



Exploring the Coaching Role in Early Childhood Education Professional Learning



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How do you see yourself? Are you a mentor? Are you a leader? Are you a supervisor? You have probably thought about these roles and what they mean, but have you considered yourself as a coach? In this blog post,

I will be exploring the coaching role in early childhood education (ECE). I have thought of myself as a mentor and a leader. I have not previously considered myself as a coach, but I now see the benefits of examining coaching from the perspective of early learning. Coaching in ECE is evolving. There is growing evidence that unlike other professional development/learning approaches, it has the potential to lead to very positive outcomes (O'Keefe, 2014). According to [O'Keefe](#) (2014) ECEs often, engage in professional development experiences by themselves, and these are usually

one-time, lecture-style trainings. According to the [New York Early Childhood Professional Development Institute](#) this is not enough time for learning to be internalized. When an educator who works in a team, attends a training alone, they may struggle to implement new strategies without the collaborative support of their colleagues. While webinars and online trainings have become increasingly popular, especially in this past year, these modalities can be impersonal and can fail to engage educators “who have questions about specific students and challenges unique to their own practices”

(Frazier, 2018, p. 3). Coaching, when implemented well, looks very different: It lasts longer, and it is grounded in an educators' practice (O'Keefe, 2014).

supervisor
mentor
coach
leader

Coaching is an individualized approach to professional learning “where educators work towards specific teaching goals with support and feedback from a designated

colleague or expert”. Mentoring is usually “a peer-to-peer relationship between a more-experienced and less-experienced educator”. Supervising is “between an educator and the person who has direct managerial responsibility over them” (O’Keefe, 2014, p. 4). These are important roles but are they effective when the desired outcome is professional learning? In my Ontario context, leaders are often referred to as “pedagogical leaders”. Pedagogical leadership is guiding the study of the teaching and learning process alongside educators. Pedagogical leaders can be anyone with a strong

knowledge of theory and practice, experience, and a commitment to ongoing learning. Watch this video to learn more about pedagogical leaders.



Pedagogical leaders can increase their effectiveness if they see their role from a coaching perspective.

“Coaching is designed to build

capacity for specific professional dispositions, skills, and behaviors and is focused on goal-setting and achievement for an individual or group”. Above all, “it is a relationship-based process” led by someone who “serves in a different professional role than the recipient(s)” (National Association for the Education of Young Children National Association of Child Care Resource and Referral Agencies, 2011).

Early childhood educators understand the importance of relationships and trust. How does a coach build trust? Start from a position of love and kindness. A legendary football coach once said that ...

Coaching is a profession of love. You can't coach people unless you love them ~

Eddie Robinson

Sometimes love can be tough. It is not always easy to address practices that seem outdated or ineffective.

Kindness is a combination of acceptance and compassion. There are so many challenges in the early learning profession, and these have intensified almost beyond measure with the pandemic. Accept those who you coach and offer them compassion. In the past, I approached professional learning with judgement. Now, I see those whom I support from a position of strength and capacity. I believe in their competence to go forward on their journey. Now rather than a judge, I model the role of the coach.

The coach models. They understand that they are engaged in a parallel process. Their strengths-based, reflective interactions serve as a model for the interactions that the

educator has with colleagues, families, and children (Jablon, 2016). The coach acknowledges the experience and skills that the educator brings to their work, just as the educator should acknowledge the experiences of children and families. When “the coach challenges the educator to experiment with new practices” they do so while maintaining trust and by being “knowledgeable, dependable, and optimistic” (Frazier, 2018, p. 4). The pedagogical leader as coach demonstrates the same dispositions that they want to cultivate in others. Dispositions are ways in which a

person is inclined to behave.

Professional dispositions are the tendencies to think and act in certain ways that are valued by the field (Swim & Merz, 2016). The following professional dispositions are recommended by the New York Early Childhood Professional Development Institute in this [policy brief](#).

- *The disposition to be strengths-based:* The coach identifies strengths in the educator's practice. Moments of effectiveness are reflected back to the educator. The educator who is confident that the coach will respond to them in a

strengths-based way is more likely to experiment with new practices.

- *The disposition to be self-reflective:* The early childhood coach develops the educator's disposition to be reflective by taking time to ask open-ended questions and listen.
- *The disposition to be self-directed:* Coaching develops this disposition because it asks educators to determine what goals are most relevant for them. The educator who sets their own goals is likely to be ready to make the change they have envisioned.

To explore your role as a coach, start by building a culture of collaboration based on trusted relationships. Set goals for practice. This will lead to pedagogical knowledge and professional dialogue, and end in effective and meaningful

programming for children. That is my theory. Will this work for you? Can you see opportunities in your practice to coach? I look forward to your feedback and input. What do you think?

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