



“I Need You to Show Me:” Coaching Early Childhood Professionals

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Abstract

In most states, Early Childhood Educators (ECEs) with a Birth-Kindergarten teaching license serve as both the general education teacher and special education teacher for children and their families in inclusive early childhood education (ECE) settings. Prior research suggests that inclusive programming does not guarantee these ECE settings are high-quality. Although evidence-based practices (EBP) and the Division of Early Childhood (DEC) Recommended Practices (RPs) have been established, a research-to-practice gap still exists in the inclusive, ECE classroom. Additional research indicates that coaching teachers may influence their implementation of EBPs in classrooms. This study provided early childhood educators (ECEs) the opportunity to share their perceptions about the support they receive from mentors and evaluators, as well as report the specific aspects of coaching needed to be successful while working in inclusive pre-kindergarten (Pre-K) classrooms. Qualitative research methods using an ethnomethodological framework were used to examine ECEs' responses to semi-structured questions. Findings from this study can inform a prospective coaching model that includes explicit modeling, a deeply reflective component, and an array of professional development (PD) opportunities.

Keywords Early childhood education · Coaching · Reflection · Evidence-based practices

Introduction

The Council for Exceptional Children (CEC) and the Division for Early Childhood (DEC) acknowledge the need for a well-prepared workforce of individuals who can provide evidence-based practices (EBPs) to children in inclusive settings (Stayton, 2015). In the fields of early childhood (EC) and early childhood special education (ECSE), professionals draw upon the expertise of organizations such as DEC and the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) for resources and guidance to implement EBPs. The DEC recommended practices (RPs) cover seven strands to provide practitioners and families with information to promote optimal outcomes for children who may be at risk for or who have developmental disabilities (Division for Early Childhood, 2014). These practices (e.g., assessment, environment, family, instruction, interaction, teaming and collaboration, transition) provide guidance and support in making connections between research and practice

across early childhood settings and natural environments. For example, included in the instruction strand (INS4) is the recommendation that “...practitioners plan for and provide the level of support, accommodations, and adaptations needed for the child to access, participate, and learn within and across activities and routines” (p. 12).

While DEC's RPs provide guidance for supporting children who may have or be at risk for developmental delays, the NAEYC Early Childhood Program Standards and Accreditation Criteria indicate program quality for the general population of children in early childhood education (ECE) classrooms (NAEYC, 2019). Indeed, some research (Buisse & Hollingsworth, 2009) suggests these standards may not adequately provide guidance about the individual needs of children who are diagnosed with or at-risk for developmental delays and disabilities.

Prepared Workforce

In most states, Early Childhood Educators (ECEs) with a Birth-Kindergarten (B-K) teaching license have the dual responsibility of serving as a general education teacher and special education teacher for children and their families (Blanton & Pugach, 2011). Standards set forth by DEC and

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the NAEYC mutually aim to establish a prepared early childhood workforce to meet the developmental needs of children and partner with their families during the process (Chandler et al. 2012). Additionally, the National Research Council and the Institute of Medicine recommend that ECEs have specialized knowledge, skills, and training to meet the diverse needs of young learners (Friedman-Krauss et al. 2020).

Recent research highlights concerns about a qualified ECE workforce. In their review of research about issues such as funding, teacher qualification, and ECE policies, the National Institute of Early Education Research (NIEER) issued findings in the State of Preschool Yearbook for 2019. These findings indicated that out of 50 states and the District of Columbia, 44 have state-funded Pre-K programs, with only four states meeting NIEER's 10 quality standards benchmarks (i.e., Alabama, Michigan, Mississippi, Rhode Island) (Friedman-Krauss et al. 2020).

Concerns about Preparation

Prior research suggests that inclusive programming does not guarantee high-quality programs. Many ECEs and other specialists, including those who work in state-initiated pre-kindergarten (Pre-K) programs, are not specifically trained to work with children at-risk for or diagnosed with developmental delays and their families (Odom et al. 2004). Recently, Chadwell et al. (2019) reported ECEs do not feel as prepared to teach children with disabilities compared to teaching children who are typically developing.

High-quality early care depends on the consistency of well-educated providers. Unfortunately, this consistency is threatened by low wages, burnout, minimal requirements to enter the field, and a lack of recognition. In combination, these factors contribute to high staff-turnover rates (Child-care Aware, 2017; Gomez et al. 2015). Across national studies, annual turnover rates for child care workers range from 26 to 40% (Roberts et al. 2018). Reports from California estimate that approximately 85,000 individuals are employed in the ECE workforce and statewide turnover rates are high for both lead teachers (22%) and assistants (24%) (Austin et al. 2018). Information reported from the Child Care Services Association (CCSA) indicates that over a five-year period in North Carolina, an increase occurred in the proportion of ECEs and assistants who left their centers, from 18% (2015) to 21% (2020) during the previous 12 months, and nearly one in five teachers (19%) said they plan to leave the field in the next three years (CCSA, 2015; CCSA, 2020).

Professional Development

Although EBPs have been established, a research-to-practice gap continues to permeate ECE classrooms (Cook & Odom, 2013). Research suggests ongoing PD supports teachers' use

of EBPs (Elek & Page, 2019). Not only do ECEs gain confidence and proficiency when they implement EBPs with children in inclusive environments, but future PD needs may be discovered during this process (Maryam et al. 2020). Thus, PD can be one way to help bridge the gap between research and practice as ECEs transition from preservice to in-service teaching. Therefore, PD may need to be highly individualized (Gomez et al. 2015), and should include mentoring on the implementation of EBPs (Francois, 2020; Stayton, 2015).

Coaching

With a national child care workforce including approximately two million adults caring for 12 million children under the age of five, ECEs may benefit from the support of coaches. ECEs who work with children and families in inclusive settings face many challenges (Francois, 2020), and need to be flexible due to factors such as (a) available resources, (b) children's participation in the classroom, and (c) family engagement (Odom et al. 2004). Indeed, ECEs who have a strong sense of self-efficacy and who feel confident in their teaching practices may have a favorable impact on children's achievement (Guo et al. 2014).

Coaching support for ECEs may influence a teacher's decision to stay in the field and lead to greater use of EBP (Kretlow et al. 2012), particularly for children (Schachter, 2015). Wood et al. (2016) suggested that coaching should be part of the PD process, and practitioners can implement EBPs with high levels of fidelity when high-quality PD and coaching are provided. In addressing the field's many challenges, it is important to consider teachers' perspectives and their capacity to work in inclusive ECE settings. Due to the specialized skills and depth of knowledge needed by B-K licensed ECEs, coaching may be beneficial to ECEs in examining approaches to use with children in inclusive settings.

Coaching models from both early childhood and school-age settings offer specific, individualized strategies (e.g., ongoing PD, multi-level support) that may increase with frequency and intensity (Rush & Sheldon, 2020; Wood et al. 2016). Coaching ECEs is typically demonstrated in natural settings (e.g., classrooms, homes) and can be delivered using various formats and models (Meadan et al. 2017; Rush et al. 2003). Research suggests that coaching models may include the combination of in-service training and performance feedback supports (e.g., side-by-side coaching, group coaching, supervisory coaching together) (Coogle et al. 2019; Elek & Page, 2019; Fetting & Artman-Meeker, 2016; Kretlow & Bartholomew, 2010; Wood et al. 2016). These specific models are responsive to teachers' individual needs by providing specialized coaching. Coaches who support ECEs in inclusive Pre-K classrooms may benefit from specific coaching strategies included in these models.

Coaches may need to use an adaptable approach to support ECEs' changing learning needs to best support the growth and development of children and their families (Gomez et al. 2015; Rush & Sheldon, 2020). Researchers have suggested the use of different formats and strategies for coaching in inclusive ECE settings. For example, Friedman et al. (2012) reported that coaching may occur in stages (i.e., setting the stage, application opportunities and feedback, mastery) and include a variety of coaching strategies (e.g., demonstration, direct teaching, modeling, problem solving, guided practice with feedback). In comparison, Rush and Sheldon (2020) have identified five key characteristics of coaching: (a) joint planning, (b) observation, (c) action/practice, (d) reflection, and (e) feedback. Moreover, Friedman et al. described ten effective elements of coaching (e.g., capacity-building, goal oriented, collaborative, reflective).

Implementation of Coaching Strategies

Based on the diverse needs of ECEs and the children they serve, coaches should meet teachers "where they are," much as teachers do with the children and families they support. Caregiver coaching and joint planning use capacity-building approaches by modeling supportive strategies for ECEs (Inbar-Furst et al. 2020; Rush & Sheldon, 2020). Jablon et al. (2016) proposed that modeling in early childhood settings influences child outcomes, and coaches should model behaviors that positively influence interactions among teachers, children, and families.

Having a knowledgeable colleague to support teaching practices may guide teachers to self-reflect and improve practices that lead to positive child outcomes (Cruickshank, 1998; Onchwari & Keengwe, 2010). Furthermore, research indicates that an educator's knowledge base is built upon how the individual views oneself (Francois, 2020). Effective coaching, which includes self-reflection, may lead to caregiver-implemented strategies and the use of EBPs (Inbar-Furst et al. 2020; Meadan et al. 2017). Reflective practice takes place when adults participate in learning new information while engaged in the process (Kretlow & Bartholomew, 2010).

Study Purpose and Research Questions

Previous research about PD and coaching has used quantitative methods to examine the effectiveness of educators implementing behavior supports (Fettig & Artman-Meeker, 2016; Hemmeter et al. 2015), communication strategies (Storie et al. 2017), and literacy instruction (McCollum et al. 2011). This study used qualitative research methods to investigate PD and coaching and gain an in-depth understanding of the perceptions of ECEs regarding the support provided to them in their work with children in inclusive Pre-K

classrooms. In North Carolina, ECEs, who have obtained or are working toward a B-K license, are assigned mentors/evaluators (M/Es) through the statewide education agency, who often serve in a coaching role. The provision of coaching support provided to eligible ECEs is determined not only by the level of licensure held (i.e., Residency, Initial, Continuing) but through an individualized and strengths-based coaching model. The coaching model supports ECEs through phases of the NC Teacher Evaluation Process (e.g., self-assessment, professional development planning, formal and informal observation). Through an interactive modeling approach, coaches provide on-going support through implicit and explicit modeling.

One goal of coaching support is to enhance ECEs' understanding and implementation of the NC Professional Teaching Standards (Taylor et al. 2018). The integrated content of the NC Professional Teaching Standards (e.g., teacher leadership, facilitation of learning, reflective practice) serve as the conduit for performance evaluation and professional development of ECEs served by the statewide education agency.

The purpose of this study was to inform future practices used by M/Es as they support ECEs to provide high-quality inclusive education and care for children and families. This study sought to provide a voice to ECEs and to capture their perceived support needs. Qualitative research methods were used to gain an in-depth understanding of the perceptions of ECEs regarding M/E support provided to them, as well as what aspects of coaching is most beneficial to their work in inclusive classrooms. Examining the support needs of ECEs in their work with children and families may lead to the use of EBPs in inclusive settings as well as the use of specific PD and coaching models. At the time of this study, ECEs who participated were currently working as teachers in inclusive Pre-K settings. Five ECEs participated in a focus group and four ECEs participated during individual interviews by responding to open-ended questions related to working in inclusive Pre-K settings. This study addressed the following research questions:

1. What are the perceptions of ECEs regarding the supports provided by mentors and evaluators?
2. What specific aspects of coaching do ECEs report are needed to be successful while working in inclusive PreK settings?

Study Conceptual Framework

This exploratory study used an ethnomethodological framework to examine the perspectives of ECEs working in inclusive, Pre-K settings. Ethnomethodology uses interviews and storied accounts of everyday life events to empower, predict, and preempt change within organizational structures (Boje, 1991). This tradition is sociological in nature and refers to

ways that people organize daily, ordinary life events (Prasad, 2005). This framework is appropriate for this study due to the “ordinary” duties associated with teaching children in ECE settings. However, these “ordinary” actions often represent dynamic responsibilities of ECEs that may have lasting, life-altering outcomes for children and families. ECEs need to be flexible and adapt strategies for working with children and families. The framework used for this study analyzed the social interactions that take place when people strive to organize, adapt, and make sense of their everyday lives, even with constant change. M/Es may support ECEs during ongoing, natural, and unnatural changes that occur in ECE classrooms.

Methods

Qualitative research methods were used to examine perspectives of ECEs. A narrative approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was used to examine perspectives related to M/Es’ supports and the aspects of coaching ECEs report to be successful while working in inclusive, Pre-K settings. Researchers obtained Institutional Review Board approval from their university prior to data collection.

Participants

A convenience sampling method (Maxwell, 2005) was used to obtain participants for this study. The target population included ECEs who (a) had acquired or were working towards B-K licensure, (b) were enrolled in the Beginning Teacher Support Program and receiving M/E support through the Early Educator Support, Licensure, and Professional Development (EESLPD) offices, (c) had responded that they would like to participate in follow-up research by providing their contact information on the EESLPD office survey for ECEs (2017–2018), (d) worked in a non-public ECE site in North Carolina (NC) (e.g., NC Pre-K, NC Developmental Day classroom), (e) had a provisional license, and (f) were considered current or active in the NCEES/Home-base system.

A sampling frame of eligible participants was obtained by recruiting North Carolina ECEs who were currently supported by EESLPD office M/Es. These participants indicated on the EESLPD survey that they would like to participate in follow-up research regarding support received by their M/E. Participants were employed as an NC Pre-K or NC Developmental Day classroom teacher during the data collection period in one of several ECE sites (e.g., NC Pre-K only, Head Start/NC Pre-K, Developmental Day classroom/NC Pre-K, Head Start only, or NC Developmental Day classroom only).

Eligible ECEs represented non-public sites from both EESLPD office hubs (e.g., East Carolina University– East, UNC Charlotte – West). These hubs together serviced approximately 98 counties. ECEs who volunteered to participate were employed by nonpublic sites (e.g., NC Pre-K, Head Start, developmental day classroom) and were supported by M/Es.

Data Sources

Research questions for this study examined (a) ECE perceptions regarding the supports provided to them by EESLPD office M/Es through the use of semi-structured interviews and (b) the specific aspects of coaching that ECEs report are needed to be successful in inclusive classrooms. Prior to implementation of the focus group and individual interviews, participants were asked to sign an informed consent form for voluntary participation. Participants were also asked to complete optional demographic information (Table 1). The semi-structured interview questions (Table 2) were reviewed by an expert review panel (i.e., two university faculty members/researchers, two EESLPD office staff members, including the program coordinator and a M/E). Due to scheduling constraints, interviews were conducted via WebEx (WebEx, 2019) using both focus groups and individual interviews. Both focus groups and individual interviews used audio-recording features of WebEx, and participants used pseudonyms to address one another during the interview. Five participants were included in the focus group and supported by the EESLPD’s western hub. Four individual interviews were conducted with ECEs from the EESLPD’s eastern hub. The focus group lasted between 60

Table 1 Focus Group and Individual Interview Demographics for East and West Hubs

ECEs	East Hub		West Hub	
	Gender	Age	Race	PYE
Focus group				
Erica	F	30–39	W	4
Lucy	F	40–49	A	4
Ann	F	40–49	W	7
CC	F	50–59	W	7
Jessica	F	40–49	W	0
Individual interviews				
Tina	F	40–49	B	0
Paige	F	40–49	W	0
Tammi	F	50–59	W	30
Diana	F	50–59	B	35

Pseudonyms were used for all ECE names for both the focus groups and the individual interview portion of this study; *PYE* previous years of experience

Table 2 ECE Focus Group/
Individual Interview Questions

1	What successes have you had this school year in the early childhood classroom?
1.a	How have your successes been acknowledged and/or celebrated?
2	What challenges have you had this school year in the early childhood classroom?
2.a	How have your mentor and evaluator helped you during the challenging times in the classroom?
3	On what particular areas of your teaching do you feel you need help?
4	Describe ways in which your mentor/evaluator may or may not be responsive when you request help
5	Tell me about your comfort level regarding asking your mentor/evaluator for help
5.a	Tell me about reasons you may not reach out to you mentor/evaluator for help and support
6	Tell me about the experiences you've had with coaching and mentoring
7	How would you describe the coaching style of your mentor?
8	What are ways in which your mentor/evaluator has been able to support you?
8.a	What kinds of support should be offered by your mentor and evaluator?

The questions included in this table were asked to all participants during focus groups and individual interviews

and 90 min and the individual interviews lasted between 45 and 60 min. Participants represented both the western and eastern parts of NC and were given the opportunity to enter in a drawing to receive a \$50.00 e-gift card for participation.

Data Analysis

A narrative analysis was used for data collected from the focus groups and individual interviews. Data analysis began by transcribing responses from the semi-structured focus groups and individual interviews. Transcripts were reviewed manually line by line on three different iterations during the coding process. For research question one (RQ1), a doctoral student (DS) served as peer debriefer and reviewed the interview transcripts separately from the researchers and individually coded for potential themes (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). After the independent review of transcripts, they met and compared findings. Both the lead researcher (LR) and the DS completed subjectivity statements before the coding process to identify potential biases. The LR and the second author reviewed and recategorized participant responses into themes for research question two (RQ2). The LR and the DS reviewed transcripts through a winnowing process and reduced themes to improve the trustworthiness of data (Kitzinger, 1995). Member checks were completed following transcription of the interviews as a way to strengthen validity (Creswell & Miller, 2000). The LR completed member checking procedures by sending a copy of the transcript to participants. None of the participants requested changes or omissions from comments made during the interviews or focus groups.

Codes were investigated that clearly related to one another and formed themes (e.g., communication with M/Es was connected to type = phone, text, email while feedback was connected to = positive, negative, open). Main themes identified overlapped somewhat; therefore, sub-themes were developed to differentiate specific elements described for

each main theme. Main themes each had 3 sub-themes as well as defining indicators (e.g., Responsiveness [communication, feedback, specific support], Comfort Level [asking questions, reaching out, contacting others], Support Needs [should be offered, ECE as mentor, more guidance]). All ECE participants had obtained a bachelor's degree, a B-K license, and worked in a preschool setting in North Carolina.

Findings for Research Question One

Participants responses for RQ1 are summarized below and are located in Table 3. Three themes were derived from ECEs' responses during the focus groups and individual interviews (i.e., responsiveness, comfort level, support needs). Pseudonyms have been used in place of ECEs' names for individual quotes.

Responsiveness

The first theme, M/E responsiveness, relates to how M/Es communicate and provide feedback/support to ECEs. Many ECEs had positive comments regarding the responsiveness of their M/E. Participants described their communication style with their M/Es.

Paige expressed that her mentor is "...great, quick, responsive...if we needed her she was there through calling and emailing. In the past, at our team agreement [meeting] she was there in-person, we chatted about...[our] personal relationship and talked about the best way to communicate." In addition, Ann shared, "My mentor has been easy to talk to and has been very responsive." Furthermore, Paige put forth, "I can't think of a time that she [evaluator] isn't available. She's always been there for me when I've needed help."

She added,

Table 3 Quotes from 1st Research Question (What are the perceptions of ECEs regarding the supports provided?)

Themes	Quotes
Responsiveness	<p>“They’ve (mentors and evaluators) been hands on, very cooperative. They provide support by being there to listen and help find materials, activities, research articles, and sending different links to help with things you might be working on.”</p> <p>“My evaluator was very helpful, I’m new in the county and didn’t know where to go to get help. I was left just to figure it out for myself.”</p> <p>“My evaluator brought me stuff and looked stuff up for me. I have no problem asking for help, if I have an issue I would say, ‘Hey, I need help’ [laughs] but I wouldn’t want her to think that I didn’t know what I was talking about.”</p> <p>“My mentor can provide me with more support by meeting with me at a time other than naptime.”</p>
Comfort Level as ECE	<p>“I have become more confident, flexible, and a better advocate for my children.”</p> <p>“I communicate more and I’m open to new ideas”</p> <p>“I have learned to think more outside the box.”</p>
Support Needs	<p>“[I need] more support in managing challenging behaviors.”</p> <p>“More hands-on training in the area of inclusion.”</p> <p>“The office could provide resources on behavior management.”</p>

The themes in this table represent the perceptions of ECEs regarding the supports provided to them by mentors and evaluators

“My site administrator is my evaluator now and asked me what I wanted help with this year. We have a really open dialogue. We have a lot of verbal communication. She doesn’t email or send resources since I see her everyday...I can’t think of a time that she isn’t available. She’s always been there for me when I’ve needed help.”

Tina shared, “My mentor and evaluator were there every step of the way with any questions that I had.” CC added, “My evaluator was great and she understood me very well and always provided me with resources in any area I needed.” Erica acknowledged, “They were very helpful, there was not a time that I called, emailed or texted them that I did not receive a response. They truly extend their time and effort to help me of which I am very thankful.” Tammi noted,

“My evaluator was wonderful this year. She was supportive if I had any need or concern. She was quick to respond back to me on different issues. She always gave me several dates to pick from for my observations which was not available to me in the past from my last evaluator.”

Comfort Level as ECE

Several ECEs discussed differing levels of comfort in seeking support from their M/Es. The second theme, pertained to ECEs comfort level with their M/E regarding asking questions, reaching out to their M/E, and contacting others for support. While ECEs shared that they were comfortable reaching out to their M/E, they didn’t always want to ask for help. In reference to asking for help, Diana reported,

“Hey, I need help, [laughs] but I wouldn’t want her [M/E] to think that I didn’t know what I was talking about. I would always like for her to...[pause] sorry I’m looking for the right words. I always try to do the right things. I don’t want to come across like I don’t know what I’m doing, ya know? I don’t know. Sometimes I just want to say, ‘tell me how to do it and I’ll do it.’”

Erica acknowledged that when asking her M/E questions that she, “...didn’t want people to think I didn’t know my job.” Tammi described herself as, “...not liking to ask for help. But I feel pretty comfortable.” CC noted that she always feels comfortable, “On a scale of 1–10, a 10.” Separately, Paige shared about her own comfortability asking questions to her M/E. When speaking of her comfortability with her evaluator who also serves as her site administrator, she expressed, “I’m totally comfortable. Good, bad, ugly, it doesn’t matter. I feel really comfortable. We have a great relationship at work and outside of work so I’m very comfortable.”

Support Needs

Several ECEs shared their perceptions regarding the third theme, support needs, from their EESLPD office M/Es. Participants offered feedback that was focused on supports that should be offered including possible teacher-to-teacher support and more guidance from M/Es.

Erica acknowledged that she would like to know more about the mentor process because, “...we have turnover and I know the EESLPD can’t mentor every teacher who needs it.” Tammi noted, “[I need] collaborative efforts

between mentors and evaluators to support me” as well as “resources to meet the expectations on the rubric.” Diana expanded this discussion by adding the need for M/Es to “come to the classroom and demonstrate something you have been talking about or something you don’t know how to do.”

She shared,

“I’m a hands-on, visual learner. I’d rather see you do it than read about it. I like demonstration classrooms. I’d rather go see it done. I think they [M/E] should be able to come in and teach you what you need to learn about. [Instead of] just observing you and talking afterwards, be more hands on and come in. If I were an evaluator, I’d like that part more than evaluating. Being able to come in and show how to do something.”

Table 4 Quotes from 2nd Research Question (What specific aspects of coaching do ECEs report are needed to be successful while working in inclusive PreK settings?)

Themes	Quotes
Modeling and Demonstrations	<p>“I need more hands-on examples when it comes to what my mentor and evaluators are looking for.”</p> <p>“It would be nice if they would come to the classroom and demonstrate something you have been talking about or something you don’t know how to do.”</p> <p>“It would be helpful for them [mentor/evaluator] to be able to come to the classroom and demonstrate something you have talked about, or something you don’t know about, like what that should look like in the classroom...I think they should be able to come in and teach you what you need to learn about.” “More hands-on training in the area of inclusion.”</p> <p>“I think they [mentor/evaluator] should be able to come in and teach you what you need to learn about. [Instead of] just observing you and talking afterwards, be more hands on and come in. If I were an evaluator, I’d like that part more than evaluating. Being able to come in and show how to do something.”</p>
Information Sharing	<p>“[My M/E] showed us the solution cards [from the Center of Social and Emotional Foundations for Learning, CSEFEL]...but now we have to say first you need to do this and then you can do that.”</p> <p>“Talked with her about Becky Bailey’s Conscious Discipline and using breathing strategies to help the girl distract focus away from anger, positively redirect her. [For example] ‘I need you to help me, read this book to me.’ It diffuses [her] anger.” Tina added that her evaluator has been supportive because ‘... she knew I had children with challenging behaviors.’”</p>

The themes in this table represent the specific aspects of coaching ECEs reported as needed to be successful while working in inclusive PreK settings

Findings for Research Question Two

A summary of the findings for RQ2, “What specific aspects of coaching do ECEs report are needed to be successful while working in inclusive PreK settings?” are below and participants’ quotes can be found in Table 4. Four themes emerged from ECEs responses during the focus groups and individual interviews (i.e., modeling and demonstrations, information sharing, feedback, reflection). Pseudonyms have also been used in this section in place of ECE names in relation to quotes provided.

Modeling and Demonstrations

ECEs discussed specific strategies their M/Es could use to provide support. ECEs shared that they needed modeling (e.g., model classrooms) and demonstrations (e.g., hands-on

examples) from their M/Es in their work with children in inclusive settings. Ann noted that her M/E could, “Suggest model classrooms in the area that I could visit to help improve my own classroom.” Diana reported, “I need more hands-on examples when it comes to what my mentor and evaluators are looking for.” Furthermore, Erica shared, “I need to be provided with examples of what they need me to do.” Additionally, Lucy suggested, “Perhaps my mentor can provide me with specific examples to show best practices of things I’m working on to give me a picture of a model practice.”

Information Sharing

ECEs shared about the specific information they received from M/E’s including the need for more access to PD. Participants responded that they received both general and specific information from their M/Es. Tammi reported that her M/E “...share[d] resources.” Lucy added that “They [M/E] are always helping me find the right people for specific help.” She noted that her most “...enjoyable experiences” with her M/E was when she visited other NC Pre-K classrooms. About this experience, Jessica acknowledged:

“We are all teachers and a lot of times we are stuck in our own classrooms. Through the EESLPD program... my mentors and evaluators gave me several places I could observe other teachers’ classrooms.”

Lucy described her experience with her M/Es during exchanges of information,

“They’ve (M/Es) been hands on, very cooperative. They provide support by being there to listen and help find materials, activities, research articles, and sending different links to help with things you might be working on.”

Educators indicated that at times they worked together with M/Es to find answers to questions, and were overall comfortable asking for help. Erica described her evaluator as “always coming to me with concrete information.” Jessica added, “I would like a way for teachers to share the way we are now, to communicate, and those of us who have some stuff to share, just talking back and forth.”

Several ECEs mentioned the need for support about licensure and “affordable trainings and workshops.” Ann added, “maybe offer more online, evening PD classes” and “more resources based on [professional] goals.” Tina reported, “I really enjoy having a mentor to bounce ideas or thoughts off of when it comes to extending my personal growth and learning, so I would like to keep picking her brain at times because we got along so well. Separately, Diana shared, “They were very helpful and gave me resources to help me succeed.”

Feedback

ECEs discussed the feedback needed from their M/E. Some ECEs reported that they wanted more feedback regarding their teaching practice. Others indicated the current M/E services met their needs. CC suggested, “More feedback throughout the school year.” Tina shared, “By monitoring as they [M/E] did this year and giving me their feedback to help me.” Separately, Lucy said, “Continue to provide feedback, resources, and the encouragement that she is already giving.”

Reflection

ECEs reported about their participation in reflective practice guided by M/Es. CC acknowledged, “I’ve learned how to reflect on my practices during the week, how to apply areas of need to my lesson plan, and how to differentiate.” Jessica added, “[My M/E] helped with lesson planning and ways to help me reflect and incorporate more differentiation in my teaching.” Erica noted, “[My M/E] gives me ideas on how to reflect.” Diana shared, “I believe I have the opportunity to reflect and focus on specific areas of teaching to further develop.” See Table 4 for more examples of participants’ comments related to themes from the RQ2.

Discussion

This study’s purpose was to examine the perspectives of ECEs regarding the supports they need in order to meet standards set forth by professional organizations. This study analyzed the social interactions that take place when people organize and make sense of their everyday lives through the coaching strategies they preferred and their perceptions of support already offered. Qualitative research methods were used to learn about PD and coaching strategies used to support ECEs in their work with children in inclusive Pre-K settings.

Contributions to the Literature

This study described the perspectives of ECEs in terms of their support needs and the ways in which they could receive support. ECEs discussed their preferences for specific types of coaching strategies. They discussed their comfort level when communicating with their M/E, which contributes to the gap in existing literature. Building on previous research by Friedman et al. (2012), this study revealed ECEs’ preferences about specific aspects of coaching (i.e., modeling and demonstration, information sharing, reflection) in inclusive PreK settings. As noted by Rush & Sheldon, 2020, five characteristics of coaching were identified and align with

findings from this study suggesting ECEs prefer reflection and feedback.

Limitations and Implications for Future Research

Information obtained from the surveys did not provide clarity about participants' years of experience as licensed educators. Due to the range in years of experience indicated in survey responses, it may be interpreted that for ECEs who have a greater number of years in the classroom, they may have had coaching support for the same duration of time. Due to limitations of our data collection procedures, we were unable to determine what types of PD these ECEs received prior to receiving a license. Future research should obtain specific information about ECEs' years of experience as a licensed teacher.

Additionally, participants were engaged in individual interviews or focus groups. Not all ECEs participated in both formats. During focus groups, some comments prompted new ideas for discussion among ECEs. However, during individual interviews, ECEs shared detailed information on specific topics. To improve consistent application of the interview protocol across all participants, future studies should use one format (i.e., interview or focus group) rather than a combined format.

Finally, this study did not include follow-up interviews. Follow-up interviews would have been beneficial to gain more insight into ECE preferences within the coaching experience. Future studies could include a series of targeted questions that may provide information to inform coaching and supports for ECEs.

Implications for Practice

The development of a specialized coaching model for working with teachers in inclusive settings should be guided by perceptions and voices of ECEs who currently work with children and families in inclusive settings. Coaching while using this specialized framework may guide teachers' application of EBPs and could narrow the research-to-practice gap in inclusive classrooms. While DEC's RPs (e.g., INS4) and NAEYC standards have been established, these practices cannot be impactful for children unless they are applied by knowledgeable and skilled ECEs. Findings from this study indicate several implications for practice such as coaches' use of explicit modeling, reflective practice, and information sharing.

As one ECE noted, "I need you to show me." Specific to this study, findings suggest that ECEs want to be supported by coaches who use explicit modeling when working with children in inclusive classrooms. A shift to a more active coaching model could occur when supporting ECEs in inclusive classrooms. We recommend active, explicit modeling be

implemented with ECEs in a prospective specialized coaching framework.

Several participants commented that their M/Es were very good at "asking the right questions" that led to reflection. During interviews, some ECEs discussed that being guided through a self-reflective process by their M/E made them feel more confident as teachers.

A specialized coaching framework should include a deeply reflective component in which ECEs have opportunities to become self-aware in their need to consistently adapt to the learning needs of individual children in inclusive classrooms.

ECEs want information. Participants stated that they want to continue to receive information from their coaches that could include "...videos and references." Other implications for practice include providing ECEs a list of upcoming conferences and training opportunities. We recommend coaches provide specific resources to ECEs (e.g., online training, webinars).

Conclusion

In this study, ECEs were given the opportunity to share their perceptions of M/E support they receive, and to discuss specific coaching supports needed to be more effective teachers of children in inclusive settings. Findings from this research indicate that ECEs would like to have explicit modeling from coaches. The development of a specialized coaching model that includes explicit modeling to support ECEs could lead to a more prepared, knowledgeable, and highly skilled ECE workforce. ECEs who have specialized knowledge and who implement EBPs with children in inclusive settings may contribute to narrowing the research to practice gap. Furthermore, findings from this research may affect coaching practices offered to ECEs as a means to support their individual needs and guide them through a reflective practice that may influence their decision to stay in the field.

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Declarations

Conflict of interest The authors have no relevant financial or non-financial interests to disclose.

Informed consent A statement of informed consent is included in the manuscript.

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