

Coaching in Childhood Education: Using Lessons Learned to Develop Best Practice for Professional Development in a State System

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Abstract

Recent economic analyses point to large returns for investing in quality early childhood education programs and programs provided for children in poverty most often show the greatest benefits for children. This article describes the role of an innovative coaching approach to educator professional development in one of the poorest states in the United States of America with 55% of children from birth to age six living in poverty. The authors describe the benefits of a quality Pre-Kindergarten education and examples of system-wide innovations that have allowed the program to increase from serving 6% to 25% of all eligible four-year-olds, while increasing the percentage of children meeting or exceeding widely-held expectations by the end of the program. Examples of innovations are provided that can be used by other programs to advocate for increasing Pre-Kindergarten investment and the quality of programs for young children.

Keywords: Pre-Kindergarten; early childhood education.

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In the United States of America, Alabama has been known for many things (football, history of civil rights, etc.), but few people would associate Alabama with one of the best state funded pre-Kindergarten programs in the USA. *First Class* is Alabama's state funded voluntary Pre-Kindergarten for four-year-olds. In a state that ranks 50th in math for eighth-graders, people are looking for a variety of solutions to an ongoing problem and funding Pre-Kindergarten is at the top of the list. The governor has stated, "It is the most important thing we can do in education" (Cason, 2014) and the legislature has acted on its words in recent times by increasing money for *First Class* which has caused the number of four-year-olds participating in state funded Pre-Kindergarten to quadruple in the past four years. Although the challenges and successes are a case study from one state in the USA, the advocacy, policy approaches, and strategies for developing an increased capacity to meet the needs of young children can apply universally.

According to the National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER), Alabama is one of very few states that met all benchmarks for quality in the 2016-2017 school year. IN fact, Alabama has met all benchmarks since 2005-2006. Increasing the number of four-year-olds served from 6% to 25% in the last four years has required a quadrupling of teachers, teacher assistants, program coordinators, etc., and corresponding shifts in how professional development occurs to ensure quality as the system develops. To meet these needs, a new system of coaching has been developed for the state. This article will describe the new coaching model of professional development called the Alabama Reflective Coaching Plan (The ARC-P) and its symbiotic relationship with the state funded Pre-Kindergarten system in Alabama. We will do this by relating the ARC-P to (1) leadership (2) ambitious goal development, (3) developing group held principles, (4) local ability to solve complex issues, and (5) collaboration that have been identified as necessary for successful leadership and change (Hirsh, no date).

The Alabama Reflective Coaching Plan

Pre-Kindergarten education was mentioned by President Obama in his last two *State of the Union* addresses and rather than being a divisive issue, the push for state funded Pre-Kindergarten is relatively non-partisan. Although Pre-Kindergarten has been framed by some as a social program, *The Education Commission of the States* (2014) indicated that some of the largest increases in state appropriated money for Pre-Kindergarten have been in Republican dominated states. Much of the push has come from the business sector citing Nobel laureate economist James Heckman who found a seven to ten percent annual return on Pre-Kindergarten investment and the *Institute for a Competitive Workforce* estimating that a \$1 investment in Pre-Kindergarten translates to a \$2.50 to \$17 savings over time (Pepper, 2013). Pre-Kindergarten is becoming a large investment in education and touted as a way to enhance later school success. At the same time, states face challenges with scaling up programs to provide more state funded Pre-Kindergarten while maintaining a high quality education that research indicates leads to better school and life outcomes, especially for children in poverty (Barnett, 2011).

Much of the rationale for the focus on our approach to coaching as the keystone for developing the ARC-P professional development system came from research by Dunst (2000) and previous experience by the first author with a systems change project in a neighboring state over a period of six years. Dunst's review of research within and across multiple disciplines found intervention programs typically focus on what can be considered traditional models of services: Programs fix problems, use experts as the change agents, focus on what hasn't been working (the deficit approach), develop a systems approach around the needs of the professional, and use a top-down hierarchy where the professionals determine change.

Table 1

Traditional to New Models in Coaching. Adapted from Dunst (2000).

Traditional Paradigm	New Paradigm
<p>Treatment Models Focus on remediation of a disorder, problem, or its consequence</p>	<p>Promotion Models Focus on promoting competence and positive functioning</p>
<p>Expertise Models Depend on professional expertise to solve problems for People</p>	<p>Capacity-Building Models Provide opportunities for people to use existing abilities and develop new skills</p>
<p>Deficit-Based Models Focus on correcting a person’s weaknesses or problems</p>	<p>Strength-Based Models Acknowledge the assets of people and help them use these assets to improve functioning</p>
<p>Service-Based Models Describe practices primarily in terms of professional services</p>	<p>Resource-Based Models Describe practices in terms of a wide variety of formal and informal supports within a community</p>
<p>Professionally-Centered Models View professionals (the consultants) as experts who determine the needs of a person from their own as opposed to the other person’s perspectives</p>	<p>Teacher-Centered Models View professionals (the coaches) as agents of teachers/ coaches/ administrators, and responsive to desires and priorities</p>

In contrast to a traditional paradigm, the development of the ARC-P was based on initial guiding principles for an empowerment approach. Coaches are seen as promoting competence with the teachers / administrators / other coaches with whom they work. The primary focus is on capacity building: using the assets of the person, the coach serves to enhance existing abilities and develop new skills. Coaches are to be a support to other teachers, administrators, and other coaches using formal and informal supports. Although there are many definitions of coaching, we have used Rush and Shelden’s (2011) evidenced based definition that focuses on (a) identifying what we do as an adult learning strategy; (b) where the coach promotes the learner’s ability to reflect on his or her actions as a means to determine the effectiveness of an action or practice; and (c) develops a plan for refinement and use of the action in immediate and future situations.

Leadership Matters

We initiated the ARC-P in the summer of 2013 into what Alabama calls their *First Class* Pre-Kindergarten program in what has been described as a paradoxical top-down and bottom-up approach at the same time (Knight, 2007). The initial conversations for the ARC-P model took place with a university consultant, the director of professional development for the *First Class* program, and most importantly, the state Secretary for the Department of Early Childhood Education. Buy-in at the top from the beginning and continued support has been critical to the development of the ARC-P. From the initial meeting, it was then important to systematize a professional development program that would best meet the needs of the state and create an internal leadership that would grow from the ground up within each of the five regions of the state.

Developing Group-Held Principles Are Key to Substantive Change

A nebulous version of coaching had been used for a couple of years before without systematic support for the coaches or a clearly defined role. Coaches were all things to all people, playing the role of support while at the same time reviewing the programs for adherence to policy and monitors of program requirements. In order to implement the new ARC-P coaching model, the state department organized a two-day retreat to introduce the ARC-P to the professional development (PD) staff. One of the first principles that we centered on was the role of coaching as distinct from program monitoring. For the 2013-2014 year, two jobs were created. The role of coach was to be distinct from program monitors so that nuances associated with coaching Pre-Kindergarten teachers didn't confound the evaluative/monitoring role of the program monitors. During the two days, PD staff were introduced to the new model, and the roles of each job were discussed and refined. The process of coaching was outlined (see Figure

1) as a way to begin the model and have a baseline systematic model from which later conversations could refine the ARC-P.

Figure 1:

Coaching Approach to Teacher Empowerment. Adapted from Rush and Sheldon (2011).



Knowing that one-shot PD workshops are minimally effective, the coaches, monitors, and the upper administration of the program met monthly until the new year to review the roles of the professionals, and create a cross-regional community through which personnel could share what was working well and discuss challenging situations. During this time, the second underlying principle that was negotiated with the PD staff and state level administration was a tiered service delivery model. In prior years, some coaches were not providing services in an equal (or equitable) way to the teachers. Complaints had resulted in an administrative decision to require coaches to visit programs once a month for a half day. Given that principles of best practice in teaching support differentiated instruction, discussions at all levels of the system centered on the value of providing different things for different people at different times. As many coaches were new to the system, there was a cautious (trust but verify) release of an obligation for coaches to meet every month for the same amount of time with the teachers toward a differentiated model of

support that was tiered. For example, whereas some “new” teachers maybe veterans from other programs, other new teachers had little to no experience working with Pre-Kindergarten students. Teachers and coaches were vocal that some beginning teachers would have liked almost daily help at the start of the new academic year while other teachers refining their practice needed time to settle in with their new children without having to also work with a (sometimes new) coach and program monitor.

An outcome was a tiered component to coaching and is an example of a group-held principle developed so that coaches could negotiate with returning teachers to the system. Formative data were collected and indicated that of the 420 teachers, 120 (29%) were in new classrooms, 51(12%) were classified as new teachers, 133 (32%) were classified as progressing, 104 (25%) were refining practice, and 12 (3%) were “other” (internally this could be described as burned-out, planning to retire and less motivated to conform to the state’s *First Class* standards, etc.). Coaches at the start of the 2014-2015 school year individualized time, knowing that progressing or refining teachers of their practice were not likely to need the frequency, time, and intensity of support as a new teacher with a brand-new recently funded *First Class* classroom. Ongoing conversations about “trust” to the administration, the regional supervisors, and the coaches were necessary and will continue to be necessary for balancing professional independence with accountability.

Expertise Exists Within Most Schools to Solve Complex Problems

The second half of the 2013-2014 year was spent providing individual support to districts. Each month, the university consultant and the Director of Professional Development would meet with each of the regions to develop their internal capacity to develop and monitor their own Professional Development (PD). Said another way, a bottom-up approach with top-down support to develop a grass-roots PD system was a goal of ARC-P. In prior years, PD had

been provided at the state level: A two-day professional development conference was provided in the summer and state initiated topics of general interest (and need based on prior data) were provided for all teachers.

A shift to the new coaching model was to individualize support for the Pre-Kindergarten teachers based on needs that develop during the school year. During the monthly meetings with each of the regions, the coaches and monitors were coached to develop their own capacity to provide PD to their teachers with the following intentional benefits: (1) coaches were to see themselves and their teachers as having the expertise to help each other; (2) coaches were to feel empowered to make local decisions about how best to help their teachers; (3) coaches would develop their capacity and expertise to help their teachers in meaningful ways (where the teachers identified they would like support); (4) coaches would share strategies and PD opportunities with other coaches in their region; (5) the strengths of individual coaches and teachers as local experts would be realized and could be used as PD for others in the region; and (6) the region would develop the capacity and be empowered to provide its own PD within the district that has the potential for sustained and substantial growth.

Collaboration Among Educators is Key to Ensuring Great Teaching for Every Students

Coaches have been able to develop personalized approaches to meeting the needs of their students. This helped create an atmosphere where collaboration has led to teachers and coaches developing their confidence in their own abilities while helping others to develop their skills. As an example, the state implemented *Teaching Strategies GOLD*[®] as one of its assessments. Even though all teachers had been trained on the system as a large group, some teachers naturally had prior experience with *GOLD*[®], other teachers learned the electronic and online data entry system quickly, and some teachers needed more help with figuring out the utility and functionality of the assessment. During the spring, coaches were coached during the regional monthly meetings to

develop grass-roots professional development for their teachers. Guiding principles were provided to the coaches (see Table 2) but the topics of professional development and how the professional development was provided was developed by the coaches.

Table 2:

Top 10 Tips for Coaches. Adapted from The National Center on Quality Teaching and Learning (2014) and Most Effective Adult Learning Methods Practices (Dunst & Trivette, 2011).

- ✔ Build the relationship: Relationship over control
- ✔ Share successes: Build on the positive, share with other coaches and teachers
- ✔ Map it out: Use an action plan as a roadmap for your coaching journey: The most effective teacher strategy has a teacher reflect on their practice and identify their own performance goal
- ✔ Provide supports: Have the teacher identify the supports they may need
- ✔ Be transparent: Highlight coaching as part of professional development right from the beginning
- ✔ Be prepared be responsive: Focus on having the teacher assess their strengths and weaknesses
- ✔ Anchor it: Use data to anchor your observations and feedback. Real life applications lead to success
- ✔ Be patient: Change takes time
- ✔ Find the right fit: Just like teaching, coaching isn't "cookie cutter"
- ✔ Connect with a community of coaches: Coaches should be learning too

An example of a collaborative outcome was coaches setting up small group professional development days so that local challenges could be addressed. One coach invited her teachers to her house for a pot-luck with an open forum for teachers to share some of their successes in their classrooms. Another coach provided an account of how she was asking one of her teachers if she could do an informal presentation to other teachers on how to use *GOLD*[®] to inform their teaching. Another couple of coaches decided to hold a regional math development day and opened "slots" to other teachers in other regions. These coaches have been asked by other region coordinators to provide the same opportunities in their districts. One coach noted:

As a coach I enjoy feeling empowered with the ability to differentiate the support I provide teachers based on their individual needs as a professional. It allows me to work with teachers in a way that reflects with them on their present practices and set professional development goals. It also allows me to grow as a professional.

Ambitious and Measureable Goals Precede Effective Professional Learning

Alabama is only one of two states that maintained its 10 out of 10 rating from the National Institute of Early Education Research (NIEER) for the past 10 years. The *First Class* program has a history of meeting ambitious and measureable goals but the program only served roughly 6% of all eligible four year olds until the 2012-2013 year. The quadrupling of children served in the past four years has necessitated the development of the ARC-P as an evolving model designed to help ensure the maintenance or improvements in quality. Business leaders, educators, and the state's administration have a lofty goal of providing services for 60% of four-year-olds in the next eight years. To do this, the state has worked with the professional development staff to develop the Alabama First Class Framework (see Figure 2).

Figure 2

Alabama First Class Framework

The comprehensiveness of the *First Class* program has centered data at the heart of its model. Evaluations of the program over the years have been budgeted for and data-based results have leveraged the ability to successfully lobby the state’s finance committee and legislature. Data has indicated that the children in past programs were able to increase measures related to later school success to a national average, outperform children that didn’t receive a *First Class* education, and that differences in state test scores persisted through sixth grade.

A survey of more than 2,300 parents of children attending *First Class* noted they were either satisfied or very satisfied with the program (98.2%), teacher-child interactions (98.5%), parent-teacher interactions (98.0%), and classroom instruction (98.7%). Less than 1% believed that their child did not make any progress in social skills, independence, language, math, creativity, and enthusiasm while 83.6% believed their child to have made “significant” progress

in math, with more than 85% believed the children made significant progress in the other areas. Furthermore, in 2014-2015, data from Teaching Strategies *GOLD*[®] indicated a range of 14% to 16% *Below Growth Range* for social-emotional, physical, language, cognitive, literacy, and mathematics skills. By the end of the year, the range for the six skill areas was between 84% and 86% in the *Meeting or Above Growth Range*. Even though the program has expanded rapidly from 206 classrooms in 2012-2013 to 810 classes in 2016-2017, evaluations of the children's progress have shown continued improvements. For the six domains on *GOLD*[®] this past year, the percentage of children *Meeting or Above Growth Range* has increased from a low of 93% for math to 98% for literacy skills.

As the program expands and develops, there will have to be a continuing analysis and refinement of the ARC-P, but initial data indicate this coaching model as being a very successful component of scale-up within a system while maintaining the program's quality. As with any evaluation of a program, examples of specific successes help to contextualize what we know about a program. After the Governor of Alabama declared Wilcox County the poorest county in the nation in 2014, *First Class* Pre-Kindergarten programs were set up in the county so that every child had access to a state funded Pre-Kindergarten program. In 2016, when children were assessed as they entered pre-K, only 7% of children met or exceeded widely-held expectations for math, 48% for social emotional, 33% for physical and also language, 21% for cognitive, and 42% for literacy achievement. When assessed at the end of Pre-Kindergarten, the percentage of children meeting or exceeding widely-held expectations had increased to 99% for social-emotional, 93% for physical and language, 99% for cognition, 98% for literacy, and 97% for math. Although policy decisions often center on economic returns, cost/benefit ratios, or state-wide aggregate scores, knowing that close to 100% of all children from one of, if not the poorest,

counties in America can enter kindergarten ready to succeed is a powerful story that speaks to the value of a quality early childhood education.

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