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“More time. More showing. More helping. That’s how it sticks”:

The Perspectives of Early Childhood Coachees

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Abstract

Coaching is a form of consultation used in early childhood settings to support positive outcomes for young children and families. While some research shows the effectiveness of coaching on practice and outcomes, little information is available on the experiences and perspectives of “coachees” as recipients of coaching support. The purpose of this study was to understand, from the coachees’ point of view, the benefits and challenges of participating in an early childhood coaching relationship. Twenty-one parents, preschool teachers and childcare providers who had engaged in coaching relationships participated in interviews and completed surveys regarding their experiences and perspectives. Data were thematically analyzed. Five overall themes, and sixteen subthemes, emerged as salient to the experiences of these coachees: (1) qualities of the coach; (2) resources provided by the coach; (3) qualities of the coach-coachee relationship; (4) coachee transformation; and (5) challenges to the coaching process. This in-depth, qualitative examination of coachees’ experiences revealed a powerful story of the transformative nature of their partnerships with their coaches. The study has implications for hiring early childhood coaches, planning professional development activities for EC coaches, and implementing models of early childhood coaching.

Keywords: early intervention, coach, relationship-based practice, qualitative research, professional development

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The Perspectives of Early Childhood Coachees

The primary goal of early childhood programming, including education and intervention services, is to promote the well-being of children and families. Ultimately, the purpose is to improve and support positive outcomes for young children across developmental domains. To do so, early childhood interventionists engage with families, childcare providers and preschool teachers within home, childcare and preschool environments. In the early childhood field, attention has shifted away from child-focused, direct service delivery models to caregiver-focused, consultative approaches (Dunst, Raab, Trivette, & Swanson, 2010; Hanft, Rush, & Shelden, 2004).

One of the foremost models for providing consultative support has been coaching. In coaching, an early childhood educator, mental health specialist or other early interventionist (hereafter referred to as “coach”) regularly meets with a parent, childcare provider or preschool teacher (hereafter referred to as “coachee”). The dyad engages in interactions including observation, reflection, and action planning for the purpose of assisting the coachee to implement effective practices to support the child’s healthy development (Fox & Hemmeter, 2011; Hanft et al., 2004; Rush, Shelden, & Hanft, 2003).

The underpinning for all successful coaching experiences is a positive relationship between the coach and coachee (McWilliam, Tocci, & Harbin, 1998; Wesley & Buysse, 2006). This supportive foundation is the basis for a working partnership which encourages problem identification and problem solving interactions between coach and coachee (Hanft et al., 2004). Quality partnerships will result in increased capacity for coachees to effectively care for and educate children. Coaches must be proficient in active listening, collaborative problem solving,

and joint planning. Effective coaches offer feedback to help teachers, child care providers, and families develop skills (Dunst & Trivette, 2009; Fox, Hemmeter, Snyder, Binder, & Clarke, 2011; Joyce & Showers, 2002; Onchwari & Keengwe, 2008; Sheridan, Edwards, Marvin, & Knoche, 2009). Knowledge about evidence-based interventions for promoting child development and solving challenges encountered by caregivers of young children, many of whom are at-risk for or demonstrating developmental delays, is also critically important (Woods, Wilcox, Friedman, & Murch, 2011).

A coaching model has proven effective in transforming coachees' practices as well as supporting positive outcomes in young children. A number of researchers have found evidence for improved practice when training is followed by on-site mentoring from a coach, who provides feedback and follow-up support for effective implementation (Fox et al., 2011; Neuman & Wright, 2010; Onchwari & Keengwe, 2008; Powell, Diamond, Burchinal, & Koehler, 2010; Snyder & Wolfe, 2008). Parent and teacher efficacy, competence and confidence have also been improved as a function of coaching (Brown, Knoche, Edwards, & Sheridan, 2009; Heller et al., 2011; Trivette, Dunst, & Hamby, 2010). These competencies, in turn, have been linked to improved classroom practices (Pianta, Mashburn, Downer, Hamre & Justice, 2008; Powell et al., 2010; Raver et al., 2008) as well as improved child outcomes including cognitive and adaptive skills, and early language and literacy development (Mashburn, Downer, Hamre, Justice, & Pianta, 2010; Powell et al., 2010; Tamis-LeMonda, Bornstein, & Baumwell, 2001; Trivette et al., 2010).

Though literature is available on the positive effects of coaching on the instructional practices of coachees and subsequent child outcomes, little is known about the reactions, perspectives and needs of coachees. While a few studies have investigated the perspective of

coaches, little is known about the perceived experiences and needs of coachees (Lanigan, 2011; Salisbury, Woods, & Copeland, 2010; Weatherston, 2010). The purpose of this study was to understand the experiences of coachees who were engaged in a coaching relationship to support and benefit their interactions with and care of young children and their families. The study sought to understand: What benefits and challenges did coachees perceive to exist for this model of service delivery? How did coaches demonstrate the dual skill sets of strong consultative skills and knowledge of evidence-based practice in their coaching practice? How have the coachees' experiences with coaching resulted in personal change? Findings from this study will provide a voice to coachees who are the active participants in coaching. The study will identify strengths of a coaching model as well as identified needs, and will contribute to the understanding of essential characteristics and implementation of coaching models, including the hiring of early childhood coaches and coach professional development activities.

RESEARCH CONTEXT

This study is part of a broader inquiry conducted to evaluate the experiences of coaches who had participated in an Early Childhood Coach (EC) training series offered by the state department of education. The experiences of coachees were also investigated. The coach participants were employed in a variety of agencies that provided services targeting children's social-emotional development, early childhood mental health, early childhood program quality, early language and literacy, family support and/or early childhood special education. Coach participants provided services to coachees (e.g. teachers, child care providers and/or families).

The 3-day training was developed by a multi-disciplinary team of state stakeholders in order to provide expanded, consistent professional development for early childhood coaches. Key training content included: (a) essentials of didactic training; (b) the contextual and systemic

variables that can influence the coaching relationship; (c) the structure and process of coaching in early childhood education; (d) the relational, dyadic context of coaching; (e) effective coach characteristics including communication, relationship-building, and collaboration; as well as (f) information on helping coaches to identify effective coachee characteristics, and the role of supporting coachee knowledge in a coaching partnership. Research has indicated a need for an explicit focus on such skills during training, as well as follow-up support to ensure the implementation of innovative practice (Dunst & Trivette, 2009; Joyce & Showers, 2002).

METHODS

To understand the perspective of coachees, a qualitative approach was selected as the methodological design for the study. Qualitative research is appropriate under conditions that warrant the exploration of a topic (Creswell, 2013). In this case, the perspectives of coachees involved in coaching relationships has been understudied; as a research team, we hoped to illuminate the authentic experiences and viewpoints of participants through in-depth interviews and open-ended survey questions. Furthermore, the qualitative approach provided an opportunity to empower the coachee participants. The qualitative process allowed the voices of the participants to be heard; the views and perceptions of teachers, providers, and families is often neglected in the study of the implementation of early childhood programming.

Participants

Participants included 20 early childhood coaches and their coachees. The coach participants were purposefully sampled for the larger evaluation study to represent the broad range of service contexts, settings and initiatives that use coaching as a professional development strategy. Coaches were selected to represent early intervention/early childhood special education, mental health/social emotional programming, quality initiative sites, as well as Early Head Start

and Head Start in various geographical locations in a Midwestern state. Furthermore, they were selected to represent professionals with varied levels of experience and background in coaching. After the coaches were invited to participate in the study and provided consent, each coach was asked to select one member of her caseload of coachees to be invited to participate in the evaluation activities. The coach-coachee dyads had, at a minimum, a six-month coaching relationship. In one instance, one coach was serving two coachees in a single classroom.

The 20 coach participants had a mean age of 37 years (range 23 to 54 years), and all were female. Coaches identified their ethnicity as White, non-Hispanic (82.4%), African-American (5.8%), and biracial/multi-racial (11.8%). The education levels of the coaches were as follows: graduate degree (35.3%), some graduate coursework (23.5%), bachelor's degree (29.4%), associate's degree (5.9%), and some training beyond high school (5.9%). The coaches' average experience in early education and care programs was 13.4 years (range of 2 to 35 years), and their average experience as a coach was 4.38 years (range of 0 to 21 years).

The 21 coachees included eighteen preschool teachers and child care providers, and three family members of young children enrolled in a variety of preschool, child care, and early intervention services (Table 1). All were female, with a mean age of 31 years ($SD= 8.7$). Many had completed education beyond the high school level, with 42.2% reporting completion of a four-year college or graduate degree. Coachees who were preschool teachers or childcare providers had an average of seven years of experience teaching young children.

The coaching interactions (meetings between coach and coachee) took place in a variety of settings including homes, child care settings, and preschools. Coaches met with coachees one to four times monthly, with sessions generally lasting from 30 to 60 minutes. The nature of the visits varied according to the goals of the program. For example, some coaches focused on

improving program quality, some on ameliorating children's mental health concerns and some on promoting children's development as delineated by IFSP or IEP goals.

Procedure

Two sources of data were collected and analyzed for this study. First, coachees participated in in-depth, semi-structured interviews during which they were asked to respond to five, structured open-ended questions. Interviews were conducted by members of the research team. Questions were designed to gather information on the experiences of the coachees who participated in the coaching intervention. All interviews were audiotaped and recordings were transcribed verbatim. Second, on two occasions approximately two months apart, coachees provided written responses to four open-ended questions. The interview and survey questions are shown in Table 2. It is important to note that the coachees in this study were individuals who were both coached and interviewed one-on-one, with the exception of one set of participants, who were coached and interviewed together.

A thematic analysis framework was utilized as the data analysis format. Data were analyzed across all coaches, irrespective of work setting. "A priori codes" were not identified for this study; rather, the research team, composed of the primary investigator and two graduate assistants, searched printed transcripts and surveys for emergent categories of information (Creswell, 2013). Next, team members independently read the coachees' responses to each question, highlighting significant segments in the data that informed the researchers' understanding of coachees' perceptions of their experiences with the coaching process. Each segment was coded with a word or phrase which captured its meaning. Team members then compared lists of significant responses and the corresponding codes. For discrepancies, the three researchers discussed the response and/or the code and came to a consensus on the relevant code.

The transcripts of both the interview and open-ended survey, and the initial coded segments were subsequently entered into MAXQDA10, a qualitative data analysis software program. The software provided a method to organize and retrieve codes and thus facilitated data analysis. Using an iterative process, the research team examined the codes that were discovered in the participant responses, and grouped the codes into categories. The transcripts were reviewed multiple times in relation to the categories, and the categories were further refined. The data revealed sixteen final categories/subthemes that were grouped into five broader themes.

The research team conducted a member check to ensure the validity of the findings. This was accomplished by contacting two coachees, whose coaches had participated in the 3-day coach training, and inviting them to reflect on the findings. One coachee was a participant in the original interviews, one was not. A summary of the major findings was shared with the two coachees through individual phone conversations. The coachees were asked if the findings were accurate and complete in light of their experiences with the coaching process, and if the interpretations were fair. The coachees confirmed the accuracy of the results as typifying their experiences with their coaches and therefore the themes that were identified through the analysis were not modified following the member check.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Five main themes and sixteen subthemes emanated from the iterative analyses of the interviews and open-ended survey responses (see Table 3). The themes included the coachees' reflections on the unique characteristics and value of their coaches, the dyadic coaching relationship, and their own personal growth as a function of participating in the coaching intervention.

Theme 1: Qualities of the coach

Coachees valued the skills and rich background of their coaches. The specific value was in their coaches' knowledge and expertise in early childhood and experience working with young children, as well as their abilities to provide fresh perspectives to situations in the home or classroom setting.

Subtheme 1: Coach's knowledge and expertise. The coachees expressed great respect for their coaches' knowledge of child development and effective educational practices, as well as the coaches' expertise and advice for them when they had questions or challenges. One participant shared this about her coach: "She is resourceful, knowledgeable, and empowering! She backs up all of what she says through credible information." Some participants mentioned their coaches had particular areas of expertise such as training in play therapy and family counseling, but more often, coachees were referencing their coaches' global funds of knowledge for addressing the early learning environment, or children's individual needs or behavioral challenges. When one participant was asked what she would miss most if she did not have a coach she replied, "Her advice. When we're going through difficult times, that's probably what I'd miss the most. Being able to get that advice and all that information."

Subtheme 2: Coach's experience working with young children. Coachees recognized that their coaches' knowledge and expertise was a direct product of having had many years of experience working in the field of early childhood education. Such experience lent credibility to the ideas, techniques and strategies which coaches might offer coachees. One coachee explained, "They know what's going to work with those children because it's not something brand new to them." There seemed to be a perception that coaches had previously worked through some of the same issues currently faced by coachees, making their solutions plausible to the coachees.

Subtheme 3: Coach's ability to provide a fresh perspective. A third quality which the participants appreciated in their coaches was the coaches' abilities to serve as "another set of eyes," providing fresh perspectives. Some coachees felt that being in the trenches limited their ability to see incremental progress in children. Coaches, alternatively, were able to observe and point out these changes. Other participants mentioned the benefits of being able to access a "second opinion" about a child or situation. One stated: "I think what I like best is having another person, another opinion. Kids are complex."

The capacities of the coach were understandably important to the coachee. Other studies have identified similar coach characteristics as critical to the coaching relationship (Pianta, 2011; Weatherston, 2010; Woods et al., 2011). In this study, coachees reported valuing both their coaches' past experiences in working with children and the expertise coaches demonstrated in designing effective interventions for challenges faced by coachees. Coaches' abilities to guide the participants' understanding of child development information (Peterson, Luze, Eshbaugh, Jeon & Kantz, 2007) as well as offer concrete strategies for working with children (Hanson, 2003; Weatherston, 2010) were likely influential to coachees' abilities to implement effective practices with children.

Theme 2: Resources provided by the coach

The benefit of the coach was not only in the depth of experience and background that they provided to their coachees. Coachees also reported that coaches provided both tangible and intangible resources including: (a) ideas, strategies and techniques for effective practice, (b) formal professional development opportunities, and (c) a physical presence in the classroom.

Subtheme 1: Ideas, strategies and techniques. Coaches drew upon their knowledge, expertise, past experience, and personal perspectives to serve as a rich source of ideas, strategies

and techniques for enhancing early learning environments, promoting child development, and addressing specific challenges encountered by the coachees. This was the most commonly reported benefit of the coaching process for these interviewed coachees. As one participant mentioned: “She has a lot of ideas to help us in the classroom. She thinks outside of the box which we need with some of our kids.”

Coachees appreciated coaches modeling techniques for them: “She’s done a lot of role modeling and she’s shown me a lot of strategies and techniques that I can use in the classroom that I wouldn’t have even thought to even use or that it would even work.” At times, coachees referred to the ideas offered by their coach as innovative: “She has fresh, new ideas.” At other times, coachees reported that coaches helped them tweak an existing strategy. In addition, coachees shared that the coaches knew where to seek help if a question was outside the coaches’ realms of expertise. One participant shared: “The most helpful thing about my coach is she will tell me when she doesn’t know and will find me the answer.”

Bringing tangible objects into the classroom to supplement the learning materials was another way in which the coach served as a resource for enhancing the early learning environment. A coachee said she appreciated these items: “The things that (my coach) brings in the classroom, like more dress-up things, just the little things that improve my classroom.” Though mentioned by several coachees, the delivery of tangible objects was not as widespread as the intangible supports.

Subtheme 2: Formal professional development opportunities. Coaches served as a resource for professional development opportunities which enabled participants to enhance their skills. Some training was directly delivered by the coaches: “I enjoy the behavior trainings she does.” Some professional development was supplied through written or Internet sources: “She

always brings me articles or tells me to go to a website. Or, we'll go to a website together and we find out those 'whys.'" Coaches also referred the coachees to community training programs or workshops as needed (e.g., Love and Logic).

Subtheme 3: Physical presence in the classroom. There were times when the coachees reported that the actual physical presence of the coach in the classroom was a valued resource. Coaches were not afraid to pitch in and be the "extra pair of hands" needed at a particular moment. One coachee described this as "supportive" and added: "(If) we have a kid that's having a really hard time, she'll come in, step in, and help us."

It is not unexpected that resources offered by the coach are of benefit to this group of coachees. In fact, it is at least in part through the resources offered by coaches that practitioners and families are able to make changes in their practice. Other studies of coaching have identified some of the intangible resources offered by coaches, such as brainstorming, modeling, and goal setting as particularly valuable in the coaching relationship (Koh & Neuman, 2009; Lanigan, 2011). Interestingly, tangible resources are of less substantial benefit (Neuman & Wright, 2010; Weatherston, 2010). That is, the strategies and ideas that evolve from the coaching interaction are more appreciated than physical resources alone. These findings align with a coaching model that is based on practice and process, rather than an approach driven by the provision of materials.

Theme 3: Qualities of the coach-coachee relationship

The training of the coaches involved in this study included substantial content on supporting skills to promote the development of effective dyadic relationships with families, child care providers and preschool teachers. The perspectives of coachees indicated that they experienced these relationship skills in action through defining factors of a strong relationship

such as reciprocity, effective communication practices, giving and receiving feedback, empowerment, and relationship satisfaction.

Subtheme 1: Reciprocity. The coach-coachee relationship is a two-way street. Many of the coachee responses reflected the mutuality of the coaching process. For the most part, coachees expressed deep feelings of trust in their coaches. The dependability and reliability of the coach played a major role in the development of trust. One participant said, “She honors her promises. She is a person of her word.” Coachees appreciated coaches who could be counted upon to keep appointments and those who demonstrated responsiveness by obtaining supplies or information discussed in coaching sessions in a timely manner.

Coachees were not merely receptacles for the input, knowledge, and techniques shared by coaches. They came to the table with their own unique funds of knowledge, skill sets and strengths. Coachees reported that they enjoyed the chance to share their own ideas with the coaches. “Bouncing ideas” off the coach allowed a coachee to more deeply explore ideas, get advice from the coach, and refine the strategy or activity for effective implementation. It served as a form of interactive problem-solving. A coachee explained: “When she sees that things aren’t working, or when I see things that aren’t working, it’s nice to be able to bounce ideas off of each other. It works really nicely.”

The presence of trust in these relationships resulted in coachees feeling able to voice concerns, share fears, and give honest opinions about suggested strategies or techniques. One coachee explained it this way: “(My coach has) really taken the time to get to know me, my motivations, hopes, fears, road blocks, both personal and professional, so I never hold back or feel like I have to ‘put on a show’ when she comes.” One coachee felt able to consider the coach’s input and utilize or set aside the information at her discretion: “If you want to use it, you

can and if not, they're not offended." When asked what advice they would give future coachees, several respondents suggested that coachees not hesitate to be honest with their coaches. As one coachee explained: "Be completely open, be honest, lay your cards on the table. You have absolutely nothing to lose and everything to gain."

In addition to trust, coachees felt that their relationships with their coaches were characterized by mutual respect. While coachees respected the knowledge and expertise of the coaches, the coaches, in turn, communicated authentic value for the roles and competencies of coachees. This was conveyed by a coachee who said, "We have established a good relationship centered around a positive attitude and mutual respect."

Another manifestation of the reciprocal nature of the coach/coachee relationship is that respondents characterized it as a partnership. Coachees found that they were able to develop partnerships with their coaches around common goals, a mutual enjoyment of children, and shared philosophy regarding the development of children. Several stated that they worked well together. As one coachee stated: "Mutual respect and common goals and interests help us to stay focused and brainstorm on working together, pooling many outside resources, in regard to achieving our goals." The coachees seemed to feel, as the participants in Cambray-Engstrom & Salisbury's (2010) study did, that coach and coachee were on "equal footing" (p. 270).

Subtheme 2: Communication practices. This group of respondents identified strong communication skills as an integral factor in an effective coaching relationship. Coachees shared that coaches were good listeners: "She listens, then gives me suggestions or asks me to think about it and what do I think?" Coaches were described as approachable and non-judgmental: "It is very easy to talk to her about concerns or things that are going well." The term "open communication" was used by a number of coachees, as in this example: "We have a wonderful

relationship with open communication. We work very well together.” Coachees shared that they were quite comfortable asking questions of their coaches, and this was a key piece of advice they wished to share with future coachees: “If you have any sort of question or any kind of concern, or ‘I can’t do this’ mentality, make sure you say something to your coach because if you have the right coach, (she) will help you through it.”

One specific communication practice which was noted and valued by coachees was the coaches’ use of reflection. Reflection in early childhood coaching refers to an interactive process whereby a coach prompts a coachee to think about her actions in light of her intended objectives. Through active engagement in discussion with the coach, the coachee is encouraged to self-assess or consider ways to generalize previous knowledge and skills for addressing current challenges (Hanft et al., 2004). Coachees reported valuing opportunities to engage with their coaches in the reflective process. One coachee said, “My coach was able to reflect with me on what worked and what didn’t work.”

Subtheme 3: Giving and receiving feedback. Coachees reported getting a great deal of feedback from their coaches, something they viewed as a pathway to improved practice. This was illustrated by the following statement from a coachee, “I believe that I am helping the children more because of the feedback my coach has given me.” Feedback reportedly took the form of positive reinforcement of effective practices, or was offered as suggestions for change—both forms of input were generally appreciated by coachees. A respondent put it this way: “Everything that I’ve talked to her about she’s been able to either say ‘Yeah, I think you’re on the right track’ or ‘Here, let me show you that there might be something that you could do differently’ or ‘Maybe we can talk to somebody about that.’” Another noted, “I like receiving the feedback. I know what I’m doing correctly and things that I could improve.” One teacher

described it this way: “She also points out things that we’re doing good in the classroom that we may not see because we see the child every day and she comes in every once in a while.” Most coachees reported seeing corrective feedback from their coaches in a positive light. Feedback has also been viewed favorably by coachees in other studies (Koh & Neuman, 2009).

Subtheme 4: Empowerment. Empowerment refers to the enhancement of one’s power, confidence, or self-esteem, and participants reported experiencing this as a result of coach-coachee relationships. Coaches were described as caring, concerned, and approachable—qualities which helped coachees feel comfortable in extending themselves and growing as competent parents, child care providers, and teachers. Coachees stated that they felt encouraged to be their best, to be successful and to solve their own problems. One said, “It’s really empowering for me, very encouraging, and they bring out the best in me. They’re always asking questions that help you come up with solutions. Like you’re doing your own problem solving so you do feel more power because of the choice that you made.”

Several coachees described their coaches as motivators or advocates. One reported: “She is one of my biggest cheerleaders!” Coaches supported their coachees, helped them define and focus upon goals, and sometimes even pushed the participants to attain established goals: “They can help you, if you have a specific goal, but don’t know how to get it, they can help you get focused. They can push you to better yourself. They can say, ‘This is how we can do this.’” Additionally, coachees said they felt coaches were on their side, looking out for their best interests, and promoting their success. One mother put it this way, “She’s amazing...an amazing advocate for me and my family” and went on to explain how her parenting skills had grown since beginning to work with the coach.

Many coachees spoke of appreciating the help and support given to them by their coaches. They often couched this in terms of the coach “offering” support and being “willing” to help. This suggested that the coaches’ help was contingent upon the request of the coachee, a practice known as “helpful helping.” Dunst & Trivette (1994) described contingent help-giving as occurring when “help-seekers are encouraged to play a major role in deciding what is important to them, what options they will choose to achieve intentions, and what actions they will take in carrying-out intervention plans. The help-seeker is viewed as the essential agent of change; whereas, the help-giver’s roles are to support, encourage, and create opportunities for the help-seeker to become competent” (pp. 166 – 167). The responses of these coachees would indicate this was the modus operandi of many of their coaches. One coachee shared this about her coach: “She is willing to help and offer support when I need it.”

Respondent quotes illustrated that through caring, advocacy, motivation, and contingent help-giving, the coaches enhanced feelings of power, competence, and self-esteem within their coachees. Empowerment was a significant quality of these dyadic relationships.

Subtheme 5: Relationship satisfaction. Participants expressed overwhelmingly positive attitudes about their relationships with their coaches and their experiences in the coaching process. Some of the descriptors used included: “above expectations,” “wonderful asset,” “everything has been great,” and “I love everything about it.” Positive responses were recorded in response to several of the interview and survey questions including, somewhat surprisingly, “What is most difficult about coaching?” and “What would you like this coach to do differently?” In fact, the responses of many coachees was “Nothing.” Coachees were, in contrast, profuse with their expressions of satisfaction with coach-coachee interactions: “The relationship

between the coach and myself is good,” “I am very satisfied with my coach,” and “There is nothing that I would suggest to be done differently.”

Such evidence of close, positive relationships between coach and coachee may have ramifications when coaching support is withdrawn. One coachee expressed: “I never want it to end.” Other participants shared similar feelings of sadness at the thought of no longer working with their coaches. One said, “She might be leaving, so that would not be good.” Programs must carefully consider the implications of removing coach support, and carefully scaffold the change.

As has been previously described, the coachee participants viewed the quality of coach-coachee relationship as fundamental to the success of the coaching experience (Heller et al., 2011; Lanigan, 2011; McWilliam et al., 1998; Wesley & Buysse, 2006). Partnership has been viewed in other studies as essential element of coaching (James & Chard, 2010). In coaching, or consulting, the process is driven by the relationship; effective coaching focuses on the relationship as a mechanism for supporting change in the coachee (Hanft et al., 2004; Johnston & Brinamen, 2012). Positive relationships have been investigated as a potential moderator of coaching effectiveness, and are identified as important to participant outcomes and behavior change (Brown et al., 2009; Green, Everhart, Gordon, & Gettman, 2006; Lanigan, 2011).

Theme 4: Coachee transformation

There were profound and interesting findings regarding the coachees’ perceptions about how they had changed as a result of participating in the coaching process. Transformations occurred in two primary arenas—improvement of practice and affective changes.

Subtheme 1: Improvement of practice. Coachees articulated changes they had made with regard to their daily practice in home, childcare, and preschool settings. Improvement of practice

was identified across three areas—enhanced knowledge of children, stronger skills for promoting children’s development, and more effective preparation for working as a member of a team.

Participants said they gained knowledge about typical development of infants, toddlers and preschoolers, in general, and felt they better understood the specific children in their care. A parent said, “She helps me understand my child.” When asked what advice she would give future coachees, another parent said she would tell them that a coach can, “help them get more of an understanding about where the child is at, what they want to do with the child, even watch the child grow as they’re doing things that will help (the child).”

Coachees reported improved skills as a result of working with coaches. Respondents felt that they had gained valuable competencies for interacting with children, arranging learning environments, using structure and routine, designing developmentally appropriate activities, and supporting positive behavior by working with their coaches. One parent shared, “I’m more understanding, I guess. I’ve learned a lot. I didn’t really know much about being a mom. It really kind of taught me.” A preschool teacher stated, “I feel I have grown as a teacher with new strategies that I hadn’t thought about before.”

One of the specific skills mentioned as an area of growth was problem-solving. Coaches helped coachees focus on issues, generate alternatives, select a strategy, and evaluate its effectiveness through use of reflection and feedback. A participant recalled, “They’re always asking questions that help you come up with solutions; you’re doing your own problem solving.”

The generalization of skills across time and setting is a desired outcome of coaching. Coachees shared that they were using strategies learned from their coaches to promote the development of all children in their care, not just those identified for particular programs such as Part C special education services. One teacher explained, “I really want to learn how to utilize

everything that I have in a lot of different ways to help all the children who need help. Not just the ones with special needs, my regular kids.” Coachees stated they learned strategies that could be useful in future scenarios with children and families. Respondents felt able to adapt or modify new activities based upon principles they had learned from their coaches. One participant summed it up well: “As it stands now, I am learning from my coach even when my coach is not there. She has given me so much, that several times per week I can do something, or step outside my ‘box’ and expand my children’s range, depth, and knowledge.”

Finally, as coachees progressed in developing working relationships with their coaches, they learned it was possible to maximize the coaching experience by preparing for coaching sessions. Some strategies they suggested for future coachees included (a) jotting down questions throughout the day, (b) thinking about possible goals for children and communicating them to the coach ahead of the session, and (c) planning an uninterrupted time with the coach.

Subtheme 2: Affective changes. Affective changes refer to transformations of emotions, perceptions, and self-concept, and such changes were reported by these respondents as a direct result of their participation in the coaching process. The coachee participants reported impacts in affective domains including open-mindedness, commitment, persistence, and self-image.

Many coachees felt that open-minded attitudes allowed them to fully benefit from their coaches’ input, even though it was challenging at times. One person said, “I’ve changed a lot because I guess she basically opened up my mind to more ideas that I can use that I wasn’t using.” Several coachees said it was crucial to “put yourself out there,” conveying the need to commit wholeheartedly to the process, and remain open-minded. They advised future coachees to be both willing to try interventions and persistent in utilizing them. “If you really and truly

want to make your daycare better you really need to put yourself into it 100%. Your coach will usually put herself into it 100%.”

Coachees shared that their perceptions of themselves had changed as they came to realize how they could meaningfully impact the development of children in their care. One participant described the shift in self-image this way: “I think I am more a childcare provider than a babysitter,” and a parent stated: “It changed the whole way me and my kids are with each other.” Some coachees went so far as to claim that they had changed fundamentally as people. This growth in self was attributed to the input of knowledge and skills as well as the support and validation they received from their coaches. One respondent shared, “I have become a better person and I’ve become a better childcare provider through the coaching experience, with different suggestions and different ways of doing things.”

Coachees in this study found they were transformed personally in their knowledge and child development skills. They also reported changes in their self-concept and reported more confidence in their work. Though the investigations into coaching are limited, changes in practice and attitude have been considered as markers of effective coaching interventions. Change in practice and behavior can result from coaches’ abilities to support problem-solving and skill generalization (Hanft et al., 2004). Specifically, studies of coaching have revealed effective change in instructional practice in the target areas of language and literacy (Koh & Neuman, 2009; Neuman & Wright, 2010; Powell et al., 2010); and social-emotional development (Raver et al., 2008), as well as improved confidence and competence in skill use (Brown et al., 2009; Heller et al., 2011; Lanigan, 2011). Furthermore, coaching has resulted in positive change in parenting behaviors (Dunst & Dempsey, 2007; Humphries & Dunst, 2003; Marchant, 2001; Sheridan, Welch, & Orme, 1996; Trivette et al., 2010).

Theme 5: Challenges to the coaching process

Although coachees overwhelmingly viewed their coaching experiences as positive, a number of challenges were also identified. There were issues of time, situations which caused discomfort, and reported difficulty applying strategies developed in the coaching sessions.

Subtheme 1: Time. Although the word “time” frequently was used when coachees were asked “What is most difficult about coaching?” there were variations in intended meaning. Some participants commented on the availability of the coach, expressing that the coach was not able to come frequently enough: “Once a month she’s here...I’d like her here more.” Some referred to scheduling challenges such as finding a mutually agreeable time or having enough time in the busy daily routine for a coach-coachee conversation uninterrupted by childcare responsibilities. One coachee said, “Finding the time to have the coaching conversations, that’s the hardest part.” Some respondents stated insufficient time during the coaching session to cover the myriad of children’s needs. This was evident in the following response: “I would like a full hour for each session. We do have behaviors in our classroom. Thirty to 45 minutes isn’t enough time. I know (COACH) doesn’t have a lot of time for just us, but we value her input.”

The challenges of “time” were sometimes attributable to or exacerbated by the workloads of either the coach, or the coachee. Coachees understood that their coaches often served numerous sites, requiring travel and coordination of diverse schedules. One coachee explained, “She’s got a ton on her plate.” In addition, some coachees had their hands full with the amount of children in their care. This led to difficulties scheduling coaching conversations and individualizing interventions for a particular child. A preschool teacher said, “I think another thing that makes it difficult is that I have seventeen kids in the morning and seventeen in the afternoon. It’s hard for me to focus on one child for a long amount of time.”

Subtheme 2: Coachee's discomfort. Some coachees expressed discomfort with the coaching process. The presence of a coach in one's home or work environment led some coachees to feelings of being watched or evaluated. For some, this engendered feelings of fear or nervousness that they would receive criticism. One participant shared, "Sometimes it's a little hard to hear the negative feedback but that's a part of it, and the only way to improve is to hear what you're doing incorrectly." One coachee shared that there are times she does not feel open to sharing her classroom. For her, this was what was most difficult about coaching: "Just knowing that not every day is gonna be a great day and almost feeling like your every move is being watched. So, depending on your mood on the day would be the most difficult, not always feeling so open to sharing your teaching with somebody." Other respondents mentioned concern about the balance in the coaching relationship—one worried that she talked too much and another felt the coach talked too much. Some coachees observed tensions among team members which created feelings of discomfort for them. One said, "If she has 'differences' with another (team member), I don't want to know about it. And I don't want to be put in the middle of it."

Subtheme 3: Difficulty applying strategies. One of the most commonly expressed challenges for the coachees was that of applying the strategies or interventions developed during the coaching process. Coachees reported that more showing, modeling, feedback, and help was needed to ensure effective implementation. One coachee said that at times, different ideas were needed because the initial strategy was not effective. One of the parents shared that it was challenging for her to recall all the steps to the intervention when she needed to use it in real time, after the coach was gone. She described her dilemma this way:

You're sitting there having a conversation. It's not actually like one-on-one actions.

We're not working through it. We're talking about how we're supposed to work through

it. Whenever they leave, then we have to sit there, as a parent, we have to jump back and try to remember exactly how those steps that we went over in the coaching session (went), as well as trying to incorporate it, at the same time trying to deal with other things.

One coachee had these ideas for improvement of the coaching process: “More time. More showing. More helping. That’s how it sticks.”

Challenges are inherent in implementing a fluid and responsive intervention like coaching. The challenges reported by coachees need to be carefully considered by program developers so as to make attempts to mitigate perceived barriers such as time allowed for coaching contacts (Brown et al., 2009; Onchwari & Keengwe, 2008), including the frequency and duration of visits (Green et al., 2006), or discomfort of coachees. Furthermore, workload of both coaches and coachees is recognized as a barrier to effective coaching efforts, which can result in scheduling challenges (Onchwari & Keengwe, 2008).

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

The purpose of this study was to understand the experiences of early childhood coachees who had engaged in a coaching relationship to support their practices and interactions with young children. Importantly, the study attempted to give coachees a voice; literature has examined the consultant/coach perspective but limited findings are reported from the perspective of the coachee (Koh & Neuman, 2009; Lanigan, 2011; Salisbury et al., 2010). This study contributes to that limited literature base. With an increase in the implementation of coaching as a form of professional development and family support, it is important to learn about the experiences of those who are involved in the process to continue to evolve the practice.

There are several conclusions that can be drawn from this study. First, the study demonstrated that coachees did perceive to gain skills as a function of their participation in the

coaching relationship. This is particularly significant given that the ultimately goal of coaching is to support effective practices and promote the well-being and positive development of young children and families. While data on observed coachee practices and attitudes were not collected as part of this investigation, the changes reported by coachees in their perspectives, approaches and practices can be interpreted as a positive outcome of the coaching interactions. Other studies have also identified positive associations between coaching and changes in teachers' behaviors and attitudes (Heller et al., 2011; Mashburn et al., 2008). Coaching, therefore, should continue to be considered as an effective approach to supporting early childhood practitioners and families.

A second key finding was the overwhelming positive response from coachees. They found true value in their relationships with their coaches, and experienced both personal and professional growth through participation in the coaching relationship. Their positive experiences were equally dependent upon the expertise and skill of the coaches, as well as the quality of the dyadic interactions with their coaches. Either in isolation would not have been sufficient for promoting outcomes, or achieved the same positive coachee responses.

Third, the study provides insight into future directions for the implementation of early childhood coaching models, including the hiring of early childhood coaches and their ongoing professional development. As reported by the coachees, there are essential, or favorable, coach characteristics to consider when hiring early childhood coaches. Hiring coaches with necessary early childhood background knowledge and experience is essential. However, the ability of the coach to engage in quality relationships is of equal importance. Moreover, professional development efforts for coaches need to be offered and structured in a way that supports the coach in their interactions across both of these dimensions (knowledge and relationship skills);

including awareness of discomfort on the part of the coachee. The use of reflection supervision has been used effectively in other studies of coaching (Heller et al., 2011).

Furthermore, there are key implementation features of the coaching model to carefully design. First, the coaching model needs to include sufficient dedicated time on the part of both coach and coachee to facilitate the coaching relationship and requisite required components. Second, a reflective component was viewed as important by this group of coachees and would be an appropriate and essential element to include in developing programs. Finally, agencies must consider a plan for removing coach supports. That is, directed attention must be given to capacity-building in coachees so that they continue to become self-reliant and less dependent on coach-driven or coach-directed supports. Many coachees expressed distress at the prospect of removing coach support; a dedicated plan for ongoing support is needed.

Significantly, this study provides evidence that it was worthwhile to ask coachees about their perspectives on the coaching relationship. The respondents were actively engaged in the interview process, and willingly provided information on their impressions and reflections regarding their experiences in coaching. The study allowed us to gain an “inside-out” perspective of coachees from multiple vantage points (e.g. child care provider, preschool teacher or family member). With the insights from this group, models for coaching in early childhood can be embellished. Coaching as a form of professional development is investing in the human capital of early childhood teachers, child care providers and families. To take full advantage of this investment, the insights and response of those being targeted must be considered to appropriately shape and guide supports, as well as empower participants. Future research teams should consider asking, collecting and analyzing data derived from the perspectives of intervention participants; they provide novel, meaningful and complementary insights to study impacts.

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Table 1

Summary of Characteristics of Coachees

Characteristic	All coachees (n = 19) ^a
	<u><i>M (SD)</i></u>
Age	31 (8.7)
Gender	
Female	100%
Race/ethnicity	
White, non-Hispanic	78.9%
White, Hispanic or Latino	10.5%
Biracial/multi-racial	10.5%
Education level	
High school diploma	10.5%
Training beyond high school	26.4%
Two year degree	21.1%
Four year degree	31.6%
Graduate coursework or degree	10.6%
	Preschool teacher and childcare coachees (n = 16)
	<u><i>M (SD)</i></u>
Years of experience	
Teaching young children	6.8 (8.2)

Working in early care and education	7.5 (7.8)
Employed in current position	3.9 (5.6)
Current CDA	31.3%

^aTwo coachees did not return demographic questionnaires.

Table 2

Interview and Open-ended Survey Questions

Interview questions

- Q1. What do you like best about coaching?
 - Q2. How have you changed as a result of coaching?
 - Q3. What is most difficult about coaching?
 - Q4. What, if anything, would you/will you miss when you do not have this coach?
 - Q5. What advice do you have for other providers/parents who might be working with a coach?
-

Open-ended survey questions

- Q1. How would you describe your relationship with this coach?
 - Q2. What is most helpful about this coach?
 - Q3. What would you like this coach to do differently?
 - Q4. How can the coaching sessions be improved to meet your individual needs? What suggestions do you have?
-

Table 3

Themes and Subthemes

Theme	Categories/Subthemes
1. <u>Qualities of the coach</u>	1a. Knowledge and expertise 1b. Experience working with young children 1c. Perspective
2. <u>Resources provided by the coach</u>	2a. Ideas, strategies and techniques 2b. Professional development 2c. Coach's physical presence
3. <u>Qualities of the coach-coachee relationship</u>	3a. Reciprocity 3b. Communication practices 3c. Feedback 3d. Empowerment 3e. Relationship satisfaction
4. <u>Coachee transformation</u>	4a. Changes in practice 4b. Affective changes
5. <u>Challenges to the coaching process</u>	5a. Time 5b. Coachee's discomfort 5c. Difficulty applying strategies

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