



# Instructional Coaching

## Helping Preschool Teachers Reach Their Full Potential

Sheila Skiffington, Sue Washburn, and Kimberly Elliott

*The vignettes in this article are drawn from Early Reading First (ERF) projects in two Massachusetts communities from 2007 to 2011. The quotations are excerpts from extensive interviews with teachers and coaches from the two programs that participated in the ERF projects: Community Teamwork, in Lowell, and the Worcester Child Development Program.*

Each week, Amelia, a teacher of 3- and 4-year-olds, meets with her coach Tonya to discuss the language and literacy learning of the children in her classroom. At first, Amelia wasn't thrilled to have a coach. A stranger was going to observe and judge her? No thanks. In their first meeting, Amelia cringed when Tonya said she'd like to videotape Amelia's work with the children. Who wants to watch themselves making mistakes?

But working with Tonya has been great. Most of the time, Amelia forgets the camera is there. Tonya listens carefully to Amelia and asks questions that help her think in new ways about her teaching. Amelia enjoys the opportunity to think deeply about her teaching and discuss the children's learning with Tonya.

With Tonya's support, Amelia now plans activities with specific learning goals in mind rather than just around a theme like Animals. When Amelia and Tonya review the videos of Amelia trying out activities with the children and share their observations, Amelia discovers new strategies to support children's learning. Best of all, she is starting to see children's language and literacy skills improve.

**AMELIA AND TONYA** participate in *instructional coaching*, a professional development approach. Using reflective practice strategies—including posing open-ended questions to teachers and videotaping classes—coaches help teachers analyze their teaching and its impact on children. Coaches meet weekly with teachers to help them apply what they learn from professional development experiences such as courses, workshop series, or study groups to their work with children. As engaged and engaging facilitators of teachers' learning, not all-knowing experts or casual classroom helpers, coaches cultivate in teachers the habit of continually assessing what they can do to support children's learning. Coaches also help teachers plan curriculum and build their capacity to use child and classroom data.

While instructional coaching can have many challenging moments—any important exploration of uncharted territory does—it also has soaring highs as teachers gain new insights and see children benefit from their new teaching strategies.

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A study guide for this article is available at [www.naeyc.org/yc](http://www.naeyc.org/yc). Photos courtesy of the authors.

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## The instructional coaching process

In the instructional coaching process, teachers like Amelia move through a three-phase process with a coach's support. In Phase 1, the Pre-Observation Planning Conference, the teacher sets goals for children's learning and plans an activity to meet those goals. In Phase 2, Observation and Analysis, the coach videotapes the teacher carrying out the activity. The teacher and coach then separately watch the video to assess what children have learned from the activity and to home in on the teacher's strategies in carrying out the learning goals. In Phase 3, the Reflective Conference, the coach and the teacher watch and discuss the video, and the coach asks the teacher questions to support reflection on his or her instructional practices. The teacher works with the coach to set new goals, identify an activity and strategies to meet these goals, and plan the focus of the next observation.

The videotaping that happens in Phase 2 is a very powerful part of the process. In the words of lead coach Sherri Penney, "If you ask the teacher to remember what she did, or if the coach relies solely on written observations, many important interactions can be lost. The video provides the whole picture: what the teacher did and how the children responded."

We (authors Skiffington and Washburn) are members of the team at Education Development Center (EDC), in Newton, Massachusetts, that developed and refined the

coaching model described in this article through the Excellence in Teaching courses and projects funded by the U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, Office of Head Start, and numerous state education agencies (Dickinson & Brady 2005). This model supports preschool teachers in applying new knowledge and evidence-based practices in their work with children and helps them cultivate the habit of using self-reflection as a tool to assess and refine their teaching. The model features key elements of effective professional development (NAEYC 1993; Bransford, Brown, & Cocking 1999; Garet et al. 2001; Hawley & Valli 2001; Snow-Renner & Lauer 2005).

Coaching has qualities lacking in other forms of professional development that are essential for teacher learning:

it is practice-based, ongoing, individualized, reflective, and intensive, and it actively supports the translation of research into practice (Garet et al. 2001; Annenberg Institute for School Reform 2004; Bean & Morewood 2007; Darling-Hammond & Richardson 2009; Knight 2009). It leads to measurable changes in teachers' practice and improvements in children's learning.

While we have used instructional coaching to foster teachers' use of research-based strategies to support children's early literacy and science learning, the model has the potential to promote pre-K through grade 12 teachers' application of any new knowledge. Indeed, our colleagues at EDC have successfully used similar instructional coaching models

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Between sessions, they complete course assignments that require them to use the new practices they are learning with the children in their class, with support from their coaches. In the last session of the course, Amelia learned some new book-reading strategies that she must now try out in her class.

To prepare for the Pre-Observation Planning Conference, Tonya had reviewed her notes from prior conferences with Amelia and Amelia's lesson plans. In the conference, Amelia shares with Tonya the book she has chosen for story time, Henry Cole's *Jack's Garden*. She points out the vocabulary words in the book that are related to the class's current unit about plants. Then she explains the new practice she will be using and a goal for the children's learning: instead of having children sit quietly and listen as she reads the book aloud, she wants to encourage them to actively participate. She plans to ask open-ended questions (What vegetables would

you plant? What do you need to make plants grow?). She has just learned about the benefits of this strategy, and she's eager to see how the children respond.

During the conference, Tonya lets Amelia take the lead in choosing a focus and goals and expresses enthusiasm about Amelia's plans. Amelia tells Tonya, "I'm really worried about Carlos." She shares her observations and questions about Carlos and says, "I'm just not sure how to help him."

"Those are important questions," Tonya replies. She suggests, "As I videotape, I'll capture the whole class, but I'll make sure to focus in on Carlos. Would that be helpful?"

"Yes!" Amelia says, "It's really hard to pay attention to just one child during story time, and I want to see how he responds to the story."

Finally, they agree on a day and time for the observation.

## Observation and Analysis

***As the teacher carries out the activity, the coach observes and videotapes him or her. The video serves as an objective record of what happened. Afterward, the coach and teacher watch the video separately and write down their observations before the reflective conference.***

Soon after the observation, Tonya watches the video and takes notes on what Amelia did and what the children did and said. (These notes are factual only—not "what the teacher did right or wrong"). Tonya comes up with questions to help Amelia reflect on the activity, such as, What did the children do and say during the activity that tells you that you did or did not meet your goals? What might

focused on improving mathematics and science teaching and learning in higher grades (Morse 2009; Zubrowski, Troen, & Pasquale 2007). This article provides a glimpse of the instructional coaching process and the teacher-coach relationship, and it shares effective strategies to support and sustain instructional coaching.

## Instructional coaching in action

**Carlos joined Amelia's class a month ago. He is very quiet, and Amelia is not sure why. Is Carlos shy? Is he quiet because he is struggling to learn English? Does he lack skills in his first language? Amelia has learned some strategies to support dual language learners in the course she is participating in, but which ones should she use? What does Carlos need?**

Amelia wants Tonya to observe and videotape her trying out a new, more intentional approach to book reading. She also wants to share her questions about Carlos.

## Pre-Observation Planning Conference

***The teacher chooses a focus for the observation, sets goals for children's learning, discusses the rationale for choosing the goals, and talks about the teaching strategy he or she will use.***

In a three-credit college course that includes six sessions spanning a five-month period, Amelia and her colleagues are learning evidence-based practices to promote children's early literacy and to support dual language learners.

you do if . . . ? What did you notice when you . . . ? What, if anything, would you do differently next time? Tonya swiftly passes the video on to Amelia, because she knows Amelia is very busy and wants to make sure she has plenty of time to prepare.

When Amelia gets the video, she watches it, analyzes children’s responses, and assesses whether she met the activity goals. It helps that her supervisor and program director support her participation in instructional coaching; they expect her to take time each week for her work with Tonya. Once, Amelia did not have time to watch the video before the reflective conference. She had to reflect on the spot, which was really difficult.

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Amelia bursts into the room. “He understands! Carlos understands!” she exclaims, “Did you see what I saw?” Tonya replies, “Tell me what you saw!”

They sit down and Amelia tells Tonya that she feels like she met one specific goal: using open-ended questions did encourage the children to actively participate, and she also learned something important about Carlos. As they watch the video, Amelia points to children listening with interest and talks about their thoughtful answers to her questions. She shows Tonya several children who recognized words in the book from their study of plants, and a few who came up with their own questions. When Carlos comes on the screen, Amelia hits the pause button. “Right there!” she says.

In the video, as Amelia asks a question about the story, Carlos clearly mouths an answer (“Seed”). Amelia starts the video again and hits the pause button when Carlos mouths another answer (“Water”).

She says, “I had no idea Carlos was saying anything during story time. The other children are louder and blurt out their answers. This shows that Carlos not only understands questions—he can answer them.”

### Reflective Conference

*The coach and teacher view the video together. The teacher reflects on the extent to which he or she met the goals of the activity. Using open-ended questions, the coach encourages the teacher to talk about what worked and what didn’t and to identify strategies to make the activity more effective for children.*

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“That’s a great catch,” Tonya replies. “Now that you can see that Carlos understands, what can you try next to help him build his oral language skills and not be overshadowed?”

Amelia nods. “I want to do some one-on-one reading with Carlos and some small group readings of the book. Some of the children will always be louder than others, but I want them all to participate! Let’s make a small group book reading our next observation. I’m going to include in the small groups the children who are typically quiet to see if the smaller setting will increase their participation.”

“Sounds good,” Tonya says, “Sometime soon, we need to analyze the data from the recent formal language assessments. Will you have time for that next week?”

“Sure!” Amelia responds, “It will help to see what the data tell us about how Carlos and everybody else are doing. When can we get together next?”

This process would be more difficult if Amelia did not trust Tonya, if she really wanted Tonya to just tell her what to do, or if Amelia refused to try new teaching strategies. Instead, Amelia and Tonya’s strong relationship, Tonya’s coaching skills and respectful treatment of Amelia, and Amelia’s appreciation for Tonya’s experience and the effectiveness of the coaching model make it easier for them to work productively together. As shown in the lessons that follow, we have learned that these factors, as well as many others, play pivotal roles in teachers’ and coaches’ ability to navigate the instructional coaching process.

## Lessons learned

The following eight points can help professional development specialists strengthen their coaching initiatives. Each includes insights from coaches and teachers who took part in EDC’s Early Reading First projects.

**1. Teachers have differing abilities to reflect on their practice.** Reflective practice is new for many teachers. The coach often meets a wall of silence when a teacher feels overwhelmed by the reflective coaching process and doesn’t know how to respond. Coaches must be ready to tailor their strategies to meet teachers where they are.

Patience is essential. It is also important to be respectful, to use humor, to be positive, and, if necessary, to gradually move from “Why don’t you try . . .” to “What do you think you should do?” To help one teacher who was struggling with reflective conferences, coach Lori Coletti suggested that the teacher “watch the video and respond in writing to some guiding questions. As her coach, I did that too. We wrote about it first, and then we shared our reflections. That worked better for this teacher.”

**I suggest that they approach coaching wanting to become a better teacher and wanting children to get the most from their classroom.**

**2. Teachers can take steps to make sure they get the most out of instructional coaching and the reflective conferencing process.** These steps include teachers approaching the coaching experience with an open mind; bringing a sense of curiosity about how children learn and a motivation to try new things to improve their learning; and preparing for and actively participating in the process. As teacher Christina Silveira Gonzalez notes, “Some teachers resist coaching. They feel like they’ve learned everything they could possibly learn and are doing everything they can do for children. Instead, I suggest that they approach coaching wanting to become a better teacher and wanting children to get the most from their classroom. If they do that, they will benefit tremendously from coaching.”

**3. Coaches can help teachers overcome “videotaping anxiety.”** Like Amelia, many teachers dread having their coach videotape them. Teacher Christina Silveira Gonzalez recalls, “At first, it’s hard to see yourself on video. When you sit down to watch a video for the first time, you’re worried about everything you’ll see that you’re doing wrong . . . you even notice your hair is a mess. Coaches help you realize that watching yourself helps you become a better teacher.”

Coach Cindy Hoisington agrees that “most teachers are uncomfortable. One teacher refused to be videotaped because she hated to have her picture taken. There was no convincing her; but one thing worked: focusing the camera on the children. You can hear the teacher, but leave her out of the picture at first, if she’s uncomfortable. Build up gradually—increase your focus on the teacher over time.”

Coaches can also try these methods:

- Videotape and analyze the classroom environment as the starting point in the coaching relationship
- Offer to be videotaped while modeling an activity
- Give the camera to the teacher to use
- Shoot lots of footage to help teachers get used to the camera

**4. Coaches support teachers in changing their practice by helping them learn how to make meaning of data.**

An important part of instructional coaching is using data to guide teachers. Coaches can use data from standardized instruments and observational data from videos to demonstrate how children are growing and the kinds of support they need. Useful tools include instruments that examine classroom environments, look at teacher-child and child-child interactions, and assess children’s vocabulary and prereading skills.

Coach Sherri Penney notes, “Looking at data helps teachers see the big picture of children’s learning in comparison to children outside their classrooms and nationwide. Some are surprised when they see how children in their classrooms compare to the norm. They may find that the most verbal child is just average or below average when it comes to vocabulary. This is a learning curve for many teachers. They become interested in what the data show and are eager to look for new ways to boost children’s learning.”



##### 5. Successful coaches possess core competencies.

Effective instructional coaches possess several important qualities. They have a deep understanding of child development and the content area in which they support teachers. They use adult-learning best practices to connect with teachers and are good listeners and skilled reflective practitioners. They focus on teachers’ strengths yet can address challenges. And, as coach Sherri Penney says, “they have a passion for excellent teaching and a respect for teachers!”

Teacher Christina Silveira Gonzalez says, “My coach puts me at ease and makes me feel proud about what I’m doing—that I’m making a difference. She listens and she’s caring. She doesn’t just give me things; she teaches me how to find resources.”

Coach Lori Coletti believes coaches should “model reflection, be persistent, and work alongside and sometimes behind the teacher—let the teacher lead the work and reflect on the experience (Did it work? Why or why not?).”

##### 6. Coaches need ongoing training, support, and supervision.

EDC researcher Julie Hirschler observes, “Excellent coaches aren’t born that way; their skills need to be nurtured. My advice is to build training and supervision for coaches into all coaching programs.” Coaching programs work best when a supervisor is assigned to support each coach and time is scheduled for them to meet regularly—at least once a week. The supervisor serves as a sounding board, observes the coach in action with

the teacher, offers resources as needed, and helps the coach stay on track to meet the goals. Typically, coaches receive more intense support and supervision at the beginning of their work with teachers and when challenges arise. All coaches benefit from being observed, receiving feedback from supervisors and coaching peers, and reflecting on and analyzing their work with teachers.

As with teachers, videotaping plays a key role in facilitating coaches’ self-reflection and analysis of their strategies to support teachers’ professional growth. Coaches videotape their reflective conferences with teachers and analyze the videos with supervisors and/or fellow coaches. They also take part in training sessions and study groups on instructional coaching techniques; complete coursework to keep current with research; and participate in professional development alongside teachers. After viewing a video of a reflective conference, coach Sherri Penney shared, “I found that I did not wait long enough after asking the teacher a question. Sometimes I went right into offering suggestions when they were not asked for. Reflecting is key in teaching *and* in coaching.”

##### 7. Professional development experiences provide a helpful framework for instructional coaching.

Coach Cindy Hoisington notes, “If you don’t have a framework for coaching, it’s easy to get off track. When coaching focuses on key principles from professional development experiences and a teacher says, ‘I can’t get children to listen to the story,’ you can say, ‘I hear you, but let’s look back at the book-reading tips from the workshop. How did you apply them when you read the book?’”

Instructional coaching creates classroom laboratories by helping teachers reflect on their practice in relation to new knowledge. Teachers experiment with and master new techniques and ideas with their coaches' support. This extends the effects of professional development by promoting reflection (Knight 2009; Neufeld & Roper 2003) and supporting teachers as decision makers and problem solvers (Manzo 2005; Neufeld & Roper 2003).

**8. Successful, sustainable coaching depends on program leaders' support.** Coaching is more likely to be successful when program directors and administrators send the message that they are 100 percent behind coaching and that coaches are a vital resource for staff. Coaches, supervisors, and program leaders must share a vision and goals for instructional coaching and develop clear protocols for communication. Coaches must invest time in building relationships with leaders. Coach Lori Coletti says, "We met with administrators quarterly to update them on progress and prepare them for changes. So, if teachers were going to rearrange writing areas, we would give administrators a heads-up. The administrators also attended trainings to help them understand the how's and why's of the coaching."

**Instructional coaching creates classroom laboratories by helping teachers reflect on their practice in relation to new knowledge.**

"My fellow teachers and I are looking a little bit deeper into a topic of study, and I think what I'm seeing a lot more now is writing. The children's writing has really taken off. We've put up charts and graphs, and the activities are really promoting language and literacy. We're digging deeper . . ."

—Shelese Johnson

Coaches share the following advice for those who seek to provide instructional coaching:

"Be prepared. If you haven't 'done your homework'—if you haven't watched the videos, if you miss what the teacher wanted to look for, if you let the batteries in your camera run out, if you're late—it sets up a bad dynamic. When you're prepared and you are doing what you told the teacher you were going to do, it means you're valuing the teacher and modeling how you want her to behave with children."

—Lori Coletti

"Tell the teachers what coaching is and what it is not. Many don't know! Some teachers think the coach is going to make stuff for their classroom. Or they may try to use a coaching session as a time to complain or vent. The tone is important, and you need to set the right tone from the get-go."

—Sherri Penney

"Keep in mind how busy a preschool teacher's life is. You can't expect to be welcomed with open arms if you have the attitude that you're there to 'fix' teachers. Know that you're coming to support teachers in being their very best; recognize that all teachers bring a lot of skills that you'll help build on; and always exude that attitude."

—Cindy Hoisington

## Final reflections from teachers and coaches

Instructional coaching is an innovative approach to professional development that, while challenging, has significant benefits for teachers and children. Teachers who participated in instructional coaching weigh in:

"Coaches make sure you're teaching to the best of your ability and make sure you're always thinking, 'Are the children learning what they need to learn?'"

—Christina Silveira Gonzalez

"My coach helps me stay focused on what I'm trying to do. A lot of times I have in my head what I want to do. I might not lose focus but try to just get the job done, and my coach brings it back to 'Why do you want to do this, what's your intention for these children, what is the basic premise you want them to go away with?'"

—Joan Martin

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