to its usefulness for, applicability to, and impact on pedagogical knowledge, goals, and practice. Largely through interviews I investigated which elements of the coaching relationship early educators report as most salient in driving them to strive to advance their practice. The field of early childhood education is turning to instructional coaching as a promising lever for increasing teacher capacity and student achievement, but we know little about the characteristics of the instructional coach as well as the features of the teacher-coach relationship that make it impactful. This study has surfaced several important findings.

First, participating early educators found consistent and individualized observation of and feedback on practice, support with students, and access to materials and resources from the instructional coach critical to enhancing pedagogical knowledge and implementing any suggested teaching strategies; however, teachers overwhelmingly cited the social-emotional supports offered through coaching as having the greatest impact on pedagogical goals and
practice. According to teachers, the most significant of these supports included cultivating a safe space where they could express themselves. Within this safe space, practitioners felt able to consider and strive toward improving instructional practices and efficacy.

Consistent with research investigating high quality instructional coaching relationships in elementary settings, this study finds that the practices and expertise of the coach impact her perceived efficacy in early childhood settings as well. Specifically, the current study aligns with the extant literature in acknowledging that instructional coaching practice must be hands-on, consistent in providing observation and feedback, and sustained over time (Guskey, 2003; Hsieh, et al., 2009; Klingner, 2004; Joyce & Showers, 1982). Furthermore, data collected in this study underscore previous research findings that the aims of coaching are advanced when instructional supports are individualized and responsive to contexts and persons (Guskey, 1986; Klingner, 2004; Knight, 2007; Joyce & Showers, 1982), and extend these findings from the elementary and secondary settings to early childhood. In conjunction with such methods, instructional coaches gain credibility and build practitioner trust by demonstrating pedagogical expertise (Crandall, 1983); early childhood educators in this study further stipulated that such expertise should include a combination of theoretical knowledge and years of teaching experience. Taken together, these findings affirm that the quality of instructional coaching is determined by educators using indicators of both their methodology and knowledge.

In addition, consistent with prior research and theory, I found that the relational aspects of instructional coaching are vital to its effectiveness. Knight (2007) promotes the establishment of emotional connection as the foundation for productive early educator-coach partnerships; the findings from the current research highlight that creating safe spaces for teachers to find and express their individual and collective voices is particularly crucial to investment in and
commitment to the instructional coaching relationship. Existing research suggests that beyond enabling open dialogue and reflection on practice, instructional coaching can and should grow a community of vocal practitioners (Guskey, 2003; Hsieh et al., 2009; Klingner, 2004); when teachers regularly discuss their experiences and collectively seek solutions, they develop a culture of collaboration (Little, 1981). In the current study, teachers deeply valued both one-on-one time with the coach and the opportunity to learn about, empathize with, and improve instruction among peers. Because of the overall perceived benefits of the coaching relationship—specifically the social-emotional aspects—teachers reported noticeable improvements in pedagogical practice, early educator self-regulation, and classroom climate.

Despite the convergence between findings of the current study and prior work, this research—a preliminary study of the nature of coaching relationships in the early education setting—illuminates both disparities in and limitations of the extant literature. While research has confirmed that high-quality professional development programs focus on enhancing teachers’ content and pedagogical knowledge and use data to link instructional practice to improved student outcomes (Guskey, 2003; Klingner, 2004), early educators in this study did not identify these aspects of the coaching relationship as most critical to its success or to the improvement of classroom practice. Granted, the means used in the instructional coaching relationship depend fundamentally on the ends to be achieved; however, no matter the aims, it appears key that, in order to be motivating for educators, the relational aspects of the relationship must coincide with the cognitive ones. That is, the foundation for advancement of pedagogy is laid in the individualized support and safety that the instructional coach cultivates with collaborating teachers. Therefore, the findings of this study extend the current literature by demonstrating that certain coaching qualities and social practices may be particularly important for motivating
teachers to invest in the instructional coaching relationship and consequently further their practice.

**Conclusions & Implications**

At many levels, this research has the potential to open a new dialogue about how to inform the design of coaching initiatives, which are growing in popularity as a professional development tool in early childhood. Findings from this research further demonstrate that the value of the professional development relationship fundamentally resides in the coach possessing certain qualities, including ample classroom and teaching experience, a willingness to be hands-on, and a positive mindset. The absence of such characteristics may diminish the impact of instructional coaching on early childhood instructional practice.

The results of this ethnographic study provide key insights into how early childhood educators and their mentors navigate coaching structures and relationships in order to enhance classroom practice. For researchers, this study has the potential to fill a gap in the literature related to effective practices in early childhood coaching relationships, providing a starting point for future research in this area. In addition, the features of coaching identified as productive in the current context might be looked for elsewhere or even promoted in future experimental studies. Since Head Start and other federally funded early childhood programs mandate coaching, understanding how to most effectively train coaches to positively impact pedagogy in the early childhood setting is particularly important for policymakers. Specifically, subject to further development and replication, results of this study could have a central role in determining important topics for coach training and professional development, as well as themes for teacher-coaching sessions. Finally, this study can help early childhood educators consider the role of
coaching in improving classroom practices, and provide guidance in optimizing the relationship with a coach.
References


Appendix 1

R² Teacher Exit Interview/Coaching Study Teacher Interview Protocol
Spring 2015: Adapted by Rebecca Blazar Lebowitz

Interviewer’s Role
Thanks for taking the time to talk with me. You just participated in a series of monthly workshops and classroom coaching with Robin and Julie. We are interested in understanding your experiences with this program, and getting your honest opinion, in order to make it better for next time, when we will work with more teachers.

Address confidentiality
These interviews are confidential. Nothing you say will be shared with any staff or other teachers. The only information we will report and focus on is when the same idea or opinion is shared by almost everyone or everyone. Your name will never be in a report.

Audiotaping
I would like to audiotape our conversation if you’ll permit it, so I can focus on the conversation rather than transcribe it while you’re talking, and so I don’t make mistakes when I am interpreting it. The recording is not shared with anyone beyond our research team. Would this be ok?

If we get to the end of the interview and there’s something we haven’t covered that you think is important, please let me know and we’ll have time to talk about it then.

GO-TO PROMPTS:
- Tell me more about that.
- What do you mean by...
- Why...?

A. Demographic Survey

So first I would just like to get a little bit of information about your professional background so we can understand the different teachers in the program.

This survey is confidential. Nothing you say will be shared with any staff or other teachers. The purpose of this survey is to get information about early childhood teachers.

B. Experience with the Program/Strategies

- Tell me about your experience with this program. What did you think about it?
- How was this program different from your past professional development experiences, if it was different?
- Were the strategies taught in the program different from your regular teaching strategies? If yes: in what ways?
- What strategies did you find the most useful? Why?
- What strategies did you find most the least useful? Why?
- How did people who work with you influence your use of the strategies?
  o (co-teachers, supervisors/directors, PLC members)

C. Experience with the R² Professional Development & Support Components

I’d like to better understand your experiences in the workshops and with coaching.

- What about the workshops and coaching was most helpful to you?
- What do you wish had been different?
  o What would you recommend Robin and/or Julie change?
- Since the beginning of the year, what changes, if any, did you notice in your teaching?
  o What changes, if any, did you notice in your students?
- Tell me about a typical meeting with Robin.
  o (if not already answered here: What did you talk about during these meetings?)
- Did your meetings change over the two years? In what ways?
- How did this experience compare to times when other people have supported you in your classroom?

D. Scenarios

Now that you’ve completed the program, I also want to know more about what you might do in certain coaching situations. So, in this final set of questions, I am going to present some scenarios about a teacher, Monica, who is working with her coach, Carla. After we read about Monica and her coach Carla, I’ll ask what you might do if you were Monica.

1. Monica is meeting with Carla. Carla is making suggestions for strategies that Monica can try in her classroom to make circle time run smoother. Monica disagrees with some of the suggestions that Carla makes. What would you do if you were Monica?

2. In Monica’s last meeting with Carla, Carla suggested a certain strategy to use in her classroom. When Monica meets with Carla this week, Carla asks how using the strategy went. If you were Monica, how would you respond if:
   a. You had tried the strategy but it didn’t work?
   b. You hadn’t tried the strategy?

3. Monica’s early childhood center is looking to hire a new coach to work with teachers.
   a. What would you suggest they look for in a person when they do their hiring?
   b. What supports would you want from the new coach?

F. Wrap-Up
That’s all I wanted to ask you about today. Is there anything you would like to add that we haven’t talked about? Thank you very much for your time.

Teacher Survey

Name: ______________________________________ (first) ______________________________________ (last)

Section 1. About You

1. Please list your current position: ____________________________________________________________

2. Including this year, how many years have you been in your current position? ________

3. Including this year, how many years have you been working with children professionally? ________

4. What is the highest level of education you have completed?

- ☐ Less than high school diploma
- ☐ Bachelor’s degree

- ☐ GED
- ☐ Master’s degree

- ☐ High school diploma
- ☐ Doctorate degree

- ☐ Some undergraduate (no degree) Please specify: ________________________________
- ☐ Some graduate (no degree) Please specify: ________________________________

- ☐ Associate’s degree
- ☐ Other: ________________________________

5. Do you hold a degree in early childhood education?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No
- ☐ Currently working on a degree in early childhood education

Do you hold a degree in a field related to early childhood education (for example, elementary education, special education, human development, sociology, or psychology)?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No
- ☐ Currently working on a degree in a related field
Do you have a teaching license? If so, what is it?
__________________________________________________

6. Which category best describes your race?

☐ American Indian or Alaska Native
☐ Black or African American
☐ Native Hawaiian, Pacific Islander
☐ Multi-Race
Please Specify: ____________________________

☐ Asian
☐ Hispanic, Latino/a, or Spanish
☐ White
☐ Other:
______________________________

What is your primary language?

☐ English ☐ Spanish ☐ Other: ________________________________

What languages do you speak fluently? (Check all that apply.)

☐ English ☐ Spanish ☐ Other: ________________________________

What is your place of birth? ________________________________
Appendix 2

Data analysis codes and subcodes.

- Evaluation of $R^2$
- Future coach(ing)
  - Coach qualities and supports
  - Collaboration and problem-solving
  - Getting feedback
  - Openness and honesty
- Mindset
- Peer relationships in program
  - Collaboration and influence
  - Community
  - Comparison to before
  - Isolation
- $R^2$ strategies
  - Relationship to existing practice
  - Usefulness
- $R^2$ workshops and coaching
  - Building trust
  - Comparison to other PD and supports
  - Individualization
  - Logistics
  - Supports offered
  - Usefulness
  - Voice and safe space
- Seeing changes
  - In students
  - In teacher practice
  - In workshops and coaching