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Individualized Coaching to Improve Pre-School Quality:

Perception of Teachers and Administrators

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Introduction

Research has continuously suggested that long-term success foundations are established first years of a young child's life. A child's development is a delicate experience-dependent process, heavily influenced by environmental and contextual factors in a synchronous manner comparative to a *constructive web* (Cantor et al., 2018). During these early days of life, integral domains and functions are quickly established in the brain. Thus, the quality of experiential interactions with family, peers, and teachers are linked to long-term outcomes (Kern & Friedman, 2008). High-quality Early Childhood Education (ECE) is a critical component of this experience-based process.

According to Heckman (2011), disparities in young children's cognitive, social, and emotional supports manifest in a variety of forms. Factors such as income, parenting style, and family structure can shape a child's opportunity. Therefore, as some families have access to accredited educational programs more conveniently than others, inequities can be perpetuated. Childhood research has shown that irregularity in the quality of early-life experiences due to socio-economic status is correlated with a significant disparity in opportunity as children mature subsequently. Long-term well-being and achievement levels are also negatively affected (Fernald, Marchman, & Weisleder, 2013).

Presently, policymakers have garnered significant attention as the ability to implement a high expectation for childcare and preschool programs to enhance children's long-term outcomes is theirs. President Biden's 2020 *Plan for Educators, Students, and Our Future* proposes a multitude of supports for the US Education System as a whole, including Early Childhood Education (Biden Harris Campaign, 2020). In 2013, President Obama instated legislation emphasizing equal opportunity for "vocabulary, social and emotional development while helping students stay on track and stay engaged for the early elementary grades" (Office

of the Press Secretary, 2013). Biden has then refocused on the importance of relieving low-income families from the "burden, with potentially life-long consequences for their children" that accompanies poor early childhood experiences (Biden Harris Campaign, 2020). His initiative aims to provide all families with access to financially reasonable and high-quality Pre-Kindergarten programs. Policymakers recognize the value of investing in ECE, which "will close the achievement gap, promote the labor participation of parents who want to work, and lift our critical early childhood education workforce out of poverty". Federal and state legislation are exercising their power to improve access to beneficial early learning experiences, promoting students' equal opportunity in their earliest years and beyond.

Kindergarten Readiness

A primary objective during preschool years is kindergarten readiness. Transitioning from independent home and family care to a group learning community can be difficult for children, considering the wide variety of educational backgrounds within their homes. According to Gill et al. (2006), the readiness of the child entering Kindergarten has been evaluated through child indicators and predictors of ability through assessment. As the developmental expectation for students between ages five and six moving into kindergarten has increased over the years, so has preschool's perception of children's readiness for academia. (Hatcher et al., 2012). Studies show that early childhood programs' responsibility carries a "multidimensional definition of kindergarten readiness, citing social and emotional factors as the core of readiness, combined with perceived academic components such as literacy skills" (p. 10). High-quality early education is fundamental for many factors that are indicators of long-term academic success and well-being later in life.

Ensuring high quality in early childhood programs' is often restricted by program funding and structural inconsistencies, and other barring factors. Rating criteria should be

established to gauge education quality and appeal to a federal and state standard for early developmental education. Controlling experiential quality is a dynamic endeavor, but the interactions and practices within school environments can be updated with developmentally appropriate theory. In the development of these practices, questions such as, What does it mean to be high-quality? and how can educators improve quality large-scale? should be held at the forefront of the minds.

Quality Rating Improvement Scale

The Quality Rating Improvement System (QRIS) is a market-based approach (Quality Compendium, 2020, p.9) utilized by 41 of the United States of America in early childhood settings to score the program's holistic quality of productive learning. The QRIS scale is traditionally employed to "provide simplified information about organizational quality to the public" (Bassok et al., 2019, p.839). Awarding stars or other measures often represent the quality being measured to communicate credibility to consumers. Highly accredited programs, or those with stars, incentivize consumers to choose the organization's service.

The QRIS first came into working order in 1997. In 2007, The "Race to the Top-Early Learning Challenge Grants" was awarded to twenty states. It required a QRIS Program's facilitation to enhance the experiential quality of center-based, family-based, and afterschool programs for children (Tout et al., 2017). In some states, this system is voluntary. Assessments are traditionally accompanied by teacher coaching programs and other incentives for participation. According to Wechsler et al. (2016), "support can take the form of technical assistance, such as on-site coaching or consultation; financial incentives, like tiered child care subsidy reimbursement rates and quality improvement grants; and workforce supports, like wage subsidies or scholarships for teachers pursuing

higher education" (p. 3). Depending on state regulations, program structure, criteria, and scoring for high-quality learning can vary (Sabol et al., 2013). The QRIS provides a valuable framework for holding educational stakeholders accountable and upholding a high-quality standard.

Defining Quality

Extensive research within the Child Development field has consistently proven the importance of developmentally appropriate instruction for young children that focuses on the whole child (Wechsler et al., 2016). According to Phillips et al. (2017), defining high-quality is contingent on the expectation for teacher training, classroom environmental quality, and the interactions that take place. In focusing on developing each domain, curricula planned and implemented must address language, cognition, fine and gross motor, and socio-emotional learning. Other traditional qualities of a healthy learning environment for young children are low student-to-teacher ratios, thoughtful child-led instruction, and continuous assessments. (Wechsler et al., 2016).

An essential building block to creating these learning environments is highly trained and well-educated teachers. Teachers with a child development-focused educational background and professional training in these practices can best support high-quality learning. However, hiring and retaining well-educated teachers can be a challenge for many centers around the country. Moreover, different states have different expectations for teacher preparation programs and certification. QRIS Programs can serve both as a resource for hands-on professional development and provide ways for teachers to keep their practices up to date. High-quality learning is a dynamic process but can be adapted to fit into any school environment with the appropriate support.

While there is a strong correlation between high program scores and market demand for enrollment, there is little evidence of improved long-term child achievement with highly accredited QRIS programs. According to Sabol et al. (2013), "on most measures of children's learning, programs rated high by QRIS produce outcomes that are not significantly better than those of low-rated programs" (p. 845). Research indicates that "it may be that well-intentioned staff and leaders in ECE programs lack a full understanding of appropriate quality standards or the extent to which their program meets those standards" (Bassok et al., 2019, p. 841). This forges the question, what can we need to do differently? What changes are necessary to correlate long-term successful student outcomes from this program? Issues that currently perpetuate in the accreditation system are low expectations for recognition in some states, voluntary participation, and emphasis directed away from school readiness.

Sabol and colleagues (2013) isolated one of the four QRIS indicators of high-quality, student-teacher interactions and studied how a high and low rated program affected student's long-term achievement outcomes. Researchers found that process quality criteria, such as these interactions, were increasingly correlated with a student's success rather than structural. Surprisingly, "children had stronger math skills, but not a pre-reading, expressive language, or social development" (p.846) in highly rated programs. Sabol and colleagues encourage state administration to profit from the prosperous research supporting holistic learning through social-emotional development. To promote a correlation between accredited programs and high student achievement levels, the QRIS process should be revised to support structural quality improvement.

Measuring Quality in QRIS

Indicators of quality education exist and are assessed in many data-based forms. The

*Early Childhood Education Rating System Revised (*ECERS-R) is a common measure utilized

by states' QRIS to measure quality. The ECERS-R assesses four standard indicators of high-

quality learning defined by the QRIS, staff qualifications, staff-child ratios, family

involvement, and learning environment (Sabol et al., 2013). These criteria can be divided into

two categories. The structural quality, or "program-level inputs that are straightforward to

quantify and regulate such as, teacher education and experience levels, class size, and staff-

child ratios" (Bassok et al., 2019, p 840), and the process quality, or the quality of a child's

experience and interactions in the classroom. Though it may be complicated to gather and

represent accurately, process quality has shown to be a "consistent, though modest, predictor of

children's learning, then structural measures" (p. 841).

The ECERS has stood as a fundamental benchmark for the quality of children's

learning environments for over 25 years (La Paro et al., 2012). The ECER-R was designed with

scholarly child development research on a global scale. ECERS-3 is a standardized observation

measure that consists of 35 items divided among six subscales: space and furnishing; personal

care routines; language and literacy; learning activities, interaction; program structure (Harms,

Clifford, & Cryer, 2015). Each category is then rated on a 7-point Likert scale, one being

"inadequate" and seven being "adequate". This comprehensive and cohesive scale measures

both process and structural quality, rating the full experience children contact.

Past research indicates that the ECERS-R scale supports long-term achievement

outcomes for students later in their academic careers and successful lives (La Paro et al., 2012).

But extensive data has proved the complexity of assessing and rating high-quality early

childhood learning experiences because of their dynamic nature. The ECERS-R Scale can be

utilized in culmination with other educationally supportive infrastructure, such as coaching and training programs to prepare classrooms for assessment.

QRIS Embedded Coaching

Professionals can utilize experienced teacher coaches to support the continuous development and dedication to a high-quality learning environment within the QRIS process. Teacher coaching is a widely utilized tool were experts with both specializations in child development and adult learning theory work with mentees on a variety of goals. According to The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAYCE, 2011), "coaching is designed to build capacity for specific professional dispositions, skills, and behaviors and is focused on goal-setting and achievement for an individual or group". According to O'Keefe (2017) researchers have found that "high-quality coaching has positive effects on teachers practices across various measures of instructional quality. Fewer studies measure child outcomes alongside teacher outcomes" (p.10). Teachers can reflect on their practice, and consider outside perspectives to transform their environments for children's development. How can we design and measure the efficacy of these programs on the benefits for long-term student performance?

Early childhood education teacher coaching is unique to other professional development or consulting programs, depending on how it is defined. "Instructional Coaching Models" target closing student performance gaps by accelerating teacher's practice and instructional routines to support learning. Other coaching programs can exist on a wider scale, such as a "Systems Coaching Model" to build collective knowledge, effective systemic processes, and progress monitoring capacity across the organization" (Vermont Agency of Education, 2016, p.1). Most coaching program designs consist of a "Theory of change and goals" which objectify means of "improving educator skills and practices as a means to improve child

outcomes" (O'Keefe, 2017, p.13). Depending on the teacher-coach relationship, goals can be tracked and assessed through various systems; one of these being goals that are strategic, measurable, attainable, results-oriented, and time-bound (S.M.A.R.T.). Additional components to teacher coaching implementation are targeting teachers for participation, center staffing, program duration, leadership roles, and educational content (O'Keefe, 2017).

The success of teacher coaching programs is dependent on their design and contributors. The 2011 *Acelero Learning Teacher Coaching Program* implicated the strategic designation of center directors as the coaches themselves. Taking the school community as a whole into consideration is essential for a functioning teacher coaching program, as classroom changes often have to be approved by the administration. This coaching style deviated from the "recommendation of many researchers and other programs, who believe mixing coaching and evaluation can hinder coaching relationships or provoke a teacher backlash" (p.23). Adapting staff roles for sustainable relationships with teachers and long-term improvement that was specific for each classroom's needs. Directors face challenges of balancing responsibility in this coaching model. Successful teacher coaching programs integrate the entire school community, designing goals for specialized improvement to each classroom community.

New Hampshire's QRIS

In New Hampshire today, this participation program is entirely voluntary. The QRIS designates early child care centers into three licensure levels: Licensed, Licensed Plus, and Accreditation (nationally accredited programs) (New Hampshire Department of Health and Human Services, n.d.). On the most basic level, early childhood centers are assessed on their child-teacher ratio, group ratio, health and safety regulations, and teachers that are "knowledgeable in child development and other related topics" (p. 1). To be a licensed early learning or care center, teachers may or may not have a high level of knowledge regarding

developmentally appropriate curriculum and other elevated process quality learning

indicators. Additionally, Licensed Plus programs are working to improve the quality of care

and learning and are in the process of becoming Accredited. Finally, Accredited programs are

at the highest level and are promoted by outside evaluation entities such as NAYCE. Whether

they be externally or family operating, early learning centers' quality varies based on the level

of licensure or accreditation achieved.

New Hampshire is in the process of revising its QRIS. This draft is a collaborative

effort by the Department of Health and Human Services' (DHHS) Bureau of Child

Development and Head Start Collaboration and professional research organizations and

evidence-based child development centers. According to the New Hampshire DHHS, the QRIS

Task Force organizes each component of the program's intricacies, such as realistic standards

and incentives for teachers. Other states in the United States are referred to as models for their

well-developed early childhood learning standards. For example, the Alabama Quality STARS

Program is the state's specialized QRIS program, which includes a four-part required criterium

outlining internal requirements as well as family involvement and administration training

(Alabama Quality STARS., n.d.). Their website clearly outlines the specific qualities they

expect each stakeholder in a child's educational experience to uphold. Additionally, providing

additional training to teachers and administration is an integral piece to achieving a premier

experiential learning environment. The state is currently working diligently to expand and

improve this program.

Pilot Study of New Hampshire's QRIS coaching Model

In the summer and fall of 2019, a pilot evaluation for New Hampshire's QRIS coaching

model was completed (UNH IRB Number 8048). The current study is aims to extend this

study's quantitative analysis of changes in ECERS-3 score from pre- to post-coaching. As seen

in Table 1, the ECERS-3 scores for classroom teams was higher after participating in the four-

month teacher-coaching pilot (1.12 points on the 7-point scale or a 1.28 *SD* increase).These

improvements in scores were correlated to the areas that teachers and coaches focused on for

improvement. For example, revamping Space and Furnishing, Learning Activities and

Interaction were targeted for improvement by teachers and coaches.

Table 1.
Pilot Study of New Hampshire's QRIS coaching Model for Descriptive Statistics

Scale	New Hampshire Pre-Coaching		New Hampshire Post-Coaching		National Comparison[1]	
	Mean	*SD*	**Mean**	*SD*	**Mean**	*SD*
Space and Furnishing	3.02	0.76	3.90	0.70	3.56	1.44
Personal Care Routines	2.87	0.68	3.94	1.43	3.44	1.43
Language and Literacy	3.29	0.96	4.38	0.78	3.85	1.64
Learning Activities	2.31	0.71	3.77	0.74	3.30	1.49
Interaction	4.23	1.46	5.53	0.81	3.59	1.42
Program Structure	3.56	0.84	4.16	0.75	3.45	1.61
Total Score	3.08	0.75	4.20	0.63	3.51	1.50

Note. [1]National comparison data from Early et al.'s (2018). The sample consisted of 944 preschool classrooms serving 3-and/or 4-year-olds from 862 program in the states of Georgia, Washington, and Pennsylvania. Classrooms auspice included 14% Head Start, 39% state prekindergarten, and 18% public school and the majority served 4-year-olds (57.5%)

Compared against ECERS-3 National Scores (Table 1). Across these ECERS-3 Assessment

subscales, the national comparison sample cited scores ranging from 3.30 (Learning Activities)

to 3.85. Evident in Table 1, NH classrooms all began with lower scores than the national

comparison, except for the Interactions and Program Structure subscales. After programs

participated in the Coaching Pilot, NH classrooms scores all surpassed the national average,

including their total score.

Current Study

The current study provides a qualitative examination of the themes among responses of preschool teachers and administrators who participated in embedded coaching to improve classroom quality aligned with the state's QRIS. The University of New Hampshire's Teacher Coaching Project is a QRIS coaching pilot that encouraged the importance of high-quality interactions, open communication, ongoing observation, and feedback enabling goals to be set and achieved. The ECERS-3 (Harms, Clifford, & Cryer, 2015) observation and the scoring model served as a benchmark for improvement and was completed at the onset and conclusion of the embedded coaching model.

Research Questions. The pilot study aimed to evaluate a potential coaching framework for statewide implementation to support the QRIS in New Hampshire and improve children, families, schools, and communities. Specifically, the current study examines the feedback teachers, administrators, and coaches provided in focus groups on their experience adapting their classrooms in preparation for the ECERS-3 assessment. The following research questions were the focus of the study.

1. What were teachers' motivations to join the coaching program, including experience and incentives?

2. What are teachers' and administrators' perceptions of training and coaching models, including benefits, limitations, and implications for future design?

4. How was conducive communication achieved between administration, teachers and co-teacher teams? What were indicators and barriers to success?

5. Based on focus group data, do teachers feel they can sustain their goals and improvements through this coaching model?

Method

Participants

This study is an evaluation of the focus group data from the University of New

Hampshire Teacher Coaching Pilot Program that occurred in the summer and fall of 2019. This

research was conducted as part of the NH Preschool Development Grant, which is $3.8 million

of federal funds provided by a collaboration between UNH, NH Departments of Education, and

Health and Human Services. To inform a future design for a statewide ECE QRIS Coaching

Program, teachers, administrators, and coaches gave feedback in focus group settings about their

experience.

The current study was conducted with two cohorts of preschool classrooms in the

summer (C1) and fall (C2) of 2019. In total, 14 preschool classrooms across 9 center-based early

childhood care and education programs participated in the study (UNH IRB Number 8048)

Coaches were placed in programs where 20% of children were receiving Child Care and

Development Fund scholarships. Teachers and administration committed to approximately 40

hours of effort, 32 hours to coaching, and 8 hours for focus groups and other administrative

duties for this study.

Procedures

The coaching design for this study aimed to integrate professional development

elements into day-to-day activities for teachers to promote their pedagogy's long-term

development according to critical high-quality measures (see Appendix I for project timeline).

After administrative commitment, teachers voluntarily consented to participate in the four-

month-long coaching program.   Teachers completed 9 hours of training time shadowing

professionals and collaborating in observation sessions at a NAEYC accredited Child Study

and Development Center where they were trained on the utilization and preparation for the Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale - 3rd Education (ECERS-3)

The 4-month coaching pilot compromised four distinct stages. Teachers were assigned to their designated coaches by researchers. The coaches were Child Development Professionals and a master's degree who were certified ECERS-3 coaches. First, the ECERS-3 pre-intervention observation assessed classrooms according to their initial environments. Second, teachers and coaches collaborated to interpret their assessment scores and feedback to inform SMART goals to cater to individual classroom needs. Specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, time-bound objectives are essential to "build constructive relationships and use strength-based teaching methods when working with teachers" (Rush & Sheldon, 2011). For most teachers in the two cohort samples, goals where be geared towards improving individualized teaching strategies, teacher-child interactions, and pedagogy rather than assuring that content standard are met.

During the third phase, coaches visited classrooms for observation, reflection, and goal setting 3-5 during the pilot, for approximately 20 hours. The frequency and duration of these visits were dependent on the teacher and coach's terms. Coaches supported teachers in two video recordings of their classroom instruction and reflection time as a method for meet SMART goals. During this time, coaches supported teachers in their choices to purchase new materials for their classroom. Administrative members were scheduled to observe classrooms and check-in on teacher progress monthly, for approximately four hours at a time. The fourth and final stage consisted of the ECERS-3 post-intervention assessment and designated teacher reflection time with coaches. This pilot was concluded within each cohort with an approximately one-hour focus group session.

Materials

The study consists of pre and post coaching assessments of classroom practices to evaluate the impact of coaching on classroom quality. In addition, teachers and program administrators completed focus groups to provide evaluative feedback about efficacy of the coaching model.

Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale 3rd (ECERS-3). Classroom assessment in both cohorts will be implemented before and after coaching collaboration by an ECERS-3 staff assessor. The ECERS-3 is a standardized observation measure that consists of 35 items divided among six subscales: space and furnishing; personal care routines; language and literacy; learning activities, interaction; program structure (Harms, Clifford, & Cryer, 2015). Each criterium is rated on a 7-point Likert scale. Subscale scores are calculated by averaging all the items in each subscale. Coaches and assessors had were certified ECERS-3 at a minimal reliability level of 85% for coaches and 90% for assessors. To maintain objectivity, assessors only entered the classroom pre and post-coaching interventions.

Focus Groups. Focus group sessions were conducted after each cohort's coaching program with separately for program teachers and administrators (see Appendix II for complete list of focus group questions). Participants answered questions regarding their experiences with the pilot coaching model, ECERS-3 evaluation, and implications. The focus groups included 14 questions and additional items based on facilitator interpretation. Teacher groups were prompted to discuss topics such as "What was the biggest challenge for you in receiving these scores?". Administrators were asked a similar set of discussion questions to gauge their involvement and sense of efficacy of the program. Additional fundamental reflective questions, such as "what excites you about the goals you have set with your coach?" and "was the information provided to you from the ECERS helpful for you and your coach to create your

goals?" were asked to inform the feasibility for state-wide implementation of the coaching model.

Analytic Approach

This study's analytic approach is a qualitative coding process highlighting the predominant themes from the post-pilot Focus Groups for C1 and C2. To extrapolate the most effective feedback from teachers and administrators about program efficacy and their experience, I adopted an Applied Thematic Analysis approach. ATA focuses on attaching thematic meaning to lived experience by supporting claims with specified evidence from participant data. According to Guest et al. (2012), ATA is positioned within the realm of inductive qualitative analysis to effectively "frame the process and provide rationale" (p.4). ATA was utilized in this study to explore participants' perceptions of efficacy on individualized teacher coaching and the ECERS-3 assessment process. Teacher and administrative experiences were organized into general themes and supported by specific evidence from the focus group transcripts.

The first step in this analytic process was to identify general themes from the C1 and C2 Teacher and Administrative Focus Group Transcripts. This process began in May 2020. I kept a journal document in Microsoft Word where I made notes of repetitive or essential feedback, whether it was positive or negative in terms of the study. Next, I developed a codebook using the software MAXQDA. This qualitative coding program allowed me to assign codes to passages from the four focus group transcripts. The MAXQDA codebook was refined as analysis continued, and evidence was found to support or refute predominate qualitative codes and subcodes. The final stage in the ATA process focused on analyzing the relationships between themes in these focus groups. Participants across the two cohorts reflected differently

on program structure, center size, and specific participant motivations within the study. I

engaged in a compare and contrast process between and within codes to understand the

passages underlying meaning and outstanding characteristics. I was involved in this process

independently, but I collaborated with UNH Human Development and Family Studies

department members for guidance until a straightforward narrative formed using the available

the data.

<div align="center">**Results**</div>

Three main themes were identified throughout the reflective C1 and C2 teacher and

administrative focus groups. These principal codes were subdivided into specific subcodes. The

first theme, *Motivation for Training* outline the pre-enrollment process's perceptions of how it

affected participants' experiences. Next, within *Constructive Coaching and Implementation,*

mentors supported teachers in the program through multiple communicative approaches. . The

third predominant theme among participant feedback was *Communication and Administrative*

Involvement.

Motivation for Training

In each cohort, teachers voluntarily joined the pilot program, understanding criteria for

participation. Teachers were informed about the personal and supply stipend by their

administrators. Teachers' motivation for participation stemmed from incentivization—their

experience and determination for improving their classrooms. The pre-pilot ECERS-3 Training

was perceived as foundational to understanding the assessment process and overall

communication throughout the study.

Reflecting on Teaching Practice. Throughout C1 and C2 focus group sessions, teachers

and administrators expressed a need for a "fresh perspective" in their classrooms regardless of

their experience. An opportunity for self-reflection of practice, with an expert external to the

center staff, was an integral benefit of this program's program. A theme of *complacency* was

evident throughout transcripts as teachers expressed the routines they noticed as training and

coaching intervention began. For example, a teacher in the Summer Cohort said in reflection:

> It's made me feel that I don't have to follow a routine that I had ... I mean I have colored
> boxes for each month. 20 years of ... I just pull out the October box. And all my materials
> are in there, so I can do projects. But to look at things a little bit differently. Let's put in
> some science stuff. Let's put in some things.

Teachers felt a sense of freedom from their stagnant routines due to the coaching and

training interventions. A pillar of high-quality education is the component of child-led

instruction, which can be barred by standardizing curriculum routines. Teachers had an

opportunity to reflect and collaborate with their coaches to refresh their practice. Coaches and

teachers collaborated to expend supplies incentives to, in turn, expand practice all around.

Teachers also indicated this sense of low-quality, stationary practice in reflection of their

teaching practice since it had been a long time since their last individualized instruction

opportunity. Teachers and administrators perceived the collaborative experience based around

the ECERS-3 Assessment process as a productive opportunity for structured self-reflection.

Reaction to Incentives. Teachers were motivated to participate by the personal stipends

and supplies provided. Based on their classrooms and personal motivators, participants perceived

each component as beneficial for different reasons. Some teachers in C1 and C2 expressed their

reaction to the personal stipend as their first motivator along with the other program qualities.

> Oh, they'll be paying you for your time. So I was like, Okay, I'm 100% sold. No matter
> what, I'm willing to do it because I know that not only am I going to get the feedback, but
> I'm also going to get something out of it too.

On the other hand, teachers seeking new materials for a long time expressed the

incentives as their primary motivator in both C1 and C2. According to a teacher in C1, "I heard

about the classroom supply list first, and that's when I accepted, because, for us, it's hard to get a large chunk of money to buy larger purchases". Teachers and administrators perceived the supplies stipend to all around be an asset to this program.

C1 and C2 Administrators perceived incentives as an opportunity for teachers to be treated with *professionalism* throughout the program. A C2 administrator "shared with the teachers that these opportunities do not come down the pipe in my tenure being in this field. To be incentivized monetarily, plus supplies for the classroom that you have a voice in... Unheard of". Incentives served as an external motivator to teachers who may have been indecisive about their participation due to their years of experience. Monetary incentives for extra time, classroom supplies, and overall involvement forged a sense of *professionalism* among participants throughout the study. Administrators and some teachers recognized the intrinsic value that a coaching and assessment process would improve their classroom's overall quality. Depending on program style, funding structure, and teacher attitudes teachers accredited incentives differently to their decision-making process.

Constructive Coaching and Implementation. A central theme amongst all parts of the study feedback was *communication*. Balancing roles between classroom teams, administration, and coaches was reported as being key to establishing emerging high-quality classrooms and helping teachers feel satisfied with their goals. The importance of clear constructive communication was present across all aspects of the coaching model.

Implications of ECERS-3 Training. Teachers and administration both recognized the three-hour ECER-3 Training session to be an integral piece to making this program run smoothly. Participating teachers, administrators, and classroom team members were invited to sit in on a review of the ECERS-3 criteria, observe preschool classrooms at a NAEYC accredited

Early Childhood Center, and reflect with coaches about the observation. Teachers expressed their appreciation of the visual modeling piece that the observation training provided. According to a C1 Teacher participant, "[Blind] and I to both be here together to see the classrooms and knowing that I had money to be able to make changes, what I could do, the visual really was key for me too. And then being able to come back in here and talk with everybody and ask questions". Positive feedback was received on the training structure, as the multi-faceted structure brought clarity to the complicated assessment tool. Another teacher in the C2 cohort expressed that the observation component "just gave me a push that I probably would have needed" to feel motivated to ignite change in her classroom. According to teacher feedback and focus group data, observing classrooms at the NAEYC center modeled new examples for classroom practice. Teachers in C2 shared specific anecdotes of how the open-ended practice they observed allowed them to implement high-quality learning encounters that they would never have thought of. For example, a C2 teacher explained that she witnessed children using knives. She explained with "cutting the Playdough and doing it with the pumpkin, they're getting stronger and now know more how to cut it. So I learned that from coming here and observing their classroom here." Focus group evidence indicates that teachers derived value to their practice from observing a model high-quality learning environment to start their improvement process.

A theme that stood out among teacher feedback in both cohorts on training was the level of depth and detail of the ECERS-3. A C1 teacher expressed

It would've been nice to go over more of the ECERS book itself because it's very detailed and very black and white. And sometimes we don't get it. I'll admit, we look at it and go, Okay, yeah. I'm doing that. When really we're not doing it exactly like they want it, which means the score is down.

The ECERS-3 assessment tool is perceived to be complicating and confusing for some

teachers. Teachers and administration explained that they have either heard of or learned about

this assessment at one point. Still, they did not recall an in-depth experience of adapting their

classroom to prepare for an evaluation. Participants expressed that if they had spent more time

studying the scale and understanding the criterium for scoring, they would be more satisfied with

their end scoring. Observation, ECERS-3 training and, reflection time were three key pieces that

teachers and administrators expressed to be integral to the training process. Along with building

an understanding of the QRIS preparation and teacher coaching assessment process, the pre-pilot

training also served as a de facto method of establishing *roles and communication* for the rest of

the program. Teachers, administrators, co-teachers, and coaches all were responsible for

assuming a role in facilitating environmental change in participating classrooms to receive a

high-quality rating at the end of the study. Teachers and administrators repetitively expressed

barriers to conducive communication as a negative outcome of the study. During the ECERS-3

training sessions, participants were informed on the process and the expectations each teacher-

coaching team was responsible for. Teachers explained that it was challenging to undergo

classroom and practice changes when their teammates were not fully involved as illustrated by a

C2 teacher

> This isn't even about the training, it's just more about my environment because there
> wasn't a lot of involvement with the co-teacher also being involved with the training. It
> felt like we weren't always on the same page. Kind of a lot of friction has come up
> because of that, just kind of not being included. I tried my best to include them because it
> wasn't both of us receiving the same feedback and the same training at the same time. It
> was pretty tough.

Teachers perceived the ECERS-3 Training sessions to establish an understanding of the

assessment process as a whole. Teachers whose classroom teams voluntarily participated in

training could offer extra support in achieving the set goals. Many teachers in C1 and C2

expressed admiration for their co-teaching teams and how they are just as crucial to establishing

a high-quality classroom as the lead teacher. Other teachers perceived the misconceptions and

communication among teammates caused by missed training to be a barrier to overall success. A

C1t teacher expressed the following about her associate, "they don't really understand ECERS,

and our classroom is ECERS designed. So for them to come in and they're like, 'What is going

on?' They don't really understand. So if they understood, I feel like the classroom would be more

smooth." In conclusion, teachers perceived the ECERS training as an essential piece to establish

overall understanding, communication, and long-term outcomes of the assessment process.

Benefits of the Coaching Model. Participating teachers cumulatively agreed that expert

coaches' support was a beneficial experience in remodeling their classrooms and practice.

According to both C1 and C2 focus group, an open communication style was critical for meeting

goals and greeting a healthy relationship. Coaches who remained available to support their

teachers outside of their scheduled intervention times could sustain functional classroom

changes. To support the dynamic QRIS process as a whole, coaches were perceived as the best

support with an open communication style with their teachers. For example, a C1 teacher

explained:

> So, I had a very open relationship with Sarah, so I would just call her, and we would talk
> on Facebook sometimes, back and forth. And I'd shoot pictures and say, "What do you
> think of this? What do you think of that? What can I do? Give me your thought process
> back." That's how I handle it.

Rather than producing concrete feedback and aiming for specific outcomes, coaches

guided teachers through the ECERS-3 Assessment process as new ideas came to their minds. In

this example, the coach was available after hours of her in-person participation in the classroom

to support her teacher. Another quality that contributed to the communication style that teachers

perceived as positive were being empathetic. Rather than acting as a "higher-up" or professional

who is more knowledgeable than their teacher mentee, teachers perceived constructive coaches to be the most helpful. Another C1 teacher explained her experience in the coaching process as:

> The coaching part really stood out to me, and was I think, one of the best parts about the ECERS program for me. Because I was able to get that mentor aspect, without having to feel like I was being judged or ... It was just pure enthusiasm on her part. That was able to better my classroom. And better my kids, and better myself.

Compared to past coaching or professional development opportunities, this pilot design was differentiated because coaches followed an open and even communication model. It was an integral piece for teachers to expand their classroom's environmental quality, but bettering practice was an excited and supportive mentor.

An additional dimension to the coaching style that was reported to be the most beneficial for success in this study was assessing the current practice of teachers, and planning goals accordingly. Teachers at the beginning of the study had various levels of experience and teaching philosophies. Teachers expressed their admiration for coaches that took time to understand their perspective and adapt their support based on the assessor feedback. For example, a C2 teacher explained that her coach was

> She was good about making sure that everything that we changed in the classroom worked with our personal philosophies and with our philosophy of the center. And I liked that we weren't just picking out things that she wanted to see changed. It was all focused on what we thought would work best for our classrooms.

Identifying that communication and coaching style is not one size fits all supported participating teachers' positive experience. They felt appreciated and respected as professionals when coaches took the time to understand their perspectives. Focus group evidence indicates that administrators share the same perception of coaches. Administrative staff shared that their experience supporting teachers at their centers is always very different, depending on personality and teaching approach. An C1 administered shared she observed a positive teacher-coach relationship when the mentor approached criticism constructively.

A very difficult teacher with very black and white perspective. The coach was able to pull things out and really display things for that teacher in a way that I'm not sure my director would have ever necessarily been effective at doing, so it was nice to have that perspective and the skills that the coach was able to say, "I hear what you're saying and this is what we're doing, but have you thought about this?"

Coaches implementing an open and constructive communication style could benefit teachers more than their administration had been able to in the past. Having the "fresh perspective" of an outside professional was conducive for revising complacent teaching practices. Approaching coaching with open-ended questions and allowing teachers to guide change was the most effective, according to the C1 and C2 focus group data.

Leveraging Incentives. The QRIS Pilot coaching to benefit was the supplies incentives' collaborative use. After the first ECERS-3 assessment and assigning goals, coaches supported their teacher mentees to buy new or reframing old materials to help a higher-quality learning environment. Most C1 and C2 gave feedback about how the materials in their classroom or how they were placed contributed to a lower test score. One C2 teacher explained that the new toys were her favorite part of the incentives package.

Definitely the toys, that would be the toys for me too. I never realized that I didn't have a whole math center. I had a little bit of math but most of them were just fine motor manipulatives, and when you get that other set of eyes being like, Well, that's just fine motor. Well that's just fine motor. Are you kidding me? I was like, Come on. So I actually flipped one of my cabinets and made a whole math center, so the money, most of my money went to the toys just for teaching the kids how to count, cause they didn't know how to count."

This teacher experienced a positive coaching collaboration in purchasing new manipulatives and learning new ways to utilize the items in her classroom. In addition to ECERS-3 Training, coaches continued to educate their mentors about high-quality and developmentally appropriate classroom practice. Teachers' feedback to these questions was as coded as *reflective practice* and *informed use of incentives.*

In addition to supporting teachers in purchasing and reutilizing classroom materials to encourage a high-quality learning environment, coaches leveraged incentives to help teachers increase their post-assessment scores. Participants in C1 and C2 perceived the ECERS-3 assessment as a stringent process with strict standards. The scoring process was stressful for teachers that did not understand the feedback or reasoning. Coaches acted as a mediator for explaining these scores and creating solutions to improve the post-assessment feedback. One teacher in the fall group explained that,

> I think the toy stipend was very, very beneficial in increasing our score. At least for mine personally. We got marked down a lot for not having enough of a certain thing or, you know, pieces were missing of a certain type of toy, and just by having the flexibility to go in and look at, okay, what did we score low on? What areas do we need toys? And being able to buy has helped our score tremendously.

Coaches supported their mentee teachers to increase scores by giving them ways to utilize the materials incentive. They also were a resource to generate and answer questions to guide teachers' learning. The coaching influence combined with incentive funds was effective in this study design to direct teachers in their choices. These variables worked together to help teachers increase their ECERS-3 post-assessment score, understanding high-quality and overall practice.

Teachers Perception of Control with ECERS-3. The predominant theme extrapolated from the four focus group transcripts in the context of the ECERS-3 assessment process was a *lack of control.* Both teachers and administrators perceived parts of the ECERS-3 assessment process as stressful and frustrating due to some subscales' criteria. Stakeholders indicated that they felt that they were unable to control or change their teaching environments according to the ECERS-3 assessor feedback. Many teachers described the assessment timeframe as a "little snapshot" that fails to represent their accurate classroom dynamic and quality. One C2 teacher commented, "I feel like three hours is hard to get an accurate snapshot of what's going on in the

classroom". The time limitation of the ECERS-3 observation component is the first limitation to teachers feeling in control over the QRIS Study duration.

The following code within the Teacher's Perception of Control in the context of this assessment is *environmental limitations.* Participating teachers vocalized stress about the permanent aspects in their classroom and centers as a whole that lowered their overall quality score. For example, a C1 teacher indicated

> It was just a little frustrating on my end knowing that no matter what I did, or how much I advocated or anything like that, there were things that I couldn't change. And I think that was the worst part about my experience, was stuff that nobody had control over. We're an old building. Yeah, we could use some paint, yeah we could use this. But there was nothing that we could do. And I think just having that in the back of my head was just a little bit of stress. But it wasn't anybody's fault.

A C2 teacher expressed concern that she was assessed based on the quality of aspects in her old building that she could not change personally. The participants understood that it was not in anyone's control, and this stress was due to the structure of the ECERS-3 assessment. Another C1 teachers shared anecdotes with implications of the theme control, such as,

I know that there were a lot of things in the building that I'm not able to change, like the bathroom not being in the classroom, the playground, so I was really nervous about scoring in that, because you can't change those pieces. So, having somebody come in and see those pieces and have that reflection in our scoring really had a lot of stress on me. So that piece, I also had a bee sting on the playground. So, you know those pieces, you come in, and you can't control those things. So those are pieces that can reflect your score even more. Regardless of other progress made with their coaches in their classrooms, teachers felt a sense of unease about the second ECERS-3 observation since they knew there were environmental and situational aspects of the criteria that they were unable to improve. A C2 teacher offered feedback for future implementation, "I think it [the assessment] should be just based on your classroom."

Teachers and administrators perceived *children's' behavior* as another uncontrollable stressor on their ECERS-3 score. Teachers describe their experiences of children misbehaving during observation as a negative, as well as a distraction from evolving their practice during the study. A C2 administrator explained "it was mentioned consistently in the observations about how children's behaviors took away from the assessment, and she narrated quite well what the teachers were doing with the redirecting the tools that they used, all that, but that took away from those things that we're looking to be scored." Teachers perceived children's' unexpected behaviors throughout the assessment timeframe to be a misrepresentative factor of their overall environmental quality.

Another way participants found this variable was confounding to achieving their goals is that it distracted teachers from implementing on their own time. Teachers with classrooms where behavior management is the priority explained that they had a more difficult time actively engaging in implementing changes. In reaction to a question about sustaining progress and goals in the long term, a C2 teacher explained, "in the back of my mind I have those ones that I still want to work on...I have a tough class this year. A lot of difficult behaviors, so a lot of my attention is that versus making sure I get my vocabulary in, making sure I have time to sit in the auto lab." She expressed a desire for a longer study duration since it took her longer to implement the changes she aimed for due to difficult children's' behavior. *Children's' behavior* appeared in both focus group transcripts as an uncontrollable assessment criterium that was a stressor for participating teachers.

Another dimension of the theme of control that frequently appeared in both sets of focus group data was coaches' redirecting approaches. After receiving assessor feedback, coaches

helped translate and problem-solve ways to make the changes. A C2 teacher explained how her

coach implemented an explicit strength-based approach when reflecting on her lower scores,

> She kind of pointed out, Let's work on changing the things that I can control. Because of the environment of my outdoor space, I can't change that. That's not in my control. So we concentrated on the things that they said that were important to me, and that's what we worked on. And she was very supportive of that.

> Coaches utilized constructive and strength-based communication based on the personality

of their teacher mentee. Some teachers reacted negatively to their assessor feedback, and others

understood the rigid nature of the ECERS-3 process. Administrators also perceived coaches as a

helpful influence on teachers who had a negative reaction. A C2 administrator noted

> There were two separate classrooms that she worked with at our location, and one of the teachers, at first, was defensive in her scores. And I thought [the coach] handled that very professional and kept turning the conversation around. She was always on point, she was factual, and was reminding this teacher, it's okay, some things will never be changed in this program based on philosophy or how your environment looks. For instance, our cubbies are going to be in our hallway. It is what it is, and there's nothing going to change, and we just have to accept that, and that's no fault of anyone's.

In this instance, the coach recognized that the teacher was very detail-oriented. Instead of always

using the same approach, this coach explained the factual reasoning behind her scores to

motivate her teacher mentee. Focus group C2 administration feedback indicated that teachers

would have perceived a higher sense of control if they had an "opportunity to connect with the

observer" and that a "larger round table for all of us to meet" would help to support teachers'

sense of authority throughout the pilot. AC2 teacher suggested that the assessor only based their

score on their classroom, and combined it into an overarching score to give teachers more direct

feedback. Overall, coaches supported teachers with individualized strategies to relieve stress that

the ECERS-3 assessment process produced to refocus on improving environmental learning

quality.

Communication and Administrative Involvement

Varying degrees of communication and involvement between and of program participants were frequently deliberated during focus group sessions. The theme of *communication* pertains to style, the definition of roles, and other hindrances of barriers or facilitators to success. Data indicates clear communication among teachers, administrators, coaches, and associate teachers was essential to achieving a high-quality score and an enjoyable program experience. Additionally, *involvement* appeared as a powerful theme in the context of administrators' roles. Administrative support throughout the study contributed to the overall success and sustainability of gains achieved. The program's design and structure in the context of the center size and the number of participants also became a barrier for some participants. Communication and involvement were closely interlinked as a facilitator of scoring highly after the QRIS evaluation process.

Administrative Involvement. According to transcript data and study design, administrators' role was to be a guiding resource for structure and overall quality improvement. Due to misconceptions, lack of training, and design of the centers, this role was frequently misconstrued during the pilot. Data indicates that administrators who clearly understood their role perceived themselves as an extra resource for teachers to utilize when their coaches were unavailable. Since coaches only made four formal visits to the site, administrators could fill that role when the expectation was clear to them. A C2 administrator reflected,

> I had one teacher that I had to remind her that these scores, whether a deficit, or a great strength, we were going to celebrate them, either way. And I wanted to learn, right alongside with her, this piece, and that I was depending on them, to then teach me about ECERS.

Teachers perceived administrators who utilized enthusiasm and expressed interest in their staff's progress as supportive. According to teacher feedback, administrative involvement was key to

making decisions making and helping teachers feel authoritative in their classroom. Teachers and

administrators stressed the importance of establishing communication between their teams

during this time in both C1 and C2. Both C1 and C2 participants agreed that more training and

planning time set aside before the first assessment would have been conducive to understanding

their roles more clearly. A C1 teacher explained, "It feels like from the get-go there just became

this unintentional divide, and I don't know if it was interpretation or the wording that we chose

when we were communicating the intent". An C2 administrator also expressed frustration and

confusion surrounding their relationships with teachers and unclear roles,

> I wasn't sure as well that they could make changes on some of the things that they got
> low scores for. Am I supposed to help talk to them about how they could make these
> changes? Do they need to do that on their own? Is their coach supposed to help them?
> That was a little confusing.

In the context of feeling under-involved with their staff, participants in both C1 and C2

expressed that they felt unsure about their role in the pilot teacher-coaching program. Since this

assessment was introduced as a study, administrators said that if this were a statewide mandatory

process, they would be more involved. This theme can be categorized within the overarching

code of miscommunication, breeding long-term outcomes in the study. Some administrators

expressed a sense of confusion surrounding their role due to precedents established at the

beginning of the study.

In addition to unclear roles, participants experienced difficulty interpreting assessment

scores and implementing high-quality classroom changes. Additional training and distribution of

parts at the beginning of the study could amend this long-term issue for participating

administrators. Administrators indicated that they felt at a loss as far as the technical ECERS-3

information goes when they could not train teachers. To illustrate the general perspective that

administrators reported on their involvement, a C2 administrator participant reported,

> Everything that happens in that program is my responsibility, so it would be just as important to me to make sure that the ECERS was taken care of as much as child care licensing and NAEYC, and I would treat it as the same standard. So, if it was a statewide process, then QRIS is a mandate, then I would be all in, all of the time.

Additional barriers to consistent administrative involvement were *center structure* in the context of size. Participants expressed varying feedback about the number of participating classrooms and the number of administrators on their team. Focus group evidence indicated teacher, administration, and coach relationships were more complicated in C1 due to the multi-site implementation of the QRIS Pilot. In contrast, administration in C2 expressed a higher sense of ease with communication between stakeholders since there was once a coach for multiple classrooms at one center. As a result, teachers and administrators in both cohorts agreed that ECERS-3 trained coaches would be a valuable resource aside from coaches, as noted by a C1 administrator

> The two programs that I had independently functioning based on the mode weres a very different experience from the multi-site perspective. I have one program that had three classrooms going through it together, and the benefit that they had was to be able to tag team and really share feedback and talk about it. They were all on the same page, and then I have one person that was completely out of the loop, but he's like, 'I learned about this.'

Depending on the participating center's structure, varying administrative support amounts are necessary for a conducive quality improvement process in the classrooms. Teamwork and reflection were valuable assets to the coaching model, especially when administrators perceived their center's structure as complicated due to implementation size. Teachers in the fall cohort whose administrators participated in the ECERS-3 training expressed a sense of security and support from their directors. According to a C2 teacher,

> My administrator had gone through the ECERS training before I was even chosen to do this, so having her eye come in when [the coach] couldn't be there, she would help me understand things and give me more feedback on what I could move and kind of other tweaks I could make that she knew I could do cause she is in my center every day.

Administrators trained on the QRIS process reported that they could participate with a high level of involvement and be perceived as supportive by their teaching staff. Administrators as alternative mentors were indicated by focus group data to benefit the overall cohesiveness of the ECERS-3 Assessment. In conclusion, according to focus group data, the general theme surrounding administrative involvement did not meet participants' expectations. Administrators felt unsure of their role and struggled to support teaching staff due to a divide in the process. Regardless, teachers perceived trained administrators as supportive resources during the quality improvement process.

Communication. Underscoring each finding from the focus group feedback is the theme of open communication. Participants perceived their success as a team to rely on communication strategies and stakeholders' motivation. Both administrators and teachers are held responsible for reporting to each other and working with coaches and associate teachers about changes in motion in their classrooms. Productive communication between stakeholders was perceived as the defining factor of success or failure within this program's program. Teachers and administration recognized teamwork and reflective time as a vehicle for success. For example, a C1 teacher participant explained, "I think being able to express what was working and what we needed to work on as a group, or what we think is valuable, really helped me. And I think those parts of the training were dead on. I like that." Feeling the support of other staff members who are also working to improve the quality of their classroom helped teachers feel encouraged. A C1 teacher explained that knowing that "somebody else didn't get it either. So, I'm not alone. So, I think the not alone part and having everybody together was a big piece to get this to go." Teachers saw the QRIS process as a smoother and enjoyable experience with the support of one another to make taking constructive criticism feel more palatable.

A C1 teacher explained that the support of her coach in conjunction with other stakeholders in the study was beneficial for her learning. When "everything's working together, it's all cohesive. It's the curriculum. It is coming together as well as being able to make the changes in the classroom. So, it's a great experience." To facilitate sustainable curriculum and practice improvements, teachers cited teamwork and reflection to be critical. Deliberating as a team allowed teachers to gather ideas from one another without the support of coaches or administrators, forging a sense of independence and confidence. Communication between stakeholders and open relationships among staff is necessary for this to take place.

Barriers to communication among teachers, administration, associate teachers, and coaches were consistently explained in the context of setting expectations. A C1 teacher explained,

> I don't think there were clear expectations. When we had our first meeting, it was you're welcome to participate, if the teachers want to allow that, so I was waiting for the teachers to allow that, but my understanding from them was that they didn't realize they could include us, so it just became a very quick segregation of *teachers and coaches versus admin.*

Sense of authority and roles of teacher mentors, whether it be teachers or administrators, was misconstrued during the training portion of the study in C1. Again, the communication style and the overall atmosphere were explained as critically established before the study began. Teachers expressed that this "divide" and misconceptions surrounding roles forged adverse long-term outcomes on their success in the study. A "segregation" among participants acted as a barrier to teamwork and open communication during the quality improvement process.

According to focus group data, other barriers to a meaningful teacher-coaching and assessment experience were communication with associate teachers. A large portion of teacher participants expressed frustration and stress surrounding the involvement of co-teachers in their classrooms during the process. Due to the structure of most Early Childhood Education centers,

lead teachers are usually accompanied by an associate teacher for support in their instruction and

classroom management as reflect by a C2 administrator:

> We had to work up a system to ensure that after there was the initial coaching with the lead teacher, that there was then time for the lead to then coach her associate teacher, because, essentially, they're being assessed as part of the environment as well. And if you have someone that's not understanding ECERS, that's going to affect the outcomes of the scores.

> In the assessment and quality scoring context, untrained co-teachers negatively affected

the outcomes for their lead teacher participants. As a result, administration and teachers both

expressed the importance of including co-teachers in the initial training to begin a positive and

collaborative experience. Another C2 administrator expressed,

> Our hardest part that we just had with this was only having one of the teachers being coached. That was our biggest challenge in our center, at least that classroom. The second teacher didn't feel like they were fully involved, even though the other teacher shared stuff with them, but she didn't get to meet with Abigail [her coach] and have all these discussions. And she read the full report, but she just didn't feel involved.

> Participant feedback detailed suggestions for the formal implementation of this study and

the importance of co-teacher training. Untrained co-teacher perpetuated the feeling of lack of

control for teachers, in turn breeding negative perceptions of the study. Co-teachers generally felt

authority in their classroom and being untrained caused miscommunication between teacher-

coaching teams in general. Associate teachers should agree to stay on board in their classrooms

for the duration of the QRIS process and have mandatory attendance in the training sessions.

Communication among participants in the study is essential for improving practice and the

quality of education in ECE classrooms.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to evaluate the qualitative themes among teacher and

administrator feedback after participating in a four-month-long individualized coaching and

ECERS-3 assessment process. Findings from both cohort focus groups concluded that

participants felt strongly about communication, training, and overall control during their experiences. Focus group transcripts were analyzed together due to paralleling feedback codes from teachers and administrators about their experiences. Overall, both teachers and administrators perceived a sense of improvement in the quality of their practice during and after their participation in the program, supporting the positive post-assessment scores. Qualitative results detailed facilitators and barriers to success within this process, which included interactions with coaches and ways to best prepare for the ECERS-3 post-assessment. This study supports a comprehensive quality improvement system for Early Childhood Education in the state of New Hampshire, and in turn, sustainable quality improvement. Across the board, negative perceptions of were derived from the short-term scoring aspect of the quality rating process. Participants perceived a lack of control around the process and unsure how to continue their journey to "high-quality." Future implementation should highlight the importance of long-term quality improvement rather than a short-term score.

Promoting Cohesive Participation

Coding results indicated that participants perceived training as one of the most critical stages of the individualized intervention process. During this time, teachers and administrators observed Reggio Emilio inspired ECE Classrooms at the UNH Child Study and Development Center and set a foundation for conducive understanding and communication during the study duration. Elaborating on these beneficial portions of training will support a low level of stress and a higher sense of teamwork for participants in future study designs. Teachers and administrators felt motivated by the high-quality knowledge they learned and observed during these sessions. Moving forward, ECERS-3 training and reflection time is recommended as mandatory for ECE teachers, associate teachers, and administrators.

The study design recommended that participants from each cohort voluntarily participate in one training session that included formal training on the ECERS-3 tool and observation time. Some teachers perceived this time as a critical inspiration for their high-quality practice and preparation for the ECERS-3 assessment. Predominate feedback indicated that missing participants from this training time created a "segregation" among teachers, co-teachers, and administrators during the rest of the study. Based on this data, anyone interacting with the ECERS-3 assessment and coaching process is recommended to attend a training session. This participation would allow stakeholders to understand the core concepts the contribute to evolving into a high-quality learning environment. Co-teachers and administrators would fully participate, feel professional, and support teachers' sense of control during this process.

In addition to mandatory attendance, the structure of training sessions should be revised based on transcript data. Thematic evidence indicates that participants perceived the observation and any whole-group discussion time to be facilitators for their success. As a result, training times could potentially be divided into separate sessions to elaborate on critical concepts. Formal lecture, observation, and whole-group discussion time are recommended for a sustainable duration to achieve a complete understanding of the ECERS-3 assessment tool. To support this comprehension, training facilitators should stress the rigid nature of this rating tool. For example, they were highlighting the truth of uncontrollable environmental aspects dictating some subscale scores during the assessment. Teachers perceived this lack of control as a highly stressful process highlighted that they wish could have been avoided. As a result, in-depth training is recommended to prevent adverse outcomes. Participants could benefit from hearing from past volunteers who could relate to their experience. Finally, professionals and coaches are advised to continue to stress the perspective of high-quality learning in the given environmental

circumstances. Teachers and administrators perceived adverse outcomes from uncontrollable aspects of their environments. Coaches and trainers should focus on the elements that teaching teams can control, such as student-teacher interactions or ways to reframe learning centers or materials. Participating teachers will learn to transform the environment they are surrounded by as high-quality learning takes on many forms.

In conclusion, future training design should center around an inclusive and in-depth approach. According to study evidence, participants would benefit from a longer training duration, mandatory participant attendance, and in-depth emphasis on essential ECERS-3 components. After the study, some teachers and administrators were disappointed that they were never informed of certain qualifiers. Additionally, reflection and whole-group discussion time is recommended to create a supportive and inclusive environment. Participants will be able to reflect and openly communicate to facilitate group success. Developing high-quality pedagogy is historically a team effort, as teachers work together to brainstorm best practices for their classrooms. Participants in future implementation should have channels for this communication, whether virtual or in-person, to bring center staff together as a conducive team. Teachers who felt isolated by miscommunication felt adverse outcomes on their post-assessment scores. Developing high-quality learning is mainly dependent on communication and ongoing education of novel channels for success.

Emphasis on Sustainable Quality Improvement

Participants' negative perceptions of the study design were mainly derived from emphasizing the scoring aspect of the QRIS process. A QRIS is meant to both rate and provide means for improvement. Based on the focus group evidence, future implementation of individualized coaching combined with an ECERS-3 assessment process should focus on

continuous growth rather than a short-term rating. As previously claimed, a score that represents high-quality in the context of a QRIS scale can increase the market demand for participating early childhood learning centers. Participants indicated that the rigid scoring criteria and assessment timeline both supported and interfered with developing a high-quality learning environment. The "snapshot" or short-term window allotted for observation was deemed as unrepresentative of their classroom by focus group participants. Future implementation should highlight the importance of sustainable growth after the duration of the study rather than working towards a short-term score goal.

Primary thematic evidence indicated that teachers and administrators perceived a lack of control around the assessment process as a consistent stressor throughout the individualized coaching program. By reframing this intervention to focus on the improvement aspect rather than rating, stressors derived by the assessment process may be mitigated. Based on this study, it is recommended that coaches should implement and advise based on the long-term nature of improvement within participating classrooms. Teachers and administrators could feel a higher sense of control and motivation to improve their learning environment. Additionally, the future implementation should structure mechanisms within the study for sustainable changes beyond the termination of intervention. For example, the administrative staff is recommended to shadow coaches during the goal-building process to be a sustainable resource. This would also be helpful when coaches are not present in the classroom or able to meet during the duration of the study. The administration would feel a sense of involvement if directly scaffolded into the process. Other mechanisms are recommended to inform statewide implementation and emphasize continuous growth over a short-term quality score. Viewing quality improvement as a process

rather than a goal will support teachers' perception of practice and potentially limit complacency in practice in the future.

Limitations

The limitations of this study remain within the sample size of the two participating cohorts. Miscommunications and understandings due to structural issues among staff could have been avoided with revisions but were informative for results. Teachers and administrators had misconceptions about scheduling, assessment, and general design components due to a lack of clarity in training. This will inform future implementation but distracted from fundamental interactions among stakeholders that could have taken place. Additionally, the study was limited by its performance before the COVID-19 outbreak. Early childhood centers of New Hampshire were operating differently in 2019 than what we see today. This bears the question; how do we translate high-quality intervention to distances and remote classrooms? Can coaches be trained on high quality in this context to support current teachers? How can we revise quality rating criteria to meet these needs? Significant components of high-quality defined learning take place in these settings today, but on a different scale. This study is not representative of knowledge that takes place today but can evolve into a future informed design.

Conclusion

This study highlighted the importance of communication and sustainability within individual teacher-coaching programs. Teachers and administrators felt that with the appropriate training, resources, and communication channels, they could reform their practice in preparation for the ECERS assessment. Teachers perceived the assessment as stress-inducing due to the lack of flexibility within the ECERS-3 Scoring process. As a result, it is recommended that the study objective is shifted to long-term improvement during future implementation, rather than

incentivizing with a score. Based on focus group data, teachers and administrative staff should be

equipped with high-level training and resources for sustaining improvement after intervention.

One way suggested among participants was to train administrators to act as coaches and support

changes in the classroom. These findings can be adapted to accommodate COVID-19

restrictions, as predominant themes will remain the same. For example, means of participating in

training could be transitioned to remote. In conclusion, achieving high-quality learning is defined

far beyond a score and should be perceived as a process in the state of New Hampshire

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Appendix I: Project Schedule

Classroom Visits (5 visits, total of 20 hours)

- Month 1- Review ERS/ goal setting– 4 hrs.

- Month 2 - observation/reflection – 4 hrs.

- Month 3- observation/reflection- 4 hrs.

- Month 4- observation/reflection- 4 hrs,

- Month 6/7 feedback from ERS-CQI plan- 4 hrs.

Video Recordings with Coach Feedback (2 exchanges)

- Month 4

- Month 2

Administrator Visits

- Month 1 -Admins participate classroom visit- 4 hrs.

- Month 2- Conversation with Admin to review trends throughout classroom/ goal set.

  2- hrs.

- Month 6/7- Admin to participate in Oct classroom visit- 4 hrs.

- Month 7- Conversation with Admin to review trends throughout classroom/ goal set. -

  2 hrs.

Regional Cohort Trainings

- Month 1- introduction/goal sharing- 3 hrs.

- Month 6- wrap up/ reflection- 3 hrs.

- TBD- Training at UNH- 6hrs.

Online Forum/Other communication

Weekly discussion/email exchanges question for teachers

Appendix II: Focus Group Questions

1.   What excites you about the goals you have set with your coach?

2.   Do you think the Early Childhood Environmental Rating Scales (ECERS) were an accurate reflection of your classroom?

3.   Was the information provided to you from the ECERS helpful for you and your coach to create your goals?

4.   What was the biggest challenge for you in receiving these scores?

5.   Did the goals you created with your coach help you with daily planning and implementation?

6.   What are the strengths of your class room and teaching?

7.   Tell us about some of the successes you have had that you believe is a result of participating in the coaching program.

8.   What advice do you have for the coaches to help them create a successful mentoring program?

9.   What would help you meet your goals?

10.   Describe your classroom learning environment. How does the physical layout support learning?

11.   How does it interfere with learning?

12.   How do you engage children in the learning process? Asking questions? What are your expectations for behavior in your classroom?

13.   What changes have you made to your teaching style that is a direct result of working with your coach?

14.   Is there anything else you would like us to know?