

Activity 6.2 – Problem Solving Workshop

Bridging the Gap Between Professional Development and Practice: A Unified Coaching

Approach

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Introduction

In the early childhood field, educator implementation of practices learned through professional development varies in consistency, quality, and depth. This variation points to a larger issue in how professional learning translates into classroom practice. In my experience supporting educator learning and coaching systems, I've seen this disconnect play out in real time. Teachers leave training with new ideas, but those ideas do not always carry over into daily instruction in a consistent or lasting way.

This proposal focuses on that gap and looks at how professional development design and post-training support influence educators' ability to move from initial learning to sustained classroom practice. The purpose is to introduce a unified coaching system that strengthens the connection between professional learning and implementation. At its core, this proposal argues that professional development alone is not enough. Meaningful and sustained change in classroom practice requires intentionally designed systems that connect learning, coaching, and ongoing support.

Background and Significance

Professional development is widely used as a primary strategy for supporting educator growth and improving instructional practice. However, participation in professional learning does not consistently lead to meaningful or lasting changes in classroom instruction. A recent scoping review found that educators often struggle to apply learning after formal training concludes, highlighting ongoing challenges in implementation and sustainability (Nimante et al., 2025).

This challenge is often described as an issue of learning transfer, or the ability to apply and sustain new knowledge in practice over time (Brion, 2020). Research suggests that effective

professional learning extends beyond the training event itself and requires intentional design, follow-up, and support.

Instructional coaching is frequently identified as a job-embedded support that can help educators reflect on and refine their practice (K20 Center, 2018). However, coaching is most effective when it is part of a broader system rather than standalone support. In early childhood settings, where instruction is highly contextual and responsive, understanding how professional development and ongoing supports work together is especially important.

Research and practice both suggest that professional learning is more effective when supported by ongoing, job-embedded structures such as coaching. Models that intentionally connect training to follow-up support have been associated with stronger implementation and more sustained changes in instructional practice. This proposal builds on those findings by outlining a system that brings professional development and coaching into closer alignment rather than treating them as separate efforts.

The Problem, Causes, and Effects

The central problem is the gap between professional development and sustained classroom implementation. Educators may understand new strategies, but without structured and consistent support, those strategies are not always carried into daily practice.

Several factors contribute to this gap. Professional development is often treated as a one-time event instead of part of an ongoing learning process. Opportunities for practice, feedback, and reflection can be limited or inconsistent. In addition, variability in instructional support systems, including coaching, can lead to very different experiences for educators depending on where and how they receive support.

Context also plays a role. Time constraints, competing priorities, and program expectations all influence how educators engage with and apply new learning (Yang et al., 2024; Lobman & Ryan, 2008).

These challenges result in inconsistent implementation across classrooms and reduce the overall impact of professional development. When learning is not sustained, programs are not seeing the return they expect on their investment in training, and educators may feel frustrated when they are expected to implement new practices without enough support.

Project Plan

To address these challenges, this proposal introduces a unified coaching system designed to support the transfer of professional learning into classroom practice. Coaching is not positioned as a separate initiative, but as a part of a larger professional learning system that focuses on ongoing implementation, reflection, and continuous improvement.

The model is designed to create consistent expectations for how instructional support is provided. Coaching is aligned directly to professional development content so that educators receive support that is connected to what they are learning. Through structured processes for goal setting, observation, feedback, and reflection, the system provides a clear and predictable way to support instructional change.

Consistency is a key part of this approach. Shared tools and protocols help reduce variability in how support is provided, which makes expectations clearer for both educators and those providing support. At the same time, the system allows for flexibility so that support can still be responsive to different classroom contexts. This balance between consistency and flexibility is important for making the model both effective and realistic to implement.

Success of this model would be measured through both implementation and instructional indicators. Evidence of success would include increased consistency in how coaching practices are applied across settings, regular use of shared tools and protocols, and stronger alignment between professional learning and coaching conversations. Over time, success would also be reflected in observable changes in teacher practice, including more consistent use of targeted instructional strategies and increased confidence in applying new learning in the classroom. Feedback from educators and coaches would provide additional insight into how well the system supports ongoing learning and implementation.

Conclusion: Considerations, Benefits, and Future Implications

Implementing a unified coaching system requires an investment of time and resources. This includes developing tools, providing facilitator training, implementing effective follow-up steps, and allowing time for educators and instructional leaders to engage in the process. There may also be a transition period as new expectations and structures are introduced.

Implementation may also be influenced by factors such as staff capacity, competing priorities, and varying levels of buy-in across sites. To address these challenges, the model is designed to be flexible in its rollout. Programs could begin by implementing core components, such as shared coaching tools or aligned goal-setting practices, before expanding to a fully integrated system. Providing ongoing support for coaches and creating space for feedback throughout implementation would also be critical for long-term success.

Even with these initial considerations and investments, the long-term benefits are significant. A more aligned and consistent professional learning system can lead to strong implementation of instructional practices, improved teaching effectiveness, and better use of

professional development resources. Instead of learning being introduced and then fading over time, it becomes part of ongoing practice.

Looking ahead, this approach supports a shift in how professional learning is understood. Rather than treating training as a one-time event, it becomes an ongoing process that includes support, reflection, and continuous improvement. This creates a more sustainable path for meaningful change in classroom practice.

References

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