



## WHAT DO WE KNOW ABOUT COACHING?

A skilled, knowledgeable, and energetic teaching force will be vital to meeting a program's Head Start school readiness goals. Just as children need individualized support to meet their potential, teachers and staff need professional development that is based on their needs, experiences, and goals. Head Start approves of providing this type of support through various professional development initiatives, including mentor coaching to promote effective teaching practices (Herren, 2009). Head Start administrators, teachers, and coaches, as well as professionals throughout the early education field, need guidance on how best to deliver the types of professional development supports that teachers need for improving and refining teaching practices associated with positive outcomes for children.

Quality teaching and learning are achieved through systematic and coherent professional development programs for teachers and staff. Three interrelated concepts work together to achieve the goal of school readiness in Head Start:

- The Head Start Child Development and Early Learning Framework lays the foundation for every teaching and learning experience in Head Start. It helps answer the question, "What should I teach?"
- The NCQTL Framework for Effective Everyday Practice (i.e., the House) presents the elements of quality teaching and learning. It helps answer the question, "How should I teach?"
- Effective early childhood professional development approaches that support teachers' skills, knowledge, and performance in the classroom help those responsible for professional development answer the question, "What should I do to help teachers support all children's progress toward school readiness goals?"

This brief will focus on one component of effective early childhood professional development: *Practice-Based Coaching*. Coaching, in general, fits within the overall context of a broader professional development plan. It is a term used to describe sustained and focused professional learning experiences. Coaching is a flexible tool for meeting teachers' needs. It can be guided by experts, fellow learners (peers), or oneself. Coaching can occur alone or after other professional development events such as courses or workshops. *Practice-Based Coaching* is one of many approaches to coaching. It differs from other approaches because of its focus: *using effective everyday teaching practices that are important for children's school readiness*. It involves (a) helping teachers use newly acquired skills, strategies, or models on the job and (b) linking those skills, strategies, or models to positive child outcomes.

To describe the research behind *Practice-Based Coaching*, a team of researchers from the National Center on Quality Teaching and Learning (NCQTL) built on and extended a thorough review of the early childhood professional development literature conducted by Snyder and colleagues (2012). The goal of the NCQTL review was to:

1. Examine what recent research says about coaching for practitioners who work with young children.
2. Examine what recent research says about key components of the *Practice-Based Coaching* model.
3. Discuss why Head Start programs might consider *Practice-Based Coaching* as an essential part of professional development.

## 1. What Does Research Say about Approaches to Coaching?

To answer this question, NCQTL identified and reviewed 101 studies published from 1995 through January 2011. Studies included in the review described some form of coaching for practitioners who worked with children ages three through five. To be included in the review, some form of empirical data on teacher or child outcomes was required.

For the review of literature, coaching was defined broadly. Studies were considered to include coaching if the study described support that was provided to practitioners, and support was sustained and focused. The support described in these studies was designed to help practitioners implement teaching practices through a process that included examining practice, using support strategies, offering feedback, and adjusting support or teaching practice throughout the process.

To help define the knowledge based around coaching, the 101 studies were described in terms of the “who,” “what,” and “how” of each coaching experience (National Professional Development Center on Inclusion, 2008).

### *Who has participated in coaching?*

Coaching has been studied in center-based child care, preschools, Head Start settings, and family child care settings. Participants represented the diversity of the early care and education workforce. Many of the classrooms or settings served children with or at risk for disabilities. Most often, lead teachers were the recipients of coaching (76%). Paraprofessionals and teaching teams were the recipients of coaching in nearly 25% of studies.

It is harder to describe the coaches. In over 75% of the studies, coaching was provided by consultants or research staff. Supervisors provided feedback in 7% of studies. Colleagues and peers provided feedback in 6% of studies. Individuals provided feedback to themselves in 8% of studies. The qualifications of the individuals who provided coaching were described infrequently. Only 19% of studies reported that coaches had formal training in coaching or consultation, and 39% of the studies reported that coaches had previous teaching experiences.

### *What content has been coached?*

Teaching practices related to social-emotional development (36%), pre-academic skills (43%), communication skills (22%), or instructional practices that were not content-specific (25%) were typically the focus of coaching in the reviewed studies. Content on inclusive practices, family-centered practices, motor skills, or adaptive skills were less often reported in the reviewed literature. (Note: content categories are not directly tied to the Head Start Child Development and Early Learning Framework domains).

### *How was coaching provided?*

In most studies, coaching was paired with some type of in-service (40%) or staff development (25%) prior to the start of coaching. In 14% of studies, coaching was used as part of pre-service training. Coaching was the primary form of professional development in 24% of studies. Most studies did not report details of the coaching procedures. Only 23% of studies reported that coaches followed a coaching script or manual. Practitioners were provided with materials or resources in 27% of studies. Coaching feedback was delivered in a face-to-face format in 74% of studies and through a web-based format in 12% of studies. Coaching lasted from one week (1%) to one year (22%). Coaching usually occurred weekly (39%) or monthly (26%). The length of practitioner and coach meetings was not reported in 48% of studies but lasted more than 30 minutes per week in 37% of studies.



## 2. What Does Research Say about *Practice-Based Coaching*?

*Practice-Based Coaching* is a cyclical approach for supporting effective teaching practices that lead to positive outcomes for children. *Practice-Based Coaching* occurs within the context of a collaborative partnership. The coaching cycle involves planning goals and action steps, engaging in focused observations, and reflecting on and sharing feedback about teaching practices. The figure below provides an overview of *Practice-Based Coaching* and represents the relationship among the components.



*Practice-Based Coaching Graphic*

*What components of Practice-Based Coaching have been examined in the literature?*

The *Practice-Based Coaching* cycle begins with a process of planning goals and action steps to identify desired outcomes and steps to support achieving these outcomes. Twenty-three percent of coaching studies explicitly identified goal setting or action planning as a procedural component of the coaching implemented. In the *Practice-Based Coaching* cycle, shared goals and action plans are used to guide a focused observation. In 65% of all coaching studies, observation was a part of coaching. Following an observation, the *Practice-Based Coaching* cycle emphasizes a process to reflect on and share feedback about teaching practices. Twenty-two percent of coaching studies identified reflective conversations as a coaching process and 72% of studies described some type of performance feedback about teaching practices. Performance feedback could be verbal (64%), written (24%), or in graphed format (7%). Throughout the coaching cycle a variety of support strategies can be used to help teachers implement effective teaching practices; 65% of coaching studies used at least one coaching support strategy associated with *Practice-Based Coaching*. These included modeling (45%; coach demonstrations of how to implement strategies), problem-solving discussion (30%; interactions between the coach and teacher designed to identify the problem, generate options, decide on a possible solution, implement the best solution, and evaluate the solution), in-situ support (8%; supports provided by the coach within the classroom), or role-playing (4%; simulated situations between the coach and teacher to help the teacher to learn or practice strategies).

### *How many studies have used Practice-Based Coaching?*

To identify studies that used *Practice-Based Coaching*, NCQTL identified studies that reported using components of *Practice-Based Coaching* together (goals and action plans, observation, reflection, and feedback). It is important to note that studies might not have referred to their approach as *Practice-Based Coaching* to be included in this section. Seventeen percent of studies described coaching to include the three components of *Practice-Based Coaching* and 76% of these studies used support strategies associated with *Practice-Based Coaching*. Fifty-one percent of studies described at least two of the three components of *Practice-Based Coaching* and 66% of these studies used support strategies.

### *Is Practice-Based Coaching effective for improving teaching practices?*

Studies that used components of practice-based coaching lead to a range of positive outcomes for teachers, including implementation of desired teaching practices, behavior support practices, or curricula; implementation of practices with fidelity; changes in teacher-child interactions; and self-reported changes in knowledge, skills, and attitudes about teaching practices.

In addition to changes in practice, studies that used components of practice-based coaching were associated with positive child outcomes. Child outcomes included increased participation and engagement, increased social skills and fewer challenging behaviors, increased literacy and language; and increased skills associated with the Head Start Outcomes Framework for logic and reasoning and approaches to learning.

### **3. What Does this Mean for Coaches and Teachers in Head Start?**

This literature review helps us understand the importance of sustained professional development experiences for all early care and education professionals. Although there are many goals for coaching, and many coaching approaches in Head Start and throughout the early education field, the literature supports using a *Practice-Based Coaching* model to build a bridge between learning about a practice and using it in the classroom. Using *Practice-Based Coaching* requires shared planning for goals and action steps, focusing observation on desired outcomes and collecting reliable data, using data to guide reflection and feedback about teaching practices, and providing supports to implement teaching practices as intended. The National Center on Quality Teaching and Learning is committed to helping Head Start training and technical assistance providers and teachers use *Practice-Based Coaching* to improve teaching and learning in the classroom.

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