



EARLY LEARNING: SUPPORTING TEACHERS OF OUR YOUNGEST CHILDREN

By Anne Watkins, New Teacher Center Senior Director

IS EARLY LEARNING IMPORTANT?

There is little debate about the benefits of early learning for children, particularly disadvantaged children. James J. Heckman, Ph.D., Nobel Prize winning professor of economics at the University of Chicago, has examined early childhood intervention extensively. His and other research find that family environments such as socioeconomic status and degree of parental education are predictors of a child's cognitive and socioemotional success. The gap between advantaged and disadvantaged children appears early in life. With an increasing number of children in the United States being born into families that face poverty, providing early supports becomes even more important. Heckman advocates for a major refocus of policy to capitalize on the importance of high-quality education in the early years in closing the achievement and success gap both in school and life.

New Teacher Center (NTC) has found that support for all teachers is fundamental to effectiveness and student success, and coaching is proven to be one of the most effective professional development strategies in improving the quality of instruction. NTC is building on what has had positive impact in the K–12 space to contextualize a system of support for Early Learning educators.

COMPLEXITIES AND CHALLENGES OF EARLY LEARNING

There is much variety in the types of early learning environments and experiences available to families today, ranging from private pre-schools, to day care programs, to pre-kindergarten programs which are part of public schools. And while there is a variety, access to high quality programs is too often limited.

Preparation for early educators varies enormously. Teachers may enter the profession with a high school graduation diploma, completion of community college courses that lead to certification, or university degrees in early childhood education. Some Early Learning teachers have student taught in an Early Learning context while

others have had previous experience teaching older children in K–12 classrooms and little knowledge of developmentally appropriate pedagogy for our youngest learners. Others have had little or no teaching experience.

While teaching salaries are generally low, early childhood teachers are typically paid even less than K–12 teachers. There are widely differing professional development opportunities and requirements, and Early Learning teacher accountability and evaluation varies greatly, as does collection of achievement data. Society often perceives them as babysitters, less important as educators and leaders. There can be more than one teacher in a classroom, often with differing educational backgrounds, philosophies and experiences. And when the Early Learning sites are part of an elementary school, mentoring can be particularly challenging for site administrators who have already full plates and may not have deep knowledge of age-appropriate teaching strategies for very young students.

There are similarities between supporting early educators and K–12 teachers. All instructional mentors and coaches aim to develop autonomous, reflective teacher leaders, able to provide high quality learning environments for all children. As a result, these coaches need to develop the skills, language, and habits of mind to be effective.

And there are differences—working with multiple teachers in the classroom requires coaches to draw upon different facilitation skills than those necessary to coach a single teacher. Because early educators have a wide range of education backgrounds and credentialing requirements, each teacher comes with differing amounts of pedagogical foundation. Also, as Early Learning instruction, student work, and assessments are unique to the Early Learning space, coaches must learn specific strategies, tools and resources. The range of private and public contexts that make up the Early Learning landscape adds an extra layer to the complexity of providing support.

NTC AND EARLY LEARNING

In response to the increased awareness of the importance of early learning, NTC is dedicated to improving early learning opportunities by accelerating the effectiveness of these teachers. NTC's theory of action includes building deep levels of content and pedagogical knowledge and coaching expertise.

Professional Standards Guide Coaching and Teacher Growth

Effective coaching requires that all stakeholders (teachers, coaches, administrators, and families) hold a clear vision of a high-quality Early Learning classroom and the teacher's role in it. NTC's **Standards and Continuum of Early Learning Teacher Practice** offer a comprehensive framework of the characteristics of effective Early Learning teaching and are used to guide the work of the coach and teacher.



New Teacher Center Standards and Continuum of Early Learning Teaching Practice

Based on research and the work of many early education organizations such as the National Association of Young Children, Head Start, California Department of Education and the CLASS, ECERS and DRDP assessments, these **Standards** present a holistic view of teaching practice with children ages three to five throughout a career. They are organized into five standards which are interrelated and together provide a complete picture of effective teaching:

- **Establishes and Maintains a Culture of Safety, Respect, and Rapport**
- **Implements Strategies to Engage, Challenge, Deepen Understanding, and Maintain Well Being Through Quality Interactions with Children**

- **Collaborates with Families to Support Children's Well-Being and Learning**
- **Plans Standards-Based, Developmentally Responsive Environments Based on Observation and Assessment**
- **Commits to Developing as a Professional**

Each standard contains multiple elements that offer more detailed descriptions of the standards in practice. Accompanying the **Standards** is a **Continuum**, which describes five developing levels of practice: *Emerging, Exploring, Applying, Integrating, and Innovating*.

The Standards and Continuum guide teachers and their coaches to focus discussions on strengths and areas for growth, set professional goals, reflect on practice through formative assessment, select appropriate professional development, collaboratively self-reflect and assess, and inquire continuously into practice.

Coaching Philosophy, Knowledge, and Skills

Effective Early Learning coaches learn a combination of complex skills, knowledge and habits of mind.

Building a Trusting Relationship

From the beginning, the coach and teacher(s) must establish a deep, trusting relationship. For teachers to take the necessary risks to grow, they must feel safe to share their successes and challenges honestly. If there is more than one teacher in a classroom, building trust can bring unique challenges. Each teacher may come with differing educational backgrounds and beliefs about child rearing, discipline, and learning abilities. The coach requires skill and language to facilitate conversations that bring coherence to philosophy, maintains trust and open communication between the teachers.

Formative Assessment

Coaches and teachers learn to use many of the same NTC Formative Assessment and Support (FAS) system tools and protocols proven effective with beginning teachers and new administrators. For example, the *Collaborative Assessment Log (CAL)* provides a record of coaching conversations and other interactions by documenting successes, growth, areas of focus and concerns, and next steps for teacher(s) and coach. Coaching conversations inquire into instructional practice—plan lessons, determine an observation or videotaping focus, reflect on data, assess student needs, and brainstorm solutions to challenges.

Teachers Set Professional Goals

Setting professional goals provides a foundation for formative assessment of professional growth. In setting goals, teachers and their coaches co-assess using the **Continuum** to pinpoint strengths and areas for growth. From this formative assessment and with the support of the coach, teachers set goals, create a plan for achieving them, and describe evidence of growth. Goals support the coach in focusing support.

Mid way through the school term, goals are revisited to assess progress and make revisions as appropriate. An initial goal may have been too broad or less important than others which have emerged as the year progressed. Or a goal may be reached, and another goal has become evident. This fine-tuning can help assure that both the coach and teacher are focused on goals that can have the biggest impact on student growth.

At the end of the school term, the coach and teacher once again co-assess progress toward goals by reviewing artifacts such as CALs, observation data, lesson plans and student work analyses. They reflect on successes and decisions made, noting continuing and new areas for growth. This process keeps goals relevant, and in the forefront of continued professional growth.

Collecting Classroom Data

Effective coaching includes classroom visits and videotaping to collect data of teaching and learning.

A pre-observation conversation between coach and teacher(s) is a critical first step in narrowing and clarifying lesson objectives and teaching strategies, identifying the focus for data collection, and exploring how the lesson to be observed fits into the larger scope and sequence of the curriculum.

Coaches can collect a wide variety of data during an *observation* using such tools as *Selective Scripting* or *Seating Chart*: strategies the teacher(s) uses to attend to children's social and emotional needs, preventions and interventions that increase positive language, interactions and safety, student interactions that are evidence of resolving conflicts, handling emotions, and supporting each other's learning.

Video can also provide valuable primary data. If there are two teachers in the classroom, it can be useful in capturing their classroom dynamics. Video of students allows teachers to observe first hand behaviors they may not see while focused on teaching. Videos can be viewed by the teacher(s) later or in collaboration with the coach.

Reflecting conversations between the teacher(s) and coach following a classroom observation or videotaped lesson segments, offer opportunities to analyze data, discover entry points, and set next steps such as differentiating or modifying lessons, or strategies to more fully reflect and celebrate children's languages and cultures.

These data provide formative assessment that can identify successes and areas for growth.

Analyzing Student Work

Looking at student data is key to clarifying the impact of teaching on student learning. Because Early Learning student work is different in Early Learning contexts than in K–12, NTC has modified the tools coaches and teachers use to reflect the unique Early Learning environment. Analysis of student data, such as language samples or video of play, guides teachers in formatively assessing learning needs, adjusting lessons, and planning differentiated learning.

COACH PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Through experience, NTC has developed a variety of professional development strategies that are contextualized for coaches of Early Learning teachers. And while there are similarities between Early Learning and K–12 curriculum, there are significant differences. Coaches must learn how to support the teacher in planning and facilitating developmentally appropriate strategies including developing *Play to Learn structures* for younger children. A greater focus on aspects of social and emotional learning such as motivation, resilience, positive self-image, and respect for differences is important. The Early Learning teacher needs to be able to teach developmentally appropriate and effective lessons to support language development, including communication and problem solving. Through child driven and teacher guided activities, early education teachers develop habits of mind that provide the foundation for successful learning and prepare students for Common Core curriculum. These concepts and skills are learned through different professional development experiences.

The Professional Learning Series for Early Learning Coaches introduces essential coaching concepts. Concepts and tools are introduced, followed by time for participants to practice and explore applications to their own contexts. These professional development sessions are offered over the school year.

Coach Forums or *Professional Learning Communities (PLC)* build a community of support, deepen the learning, especially of concepts unique to Early Learning, and provide coaches opportunities to reflect on individual practice. Coaches learn from each other through structured inquiry, case studies, and problem solving. For example, coaches focusing on facilitating productive conversations between two teachers in the same classroom meet together, while others who want to learn more about Play to Learn strategies or oral language instruction, meet to share successes and brainstorm solutions. These professional learning communities provide a rich environment for purposeful and strategic learning.

Meta-Coaching

Coaching for coaches is a critical component of professional development. NTC lead coaches and peer coaches can regularly observe and collect data of coaching conversations between a coach and teacher or classroom observations, then analyze data together. A CAL guides the conversation about what's working, challenges, next steps, and support needed. Lead coaches ask questions that both model the coaching language and promote accountability. Peer coaches develop professional relationships that assure safety for risk-taking and growth.

Coaches Professional Goal Setting

Coaches participate in a goal setting process that is parallel to the teachers they support: co-assessing their strengths and areas for growth on a continuum with a lead or meta-coach, setting goals, creating a plan for achieving them, and determining evidence of growth. Goals are revisited mid- and end of the year, guiding the focus of observations and conversations. This parallel process reinforces the belief in ongoing learning throughout a professional lifetime.

Developing Leadership

NTC is firmly committed to developing teacher leaders across the profession. Traditionally, teachers haven't been given many leadership opportunities. The same can be even more true for many early education teacher leaders who have been paid less and given lower status than K-12 teachers. Research has found that teacher leadership is critical in decision-making and improving the profession. It is a goal of the NTC Early Learning Initiative to change this perception through leadership development.

Leadership: Innovative Teaching Practice

Many of the descriptions of innovative teaching on the *Continuum of Early Learning Teaching Practice* describe leadership roles and responsibilities that teachers are encouraged and expected to assume:

Standard 1: Establishes and Maintains a Culture of Safety, Respect, and Rapport, innovative teachers lead staff and colleagues in reflecting on and using effective strategies indoors and out to ensure the emotional, social and physical safety of each child and in staying informed about relationship-based early childhood practice.

Standard 3: Collaborates with Families to Support Children's Well Being and Learning, innovative teachers structure leadership opportunities for families to contribute to the Early Learning community.

Standard 5: Commits to Developing as a Professional describes leadership responsibilities such as supporting staff and colleagues to maintain the motivation, resiliency, and energy needed to ensure that all children learn to their maximum potential, and initiates and facilitates professional learning in a community of practitioners to advance the learning of all children.

This language reframes the role of the Early Learning teacher as one of a leader.

Facilitating PLC

Coaches themselves model leadership by assuming facilitation roles in forums and professional learning communities (PLC). They learn how to create and facilitate a PLC that fosters inquiry in NTC professional developments session: *Facilitating Inquiry-Based PLC*. Gradually, coaches assume more responsibility for their own professional learning and that of the teachers they support.

By assuming leadership roles, both coaches and Early Learning teachers can continue to grow as efficacious professionals committed to empowering themselves as well as other stakeholders (families, communities, schools, and stakeholders) to be decision makers about student learning.

With this comprehensive plan for professional growth, coaches of Early Learning teachers hone their skills and deepen their understanding of how to effectively support Early Learning teachers.

NEXT STEPS

As a nation, we are gaining a greater awareness of the importance of effective early learning. Researchers continue to explore effective practices of Early Learning teaching. National and state policymakers are becoming more focused on supporting early learning. In October, 2014, President Obama pronounced:

If we make high-quality preschool available to every child, not only will we give our kids a safe place to learn and grow while their parents go to work; we'll give them the start that they need to succeed in school, and earn higher wages, and form more stable families of their own. In fact, today, I'm setting a new goal: By the end of this decade, let's enroll 6 million children in high-quality preschool. That is an achievable goal that we know will make our workforce stronger.

<http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2014/10/02/remarks-president-economy-northwestern-university>

NTC supports early learning by building on years of experience supporting teachers through highly trained instructional coaches and mentors. It continues to explore innovative strategies to build early learning expertise within the range of complex environments. By offering the most effective coaching support to all Early Learning teachers, especially those who teach high risk children, NTC works to close the achievement gap even before it opens.

INQUIRY QUESTIONS

1. What is the state of early learning in your community/school district?
2. What are the demographics of children and their families most in need of highly effective Early Learning teachers?
3. How are Early Learning teachers recruited, hired, and given professional development?
4. What would Early Learning teachers in your context identify as their biggest challenges?
5. How are coaches of Early Learning teachers developed professionally in your district? What are some other ways?
6. How does your school context support Early Learning teachers?
7. How do Early Learning teachers perceive themselves professionally? Imagine if you asked them to write about their professional commitment and mission, what would they say?
8. How do Early Learning teachers identify their professional goals, plans for achieving them, and evidence of growth? How might they be better supported in understanding the importance of and setting goals?
9. How can you advocate for stronger policies and greater funding for early learning in your context?

RESOURCES

James J. Heckman, Ph.D., "The Case for Investing in Disadvantaged Young Children," *Big Ideas for Children: Investing in Our Nation's Future*, <http://heckmanequation.org/heckman-equation>

Sheila Skiffington, Sue Washburn, and Kimberly Elliott, "Instructional Coaching: Helping Preschool Teachers Reach Their Full Potential," *Young Children*, May 2011.

Sarah Carr, "Pre-K Has Changed. Can Teachers Keep Up?" *Schooled, Columbia Journalism School's Teacher Project*, Nov. 6, 2014.

CASE STUDY: CASE OF PRACTICE

When I first met Marta, I was unsure of how much we could accomplish together. As a veteran teacher with 29 years of classroom experience, I knew she brought many strengths and had shown tremendous dedication to her students in the past. However the majority of her experience had been teaching in and leading middle school—an age that is quite different than the class full of 4 year olds she had agreed to teach as part of a new Early Learning program in our school district. I wondered how to use our coaching relationship to build on her success while supporting her to create a developmentally appropriate learning environment for her 24 young students.

When we first began meeting, Marta explained to me that she didn't really know what preschool should look like. She wanted to maintain high academic expectations for her students while providing instruction that met their developmental needs and wasn't sure what was appropriate for this age group. Marta was used to lecture style teaching and knew the approach would not work with younger students, but wasn't sure what she should do instead. It was also Marta's first time working with an assistant teacher, a second adult in the classroom, and she didn't know how to use the assistant teacher's time effectively. Marta felt overwhelmed by all the new, unfamiliar instructional challenges she was facing and even considered taking an early retirement.

I was able to arrange some visits to other preschool classrooms where we could observe together and decide which features Marta was going to bring back to her students. During our debrief conversations, I asked Marta questions about what she noticed so that she would articulate the critical role setting up an intentional classroom environment plays and how each teacher structured the day to have a balance of child and teacher directed activities. I also introduced her to **NTC's Standards and Continuum of Early Learning Teaching Practice**, which articulates a vision of what highly effective early learning can look like. Together, we co-assessed where Marta saw herself on each element and were able to set a first goal that we could work on.

As a result of these visits and initial conversations, Marta grew excited about redesigning and restructuring her classroom. We observed her students to see what they enjoyed and together created centers and classroom areas that would meet and extend her students' thinking and learning. Sometimes the two of us met. At other times we invited her assistant teacher, Maria, to join us. We

discussed how each area should support both academic growth and opportunities to grow students' problem solving ability and social emotional competency, all while being fun and joyful. As Marta implemented new areas, she was proud of how her students engaged with the materials and each other.

When Marta began to notice her students' success and her own professional growth in meeting her students' needs, she invited me into her classroom more frequently. Sometimes we co-planned a lesson using a developmentally appropriate strategy such as shared reading. Then either I modeled it and she observed or she taught and I observed her, each time collecting data connected to our objective (eg. about the questions she was asking her students or their level of engagement and ownership). Other times, I video taped during centers and small group time for us to watch later, or we analyzed her students' emergent writing. During each debrief session, I noticed Marta asking herself more reflective questions about the data we collected and what this told her about her teaching and the students' learning.

When Maria joined us for these conversations, it was clear that Marta and Maria were becoming more aligned as co-teachers. Maria's responsibilities were shifting towards supporting students and instruction and less of the photocopying and cleaning she was doing at the start of the year. We even used the **Standards and Continuum** to decide on a new goal that focused on increasing students' oral language that both could work on together.

Throughout our year together, we worked on classroom environment, refining Marta's understanding of developmentally appropriate practice, promoting early literacy and scaffolding students to build their social emotional skills. At our last session together in June, Marta came with a list of topics she wanted to work on over the summer and into next year. She also told me she had signed up to be the Early Learning Teacher Leader for the district. It felt almost magical to see how reflective and intentional Marta had become about supporting her young learners. With the support of a consistent thought partner and coach, Marta went from being overwhelmed and frustrated to leading the way for Early Learning in our community!

—Jenna Wachtel, NTC Associate Program Consultant,
Early Learning Lead/Coach



TO DISCUSS A PARTNERSHIP WITH NTC TO TAKE YOUR INDUCTION PROGRAM TO THE NEXT LEVEL, CONTACT US AT 831.600.2200 OR INFO@NEWTEACHERCENTER.ORG

Supported by the David and Lucile Packard Foundation.

