**COACHING FOR CHANGE**

Observation and Reflective Conferencing

High quality learning environments coupled with secure and responsive relationships and interactions with adults and other children are foundational for all children’s development.

A high quality environment is one that is engaging, one in which children are intellectually active, where instructional practices are couched in a progression of developmentally appropriate practices and where all learners have-- access to, participate in, and progress in learning.

The drivers of quality include the intentional selection of educator supports including coaching, initial and ongoing training and reflective supervision of Coaches and Technical Assistance (TA) providers, and use of data systems to monitor progress and evaluate strategies for improving quality.[[1]](#footnote-1)

Effective coaching happens when the Coach develops first and foremost, a positive, productive and meaningful relationship with early educators and caregivers based on trust and respect.  Effective Coaches are responsive and respectful.  They share their background, knowledge and experience.  They foster a reciprocal exchange while working jointly on goal setting and by providing timely feedback. They are empathetic; they can understand and incorporate individual perspectives in coaching. They build on the strengths of individual educators, and adapt the amount of support needed based on participants’ needs and the context and goals of the programs they represent. They model and are hands-on.

Effective Coaches are reflective and non-directive.  They help practitioners to build self-awareness and knowledge and to measure their growth over time.  Effective Coaches are culturally competent – they embrace diverse cultures and beliefs. They exhibit compassion, a desire to understand and improve others’ lives.  They define clear roles for themselves and the participants in the process.  They are goal oriented and solution focused. Effective Coaches navigate conflicts through negotiation, facilitation and team building. [[2]](#footnote-2)

An effective model of coaching emphasizes relationship building, goal setting, and targets quality improvements (including interactions between teachers/caregivers and children) that will ultimately increase support for children’s optimal development. It focuses on the implementation of action plans with clear roles, provision of feedback and reflection, and finally provides an opportunity to assess the process and plan for sustainability.

Coaching involves the creation of shared goals and action plans, conducting focused observations and providing reflection and feedback within the context of a shared partnership. For initial goal setting and action planning, rating reports from a formal observation tool are frequently used as a needs assessment for participating programs.



An important part of coaching is using data to guide teachers. Coaches can use data from standardized instruments and observational data from video to demonstrate how children are growing and the kinds of support they need. Instruments that examine classroom environments, look at teacher-child and child-child interactions are useful tools to measure environmental quality and instructional practices.

There are several formal observation tools that provide objective criteria for observing classroom quality and effective interactions. The Classroom Assessment Score System (CLASS) developed by Robert Pianta, University of Virginia measures the effectiveness of teacher student interactions. It focuses on the interactions that promote academic learning, engagement and social development. While the CLASS does not directly measure the way teachers design materials or activities, by focusing on the degree to which students are engaged in their work, the level of their thinking and the quality of feedback provided by the teacher it measures the impact of materials and lessons.

Based on the information obtained from the CLASS or similar tools, a set of goals is developed that guides the creation of an action plan. Goals should be clearly defined, measureable and achievable within a defined time frame. During planning, the steps, resources and supports needed to reach a goal are specified. The plan also includes a time frame to review progress on goals. The steps included in an action plan are small, observable tasks or strategies that support accomplishment of the goal. The goals and action plan provide a roadmap for the support and feedback that occurs as part of the other components in the coaching cycle.

To be effective*,* coaching must have two core elements: (1) ongoing observation and (2) individualized, reflective discussion and feedback. This document presents a five step conferencing process that is grounded in observation and reflection.[[3]](#footnote-3) The Observation and Reflective Conferencing Process contains five steps:

1. Pre-Observation Planning Meeting
2. Observation
3. Post-Observation Analysis
4. Reflective Conference
5. Post-Conference Analysis

In the Pre-Observation Planning meeting the mentee sets goals for children’s learning and plans an activity to meet those goals. In Step 2, the coach observes or videotapes the mentee carrying out the activity. In Step 3, the coach watches the video or reviews observation notes to assess what children have learned and to home in on the mentee’s strategies in supporting learning goals. In Step 4, Reflective Conference the coach and the mentee watch and discuss the video or review observation notes and the coach asks the mentee questions to support reflection on his her instructional practices, they set new goals. Step 5 entails assessing the usefulness and impact of the Reflective Conference.

**What is the mentee’s goal?**

The Observation and Reflective Practice process provides opportunities for mentees and Coaches to engage in a cycle of continuous improvement.

# The Continuous Improvement Framework**[[4]](#footnote-4)**

They do this by engaging in **knowledge‐building** conversations where mentees learn about and/or design a strategy that addresses an identified challenge. They **plan** how they will incorporate the new strategy. Supported by a planning guide or protocol, they:

* outline steps for implementation, including strategy adjustments for their context
* brainstorm potential roadblocks and ways to prevent or address them

They **try** their plans in the classroom or family child care setting. New observations and reflection conferences are planned to notice and discuss what’s working and what’s challenging.

## **step 1: Pre-Observation Planning Meeting**

During Pre-Observation Panning Meeting, Coaches and mentees have the opportunity to discuss current instructional strategies, child-level characteristics, behaviors and engagement, and ways the environment and teaching practices are organized to support children’s learning. A key outcome of the meeting is agreement on an instructional focus for the observation/video review.

**Pre-Observation Tips**

* Observation in Coaching is not evaluative
* Together, Coaches and mentees establish a focus for the observation or video
* The observation concentrates on the mutually agreed-upon focus

##### **C:\Users\Linda\Dropbox\MI Pictures\Circle, Colo jpg.jpgSteps in the Pre-Observation Process**

* **Establish A Focus And Goals For The Observation OR VIDEO**

**Help your mentee identify an appropriate goal** for the observation/video review. What does the mentee want the children to gain? How will she support their learning? What aspect of her teaching does she want to reflect on during the conference?

* **Schedule the Observation and Reflective Conference**

**Schedule the observation** or video review for an appropriate time so you can see the activities related to the mentee’s goal. The videotaping that happens here is a very powerful part of the process. If you ask the teacher to remember what she did or if the coach relies solely on the written observations, many important interactions can be lost. The video provides the whole picture, what the teacher did and how the children responded.

**Take time to plan** your approach to the observation/video review. Given the educator/mentee’s goal, what aspects of the environment and the interactions do you want to attend to?

**What Coaches can do:**

* Learn more about the make-up, values, and culture of the community of learners in the mentee’s classroom or family child care home
* Ease tension and anxiety about observation/video review
* Lay the groundwork for a productive post-observation/video review conference

**What Mentees can do:**

* Have the opportunity to voice their needs and goals
* Get clarity about the observation/video review

**Coaches and Mentees** **together can:**

* Select a focus for the observation
* Agree on an approach, a recording method (observation tool or videotape), and a time
* Set time for the post-observation/video review conference

**Schedule the reflective conference**. Hold reflective conferences soon after classroom visits or video sharing, ideally within 48 hours to maximize relevance.

## **step 2: Observation**



Observation is a mirror that Coaches can hold up to help mentees view their own work in classrooms. Through this mirror, mentees can also see how their own work supports children's learning and improves children’s outcomes. It can also help Coaches collect accurate, reliable information about a mentee's strengths, children’s engagement in the learning process as well as areas that can be enhanced. With this information, Coaches can help mentees to think objectively about their work, and validate and reinforce effective practice. They can also help them set goals for professional growth. Observation is one of the most important ways that Coaches can tailor their support to the individual needs of each mentee.

There are many ways to engage in focused observations, including live observation by the coach and reviewing videotape. As the teacher carries out the activity the coach observes and either the coach or mentee records a video record of the activity to teaching practices including interactions and children’s responses to instruction. The video serves as an objective record of what happened.

Prior to viewing a shared video or starting an observation, check with the mentee to determine if there have been any changes in the mentee plans regarding the observation or that might have impacted what was captured in the onsite observation or video. During the actual observation or video review, use the agreements (e.g., about length, focus, and recording method) that were made with mentee during the Pre-Observation Planning Meeting. It is important to concentrate on the mutually agreed-upon focus. For example, if the recording method was to capture the frequency with which the mentee provided meaningful feedback to children, this should be the primary focus of the observation or video viewing.

Note that you might observe an inappropriate practice that was not identified as part of the agreed-upon focus. If the practice involves a health and safety issue, address it immediately. For other issues, take note of the concern and address it at a more appropriate time.

* **Stick to the Plan**

**Be sure to focus** **on the agreed-upon plan**, attending to the mentee’s goals for the observation or shared video.

**Use your notes** about relevant aspects of the environment and interactions to keep you focused.

**Pay attention** to the mentee’s approach, responses to classroom situations *and* the children’s behaviors, interactions and engagement. Research shows coaching around environments or instructional practices alone does not produce changes in child outcomes. That is why linking instructional practices, environmental assessments with child outcomes in coaching conversations is so important.

* **Document**

**Record objective notes** about what you see and hear. Note both your objective observations and questions or comments that come to mind as you watch and listen.

**What Coaches can do**:

* Focus on the mentee’s practice and her interactions with children
* Strive to record observations or make comments on a shared video according to the agreed upon plan
* Keep the documentation objective by recording exactly what you see and hear.

**OBSERVER BIAS**

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Each person brings his or her own unique experiences, education, and values to interactions with others. All of us look at events through different "lenses" formed by our culture and experiences. It is vital for Coaches to be aware of the various "lenses" they use when observing a mentee.

Understanding "where the mentee is coming from"—his/her culture, values, preferences, and styles—is essential. Such understanding is the foundation of strong relationships between Coaches and mentees. It is also the key to unbiased observation.

Observer bias is a way of thinking that prevents someone from seeing a situation or a person fairly. Biases may be subtle and lie below the level of consciousness. The Coaches’ preconceptions and biases affect what they pay attention to during an observation and influence the judgments they make. To support mentees and to be effective, unbiased observers, Coaches must recognize and attempt to control for all of their assumptions and “lenses.”

**To overcome or minimize the effects of biases, Coaches can:**

* Become aware of the lenses they bring
* Talk about beliefs and values with mentees
* Use formal observation tools when possible that give observers objective criteria
* Follow guidelines for accurate and objective recording.

## **Step 3: Post-Observation Analysis**



Planning is the key to effective reflective conferences. Educators and coaches use guiding questions to **reflect** on and **analyze** what they notice, identifying patterns that shed light on strengths and barriers to effective instruction. Coaches need to consider the evidence of teaching and learning they observed related to the mentee’s goals. Then they need to think about how to make the most of the time they will have together.

Engage in the post-observation analysis process by setting realistic goals for the follow-up conference which can be conducted remotely or face to face. Identify any challenges you want to see addressed. Then develop questions to get the process started.

* **ANALYZE YOUR OBSERVATION**

**Ask yourself** what you have learned about your mentee’s teaching and children’s learning. Consider these questions:

* *What were the critical events? Were there any clear patterns?*
* *What are the messages behind children’s behaviors, interactions and responses related to the observation focus area?*
* *What are the mentee’s strengths related to the observation focus area?*
* *Did the mentee miss chances to support conceptual learning? Did the mentee miss chances to enhance a specific skill or area of learning and development?*
* *What are environmental/instructional stressors that interfered with teaching and learning?*
* *How did mentee and child responses influence one another?*
* *What do I want to accomplish in the reflective conference?*

**What Coaches Can Do**

* Review the goals of the observation/video review established during the pre-observation planning meeting
* Review their observation notes and other documentation from the onsite visit or video and decide what to address during the conference
* Develop a few open-ended questions to guide the reflection
* Be prepared to probe for more detail and further thinking
* Prepare to draw the mentee’s attention to missed opportunities or challenges faced
* Think through several possibilities for the mentee reaction and how to respond.

**What Mentees Can Do**

* Engage in self-reflection on the observed activity and the effectiveness of the strategies used including impact on student behaviors, teaching and learning
* View the videotape of the observation when available
* Prepare questions to ask the Coach.

## **Step 4: Reflective Conference**

Reflection means stepping back from the immediate, intense experience of hands-on work and taking the time to wonder what the experience really means.

― Parlakian, 2001

Reflection is a powerful process through which Coaches help mentees to examine and enhance their own practice. We use the term *reflection* to mean examining teaching practices in relation to children’s learning and development outcomes.

Sharing feedback about teaching practices involves providing information about performance that is both supportive and constructive in the sense that it moves the teacher to a higher level of practice ad is intended to help achieve identified goals and improve or refine teaching practice.

**Supportive Feedback**

Recognizes and encourages successful implementation of teaching practices

Connects information from the observation to goals and action steps to illustrate progress toward desired outcomes**.**

**Constructive Feedback**

Used to help recognize opportunities for improving or refining teaching practices

It is specific and intentional.

Mentees take a leading, active role in reflective conferences. Together, Coaches and mentees reflect, learn, and plan. The Coach and mentee may view a video together. The mentee reflects on the extent to which he or she met the goals of the activity. Using thought provoking questions to stimulate a mentee’s thinking and problem solving, the Coach encourages the mentee to talk about what worked and didn’t work and to identify strategies to make the activity more effective for children. When mentees focus on the relationship between their teaching approaches and children’s learning, they can identify ways to change and improve their practice.

Educators and coach engage in **knowledge‐building** conversations.[[5]](#footnote-5) Educators learn about and/or design a strategy that addresses an identified challenge. These strategies are most often related to:

* themselves (e.g., increasing classroom talk)
* children (e.g., using descriptive words)
* the setting (e.g., preventing hotspots, smoother transitions)

**Use the principles for reflective conferencing as you plan.** How will you…

* Encourage and value the mentee’s voice?
* Promote mentee reflection?
* Challenge thinking?
* Build on strengths?
* Focus on achievable goals?

**Create open-ended questions.** You want to ask questions that encourage the mentee’s reflection. Ask the mentee if she feels that she achieved her goal. Ask what she noticed about the children’s engagement and learning. Also, ask her if she was surprised about how it went.

**Plan how you will introduce a challenge.** How will you challenge the mentee to think about her work in a new way? How can you use your observations of the children’s engagement and participation to help the teacher make insightful connections between teaching and learning?

**Think through several scenarios.** How might the mentee react to your challenge? What past observations have you made that suggest possible reactions? Think through several possibilities and how you will deal with them.

**Consider possible next steps.** What will help the mentee “move on” in her development? Is there something you might model for her or an opportunity for co-teaching? Might an observation in another classroom help, or a reading? Have several ideas to draw on during the conference.

**Encourage Reflection During the Conference**

**Begin by reviewing the goals and focus of the conference**. Review what you talked about in the pre-observation planning meeting. Confirm the mentee’s goals and the focus of the observation.

**Let the mentee comment first.** Invite your mentee to share thoughts about the effectiveness of her teaching during the observation or video. Use questions like*:*

* + *What did you think about the activities I observed or captured in video?*
  + *How effective do you think you were at achieving your goals?*
  + *What were you trying to accomplish? Did it work? Why? Why not?*

**Use questions and comments** to draw out the mentee’s thoughts and feelings about her teaching. Help the mentee to connect teaching practices to the children’s learning. Acknowledge your mentee’s insights. Use questions and comments like:

* + *What do you think you did that contributed to these behaviors from the children?*
  + *Do you see any patterns developing?*
  + *That is a nice example of…(cite a child outcome or learning goal)*
  + *Explain more to me.*

**Share your own observations.** Once your mentee has shared her thoughts and ideas, introduce some of your insights. You might cite more evidence of how her goal was met or whether key points were missed.

**Reflective conferencing is effective when Coach and mentees:**

* Equally “own” the reflective process.
* Document teaching and learning to help them reflect.

**Reflection begins with thought- provoking questions. Here are a few examples:**

* “How effective was this conversation in promoting children’s use of new vocabulary words?”
* “I wonder what you thought about Tommy’s response to your question about the butterfly’s wings.”
* “What are some of the challenges you are facing as you think about developing these children’s language skills?”
* “What might you have done differently?”

**ADDRESSING A CHALLENGE**



Productive reflective conferences encourage mentees to analyze missed opportunities and to address the challenges they face when teaching. Mentees often bring up teaching challenges on their own: “*When having conversations with children, I know that I tend to jump in too quickly. I need to give certain children more time to respond to my questions.*”

If the challenge is less obvious to the mentee, the Coach needs to raise the issue. The Coach can effectively bring up such challenges by focusing on the mentee’s goals, examining the response of a child or group of children, or pointing out a difference in perspective between the Coach and mentee. The goal at this stage is to open the mentee’s thinking, helping her or him to see a situation from a new perspective and move the mentee to a higher level of practice.

**To challenge the mentee’s thinking, the Coach:**

* Pursues the mentee’s ideas about missed opportunities or challenges
* Points out missed opportunities that are not evident to the mentee
* Shares own perspective about effective approaches to promoting positive outcomes for children
* Uses questions like “What if….?” Or, “How might you ……? to open the mentee’s thinking to new perspectives.

**Challenge Your Mentee’s Thinking**

**Address your mentee’s teaching challenges.** Sometimes, these challenges are obvious to the mentee. Other times, you will need to point them out.

**Connect practices and children’s responses.** Help your mentee see the link between her teaching and children’s learning. Give examples from the observation.

**Think about why your mentee might be struggling.** As you consider your next steps, think about some of the reasons why your mentee might be having a hard time trying new behaviors. Is your mentee challenged because of limited foundational knowledge, conflict of beliefs, or complexity of change?

**Share your own perspective.** Strive to open up the mentee’s thinking to new perspectives about how to meet child outcomes.

**Address differences of opinion.** Look for a place where you and your mentee can agree. You might go back to a shared value discussed earlier, as you address the point on which you differ. “We both agreed that it is important to encourage language development from the beginning. This is one of the ways I see that happening.” In other situations you might pose a question to explore together. A reading, a formal observation, or an interview with an expert could provide further information that will help you address your differences.

**Conclude the Conference**

The final step in the reflective conference is to bring the event to a worthwhile conclusion. The Coach reviews the highlights of the conference with the mentee including any challenges that arose during the discussion. The Coach and mentee work together to develop new strategies to try that will help to improve practices and support children’s learning. Planning next steps with timelines and necessary resources reinforces the on-going nature of the professional conferencing cycle. Next steps may include such activities as reading about a certain topic, mentee observation of a colleague, Coach modeling, jointing analyzing child assessment data, or a follow-up observation.

**Review the highlights** of the conference. Make sure to review the challenges discussed and the mentee’s goal.

**Identify strategies** that will help to improve practices and support children’s learning. Criteria for selecting strategies include feasibility of implementing the practice and its likely impact on some aspect of children’s engagement and learning.

**Plan next steps** that will help meet the mentee’s goal. Set a timeline and identify necessary resources. Next steps might include:

* A reading
* A visit to observe another teacher
* The ELMC modeling or co-teaching in the mentee’s classroom
* A follow-up focused observation by the Coach

Coaches use a variety of strategies to provide support to improve and refine teaching practices and to improve children’s engagement. These strategies include:

* Analyzing, interpreting and using assessment data
* Creating goals or improvement plan linked to environments, practices and child outcomes
* Modeling techniques through video or in person
* Providing feedback
* Co-teaching
* Sharing materials and resources
* Watching and discussing video of best practices
* Engaging in coaching conversations
* Observing providers and classroom settings
* Helping teachers develop strategies for dealing with difficult situations
* Engaging in collaborative problem solving
* Promotion of reflective practice
* Using data to inform coaching

## **yufcbyee[1]STEP 5: POST CONFERENCE ANALYSIS**

The final step in the professional conferencing process, the post-observation analysis, allows Coaches to reflect on their own practice. They do this by reflecting on the goals for the conference and assessing their effectiveness in meeting these goals. Coaches engage in a careful analysis of all aspects of the conference and think about what they will do differently next time. Coaches should also encourage mentees to engage in a similar process of self-reflection.

**Coaches reflect on their own practice by considering these questions:**

* Did I successfully address the goals for the conference?
* How did I help my mentee reflect on her or his teaching practices?
* How effective was I in encouraging my mentee to take initiative during the conference?
* What were some challenges or missed opportunities? How effective was I in addressing these?
* What will I do differently next time?

**Mentees can ask themselves:**

* Was I adequately prepared for the conference?
* Did I express my thoughts and ideas fully?
* Did I leave any questions unanswered?

**Reflect On Your Goals**

**Reflect on your goals** for the conference. Consider these questions:

* + *Were you successful in achieving your goals?*
  + *How did you help your mentee reflect on her teaching practices?*
  + *What were some challenges or missed opportunities?*

**Identify goals for your next conference.** Think about what you will do differently. Decide on the steps you take to achieve these goals. Think about talking to other Coaches about their experiences with reflective conferencing. Consider sharing a reading with your mentee or reading for your own growth. Also think about videotaping the next conference with your mentee.

* + As with teachers, videotaping plays a key role in facilitating coaches’ self-reflection and analysis of their strategies.

**Using Data to Inform Coaching**

If you can’t measure something, you can’t understand it. If you can’t understand it, you can’t control it. If you can’t control it, you can’t improve it.”

-H. James Harrington

Underlying effective coaching practices is a focus on the intentional use of data to inform our practices and to determine if they impact child outcomes. The goal is to use data to inspire us rather than to burden us and to illuminate understandings about classroom practices and quality and children’s learning.

Coaching plans are based on the results of assessment data about the mentee’s classroom environment and instructional practices and children’s learning and development. Mentees and coaches together examine data to better understand the performance of children, the factors contributing to high and/or low performance, ways to improve mentee practices, and to define what information to collect to document progress in changing practices and improving children’s performance.

Collecting data is central to the work, yet making sense of the data and using it to move mentees to a higher level of practice and ultimately improved child outcomes can be daunting. Coaches play an important role in helping mentees understand what the data suggests and how to use it for quality improvement

Questions that Coaches can pose to support better understanding of the data include:

* What do we know as a result of examining this data?
* What do we think as a result of examining this data?
* What don’t we know as a result of examining this data?
* Was the goal reached?
* How does/will this data help us improve program practices?
* What needs to happen next?

The data gathered should help Coaches determine what changes to make in the Coaching process. For example, if mentees are not moving to a higher level of practice, Coaches will want to think about making changes related to:

* Coaching strategies
* Coaching content
* Dosage of coaching
* Intensity of coaching

In sum, using data effectively does not mean getting good at crunching numbers. It means getting good at working together to gain insights from assessment results and to use insights to improve instruction, coaching and child outcomes.

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5. LeSaux, N., Jones, S., Harris, J., & Kane, R. Lead early educators for success. Issue Brief 8 (Spring 2014). Harvard Graduate School of Education. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)