



Core Competencies for Coaches

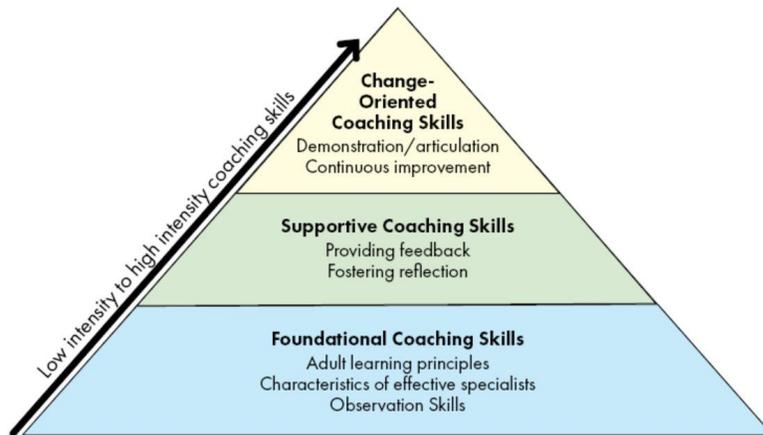
Overview

Competencies are defined as an individual's demonstrable abilities that can be observed or otherwise assessed. The competencies in this document represent core strategies that coaches can use to scaffold educators' ability to provide children with high quality and impactful experiences, interactions, and instruction.

Individualized coaching is a promising strategy for improving the quality of children's learning experiences. Coaching models have been linked to gains in educators' self-efficacy and can increase teachers' use of effective instructional strategies, which, in turn, may help teachers to feel more effective and reflective in their teaching practices. Despite this promise of coaching, there continues to be mixed research support for its effectiveness as a professional development model, likely due to poorly defined coaching processes across the field of education. Unclear coaching processes can undermine the effectiveness of coaching and result in missed opportunities to improve instruction and, ultimately, student outcomes. A goal of this document is to increase the transparency of quality coaching strategies to support alignment and implementation of effective practice across all coaching contexts. Using this competency-based framework naturally supports quality improvement efforts because it articulates specific behaviors that can be set as goals, practiced, and observed for improvement.

Over the past 20 years, the Children's Learning Institute (CLI) has established a significant body of research and implementation expertise in the development and investigation of coaching-based professional development models for early childhood educators. Repeated implementation and refinement of our model has helped us to isolate the coaching behaviors that we hypothesize are contributors to teacher change independent of intervention content or grade level. Thus, the competencies included in this document are generalizable across varied coaching contexts and can be applied to most age levels and programs.

There are seven categories of competency: adult learning theory, characteristics of effective specialists, observation, providing feedback, fostering reflective thinking, demonstration and verbal cues, and supporting continuous improvement. Each competency may be demonstrated during one-on-one conversations with teachers (e.g., feedback conversations), during instruction or interactions with children (e.g., during co-teaching), or in both contexts. Coach-teacher interactions can be focused on classroom management, children's behavior, or children's skill development.



Each of the seven coaching competencies are clustered across three tiers: foundational, supportive, and change-oriented competencies (McLeod, Hardy, & Grifenhagen, 2019). The three tiers are progressive, with foundational coaching skills representing a core set of knowledge and competencies that are necessary to demonstrate the other two tiers of competencies. This framework works concurrently with structural supports (e.g., coaching duration) and content focus areas (e.g., knowledge of evidence-based practices and early learning outcomes).

Coming soon: Coaches will be able to earn micro-credentials across the seven areas by demonstrating individual competencies via video submissions or other artifacts. Please contact Dr. Varghese for more information (Cheryl.A.Varghese@uth.tmc.edu). Information will also be posted on cliengage.org when the micro-credential system launches. The micro-credentials will be linked to the Texas Early Childhood Professional Development System (TECPDS), automatically updating the education and credentials for early childhood professionals with personal TECPDS accounts.

Using This Document:

- **Coaches, Mentors, Specialists:** Professionals who provide direct coaching services to educators can use this document to self-assess current skill levels, set goals for improvement, and track improvements. Used over time, the tool supports self-reflection and differentiation of skill levels (i.e., identification of competencies demonstrated but needing further improvement). By looking at gaps across the seven areas, coaches are able to identify where additional training and learning is needed, allowing for targeted professional development decisions that build specific skill sets.
- **Program Administrators:** Professionals who are responsible for managing, implementing, and evaluating programs can use this document to identify areas of need, create targeted professional development plans, and evaluate the appropriateness of existing trainings. The framework can also be used to develop detailed job descriptions and reward coaches who engage in improvement efforts and demonstrate increasing levels of competence.
- **Policymakers and Program Leaders:** Individuals responsible for high-stakes decisions, policies, and programs can use the competencies to create and implement policies and initiatives that support quality improvement and professionalism of coaching services.



Core Competency Area 1: Adult Learning Theory

Coaches must apply their knowledge of adult learning theory to their practices with educators. Adults learn best in environments that allow them to actively engage with content, ideas, and people; seek support when needed; and feel safe when trying new approaches. Adults also may need to connect the content of learning to relevant contexts (e.g., specific problems in the classroom) before they commit to learning new ideas or concepts. Coaches who work with adult learners across all types of settings (e.g., Head Start, public pre-k, center-based child care) and grade levels must be able to deliver coaching in a way that recognizes and fulfills teachers' needs to a) actively engage in learning that is directly relevant to them and b) become autonomous educators who can independently demonstrate competency. The competencies represented in this section are **foundational** for all coaching competencies (e.g., knowledge of adult learning theory supports fostering reflectiveness, providing demonstration and verbal cues, and supporting continuous improvement).

Adult Learning Theory Competencies

- Creates and sustains an engaging, supportive, and safe learning environment**
- Describes and applies principles of adult learning** in the creation and delivery of professional development (e.g., principles from andragogy, cognitive science, experiential learning, self-directed learning, and transformational learning theories)
- Promotes understanding and retention by providing participants repeated and varied opportunities to engage with content/material** (e.g., uses auditory and visual stimuli, opportunities to engage in discussions, application exercises through behavioral and experiential activities, and opportunities for participants to share and guide others)
- Describes how individual and/or cultural differences** (e.g., national origin, age, professional status) **can impact learning preferences**, and considers differences when developing strategies to meet the teacher's needs
- Delivers professional development with a balance of trainer-directed and self-directed learning** and demonstrates understanding of how to adjust training approaches for participants (e.g., understands that biases toward individuality and autonomy in western thinking may isolate or seem irrelevant to members of communal cultures)



Core Competency Area 2: Characteristics of Effective Specialists (Trainers/Coaches)

Coaches are able to create an environment that supports adult learners' efficacy and capacity for implementing evidence-based practices when they establish positive and supportive relationships with educators. Adult learning is shaped by prior knowledge and experience, and for some adults, this can serve as a barrier to learning and practicing new strategies. Establishing relationships that promote open communication, experimentation, and two-way feedback can increase receptivity to new approaches and mitigate resistance from educators. Coaches also build relationships with school leaders to increase understanding and alignment around improvement goals, support needed, and progress. Effective coaches continually reflect and improve on their interactions with educators to ensure that they are responsive to their professional and learning needs. Positive and supportive interactions between coaches and educators are **foundational** for the success of coaches' feedback and guidance to educators. The competencies in this section address the core knowledge and skills needed to promote strong collaboration and good working relationships between coaches and teachers.

Characteristics of Effective Specialists Competencies

Flexibility, Respect, and Accountability

- Reflects on one's own biases and perspectives** on adult learning to help maintain objectivity, respect, and flexibility with learner(s) throughout interactions with educators
- Shows respect to all learners** and avoids using any verbal or nonverbal characterizations of diverse individuals or groups
- Shows flexibility by making accommodations** for learner preferences that do not alter the content and effectiveness of the training or coaching
- Respects the teacher's authority in the classroom** (e.g., refrains from unnecessary interruptions during instruction or interactions)
- Shows respect by moving on once learner demonstrates understanding** (i.e., avoids repeated explanations or demonstrations of concepts the teacher has grasped)
- Recognizes and responds sensitively** if learner shows discomfort or resistance
- Shares leadership during activities** intended to increase learner problem solving and decision-making skills
- Ensures that personal content knowledge is deep** enough to support learners, and connects those who need additional information with the right resources
- Refrains from promising answers that will not be delivered**, and informs learner(s) when an exact answer is not known

- Solicits and accepts critical feedback** about one’s training or coaching style, demeanor, and content, then integrates feedback to improve the quality of learners’ experiences

Communication

- Maintains a positive, approachable, and attentive demeanor** during classroom visits or feedback sessions
- Uses verbal and nonverbal language that is positive** in content and tone
- Values the teacher by responding sensitively** to teacher’s comments and questions
- Encourages the teacher to talk about their own interests and challenges**
- Provides positive encouragement to motivate the teacher** to try new strategies and/or practices or persist when implementation challenges arise
- Reinforces existing positive practices by providing specific feedback** that highlights the connections between teaching behaviors and child response and understanding (e.g., “It was great that you reduced the quantity of manipulatives when you noticed that [child name] struggled with this activity”)



Core Competency Area 3: Observation Skills

These competencies describe the core knowledge and skills needed to understand the purpose, benefits, and uses of coach observation and evaluation. Observation and evaluation serves multiple purposes in the context of coaching, including a) assessing and understanding teachers’ individual needs, b) gathering evidence of teacher and/or student behaviors for feedback to teachers, and c) gathering data and feedback to evaluate and improve teachers’ classroom practices. Coaches’ observational skills are also often **foundational** for many of the other coaching competencies (e.g., coaches must have good observation skills to provide accurate feedback). Coaches must consider the methods and tools (e.g., formal, informal, norm-referenced observation tools) most appropriate for the purpose of the observation and/or evaluation.

Additionally, coaches should account for the ways that the information from the observations and/or evaluation will be analyzed, reported, and used. Clear communication with teachers about what to expect before, during, and after observations can alleviate anxieties about observations, maintain professionalism, and establish coaching routines.

Observation Skills Competencies

- Remains objective**, scoring only what is seen or heard (i.e., does not make inferences about a teacher’s meaning or intentions)

- ❑ **Manages cultural and individual biases** (e.g., does not allow speech/dialect/casual register to affect scoring in irrelevant areas; avoids sympathizing with target)
- ❑ **Uses neutral verbal and nonverbal communication** during scored observations to avoid inadvertently influencing classroom interactions (e.g., assessor avoids sitting down with a child who is painting and saying, “Wow, what are you painting today?” which could prompt the educator to sit with another child and start a conversation about his or her work)
- ❑ **Sets clear expectations** for what to expect before, during, and after observation period (e.g., how long the observation will be, the extent of your interactions during observation, when they will receive feedback)
- ❑ **Practices good note-taking** that provides sufficient details and specific evidence to support feedback conversations or completion of assessment instruments
- ❑ **Prioritizes constructive observational feedback to share with the teacher in a way that is not overwhelming** (e.g., even though there may be many areas for feedback, the coach selects a few to work on with the teacher)
- ❑ **Recognizes when to terminate an observation and/or report an incident** (e.g., child mistreatment)



Core Competency Area 4: Providing Feedback

The competencies in this section address the core knowledge and skills needed to provide teachers with strong feedback that is constructive, succinct, and focused. This set of coaching competencies are considered to be **supportive** because the coach is helping to facilitate awareness and understanding of best practices. Feedback should always occur in the context of positive and supportive interactions between the teacher and coach. Coaches are responsible for providing feedback that is accurate and evidence-informed and for refraining from providing feedback that is outside their area of expertise. During feedback sessions, coaches give opportunities for teachers to seek clarification, discuss strategies or solutions, and engage in back-and-forth conversations. Finally, coaches’ feedback is a starting point for helping teachers to identify areas for improvement in their instructional and professional practices.

Providing Feedback Competencies

Content-Focused Feedback

- ❑ **Uses content-focused language that references key student learning objectives during feedback conversations** (coach has to use domain specific language)
- ❑ **Uses content-focused language that is age appropriate and aligned with relevant national, state, or program learning guidelines**

- ❑ **Uses content-focused language that is directly linked to observational assessment tools** used by the teacher’s program to track performance to reinforce the connection between performance data and implementation
- ❑ **Uses content-focused language that takes into account and builds upon what the teacher already knows** about skill development, pedagogy, and evidence-based practice

Feedback Communication Characteristics

- ❑ **Succinctly summarizes events or interactions** to allow ample time for discussion and back-and-forth conversation
- ❑ **Stays focused on feedback that fits the current instructional and interaction context** (avoids drifting into topics not tightly matched to the situation)
- ❑ **Quickly corrects misunderstandings in content or instructional practices in the moment** rather than waiting until the lesson or interaction is over
- ❑ **Delivers constructive feedback** that includes possible solutions or opportunities for growth; shows respect rather than condescension

Actionable Feedback

- ❑ **Provides adaptations, modifications, or extensions to improve future delivery** of instruction or support (support refers to classroom management, schedules, etc.)
- ❑ **Provides opportunities for immediate practice** by recommending adaptations, modifications, or extensions to improve instructional delivery or interactions in the moment and when the coach is present to provide support
- ❑ **Builds on what the teacher is already doing** by providing actionable feedback that pushes for more skilled practice and supports more complex, sophisticated implementation of evidence-based practice



Core Competency Area 5: Fostering Reflective Thinking

Coaches engage in reflective conversations with educators so that they become independent problem solvers who are able to monitor and evaluate the effectiveness of their practice. Teachers who reflect on their classroom instruction are better positioned to adapt and modify their instruction to make it more effective. Strategies such as open-ended questions/prompts with adequate wait time encourage teachers to adopt contemplative and reflective dispositions. Video playback also can be a powerful tool for helping adults reflect by allowing the adult to slow down and view events from a different vantage point or perspective. This set of coaching competencies is considered to be **supportive** because the coach is primarily helping the teacher to engage in a new way of thinking.

These competencies describe the core knowledge and skills that are needed to successfully foster reflectiveness within teachers.

Fostering Reflective Thinking Competencies

- ❑ **Uses reflective prompts/language rather than relying heavily on summary or declarative statements** (e.g., “What seemed to work for the children during this lesson? How do you know?”)
- ❑ **Prompts the teacher to provide evidence** that children were engaged or unengaged during interactions and instruction that are the subject of reflective conversation
- ❑ **Orients the teacher to child signals** to increase the teacher’s ability to recognize children’s current level of engagement and understanding (i.e., reference to children’s signals during instruction or while using video recordings)
- ❑ **Guides the teacher to provide their own explanations of connections between specific teacher action(s) and child behaviors/responses** or helps the teacher to think of connections between instruction and child behaviors or responses if the teacher is unable to make connections on his or her own
- ❑ **Incorporates conversations about learning standards into reflective discussions** to help the teacher think about how their lessons and interactions align with key child outcomes
- ❑ **Prompts the teacher to think about and question the extent to which their instruction and interaction matches the targeted developmental or learning objectives**
- ❑ **Connects reflection opportunities to child data and progress monitoring results** to strengthen the teacher’s ability to recognize opportunities to adapt instruction and interactions to individualize support
- ❑ **Supports the teacher to articulate specific action steps** (e.g., professional development opportunities lesson adaptations) that are in alignment with their reflections on events and interactions
- ❑ **Uses a variety of prompts as needed until the teacher provides objective description of events;** this would occur prior to making judgments or moving on to solutions or next steps (i.e., describing what happened without the “why” it happened)
- ❑ **Uses a variety of prompts as needed until the teacher articulates their own explanations or judgments about particular events or interactions they’ve just described**
- ❑ **Uses a variety of prompts as needed until the teacher generates alternative explanations that consider others’ perspective** (e.g., administrator, student, teacher, etc.)
- ❑ **Offers alternative or contrasting perspectives** *in response to* a teacher’s own explanations or judgments of an instructional situation or interaction
- ❑ **Supports the teacher in drawing conclusions and describing next steps** for improvement (e.g., instructional adaptations, changes to routines)



Core Competency Area 6: Demonstration and Verbal Cues

The competencies in this section address the core knowledge and skills needed to show how coaches can effectively use demonstration and/or verbal cues to support teachers' instructional practices. Verbal cues are defined as the clear and explicit verbalization of the steps, procedures, or process for implementing a lesson or strategy. Modeling and demonstrating activities communicate the subtleties (i.e., tacit knowledge) of implementing new practices that cannot always be easily articulated verbally. These competencies are part of the **gradual release of responsibility** process, in which coaches demonstrate/articulate specific practices and then scaffold educators by gradually allowing them to assume more responsibility over implementation. Demonstration and articulation also can allow the teacher to assess a coach's credibility in the classroom, which supports relationship building. This set of coaching competencies are considered to be **change-oriented** because they directly contribute to changes in teacher practices.

Demonstration and Verbal Cues Competencies

- Models or demonstrates a lesson or strategy in the teacher's own classrooms** to help the teacher see how new practices look when implemented in the context of their own resources, classroom environment, and student needs
- Shares and discusses targeted video exemplars** as an alternative to in-class demonstration to show rather than simply tell the teacher about new practices
- Connects demonstrations and/or articulations** to previous professional development to support transfer of learning
- Provides the teacher with an immediate opportunity to practice with coach feedback** after demonstrating a new strategy or practice
- Prompts the teacher before demonstrations to observe** for specific instructional elements or student responses/engagement to focus their attention
- Clearly articulates the steps/procedures during modeling and demonstration** to draw attention to the key aspects or transitions in lessons
- Clearly articulates the steps/procedures (i.e., without demonstration) to guide the teacher** to implement practices and strategies on his/her own
- Engages in co-teaching** in which the coach (1) joins the teacher in planning the lesson, (2) begins the lesson by modeling and guiding the first turn, and (3) transitions to supporting the teacher in implementing the remainder of the lesson
- Actively participates in a lesson or interaction, working side-by-side with the teacher** to offer brief demonstrations or articulation to correct the teacher's mistakes, misunderstanding, or missed steps during implementation
- Verbalizes thought processes to help the teacher see the logic and intent** of instructional strategies and practices

- ❑ **Uses brief verbal or nonverbal cues to help the teacher** recognize opportunities to make adjustments to instructional situations or interactions
- ❑ **Provides a quick explanation or cue** to guide intervention and support in response to children's signals



Core Competency Area 7: Supporting Continuous Improvement

These competencies address the core knowledge and skills needed to engage educators in continuous improvement cycles. Improvement cycles include the assessment of skills, planning of targeted improvement activities, practicing to achieve goals, and reflection on progress and growth. Continuous improvement competencies are considered to be **change-oriented** because they support small, incremental changes to practice that collectively lead to large, transformational changes. Coaches may utilize a **gradual release of responsibility** approach to ensure that educators feel a sense of ownership throughout this process until teachers can independently engage in their own improvement cycles. Coaches are also responsible for working with administrators to establish and promote a culture that values improvement and allows teachers to acknowledge and address areas for growth.

Supporting Continuous Improvement Competencies

Communicate about Continuous Improvement

- ❑ **Describes** how the **core principles of continuous improvement** (e.g., repeated cycles of assessment, planning, practice, and reflection) are applied in educational settings
- ❑ **Engages the administrator in conversations about the process for continuous improvement planning**, the coach's role in supporting the teacher toward meeting goals, and supports that are needed at the administrative level in order to make progress toward identified goals

Analyze Data and Set Goals

- ❑ **Helps the teacher learn to interpret classroom data** to identify priorities for improvement in the skill development of their students
- ❑ **Helps the teacher learn to interpret performance data** to identify priorities for improvement in their own practice
- ❑ **Supports the teacher in articulating their own goals** for improvement and professional development
- ❑ **Supports the teacher in setting realistic goals** (i.e., within scope and timeframe) in alignment with classroom data, performance data, and their own interests

Plan and Practice

- ❑ **Supports the teacher in identifying and planning for repeated practice** opportunities in connection with goals
- ❑ **Documents action plans** that specify improvement goals, needed resources and support (e.g., professional development), and specific steps for the teacher and coaches (e.g., practice opportunities)
- ❑ **Connects feedback with planned practice opportunities** using language that is consistent with documented goals and improvement strategies
- ❑ **Engages the teacher in reflective conversations about progress in meeting goals**, including the identification of barriers and supports for improvement
- ❑ **Tracks and reports on the teacher's progress** in a manner that supports evaluation of progress and the revision or conclusion of activity related to the established goals

Glossary of Key Terms

1:1 coaching: 1:1 coaching describes when a coach works individually with a teacher, typically before or after an in-class coaching session. During 1:1 coaching sessions, coaches and teachers may work together for a variety of reasons, including time to planning lessons, problem solving, discussing student progress, and debriefing about observed lessons.

Andragogy: Andragogy is the method and practice of teaching adult learners.

Articulation: Articulation describes when a coach clearly and explicitly verbalizes the steps, procedures, or process for implementing a lesson or strategy.

Attuned: Being attuned is being aware of and responsive to children's responses, cues, and signals.

Classroom management: Classroom management describes a teacher's ability to create an organized and predictable environment for child learning combined with the emotional climate and support that fosters children's feelings of acceptance.

Coach: Coach describes a professional who provides direct and individualized professional development services to educators. Coaches are also sometimes referred to as specialists or mentors.

Coaching competencies: Coaching competencies describe sets of skills that are needed to show mastery across various aspects of coaching. There are eight coaching competencies: adult learning theory, characteristics of effective specialists, observation skills, providing feedback, fostering reflective thinking, demonstration and articulation, and supporting continuous improvement. Each of the eight coaching competencies is made up of a series of related skills that collectively show mastery of the coaching competency.

Coaching micro-credentials: Coaching micro-credentials are a digital form of certification that indicate competency in a specified set of skills (National Education Association, 2018). To earn coaching micro-credentials, coaches select the competency indicator they want to show mastery in. Then, coaches complete the requirements needed to earn the selected coaching competency. Individual badges are awarded upon successful completion of each requirement for the selected coaching competency. Additionally, a micro-credential badge is awarded upon successful completion of all of the requirements for the selected competency.

Coaching strategies: Coaching strategies are methods/techniques the coach uses to support teachers in developing and improving their instructional skills and abilities.

Continuous improvement: Continuous improvement describes the practice of guiding teachers to set measurable aims and test whether the changes they make lead to improvements. Typically, this process encourages teachers to 1) make a change related to an aspect of classroom instruction; 2) implement the change; 3) examine the data resulting from the implemented change; and 4) reflect on what they have learned by abandoning, revising, or increasing the change (Langley et al., 2009).

Co-teaching: Co-teaching is a process by which the coach (1) joins the teacher in planning the lesson, (2) begins the lesson by modeling and guiding the first turn, and (3) transitions to supporting the teacher in implementing the remainder of the lesson. Co-teaching is a process that combines coaching strategies such as instructional planning, modeling, side-by-side coaching, and reflective questioning to provide teachers with a rich learning opportunity and high levels of support.

Cues: A cue is a type of receptive communication that provides a message from one person to another.

Demonstrating: See definition of “Modeling.”

Gradual release: Gradual release describes how coaches scaffold teachers' instructional improvement over time. Gradual release is a process by which the coach strategically scaffolds teachers' learning in order to provide sufficient initial support as teachers are acquiring new knowledge and learning new skills. It may occur over a few minutes, a day, a week, a month, or a year.

In-class coaching: In-class coaching is defined as when the coach works with a teacher during a period of classroom instruction when students are present. A coach may demonstrate, provide verbal or nonverbal guidance, observe, and provide feedback during in-class coaching sessions.

“In the moment” coaching: In the moment coaching describes when a coach provides feedback or intervenes while the teacher is delivering a lesson or implementing a strategy.

Instructional planning: Instructional planning is a very intentional period of sitting down with a teacher, mapping out a specific activity or lesson, usually with data, curriculum guides, activity guides, etc. This is a process of helping teachers to organize and optimize their instruction. It is an organized description of the activities and resources the teacher will use to guide the children to a specific learning objective. It details the lesson the teacher will teach and how to teach it.

Modeling: Modeling is when the coach demonstrates a lesson, approach or strategy they would like to see the teacher do. Modeling is a high-intensity coaching strategy because the coach is the one doing the “heavy lifting” with interactions that often target specific behaviors and instructional change. The process for demonstration includes feedback and then immediate practice.

Reflection: Reflection is described as an ongoing process of learning from experiences in order to gain insights about the individual/practice. Reflection occurs when a teacher demonstrates self-awareness and critical evaluation of their teaching practices and professional learning/development. The purpose of reflection is to gain new understanding in order to improve future practice.

Responses: Responses are a child’s reaction to any event, situation, question, experience, or other type of stimulus.

Scaffolding: Scaffolding refers to a process in which coaches model or demonstrate how to solve a problem and then step back, offering support to the teacher as needed.

Side-by-Side Coaching: Side-by-side coaching is the process of providing the teacher instructional support while the teacher is providing classroom instruction. This strategy is used when the teacher is very familiar with the instructional practice or activity. During the lesson, if the coach identifies a missed opportunity, the coach should briefly interject with a comment, suggestion, or tip while the teacher is providing classroom instruction. The teacher is doing the majority of the work teaching the lesson, while the coach is close by to “jump in” to improve or enhance the lesson as needed.

Signals: Signals are gestures, actions, or sounds that children use to convey information.

Skill development: Skill development describes teachers’ instructional efforts that are focused on increasing students’ independence, learning, problem solving skills, and critical thinking skills.