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Early Head Start Teachers' Perception of Coaching Experiences

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Abstract

A rich literature describes the efficacy of coaching programs for early care and education (ECE) teachers. ECE teachers can provide unique insights into the coaching process and several studies have described the coaching experience from the perspective of ECE teachers serving preschool-age children. However, limited data are available to describe the coaching experience from the perspective of Early Head Start (EHS) teachers caring for at-risk 1- and 2-year-old toddlers. We therefore sought to document the lived experiences of a group of EHS teachers who underwent a comprehensive coaching program so that we could compare their descriptions to (a) the intended experience of the coaching program and (b) other reports in the literature describing the lived experiences of ECE teachers who underwent coaching. We completed a series of focus groups with 23 EHS teachers who were participating in a Practice-Based Coaching program. Teachers' descriptions of their lived experiences with coaching were recorded, transcribed, and qualitatively analyzed using the grounded theory approach. We identified four broad categories of responses: coaching strategies, relationship building, value added, and unintended consequences. We clarified the nature of these categories with additional themes and sample responses from the participants. Compared to prior focus group data, the teachers in our study more frequently described the impact of coaching on the class dynamic. We conclude by discussing considerations when coaching Early Head Start teachers.

Keywords Early Head Start · Early care and education · Teacher coaching · Teacher perspectives · Practice-based coaching · Teacher focus groups

High-quality early care and education (ECE) can have a significant, positive impact on children's developing cognitive, academic, and social outcomes, as documented by multiple meta-analyses (Camilli et al., 2010; Magnuson et al., 2016; Nores & Barnett, 2010). One of the most powerful influences in ECE is the classroom teacher, whose emotional support, classroom organization, and instructional support can significantly enhance children's social-emotional and early academic skills (Perlman et al., 2016). Most ECE teachers have lower educational qualifications and less preparation to support children's social and academic needs when compared to their K-12 counterparts (Early et al., 2007). Professional development (PD) can expand skills and refine beliefs of ECE teachers so that they can more effectively support children in their classrooms. The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC, 2011) defined PD as specialized learning and support activities intended to enhance teachers' knowledge, skills, practices, and dispositions. One type of PD consists of training, where instructors with specialized content knowledge and expertise in adult learning disseminate information, often in a group format, with the expectation that teachers synthesize that information into their practice. Coaching is a specialized type of training, where teacher knowledge and competency are expanded through an ongoing, personal relationship between the teacher and coach. With coaching, the teacher and coach must build trust so that they can develop shared goals and collaborate throughout the coaching process (NAEYC, 2011). A rich literature has documented improved ECE teacher beliefs and instructional practices as a result of high-quality coaching programs (Egert et al., 2018; Hindman & Wasik, 2012; Kraft et al., 2018; O'Flaherty et al.,

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2019; Ottley & Hanline, 2014; Romano & Woods, 2018; Zan & Donegan-Ritter, 2014; Zaslow et al., 2010). In Kraft et al.'s meta-analysis of 60 studies on ECE coaching, pooled effect sizes demonstrated that coaching programs resulted in significant improvements in teachers' instructional practices and children's academic outcomes.

Characteristics of Effective Coaching

In their scoping review of high-quality ECE coaching programs, Elek and Page (2019) identified four essential features of effective coaching programs: observation, feedback, goal setting, and reflection. Successful observation, feedback, and goal setting relies on the coach's and teacher's abilities to build a true partnership and engage in collaborative practice (Jayaraman et al., 2015). The coaching experience is culminated by having the coach, as a trusted expert, guide teachers in deep reflection on their practice over time (Riley, 2003). One popular coaching approach that includes these central features and has been implemented at scale is Practice-Based Coaching (PBC; Snyder et al., 2015). PBC is a cyclical process where the coach and teacher assess classroom needs, jointly plan for modifications to instructional practices, and evaluate the effectiveness of the targeted practices by having the coach observe the teacher and children. As part of the evaluation process, the teacher is guided to reflect and respond to the coach's feedback. Multiple studies have provided evidence documenting the effectiveness of PBC in ECE (Conroy et al., 2014; Dennis et al., 2021; Gardner-Neblett et al., 2020; Sutherland et al., 2018). For example, Gardner-Neblett et al. documented significant growth in ECE teachers' perceived self-efficacy in supporting young children's language growth after participating in a workshop and one-on-one PBC, with teachers participating in PBC showing significantly more growth than teachers participating in the workshop alone.

ECE Teachers' Insights into Coaching

Given the central role of teachers as collaborative partners in the coaching process, they can provide valuable insight into the coaching experience. Studies on coaching effectiveness typically document the impact of coaching on teachers' perceived self-efficacy and their recommendations for improving the coaching program (e.g., Onchwari & Keengwe, 2008; Romano & Woods, 2018). For example, the teachers in Onchwari and Keengwe's study completed an emergent literacy coaching program and reported good fidelity in implementation, general acceptance of the coaching curriculum, and recommendations for decreasing the number of tasks included in the training. This type of feedback helps identify potential adaptations to an individual curriculum but provides limited insight into the full lived experiences of teachers completing a coaching program.

Qualitative analysis of focus group and interview data can provide rich insight into teachers' opinions about the coaching experience. The goal of qualitative analysis is to understand how and why people behave in certain ways (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Several studies have systematically examined ECE teachers' perceptions of the coaching experience, asking teachers to identify aspects of coaching that they liked (or perceived to be effective) and aspects that could be improved (Knoche et al., 2013; Nasser et al., 2015; Shannon et al., 2021; Taylor et al., 2021). One common theme captured relationship building between the coach and caregiver. For example, teachers from Knoche et al. described the importance of collaboration, feedback, and supportiveness in the coach-coachee relationship. Teachers from Shannon et al. also highlighted how the coaches provided a level of accountability that was missing in self-guided PD. Teachers from Taylor et al. highlighted the importance of the coaches' responsiveness and overall level of comfort between the coach and teacher. A second major theme surrounded the value added from the coaching experience (i.e., perceived benefits and positive outcomes). For example, teachers from Nasser et al. appreciated the practical, hands-on strategies provided by their coaches, and teachers from Knoche et al. described the benefit of having another adult in the classroom to assist with instruction. Many respondents described improvements in their instructional practice (Knoche et al.; Shannon et al.), changes in thinking, and improved child outcomes (Shannon et al.). A final theme surrounded unintended consequences with coaching (i.e., perceived disadvantages and negative outcomes), such as increasing the teachers' workload and awkward interactions with coaches (Knoche et al.), as well as questions about the fit of coaching for experienced teachers (Nasser et al.).

Coaching ECE Teachers Serving At-risk Children

Children raised in poverty frequently experience poor academic and social outcomes, which are related to altered neural pathways associated with the adverse conditions of poverty (Hair et al., 2015). Head Start (HS), founded in 1965 and reauthorized in 2007, is a federal initiative designed to counteract the impact of poverty by providing education, health, and nutrition support to low-income children, aged three to five years, and their families. In 1994, the Early Head Start (EHS) program was introduced, which extended supports to low-income pregnant women and families with infants and toddlers (up to 3 years of age). A core service within EHS is center-based caregiving, where infants and

toddlers attend a classroom within a center and are cared for by an EHS teacher who is trained to advance infants' and toddlers' physical, cognitive, social, and emotional skills (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, n.d.).

When children in poverty experience high-quality instruction, they often experience significantly improved oral language skills and academic readiness (McCartney et al., 2007). Coaching programs can empower HS and EHS teachers to modify their beliefs and improve instructional practices (Hindman & Wasik, 2012; Romano & Woods, 2018; Zan & Donegan-Ritter, 2014). In fact, the National Center on Quality Teaching and Learning (2020) encourages all HS and EHS providers to implement Practice-Based Coaching (PBC) given the teacher-centered approach and strong evidence-base demonstrating how PBC programs lead to improved instruction and child outcomes (Conroy et al., 2014; Dennis et al., 2021; Gardner-Neblett et al., 2020; Sutherland et al., 2018).

Documenting the lived experience of HS and EHS teachers can provide unique insights into the coaching process because of the high level of need for many of the children and because the teachers themselves tend to have a lower income and report a higher level of workplace stress when compared to other ECE providers (Li Grining et al. 2010; Whitaker et al., 2015). Most studies examining the lived experiences of the coaching process queried ECE teachers who teach children from middle- and upper-middle class households, with only Nasser et al. (2015) exclusively examining HS teachers. Two of the major themes identified in Nasser et al.'s focus groups were consistent with themes from the other ECE focus groups: the appreciation of resources and usable knowledge (i.e., practical applications) and an appreciation of positive interactions with their mentors. The respondents in Nasser et al. noted several concerns with coaching that were not highlighted in the other focus groups, including (a) the selection process (i.e., how the center decided who would receive coaching), (b) the benefit for all participants (i.e., some participants believed coaching was most appropriate for novice teachers), and (c) the clarity of expectations for involvement.

Summary and Rationale

Coaching can be a powerful force in the ECE classroom. Prior studies have provided distinctive insight into the coaching process by documenting ECE teachers' perceptions of the coaching process, yet more data are needed on the coaching experiences of teachers serving young children who are at risk for poor social and academic outcomes. In addition, nearly all of the ECE teachers in prior studies taught older preschool children, leaving much unknown about the coaching experiences of ECE teachers who care for infants and toddlers. Preschool teachers implement an academic curriculum, with a primary focus on mathematics and emergent literacy (e.g., Evidence-Based Program for an Integrated Curriculum; Fantuzzo, et al., 2011), and they tend to participate in coaching programs that also focus on early academics (Egert et al., 2018; Kraft et al., 2018; Zaslow et al., 2010). ECE teachers who care for infants and toddlers tend to focus less on academics and more on fostering children's general language and social-emotional skills (National Center on Early Childhood Development, Teaching, and Learning, 2017). Likewise, their coaching programs tend to focus on children's language and social-emotional skills (O'Flaherty et al., 2019; Ottley & Hanline, 2014; Romano & Woods, 2018). Furthermore, the types of interactions between teachers and children differs across these age groups, with infants and toddlers lacking much of the independence of their preschool counterparts.

We were interested in documenting the first-hand accounts of EHS teachers who underwent a comprehensive coaching program. We aimed to capture the experiences of EHS teachers who served at-risk infants and toddlers, as the realities of these teachers' day-to-day lives are quite different than teachers serving older, predominantly middle- and upper-middle class children, which may result in different perceptions of the coaching experience. We sought to document EHS teachers' perceptions of the coaching experience by addressing the following research question: What were the lived experiences of EHS teachers participating in PBC?

Methods

Participants

We recruited 23 EHS teachers to participate in a series of focus groups in the spring of 2019. The teachers were all employed by a large early childhood and community engagement center, practicing at two different sites located in the tenth and eleventh poorest zip codes in the state. Across the two sites, the early childhood center managed 24 EHS classrooms, 15 HS classrooms, and 13 4-year-old and 5-year-old kindergarten classrooms. The educational center also operated a home-based prenatal and early educational program, serving hundreds of families in the community. The EHS classrooms offered year-round programming and had class sizes of eight or less children, with a Lead Teacher and Assistant Teacher in each classroom. The educational center consistently received the highest rating (five stars) from the state's YoungStar rating program, which evaluates the training and education of staff, the curriculum and learning environment, the center's business and professional practices, and the center's initiatives surrounding health and wellness (Wisconsin Department of Children and Families, n.d.). In

2017, the center was one of the only programs to have ever received a perfect score on the YoungStar rating. The center had strong administrative leadership, which included a president, three vice presidents, three program directors, and four administrative directors. The center had substantial financial and non-financial support from organizations throughout the region and has been a good steward of those resources, earning 100 out of 100 points on the Encompass Rating system for finance and accountability (Charity Navigator, n.d.)

All participating teachers were serving as Lead Teachers in their classroom; six of the teachers had been Assistant Teachers but were filling in as Lead Teachers due to staff turnover. The teachers had, on average, 4.9 years of experience teaching at the educational center (SD 2.9; range 1–12.75 years). Six teachers had a high school diploma, 11 had an associate's degree (2 years post secondary), and four had a bachelor's degree (4 years post secondary). All teachers were female and spoke English as their first language. Eighteen of the teachers were African American and five were White.

Professional Development

Regular, purposeful, and high-quality professional development has been and continues to be implemented at our partner educational center. The educational center requires that all Lead Teachers and Assistant Teachers participate in regular, ongoing training and coaching from the time they begin working at the agency.

Coaches

Each teacher at the educational center was assigned a coach and each coach was responsible for working with eight classrooms, coaching a Lead Teacher and Assistant Teacher in each classroom. All coaches had a bachelor's degree in Early Childhood Education or a related field (with a minimum of 18 credits in Early Childhood). Coaches had at least 5 years of experience working with children ages birth—five and experience with teacher coaching. Coaches received ongoing professional development on best-practices in coaching and were directly supervised by the Director of Educational Programs. The coaches were responsible for both individualized coaching and participating in professional learning communities (PLCs) with the teachers and other coaches. Six different coaches worked with the 23 teachers who participated in this study.

Professional Learning Communities

There were four PLC meetings in the fall, prior to the beginning of the academic year. The initial PLC meetings included the center's *Day in the Life of a Teacher* program, where the group spent time discussing what a typical day of teaching looked like. The teachers and coaches also reviewed the center's teacher manual, which explained the daily schedule, how to develop routines, lesson planning, education policies, assessments, and data collection procedures. The goal of these early PLC meetings was to establish the expectations for the teachers and allow the PLC to collaboratively prepare for the coming year. The PLC meetings in the fall also provided the opportunity for the coaches to introduce the teachers to new aspects of the coaching program. In addition to the four PLC meetings at the beginning of the academic year, the teachers and coaches had monthly Collaborative Curriculum PLC meetings, where the PLCs discussed data, children's outcomes, and had collaborative planning time for the teachers to share ideas about the EHS curriculum and routines.

Individualized Coaching

In addition to the PLC meetings, each teacher participated in individualized coaching. The educational center implemented Practice-Based Coaching (PBC), which was a cyclical coaching process that supported the teachers' use of effective teaching practices. The immediate goals of the PBC program were to promote teachers' deep reflection about their beliefs surrounding teaching and child development and to improve the quality of instruction. The ultimate goal of the coaching program was to observe improved outcomes for the children in each classroom as a result of the improved instruction. The PBC system at our partner educational center was designed to create a collaborative partnership by fostering a trusting relationship between the teachers and their coaches. The three key components of the coaching cycle included focused observation, development (or refinement) of an action plan, and teacher reflection on instructional practices. The focused observations occurred twice per month. At a minimum, teachers and coaches were required to meet weekly for 20–30 min. Additional meetings were completed if deemed necessary by the teacher or the coach.

One key component of the PBC coaching process was data collection. In the fall of 2018, the center introduced the Construct Coaching tool (Southwest Human Development, n.d.), which was an online tool that allowed coaches to enter data on teacher performance and facilitated the teachers' and coaches' collaborative identification of coaching goals. Coaches completed focused observations of teacher practices twice per month and entered data into the Construct Coaching tool. Data were also collected on children's social-emotional and language developmental status. This child-level data was used to create an Individualized Child Plan, with each child having their own goals.

The teachers and coaches used these teacher- and child-level data to collaboratively develop an action plan with set goals. Goals focused on instructional techniques to foster the children's social-emotional and/or language skills. Subsequent observations were then completed and entered into the Construct Coaching tool, with the coach providing feedback and encouraging the teachers to use these new data to reflect on their practices and on their beliefs about the role of early education in promoting children's development. From these meetings, the team discussed the current goals and developed new goals as needed. The PBC action plan—observation—reflection cycle would then be repeated, working on a particular set of goals, and then transitioning to new goals as appropriate.

To illustrate the coaching program at our partner educational center, we provide an example of a PBC coaching sequence. During the focused observation, one coach identified that a teacher was responsive to some of the children, but notably less responsive to several of the children in the classroom. This observed trend was entered into the Construct Coaching tool. Looking at the child-level data, the coach also realized that some of the children who received less responsivity from the teacher had expressive language goals on their Individualized Child Plans. Looking at both the child- and teacher-level data, the coach and teacher jointly developed the goal of increasing responsivity to the children with lower language skills. The teacher reflected on this feedback and worked with the coach to develop instructional strategies. During the subsequent focused observation session, the coach noticed an increase in responsivity and gave the teacher feedback, reinforcing the teacher's increased input to the child and providing additional suggestions for enhancing responsivity with the children.

Focus Groups

Our strategy was to complete focus groups with five to six EHS teachers per group until we reached saturation, where no new major themes were included during the focus group sessions (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). We completed these focus groups across the two sites in April and May of 2019. The two sites worked under the same early childhood organization but had little interaction with each other. Each site had its own administrative directors and coaches. The meetings occurred over the lunch hour, with lunch provided to the teachers. The focus group procedure was based on the recommended best-practices described in Krueger and Casey (2014). During each meeting, the first author served as the moderator and the second author was the note taker. The moderator and note taker had no prior interactions with any of the teachers. The moderator completed a 2-day in-person workshop with Richard Krueger and Mary Anne Casey for hands-on training in focus group methodology. The moderator started the session by providing background information and describing expectations for participation (see "Appendix"). He then asked an introductory question to initiate the group conversation without establishing the dominance of any given teacher ("Tell us one thing that your children did in the last week to make you laugh"). Each teacher was given the chance to answer the question if she wished.

The moderator then transitioned to the two key questions for this study: "What are some things you like about your current coaching?" and then "What are some things with coaching that you don't think are very helpful?" We chose to use non-leading open-ended questions to provide the respondents the opportunity to describe aspects of coaching that they found most relevant to their lived experience and to avoid dichotomous questions, which do not promote deep discussion (Krueger & Casey, 2014). Asking about both positive and negative experiences was consistent with prior studies of ECE teachers' perceptions of coaching (Knoche et al., 2013; Nasser et al., 2015; Shannon et al., 2021; Taylor et al., 2021) and made it clear that we were interested in hearing a range of opinions about coaching. The teachers were given ample time to answer each question, with sessions lasting approximately 1 h. The moderator would ask clarifying questions as needed. On occasion, he had to redirect participants who were speaking off-topic. He cued all participants to contribute to the conversation but did not require responses from any individual. All sessions were audio recorded and later transcribed. After completing each focus group, the moderator and note taker completed a debriefing session to develop preliminary impressions of the findings. The team reviewed the note taker's notes, identified the major themes, and determined if any new themes were introduced during the session. Most new themes were observed during the second and third session, with the third session revealing some small idiosyncratic differences that were likely related to teachers being at a different site. We identified no major new themes after the fourth session and concluded that we had reached saturation and stopped our recruitment effort.

Analysis

We completed qualitative analysis of the data using grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). We recruited two masters-level graduate students in speech-language pathology to be our research assistants (RAs) and assist with the coding. The RAs had experience assisting with research but had no formal training with qualitative analysis. The first author has training and experience completing qualitative analysis and provided mentoring to the rest of the coding team. The RAs transcribed each of the focus group sessions and then carefully read the transcripts to familiarize themselves with the

data. They completed open coding of the data to name, categorize, and describe phenomena (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The RAs read the transcripts, identified excerpts that contained a unique idea, and gave one or more codes to capture the teachers' perceived intent. The RAs were instructed to insert multiple codes and write memos throughout the open coding process. For example, one teacher stated, "I've had mostly a positive experience with the coaching. My coach is laid back and willing to like work with you." The RAs initially gave the following codes for this statement: positive, thoughts about coaching, coach traits, collaborative, and personality. The RAs discussed their coding and used constant comparison, where they compared existing codes (and the associated text) with other codes and text, adjusting the codes as needed (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). After completing an initial round of open coding on the transcripts, the two RAs met with the first and second authors to review the initial coding. The team discussed the codes and consulted the original text from the transcripts to refine the codes. The first and second authors made recommendations to the RAs to modify the coding, including suggestions to combine individual codes. In the above example, the coding team concluded that terms "positive," "negative," and "thoughts about coaching" were too general and that the features of the coach were the most appropriate codes. The team also determined that "disposition" was a more precise and inclusive term than "personality." The RAs returned to the transcripts and finished the open coding process, resulting in a uniform set of codes aligned with the transcript text.

The first author exported the codes and affiliated text into a spreadsheet to begin axial coding, which is the process of seeking common themes by comparing codes and referring to the original text for clarification (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). He noted the central phenomena associated with the different codes and began organizing the codes into multiple themes. Theme development and organization was an iterative process, with the creation of themes, rumination, and revision of themes. He created an initial model, or theory, of teachers' perception of coaching and presented it to the second author and RAs. The full coding team met to discuss these themes, again reviewing individual codes and related text. The data were verified by consulting with the coding notes from each focus group session and revised as necessary (Morse et al., 2002). The team made minor revisions until every member of the team concluded that the final model was an accurate representation of the data.

We then presented our model to three administrators at the educational center, who served as content expert auditors to determine the trustworthiness of the data (Amankwaa, 2016). Each of these administrators had training in early childhood education and had daily interactions with EHS teachers and coaches. Each administrator was familiar with best practices in coaching and appreciated the day-to-day experiences of individual teachers and coaches. We presented our model, described each theme, and provided excerpts from the text to illustrate each theme. The administrators had minor feedback and uniformly agreed that our model was a reasonable and accurate depiction of the lived experiences of teachers receiving coaching.

Results

Our final theoretical model of coaching included four major categories of themes, each with additional sub-branching themes that provide more detailed specification of our model of coaching. The categories, major themes, and descriptions of the themes are provided in Table 1. Within these categories and themes, the participating teachers described both positive and negative experiences related to the coaching model. We will next describe each category within the model and provide sample text that embodies the participants' viewpoints.

Coaching Strategies

Teachers frequently mentioned day-to-day events that occur when implementing a coaching program. When discussing coaching strategies, the teachers described the clear, tangible activities completed throughout the coaching process, which included the coaches' observations and interactions, shared development of instructional goals, feedback from coaches on progress towards the goals, and personal reflection on their growth as teachers.

Classroom Observations & Interactions

One core coaching strategy frequently mentioned was the coach's direct interactions with the teachers in the classroom, which included their observation of instruction. Teachers expressed a desire for the coach's observations to authentically capture their interactions with children and their execution of instructional strategies. The teachers wanted these observations to be non-intrusive and accurately depict their everyday interactions. For example, one teacher expressed frustration when a coach stated, "I need to observe you doing this, I need to observe you doing that" and described how it was not authentic, questioning, "Well how do I get the kids to listen to me and bring them all geared to that one task that she wants us to do?" Many teachers had opinions about the number of observations and interactions that they had with their coaches, with most teachers believing that coaching sessions were too frequent (e.g., "Okay, you were just here, and now you're back?") and too long (e.g., "They want to do a 30-min observation and sit and talk to you again for another 20–30 min—so we're at an hour now"). A few

Table 1 Theoretical model of coaching with descriptions of major themes

Major categories	Themes	Description
Coaching strategies	Classroom observations & interactions	Coach's direct interactions in the classroom, mainly observing instruction. Desire for observation that is *naturalistic;* with appropriate *frequency* and *duration,* completed at an *opportune* time
	Goal setting	Collaborative development of goals that, ideally, are *individualized* and *practical.* Desire for a manageable number of goals. The purpose of the goals, and coaching in general, should be *clear* to the teachers
	Feedback	Coach's feedback provides insight into the teaching process. Feedback can be presented through multiple modalities, such as discussions or watching videos of instruction
	Reflection	Teacher self-reflection provides the opportunity to ruminate on instructional practices
Relationship building	Collaboration	True partnership between coach and teacher, characterized by a shared vision
	Supportiveness	Coach's provision of reassurance, compassion, and encouragement
	Disposition	Coach's personality and temperament. Desire for coaches that are warm and good-natured
Value added	Instructional practice	Teachers use of new or improved strategies with their children. Often observed to coincide with improved child outcomes
	Additional resources	The teachers described multiple instances where coaches provided resources, which assisted with day-to-day classroom activities
Unintended consequences	Class dynamic	Teachers frequently observed disruptions to their classrooms as a result of the coaching process, often as a result of a new adult in the room
	Teacher workload	Teachers had to complete additional non-instructional activities, such as paperwork and meetings, which added responsibilities to an already busy schedule

teachers felt that they did not see their coaches enough, such as the teacher who stated, “You can have the problem also of not seeing your coach that often.” Many teachers also expressed frustration when the observations and interactions were completed at an inopportune time, with one teacher stating that “Sometimes the timing is wrong” and that often there is “just too much going on.” Another teacher wished that her coach would not “try to discuss it when we're interacting with the children,” but, rather, would wait until a more opportune time. The teachers frequently described the importance of flexibility in scheduling observations and interaction, with one teacher stating, “I can't say you can come in every single time you see me at 10:00.” Another teacher was pleased that her coach “lets me determine when she's coming in,” and another teacher described her success in collaborating with her teacher to find a good time, stating, “I literally had to let my coach know, a couple weeks ago, it was just too much going on. I said now is not the time and she respected it after a few minutes.”

Goal Setting

Teachers frequently described the process for developing goals and the types of goals that they developed. Teachers highlighted the importance of individualizing goals to their needs, with one teacher stating, “I would like somebody to help me with things that I want to work on that I feel that I need to.” The teachers also described the number of goals that were developed at any given time, with a preference for a smaller, more manageable list of goals, including a teacher who was pleased when her coach “Focused only on one goal and she would come in and we would work on it”. Teachers also commented on the goals themselves and appreciated practical, “hands-on” guidance from their coaches, such as suggestions for class activities and concrete strategies to promote children's engagement. The teachers also described the importance of clearly establishing the purpose of coaching, with one respondent stating that “I want to know what is developed and how does it affect me or anything, like my job.” Teachers expressed dissatisfaction when they did not have a strong understanding of the purpose of the coaching (e.g., “It's kind of like you're coached to be coached”).

Feedback

Teachers frequently described how coaches provided feedback, communicating their observations and making suggestions for the teachers. The teachers described how the feedback was often useful, with one teacher stating, “So they can see something and help you to fix it in the right way when you don't even see it, because we're so caught in our daily schedule and what we are doing today, and they guide us and help us try a different way that's beneficial for the classroom and the children.” Another teacher stated, “I like to see how I did, I like to argue back with the coach what I think I did better than what she said. I just like the back-and-forth exchange, the feedback.” The teachers also described the modality of feedback, with many comments about watching videos of themselves with the children. Most teachers described initial unease with watching themselves,

yet ultimately saw the value in this objective feedback. One teacher stated, "In the beginning, please don't record me, I don't want to hear my voice. But when I go back now and see, I can see my progress." Another teacher stated, "I'm probably, like, not the shyest person in the world so I like to get recorded. I like to hear feedback. I like that kind of stuff, like don't none of that bother me."

Reflection

Teachers also appreciated the opportunity to reflect on the coaching process and on their instructional practices. For example, one teacher stated that she used the feedback to "Sit back and think of different ways to do things." Another teacher described how reflection helped her "Build that knowledge just by saying hey, I could have done this, I could have done this, and next time you'll keep that in your thoughts, and you can utilize what you missed out on," while another teacher concluded, "We're often our own biggest critics."

Relationship Building

Our analyses of the transcripts and session notes illustrated the importance of interpersonal relationships between teachers and coaches. Key features of teacher and coach relationships included the ability to collaborate, perceived supportiveness of the coach, and the coach's overall disposition.

Collaboration

When describing the relationships with their coaches, the teachers highlighted the importance of having a true partnership, with a shared vision for coaching. Most teachers described having positive, cooperative relationships with their coaches, which strengthened the coaching experience. For example, when describing the relationship with her coach, one teacher felt that, "we're a team and working together to get an outcome" and another teacher stated that her coach "was like a team member." Some teachers did not experience as strong of a collaborative partnership with their coaches, which impacted their coaching experience (e.g., "She's very black and white and not as flexible").

Supportiveness

Whereas the descriptions of collaboration in coaching addressed shared responsibilities and decision making, teachers' descriptions of supportiveness in coaching spoke to the coaches' level of reassurance, compassion, and encouragement. Teachers who had supportive coaches had more positive experiences and expressed greater perceived self-efficacy. For example, one teacher stated, "She just pushed me and pushed me and gave me the feedback and what I needed, and I was like, 'OK, I got this.'" Another teacher stated, "She's always reassuring me and saying, oh you know, 'what did you like about the session?' or 'what do you think worked?' and, you know, even if it's something that was challenging, she's always very positive about, you know, next time we'll do it."

Disposition

The final trait frequently described by the teachers was related to the coaches' personality and temperament. Most teachers appreciated when they perceived their coaches to have a calm, cool, and good-natured temperament, with teachers appreciating coaches who were "laid back" and "just generally a nice person to be around." One teacher stated that her coach "has patience with me." Some teachers had coaches with dispositions that were not as warm and open. For example, one teacher, describing her interactions with her coach, stated, "When she speaks, her tone is firm and strong."

Value Added with Coaching

The teachers described many positive outcomes from coaching, which they perceived to provide true value added from the coaching experience. The teachers perceived that value was most added with their instructional practices and through the provision of additional resources from the coaching staff.

Instructional Practice

During each of the focus groups, multiple teachers described how coaching resulted in improvements with their teaching. The teachers described how they learned to implement new strategies, as evidenced by the teacher who stated, "It gives you new ideas for how to approach different situations." Another teacher stated, "I think it has made me a better teacher, added more to my teaching skills." Several teachers recognized how their improved instruction had a significant impact on the children in their classrooms. For example, one teacher described how she used coaching and "applied it and it ended up turning out helpful for the school year because now all of my kids are talking more than they did at the beginning of the school year." Another teacher described how the coaches "guide us and help us try a different way that's beneficial for the classroom and the children."

Added Resources

The teachers described how participation in a coaching program provided resources that they would have not otherwise

had. For example, one teacher stated that her coach "actually found the pictures, laminated them, brought them to me, and just gave me different ideas of how to use them with the children." Another teacher stated that her coach also helped with identifying appropriate materials, stating, "We were doing the alphabet with the name and the sound during group time and she made me these really nice cards and it was helpful at group time for the 3-year-olds." Another teacher described the value added when her coach "Comes right in, she sits down, plays with my kids. They think of her as a third teacher."

Unintended Consequences

When describing their perception of the coaching experience, teachers described many aspects of coaching that were unsatisfactory or disagreeable. In particular, teachers described how the coaching experience had a significant impact on the class dynamic and, at times, increased their individual responsibilities and overall workload.

Class Dynamic

Many teachers expressed frustration with the classroom disruptions that often occur during the observation and coaching sessions. The teachers identified multiple examples of how disorder can ensue during coaching sessions, with many impassioned expressions of frustration. Many teachers stated that the children experienced different patterns of behavior when a new adult entered the classroom. For example, one teacher stated, "Even though they know her, some of [the children] will kind of show off, and then some of them are afraid of her." Another teacher stated that coaching "causes a sudden change that causes a lot of confusion with the children, and it's chaotic," and another teacher observed that children realize, "My teacher is busy right now so it's time for me to rock and roll." Another teacher stated, "And the whole thing changes because of how the kids will react because she's in there. I mean things are just totally different." One teacher was concerned that the coach's presence was a potential safety issue, stating, "I know in the back of my mind it's safety first. You know, even though I'm here in this coaching session I still need to be aware of what is going on around me, so I need an extra set of eyes."

Increased Workload

Teachers also described many examples of how the coaching experience can result in added duties for the teachers, such as scheduling, communication with coaches, homework, and paperwork. For example, one teacher expressed frustration with "Having to do a lot of paperwork, you know, going through, like, the data, the action plan, and all that, because our job is already stressful with the amount of paperwork we have to do."

Discussion

Coaching has been identified as a best practice for promoting the growth and development of ECE teachers, with multiple efficacy studies documenting that quality coaching leads to improved instruction and better child outcomes (Egert et al., 2018). Elek and Page's (2019) scoping review found that most quality coaching programs include observation, feedback, goal setting, and reflection. Many coaching curricula, such as PBC, include these four active ingredients (Snyder et al., 2015). We will first discuss how the teachers' descriptions of their lived experiences aligned with the four components of PBC.

Did the Teachers Describe Active Ingredients of PBC?

The analyses from our focus groups revealed that the EHS teachers in our study described each core component of the PBC approach—observation, feedback, goal setting, and reflection were frequently mentioned and characterized as important features of their coaching program. The teachers valued these active ingredients, expressing satisfaction when they were present and dissatisfaction when they were absent. Of these four components, reflection was mentioned less often than the others, possibly because self-reflection was less tangible than the other aspects of coaching. Also, reflection occurs within the teacher and may have been considered to a lesser extent when asked about coaching. Relatedly, the teachers discussed the importance of collaboration with their coach, with an entire category within our model dedicated to relationship building. These relationships are what separate coaching from more general PD and training (NAEYC, 2011). Jayaraman et al., (2015) illustrated the importance of relationship building for effective observation, feedback, goal setting, and reflection, which was recognized by the teachers in our study. The teachers were not explicitly asked to identify the components of coaching, but naturally included them in their descriptions of the coaching experience, showing that these active ingredients are powerful and meaningful.

Whereas we reached saturation on the major themes, there was some inconsistency across the teachers in their relative satisfaction and dissatisfaction with their coaching experience within some themes. For example, some teachers thought that they were receiving too much coaching, while others thought that they did not get enough. Some teachers liked their coach's disposition while others did not. Some saw the purpose of coaching while others believed the

purpose was unclear. We observed no teacher-level variables that would predict this pattern of results. To protect confidentiality and increase the comfort of the teachers, we did not ask them to identify their coach, so we could not determine if the differences in satisfaction could be explained at the coach level.

Were the EHS Teachers' Descriptions of Their Lived Experiences Similar to or Different from Those in Prior Studies?

We observed many similarities from the accounts of our teachers and those reported in the literature (Knoche et al., 2013; Nasser et al., 2015; Shannon et al., 2021; Taylor et al., 2021). A common theme in our study and the prior studies was the importance of relationship building between the coaches and teachers, which included effective communication, comfort with coaches' dispositions, obtaining helpful feedback, and the coaches' supportiveness. These studies described much of the same value added that our respondents mentioned, including the importance of practical advice, provision of additional resources, improvement in instructional practice, and improvement in student outcomes. The unintended consequences described in these prior studies also resonated with the teachers in our study, including the observed increases in workload and occasional awkward interpersonal interactions, at times influenced by personality differences.

There was one notable similarity in the responses from Nasser et al. (2015) and the teachers in our study that was not observed in the other studies. Both our teachers and the teachers in Nasser et al. expressed dissatisfaction when the coaching expectations and teacher selection process were not clearly explained to the teachers. This unique finding from within these two groups of teachers could have been idiosyncratic. The coaches at these sites may have underspecified the purpose and selection process for coaching, or these particular teachers may have expressed this dissatisfaction. An alternate explanation could be related to the characteristics of this pool of teachers, with both groups exclusively serving at-risk children in HS and EHS and most of the teachers being non-white. The effects of systemic racism in the United States can be observed in educational settings, with non-white teachers frequently expressing mistrust of educational systems (Brezicha & Fuller, 2019). Our teachers and the teachers from Nasser et al. may have had a level of mistrust and skepticism that made them question the purpose of coaching and why they were selected to complete it.

One striking difference between our study and prior studies surrounded the unintended consequence of coaching on the class dynamic, which stimulated the most passionate comments in our focus group sessions. In every focus group, there were long and heartfelt concerns expressed about the impact that the coaching activities had on the children in the classroom. The teachers described how the coaching experience resulted in frequent shifts in the class dynamic that often dysregulated the children. Understandably, these EHS teachers had notable concerns about the logistics of the coaching process, wanting to ensure that they obtain the optimal dosage of coaching, implemented at the most opportune times to minimize the impact on the class dynamic. The teachers acknowledged the fluidity of EHS classrooms and highlighted the need for flexibility in scheduling. Our teachers may have mentioned these logistical issues more than the teachers in prior studies because of variations in the implementation of coaching across the locations, with different policies for when and where the coaching occurs. Another plausible explanation could be inherent differences in the preschool and infant/toddler populations. EHS teachers are responsible for children under the age of three, who require more direct supervision and are prone to disruption from changes to classroom routines. In addition, the children have less developed language and self-regulation skills than their preschool counterparts. As a result, older preschool children may be more adept at changing activities or staying on schedule so that coaches can observe targeted skills without as much disruption. EHS teachers, on the other hand, may need to follow the children's lead to identify their needs, making it more difficult to follow a predetermined schedule and/or pivot to targeted activities during coaching time. Compared to preschool curricula, teachers caring for infants and toddlers place greater emphasis on children's social and emotional development (National Center on Early Childhood Development, Teaching, and Learning, 2017) and EHS teachers may be more attuned to children's emotional states and the impact of classroom disruptions given the developmental focus of the program.

Limitations

Because this study was completed within a single center, widespread generalization of the results is limited. Future studies on EHS teachers' lived experiences with coaching will provide further data on universal aspects of the coaching experience and those that vary by location and/or coaching program. Each teacher in our study participated in PBC, an evidence-based program widely used in HS and EHS programs. We opted to evaluate teachers' experiences with a business-as-usual implementation of the program, meaning that we did not collect fidelity data on implementation. We chose this approach to optimize the authenticity of the coaching program. Furthermore, our partner educational center is highly rated and has a reputation for excellence. We suspect that the coaching was implemented with high fidelity and with strong expertise, but we have no data to definitively document the coaching practices.

Implications

The EHS teachers in our study recognized the importance of the active ingredients of PBC coaching (observation, feedback, goal setting, and reflection), providing further support for maintaining these features in high-quality coaching programs. Whereas prior studies showed that these active ingredients could be identified by ECE teachers who work with older preschoolers (Knoche et al., 2013; Nasser et al., 2015; Shannon et al., 2021; Taylor et al., 2021), our study demonstrated that ECE teachers serving, aged one to two years, toddlers were also sensitive to the nature of ECE coaching. Even though infant and toddler programs tend to focus less on academics and more on language and social-emotional skills (National Center on Early Childhood Development, Teaching, and Learning, 2017), the teachers in our study viewed themselves as educators and used the coaching experience to refine their pedagogy with the goal of improving their children's outcomes. This implies that managers of ECE programs should ensure that all ECE teachers have the opportunity to participate in coaching programs, as all teachers have the potential to improve their skills and make a significant impact on their children's lives.

One notable difference between these prior studies and our study was the perceived impact of coaching on student behavior and teacher workload, which were notable costs associated with coaching. Based on our results, system administrators should not only consider the obvious costs of coaching (coaching staff, training, materials), but also the significant teacher-level costs in the form of time, effort, and impact on the classroom. These teacher-level costs appear to be more pronounced for EHS teachers, working with the youngest and neediest individuals at a center. The results of our study also highlighted the importance of culturally competent delivery of coaching. HS and EHS teachers are more likely to be from an under-represented background and are likely to have multiple stressors, such as low income and a high workplace stress (Li Grining et al. 2010; Whitaker et al., 2015). HS and EHS coaching programs should ensure that the expectations are explicit and that all stages of the coaching process are planned for and delivered through responsive and collaborative relationships with teachers.

This study further documented the power of obtaining teachers' feedback on their lived experiences with coaching, which can be useful as a formative assessment to improve current coaching efforts. For example, the teacher data revealed that the coaching program would have been more successful using less intrusive implementation models. Keeping open lines of communication between teachers, coaches, and administrative staff will assist in improving the coaching experience and overall teacher satisfaction. The satisfaction and well-being of the early education workforce is more important than ever given the high turnover frequently observed in early childhood settings (Schaack et al., 2020; Wells, 2015).

Appendix

Introductory Script

Good afternoon. My name is {Moderator} and this is {Note Taker}. We are here today to talk to you about your experience with coaching. Each of you is an EHS Teacher and has received coaching, correct? Because you have experienced coaching first-hand, you know a lot about the coaching experience. We would like to learn from you. What have been your experiences? What do you think of coaching?

Before we start asking questions, we want to talk about our expectations for today. We are going to ask you some questions. {Note Taker} will take notes. We will record this session so that we can go back and listen to the conversation. We will not share what you say with anyone, other than our students who will help to code your responses. We will not share anyone's specific responses. No one from {Name of Center} will hear your recording or know what you said during this meeting. We ask that everyone keep this conversation confidential, but we cannot guarantee that other teachers in this room will not share what you say. Does everyone understand? Does anyone have any questions?

I would like to go over a few pointers for today's session. There are no wrong answers. Everyone doesn't have to agree with each other, but we all should listen respectfully. It will be helpful if only one person talks at a time. Please silence your phone. If you do need to take a call, that is fine. Just step out of the room and come back when you are finished.

My role is to simply guide the discussion. I want you to talk to each other—not just answer to me. It's the most fun and works the best if you all have a conversation. I may need to interrupt from time to time—I apologize for that in advance. Are there any questions?

Moderator Notes

- Serve as a facilitator—not simply questions/answers
- Sample phrases to help participants expand their thoughts include
  - "Say more."
  - "Would you give an example?"
  - "I don't understand."
- Try to elicit thoughts *and* emotions

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Data Availability Because the full focus group transcripts could potentially identify an individual speaker's identity, the raw data are not available.

Code Availability N/a.

Declarations

Conflict of interest The third author is President of the Next Door Foundation. No other authors have financial or nonfinancial conflicts of interest to declare.

Ethical Approval This study was approved by the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee Institutional Review Board.

Consent to Participate Each teacher provided signed informed consent to participate in the study.

Consent for Publication As part of the informed consent, teachers agreed to allow dissemination of general themes from the focus groups and de-identified excerpts from the focus group transcripts.

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