

The Impact of a Mentor-coaching Model on Teacher Professional Development

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Abstract The purpose of this study was to examine the impact of the mentor–coach initiative model on participating Head Start Programs. The researchers interviewed 44 participants across two mid-western states. The participants provided positive feedback about the initiative and identified specific literacy practices based on this model that were successfully implemented in their classrooms. Evidence from this study suggests the importance of incorporating the mentor-coaching initiative model to enhance teacher pedagogical practices.

Keywords Teacher professional development · Mentoring · Mentor-coaching · Literacy · Head Start

Background: The Mentor–Coach Initiative

In the 2002 State of the Union address, President Bush emphasized the need for schools to prepare children to read as one critical step in education reform (White House 2002). Recognizing the importance of the early years in shaping the success of children, the President initiated the *Good Start, Grow Smart* early childhood initiative and implored Head Start programs to start implementing

strategies that can significantly prepare children for school. In response to this initiative, the Head Start Bureau began focusing on ways to improve its services, specifically in early literacy skills.

With the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLBA) in place, educators are looking for ways to ensure that all teachers are well trained to produce the expected learning outcomes (Tugel 2004). Since most of the new reforms and policies place high demand on teachers to produce desired outcomes, educators are continually investing in programs that promise to help teachers achieve this goal. One such program that was aimed at improving the quality of Head Start teachers' knowledge and skills in literacy development was the Strategic Teacher Education Program (STEP) Early Literacy Mentor–Coach initiative model. The STEP model was “a comprehensive, multifaceted, sequential professional development endeavor that was aimed at training teachers on research based literacy practices that would lead to positive child outcomes and school readiness” (ACYF 2002, p. 3). Mentor-coaching approaches were emphasized as an effective way of providing teachers with support and on the job guidance as they engage in their daily teaching activities.

The Center for Improving the Readiness of Children for Learning and Education (CIRCLE) at the University of Texas Health Science Center at Houston was hired to develop the training model and materials that would be used by the STEP. Head Start programs were asked to select a few teachers from their programs to attend the CIRCLE training, which was held in Washington D.C. during the summer of 2002. The teachers who attended the Washington training were to act as the Early Literacy Mentor-Coaches for their respective Head Start programs. Through the training, teachers were exposed to ways of providing appropriate literacy environments and routines,

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phonological awareness, written expression, language development, print and book awareness, motivation to read, read aloud, letter knowledge, and literacy mentoring areas strategies (Zorn et al. 2003). After returning to their programs, the Early Literacy Mentor-Coaches were required to provide support to two or more teachers in their programs.

Regional centers were urged to provide ongoing support through mentor-coaching approaches. On site support was to focus on strategies that would provide literacy resources to Head Start programs. The regional Quality Improvement Center (QIC) that provides training and technical assistance to Head Start programs provided Mentor–Coach Specialists (MCS) to continue support and further training on the STEP materials to teachers at their specific sites. The MCS received the STEP training in the months of November 2002 to January 2003 in Washington D.C. The MCS were required to visit Head Start programs and provide on-site support to the Early Literacy Mentor-Coaches twice a month up to 4 h for each visit. This on-site training was carried out during the months of February 2003 to June 2003 when the mentor-coaching initiative came to an end (Zorn et al. 2003).

Mentoring and Teacher Instructional Practices

Since the mid-1970s, great attention has been paid to mentoring. Given that mentoring has been widely used in the business world, it is helpful to compare its use in the educational institutions. Companies have credited their successful growth among their workers to mentoring. Managers have realized that mentoring is one of the best ways to dramatically enhance employee skills and motivation (Murray and Owen 1991). Additionally, business organizations view mentoring as an important element that greatly contributes to a company's survival. Odiorne (1985) described mentoring as an American management innovation strategy that has provided a mechanism through which organizations have regenerated themselves from within.

In many companies, mentoring programs play a significant role in the career, retention, and leadership development of employees. Similar benefits have been reported in teacher education programs. Particularly in the early childhood education, mentoring provides a means for teachers to enhance their skills. This is especially important for unqualified teachers (Saluja et al. 2002). Mentoring provides that possibility of enhancing their qualifications (Ryan et al. 2004).

In teacher education, mentoring and its benefits have been explored intensely, especially in supporting new teachers into the field. The need for exploring mentoring

benefits for experienced teachers and as a cost effective strategy when compared to other in-service professional development activities is also important. Apart from being a vehicle for accelerating the education reform process (Maynard and Furlong 1993), mentoring provides a medium through which professional development activities can be made available to teachers on a continual basis (Tugel 2004).

The concept of mentoring and the term itself date back to ancient Greece. In Homer's *Odyssey*, Odysseus' son Telemachus receives care and counsel from a family friend Mentor while Odysseus is away in the siege of Troy. This concept has contributed greatly to the way the term is and has been perceived (Murray and Owen 1991). The central quality of modeling found in mentoring has evolved from Odysseus's act of bestowing an individual with the responsibility for nurturing, educating, advising, and protecting his son (Whitaker 2002). Following this model, mentoring has often been portrayed as an intentional, nurturing, instructive, and supportive activity by an older, more experienced person that helps shape the growth and development of a younger, less experienced person.

In recent years, the term mentoring has come to refer to a person who serves as a trusted friend, guide, teacher, adviser, and helper to another (Shea 1994). However, mentoring is "a learning opportunity in which an experienced colleague, the mentor, socializes the learner or the protégé to the larger context of an organization, profession, or industry" (Sisakhti 1998, p. 57). Jeruchim and Shapiro (1992) identify mentoring as "a close intense, mutually beneficial relationship between someone who is older, wiser, more experienced, and more powerful with someone younger or less experienced" (p. 23). Further, Jeruchim and Shapiro note that mentoring is a complimentary relationship, within an organizational or professional context, that is built on both the mentor's and the protégés needs. In education, it is widely used to support novice teachers and also to reduce attrition rates (Feiman-Nemser and Paker 1993), but its use as an ongoing in-service activity for teachers to acquire new skills has not been greatly explored.

Why Mentoring?

Given the current pressure for educational reforms, mentoring can be an effective way to train teachers to adopt new practices (Weaver 2004). Since change cannot arise spontaneously from externally imposed expectations or mandates, or solely from one-time training sessions or in-service courses (Barth 2001), professional development practices such as mentoring that provide one-to-one guidance and ongoing on-site support can be more successful

because learning depends on the collegiality among teachers. Other than this, collegial models enable teachers to talk about practice, observe others' practice and work together to plan, design, research, evaluate curriculum, and teach each other what they know about teaching and learning.

This sense of collegiality provided in mentoring makes less experienced teachers feel safe to make mistakes, study themselves, and share learning with each other to create excellence in their delivery (Dantonio 2001). Understanding that judgments about instructional effectiveness and decisions about how to change come from teachers themselves makes mentoring an effective strategy for achieving this goal. Cummin (2004) argues that excellent teacher education programs are as a result of personal, ongoing relationships brought about by effective mentoring approaches.

One of the recommendations by the National Commission on Teaching and America's Future report (1996) is that if we have to invest in quality teaching, professional development activities that support teachers should be embedded in the teacher's daily work through joint planning, study groups, peer coaching, and research. The benefit of such activities is that they provide for ways that teachers can continue to have access to the latest knowledge about teaching and learning with on-site support. Some of the key challenges of making it possible for teachers to acquire the necessary knowledge needed to be highly qualified teachers is the difference in the quality of educational training programs they attended. This calls for structuring training programs based on how teachers learn or practice develops.

Understanding how teachers go about changing their pedagogy is important. Teachers begin their focus of teaching initially on themselves and then move to students and their own learning (Darling-Hammond and Baratz-Snowden 2005; Schaverien and Cosgrove 1997; Wasik 1998). Since change brings about resistance, be it positive or negative, using mentoring relationships provide a channel through which teachers can identify with the need for adopting the positive practices being presented to them. Mentor-model professional development approaches tend to get to the core of teacher's issues. The mentor is often a fellow teacher who can relate to teacher's experiences or challenges in their place of work. In this mode the mentor provides a suitable ground to understand the teacher's concerns and for the teachers to be comfortable to share fears and problems. Through this caring supportive relationship, teachers begin to have an attitude shift. It is after teacher attitudes are managed, change can take place. While the early childhood field continues to face challenges in teacher quality, investing in mentoring is a great opportunity to make a difference in teacher practices.

Methodology

The participants for the study were 44 Head Start teachers across two mid-western states. Teachers were recruited from programs that participated in the mentor-coach initiative. Teachers that received mentoring from the Early Literacy Mentor-Coaches were targeted. Participating programs were visited and one-on-one interviews with each participating teacher were held. The interviews focused on obtaining the teachers' views about the success of the mentor coach initiative in their programs. Classroom observations were also carried out after interviews to ascertain aspects of the training teachers had implemented in their classrooms. Six open ended questions were used.

1. Is the mentor-coach initiative continuing in your program?
2. What forms of training and materials did you receive or have you received in the process of the mentor-coach initiative?
3. How often did you receive this support during the mentor coach process?
4. How helpful was the mentor-coach initiative in supporting and enhancing your literacy practices?
5. What are some of the aspects of the mentor-coach initiative training that you have implemented in your teaching and classrooms?
6. What challenges did you face in implementing the strategies learned in the mentor-initiative; what other concerns do you have about the initiative?

Continuity of the Mentor-Coach Initiative

Question 1 sought to discover whether the mentor-coach initiative was continuing in the Head Start programs. Since the Early Literacy Mentor-Coaches who had received training both in Washington D.C. and from onsite support were expected to continue it in their programs, the goal was to find if it was possible to use this model toward that goal. Teacher interviews revealed that about three-quarters of the teachers (34 out of 44, or 77%) agreed with the statement that mentoring was continuing in their programs, indicating the continuity of the model. However, 10 of the teachers did not agree with this statement. Two and a half years after the initiative was implemented, it was progressing in some programs. Some programs embraced the idea and continued with it while some did not due to specific challenges that are identified later in this paper.

Literacy Training Received: What Literacy Training/Materials did they Receive?

This question focused on the type of literacy training activities teachers had been involved in within the past two

years since the initiative began. Specifically, the researchers focused on the STEP literacy training. Teacher responses were categorized into four specific major forms of training that emerged:

- (a) Training on the Early Language and Literacy Classroom Observation toolkit (ELLCO);
- (b) Use of STEP literacy book;
- (c) Literacy workshops; and
- (d) Receiving handouts or articles on literacy.

Data revealed that teachers received some form of training in relation to the STEP literacy. This form of training included either being provided with the STEP literacy activity book or being given support on how to use activities in the book to supplement their daily lesson plans (30 out of the 44, or 69%). Attending general group literacy workshops was also mentioned as one activity most participated in. Thirty-four of the 44 (77%) teachers agreed on being trained on the ELLCO toolkit as to how to assess their classroom environments to meet the ELLCO specifics. In addition, 34 teachers (75%) agreed on attending various workshops on literacy, and 25 of the 44 teachers reported receiving handouts and articles on how to support children's literacy learning in the classroom. The above information is presented in Table 1.

Following observations that were made, it was evident that classrooms had the materials required as outlined in the ELLCO toolkit. Nearly half of the classrooms observed had the same supplies of the STEP literacy materials stocked in their shelves. A difference was noted, however, in the use of materials. While most of the classrooms had the same materials, most of the materials were stocked up in shelves. It is important that teachers are given training and support to effectively adopt materials into their daily teaching.

Some teachers noted that their Head Start grantee required that classes are checked for STEP literacy materials at least once every month. Other programs also required that teachers use one activity each week from the STEP literacy book. At one site, teachers reported receiving monthly check-ups from ELMCs of specific items they had in the learning centers so as to meet the ELLCO

requirements and STEP literacy training. The danger with this approach is that two specific roles—supervision and mentoring—are tied together. Combining mentoring with supervisor roles is likely to render this professional development activity ineffective. It is important that mentoring be differentiated from supervisory roles because it can only be successful when mentors act as mentors and not supervisors. Since the roles, responsibilities, and functions of these two duties are quite different, combining them is likely to jeopardize the mentee's relationship with the mentor to the extent that mentees are not comfortable sharing their weaknesses and strengths.

Amount of Training Provided: How Often did You Receive Training?

Teachers were asked to recall the number of times they received the STEP literacy training per year during the past 2 years since it was implemented. Their responses implied that they had been participating in the STEP literacy workshops. Out of the 44 teachers interviewed, seven indicated they had received the training about three to four times a year, five mentioned two to three times a year, 12 mentioned twice a year, 11 once a year, and nine could not remember. All of the teachers stated they had received some form of training on the STEP literacy, either by being provided with the STEP literacy activities book that they were using in supplementing activities in their daily lesson plans, having had general group workshops, or having been trained on the ELLCO and how to furnish their classroom environments to fit the ELLCO requirements. Many Head Start programs observed had purchased materials required in the ELLCO or per the STEP literacy training.

While other literacy aspects continue to dwindle behind, such as the amount of reading sessions or one to one adult reading in preschool programs, more books seems to be purchased and added to the reading list. Dickinson et al. (2002) argue that reading activities in preschool programs are determined by children's current interest or needs. Dickinson et al. noticed that the literacy activity such as book reading was one activity that was sometimes omitted in most preschool programs because either the children were tardy or other activities took too much time to allow room for book reading. However, findings from the study revealed that most Head Start programs are well supplied with books, what is lacking is the training to enhance teacher skills in using book reading activities.

How Helpful was the Mentor–Coach Initiative in Enhancing Teacher Literacy Practices?

The researchers inquired whether or not the mentor–coach initiative was helpful. About half of the teachers were very

Table 1 Literacy training activities

Type of literacy training received	No. of teachers who agreed	Disagreed
1. Training on ELLCO	34	10
2. Support on use of STEP Literacy book	30	14
3. Attending STEP literacy workshops	34	10
4. Received literacy handouts/articles	25	19

N = 44

positive about the initiative; 23 of the teachers mentioned it was very helpful, 15 of them stated it was somewhat helpful, and six of them indicated it was not helpful. Teachers who indicated the initiative was not helpful stated that the initiative was beneficial to teachers who had no specialized college education, suggesting future personalization of such initiatives to individual teacher needs. This group of teachers felt that the initiative provided content they already acquired from the literacy classes they had taken in college. In addition, this group of teachers noted that the literacy training content in the STEP literacy book was not appropriate for the preschool programs. Teachers commented that they did not see how they could implement some of the suggestions and activities provided in the initiative because they were meant for elementary students rather than preschool children.

Implementation: What Things have You Implemented in Your Classroom from the STEP Literacy Mentor–Coach Initiative?

Teachers were asked to identify some of the things they learned from the STEP literacy training they had implemented in their classrooms. Most teachers mentioned activities like word walls, puzzles with pictures, and books in all learning centers, take home activities, sentence strips. This was summarized in one teacher's words: "The word walls, the kids really like that, the question of the day; they like to play the rhyming of words, with one question of the day we make graphs out of them." They also mentioned the take-home activity ideas from the STEP literacy book, story time and strip literacy activities, daily news activities, graphic activities, how to journal with children and why it is important, read-aloud activities, and science activities. One of teachers stated, "Daily news is something new and word wall, this I learned from the STEP literacy book." Another teacher remarked, "It helped. I wouldn't have known how to do the word webs, how to journal with children and why it's important." While teachers appreciated the positive aspects of the initiative, some felt they would do better if they had one-on-one support.

What Challenges Did You Experience in the Process of Implementing the Mentor–Coach Initiative?

The teachers were asked about some of the challenges they faced or face in the process of implementing the STEP literacy training in their classrooms. Their responses were grouped into common themes. Time was identified as a great challenge in accommodating the literacy aspects presented in the mentor–coach initiative. While most teachers agreed they liked the STEP literacy activities, they felt they did not have enough time to implement the

activities. Teachers of the half-day classes mentioned that the time available for half-day classes does not enable them to plan and include most of the activities in the STEP literacy books. Other challenges mentioned were having so many tasks at the beginning of year, lack of money to buy supplies or resources, differences in ages of children in their classrooms, different levels of knowledge of children, and providing activities that are age-appropriate for a group with various ages.

Some teachers were worried that the many materials in the learning centers provided as per the STEP literacy initiative would confuse the children. One teacher's comment was, "At first I was very scared-like all this stuff! The children were so excited and loud but after some time they got used to it." Another teacher said that she wished the mentor had one-on-one time with individual teachers. She pointed out that teachers are at different levels depending on education level. The training could have been more helpful if it was one-on-one so that teachers who did not have the background would benefit more.

Implications and Conclusions

Head Start programs experienced a positive impact mentor–coach initiative within the 6 months that it was implemented. While the initiative started off with only a few teachers from each of the Head Start programs receiving the training and support, more teachers in the Head Start programs got involved. It is possible that mentoring can be an effective tool toward enhancing teacher instructional practices and practices for educational programs (Ryan et al. 2004). The mentor–coach initiative approach used a "train the trainer" concept that trained a few individuals to provide training to the rest of the teachers in their own programs. This approach renders mentoring a cost effective strategy to enhancing teaching pedagogy. The important element in mentoring is the relationship that is developed between the mentor and the mentee. Through relationship-building, mentors are able to understand teachers' areas of needs and support them toward achieving those goals. Above all, the mentoring relationship enhances teachers' change of attitude towards changing pedagogy. Through ongoing support and dialogue between the mentor and mentee, teachers are likely to see the need for change in their instructional practices.

The goal of the initiative was to enhance teacher pedagogy. To ensure success of such efforts, it is important that teachers' needs and stages of development are identified. While this was a very enriching professional development activity, some teachers felt they did not benefit much because they had already learned similar content in college. Structuring mentoring in line with teachers' needs would be

more helpful. In addition, teachers have many duties; some of the Early Literacy Mentor-Coaches were performing other duties related to their jobs as teachers and center supervisors. It was difficult to wear multiple hats and at the same time render coaching effectively for 4 h as was required. Because this approach required intensive mentoring from the MCS and then delivering it to teachers, it was sometimes difficult for ELMCs to grasp this duty and as well as handle their regular duties such as being the center director or early childhood coordinators.

Future research should focus on the challenges that teachers identified such as dealing with different age groups in the same class and how to provide appropriate strategies. Teachers of half-day classes experienced difficulties in integrating these practices due to the short time they had with children. Researchers need to establish strategies to compress daily activities so that they can be used in shorter time frames.

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