

Building Capacity Through Connection: Coaching in Early Learning and Care

by

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## Abstract

Many evidence-based programs have been established to foster and support the development of quality early education for children, however methods to transfer these programs to community practice have not been well established. Recently, coaching has emerged as an alternative to traditional professional development in an effort to transfer the benefits from research efficacy trials to community early childhood settings (Powell & Diamond, 2013). Although coaching has demonstrated effectiveness (e.g., Sheridan et al., 2010), few studies have explored the aspects of coaching that may have led to positive outcomes (Downer, 2013). The purpose of this qualitative study was to gain a deeper understanding of the practice of coaching within the context of ELC settings through an in-depth exploration of early educators' experiences of being coached. Seven female early educators were purposefully sampled and interviewed about their coaching experiences. Responses were audio-recorded and transcribed, and basic interpretative analysis guided the development of codes and categories. Early educators described coaching as a gradual process of opening up to the experience while navigating complex organizational components. Educators' description of the coaching experience also included reflections on the impact of coaching such as enhanced relationships, richer learning environments, child growth and development, and strengthened professional identities. The results from this study provide an understanding of the complex and unique environments experienced by early educators, serve to endorse coaching as a viable means of improving early education contexts, and link the process of being coached to the "intensely personal activity" (Merriam, 2020, p. ix) of learning in adulthood.

## **Dedication**

This thesis is dedicated to my father, Bill Oslie. Your curiosity and endless thirst for knowledge was inspiring. I will forever miss our conversations and your ability to find humour, even on the darkest days.

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## Table of Contents

<b><i>Abstract</i></b>	<b><i>ii</i></b>
<b><i>Dedication</i></b>	<b><i>iii</i></b>
<b><i>Acknowledgements</i></b>	<b><i>iv</i></b>
<b><i>Table of Contents</i></b>	<b><i>v</i></b>
<b><i>List of Tables</i></b>	<b><i>vii</i></b>
<b><i>List of Figures</i></b>	<b><i>viii</i></b>
<b><i>Chapter One: Introduction</i></b>	<b><i>1</i></b>
<b>Study Context</b>	<b><i>3</i></b>
<b>Statement of Purpose</b>	<b><i>4</i></b>
<b>Research Questions</b>	<b><i>4</i></b>
<b>Organization of Thesis</b>	<b><i>5</i></b>
<b>Use of Acronyms and Terms</b>	<b><i>5</i></b>
Acronyms	<i>5</i>
Terms	<i>6</i>
<b><i>Chapter Two: Review of the Literature</i></b>	<b><i>7</i></b>
<b>Early Childhood Development</b>	<b><i>7</i></b>
The Role of Early Experiences in Development	<i>7</i>
Social-emotional Development as Foundational to Other Aspects of Development	<i>9</i>
Fostering Child Development	<i>11</i>
Build Caregiver Skills.	<i>11</i>
Improve the Quality of the Broader Caregiving Environment.	<i>12</i>
Establish Clear Goals and Appropriately Targeted Curricula.	<i>13</i>
<b>Transferring Research to Early Learning and Care Settings</b>	<b><i>14</i></b>
Adult Learning and Knowles' Theory of Andragogy	<i>14</i>
Professional Development (PD) in Early Learning and Care	<i>16</i>
Coaching as a Professional Development Delivery Option	<i>17</i>
<b>Summary</b>	<b><i>18</i></b>
<b><i>Chapter Three: Methodology</i></b>	<b><i>19</i></b>
<b>Methodology</b>	<b><i>19</i></b>
<b>Background of Researcher</b>	<b><i>20</i></b>
<b>Method</b>	<b><i>22</i></b>
Study Context	<i>22</i>
Figure 1	<i>23</i>
Figure 2	<i>23</i>
Selection Criteria and Participant Recruitment	<i>23</i>
Data Collection	<i>24</i>
Data Analysis	<i>26</i>

<b>Trustworthiness of the Study</b>	<b>27</b>
<b>Ethical Considerations</b>	<b>28</b>
<b><i>Chapter Four: Findings</i></b>	<b>30</b>
<b>Participants</b>	<b>30</b>
<b>Research Question One: Themes</b>	<b>33</b>
Opening Up to Coaching	34
Organizational Components	38
<b>Research Question Two: Themes</b>	<b>40</b>
Building Connection	41
Nurturing Environment	48
Room to Grow	52
<b><i>Chapter Five: Discussion</i></b>	<b>56</b>
<b>Opening Up to Coaching: Progressing Through the Stages of Change</b>	<b>57</b>
<b>The Role of Organizational Drivers in the Coaching Experience</b>	<b>60</b>
<b>Building Competence and Strengthening Connections</b>	<b>61</b>
<b>Fostering Growth through More Nurturing Environments</b>	<b>63</b>
<b>Room to Grow</b>	<b>65</b>
<b>Limitations</b>	<b>68</b>
<b>Directions for Future Research</b>	<b>69</b>
<b>Implications for Practice</b>	<b>71</b>
<b>Conclusion</b>	<b>72</b>
<b><i>References</i></b>	<b>74</b>
<b><i>Appendix A</i></b>	<b>88</b>
<b>Research Participation Consent Form</b>	<b>88</b>
<b><i>Appendix B</i></b>	<b>91</b>
<b>Interview Protocol: ASaP Educators</b>	<b>91</b>

## List of Tables

**Table 1. Frequency of Educator Coaching Experiences Themes**  
39

**Table 2. Frequency of Educator Perceived Impact of Coaching Themes**  
45

**List of Figures**

<b>Figure 1. Pyramid Model</b>	<b>23</b>
<b>Figure 2. Practice-based Coaching Model</b>	<b>23</b>



## **Chapter One: Introduction**

Early development occurs in the first few years of life and lays the foundation upon which all other learning and behaviour are built (Centre on the Developing Child, 2016). The importance of the early years cannot be underestimated. We know from numerous longitudinal studies that deficits in early development, particularly social and emotional development, are associated with a wide range of adverse psychosocial outcomes later in life including lower levels of educational achievement, higher rates of unemployment, mental health problems, criminality, substance use behaviours, and intimate relationship difficulties (Campbell, 1995; Champion et al., 1995; Fergusson et al., 2005; McLeod & Kaiser, 2004; Morgan et al., 2002). Given the role that early development plays in shaping life trajectories, it is imperative that children are provided with the experiences and opportunities required for optimal growth.

In the Canadian context, there is a cause for concern regarding child development in the early years. Recently published reports from the Canadian Institute of Child Health (CICH; 2017), indicate that 1 in 4 Canadian children who enter Kindergarten do not meet age-appropriate developmental expectations in one or more areas of development, including cognitive, social, emotional, and physical development. Of these children, 43% demonstrate additional deficits in emotional development with 7.1% of children between the ages of two to five years reported to exhibit symptoms consistent with an emotional disorder (CICH, 2017).

Other trends in child development in recent decades have seen an increase in the number of families utilizing childcare services (Statistics Canada, 2012). Fifty-five percent of Canadians use some form of childcare arrangement; the most common form of childcare arrangements accessed by families is daycare or preschool (Statistics Canada, 2012), otherwise known as early learning and care (ELC). Additionally, 70% of children below the age of five spend time in care,

and 60% of children accessing ELC spend a minimum of 30 hours a week in care (Statistics Canada, 2012). Given these findings, it is evident that a large number of children are spending a significant amount of their early developmental years in care settings and these settings are now seen by researchers and policymakers as a natural and critical site to foster healthy development.

Accordingly, researchers in early childhood development have established a wide array of evidence-based models and practices to foster healthy development (e.g., Bierman et al., 2008; Hemmeter et al., 2016; Raver et al., 2008; Sheridan et al., 2010). However, too frequently a “train and hope” approach is adopted as a method to bring research to practice in which early childhood educators receive brief training and are then assumed to implement new practices reliably (Hemmeter et al., 2016). This approach alone produces little change in educator practices (Powell & Diamond, 2013). As an alternative, coaching has been identified as an effective mechanism with which to bring evidence-based practices to community settings (Artman-Meeker & Hemmeter, 2013; Barton et al., 2013; Metz et al., 2007). Coaching is described as a provision of ongoing collaborative support through activities such as identifying goals, action planning, focused observation, reflection, and feedback (Snyder et al., 2015). Coaching has been associated with changes in educators’ practices, increases in educators’ self-efficacy, and positive child outcomes (Barton et al., 2013; Hemmeter et al., 2016).

Although coaching has been demonstrated to be an effective mechanism to transfer research to practice, coaching within ELC settings is relatively new and there is much more to be understood regarding the experience of coaching (Downer, 2013). Gaining a deeper understanding of how educators experience coaching within ELC settings will contribute to our understanding of coaching as a whole and the potential it has to improve educators’ capacity to support all children.

## Study Context

*Getting Ready for Inclusion Today (GRIT)* is a non-profit organization that provides programs to support the inclusion of children with special needs in Alberta. *GRIT* initiated the *Access, Supports and Participation (ASaP)* project in May 2012 with the aim to: 1) Build early childhood educators' capacity to use evidence-based professional practices to create high quality, responsive environments, intentionally teach social and emotional development, and respond to challenging behaviours 2) Facilitate and foster navigation of cross-ministerial systems to access supports; 3) Create sustainability through leadership development, family engagement, and inclusive policy.

Researchers have developed a wide array of evidence-based programs and practices to foster healthy development within ELC settings (e.g., Bierman et al., 2008; Hemmeter et al., 2016; Raver et al., 2008; Sheridan et al., 2010). The program model adopted by *ASaP* is Fox and colleagues' (2011) evidence-based *Pyramid Model (PM)*<sup>1</sup> from the *Center for Social and Emotional Foundations for Early Learning (CSEFEL)*. The *PM* comprises four components that address the social and emotional needs of all young children, including those with challenging behaviour. The first two components (responsive relationships, high-quality environments) are considered the 'universal level' and include practices that would be implemented with all children in a classroom. The third component (targeted social-emotional supports) offers secondary 'preventive practices' designed to address the needs of children at risk for problem behaviour. The fourth component (intensive intervention) includes practices to support

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<sup>1</sup> The *PM* was initially introduced as the Teaching Pyramid Model (Fox et al., 2003) ; in 2019 it was rebranded by the developers as the 'Pyramid Model' (National Centre for Pyramid Model Innovations; NCPMI; [www.pyramidmodel.org](http://www.pyramidmodel.org))

individualized intervention' for children with the most severe and persistent challenging behaviour.

It is important to note that the *PM* is described as a framework, rather than a curriculum (Hemmeter et al., 2013). This indicates that the authors of the *PM* recognized that early learning centres differ from location to location and prevention and intervention efforts must adapt to these varying conditions. For this reason, the *PM* framework was ideal for adoption by *ASaP*, who recognized that the demographic characteristics of regions around Alberta vary considerably. This variability influences many factors such as early educator support needed to implement the program in each early childhood setting. The *PM* outlines a series of activities that support the implementation of the model including workshops, materials, implementation guides, and coaching. The role that coaching plays in the delivery of *ASaP* was the focus of the present study.

### **Statement of Purpose**

The purpose of this qualitative study is to gain a deeper understanding of how early educators experience coaching as a method to improve their ability to enhance the social and emotional development of children in early childhood settings. Specific research questions are as follows:

### **Research Questions**

1. What is the experience of being coached to improve teaching practices aimed at enhancing the quality of early learning and care?
2. What are the early educators' perceived impact of coaching to improve teaching practices aimed at enhancing the development of children?

## **Organization of Thesis**

This thesis is arranged into five chapters. The present chapter, chapter one, provides an overview of the thesis. Chapter two reviews the literature to provide a rationale for the study and describes the context in which the study was conducted. Chapter three describes the methodology, including a detailed description of the data collection, analysis, and ethical considerations. Chapter four provides a description of the participants and the themes that emerged from each of the two research questions. The final chapter presents a discussion of the implications of the findings and limitations of the study, as well as directions for future research.

## **Use of Acronyms and Terms**

In order to ensure clarity, a brief description of the terms used within this document will be outlined.

### ***Acronyms***

*ASaP*: The acronym *ASaP* is used when referring to the *Access, Support, and Participation* program delivered by *GRIT*.

ELC: Early learning and care (ELC) refers to childcare for children ages zero to 5 years, and may include preschool programming. The majority of the ELC centres included in this study were daycare centres that provided preschool programming.

*GRIT*: The acronym *GRIT* is used when referring to the community organization *Getting Ready for Inclusion Today*.

PD: Professional Development (PD) refers to facilitated teaching and learning experiences that are designed to support the acquisition of professional knowledge and skills.

*PM*: The acronym *PM* is used when referring to the *Pyramid Model for Supporting Social Emotional Competence in Infants and Young Children*: A program, adopted by *ASaP*, that

focuses on promoting the social, emotional, and behavioural outcomes of young children birth to five, reducing the use of inappropriate discipline practices, promoting family engagement, using data for decision-making, integrating early childhood and infant mental health consultation and fostering inclusion.

*TPOT*: The *Teaching Pyramid Observation Tool (TPOT)* is a classroom observation measure used to examine the absence or presence of Pyramid Model practices.

### ***Terms***

**Coach**: The term coach is used in two ways: 1) in reference to the coach, as a role, (i.e., people who assist others to analyze their performance and who provide mentoring and support), and 2) in reference to the *ASaP* Coaches within the study. To distinguish between the general and specific use of the term coach, the author has chosen to capitalize the term when referring directly to the participants' Coach.

**Educator**: The term educator is used in two ways: 1) in reference to staff within ELC centres that work directly with children, and 2) in reference to the participants in the study. To distinguish between the general and specific use of the term educator, the author has chosen to capitalize the term when referring directly to the Educators participating in this study.

**Researcher**: In this document, the researcher is referred to as the researcher and the author.

## **Chapter Two: Review of the Literature**

This chapter reviews the relevant literature to provide a rationale for the research. The chapter begins with a brief overview of the activities of early development drawing heavily on the research synthesized by the Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University, established by Jack Shonkoff in 2006. Particular attention is paid to the importance of the ELC setting in fostering healthy social-emotional development. A review of coaching as a professional development delivery option will be offered and grounded in adult learning theory. Finally, the literature review is summarized to provide a rationale for the present study.

### **Early Childhood Development**

#### ***The Role of Early Experiences in Development***

Early childhood development refers to a period within the first few years of life in which a child undergoes significant physical, cognitive, social, and emotional growth (Centre on the Developing Child, 2016). Early childhood is largely understood within developmental research as a critical time in human development as it involves periods of rapid and significant neurological growth and structuring. We have come to understand that neurological development lays the foundation for all other learning and behaviour (Centre on the Developing Child, 2016). During the first few years of life, the brain undergoes a process called synaptic proliferation in which new synapses, or neurological pathways, are produced at an astounding rate (Centre on the Developing Child, 2016; Tierney & Nelson, 2009). These pathways enable communication throughout the brain and essentially form the biological basis for learning and development (Tierney & Nelson, 2009). Following the rapid overproduction of synapses, a process called synaptic pruning occurs in which inactive or weak synapses are eliminated, enabling more active brain circuits to become stronger and more efficient (Casey et al., 2005; Centre on the

Developing Child, 2016; Pfefferbaum et al., 1994). The process of synaptic pruning is primarily environmentally driven and largely dependent on individual experiences (Centre on the Developing Child, 2016). In other words, an individual's environment and an individual's interactions with their environment activate synapses in relevant regions of the brain subsequently strengthening these connections and ensuring their survival while unused or weak synapses are eventually eliminated. Therefore, the developing brain is shaped by an individual's early experiences (Centre on the Developing Child, 2016). Importantly, research has identified that neurological functioning is built from the bottom up, with more complex connections being built upon simpler connections. In other words, the brain relies on the acquisition of simpler skills and behaviours upon which to build more complex ones, further emphasising the role early experiences play in shaping the basis of all other learning and development (Centre on the Developing Child, 2016).

Early experiences shape the neurological framework that is the very basis of physical, cognitive, behavioural, social, and emotional functioning. Social-emotional development, for example, is interconnected with the development of the prefrontal cortex, an area of the brain responsible for higher-order processes such as executive functioning and self-regulation (Casey, et al., 2005; Centre on the Developing Child, 2016). As the prefrontal cortex is largely responsible for higher-order processes, the prefrontal cortex undergoes synaptic proliferation and pruning for longer than other areas in the brain, with the most developmental activity occurring between the ages of two and six years (Casey, et al., 2005; Thompson & Nelson, 2001). The nature of this process suggests that the window for early experiences to shape the development of the prefrontal cortex is open for longer than it is for lower-order systems, with experiences between the ages of two and six having higher potential to shape its development (Centre on the



Developing Child, 2016). The higher-order processes operating within the prefrontal cortex rely on the integration and regulation of information transmitted through neurological pathways from lower-level systems (e.g., sensory systems) in order to acquire and perform more complex skills such as the ability to sustain attention, follow rules, set goals, solve problems, and control impulses (Centre on the Developing Child, 2016). Early experiences that disrupt the development of these neurological pathways and subsequently the development of these higher-order processes (e.g., self-regulation and executive functioning), weaken the foundational capacities essential to developing social-emotional competence (Centre on the Developing Child, 2016).

### ***Social-emotional Development as Foundational to Other Aspects of Development***

Social-emotional competence has been defined in a variety of ways over the years and there is no consensus within the literature regarding one clear definition (CASEL, 2015; Denham, et al., 2014; Humphrey, et al., 2011; Izard, 2011; Jones & Bouffard, 2012; Rose-Kraznor, 1997). Although definitions and frameworks vary, it is evident that social-emotional competence is a multidimensional construct that includes skills related to self-awareness (i.e., the ability to recognize one's emotions), self-management (i.e., the ability to regulate one's emotions), social awareness (i.e., the ability to take the perspective of others), relationship skills (i.e., the ability to establish healthy relationships), and responsible decision making (i.e., the ability to make constructive decisions) (CASEL, 2015; Denham, et al., 2014; Jones & Bouffard, 2012). As such, social-emotional competence can be viewed as the acquisition of higher-level skills that rely heavily on the development of the prefrontal cortex in early childhood (Centre on the Developing Child, 2016).

Longitudinal studies of children indicate that deficits in social and emotional development are associated with a wide range of adverse psychosocial outcomes later in life including lower levels of educational achievement, higher rates of unemployment, mental health problems, criminality, substance use behaviours, and intimate relationship difficulties (e.g., Jones et al., 2015; MacCann, et al., 2020; Moffitt et al., 2011; Robson et al., 2020). For example, Jones et al. (2015) reported statistically significant associations between social-emotional skills in kindergarten and key young adult outcomes across multiple domains. Early social-emotional competence was positively associated with the completion of high school on time, the acquisition of a college degree, full-time employment, and stable employment (Jones, et al., 2015). Furthermore, social-emotional competence in kindergarten was negatively associated with the number of years of special education services received, the number of repeated grades through high school, the receipt of public assistance, involvement with police, and substance abuse behaviour (Jones et al., 2015).

Results from Jones et al.'s (2015) study are consistent with findings from recent meta-analyses examining social-emotional skills in early childhood and its prediction of later academic, psychological, social, and physical outcomes (e.g., Compas et al., 2018; MacCann, et al., 2020; Robson, et al., 2020; Smithers, et al., 2018). For example, Robson and colleague's (2020) meta-analysis reported that higher levels of self-regulation in early childhood were associated with higher levels of academic achievement and social competence, and a decreased likelihood of long-term unemployment and risk of peer victimization later in life. Robson and colleagues (2020) also reported that early self-regulation skills are related to fewer externalizing problems (i.e., overt disruptive behaviours such as physical aggression, stealing, destruction of property, etc.), fewer internalizing problems (i.e., internal psychological states related to

depression and anxiety, among other things), and a decreased likelihood of substance abuse later in life. Most significantly however, Robson and colleagues (2020) found that poor self-regulation at age seven can predict aggressive behaviour, mental health issues, and reported symptoms of physical illness as far as 30 years later in life.

### ***Fostering Child Development***

Understanding that early development is largely shaped by early experiences and that these experiences serve to lay the foundation for all other learning and development later in life emphasises the need to understand what type of experiences promote and impede healthy development. Research has demonstrated that negative and aversive environments in which children are not well-nourished, are exposed to toxic substances, or deprived of appropriate sensory, emotional, and social experiences, to be associated with deficits in children's development (Centre on the Developing Child, 2016). Alternatively, children exposed to growth-promoting environments with adequate nutrition, rich learning experiences, and nurturing interactions with responsive caregivers has been associated with healthy development (Centre on the Developing Child, 2016). With this understanding, The Centre on the Developing Child (2016) outlined five key characteristics aimed at enriching the child's environment that have been associated with positive developmental outcomes: 1) Build caregiver skills; 2) Match interventions to sources of significant stress; 3) Support the health and nutrition of children and mothers before, during, and after pregnancy; 4) Improve the quality of the broader caregiving environment, and; 5) Establish clear goals and appropriately targeted curricula. Only the first, fourth, and fifth characteristics are relevant to this research and are elaborated on below.

**Build Caregiver Skills.** Significant attention has been paid to the importance of the caregiver-child relationship and its role in shaping child development (Centre on the Developing

Child, 2016). The caregiver-child relationship is central to a child's development and is characterized by reciprocal, "serve and return" interactions in which children reach out for interaction and adults who are responsive 'return' the child's 'serve' with similar engagement as the "serve and return" behaviour continues (Centre on the Developing Child, 2016, p. 8). Research has demonstrated that when an adult's responses, or 'returns', are unreliable, inappropriate, or absent, they have the potential to disrupt development and impair later learning and behaviour (Broekhuize, et al., 2016; Burchinal, et al., 2008; Centre on the Developing Child, 2016). Furthermore, 'serve and return' interactions are not isolated to the parent-child relationship; rather, children benefit when they occur between the child and all adults who play important roles in their lives, including teachers. The first characteristic of enriching the child's environment, 'Build Caregiver Skills', highlights the importance of the caregiver-child relationship and the need to strengthen caregiver skills essential for providing the stability and responsiveness that fosters healthy child development. One of the ways caregiver skills are strengthened is through "the provision of professional development for teachers and caregivers", and more specifically professional development conducted within a "trusting relationship and the ongoing availability of an on-site mentor" (Centre on the Developing Child, 2016, p. 20).

**Improve the Quality of the Broader Caregiving Environment.** Research has emphasised the importance of establishing a safe, stable, and nurturing environment in promoting children's development (Centre on the Developing Child, 2016; Lehl, Kluczniok, & Rossbach, 2015; Schmitt, et al., 2018). More specifically, language-rich environments with warm and responsive caregiver-child interactions and learning experiences situated within settings that are structured and safe have been identified as key factors for high quality childcare (Broekhuizen, et al., 2016; Centre on the Developing Child, 2016; Hamre, et al., 2014). With a

growing number of children accessing ELC, significant attention has been directed towards assessing and improving the quality of the early learning environment (Broekhuizen, et al., 2016; CASEL, 2015; Conners-Burrow, et al., 2017; Hamre, 2014; Hemmeter, et al., 2016; Nix, et al., 2016; Oberle, et al., 2015; Phillips et al., 2009; Pianta, et al., 2005, Raver, et al., 2008; Schindler, et al., 2015). In spite of these efforts, the quality of ELC environments has been demonstrated to vary greatly, with studies consistently reporting 40-50% of early learning centres' qualities insufficient to support healthy development (Clifford, et al., 2005; Goelman, et al., 2000; Howes, et al., 2008; Palsha & Wesley, 1998; Schmitt, et al., 2018). The recognition that establishing growth-promoting environments contributes to optimal early development has led to increased efforts to understand how these environments can be improved.

**Establish Clear Goals and Appropriately Targeted Curricula.** Research has demonstrated that children's development is best supported when goals are clearly defined and a framework or intervention designed to achieve those goals is implemented (Centre on the Developing Child, 2016). Fortunately, a wide range of evidence-based frameworks and interventions have been developed to support and foster children's social-emotional development in the classroom setting (CASEL, 2015; Hamre, et al., 2014; Hemmeter, et al., 2016; Nix, et al., 2016; Kruglaya, 2014; Strain & Bovey, 2011). Although differences in implementation, structure, and content exist, the vast majority of classroom interventions and frameworks target social-emotional development through: 1) the development of responsive, nurturing teacher-child relationship; 2) the establishment of secure, stable, and rich learning environments, and; 3) the implementation of instructional practices targeting social-emotional skills. Notably, these common characteristics are in line with the key characteristics outlined by the Centre on the Developing Child (2016) as vital for fostering healthy child-development (i.e., to build caregiver

skills, improve the quality of the broader caregiving environment, and establish clear goals and appropriately targeted curricula).

Fox and colleagues' (2003) *Pyramid Model (PM)* is one example of the many evidence-based interventions and frameworks developed to target social-emotional skills in children. The *PM* is a framework that provides guidance to educators on using appropriately targeted behaviour supports and instructional practices that are strongly situated in research (Hemmeter et al., 2013). The *PM* has been associated with improvements in educator practices, gains in child social skills, and reductions in children's challenging behaviours (Artman-Meeker & Hemmeter, 2013; Artman-Meeker et al., 2014; Fox, et al., 2011; Hemmeter, et al., 2016).

Despite curricular innovations provided through research efforts, significant variability continues to exist in the quality of ELC centres in community settings. Thus, researchers have begun to turn their attention to how to best transfer successful research efforts into practice. The efficacy of the professional development practices employed to transfer evidence-based practices to community settings has been called into question (Halle et al., 2013; Howes et al., 2012).

### **Transferring Research to Early Learning and Care Settings**

#### ***Adult Learning and Knowles' Theory of Andragogy***

Adult learning theories describe the conditions under which processes of learning are optimized (Merriam et al., 2007). Knowles' (1980) theory of andragogy was one of the earliest theories to differentiate adult learning from pedagogy and remains one of the most well-known and robust theories in adult-learning today (Merriam, et al., 2020). Knowles' (1980) theory of andragogy was originally based on four assumptions about the adult learner, however Knowles (1984) later expanded his theory to include a total of six assumptions. Knowles' (1980) first assumption emphasises the autonomous nature of the adult learner and suggests adults learn

more effectively when learning is self-directed. Second, Knowles (1980) acknowledges the accumulation of experience over time and claims that this “growing reservoir” (Merriam et. al., 2020, p. 118) serves as a resource for learning. Third, Knowles (1980) claims that an adult’s readiness to learn is closely tied to the developmental tasks of their social role. Fourth, adults learn more effectively when the content is relevant and immediately applicable; therefore, learning is optimized when it is problem-centred and applicable as opposed to subject-centred and theoretical. Knowles’ (1984) later two assumptions claim that learning is optimized when the adult is internally motivated to learn and clearly understands the purpose of their learning.

It is evident that Knowles viewed these assumptions as foundational blocks around which to centre developmental programs for adults. For example, when looking at the first assumption, recognizing the self-directed nature of the adult learner emphasises learning environments that encourage learners to take an active role in the learning process, including self-planning, self-monitoring, and self-evaluation (Merriam, et al., 2020). By acknowledging accumulated experience as a resource in his second assumption, Knowles emphasises experiential techniques, practical application, and collaboration in learning (Merriam et. al., 2020; Thompson & Deis, 2004). Knowles’s third assumption around readiness to learn emphasises the importance of assessment and feedback in ensuring the learner is achieving the desired goals and that the content is developmentally appropriate within their current role. The fourth assumption emphasises the importance of content that is immediately relevant and applicable to each individual learner. Knowles’ (1984) last two assumptions emphasise the importance of understanding the learner’s goals and motivations while ensuring the learning process and rationale are clearly outlined.

### ***Professional Development (PD) in Early Learning and Care***

PD has been defined as “facilitated teaching and learning experiences that are transactional and designed to support the acquisition of professional knowledge, skills, and dispositions as well as the application of this knowledge in practice” (National Professional Development Center on Inclusion, 2008, p. 3). PD is delivered in a wide variety of formats with the most common delivery formats consisting of conferences and workshops, in-service training, online instruction, professional learning communities, and coaching (State et al., 2019). PD in early childhood education is most commonly delivered through “one-shot” training formats such as conferences and workshops, in which participants engage in intensive professional development activities over a short period of time (i.e., often one to three days) without additional follow-up or support (Snyder, et al., 2015; State, et al., 2019). Yet, there is robust literature indicating that PD is most effective when it consists of ongoing support and activities that are sustained over time (Albritton, et al., 2018; Alkon, et al., 2003; Birman, et al., 2000; Bransford, et al., 2000; Buysse, et al., 2009; Centre on the Developing Child, 2016; Darling-Hammond, et al., 2017; Dunst, 2015; Schachter, et al., 2019; Snyder, et al., 2015; State, et al., 2019). Research also indicates that PD activities should be content-focused, centering on specific curricula, interventions, or teaching practices as opposed to general teaching methods such as lesson planning (e.g., Artman-Meeker, et al., 2015). Additionally, PD activities are most effective when they provide opportunities for the learner to both observe and practice the skills being taught within the environment where the skills are to be implemented (e.g., Pianta & Hamre, 2020). PD activities should also be learner-centred with the provision of ongoing supportive visits from a skilled facilitator, allowing opportunities for the learner to reflect on and receive performance-based feedback (e.g., Darling-Hammond, et. al., 2017). Finally, the



development of collaborative relationships not only between the learner and their facilitator but also between the learner and their peers has been identified as an essential factor in effective PD (e.g., Buysse, et. al., 2009). These key features of professional development are in-line with Knowles' theory of andragogy and endorse a theory informed approach to adult learning.

### ***Coaching as a Professional Development Delivery Option***

PD formats continue to evolve over time as new research comes to light and technology advances. More recently, coaching as a PD format has emerged within the literature as an effective means for enhancing educator's implementation of evidence-based practices. Coaching has been defined by the NAEYC (2012) as an ongoing relationship-based process led by an expert to build a practitioner's capacity for specific professional dispositions, skills, and behaviours. In early childhood, Rush and Shelden (2011) were among the first to describe key characteristics of effective coaching: (1) Joint Planning: the educator and coach jointly decide on the agenda for the visit; (2) Observation: the coach observes the educator's implementation of evidence-based strategies; (3) Action/Practice: opportunities for the educator to practice targeted practice with side by side support or modeling from the coach; (4) Reflection: the coach facilitates educator reflection with open-ended questions or comments on practices; (5) Feedback: the coach provides the educator with supportive or constructive feedback. It is evident that Rush and Sheldon (2011) draw heavily on adult learning principles and research-informed practices to describe the key characteristics of effective coaching.

In educational settings, coaching has been associated with changes in educators' practices, (Barton et al., 2013) increases in educators' self-efficacy, (Barton et al., 2013) and positive child outcomes, (Hemmeter et al., 2016). Although coaching has been demonstrated to be an effective tool in transferring evidenced based practices to real-world practice, coaching

within ELC settings remains relatively new and there is much more to be understood regarding the coaching experience (Downer, 2013). A literature review by Artman-Meeker and colleagues (2015) concluded that, “One critical component of coaching that has not been systematically examined in the research is the collaborative partnership between the coach and the coachee. This partnership is likely critical to the fidelity and quality of the implementation of coaching” (p. 193). Gaining a deeper understanding of how early educators experience coaching within ELC settings will contribute to our understanding of coaching as a whole and the potential it has to improve educators’ capacity to support all children in early childhood settings.

### **Summary**

In summary to this section, it has been well established that experiences in the early childhood period are important for life outcomes. Early experiences shape the neurological foundation essential for healthy child development, including social-emotional development. Deficits in social-emotional development have been linked to a wide array of adverse psychosocial outcomes later in life. Early childhood settings are now seen as an ideal site to foster healthy child development and as such, researchers have established many promising practices that enhance child development in these settings. Transferring these practices to ELC settings requires a thoughtful approach to professional development that is grounded in adult learning principles. Coaching is seen as a PD delivery option that emphasises experiential techniques, practical application, and collaboration in learning. The present research will explore: 1) early educators’ experience of being coached and, 2) their perceived impact of coaching to improve teaching practices aimed at enhancing the development of children.

### **Chapter Three: Methodology**

This chapter presents the study design used to explore early educators' experiences of being coached. The chapter begins with an introduction to basic qualitative research and an explanation as to why this methodology was best suited to explore the research questions posed in this study. Subsequent sections outline the background of the researcher, the context of the study, the selection of participants, procedures for data collection and analysis, and strategies used to ensure trustworthiness of the study findings. Finally, ethical considerations for this study are described.

#### **Methodology**

This study relied upon a qualitative methodology to facilitate exploration of early educators' experiences being coached. Qualitative research is most appropriate when a researcher seeks to understand a process and shed light on thus far unspecified contextual variables (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). As the current study's aim was to deepen our understanding of coaching, a process to build educators' capacity to implement evidence-based practices, a qualitative methodology was utilized. In particular, a basic qualitative research design was employed to guide the sampling, data collection, and analyses for this study. Basic qualitative research is a method that permits the researcher to gain an understanding of people's experiences through uncovering their interpretations and the meaning they ascribe to these events (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). A central characteristic of basic qualitative research is social constructivism; the belief that reality is socially constructed through individuals' interpretations of their interactions with others and through historical and cultural norms operating within the individual (Creswell, 2013; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Therefore, basic qualitative research assumes there is not one observable reality, rather multiple realities as individuals construct

subjective meanings from their interactions and experiences (Creswell, 2013; Merriam & Tisdell 2016). The goal of basic qualitative research is to uncover and interpret the meanings constructed to understand how individuals make sense of their lives and their experiences (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Therefore, basic qualitative research was deemed appropriate to permit the author to gain a deeper understanding of coaching in ELC through uncovering the constructed meanings and experiences of educators being coached.

### **Background of Researcher**

Inherent to qualitative research is the reliance on the researcher as the primary instrument for data collection and analysis. Therefore, it is essential that the researcher reflects on their biases, dispositions, and assumptions and considers the role these beliefs and perspectives play in shaping the collection and interpretation of data (Merriam & Grenier, 2019; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Additionally, it is just as important that the researcher clarify these biases and perspectives to the reader in order for the reader to understand how the researcher's perceptual lens may have influenced the conduct and conclusions of the study (Merriam & Grenier, 2019; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Therefore, the present section will clarify the researchers' background and perceptual lens.

The author has completed an undergraduate degree in Psychology and is currently pursuing graduate studies in the field of school and clinical child psychology. The author has experience working with preschool-aged children as both an educational assistant and an interventionist. Each of these roles involved adopting and implementing evidence-based practices and interventions in both ELC and one to one (i.e., home or clinical) settings. Additionally, these roles included the provision of ongoing and continuous support from relevant professionals (e.g., behavioural consultant, psychologist, speech and language pathologist, etc.).

The author's experience in these roles and settings provided insight around the complexities of transferring evidence-based practices to ELC settings, and the challenges inherent to working with children (i.e., the navigation of various relevant relationships). Additionally, these experiences with children sparked an interest in early social-emotional development and motivated the author to pursue further education and research experience in the field of school and child psychology. During graduate studies, the author had the opportunity to work collaboratively with elementary, junior high, and high school educators in an effort to support students' development within the classroom. This experience once again emphasized the challenges faced when transferring evidence-based practices to the classroom setting and served to highlight the importance of establishing a trusting and collaborative relationship with educators to facilitate change.

Finally, the author would like to acknowledge extensive experience in high level athletics. The author has competed in provincial, national, and collegiate level championships and was committed to a nationally competitive sport team. It would be amiss not to recognize the role a lifetime within competitive sports plays in the author's conceptualization and understanding of the experience of being coached and what it is to be a coach. According to Rush and Shelden (2011) who wrote one of the most commonly referenced books on coaching in early childhood, *The Early Childhood Coach Handbook*, "coaching is most commonly associated with its use in athletic settings, in which the coach instructs and motivates the athletes and calls the plays that they should implement" (p. 2). In athletics, to this author, the success of coaching was moderated by the degree to which the coach established a trusting relationship with the players. As in the transactional view of development (Sameroff & McKenzie, 2003), the author acknowledges that coaching relationships are not immediate but rather they are dynamic,

they evolve and they are impacted by the changing characteristics of the player and the corresponding changes and response of the coach, all of which are situated within an-ever changing environment. Development occurs within these continuous dynamic interactions within the social context (Sameroff, 2010).

## **Method**

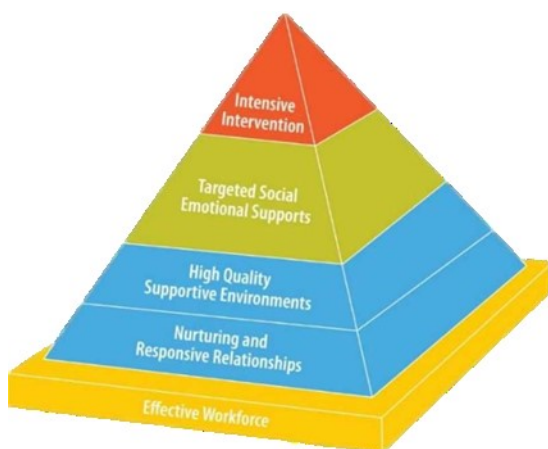
### ***Study Context***

The present study is situated within a larger study and is a collaboration with the community organization *GRIT*. Through its *ASaP* program, *GRIT* has adopted the PM framework and has been coaching educators to implement it in ELC centres across Alberta for the past eight years. The *PM* comprises four tiers of implementation practices that address the social and emotional needs of all young children, including those with challenging behaviour (Figure 1). The first two tiers (responsive relationships, high-quality environments) are considered the ‘universal level’ and include practices that would be implemented with all children in a classroom. The third tier (targeted social-emotional supports) offers secondary ‘preventive practices’ designed to address the needs of children at risk for problem. The fourth, and last, tier (intensive intervention) includes practices to support ‘individualized intervention’ for children with the most severe and persistent challenging behaviour. *ASaP* is training educators to implement the Pyramid model through the provision of practice-based coaching (Figure 2). Practice-based coaching is described as a provision of ongoing collaborative support through activities such as identifying goals, action planning, focused observation, reflection, and feedback (Snyder et al., 2015). Educators participating in the *ASaP* program are intended to receive in-person coaching twice monthly, however this frequency has been known to vary depending on individual, and organizational and logistical factors that impact the scheduling of coaching sessions. In total,

seven educators and eight coaches participating in *ASaP* were sampled and interviewed regarding their experiences with coaching in 2016. For the scope of this study, only the educator interviews were analysed and interpreted to address the research question.

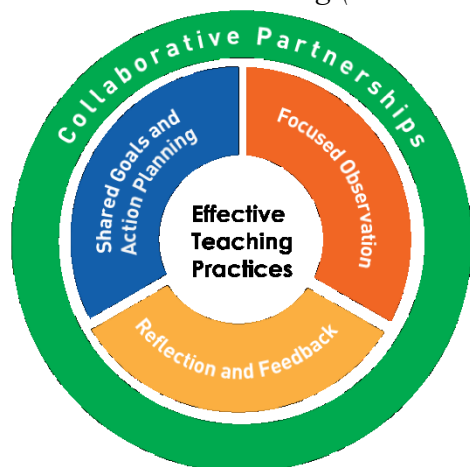
**Figure 1**

*Pyramid Model (National Centre for Pyramid Model Innovations, n.d.(a))*



**Figure 2**

*Practice-based Coaching (National Centre for Pyramid Model Innovations, n.d.(b))*



### ***Selection Criteria and Participant Recruitment***

Purposeful sampling was utilized to gain an in-depth understanding of coaching in ELC. Purposeful sampling is not random, rather it allows for the researcher to select a sample of information-rich cases, cases that directly reflect the purpose of the study and from which the

most can be learned (Merriam & Grenier, 2019; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The inclusion criteria for participants were as follows: (1) educator, (2) employed within early learning and care, and (3) previous or current participation in *ASaP*. The participating Educators were female and ranged in age from 25 to 55 years. Two of the seven Educators represented visual minorities, while the other five Educators did not. The Educators' experience in ELC ranged from three to 25 years and their level of education ranged from early childhood diplomas to a graduate degree. At the time of the interview, two Educators had been participating in *ASaP* for a year or less, one Educator had been participating for two years, two Educators had been participating for three years, and another two Educators had been participating for four years.

Participants were recruited with the distribution of a package consisting of a letter outlining the study and a consent form to be completed by interested individuals (Appendix A). The study information packages were distributed in-person at two *GRIT* in-service events and via emails to the directors of participating ELC centres. Interested individuals provided their contact information either in-person (i.e., at *GRIT* events) or via the email provided on the study information letter. Interested individuals were then contacted via email and a date and time to conduct the interview was arranged.

### ***Data Collection***

Educators participated in a one-to-one, semi-structured interview of approximately 45 to 75 minutes in length. All interviews were conducted in person from May to June 2016. Interviews were held at each Educators' respective ELC centre in a private room.

An interview protocol was developed in collaboration with the larger project research team and the *ASaP* leadership team (i.e., *GRIT* Executive Director and *ASaP* Project Manager) that consisted of 13 open-ended questions and corresponding prompts designed to stimulate



Educators' reflection on the coaching provided within *ASaP* (Appendix B). Of the 13 questions, two questions (numbers 10 and 11) were not included in data analysis because they involved another aspect of the study (i.e., Navigational Supports provided to Educators). All participants received a copy of the interview protocol via email prior to their scheduled interview. This permitted Educators the opportunity to reflect on the questions and their responses decreasing the likelihood of things being left unsaid. Although member checks were not conducted due to time constraints, the provision of the interview protocol to participants a-priori may have increased the likelihood that their responses were reflective of their actual experiences, as all participants came prepared to the interview with some form of hand-written notes and/or drawings.

Interviews began with an introduction and a review of informed consent regardless that written consent had been obtained prior to the interview. Once informed consent was obtained a brief review of the interview process was conducted in which participants were informed of their right to decline a response or cease the interview for any reason, at any point in time. Participants were then asked to engage in a "warm-up" activity that requested them to reflect on what images or words come to mind when they thought about *ASaP*. This less structured activity provided an opportunity for the researcher to develop rapport and delivered insight around meaningful aspects of the participant's coaching experiences. All interviews were audio-recorded; in addition, the researcher paraphrased and documented participants' responses and created field notes of the researchers' own comments and impressions during and after each interview. Upon completing the interview, participants were shown appreciation for their involvement in the study with a University of Alberta water bottle and a hand-written thank you note. Participant demographic information was obtained from digital surveys completed as part of the larger study within which this study is situated.

### ***Data Analysis***

The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. All interviews were uploaded into *NVivo 12 Pro*, a computer software program designed to facilitate qualitative data analysis. Basic qualitative data analysis is primarily inductive and comparative. As such, the researcher makes meaning out of the data (i.e., codes) and continuously compares codes and themes to identify similarities, differences and reoccurrences (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The author began with a preliminary exploratory analysis of the data which consisted of reading through each interview transcript in its entirety and noting general comments, observations, and queries in the margins. This exploratory analysis was discussed with another researcher engaged in the study for peer review. This process allowed the author to gain a general sense of the data as a whole before breaking it into parts (Creswell, 2012). Next, the author conducted open-coding, a process of line-by-line coding which involved identifying and labeling units of data (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Units of data are segments of text that reveal information relevant to the study and are the smallest piece of information that can stand by itself (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Each unit of text was labeled with a code that described its meaning. Following open-coding, the author engaged in axial coding in which codes were compared to each other and grouped, based on a shared quality or meaning, into categories (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Categories are conceptual elements that capture many units of data (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The categories were further compared and grouped in a similar manner creating superordinate and subordinate categories. In the final stage of analysis, the author engaged in selective coding, a process of identifying core categories, or themes, that reflected recurring patterns that characterized the data (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Merriam &

Tisdell, 2016). Portions of this coding described above were selected for peer review to ensure findings were consistent and credible.

### **Trustworthiness of the Study**

Methodological rigour in qualitative research is the extent to which the researcher ensured trustworthiness of the study through addressing the credibility, consistency, and transferability of the study findings, known in quantitative research as internal validity, reliability, and external validity. The following section outlines the steps taken to ensure trustworthiness of the study and its interpretations.

In order to address the credibility, consistency, and transferability of the study's findings, the researcher employed five strategies as recommended by Merriam (2016). The first three strategies relate to the study's credibility and consistency. First, the researcher employed reflexivity throughout data collection and analysis. Reflexivity is the awareness of the influence the researcher has on what is being studied and how the research process affects the researcher (Probst & Berenson, 2014). Throughout the data collection process, the researcher identified and monitored personal biases, perceptions, and assumptions through reflective discussions with an academic supervisor and through the process of documenting preliminary comments or assumptions in the form of memos. Additionally, in the present document, the researcher provided the reader with a description of the researcher's background in an effort to make clear potential influences on data collection and analysis processes. Second, the researcher engaged in peer-review with an academic supervisor throughout the data analysis process to ensure the findings were consistent and credible. Peer-review involves having a colleague analyse portions of the data to confirm agreement around the emerging codes and themes (Merriam & Grenier, 2019; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Third, to ensure consistency, the researcher maintained detailed

memos and notes containing reflections, questions, and decisions made throughout the study and created a running record of the researcher's interactions with the data throughout the analysis (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

The final two strategies employed to increase the trustworthiness of the study addressed the concern of transferability. The researcher provided rich, thick descriptions of the participants and their experiences being coached within the manuscript to increase the reader's ability to determine the relevance of the findings in comparison to their situation (i.e., whether the findings can be transferred) (Merriam & Grenier, 2019; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Last, the researcher ensured maximum variation within the study sample to allow for a greater range of application by readers (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). As such, participating Educators vary in age, ethnicity, experience in the field, and length of time being coached. Additionally, attempts were made to ensure rural educators were reflected in the sample in addition to educators in urban settings.

### **Ethical Considerations**

The present study received approval by the University of Alberta Research Ethics Board (REB). The researcher maintained a respectful exchange with participants at all times and engaged in multiple actions designed to minimize risks to the participants. First, the researcher emphasised the voluntary nature of the study, including the participants' right to withdraw from the study at any time, and their ability to decline a response to any interview question they did not feel comfortable with. Second, although the researcher had obtained written consent for each participant prior to the on-site interviews, the researcher carefully reviewed the consent forms with each participant and clarified any questions or concerns prior to commencing the interview process. One potential participant, upon revision of informed consent, withdrew from the study.

Third, the researcher paid careful attention to the participants' verbal and non-verbal language to monitor for signs of discomfort or stress.

As the study was conducted in collaboration with *GRIT*, the researcher emphasised the anonymity of participants and confidentiality of the data to ease any concerns of raw data reaching the community partner. Participants' anonymity was protected with the use of pseudonyms. Additional identifying information such as the participants' Coach's name, and participants' centre name were not transcribed and pseudonyms or other descriptive terms were used in their place. Confidentiality was maintained in the secure transfer and storage of digital and hard copy files. Audio recordings were transferred to a secure location immediately after the interview and deleted from the device. Audio recordings, transcripts, and any other digital documents were encrypted and stored on a password-protected university cloud space. Paper documents, including consent forms, were locked in a filing cabinet inside a locked research office at the University of Alberta.

## Chapter Four: Findings

The purpose of this study was to explore the experience and perceived impact of coaching among early educators. The *ASaP* program provided the context for this study. The present chapter has three sections. In the first section, a description of each of the participants is provided. In the second, themes that emerged from the interviews regarding question one, the experience of being coached, are provided. The third section provides detailed descriptions of themes that emerged from the interviews regarding research question two, the impact of coaching.

### Participants

Seven female early educators who were Site Leads in *ASaP* ELC Centres participated in the study. A brief summary of their backgrounds and general response to the interview is provided below.

Cindy is a 48-year-old Educator with over 25 years of experience in ELC. Cindy has a diploma in Early Childhood Education and was the only participant employed within a rural ELC centre. Cindy had received one year of coaching prior to accepting an administrative role within her centre which meant that she was no longer receiving coaching at the time of the interview. Cindy had been out of coaching and in her new administrative role for one month. In Cindy's description of her coaching experience, she emphasised her Coach's role in the process and portrayed her Coach as extremely "helpful" and "inspiring". Cindy described how her initial apprehension with coaching was quickly lifted due to the wealth of positivity and useful feedback her Coach provided. Cindy related increased confidence and expertise through coaching that became most apparent in her interactions with families and coworkers. Cindy's

description of the coaching relationship indicated that she viewed the Coach as an expert and a great resource to assist her with any challenges or questions that arose.

Fran is a 55-year-old Educator with a diploma in Early Childhood Education. Fran was part of the very first group of educators within the *ASaP* project and at the time of the interview, she had received four years of coaching. Fran's passionate description of her experience being coached significantly emphasized the coaching relationship which she described as safe and supportive and within which she felt empowered as an educator. This coaching relationship increased Fran's confidence in her skills and knowledge, enhanced her professional identity, and re-ignited her passion for the ELC profession. Furthermore, Fran describes how coaching fostered a new way of understanding children that not only transformed her teaching practices but her relationships with the children in her care.

Liz is a 39-year-old Educator, who too had a diploma in Early Childhood Education. Liz had received three years of coaching at the time of the interview. Liz's interview emphasised the "peace of mind" that comes with having a coach that she can rely on for support when confronted with challenges in her workplace - challenges that were not limited to classroom management but also navigating the strains of staffing irregularities and building the confidence to engage families. Liz described how coaching, along with reflective practice meetings and workshops, all contributed to changes in her ELC practices. Liz's interview suggested that the coaching relationship was a stable and secure relationship whereas the relationships with her coworkers and families were less stable and offered room for development.

Harpreet is a 39-year-old Educator with a graduate degree and over 16 years of experience working in ELC settings. English is not Harpreet's first language. Harpreet had received less than two months of coaching at the time of the interview. Harpreet's interview

reflected an educator in the very early stages of the coaching process. Harpreet's description of the coaching experience emphasised the significant demands coaching placed on her and the stress that accompanied these demands. Harpreet described how the demands of coaching were overwhelming, interfered with the time she was able to spend with children, and placed strain on her coworkers. Although Harpreet acknowledged that coaching had some benefits, she did not feel the small benefits she experienced were worth the heightened stress and heavy workload.

Bridget is a 25-year-old Educator with a bachelor's degree and three years of experience working in ELC settings. Bridget had received three years of coaching at the time of interview. During her interview, Bridget reflected on her growth as an educator and the growth of the centre as a whole. Bridget described how coaching contributed to the development of collaborative relationships between her and her coworkers and increased her confidence in her ability to support children and engage families. Bridget expressed how beneficial it was to have the Coach's perspective when tackling challenges in the classroom and attributed her successes in the classroom to the coaching relationship, which she experienced as a safe space within which she could problem solve.

Halena is a 53-year-old female educator with a diploma in Early Childhood Education. Halena had received two years of coaching at the time of interview. English is not Halena's first language. In Halena's interview, she described her coaching experience as "overwhelming positive". Halena emphasized her appreciation for the Coach's feedback and support that enabled her to better support children and decreased her frustration with challenging behaviours. Halena described how coaching has enhanced her relationships with children, families, and coworkers through deepening her understanding of children. Halena described the administration and staff within her centre as collaborative and supportive and was one of two educators out of seven, who



did not describe difficulties with centre logistics (e.g., staffing, space, etc.) when reflecting on her experience being coached.

Sue is a 46-year-old educator with a graduate degree in education. Along with Fran, Sue has been with the *ASaP* coaching project since its commencement. In the interview, Sue described how her experience of being coached changed throughout her four years within the *ASaP* project. Sue recounted her initial experiences as predominantly apprehensive and uneasy as she grappled with new teaching techniques while feeling constantly evaluated. Gradually, over time, Sue's experiences of being coached shift from evaluative to supportive, and she describes the once foreign and unfamiliar teaching techniques as becoming more her own and originating naturally within her own practices. Sue's description of her experience being coached emphasised the changing nature of the coaching experience over time as the coaching relationship develops and the coached content becomes less foreign.

### **Research Question One: Themes**

What is the experience of being coached to improve teaching practices aimed at enhancing the quality of early learning and care?

Two main themes emerged from the interviews regarding Educator's experience of being coached. One theme, *Opening up to Coaching*, concerned Educators' reflections on how their receptiveness to coaching changed over time. The second theme, *Organizational Components*, clusters together ideas that were expressed about the logistics of being coached - what needed to be in place in order for the coaching process to be delivered effectively and for Educators to implement the coached content.

**Table 1. Frequency of Educator Experiences Themes**

Main Theme	Subtheme
<b>Opening Up to Coaching</b> , 429 references, across 7 participants	
	Coach as an unwelcome visitor, 96 references, across 6 participants
	Coach as a skilled guide, 333 references, across 7 participants
<b>Organizational Components</b> , 91 references, across 7 participants	
	Coaching logistics, 60 references, across 6 participants
	ELC Centre support, 31 references, across 6 participants

***Opening Up to Coaching***

When asked to describe what it was like to be coached, Educators unanimously described the relationship with the coach as being central to the process and described how this relationship evolved over time. Educators used a range of adjectives to describe their Coach and their coaching experiences – initially the experience was ‘stressful’ or it felt ‘evaluative’ but, for Educators who had been part of *ASaP* for more than a year, the majority of these adjectives shifted to a positive valence, such as ‘helpful,’ ‘accessible,’ ‘dedicated,’ ‘efficient,’ ‘enthusiastic,’ ‘flexible,’ ‘never gives up,’ and ‘patient.’

**Coach as an Unwelcome Visitor.** Six of the seven Educators described their early coaching experiences as ‘nerve-racking’ and ‘awkward,’ and expressed that they ‘had some reservations’ within the initial phases of the coaching process. Educators’ descriptions of the early stages emphasized an increased workload that placed significant demands on their time. Educators’ described discomfort with the Coach’s presence due to feelings of being ‘watched’

and an uncertainty in their ability to meet expectations. Some Educators even found themselves questioning the overall worthiness of their participation in the program. Liz describes how the early demands of coaching were met with apprehension and uncertainty from both her and her coworkers:

...at the beginning it was kind of like, “When are we going to have the time to do that?”  
 “How exactly is this going to look like?” that was kind of off to a little bit of a rocky  
 beginning just because it’s a lot of work, it’s hard to kind of get into right?

Cindy describes feeling uneasy in her early experiences being observed and an insecurity in her performance:

Well when you’re being watched, of course your head is going, “Okay what do I need to do here?” ... at the beginning when you’re thinking, “Well am I wasting [Coach’s] time because I didn’t get this and this and this done?”

Prior to developing a relationship with her coach, Fran describes an uncertainty around her Coach’s expectations and a sense of being evaluated:

So yes. To begin with it was awkward because we didn’t know each other... and I didn’t know what she expected of me and I put higher expectations on myself. You know? And I didn’t want to look dumb.

Harpreet, who had received less than 2 months of coaching at the time of the interview, perceives coaching to be non-beneficial and describes how the added stress and pressure placed on her have contributed to this negative evaluation:

No, it is not beneficial. It is an extra stress for me right now. And because I have to plan for that, I have to work on that, I have to think about that, 'ok this day she is coming we have to do this'. It is like an extra work for me.

**Coach as a Skilled Guide.** As the coaching relationship developed, most Educators came to see their Coach as ‘skilled’ or ‘super helpful’ and several Educators attributed their successes in the classroom to the Coach. Fran described how the coach helped her to translate information that she had learned in the workshop into classroom practices:

I would be lost without their help, or I think I would...I have been fortunate... and I find that this help has been instrumental. I just know for myself it wouldn't have gone as far as it did without their help.

Halena noted that the coach helped her to individualize the PM practices for a specific child:

It was really good to have [Coach] to observe us how we can communicate with that child, how we can create relationship with that child, and then help us to make some action plan for them and work according to that one and specifically we know how ...how to work with that child. How to help him and how to support him.

Once Educators' opened up to coaching, they reflected on their unique learning process within the coaching experience. Their comments emphasised the role feedback and goal setting played in their rate of progress and capacity building. The majority of Educators referenced feedback as the principle means of learning while coaching. The feedback helped them ‘build confidence’ and pointed out areas of strength that they had not recognized in their practice before, as Bridget describes:

Just to go through what was observed, a lot of the time when you're doing something you not only don't notice things that you need to work on or things that didn't go too well like all the little things that happen like, these two are talking to each other or this is happening over in this corner. You don't see that, but the person observing you does and is like, “Oh I noticed this. That's nice to see” and they also notice all of the positive

things that you're doing that you don't give yourself credit for and that you don't notice. So it's nice to get that affirmation as well as like, "Oh how like- in your plan here you could probably try something like this and see if more kids are engaged with it."

Liz described how feedback reassured her that she was "on the right track":

It gives me kind of peace of mind as well to be able to bounce ideas off of her... and get that feedback that I'm on the right track or that maybe we need to just tweak it a little bit and try doing this instead.

Liz's reflection indicates that she may have covered the same ground with the coach several times and that arriving at the right solution was a process. By using the Teaching Pyramid Observational Tool (*TPOT*) the Educators got feedback on their strengths but were also able to target goals that they would work on in their educational setting. Liz described how the *TPOT* heightened her awareness around what she really needed to focus on:

...when we go back and look at the *TPOT*, there are things that [we do], but then I will look at it and think, "Maybe we're not being as intentional about it, maybe we're not doing it as often as we should be." So, for me personally I find it really bringing that to the surface so that I can look back and reflect on what kind of things are happening in the room...

Importantly, Sue reflected on how the learning process never follows a straight line and many factors influence growth and change:

I think when you're working with young children, especially in child care, there is a lot of different demands on you and so this is just one of the many demands and so sometimes it takes a longer time to achieve a goal or you set a goal but then maybe you're sidetracked by something else. So... your focus on what you do determines your

success rate and sometimes when your focus is on something else you go slower. But you're still making progress but it's slower.

### ***Organizational Components***

Organizational components at the level of both the Coach and the Educator influenced the experience of coaching.

**Coaching Logistics.** The majority of Educators described how the logistical factors of the coaching sessions impacted the coaching process and often required attention, or smoothing out. Frequently described logistical factors included the length of time of the coaching visit, the day and time of the visit, and the interval between visits. The Educators indicated that process was less efficient and that they felt stress when these details were not worked out well. Harpreet for example, described discomfort when sessions went on too long:

I don't mind learning all these things, as long as it has proper timing. When they tell me the timing – like it is going to be one hour and 10 or 15 minutes is OK – I am fine with that. But when it is going to go [longer] and all that, then it is going to be hard for me. I am going to make up my mind one hour I have to be with her.

In contrast, Sue who had four years of experience being coached describes how the meeting logistics smoothed out over time:

Yeah. When we started she would always come and we would be at the end of the class, she would watch for the entire class or for a portion of the class and then if it was the morning it would be- we would be doing [the debrief] over my lunch time...If she was in my afternoon class then [the debrief] would be after school. But then we realized if she came ... at certain times and if she could watch for half an hour and then we could consult for half an hour during music class.

The Coach was able to incorporate her knowledge of the Educator and the Educator's schedule to find times that worked best for the Educator and didn't overwhelm or stress her.

**ELC Centre Support.** Educators frequently described how issues with staffing and space impeded the coaching process, but also how the support of their centre directors facilitated the coaching process. Liz noted that staffing was routinely unpredictable:

It all depends on the day, because even we can plan out the day that [Coach] is going to come and know that we are going to have this time and this time but just kind of the nature of being here and people being sick and things like that, sometimes it's a little harder to try and sneak away for a little bit.

Fran describes how limited space in her centre impacts her one-to-one debrief with her Coach:

We have like a little staff room that is also our kitchen and it's lunchtime. So it's a busy time, ...and you know the cook is like, 'Can you move your feet so I don't roll you over with a cart full of food?' So it's more [about] having a quiet space without feeling rushed.

Harpreet described how her affection for her ELC centre's administrative staff motivated her to participate in coaching, despite her reservations:

But you know my work place, they are beautiful people. They are amazing people. That is one of the reasons I was working here, super co-operative and that is the reason that I said OK I will work with *GRIT*. [laughs] Yah because [the centre administrative staff] love me.

Halena described how her centre's administrative staff supports her professional development activities:

...so our administration team are very supportive and [name] is our coordinator, so we both will go - and sometimes the program director as well - we will go to workshops and

if there was something new or if they email it to [centre coordinator] she quickly print it and make it ready and hand it to us...

### Research Question Two: Themes

What are early educators' perceived impact of coaching to improve teaching practices aimed at enhancing the development of children?

Three main themes emerged from the interviews regarding the Educators' perceived impact of coaching. The first theme, *Building Connection*, concerned Educators' reflections on how coaching transformed their relationships and enhanced their professional identity. The second theme, *Nurturing Environment*, emphasizes Educators' descriptions of how coaching impacted the classroom environment through enhancing their educator-child interactions and their teaching practices, and fostered children's development. Last, the third theme, *Room to Grow*, encompasses areas targeted by coaching that Educators' identified as having still room to grow.

**Table 2. Frequency of Educator Perceived Impact of Coaching**

Main Theme	Subtheme
<b>Building Connection</b> , 230 references, across 7 participants	
	Not alone, 86 references, across 7 participants
	Deepened relationship with children, 100 references, across 7 participants
	Confidence to engage families, 89 references, across 6 participants
<b>Nurturing Environment</b> , 84 references, across 7 participants	
	From chaos to peace, 28 references, across 7 participants



	Increased intentionality in teaching, <i>11 references, across 4 participants</i>
	Child growth, <i>19 references, across 7 participants</i>
<b>Room to Grow</b> , <i>41 references, across 7 participants</i>	
	Reaching families, <i>32 references, across 7 participants</i>
	Peer coaching, <i>9 references, across 4 participants</i>

### ***Building Connection***

When asked to describe how coaching influenced their practices within ELC, Educators' reflections centred predominantly around the transformation of their professional relationships and the deepened connections with the children in their care. Educators described how the supportive coaching relationship contributed to a sense that they were "not alone." Further, coaching facilitated a renewed sense of curiosity about children, giving Educators fresh insights into child behaviours leading to more nurturing interactions. This increased confidence in their ability to support children resulted in greater confidence to guide families in more developmentally appropriate practices. Ultimately, Educators' describe how coaching contributed to building connections with not only their coach, but with children, families, coworkers, peers in the early learning field, and their profession as a whole.

**Not Alone.** All Educators' described how the development of supportive relationships with their coach, coworkers, and other professionals in the field contributed to a sense that they were 'not alone' when tackling challenges and were often a source of validation that they were 'on the right track.' Sue's description of her coaching experience describes how her centre felt "isolated" and how she appreciated the Coach's visits and the feedback she offered:

It's really nice to have a Coach come in and then give you feedback. We are fairly

isolated down here, other than our parents we don't have a lot of people pop in and out and then give us feedback.

Liz describes how the coaching relationship has become a safe place for her to not only discuss her own progress but also the difficulties she is experiencing due to staffing instability:

I feel confident that I can talk to her about kind of everything that is going on in the room. We've had a lot of changes over the year with some staff turnover and some staff illness and things like that so not only do I feel like I'm able to talk to her about my own goals and personal growth and stuff like that in the room but also if I'm having some problems in the room or need a little bit of advice she's been a really great sounding board and she's offered me a lot of guidance in those kinds of situations.

Fran describes how coaching facilitated the development of a supportive relationship with her coworkers:

It's made us realize having a healthy team is really important and it acknowledges the fact that it's important for you to talk together, to give each other positive feedback and to support each other and to do it in a way that is very public for the children to see. Because that is modeling for the children. It's modeling teamwork, it's modeling, and also thanking your team members for the strengths that they offer.

Bridget describes how coaching has strengthened her relationship with her coworkers and how she is able to rely her on coworkers for support when confronted with a challenge: "...it's kind of brought our whole team closer together. You have other people to talk to, "Like this just isn't working today, what do you think I could do?" it's been nice". Liz describes how reflective practice meetings with ELC educators from different centres have provided her with the opportunity to receive new ideas from others in her field experiencing the same challenges she is

experiencing:

...it's interesting to find out what other people who are going through the same thing are coming up with to see new things that we maybe haven't thought of that we can try or how we can modify something we are already doing.

**A Deepened Understanding of Children.** Six of the seven Educators described how coaching deepened their understanding of children as it offered a new lens of curiosity within which to view the child. Furthermore, this greater understanding increased the Educators' confidence in their ability to support the children in their care. Sue describes how her interpretations and responses have shifted with coaching in the following:

Yeah so it impacts, when you see things. So, you might be watching and you notice somebody shrug their shoulders and turn away. Or take a deep sigh and you will go over and say, "Well I noticed that you just took a deep breath, is everything okay, how are you feeling?" It's not necessarily saying "I see you're sad" but describing what you see and then getting them to tell you how they feel because maybe how they feel isn't what I thought. Maybe they don't need any assistance. Yeah, it's a different entry point as a teacher.

Bridget describes how her interpretations of children's behaviour have slowed and how she now asks "a lot more questions":

I think you're a lot more understanding of how they are feeling, you're not really making excuses like, "Oh they are just mad because whatever they didn't get their way" or "Why are they feeling mad?" and you ask a lot more questions rather than just being like, "Ugh,"

Fran describes how the coaching experience changed the way she was interpreting a child's

challenging behavior and enabled her to go from feeling “helpless” to feeling better able to support the child:

I don't know how she did it but she found a way to make me look at what was happening differently... so this was one of the little children that you would think, “What are we going to do today? I feel like I've tried it all. What are we going to do? Oh is it June yet oh no it's only like the 6th of September...” Right? That's a horrible mindset to have and I'm not saying that it's an exaggeration but when you have a helpless feeling, and you think you've tried it all... So, definitely mentored us through some visuals, mentored us through some skills ...and so that has been a tremendous success for [child].

Sue describes how she was able to share her new knowledge with parents:

I was able to demonstrate a process in front of the parents where instead of just making it right for [the child], it made [the child] think about the process and what they wanted to do and so it gave the child the opportunity to feel their feeling...

Educators described how the knowledge and skills they acquired not only changed the way they interpreted child behaviour but also the way they interacted with children, shifting from a more directive ‘in charge’ approach to a more child-centred approach in which the Educator is “sitting beside the children” as they learn. Sue describes this process here:

I have noticed a real difference when I problem-solve with my children. It's slower. I stop and I acknowledge what I see and what I hear and I ask if I can help. If they say “yes” at that point then we try to figure out what needs to be solved and together we come up with some solutions and then I follow the children through to make sure that the solution they chose they have support while they try. Then follow up again to see if it worked. So... I'm investing a lot of time in that problem and in solving that problem and

everything else gets put on hold and my partner teacher will pick up the slack or vice versa instead of saying if somebody is arguing over maybe ea toy saying “okay I’m putting the timer, when this timer is finished then you guys trade” which would have taken much less of my time and that’s where I mean I would have been in charge of the problem solving whereas now I’m sitting beside the children and helping them problem solve but it takes way more of my time. Yup.

Fran describes how permitting a child the space to experience her emotions contributed to the development of a trusting relationship:

This morning this little girl was really upset, her mom dropped her off and they were already 15 minutes late for our field trip. ...she threw herself down and she was mad and I said, “You are mad. You’re mad, I hear you say I want my mom to take my jacket off. You are mad. I am mad. That’s okay. I’m scared that I’m going to get hurt, I’m going to be beside you, and it’s okay to be mad. When you’re done being mad, I’m just going to sit here while you’re mad, it’s okay.” I sat there, what felt like forever, patience, probably wasn’t even thirty seconds. But it felt like a really long time. ... For a little girl to know it’s okay to be mad it just happened too fast, she was dropped off and mom felt the anxiety, “Oh my Gosh I forgot about the field trip I better get going!” and puff, dump and go. And the transition wasn’t there for that little girl, we’re all lined up ready to go. Just give her a few seconds. It’s like waiting for a yellow light, it’s really not that long, I don’t know why we blast through them all the time. We expect the children to be able to just change their feelings, or not have them. Right? And so that little girl was glued to me on the field trip! And it’s just, it’s building that trust.

Halena describes developing trusting relationships with children through the use of a visual

support (i.e., First-Then):

The other one we use is First-Then so it's really, really helpful for children to understand first this one and then that one and when we just consistently continue this schedule and whatever we promise to try we just stay there, they just trust us.

**Confidence to Engage Families.** Educators described how coaching enhanced their professional identity and increased their confidence to engage families. Cindy describes how the resources she has received throughout the coaching process have played an important role in her ability to support families and transform the perception of her from “babysitter” to “childcare professional”:

...you can say to them, “I see you’re having a problem here, I think I have something that can help you out.” *ASaP* actually gave us a book about different transitions at home and the struggles that might occur and what can be triggering it and how to help and I’ve handed that book to a couple of parents and said, “Take a look through here.” So it’s great to be able to have a parent come and then you can turn around and say, “I think I can help you.” Which is huge because they trust you a lot more too and you’re not just the babysitter. You’re actually a childcare professional.

Bridget describes how coaching increased her confidence to engage parents and contributed to a sense of “I know what I’m talking about”:

Sure. I think that in having, it kind of pertains to I think one of the questions that was on here a little bit later but just in my relationship with [Coach] and her kind of helping to build my confidence to form those valuable relationships with the parents, especially when you’re trying to have maybe some of those harder conversations or things that you might need to bring up that aren’t necessarily what a parent is expecting to hear. Then

being able to have the resources so that I can speak confidently to what I'm telling them and actually build that trust with the parents as well. So that they understand that I know what I'm talking about and that we can actually help them, give them resources as well.

Liz describes how coaching enabled her to communicate more confidently and effectively with parents:

With parents, the children who have needed more supports, it's helped to like, or for me at least, it's helped me feel confident in what I'm talking about and it's given us like a nice just starting ground on like how we can start this conversation even so that nobody feels intimidated at the time and it's just like, "This is the way it is and this is what we've seen have you seen it?" and they go through their steps for talking to families, which is really great, kind of helps you start a conversation without parents feeling threatened or that you are saying something is wrong with their child.

Fran describes how recognition from families, among others, has instilled her with a sense of pride in her work:

...we just had a celebration not only through *GRIT* but also through our board members and everything so all of this kind of came together and it's like "Wow it actually made a difference" ..to have other people recognize the progress, families that have been with us for the last three years, ... it's just knowing right? And being able to be proud of that. Being able to say, "You know what I work with great people and through this program we have gone beyond where I thought we would go." Yeah.

### *Nurturing Environment*

All of the Educators' identified positive changes in the classroom environment, their teaching practices, and children's development as a consequence of participating in coaching.

**From Chaos to Peace.** All seven Educators described how the experience of coaching positively impacted the classroom environment. Educators' described these changes as fostering calmer and more inclusive classroom environments with more social-emotional learning resources. Bridget describes a situation in which coaching reduced the "chaos" and contributed to a more "peaceful" classroom:

So most recently I would say our whole room was having an issue with our transition after snack time and to activities because we have snack in the same room that we do activities, so the tables need to be cleared before anything else can happen. In previous years we were able to just have the kids do quiet reading for ten minutes and it was fine, this group it just did not work at all and we struggled and struggled and struggled. So, I went over with my coach like different strategies that we could use and we kind of found one that our whole room really liked where we would set up just quiet floor activities for them and we were able to do that within a week of coming up with the goal and it's just been amazing ever since. It's such a smooth transition, it's so much more peaceful, everybody has like a role after and you're like "Oh!" my goodness it's not chaos, nobody is sitting there trying to force these poor kids [laughing] to look at books that they don't care about. Yeah, it's nice. [Laughs].

Cindy describes how the experience of coaching has provided her with the tools to create a calmer classroom environment:



You know when you've got the more challenging behaviours a person automatically – “okay you were told no so why is this continuing?” but it's building the different strategies to build towards success that has been very beneficial and it's just calmed things.

Fran describes how coaching has made her classroom more accessible for all children:

For example, in our room I have alluded to different cultures, we have different age groups, languages, abilities. We have a child that has a diagnosed speech delay, one with an undiagnosed speech delay, anxiety, autism, and there is no division of those children. A visual that you use for a non-verbal child is just as useful to a child who knows English or might know Russian. Might speak Cantonese. A visual is a visual. It's universal. So, instead of it being: This is what we do with this child and this is what we do with that child, they've supported us in providing coaching and how to come up with strategies and tools, quotes tools, that don't allude to any particular child. Anybody can pick it up and use it, it's in the hallway when you come in. There is a picture of a hat, rain boots, do we know what to put on we don't have to nag we just point to the picture today you just need hat and shoes. It's the same, that's what we're doing. “What are we doing right now?” it's weather in Alberta it changes every five minutes but right now we're putting on hats and boots, we don't need to tell twenty children. We just point or we give them the sign, hat, shoes, boots. Then they don't feel that they have to be told everything so that's the difference right? It's universal. Seamless.

**Increased Intentionality in Teaching Social-emotional Skills.** Four of the seven Educators described how coaching increased their awareness of the importance of social-emotional development in early childhood and subsequently increased their intentionality in

teaching social-emotional skills to children. Liz describes how the experience of coaching helped her be more intentional in her teaching practices:

I would say overall just being coached has helped me be more of an intentional educator ... Really making sure that we're bringing that social-emotional growth to the forefront with the kids and being really intentional about it...like, when we're setting up a project or an art experience or something for the kids now instead of just putting out the supplies I'm being super intentional about what I'm putting out. I know I have six kids sitting here, I'm putting out three pairs of scissors and I'm saying, "Okay guys there are only three pairs of scissors here, so you're going to have to take turns and you're going to have to share and you're going to have to figure out how you're going to use these materials." So, whereas before I might have just put everything out for everybody to use. So trying to really be intentional in those teaching moments.

Sue reflects on how the experience of coaching has made her more mindful in her teaching practice:

It's given me the opportunity to watch what I do and become more mindful of my practice and the way that I plan, the way that I communicate with the children, why we do what we do, I think it's made me just reflect on the process of the time that I spend with children and what comes of it and really values the process of learning together.

**Child Growth.** All seven Educators described how coaching contributed to a reduction in children's challenging behaviours, such as 'outbursts,' 'tantrums,' and violent or aggressive behaviours. Halena describes the significant reduction in incident reports for a young child since his entering into her classroom:

I have a very special child, he is nice, I love him, but some problem from emotion or whatever is coming from... he needs more support and he didn't have any relationship, communication with anyone. He was very aggressive and I can tell you last year maybe it wasn't any day that we didn't have any accident report- maybe two or three - every day. ... but when he moved to my room [this year] we already work on this program so we just have him and ...no biting accident report and it's almost one year he is in our room, no accident report....

Fran describes how coaching contributed to a reduction in outbursts for one particular child and how this reduction was sustained as the child moved into a new classroom the following year:

Okay, the first child. By the time she had moved into the next program she had a lot of those skills so we saw a lot less outbursts if you want to call it. Which were more than likely frustrations.

Educators' not only described a reduction in challenging behaviours, but they also described gains in children's social-emotional skills. Halena describes how children developed the skills to resolve social problems independently:

They have problem solving kit and it's really really helpful and if something happens, if you're far from some small group of children and they have some problem directly they will go to the kit and take it to each other, open it and they just look for that one step by step and then they just offer each one which is solution and which one is the best one.

Because they practice on that one for a long time now they, in some way they ignore to take that one, they say "Okay, take a time there. Okay, this will be your turn."

Fran describes how one child's newly developed social-emotional skills decreased her "outbursts" and facilitated her ability to form "genuine friendships":

We saw her gain authentic friendships, genuine friendships. The difference would be to have a child come into the room that literally no wonder, like, nobody would come over. No children would want, right? They didn't want to play. Not because they didn't like her, they didn't understand her and she didn't right? She didn't have those skills yet to being the child where they would notice if she wasn't there and they would ask about her and it was genuine!

Sue describes how coaching increased one child's participation in the classroom:

The little guy who couldn't come to the snack table, by the end of the school year he was finding his way to the snack table, eating his snack, and with a reminder often with a reminder, putting his bag back in his cubby. When he was at the snack table he was having some conversations. At the beginning of the school year when it was time for snack he would lay down on the ground and he would scream because he actually didn't know what to do.

### ***Room to Grow***

Although Educators identified the many positive ways in which coaching impacted their practices and their ELC centre, they also identified areas in which they felt there was still room to grow. Two areas in particular were reiterated by Educators as areas they felt the need for more coaching, reaching families and peer coaching.

**Reaching Families.** Although most of the Educators identified coaching as having increased their confidence and ability to engage families, they all identified that there was still room to grow when it came to family engagement. Each Educator identified a need to transfer knowledge of social-emotional development to families, while two Educators identified the need for support around building relationships with parents in general. Liz describes how families'

lack of knowledge around social-emotional development interferes with her confidence in her ability to communicate effectively:

I think that part of what makes it hard is the families not really knowing or having that understanding of what social-emotional development is and how it impacts their children. It's kind of hard to explain that to them, like when they haven't heard of it before and then I always because it's something new if it's something they've never even heard of then I find myself kind of doubting myself if I'm giving them the correct information and hoping that I am relaying everything properly to them. You know?

Halena expresses her desire for monthly meetings with the parents to share the knowledge she has gained surrounding social-emotional development:

I think, but actually in fact it won't happen because people are very busy for the real life, and you cannot do anything, but I really liked to have some, like our staff meetings [laughs] some parents have some meetings and just explain about something and in some way make them to come to daycare ... if there is a big meeting once a month for all parents and they most come it really helps them to understand a child.

Harpreet, still very new to coaching, expresses her desire for coaching support around developing relationships with busy parents:

I need to know that – there are kids whose parents are super non-cooperative – sorry excuse my words – and I am – please help us to deal with your child. But we cannot say that because we can just request them. Can you – so I need to know at that point what strategies or ideas we need to use to ask and request parents please help us a little bit to deal with your child. Because when it happens we are dealing with the child and they see us – oh same teacher she is going to say the same thing. I'm not going to listen to you.

Because the parents are not very strict about it. And the things happen at the end of the day and they are upset and unhappy and I do not want to see parents unhappy. That is my biggest fear here. But then you know what we need help for that. I want *GRIT* to help us in that regard.

Educators also described frustrations with how parents' lack of, or slow, responding impaired their ability to adequately support high-needs children. Fran shares her frustrations with the parents' delay in addressing a concern, and how this delay impairs her ability to provide the child with the support they need:

My coach often said that the parents have to do their part before she can do her part. So if they had speech problems than the parent had to go get them assessed at AHS. Right? They need to do their part before we can build here. Which really slows down the process... as much as that is a frustrating slow process, waiting for the parents to get on board, I can see where it's really important. For us, we're often the first point of contact and so it takes us all the way to the end of the year before a parent is actually willing to address an issue. [Sighs] and that's where work is very frustrating because then we can't have the support that we need to make the year as successful and as supportive as possible.

**Peer-coaching.** Four of the seven Educators described a need for further coaching around navigating relationships with coworkers, particularly when it comes to transferring their skills to their coworkers. Sue describes how even after four years being coached, she still feels she hasn't "figured out" how to support the adults in her learning environment:

I think if I was here for another year then it would be a matter of me figuring out how to coach better and just continue learning what I'm learning but I think for me the next step

is how to support the adults in my learning environment, and I certainly haven't figured out that.

Liz describes the difficulty she had with bringing new practices into the room and requesting her coworkers to implement them with her:

I think it was, it's hard for me to go on my own and learn all of these great things and come back and say, "Hey guys, let's try this." And trying to get them to kind of buy into the same kind of thing.

It was evident the Educators valued the knowledge and skills they had acquired and wished to share them with families and their colleagues but they were unclear how to do this effectively.

## Chapter Five: Discussion

*So I've drawn a mountain. With several different paths, because when you're working with ASAP it's like climbing a mountain. It's hard work and everybody does it at their own speed. There are multiple paths, because we all have a different path to get to or toward the top and somebody at the top.....[who] always loops back to make sure that everybody is on the same page. So we're all kind of tackling the mountain. Which means that we're trying to become better at teaching social-emotional skills to all children but we are all developing at a speed that suits us. We all have support, there is nobody by themselves and we're all on different paths because different centers need different supports.*

*Educator participating in the ASaP Project*

Coaching has emerged as an alternative to traditional professional development efforts aimed at improving the quality of early childhood settings (Powell & Diamond, 2013). Although coaching has demonstrated effectiveness (e.g., Sheridan et al., 2010), few studies have examined coaching practices or have explored the aspects of coaching that may have led to positive outcomes (Downer, 2013). The present study investigated early Educators' experience of being coached in ELC settings using basic qualitative inquiry (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Themes derived from interviews with early Educators participating in the *ASaP* Project revealed that they encounter coaching as a gradual process of opening up to the experience while navigating their complex organizational contexts. In the early stage of the coaching process, Educators view Coaches as unwelcome visitors and, over time, this initial unease shifts, and Coaches are welcomed by Educators as skilled guides who become allies in problem-solving, trusted providers of resources and feedback, and facilitators of reflective practice. Educators described the impact of coaching as enhancing relationships and classroom practices with changes noted in the overall learning environment, their teaching practices, and children's development. The results from this study shed light on the complex and unique environments experienced by early educators, serve to enhance the understanding of the process of coaching, and endorse coaching as a viable means of improving early education contexts. The following section discusses these



findings and situates them within current research and theories of change and learning in adulthood. Finally, the chapter concludes by discussing limitations, directions for future research, and implications for improving the quality of ELC.

### **Opening Up to Coaching: Progressing Through the Stages of Change**

The majority of participants described the initial phases of their coaching experience as marked by feelings of uncertainty, anxiety, and discomfort. These feelings were accompanied by a perception of increased workload and expectations. Educators' descriptions of their coaching experiences indicated that their relationship with coaching changed over time. They came to value the coach as a skilled guide and a supportive resource they could rely on as they tackled challenges in their classrooms, with their own learning, and enhancing the participation of all children. The changes described by the Educators' can be understood within Prochaska and DiClemente's (2015) Stages of Change model. The Stages of Change model conceptualizes behavioural change as occurring in five stages: (1) pre-contemplation, (2) contemplation, (3) preparation, (4) action, and (5) maintenance. The Educators' descriptions of their initial experiences suggest they were in the pre-contemplation or contemplation stage of change. Individuals in the pre-contemplation stage are often unaware or "under aware" of their own need for change and have a tendency to "underestimate the pros of changing" and "overestimate the cons" (McConaughy, et al., 1983, p. 152). Individuals in the contemplation stage of change are more aware than the pre-contemplators of the pros of changing, however they remain acutely aware of the cons and are prone to engaging in frequent cost-benefit analyses of changing (Prochaska, et al., 2015). At first, not only did the Educators frequently note the perceived "cons" of being coached (e.g., increased workload and expectations), they also were not yet fully aware of the utility of enhancing their practices, as this Educator put it, "So I know there are

strategies to use but actually ...all it needs for me, working in childcare for the past 8 years, ...is to just talk and sit down with the child.”. Norcross and colleagues (2011) emphasised the importance of matching one’s approach to the stage in which the individual is occupying. In a meta-analysis examining the relationships between a client’s stage of change and psychotherapy outcomes, Norcross et al., (2011) reported that therapists who impose action on individuals within the pre-contemplative stage can drive their clients away while attributing their lack of progress to resistance. When we look at Harpreet’s description of her experience of coaching - an Educator who had only participated in the program for less than two months at the time of the interview – she describes coaching as “not beneficial” and explains:

It is an extra stress for me right now and because I have to plan for that, I have to work on that, I have to think about that... It is extra work for me. If they give me a choice I would never stay [in *ASaP*].

Harpreet’s description of her experience suggests she is in the pre-contemplative stage, giving far more attention to the cons of participating within *ASaP* than the pros. Despite being in the pre-contemplative stage, Harpreet feels pressure to engage in actions towards change. It is evident that the stress around engaging in these actions is contributing to a desire to exit the program, ‘driving her away’.

Educators who described moving to the preparation and then action stages commented that they were becoming more “intentional” and more “reflective” about how they were using the practices with children in their care. A few Educators indicated that they were in Prochaska's maintenance stage of change, wherein they not only felt confident in their skills but were integrating them into their practice in ways that were more meaningful to them. Susan described her evolution from precontemplation to maintenance and how her relationship with being

coached changed over a process several years. In the first year, she was “more about figuring out the tools that they were offering and maybe having a try”. In the second year, she had learned some of the tools, and was “getting better at using them”. In the third year, she was “pushing the tools a little farther” and began “problem-solving and involving the parents”. Now in her fourth year being coached, she was using the “tools effectively” and “embedding it in her practice”. She draws attention to the passage of time, that over the four years of participating in *ASaP* her response to coaching altered as she became more motivated and proactive with the process. It is clear that the benefits that she saw evolved the longer she participated in the process.

Receiving individualized feedback on clearly set goals was described by many Educators as important to this change process. Educators referenced feedback as the principle means of learning while coaching. The feedback not only helped them “build confidence” but also helped them recognize the “positive things that you’re doing that you don’t give yourself credit for and that you don’t notice”. Researchers have identified that positive performance-based feedback increases learners’ intrinsic motivation (Badami, et al., 2011). This aligns with Knowles’ (1984) assumption that learning is optimized when the adult is internally motivated to learn and clearly understands the purpose of their learning. Fallon and colleagues (2015) concluded from a meta-analysis on learning mechanisms that feedback is an evidence-based practice for affecting change. Hattie and Timperley (2007) note that effective feedback must answer three major questions asked by a teacher and/or by a student: Where am I going? (What are the goals?), How am I going? (What progress is being made toward the goal?), and Where to next? (What activities need to be undertaken to make better progress?). Educators worked with the coach to jointly set goals to understand ‘where they were going’ and formulate action plans to understand ‘how they were going’, and feedback after focused observations enabled them to understand

‘where to next’. In summary, the experience of being coached is a process conducted over time that Educator reflections endorsed. Their reflections align with theorized stages of change (i.e., Prochaska & DiClemente, 1983), feedback mechanisms that support learning, and best practice principles of adult learning.

### **The Role of Organizational Drivers in the Coaching Experience**

Educators’ frequently spoke about the organizational components (e.g., adequate staffing and appropriate space) and logistical factors (e.g., time of day, duration of visit, etc.) they encountered while being coached and the significant role these components played in either facilitating or interfering with their ability to participate in the coaching process. For example, one Educator described how organizational and logistical components impacted her one-to-one debriefs with her coach

We have like a little staff room that is also our kitchen and it’s lunchtime. So it’s a busy time, coworkers are a little more ‘This is when we need you here.’, and you know the cook is like, ‘Can you move your feet so I don’t roll you over with a cart full of food?’ So it’s more [about] having a quiet space without feeling rushed.

Research in the field of implementation science helps us understand why Educators frequently referenced the logistical and organizational supports necessary for coaching to be fully experienced. Fixsen and colleagues (2005) outlined three Implementation Drivers necessary to alleviate potential barriers and ensure successful implementation and sustainability of evidence-based practices in ELC settings. These three drivers consist of 1) Competency drivers: activities to ensure that staff have the skills necessary to implement the evidence-based practices, 2) Organizational drivers: actions, policies, and procedures that support practitioners and eliminate administrative and other barriers, and 3) Leadership drivers: critical leadership behaviours

needed to establish and sustain effective programs as circumstances change over time (Fixsen, et al., 2005). Through the organizational drivers, Fixsen and colleagues (2005) recognized the importance of a facilitative administration to adjust work conditions to accommodate and support implementation activities. The Educators' experiences highlight the integrative and compensatory nature of transferring evidence-based practices to ELC settings, in that for competency drivers (e.g., coaching) to be used effectively, it is essential for organizational drivers (e.g., facilitative administration) to develop hospitable environments to host these activities (Metz & Bartley, 2012).

### **Building Competence and Strengthening Connections**

Educators' described transformations that occurred through coaching - within their professional relationships, their relationships with children, and their relationship with their profession as a whole. They reflected on the development of supportive relationships not only with their coach, but with their room-partners, centre staff, and professional peers. Additionally, Educators described stronger educator-child relationships, fostered through a deepening curiosity and an enhanced understanding of the children in their care. The development of supportive relationships and a new lens on child behaviour contributed to a renewed sense of identity as a "childcare professional." Cindy felt that through coaching, she had a better foundation of knowledge to support parents

So it's great to be able to have a parent come and then you can turn around and say, "I think I can help you." Which is huge because they trust you a lot more too and you're not just the babysitter. You're actually a childcare professional.

Research has demonstrated that building caregiver skills through the trusting relationship of an ongoing mentorship is likely to not only improve skills but "reduce some of the isolation

and stress that is characteristic of classroom teaching” (Centre on the Developing Child, 2016, p. 20). As Sue described it

It’s really nice to have a coach come in and then give you feedback. We are fairly isolated down here, other than our parents we don’t have a lot of people pop in and out and then give us feedback.

Heineke (2013) examined the discourse between elementary school teachers and their literacy coaches and found that “without a doubt, the teacher/coach relationship was discussed more ardently than any other factor related to successful coaching” (p. 427). Furthermore, the safety of the coaching relationship may act as a springboard for more self-determined learning. Bridget captured this sense of self-determination when she described how she was able to problem-solve with coworkers, “Like this just isn’t working today, what do you think I could do?”. This aligns with Knowles’ (1984) assumption that learning is optimized when the adult learner is permitted to exercise their autonomy in the process. Deci and Ryan (1985) who have written extensively on this topic, propose that self-determination is best nurtured when three psychological needs are met: 1) autonomy: the need to experience choice in the initiation, maintenance, and regulation of the behaviour, 2) competence: the need to succeed and attain desired outcomes, and 3) relatedness: the need to establish mutual respect and connectedness with others. They hypothesize that these three needs energize the formation of identity, such as we have seen in this research. The Educator interview data revealed frequent reflections on themselves as autonomous learners, with new insights on their competence, all of which were mentored through a strong sense of relatedness initiated with their coach and extended to the children, their coworkers, families, and their professional peers. By meeting these needs through coaching, Educators expressed a stronger sense of identity as a professional early educator.

## **Fostering Growth through More Nurturing Environments**

Educators identified that coaching contributed to positive changes in the ELC environment. Importantly, they described how enhancing their teaching practices led to the development of more nurturing learning environments that fostered children's social-emotional skills. Sue described how the experience of coaching has made her more mindful in her teaching practice, "It's given me the opportunity to watch what I do and become more mindful of my practice and the way that I plan, the way that I communicate with the children, why we do what we do..." Bridget described how coaching reduced the "chaos" and contributed to a more "peaceful" and "inclusive" classroom. Educators' not only described a reduction in children's challenging behaviours, but also an increase in children's ability to participate in the classroom and develop meaningful relationships with their peers.

Educators' perceptions of the impact of coaching are aligned with recent findings from the literature. For example, in a quasi-experimental pre-post design study, Connors-Burrow and colleagues (2017) found that after coaching, early educators implementing the *PM* were observed to engage in more sensitive and nurturing caregiving (e.g., listening attentively) and incorporated more social-emotional practices into their teaching (e.g., labelling feelings and facilitating problem-solving). As described previously, Educators in the current study reflected how engaging in more sensitive and nurturing care strengthened the educator-child connection. Additionally, Educators described being more intentional in their use of practices to foster social-emotional development, as one Educator put it "really making sure that we're bringing that social-emotional growth to the forefront with the kids and being really intentional about it". Also consistent with Educators' experiences that coaching has contributed to "calmer" classrooms and "smooth transitions", Connors-Burrow and colleagues (2017) reported

significant improvements to the classroom environment after coaching, such as increased use of visual-schedules and more structured transitions between activities. Furthermore, and consistent with the current participants' descriptions of child growth, Conners-Burrow and colleagues (2017) reported that coaching contributed to small but significant reductions in children's challenging behaviours and improvements in children's prosocial behaviours.

Hemmeter and colleagues (2016) reported similar results in a randomized controlled trial of the *PM* by exploring the impact of coaching on teachers' practices and child behaviours. More specifically, the authors reported that teachers who had received coaching fostered a more positive classroom climate by engaging in more nurturing and responsive educator-child interactions and using effective strategies to anticipate, prevent, and redirect problem behaviours in the classroom. Furthermore, children whose teachers were in the intervention group were rated higher on their observed social skills and exhibited fewer teacher-reported problem behaviours than children in the comparison group. Interestingly, though Hemmeter et al. (2016) found similar child and teacher outcomes, the authors noted that the teacher practice differences (i.e., between the coached and uncoached educators) increased over time. This is in line with PD literature and the current study findings in that changing teachers' practices is a process that occurs incrementally over time and emphasizes that effective implementation of evidence-based practices in ELC settings is not achieved through one-shot training.

Conners-Burrow et al (2017) and Hemmeter et al (2016) provide strong evidence of the effectiveness of coaching to improve Educators' implementation of the *PM*. A host of research on other practices and programs in ELC (e.g., Classroom Links to Literacy, Powell, Diamond et al (2010); Teaching Through Interactions, Hamre et al (2012); My Teaching Partner, Ansari & Pianta, 2018) have included coaching as an element of implementation support. Findings from



this research, in general, indicate that these programs have had a “positive and sizable impact on teachers’ instructional practice and interactions with children” (Downer, 2013, p. 159). In concert with the findings from the present research, coaching emerges as an increasingly important component for fostering growth in Educators who strive to create more nurturing environments for children.

### **Room to Grow**

Although Educators identified the many positive ways that coaching impacted their practices and their ELC centre, they also identified areas in which they felt there was still room to grow. Two areas that were reiterated by the Educators were: reaching families and peer coaching.

Educators perceived that coaching increased their confidence and ability to engage families, yet most recognized the importance of family engagement and were still seeking ways to transfer knowledge of social-emotional development to families. As Liz described it,

I think that part of what makes it hard is the families not really knowing or having that understanding of what social-emotional development is and how it impacts their children.

It’s kind of hard to explain that to them, like when they haven’t heard of it before.

Liz’s struggle to engage families in understanding social-emotional development is a concern that extends beyond the ELC. In 2013, the Alberta Centre for Child, Family and Community Research conducted the Provincial Benchmark Survey to determine how much adult Albertans knew about child development. Of the 1,451 randomly selected adults who completed the telephone interview, findings revealed that while there was a general appreciation of the importance of the ‘early years’ for lifelong learning development and some understanding of how to support child development. There were important gaps in knowledge of when children

achieve specific developmental milestones. Notably, although respondents expressed confidence in their ability to parent, the majority incorrectly answered questions about emotional development (84 % incorrect) and social development (89% incorrect). The report concludes with a recommendation, that there is a “need for the creation of an overarching framework that provides strategic direction and integration of supports.... that support families and children’s healthy start” (Pujadas Botey et al., 2014, p.6).

Educators also expressed frustrations with how parents’ lack of, or slow, responding impaired their ability to adequately support their children. Engaging families is a top concern for many educators. There is strong and steadily growing evidence that families can improve their children's academic performance in school and have a major impact on attendance and behaviour. Children at risk of failure or poor performance profit from the extra support that their engaged families and communities provide. Evidence is clear that students benefit when educators support parents in helping their children at home and in guiding their development (Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Ma et al., 2016). Not only do the children benefit but parents’ perceptions of the ELC centre are also enhanced. An exploration of family-school partnerships in the early years found that the more parents and educators connect, the greater parents’ perception of support and “educational value” attributed to the day-care experience and the stronger the parent-teacher relationship (Pirchio et al., 2013). Although the importance of family engagement in ELC settings is well established, strengthening the educator-parent relationship remains a challenge. In a recent study, although early educators reported an increase in their teaching skills and their confidence and a reduction in child behavioural concerns, they reported little change in their abilities to engage families after coaching (Arthur-Kelly, et al., 2017). Continued efforts to

understand the unique and contextual factors that impact family engagement in ELC settings will provide valuable insight with which to inform coaching practices in the future.

Some of the Educators who had been involved with *ASaP* for a few years, identified another area in which they felt there was still room to grow - understanding how to peer coach, or transfer their new skills on to their coworkers. Sue describes how even after four years of being coached, she still feels she hasn't "figured out" how to support the adults in her learning environment. Peer-coaching, although it was introduced as a phenomenon as early as the 1980s (Joyce & Showers, 1980) is described as an "onsite dimension of staff development...[where peers]...who shared aspects of teaching, planned together, and pooled their experiences and practiced new skills and strategies [together]" (Showers & Joyce, 1996, p. 14). Bruce Joyce and Beverly Showers were staff development consultants and conducted several minor research reports (e.g., Baker & Showers, 1984; Joyce & Showers, 1980) demonstrating the utility, potential to realize school-wide improvement efforts, and impact of peer coaching. However, limited empirical evidence of its effectiveness has been conducted recently, and none in early education settings. The paucity of recent research examining the merits or process of peer-coaching in contemporary ELC settings highlight future research needs in early education. One thing is evident from the early literature on peer-coaching (i.e., Showers & Joyce, 1996) and in the coaching experiences described in the present study - implementing peer-coaching is not a simple matter. Not unlike coaching, peer-coaching requires considerable logistical planning and a supportive administration to ensure educators have the time, training, and resources required to carry out peer-coaching activities (Showers & Joyce, 1996; Wong & Nicotera, 2003). If the proper supports, or 'drivers', are not in place then early educators will undoubtedly confront significant obstacles and barriers in the implementation of effective peer-coaching. To conclude,

although peer-coaching seems like a viable and appropriate progression from coaching, it is important to recognize it is essentially another ongoing PD delivery format and will therefore require careful planning, organization, and support in its implementation.

### **Limitations**

The present study employed the basic qualitative methodology to explore the unique experiences of early educators being coached in the implementation of an evidence-based framework in ELC. It was situated within a larger study and is a collaboration with the community organization *GRIT*. The nature of the study context poses several limitations. First, the findings may be reflective of early educators' broader participation in the *ASaP* program, a PD initiative that employs multiple formats of PD integratively, and is not limited to coaching alone. Second, because this was a community-based research project, some of the questions within the interview protocol (Appendix B) reflected the interests of the community partner more than the focus of the study. Third, although the researcher took steps to ensure participants understood the limits of confidentiality, the collaborative relationship between the researcher and *GRIT* may have resulted in participants censoring their responses in efforts to preserve the nascent relationships they were forming with *GRIT* and their respective *ASaP* coach.

Purposeful sampling was used to ensure the data reflected the experiences of early educators being coached in ELC. Additionally, the sample size of the study was small. Therefore, the findings from this study are not suitable for generalization but rather serve to provide preliminary insight into early educators' experiences being coached from which to guide future investigations. Furthermore, participation in the study was voluntary and interviews were conducted at the Educator's respective centre during work. Due to the volunteer nature of participation, the study is susceptible to volunteer bias in that those educators who chose to

participate may possess characteristics that make them systematically different from the target population of early educators (Jordan, et al., 2013). It is also possible that as the interviews were conducted during the workday and required the availability of a quiet room and staff coverage, the participants may be representative of early educators with access to supportive administrations. Additionally, although conducting the interviews at the Educators' place of work during the workday alleviated some barriers to participation (e.g., scheduling, transportation, etc.) it also introduced a sense of hurriedness to the interview process due to the accommodations and adjustments being made in order for the Educator to participate in the study.

Qualitative research relies heavily on the researcher's subjective interpretation of participant experiences. Although the researcher employed strategies to reduce the impact of personal biases in data analysis and interpretation, it is impossible to remove biases and assumptions completely. It is important to recognize that the researchers' personal experiences and beliefs will have influenced interpretations of the data (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Member checking is a process in which the researcher seeks participant feedback on the preliminary findings and interpretations (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Member checking enables the researcher to rule out misinterpretations and identify biases in data analysis, it was not used within this study and may pose a limitation on the present findings.

### **Directions for Future Research**

Given the findings of this study, multiple directions for future research are proposed in order to further our understanding of coaching in ELC. Within the theme Building Connection, Educators described how parents' perceptions of them shifted from "babysitters" to "childcare professionals". The author proposed that this enhanced professional identity through coaching is

in line with Deci and Ryan's (1985) theory of self-determination, in that identity is formed when an individual's psychological needs of competence, autonomy, and relatedness are met. Further research exploring the relationship between coaching and professional identity and the extent to which coaching meets the learner's needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness may serve to address the negative and potentially limiting self-perceptions of early childhood professionals.

The importance of family involvement and the educator-parent relationships in ELC has been well established in the literature and in practice. While Educators in the present research described how coaching in the *PM* resulted in improvements with family engagement, they were clear that more work is needed in this area. These findings are consistent with research and emphasize the need for further exploration into the educator-parent relationship and the nature of family engagement in ELC as a whole. Research exploring how societal and contextual factors may create barriers to developing and strengthening the educator-parent relationship can serve to inform and enhance coaching practices targeting family involvement.

Best practices PD literature indicate that PD activities are most effective when they consist of ongoing and continuous support sustained over time. Given that the findings within this study suggest that change in early educator practices is a process that occurs gradually over time, it is clear that ongoing and continuous support such as coaching is not only beneficial but essential to affect change. Yet one-shot training practices are often preferred in ECL settings, due to the lower cost associated. Peer-coaching may be a more financially viable and sustainable approach to PD while still ensuring an ongoing and continuous delivery format. However, findings in the present study suggest that although Educators' see a place for peer-coaching in ELC, they did not yet feel they had obtained the skills or knowledge required to implement it. This is not surprising given that peer-coaching, not unlike coaching, requires significant support

and resources in place for effective implementation. The practice of peer-coaching in ELC settings is not yet well-defined and few studies have examined its effectiveness. Further research into peer-coaching in ELC settings would contribute to a greater understanding as to whether it is a viable and effective PD practice to enhance early educators' skills and the early learning environment as a whole.

### **Implications for Practice**

The findings of this study emphasize that coaching is a process that occurs over time as learners (i.e., Educators) gradually “open up to coaching”. Given this finding, it could be beneficial for coaches to have an understanding of this process and the Stages of Change framework described by Prochaska and Clemente's (1982). Progress, especially in the early stages of coaching, should not be measured solely by a change in educator practices but by the educators' progression from one stage to the next - moving from resisting change to goal setting and integrating new skills into current practice. Ignoring or not recognizing the Educator's readiness for change, may not only slow the rate of progress towards meaningful change but also have detrimental impacts on the educator-coach relationship and on the coaching process as a whole.

Positive performance feedback was emphasized by the Educators as vital to not only their skill development but to their motivation to change. Positive performance-based feedback has been demonstrated as an evidence-based practice to affect change in behaviour (Hattie & Timperley, 2007) and is linked to the development of intrinsic motivation (Badami, et al., 2011)), a key ingredient in adult learning (Knowles, 1984). It is evident that positive performance-based feedback is effective, however, it may be even more important in the early stages of coaching in which intrinsic motivation has not yet been established.

Although Educators' described coaching as a gradual 'opening up' process, it is important that we do not neglect the role of organizational components and contextual factors within this personal 'opening up' process. Even if coaches have 'opened up' to coaching and are at the action stage of change, efforts towards action may be hindered or thwarted entirely if the appropriate organizational adjustments have not been made to ensure the environment is a hospitable setting for change to take place. Although it may be tempting to hit the ground running with coaching, the current findings emphasise the importance of ensuring the appropriate organizational drivers are in place to support the coaching process.

### **Conclusion**

The purpose of this study was to provide a deeper understanding of the experience and perceived impact of coaching in ELC. Consistent with the transactional view of development (Sameroff & McKenzie, 2003), the findings suggest coaching is a dynamic process that evolves over time. This dynamic process is impacted not only by the changing characteristics of the educator as they progress through the stages of change but also by the organisational and contextual factors of the ELC environment. The findings of this study support and add to previous research on coaching in ELC and suggest that early educators view coaching as an effective PD practice. Educators reflected that coaching developed and strengthened their relationships with their coach, colleagues, families, and the children in their care, as well as enhanced their sense of competency as childcare professionals. Furthermore, Educators emphasised coaching had meaningful impacts on the ELC setting as a whole through enhancing their teaching practices to support children's development. Educators identified a need for additional support in their abilities to engage families and implement peer-coaching. Overall, the findings of this study support coaching as a form of PD to enhance teacher-practices in ELC and



serve to provide insight into the process of coaching as it is experienced through the lens of early educators.

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## Appendix A

### Research Participation Consent Form

#### CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH

Capacity Building to Bolster Wellbeing Among Early Childhood Educators and the Children they Support in Alberta  
*University of Alberta, Edmonton, Alberta*

Dear ASaP Early Learning and Care Educator:

We would like to invite you to participate in a research study conducted by Dr. Veronica Smith, Dr. Xiaozhou Zhang, and Vanessa Oslie from the University of Alberta, Department of Educational Psychology. You are being asked to participate because of your involvement in the Access, Supports, and Participation Continuum Project (ASaP) offered to you by the coaches from Getting Ready for Inclusion Today (GRIT).

#### PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The research aims to examine whether coaching supports offered by ASaP can 1) promote wellbeing and enhanced confidence in teaching among Early Childhood Educators; and 2) improve the quality the social and emotional environments in which young children learn.

#### PROCEDURES

Early Childhood Educators who participate in this study will be asked to engage in one interview (maximum 60 minutes) over the next 2 months

Interview: Educators will respond to questions about their experiences with the ASaP supports in regard to how their own social emotional knowledge and skills may have been impacted by the ASaP Project. In addition, they will be asked to reflect on how the project may have impacted children and families who attend their Early Learning and Care Centre. These responses will be collected and summarized by the researchers to ensure anonymity and confidentiality. We will conduct the interviews in a place or on the phone convenient to the educators. It will take around 30 mins to complete the whole process.

#### POTENTIAL RISKS AND DISCOMFORTS

Participating in this project involves only minimal risk. Some educators may feel uncomfortable when they are interviewed and recorded, however we will make every effort to create a comfortable environment. In addition, if any question asked in the data collection processes (i.e., survey, interview and coaching reflection) is distressing to you, you may choose not to answer. We would like to emphasize the collaborative nature of this project, as such we aim to be responsive to the unique context and needs of all those involved and will be openly seeking ongoing feedback and informed consent.

#### POTENTIAL BENEFITS TO SUBJECTS AND/OR SOCIETY

There may not be any direct benefits to participants. However, participating in this project may potentially be beneficial as the ultimate goal of this research is to reveal how coaching can best be utilized to contribute to positive outcomes. Therefore, educators may eventually receive better coaching instruction regarding their emotional and social competence development.



## PAYMENT FOR YOUR TIME

There is no payment given by the University of Alberta for participating in this study.

## ANONYMITY and CONFIDENTIALITY

Only researchers associated with the project will have access to your responses to the questionnaire, audio recording, transcripts, and coaching reflective forms. Responses made by individual participants on all the responses will remain confidential and anonymous, and your name will not appear on the questionnaire, interview note and coaching reflective form. All precautions will be made to protect the anonymity of all participants.

Regarding to the survey, no other identifying information will be captured, unless you choose to provide it. If you agree to participate in the second time survey, we will ask your email address in order to match your data with the baseline survey. At the end of the second time survey, you will be asked if you would like to participate in the third time survey and we will ask you for your email address again. If you agree to participate in the third time survey, we will ask your email address in order to match your data with the baseline and second time survey. When all times of the data were matched, we will have a Master List linking participants' email address to code numbers and remove all the email information by Nov. 2017 (i.e., prior to the last point of data collection). All the files including identified information will be destroyed at the end of Feb 2018 when the project is completed.

In terms of the interview and coaching reflective form, no any identifying information will be captured. We will create pseudonyms names for each participant in the interview transcripts and a list of code numbers for each participant on the coaching reflective form.

The data will be securely stored by Dr. Veronica Smith for a minimum of five years as required by University of Alberta guidelines. The results of this study may be presented at scholarly conferences, university class lectures, or published in professional journals.

## PARTICIPATION AND WITHDRAWAL

Participation in any of the phases of this study is voluntary, if you so chose to participate; you may withdraw your participation at any time without consequences of any kind. You may also refuse to answer any questions throughout the study in any of the phases of data collection. Regarding to the data withdraw, participants who provided contact information (i.e., email address) can contact the researchers and withdraw their data from the study up until November 2017 (i.e., prior to the last point of data collection). For other participants, data withdraw is not possible because their information is anonymous.

Incomplete data will not be withdrawn and still be collected and used in the data analysis. If participants want to withdraw this part of data, those who provided contact can contact the researcher and withdraw their data from the study up until November 2017 (i.e., prior to the last point of data collection). For other participants, data withdraw is not possible because their information is anonymous.

In addition, the researchers may withdraw you as well as your data from this research at their discretion if circumstances arise which warrant doing so.

## IDENTIFICATION OF INVESTIGATORS

If you have any questions or concerns about the research, please feel free to contact the primary investigator:

Veronica Smith, Ph.D.,                      Xiaozhou (Zoey) Zhang, PhD.      Vanessa Oslie

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In addition, the plan for this study has been reviewed for its adherence to ethical guidelines and approved by the Research Ethics Board (REB) at the University of Alberta. For questions regarding participant rights and ethical conduct of research, you can contact the Research Ethics Office at 780-492-2615.

## FUTURE CONTACT

I would like to receive a copy of the completed study (please give email address or full address)

## STATEMENT OF INFORMED CONSENT

**I HAVE READ AND UNDERSTOOD THIS CONSENT FORM AND I AGREE TO PARTICIPATE IN THE STUDY.**

\_\_\_\_\_  
*Name (Print)*

\_\_\_\_\_  
*Signed Name*

\_\_\_\_\_  
*Date*

## Appendix B

### Interview Protocol: ASaP Educators

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this interview. We are interested in your experiences participating in the *ASaP* Continuum Project. The interview will take about 30-40 minutes.

#### Warm Up

[have good markers/pens and blank paper available]

**Which words or pictures come to mind when you think about *ASaP*? Spend approximately 5 minutes thinking about this and depicting your thoughts.**

[after about 5 minutes – ask the educator to share what they have written or depicted on the paper]

#### Coaching experiences

**1. What is it like to be coached?**

*Probe: Can you tell us about some of your experiences? Positive, negative or neutral*

**2. Could you tell me a little bit more about [probe aspects of coaching that may not have been addressed by the interviewee]**

**a. Developing learning goals**

**b. Implementing learning goals**

**c. Monitoring learning goals**

**d. Being observed or coached in ratio in the Early Learning and Care (ELC) setting**

**e. Out of ratio de-brief time**

**3. Can you describe an experience where you felt coaching made a difference within your practices as an educator?**

*Probe: What do you feel most contributed to this success?*

**4. Can you describe an experience where you felt coaching may have had less of an impact on your practices as an educator?**

*Probe: What do you feel most contributed to the coaching having less of an impact?*

**5. Can you tell me a little about your experience with the training delivered through the *ASaP* workshops?**

*Probe: Did you feel that you gained sufficient knowledge, skills, etc. in training?*

*Probe: Is there something that you may have benefited from more of in regard to your training?*

*Probe: Is there something that you may have benefited from less of in regard to your training?*

**6. Now that you have some experience with being coached, what do you feel you would like more/or less of in regard to the coaching?**

*Probe: More?*

*Probe: Less?*

**7. The ASaP Continuum project aims to improve the skills and confidence of educators to support children's healthy social and emotional development. How might the project have impacted**

- a. **Your own Social and Emotional Competence?**
- b. **Your interactions with the children in care?**
- c. **Your practices with families?**
- d. **Your practices within your team?**
- e. **Your own confidence as an educator?**

*Probe: Could you provide some examples?*

**8. From your point of view, do you feel ASaP has provided you with enough or the right type of support to help all children participate?**

*Probe: Can you tell me a little more about that?*

*Probe: What might you need more of? Less of?*

### **Navigation support experiences**

**9. Have you had any experiences with a specific child that has had difficulty participating? Can you describe how you were supported in regard to this specific child?**

*Probe: What steps did you and your coach take to respond to the needs of the child?*

*Probe: What did you find the most beneficial in supporting this child?*

*(Administration of the screening tool; follow-up recommendations including referral, and follow-up observations from multidisciplinary team)*

*Probe: Are you aware of the Navigational Flowchart?*

**10. How could *ASaP* improve around Navigational Supports?**

**11. Based on your experience with the *ASaP* Navigational Supports, were there improvements among children who were provided with additional strategies /supports? Could you provide some examples?**

**Family engagement**

**12. How much of an impact do you believe *ASaP* training and coaching has had on your skills and confidence to engage families?**

*Probe: Could you provide some examples?*

**13. Are there some improvements or steps that you would like to see your centre take regarding family engagement to support social and emotional learning?**

*Probe: Could you provide some examples?*

**Thank you so much.**