Coaching for Early Childhood Educators: An insight into the effectiveness of an initiative

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Abstract
Professional development in the form of coaching has the potential to support practitioners who are being inducted into new policy and curriculum initiatives. This paper examines the efficacy of a coaching program in its support of educators to align their practice with the Victorian Early Years Learning and Development Framework for all Children from Birth to Eight Years (the Victorian Framework) and Belonging, Being, Becoming: The Early Years Learning Framework for Australia (EYLF). Aspects of the Coaching Program that were considered in the mixed-methods evaluation included the program's effectiveness, the intensity of its delivery, the approach used, and the coaching relationship. The evaluation found that the coaching program was an effective way to support educators align their practice with the Frameworks, and that readiness and commitment to change and the coaching relationships impacted on this process. The evaluation also identified possible refinements and improvements to the Coaching Program, which are noted in this article to further support early childhood educators to engage with aspects of the early childhood reform agenda**.**

Introduction
Coaching has been recognised as a powerful tool to facilitate educators to learn new practices within reform processes across disciplines. This article describes the evaluation of the Coaching Program developed by the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (the

Department) in conjunction with Gowrie Victoria. The Coaching Program was designed to support Australian educators working in Victorian early childhood services to implement the relevant approved learning frameworks: *Belonging, Being and Becoming: The Early Years Learning Framework for Australia* (EYLF) and the *Victorian Early Years Learning and Development Framework for all Children from Birth to Eight Years* (VEYLDF) (the Frameworks). These approved learning frameworks are situated within the *National Quality Framework*. The purpose of the Coaching Program was to support services to embed the Frameworks into everyday practice with children, families and other professionals, improving practice and thus outcomes for children.

The aims of the evaluation were to:
- assess the effectiveness of the Coaching Program as a model to support early years services to align their practice to the Frameworks
- inform future refinements, improvements and further development of the Coaching Program as a possible model to support early childhood professionals to engage with other aspects of the early childhood reform agenda.

A mixed methods approach, using both qualitative and quantitative data collection and analysis techniques, was employed to gather the data that formed the basis of the evaluation. Data were collected from participants early in the Coaching Program and again later in the program through surveys and interviews.

The evaluation found that the Coaching Program was an effective model for changing practice to align with the Frameworks (as reported by participants and coaches), but that there were areas where refinements and improvement can be identified for future coaching programs. This article provides an overview of the research literature on coaching, provides details of the data collection and analysis processes. It presents the results of the evaluation and suggestions for improving the Coaching Program for future offerings.

Literature Review

Coaching is described, for the purposes of this article, as a disciplined, structured process where two or more people form an ongoing relationship for the improvement of professional practice and achievement of goals (Armstrong & Geddes 2009, Robertson 2008). It is a learning relationship, in which participants are open to new learning and engage together as professionals equally committed to facilitating each other's learning, development and wellbeing, both cognitive and affective, in order to gain a greater understanding of professionalism and the work of professionals (Robertson 2008).

According to Levin (2010), two elements are critical to professional learning – adaptation of practice and the engagement of educators – creating the conditions so that educators can learn new practices. Gorrell and Hoover (2009) believe that coaching is the connector in reform efforts. Engagement of educators as identified by Levin (2010) is an important aspect of this evaluation as it directly informs the two evaluation domains of approach and relationship to the coach and therefore indirectly impacts on the overall effectiveness of the Coaching Program.

Changing professional practice
In order to learn new practices it is important to give educators the space and time to think by bringing them together for discussion and reflection on their professional practice (e.g., Stallings 1989, Weindling 1989, Killion and Todnem 1991, Wood and Bennett 2000; Armstrong and

Geddes 2009; Fleet and Patterson 2009). The isolation that educators experience can be alleviated to a large extent when they work collaboratively with colleagues on their learning. Many educators do not have the interpersonal skills to provide quality evaluative feedback to their peers or to enable them to reflect critically on their practice (Robertson 2008). Ramsay et al. (1990) concluded from their research that an outside facilitator or coach is often necessary as a staff developer to assist participants to develop the interpersonal skills to successfully take part in these types of professional development activities. Educators are busy people and do not always engage in reflection unless they are 'given some time, some structure, and the expectations to do so' (Killion and Todnem 1991, p. 14). The expectation provides the necessary pressure; and the structure and time provides the support. Pressure and support can be gained through coaching, mentoring, supervision or critical friend relationships (Costa and Kallick 1993, Robertson 2008, Somekh 1993). Fullan (2001) argues that educational change programs are often imposed on educators in multiple disconnected ways. Therefore a whole system approach, rather than a number of small projects, has been identified as the optimal approach for systemic change. That is, through a universal approach to educational change within an organization rather than individual projects, sustainable change is possible. These studies will inform the interpretation of the data and will shape the recommendations about relationships to the coach and also the intensity of the Coaching Program.

Researchers have identified several emotional and social aspects of professional learning that are inherent to both mentoring and coaching. In research by the Children's Institute from the University of Rochester (Peterson et al. 2010) on the use of mentoring to raise the quality of out-of-home care, early childhood education mentors were insistent that the emotional and social side of the mentoring experience was really important, as it is in coaching. One study provides evidence that mentoring can facilitate early childhood educator learning by responding to educators' social and emotional needs. This may be highly salient due to the long working hours and low prestige associated currently with the field of early childhood education (Peterson et al. 2010).

Coaching fulfills a variety of roles. Peterson et al. (2010) argue that, due to the potential for varied understandings of coaching, the roles of the mentor or coach need to be negotiated in each situation and 'clear boundaries and expectations' set (p. 170), as the different purposes, needs and desired outcomes can influence the relationships and the process. This aspect speaks directly to the evaluation domains of intensity and relationship to the coach. The coaching process may involve the participants in any of the following: active listening, reflective questioning, critical thinking, goal setting, observation, self-assessment and getting descriptive and evaluative feedback (Robertson 2008), and appropriate skills and protocols are essential to this process. However, Joyce and Showers (2002) have made a complete about-turn by removing 'feedback' from their coaching model and focusing instead on experimentation and risk. Such a model is built on mutual trust, respect and empathy, and, in turn, builds these qualities (Armstrong & Geddes 2009, Robertson 2008).

Changes in behaviour often follow an examination of values and beliefs, and coaching can assist participants to become more aware of their values, beliefs and behaviour. Stallings (1989) found that teachers were more likely to own change and utilise new ideas when 'they become aware of a need for improvement through their analysis of their own observation profile' (p. 3) and from observing others and trying out ideas and evaluating the effects. Weindling (1989) reiterated this, stating that educators have to be actively involved in learning experiences within their context before they become more self-aware and will see a necessity to change their current practice.

Because coaching takes place in a professional's work context and deals with the current issues they are facing, it is a powerful process to improve the quality of professional practice, especially in early childhood services. Peterson et al. (2010) state 'Mentoring programs offer the promise of sustaining improvements to early educator practices by supporting learning within the context of practice' (p. 172).

For coaching to be successful, educators must feel part of the process and be able to feel that they are designing the processes and outcomes they wish to achieve (Landsberg 2003, Oberstein 2009, Robertson 2008). The coach's role is that of a reflective questioner to facilitate ownership and self-discovery of the answers that are often within the educator (Robertson 2008; Stalinski 2004). This leads to increased feelings of efficacy and ownership. Self-efficacy is most likely to be an outcome when educators are motivated through their own agendas (Rogers 2008) to feel they can make a positive difference in their professional practice.

Much of the recent coaching literature stresses the need for coaching supervision, for ongoing development of the coaches and the quality of coaching for the coachee. A supervision culture is a very important part of the ongoing improvement of coaching practice and builds not only self-awareness of the coach but also self-efficacy. Armstrong and Geddes (2009) outlined a coaching supervision protocol where coaches were given opportunities to share the successes and challenges they had been facing in their work. Common themes about why supervision was effective for the coaches in this study were that it created a space for reflection, challenge, validation, networking, accountability and the sharing of expertise and experience. These outcomes were dependent on the quality of the supervisor's facilitation of the group.

Coaching and self-efficacy

Tomlinson (2004, p. 3) states 'central to his view of personal development are the three concepts of self-image (how we see ourselves), self-esteem (how we value ourselves) and self-efficacy (our beliefs about being able to bring about successful results)'. However, participants' readiness for change does impact on the effectiveness of coaching practice. Holt et al. (2007) conducted a major study on employee readiness for organizational change with over 900 participants from the public and private sectors, based on the belief that 'change activities are initiated and carried out by individuals within organizations. That is, even the most collective activities that take place within organizations are often an amalgamation of the activities of individual organizational members' (p. 251). Coachee self-efficacy is therefore an important consideration as it impacts upon individual levels of commitment to the coaching as identified by Holt et al. (2007). It is through these individual efforts that organisational change occurs.

Coaching is powerful because it is based on the principles of adult learning (Kolb, 1984), the importance of a concrete experience, reflective observation on that experience, abstract conceptualisation and development of ideas of other ways of working, and then the willingness and increased self-efficacy to try out new ways of being in practice (Kolb 1984, Popper & Lipshitz 1992, Robertson 2008). As a result of such attributes, coaching is an important ingredient in action learning, providing formal reflection on learning in practice, on practice and for practice. Schon (1987) affirms the importance of reflection in, on and for professional practice and the importance of understanding the gap between espoused theories of practice and theories in action.

Coaching should be both results-focused and future-focused so that educators are supported to be aspirational and move into the informed, committed action of praxis (Robertson 2008). One way that committed action is achieved is through explicitly articulated, measureable outcomes negotiated between coach and coachee. There is much empirical evidence in the international research literature that coaching and mentoring can effect changes in professional practice and impact positively on readiness to change over the longer term. In England, the Centre for the Use of Research and Evidence in Education (CUREE 2005) has produced an evidence base about what works in professional learning for educators and has concluded that professional development is much more likely to be successful when it involves collaboration between staff, and that effective coaching and mentoring is key to this professional development.

Good coaching practice

Simpson (2010) identified features of good practice, including having the choice of coach; the coachee's commitment to learning and understanding of the nature, purpose and potential of coaching; the skills of the coach; and timely availability of coaching throughout the career. An understanding that coaching is a developmental rather than remedial process was also important. Simpson (2010, p. 123) also found that the most frequently referred to positive features of coaching were:

- the value of a critical friend who was impartial, having no vested interest
- an opportunity to talk things through, discuss vulnerabilities and emotions, and make mistakes
- an opportunity to reflect, to explore options and consequences, and to think 'outside the box'
- a coping mechanism in a complex world [workplace]
- an opportunity to explore how to respond to challenging people and/or tasks
- a place to identify and affirm strengths and identify and address personal inhibitors and
- an opportunity to learn and use new tools and techniques.

The quality of the coaching practice and the coachee's satisfaction with the coaching relationship are important determinants of the amount of benefit gained from the process (Leedham 2005). Other essential ingredients for coaching success have also been identified in the research literature: a learning conversation (e.g., CUREE 2005, Dunne & Villani 2007); setting challenging but achievable goals (e.g., Moen & Skaalvik 2009, Robertson 2008); relational trust[1] (Oberstein 2009, Peterson et al. 2010); regular contact (Orem, Binkert & Clancy 2007, Robertson 2008); ownership of the process and growing self-direction (Leedham 2005, Lim 2009); a learning agreement (CUREE 2005); coachee's readiness to change (Leedham 2005, Peterson et al. 2010) and coaching skills, supervision and ongoing development (Cheliotes & Reilly 2010, Flaherty 2010).

The next section describes a coaching program with a view to assessing if and how the evaluative data resonated with the prior research on the efficacy of coaching programs to supporting educators to align their practice with new curriculum initiatives.

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[1] Relational trust is built through the day-to-day social interactions in an organisation and leads to a depth of commitment, shared accountability, and moral imperative, and allows people to approach vulnerability in their professional lives (Robertson, 2005). Relational trust is the shared endeavour of strong learning relationship and deep trust between people in an organisation 'characterised by rich networks and high social interdependence' (Bryk & Sneider, 2002).

Coaching Program Overview

A team of researchers from a large, multi-campus Australian university in the state of Queensland was commissioned by the Victorian Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (the Department) to evaluate the Victorian Early Years Learning and Development Framework Coaching Program (the Coaching Program). The Coaching Program was established to support educators in early childhood services to implement the approved learning frameworks *Belonging, Being and Becoming: The Early Years Learning Framework for Australia* (EYLF) and the *Victorian Early Years Learning and Development Framework for all Children from Birth to Eight Years* (the Victorian Framework) which are situated within the *National Quality Framework*.

At the time of the evaluation (2010–12), major policy reforms in early childhood were being undertaken in Victoria and throughout Australia. These reforms were, among other policies, the introduction of *the Victorian Early Years Learning and Development Framework for all Children from Birth to Eight Years* (2009)*, Transition: A Positive Start to School Initiative* (2009) and *Belonging, Being, Becoming: The Early Years Learning Framework for Australia* (2009). The *Victorian Early Years Learning and Development Framework* (the Victorian Framework) was designed to assist early childhood professionals to work together and with families and to advance the learning and development of all children from birth to eight. It was released in November 2009 and complements other reform initiatives. It includes the same five Learning and Development Outcomes (the Outcomes) as the EYLF and the *My Time, Our Place: Framework for School Age Care in Australia* (MTOP), including: identity, community, wellbeing, learning and communication. The Victorian Framework was written for all early childhood professionals working with children from birth to eight. It supports the development of common understandings and shared conversations with professionals and families to support children's learning and development as well as their transitions across services and systems. It has eight Practice Principles that guide pedagogy and practice which are: 1) family-centred practice, 2) partnerships with professionals, 3) high expectations for every child, 4) equity and diversity, 5) respectful relationships and responsive engagement, 6) integrated teaching and learning approaches, 7) assessment for learning and development and 8) reflective practice.

The trial of the draft Victorian Framework highlighted the need for early childhood educators to have support in understanding how their practice should change to align with the Victorian and National Frameworks. In response to this identified need, the Department developed a range of professional learning opportunities and resources to support implementation. These included engaging *Gowrie Victoria* to develop the Coaching Program and deliver it to 90 services across the state of Victoria. The Coaching Program commenced in September 2010 and concluded in December 2011.

Regional departmental staff approached services to submit expressions of interest for this program. Services were identified according to whether or not they met one or more of the following criteria as a way of prioritizing participants: not yet meeting service quality measures such as licensing (compliance data) and National Childcare Accreditation Council data; a high number of disadvantaged children – identified using the Australian Early Development Index data; a willingness to change; and no involvement in other pilots/trials (e.g., Universal Access pilots, National Quality Framework field trials) or mentoring projects led by the Department. Services selected came from Family Day Care, Out of School Hours Care, stand-alone Kindergarten, Long Day Care (including those with a funded kindergarten program), and one Multifunctional Aboriginal Children's Service. An early childhood intervention service was part of the original

cohort but withdrew from the program. Services were geographically located in the nine (9) education regions throughout Victoria.

Due to the wide variety of service types in the project, and their diverse levels of engagement with the National and Victorian Frameworks, the content of the Coaching Program was flexibly designed to be responsive to the needs of different services and individual educators working within the services. The objectives of the Coaching Program were to: support educators to embed the Victorian and National Frameworks into everyday practice with children, families and other professionals; document the practice change and serve as a case study to other services; and promote the process of change to other early childhood professionals.

Elements of the Coaching Program

The Coaching Program was implemented by trained coaches working over a period of 18 months with early childhood professionals. Services that responded to a call to participate, submitted expressions of interest, co-signed by a primary contact and a representative from each service, prior to participation in the program. During the program's implementation, coaches undertook a series of six full-day visits to work with early childhood professionals within each service. Arrangements for these visits were negotiated between the coach and the service in order to fit the specific needs of the service. In between visits, it was planned that coaches would maintain regular phone contact with the primary contact person within the centre. Further opportunity to come together for networking sessions was provided on a regional or sub-regional basis for all participants, coaches and regional and local government staff, at the beginning, middle and end of the program. Participants were also encouraged to maintain contact and network with their colleagues to discuss issues that arose from implementing the Victorian Framework through an electronic forum.

The six face-to-face visits addressed relationship building, introduced an auditing tool, and provided opportunities for reflective practice. Calls and emails were made to the primary contact within each service at least once per month, and there was ongoing informal contact via 'Meeting Place', an online platform. Participants were invited to attend meetings with program participants from their region, regional staff and *Gowrie Victoria* staff from the project team at the beginning, middle and end of the program. The meetings aimed to forge links among services and between project and regional department personnel in order to facilitate a shared understanding of the Victorian Framework.

As part of the coaching program, a Practice Principle audit was conducted during a team discussion and facilitated by the coach. It aimed to raise participants' awareness of the Frameworks as a starting point for embedding them into practice. Coaches worked with services to unpack each of the eight Practice Principles (see Coaching Program Overview for details) and assist participants to recognise links between their own practice as a means of boosting educator confidence. A Practitioner Inquiry Project (PIP) was introduced as a process of professional inquiry and action to embed change in practice. In order to support continuous improvement, the participants were encouraged to keep reflective practice journals throughout the program. Access to a DVD that provided an introduction to the EYLF was also provided to all services along with access to an advice line and relevant websites, as a further means of professional learning.

The coaches

Six (6) coaches were employed by *Gowrie Victoria* to deliver the Coaching Program. The coaches had varying years of experience in early childhood education from 15 years to 52 years. They had varied careers experiences, including primary school teaching, child care work (i.e, long day care, kindergarten, family daycare), parent support officer, field officer, special needs educator, Indigenous education support officer and higher education teaching for early childhood qualifications. They had little or no formal professional development in coaching, but all felt that many of their career experiences, such as parent consultations, gave them good experience to bring to the role. The *Gowrie Victoria* manager of the Coaching Program (program manager) also assumed a coaching role along with the other five coaches.

Prior to the commencement of the coaching program, the coaches underwent extensive professional development in relation to the Frameworks and the National Quality Framework, as well as training and support from the program manager on techniques to build a culture of peer-to-peer support. Coaches met monthly to share and discuss resources, to discuss their experience and strategies and to delegate specific tasks.

The stated goals developed by *Gowrie Victoria* for the coaches were to:
- empower services and the educators to embrace the vision and principles of both Frameworks
- assist educators to develop a relevant Practitioner Inquiry Project that was contextualised for their early childhood setting
- support service leaders to develop a Quality Improvement Plan based on specific quality areas within the National Quality Standards
- develop a community of practice amongst participating services to capture the journey of educators to share with and empower others
- develop in services the capacity to continue quality practices and improvement beyond the scope of the program.

Aims of the evaluation

The aims of the evaluation were to: assess the effectiveness of the Coaching Program as a model to support early years services to align their practice to the Frameworks; and to inform future refinements, improvements and further development of the Coaching Program as a possible model to support early childhood professionals to engage with other aspects of the early childhood reform agenda.

A mixed methods approach, using both qualitative and quantitative data collection and analysis techniques, was employed to gather self-reported data. Such an approach was seen as the most comprehensive way to capture the many shared and unique characteristics of participating individuals, services and contexts. It provided a more meaningful and wider evidence base informed by multiple and diverse perspectives than would a reliance on any one form of data gathering and analysis. This approach also provided a way to meet the differing needs and perspectives of the multiple audiences of the evaluation and develop recommendations that may inform future coaching programs to support early childhood educators to engage with further aspects of the early childhood reform agenda.

Data collection and analysis methods

Data were collected from participants early in the Coaching Program and again later in the program through the following activities:

- surveys of all participants
- interviews with primary contacts from selected services
- group interviews with the coaches
- interviews with the program manager.

A survey of all service participants was conducted at the commencement of the Coaching Program and a second survey was conducted at its conclusion. In November 2010 and January 2012, surveys were distributed by the Department to all 90 services involved in the Coaching Program, inviting all educators in each service to participate in the evaluation by encouraging them to provide information about levels of engagement with the Frameworks. Telephone calls and emails were used to remind services and educators of the surveys and to encourage wide participation. In addition, incentives were provided by the Department to encourage participation (i.e, book store gift certificates, popular teaching aids, etc).

Two group interviews were held with the *Gowrie Victoria* coaches. A representative of the evaluation team conducted the first group interview with the coaches in November 2010, and a second group interview in December 2011. Information from these group interviews was used to help identify the factors that may facilitate or inhibit the embedding of the Frameworks into practice. It also helped to better understand the coaches' perceptions of how the program manager used her expertise to guide the coaches through the initial stages of implementation of the Coaching Program. For this reason, the program manager, who was also a coach, was not included in these group interviews. The interviews were recorded and a summary of the transcript sent to the participants for verification.

In February 2011, the program manager was interviewed by a representative from the evaluation team in order to: 1) establish the overall design of the Coaching Program, and 2) to gauge her initial response to the first phase of implementation. A second interview with the program manager occurred at the end of the Coaching Program in February 2012. These interviews helped the evaluation team to understand the unique nature of her dual role and how she used her experiences as a coach to inform her practice as program manager and to guide the other coaches.

The primary contacts from 10 of the services participating in the Coaching Program were invited to take part in a face-to-face interview (February/March 2011) at the beginning of the program, and a telephone interview at the end of the program (February/March 2012). The face-to-face interviews were conducted by representatives from the evaluation team and included a range of service types (i.e., long day care, family day care, kindergarten) representing each of the nine education regions. Originally, two interviews were scheduled to be conducted in the largest region however, due to availability issues, two representatives in the Eastern region of the state were interviewed instead. The purpose of these interviews was to gauge the experiences of a representative sample of the 90 services participating in the Coaching Program.

The responses from surveys and interviews provided both qualitative and quantitative data for analysis. Before each form of analysis was undertaken, all interview participants were given the opportunity to review their interview transcripts and make amendments to ensure the transcripts accurately reflected their views. NVivo9, a qualitative data analysis (QDA) computer software

package, was used to code each set of interview data. The NVivo coding was conducted by an expert in the use of the computer-assisted method of data analysis. The NVivo findings were summarised and then compared with the findings of an independently conducted thematic analysis. Both analysis were based on a search of the documents for words and phrases that indicated salient themes found in the extensive review of the literature on coaching and professional learning on the job. Comparisons between survey data collected at the beginning and end of the Coaching Program were made using SPSS 20 (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences). More specifically, the analytic process involved computer-assisted coding and thematic analysis of data generated from the group interviews with coaches, program manager and primary contacts. Comparisons of the NVivo themes and the thematic analysis identified common key themes. The analysis of the pre- and post-program surveys enabled further triangulation of data to support claims to validity of the overall findings from the evaluation.

Results

The Coaching Program was effective as a model to support early years services to align their practices to the Frameworks. Findings in the evaluation were reported in the following four domains: effectiveness; intensity of the Coaching Program; approach; and relationship to coach. With respect to the effectiveness of the program, the data revealed that it was effective in supporting participants to align their practice with the Frameworks and has facilitated a deeper understanding of and confidence in using the Frameworks amongst participants as well as facilitated reflective practice and supported participants to implement changes. Table 1 provides an overview of the reported changes to practice reported by Coaching Program participants. The shift in percentages indicates increases in practice change, and this occurred for all indicators.

Table 1: Reported changes to practice as a result of the Coaching Program, presented as percentage

As an early childhood educator:	Survey 1				Survey 2			
	Disagree %	Neutral %	Agree %	No response %	Disagree %	Neutral %	Agree %	No response %
I ensure that every child experiences success in their learning and development	1	2	32	65	5	20	70	5
I work with families to support children's learning and development at home and in the community	1	7	26	66	5	27	63	5
I am better able to reflect on my professional practice*	--	--	--	--	8	15	72	5
I respect the view and feelings of each	1	2	32	65	10	22	62	6

child								
I develop learning programs that are responsive to each child	2	5	26	67	10	12	73	5
I encourage children to explore, solve problems, communicate, think, create and construct	2	4	30	64	13	16	66	5
I support children's learning and development through child-led and adult-led play-based learning	1	4	30	65	11	13	71	5
I gather and analyse information from a wide range of sources	2	8	22	68	11	27	56	6
I provide families with information about their children's learning and development	2	8	23	67	15	13	66	6

*This prompt was not included in Survey 1.

In terms of the intensity of the program, the evaluation revealed that the readiness and commitment to change by educators and services influenced the effectiveness of the Coaching Program. Educators indicated that they committed minimal time on tasks associated with the Coaching Program, apart from during the face-to-face visits by the coaches. Services reported diversity in the number and duration of visits they undertook. Educators' preferred mode of contact with the coaches was face-to-face visits with email and phone identified as useful for providing additional support. The coaches experienced time constraints in meeting the needs of services across the nine (9) educational regions. This was due to a variety of factors, including staff rosters that meant some staff were unable to be present for meetings; the requirement of meetings to be held in addition to the already established meetings; and lack of relief staff to free educators to attend sessions. The interviews with coaches confirmed that educators were sometimes distracted by other responsibilities, as typified in the following quote:

> … [i]t's been hard for some of them to listen to us while they're trying to work with the children. And the most effective times, and the times I feel that we've helped them get some understanding or take on a task… was when we had a meeting at night.

As evident in Table 2, respondents considered the face-to-face sessions provided by the coaches to be 'very useful' or 'useful'. This was particularly so at the time of the second survey, when the services by then had had an opportunity to engage with the variety of contact available. Almost half of respondents in Survey 2 found the meetings with the primary contact to be very useful,

with the remainder, except for two respondents, reporting some degree of usefulness. This pattern was repeated for consulting with staff at team meetings and working with individual educators, although to a lesser degree. The in-service training differed in that almost one-third of respondents provided no response which may suggest either that they did not make a distinction between support provided by the coach working with their service, and 'in-service training' provided by the coach.

Table 2: Respondent rating of the usefulness of each type of contact with the coach*****

Type of face-to-face session	Survey 1						Survey 2					
	Very useful		Somewhat useful	Not useful	Did not access	No response	Very useful		Useful		Not useful	No response
Meetings with primary contact	18	8	11	1	0	10	12	26	4	17	2	2	4
Consulting with staff at team meetings	13	11	7	0	0	19	10	21	8	17	0	3	6
Working with individual educators	12	9	8	1	0	15	15	20	7	15	4	4	5
In-service training	11	9	6	1	1	17	15	14	4	16	1	4	16
Other**	0	0	0	0	0	0	60	3	0	0	0	0	52

* Data in this table has been heat mapped by the number of respondents in each category to reveal patterns across the type of face-to-face session between the two surveys. The 'did not access' and 'no response' categories were not heat mapped.
** Other responses were 'resources', 'our own staff discussions' and 'being able to brainstorm and ask questions'.

The approach of the program explored the features of the model. Importantly, service-initiated participation in the Coaching Program was likely to facilitate enhanced engagement in the range of approaches offered. The expectations and protocols of the Coaching Program were not fully understood by all educators and coaches. The coach and educators in the services had variable experiences in setting goals across the course of the Coaching Program. The face-to-face sessions were regarded as being the most useful element of the program by most of the educators. Resources designed to enhance the Coaching Program, particularly those online, were under-utilised. As part of the evaluation, Coaches identified the need to:

- rethink the use of the reflective journal to better match the needs of educators in services, as educators found it difficult to maintain its use beyond the first few months of the program
- redesign the Practice Principle audit in a more user-friendly layout in order to support services in setting goals and finding areas as the focus for improvement
- design regional network meetings to include videoconferencing, where possible, so that more services are able to participate (rural and remote areas have difficulty with travel, and cost for attendance, including the cost of paying relief staff)
- coordinate professional learning opportunities between the various providers as there was some confusion amongst services in relation to what was on offer

- provide more opportunities for networking and sharing between services
- provide opportunities for all services to visit other services already using the Frameworks (all services were invited to visit the service at Gowrie Docklands for the final celebration; a selection of services were invited to visit Gowrie centres at other times and they commented on the usefulness of this activity; other services indicated visiting other services would enhance their ability to use the Frameworks more effectively).

The establishment and maintenance of relational trust and respect between educators and the coach were vital elements of the Coaching Program. The relationship qualities, along with an appropriate knowledge and skills base of coaches, helped to optimise the Coaching Program. Some respondents described the relationship with the coach as 'vital' to the Coaching Program, and respondents emphasised the need for it to be a 'comfortable' relationship. Respondents also provided commentary about desirable personal attributes of the coach, such as being approachable, supportive, understanding, non-threatening and easy to talk to. Services that had initially shown some resistance to working with a coach became more committed as trust built. The following extract from the educators provide the basis for the list of desirable attributes for coaches.

You need to feel comfortable with the person to have informative meetings.

You need to feel comfortable to be able to 'admit' where you need the support and know your coach will support you but not judge you.

It is important to be able to talk openly and feel safe in discussing concerns.

Having a positive relationship with our coach made educators feel at ease, comfortable and relaxed whilst in meetings, discussions, etc.

A willing participant and coach developing a good relationship tends to make us want to work better/harder.

These comments describe an increasing sense of relational trust and highlighted the importance of it for educators to share openly about their practice, as indicated in the research literature. The specific qualities of coaches identified across the data sets as being most important to the participating services were:
- a warm and friendly approach to coaching
- an ability to establish rapport with all educators in a service quickly and effectively
- availability to provide advice and respond to questions, particularly in relation to the Frameworks
- an understanding of the varying needs of services and educators.

Coaches reported they had generally formed effective learning relationships with the services, too. This reaffirms the literature that indicates the emotional and social side of mentoring is very important (Peterson, et al., 2010).

Overall, the Coaching Program improved most educators' understanding of the Frameworks. The data confirm that participation in the Coaching Program improved educators' confidence in using the Frameworks and facilitated ongoing opportunities to participate in professional learning

activities related to the Victorian Framework. Continuing with regular reflective practice will also support educators to maintain and sustain change. The intensity of the program varied across the services, leading to diverse experiences for those engaged in the Coaching Program. Readiness and commitment to change by educators and services influenced the effectiveness of the Coaching Program. The data indicate a strong preference for face-to-face visits and the importance of establishing a strong, respectful relationship. The Coaching Program included a range of activities and resources, the engagement with which varied across the services, leading to diverse experiences for participants in the Coaching Program. The data confirm the need to retain and facilitate increased utilisation of the Coaching Program activities and resources through the provision of face-to-face support from the coaches in order to encourage practice change across the service types. The relationship between the coach and the educators in the program was considered to be vital for effective engagement with the program. The data confirm that there were specific qualities of coaches that are important to the participating services in order to support change practice across the range of service types. The high quality of the relationship between the coach and the program manager has contributed to a positive flow-on effect in the coaches' supportive work with the services.

Conclusion

The Coaching Program was found to be an effective model for changing educators' practices to align with the Frameworks. However, there are some areas where refinements might improve future professional development coaching programs. The professional literature confirms that there is a range of features of good coaching practice that can be employed to optimise results. This evaluation reveals that many of these features were evident in the model evaluated. In summary, the features of good practice that are clearly evident in the program include: the structured opportunity to develop a learning conversation between the coach and the educator; the setting of challenging but achievable goals evidenced in deliverables such as staff training, newsletters to families, and incorporation of the Practice Principles into daily practice; a commitment to building relational trust; maintaining regular contact between the coach and the service; the educators' readiness to change; personal attributes of the coach throughout the program; and the expertise of the coaches in the discipline in which they are coaching.

Other features that could be further enhanced to improve the overall effectiveness of the Coaching Program, as informed by the literature and by the evaluation, include: providing educators with the opportunity to select their preferred coach; the skill level of the coach; timely availability of coaching throughout the career of the educator; understanding that coaching for professional learning is a developmental, not a remedial, process; utilising learning agreements between participants. While the literature points to these elements as having the potential to enhance the professional development coaching model, it is acknowledged that it is not always possible to engage all of these aspects in the design and implementation of a coaching program, due to a range of contextual considerations and limitations.

The Coaching Program has been effective as a model of support for early childhood services in Victoria with areas of improvement identified for future offerings. It has also facilitated practitioners' engagement with an early childhood reform agenda. This evaluation contributes to the growing research base in the area of mentoring and coaching, and sharing the findings from this research will add greater dimensions of understanding to this important strategy for professional learning.

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