NEBRASKA CENTER FOR RESEARCH ON CHILDREN, YOUTH, FAMILIES & SCHOOLS

College of Education & Human Sciences
University of Nebraska–Lincoln

What is the Landscape of Early Childhood Coaching in Nebraska?

Rachel E. Schachter, Ph.D.
Child, Youth & Family Studies
CYFS Research Affiliate
University of Nebraska–Lincoln

Hayley Jackson
Child, Youth & Family Studies
University of Nebraska–Lincoln

Lisa L. Knoche, Ph.D.
Nebraska Center for Research on Children, Youth, Families & Schools
University of Nebraska–Lincoln

Holly Hatton-Bowers, Ph.D.
Child, Youth & Family Studies
CYFS Research Affiliate
University of Nebraska–Lincoln

May 2019

Technical questions and general correspondence should be directed to Rachel E. Schachter at the
Department of Child, Youth & Family Studies (CYAF), University of Nebraska–Lincoln,
512 N 12 Street, 261 Louise Pound Hall, Lincoln, NE 68583-0858
Email: rschachter2@unl.edu | Phone: 402-472-7682

NEBRASKA ACADEMY FOR EARLY CHILDHOOD RESEARCH

UNIVERSITY OF Nebraska Lincoln

cyfs.unl.edu

Acknowledgements

Contents

Background on Early Childhood Coaching in Nebraska

Coaches have become an integral component of supporting teachers and adults working with young children and families nationally (Schachter, 2015). In the state of Nebraska, early childhood (EC) coaching has increasingly become important for this type of work (Jayaraman, Knoche, Marvin, & Bainter, 2014). Indeed, multiple initiatives within the state utilize coaches as a mechanism for supporting change in adult learners that leads to positive outcomes for young children and families. In general, coaching is a unique form of professional development that is relationship-based, whereby coaches work one-on-one or in small groups with adult learners to improve knowledge, skills, and dispositions (Aikens & Akers, 2011). Coaching can take place in adults' immediate context and tends to be ongoing rather than a single, one-time training (Joyce & Showers, 1980; Rush & Shelden, 2005). As such, coaching has the potential to provide high-quality learning experiences for adults to support high-quality experiences in EC.

Based on this growing use of coaching across the state, key stakeholders have collaborated to develop mechanisms that support coach training and development. Since this collaborative work began in 2009-10, a semi-annual coach training was developed to provide foundational coaching skills and competencies relevant for all coaching initiatives, such as developing relationships and facilitating coaching conversations. The collaborative group also came to understand that coaches needed ongoing support and initiated the offering of regular "booster" sessions to support coaches' professional development once they are in the field and actively serving coachees.

In efforts to better understand who was coaching and perceptions of the training coaches received, stakeholders conducted an initial survey in 2014 (Jayaraman et al. 2014). Results of this survey ($n = 35$) revealed that coaches liked the work of coaching and, in particular, coaches commented that they enjoyed building relationships with coachees and observing positive changes. Although these coaches were generally positive about the training they received, myriad challenges were also reported, particularly with regards to the coaching process and their own training and professional development needs.

Present Study

Since the 2014 study, coaching in various EC initiatives has grown across the state. In 2018, the Nebraska Early Childhood Coach Collaboration team was interested in reassessing the process of coaching in Nebraska. This included understanding who is doing the work of coaching, what constitutes the coaching process, how coaches perceive their work, and how coaches were prepared to do their work. Thus, a new survey was created to understand more about coaching in the state of Nebraska. It contained a variety of questions consisting of both fixed-choice and open-response comments.

Data collection was led by Dr. Schachter from the University of Nebraska–Lincoln and was reviewed by the Institutional Review Board. Participants were invited by email to complete an online survey that took approximately 20 minutes to complete. The survey was emailed to key stakeholders in the Spring of 2018 with requests that the survey be forwarded to anyone doing the work of EC coaching in Nebraska. In total, 101 individuals completed the survey. Importantly, all participants self-identified as a "coach." Participants were able to enter into a raffle to win one of five iPad minis. Survey responses were analyzed descriptively.

Next, we present our findings regarding who are the coaches, what is the content of coaching, how coaches perceive their work, how coaches know that coaching is working, and how coaches were

prepared. We conclude with recommendations for advancing the work of coaching in the state of Nebraska.

State of Coaching in the State of Nebraska

The 101 coaches reported coaching on 19 different coaching initiatives across a variety of EC contexts (e.g., Sixpence Early Learning Fund, Nebraska Department of Education Pyramid Project, Step Up to Quality, Go NAP SACC). These coaching projects included private, local, and state initiatives, as well as federally funded projects such as the coaching associated with Head Start programs. Twelve formal coaching initiatives were represented, such as Head Start, Getting Ready, and Rooted in Relationships. Seven different independent coaches or coaching programs were also represented. Almost a third of coaches reported coaching for multiple initiatives with 21% ($n = 21$) reported to have coached for two initiatives, 6% ($n = 6$) for three initiatives, and one person coached for four initiatives. Coaching was happening across the state of Nebraska, with 110 communities receiving coaching from the coaches in this study.

Who are coaches?

The majority of professionals in early childhood do not hold a bachelor's degree, with an estimated 76% holding a Child Development Associate certificate (IOM and NRC, 2012). Compared to the EC field as a whole, coaches were highly educated with 29.7% holding a bachelor's degree and almost 60% having obtained a master's degree. It is important to note, however, that approximately 30% of coaches did not have degrees in EC or education related fields (e.g., social work). Although participating coaches had a great deal of experience in EC (65.3% had over 10 years of experience), they had relatively little experience coaching in EC (68.3% had been coaching for less than five years). A description of the coaches' background characteristics are presented in Table 1.

Table 1

Background characteristics of coaches

	Number of participants (n = 101)	Percentage of participants
Years of early childhood experience		
0 years	1	1.0%
1-3 years	16	15.8%
4-6 years	11	10.9%
7-10 years	7	6.9%
More than 10 years	66	65.4%
Years of coaching experience		
0-5 years	69	68.4%
6-10 years	16	15.8%
11-15 years	7	6.9%
16-20 years	7	6.9%
21 years or more	2	2.0%
Education level		
High school degree	3	3.0%
Associate's degree in a non-education field	1	1.0%
Associate's degree in education or a related field	7	6.9%
Bachelor's degree in a non-education field	9	8.9%
Bachelor's degree in education or a related field	21	20.8%
Master's degree in a non-education related field	21	20.8%
Master's degree in education	39	38.6%

What is the content of coaching?

Coaches across the state addressed a variety of content areas using multiple coaching formats. Almost all of the participants (n = 91; 90.1%) reported focusing on the social and emotional development of children as a part of their coaching, even those working in initiatives that did not focus on this area. Other frequently reported targeted content areas were: parent/child and teacher/child interactions (n = 90; 89.1%), behavior management (n = 85; 84.2%), and parent/family engagement (n = 80; 79.2%). Least frequently targeted were science (n = 30; 29.7%) and creative arts (n = 31; 30.7%), which are not the direct focus of any formal coaching initiatives involved in this study. See Figure 1 for more information on the content focus for the coaching delivered.

Figure 1

Content Area of Coaching

Content Area	Percentage
None	1.00%
Other	6.90%
Step Up To Quality	25.70%
Science	29.70%
Creative Arts	30.70%
Program Management	30.70%
Math	32.70%
Data use	37.60%
Inclusive Practices	44.60%
Overall program quality	50.50%
Health/Physical Development	56.40%
Parenting Skills	56.40%
Working with staff/ staff relationships	58.40%
Approaches to Learning	63.40%
Overall child care/classroom environment	64.40%
Language & Literacy	69.30%
Effective Communication Practices	74.30%
Parent/Family Engagement	79.20%
Behavior Management	84.20%
Teacher/child and parent/child interactions	89.10%
Social Emotional Development	90.10%

Note. Coaches could select all responses that applied to their work.

Coaches reported using multiple coaching methods to engage coachees. The majority of coaches met one-on-one with their coachees to conduct coaching sessions ($n = 91$; 90.1%) with almost all coaches reporting meeting with coachees in person ($n = 97$; 96%). Many coaches also capitalized on technology with approximately 65% of coaches reporting meeting with coachees via e-mail ($n = 65$), less than half ($n = 45$; 44.6%) reporting meeting with coachees over the phone ($n = 45$; 44.6%), and 42.6% ($n = 43$) via text. From the data collected in this study, it appears that the coaches in Nebraska were utilizing technology as a way to connect with coachees even if time or scheduling would not allow.

How do coaches perceive their work?

Understanding how coaches view their work is important as such perceptions are directly related to their implementation of coaching practices (Schachter, Weber-Mayrer, Piasta, & O'Connell, 2018). As part of the survey, coaches were asked to describe coaching in their own words. Table 2 presents some of the frequently used words to describe coaching. Coaches used words such as "support" ($n = 39$) and "guidance" ($n = 15$) to describe their work. One coach reported the work of coaching as, "Being a supportive guide for teachers as they learn new techniques in the classroom." Building relationships was reported to be an important part of the coaching process for a quarter of the participants ($n = 23$) and is exemplified in comments such as, "building relationships with and supporting educators/providers in their work with young children and families…" A small proportion of coaches reported coaching as a structured process ($n = 11$). For example, one coach described coaching as,

> An ongoing process of interaction between coach and coachee that promotes increased confidence and competence on the part of the coachee. The process is guided by a structured process of observation, reflection, feedback and joint planning that builds from conversation to conversation.

In terms of the perceived benefits of coaching, coaches reported that seeing changes, often in the children, was what they liked most about coaching. One coach reported, "I love that I get to support teachers to have that 'aha' moment when they make a decision to implement a strategy that will benefit their students." Another coach reported, "I find satisfaction in facilitating the improved attachment between caregiver and child that results in enhanced brain development for the child." It is interesting to note that, although most coaches specifically worked with adult learners, it was their satisfaction in providing strategies and information that resulted in positive changes for the children that they most enjoyed about their work.
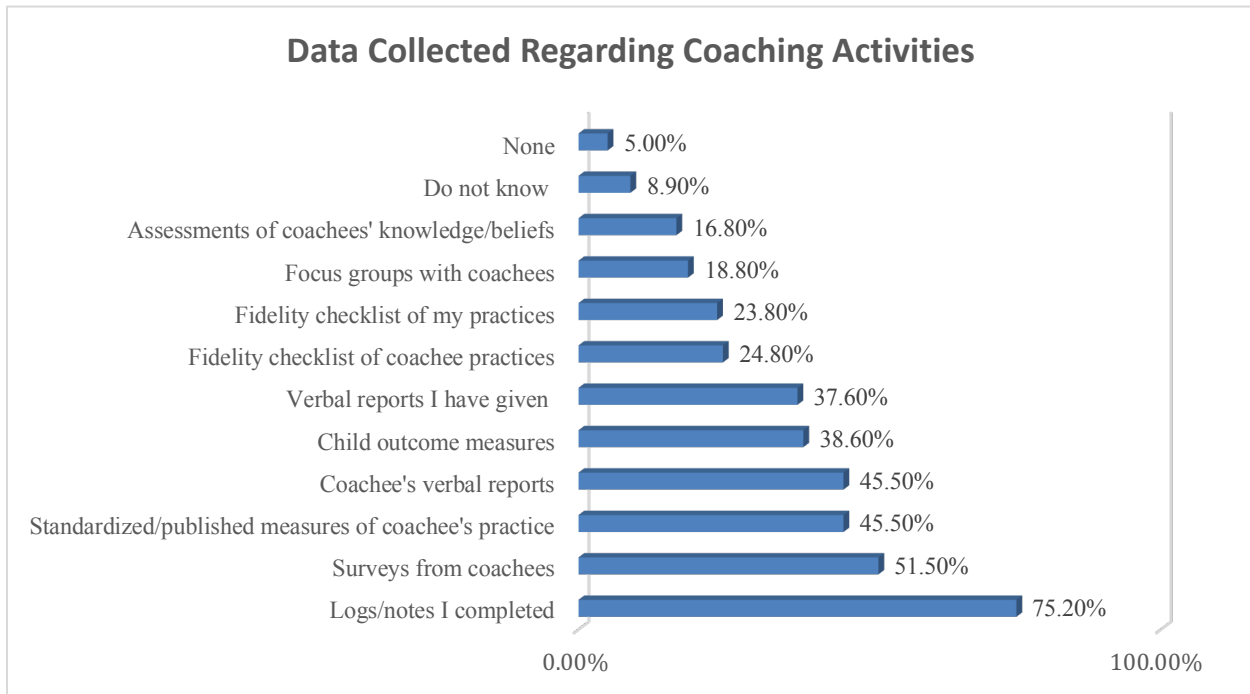
Table 2

What is your definition of coaching?

Term	Definition	*n* (n = 101)	Exemplar Participant Quote
Support	Use of support in the coach's definition of coaching	39	*"Supporting the families I work with and giving them the resources they need to succeed."*
Guidance	Use of guidance in the coach's definition of coaching	15	*"Guiding, modeling, encouraging, and sharing resources with early childhood directors and teachers to maintain and improve quality instruction."*
Relationships	Use of the term relationship or referring to a collaborative process	23	*"Building relationships with and supporting educators/providers in their work with young children and families. This support can include providing resources, providing feedback to their practice, and modeling best practice."*
Structured Process	Including specific steps such as feedback loops, reflective process, modeling, etc.	11	*"An ongoing process of interaction between coach and coachee that promotes increased confidence and competence on the part of the coachee. The process is guided by a structured process of observation, reflection, feedback and joint planning that builds from conversation to conversation."*

How do coaches know coaching is working?

Most administrators of the coaching initiatives indicated that they collect data regarding efficacy. To better understand how coaches assess if their coaching is effective, we asked coaches to report the types of data that are collected. Approximately 75% of the coaches (*n* = 76) reported collecting logs or notes that they completed, and 51.5% (*n* = 52) reported collecting surveys from coachees. Less than half (*n* = 46) of coaches reported collecting standardized/published measures of coachees' practices. See Figure 2 for additional information regarding the data collected regarding the results of coaching.

Figure 2

Data Collected Regarding Coaching Activities

| Category	Percentage
None	5.00%
Do not know	8.90%
Assessments of coachees' knowledge/beliefs	16.80%
Focus groups with coachees	18.80%
Fidelity checklist of my practices	23.80%
Fidelity checklist of coachee practices	24.80%
Verbal reports I have given	37.60%
Child outcome measures	38.60%
Coachee's verbal reports	45.50%
Standardized/published measures of coachee's practice	45.50%
Surveys from coachees	51.50%
Logs/notes I completed	75.20%

Note. Coaches could select all responses that applied to their work.

When asked if their coaching was successful, over half of the coaches reported that their coaching works "most of the time" (*n* = 64), 21.8% (*n* = 22) reported that their coaching works half of the time, and 7% (*n* = 8) reported that their coaching works all of the time. Notably, 8.9% of coaches (*n* = 9) of coaches surveyed reported that they did not know whether their coaching worked (see Figure 3). When asked how they know that their coaching worked, many coaches reported that they are able to see ideas and strategies being implemented that were discussed in previous conversations with the coachee.

Generally, coaches reported relying on anecdotal observations as a means of observing impacts of coaching. For example, one coach reported, "My coachee and I have open discussions, mutually set goals, and then the goals are met before determining the next goal." Similarly, another coach reported, "Coaching is successful when you can see the knowledge and skill set of the parent or teacher increase and the children in their care experiencing gains in their development, especially in the areas that are of concern." Although coaches knew they had access to the different data regarding coaching, they typically relied on their informal interactions with coachees to determine success.

Figure 3
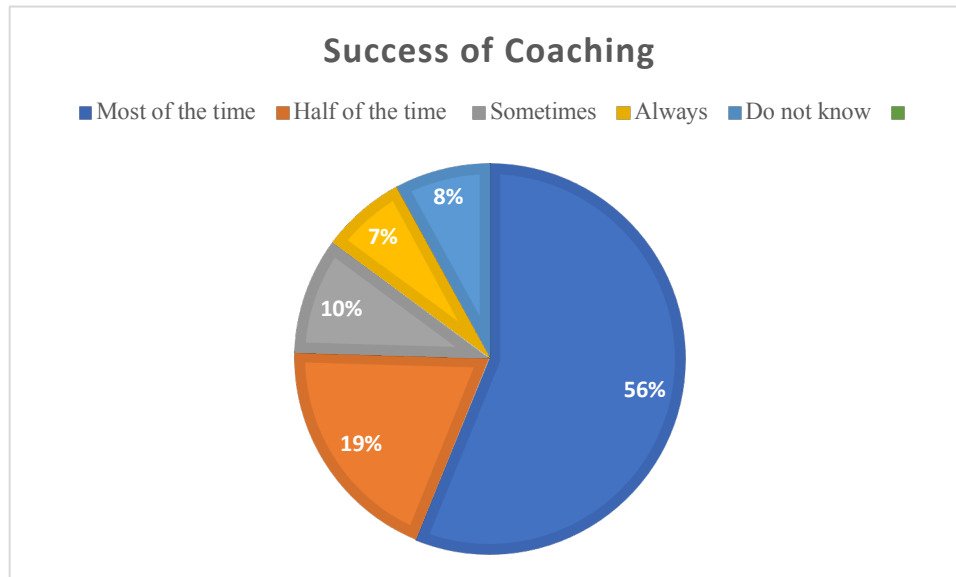
Note. Never was an option but was not selected by any of the participants.

How were coaches prepared for their work?

Coaches were also asked to provide information about the training they received to prepare them to coach in EC settings. Nearly 77% of coaches (n = 77) attended the statewide, two-day Nebraska Early Childhood Coach Collaboration training. This training defines coaching as an "interactive process based on a collaborative relationship" and emphasizes the importance of observation, reflection, and discussion. A majority of coaches also reported attending in-house workshops that focused on content specific to their coaching initiative (n = 70; 69.3%). For example, if the coaching initiative was focused on math education, the training provided coaches in-depth information about math education. Other coaches reported focusing on coaching strategies specific to the initiative they were working for (n = 63; 62.4%). Over 50% (n = 56) of coaches reported that they were prepared for the work of coaching via meetings. When asked what they perceived to be the most beneficial aspects of their training, many coaches reported meeting with other coaches and discussing their coaching scenarios as the most beneficial. One coach reported, "As a first-year coach, I've found that training has been really helpful. I also have a coach or mentor who meets with me monthly to discuss any concerns or struggles I may be having." See Table 4 for additional information on how the participating coaches were trained for the work of EC coaching.

Table 4

How were you prepared to do the work of coaching?

	Number of participants (n=101)	Percentage of Participants
Nebraska early childhood coaching training	77	76.2%
In-house workshops (content specific to project)	70	69.3%
In-house workshops on coaching (content specific to project)	63	62.4%
Meetings	56	55.4%
Other training	43	42.6%
Receive(d) coaching	26	25.7%
Other	16	15.8%
Do not know	1	1.0%

Note. Coaches could select all responses that applied to their work.

Changes and Positive Maintenance from 2014

To identify if training needs have changed or shifted since 2014, data were compared to the current survey findings. In both surveys, coaches reported having some of the same needs for additional training. In 2014, coaches ranked trainings for coaching in difficult situations as well as evaluating the coaching process in their top three training needs. Similarly, in the 2018 data coaches listed coaching in difficult situations and evaluating the coaching process as their top two training needs. In both years, coaches also noted that receiving training in cultural competence (33% in 2018 compared to 37% in 2014) was a professional development need. An area of training that may have been addressed since 2014 was the request for training on effective communication practices, which was much lower in 2018 (40% versus 11%; respectively). Additional information regarding coaches' perceived needs for additional training are presented in Table 5.

Table 5

Content Areas Coaches Wanted More Information About: 2018

	Percentage of participants	Number of participants
Coaching in difficult situations	54.5%	55
Evaluating the coaching process	34.7%	35
Behavior management	32.7%	33
Culturally competent coaching	32.7%	33
Coaching others on coaching strategies/Adult learning	23.8%	24
Coaching process	20.8%	21
Social emotional development	18.8%	19
Working with staff/staff relationships	16.8%	17
Effective communication practices	10.9%	11
Approaches to learning	9.9%	10
Parent/family engagement	9.9%	10
Overall program quality	8.9%	9
Teacher/child and parent/child interaction	8.9%	9
Inclusive practices	7.9%	8
Data use	7.9%	8
Language/Literacy	6.9%	7
Overall child care/Classroom environment	5.9%	6
Step Up To Quality	5.0%	5
Parenting skills	5.0%	5
None	4.0%	4
Health and physical development	4.0%	4
Creative arts	2.0%	2
Program management	2.0%	2
Mathematics	1.0%	1
Science	1.0%	1
Other	0.0%	0

Note. Coaches could select all responses that applied to their work.

Continuing Needs

In addition to listing areas for additional training, coaches also shared what was most difficult about coaching. In response to the most challenging part of coaching, many coaches reported working with difficult learners. For example, one coach reported this challenge, noting that, "…not all providers have a desire to make a change." This was also exemplified in the following coach comment, "Coaching individuals who do not understand the purpose of coaching, so often they are hesitant or intimidated. Without the coachee having an open mind to the process, we cannot move forward." In addition, there were systematic issues that proved challenging for coaches, such as the time associated with coaching and the ability to schedule time to meet with coachees. Further, high teacher turnover, as is common in EC (IOM & NRC, 2012), was also a struggle for the coaches in this study. Finally, coaches reported challenges within the coaching process, such as the slow process of change, a lack of resources, as well as needing more support and training. As one coach reported, "I don't always feel adequately supported."

Recommendations

Based on this survey we make several recommendations for supporting EC coaches and the process of coaching in the state of Nebraska. These recommendations also incorporate coaches' requests regarding additional training.

1. **Provide more support around children's social-emotional learning and behavior management.** Importantly, coaches reported that coachees wanted support in this area and also requested additional training for themselves. This pattern was noted across coaches, regardless of the focus of the coaching initiative. This suggests that this is an area of high-need in EC and one that is currently not adequately addressed in pre-service and in-service professional training and possibly coach training. Another possibility is that given the rapid development of young children, this is an ongoing challenge for professionals/coachees and something that will be relevant across coaching dialogues.

2. **Support coaches in working with difficult or reluctant adult learners.** One major challenge noted by coaches was working with coachees who were reluctant to change. Coach training may involve learning additional relationship building strategies as well as understanding more about how adults learn in order to successfully engage them in change that is meaningful for their lives/situation. Although the Nebraska Early Childhood Coaching Collaboration Training focuses on some of these skills, additional coach training might be beneficial. This can be achieved through targeted booster trainings for current coaches. Another option is providing an opportunity for the coaches to receive coaching on working through difficult conversations with reluctant learners through their specific coaching initiatives. Coaching on coaching was a learning strategy that coaches reported as a beneficial to their coaching practice and may also be useful in supporting coaches to work with difficult or reluctant learners.

3. **Include more training on how to evaluate the coaching process and success of coaching.** Most coaching initiatives in Nebraska include mechanisms for studying the effectiveness of their programs. However, it was less clear to coaches what evaluation processes are used and what data are available to learn about the impact of their coaching. This suggests two areas for growth; first, helping coaches know what data are collected about the coaching initiative – something that can occur at the initiative level – and second, once coaches know what data they have access to, assisting them in understanding how that data can inform their coaching. More training may be

necessary to support these skills, as data use to inform practice is a complex process. Already, 76 of the 101 participating coaches use classroom or teacher data as a mechanism to facilitate coaching – providing a solid foundation on which to build their knowledge about utilizing data to inform coaching process.

Conclusion

The findings from this survey demonstrate the range and breadth of coaching in Nebraska. Furthermore, this work provides critical information about the current state of coaches as well as opportunities for growth to continue coaching efforts aiming to improve the lives of educators, young children, and their families.

References

Aikens, N., & Akers, L. (2011). *Background review of existing literature on coaching. Final report.* Mathematica Policy Research, P.O. Box 2393, Princeton, NJ 08543. Retrieved from ERIC Retrieved from http://libproxy.unl.edu/login?url=https://search-proquest-com.libproxy.unl.edu/docview/2013523125?accountid=8116

IOM (Institute of Medicine) and NRC (National Research Council). (2012). The early childhood care and education workforce: Challenges and opportunities: A workshop report. Washington, DC: The National Academies Press.

Jayaraman, G., Knoche, L., Marvin, C., & Bainter, S. (2014). Evaluation of early childhood coaching in Nebraska – technical report vol. 1: Key findings from participant follow up survey (CYFS Working Paper No. 2014-1). Retrieved from the Nebraska Center for Research on Children, Youth, Families and Schools website: cyfs.unl.edu

Joyce, B., & Showers, B. (1980). Improving inservice training: The messages of research. *Educational Leadership, 37*(5), 379-85. Retrieved from http://libproxy.unl.edu/login?url=https://search-proquest-com.libproxy.unl.edu/docview/63712281?accountid=8116

Rush, D., & Shelden, M. (2005). Evidence-based definition of coaching practices. CASEinPoint, 1,1 –6.

Schachter, R. E., Weber-Mayrer, M., Piasta, S. B., & O'Connell, A. (2018). What happens during language and literacy coaching? Coaches' reports of their interactions with educators. *Early Education and Development, 29*(6), 852-872. doi: 10.1080/10409289.2018.1487222