

## **Inspire, Raise Awareness and Empower – Biographical Online Coaching as Part of Online Training**

Monika Zimmermann, Yvonne Reyhing

Monika Zimmermann

Zentrum für interdisziplinäres Coaching, Bergheimer Straße 104, D-69115 Heidelberg

E-Mail: [mz@coaching-zentrum-zimmermann.de](mailto:mz@coaching-zentrum-zimmermann.de)

Dr. Yvonne Reyhing

Universität Konstanz, Universitätsstraße 10, D-78464 Konstanz

[Yvonne.reyhing@uni-konstanz.de](mailto:Yvonne.reyhing@uni-konstanz.de)

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**Abstract** To promote high-quality childcare, we developed a coaching approach as part of an online training for early childcare teachers. It is based on humanistic ideas and Rogers' theory of personality development. With our coaching, we want to enable teachers to (re)connect to their own understanding of high-quality interactions, which is linked to one's own childhood experiences. This individual mindset of good teacher-child interactions is set as the basis of the entire training and the subsequent coaching sessions. In reference to the three central concerns of coaching inspired by the concept of positive psychology (positive experiences, positive individual traits and competences, and positive supportive institutions) is the possibility that building strength is the most potent weapon in the arsenal of coaching.

**Keywords:** childcare teachers; interactions; training; positive psychology

## **Begeistern, Bewusstmachen, Befähigen – Biographisches Online-Coaching als Teil einer Online-Weiterbildung**

**Zusammenfassung** Zur Förderung einer qualitativ guten Kinderbetreuung, wurde ein Coaching-Ansatz als Teil einer Online-Weiterbildung für Erzieher:innen entwickelt. Es basiert auf humanistischen Konzepten und Rogers' Theorie der Persönlichkeitsentwicklung. Das Coaching soll Fachkräfte unterstützen zu ihrem eigenen Verständnis von hochwertigen Interaktionen zurückzufinden und Verbindungen zur eigenen Kindheit zu erkennen. Das individuelle Verständnis guter Interaktionen bildet die Grundlage der gesamten Weiterbildung und des Coachings. In Bezug auf die zentralen Anliegen des Coachings, die vom Konzept der Positiven Psychologie inspiriert sind (positive Erfahrungen, positive individuelle Eigenschaften und Kompetenzen, positive unterstützende Institutionen), besteht die Möglichkeit, dass der Aufbau von Stärke die stärkste Waffe im Coaching ist.

**Schlüsselwörter:** Erzieher:innen; Interaktionen; Weiterbildung; Positive Psychologie

Positive relationships are the foundation of young children's learning and development. Developing and maintaining positive interactions is one of the key competences for teachers, especially when working with younger children. Thus, one crucial aspect of educational practice is to improve the quality of caregiver – child interactions (Melhuish et al. 2015). Unfortunately, international studies show rather medium to low process quality in childcare settings. The observed level of active learning support is consistently lower on average than the level of emotional and behavioural support across studies (La Paro et al. 2014; Reyhing et al. 2019; Slot et al. 2017).

To counteract this circumstance the iQuaKi online training was developed. The training focusses on the support of early childcare caregivers in their further development of interaction quality. The iQuaKi project was implemented from 2019 to 2022 at the University of Konstanz and financed by the German federal ministry of education and research (Bundesministerium für Bildung und Forschung, BMBF). The project comprises the development and the implementation of the training as well as an accompanying study to show its effects. Read more about the training and the evaluation study in Reyhing et al. (2022) and Reyhing et al. (in press).

## **1 The iQuaKi Training and Coaching**

In line with evidence-based practices emerging from the field, our training includes universal and targeted teaching practices for fostering children's social, emotional and cognitive skills. In line with the CLASS framework (La Paro et al. 2012), we distinguish two dimensions of teaching practices: emotional and behavioural support and active learning support. We focus on general and targeted practices which are linked to selected developmental steps of 0 to 4-year-old children and corresponding challenging behaviours. The training consists of six modules – each of them is divided into a “knowledge part” and a “transfer part”. The knowledge part uses texts and video examples from existing childcare centres in Germany, which we have enriched with content-related knowledge, as well as learning assessments. The transfer part focusses on the transfer of the content into the practical work. Therefore, different reflection techniques are used. In addition to self-reflection, coaching and team-reflection are the main focus of this part of the training. The whole training lasts for half a year and takes 1-2 hours per week. In this article the focus is on the coaching, which was developed in cooperation with Monika Zimmermann.

## **2 Theory of action and positive psychology – 2 complementary models/elements of professionalization**

“If you want to build a ship, don't drum up the men to gather the wood, divide the work and give orders. Instead, teach them to yearn for the vast and endless sea.”

*Antoine de Saint-Exupéry*

Coaching is more than the sum of selected areas of application and tools and it can – aside from being generally educational – definitely contribute to guide us toward an interdisciplinary knowledge and “understanding society”, based on purpose, consciousness, and wisdom. A training program exclusively oriented towards the market, methods, and techniques is not sufficient for this purpose. What is needed for people to develop into successful teachers, caregivers, coaches, to professionalize? What knowledge, which experiences, which self- and outside explorations, which understandings of people and the world trigger the individual professionalization?

Coaching helps people to expand their awareness and decision-making capacity. Consequently, a coaching-program must contribute soundly to the prospective coaches’ or teachers’ own expansion and deepening of their awareness of the many faces of human onto- and phylogenetic developmental backgrounds, facets, and possibilities. The understanding of the coach’s role, who thinks and acts according to this principle, is characterized by an awareness of human potentials and limits for development, his own professional expertise, and the relativity of the concept of truth. As “the” truth – even in the field of science – cannot exist, the coach can deal confidently with the gaps in his own knowledge and understanding and is able to confront the situation, explanatory approaches, interpretative patterns, and values of his clients with respect. Statements of the learners are acknowledged and accepted with regards to their subjective truth. The instructor functions as a promoter of the developing awareness of the learners and not as an expert for their individual problem solving. Knowledge acquisition is triggered through „constructive uncertainty”. Thereby, awareness promoting irritation in the constructivist sense becomes the basis for the development of autonomous strategies to overcome and solve. The trainees do not learn the quality of interaction as an unprocessed workload but generate their own understanding of it. This way, self-regulated, free learning counteracts sham knowledge and blindness.

### **3 Biographical Coaching**

The first coaching session takes place in the beginning of the training and lasts 90 minutes. During the coaching session we focus on the interaction experiences of the caregivers and their individual understanding of good interaction quality. Therefore, they individually complete a preparation task before the first coaching session starts. This task is explained in a video with some personal stories from two of the coaches, who have also carried out this exercise. This very personal approach to the topic enables the participants to open themselves up to reflecting on their own ways of acting and the accompanying development process. With the help of our biographical approach, a personal and emotional connection to the topic of the training is established. In addition, this approach offers the possibility of uncovering obstacles to implementation, which are rooted in one's own childhood experiences. In this first task, caregivers are encouraged to remember their childhood. They are asked to consider what interaction experiences with adults they had themselves as a child and then to become aware of what is particularly important to them today in interactions with the children

in childcare. They're asked to bring their thoughts and notes to the first coaching session, where they are reflected and classified.

As a result, at the end of the first coaching session there is a first draft of an individual mindset, according to the motto "good interactions for me are...". This individual mindset of good caregiver – child interactions is set as the basis of the entire training and the following coaching sessions. In the following sessions, which are in the middle and the end of the training and last 45 minutes each, this mindset is related to everyday interactions. Therefore, caregivers record themselves on video, which are viewed and reflected with the coach in the coaching session. Within the coaching, participants are made aware of parallels between their actions and challenges to action and their mindset as well as their own childhood experiences.

The coaching refers to the theory of personality development by Carl Rogers, which states that people fundamentally strive to develop themselves further: They want to have new experiences, discover new things, gain new knowledge and differentiate existing knowledge. However, it is necessary that learning is initiated by the person himself, so that the new experience is not perceived as a threat to the self. Thus, in order for knowledge to be integrated into the self, the person must first view the content as emotionally relevant and subjectively meaningful (Arnold and Gómez Tutor 2006; Rogers and Schmid 1991). Moreover it is based on the construct of interaction quality, like the caregiver – child interactions are (La Paro et al. 2012). This construct can be directly transferred to the interactions between coach and participant and thus represents a clear basis for the design of the coaching relationship. The interactions between coach and participant can be described as high-quality and beneficial if they are based on an appreciative, trusting and supportive relationship and are characterized by flexibility, stimulation and encouragement (Reyhing, in press).

89 caregivers participated in the evaluation study. Most of them also participated in the training. We conducted 70 sessions of the first coaching, 60 of the second and 49 of the third up to the end of July 2022. All three coaches were trained and worked according to the binding coaching concept. The concept consists of the basic values described above as well as a description of the specified procedure. For the first coaching the procedure is as follows:

- Short Welcome
- Narrative prompt for the interaction task
  - Part 1: Interactions in childhood
  - Part 2: Interactions today in practice
- Formulate personal understanding of good interactions
- Connect to the content of the training: Working out an individual focus for each of the first modules
- Open questions and farewell

The second and the third coaching procedure is as follows:

- Short Welcome
- Joint viewing and reflection of the videos

- Working out the parallels between actions and obstacles to action and the mindset as well as their own childhood experiences
- Open questions and farewell

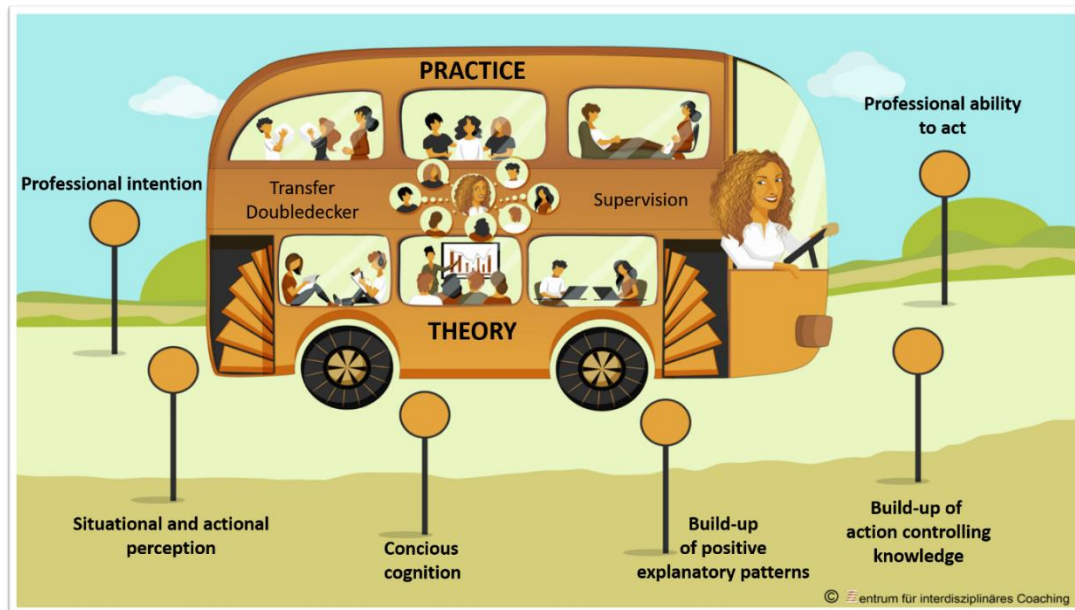
The coaching part of the training was rated as particularly useful by the participants. One of them said: „During the coaching I was able to relive and better understand my own experiences, which reminded me once again of my values in my work with the children.” Another one formulated „Through the coaching I have dealt more intensively with the topic of interaction with children. I have been encouraged to bring in and consolidate my very personal experiences and my point of view.”

#### **4 Enabling action as the central aim of the coaching-program – From knowledge to awareness and action**

Training measures aimed at efficiency must complete the task of combining the acquisition of new knowledge with its concrete realization in professional practice. The problem is the discrepancy between knowledge of professionally adequate action and its actual application in professional practice (Zimmermann 2011).

As vocational action is ultimately to be reflected and professionalized, one must first clarify what is understood as “action” in psychological action theory. According to Traub (2000), an action is marked by target-orientation and consciousness, by a hierarchical-sequential action organization, by integration of emotional processes, and by recourse to reserves of knowledge relevant to the action. Thus, one part of an “action” is the corresponding “intention” to perform the action, otherwise it is not an action that occurs but simply a behavior. Inversely, a certain intention does not imply a certain action: We can, for instance, have the “firm intention” to not overwhelm our clients with advice, but this intention does in no way guarantee the realization of the (refrain from) action.

The following graphic illustrates the stages throughout the didactically pre-structured learning journey of the coaching-program (cf. fig. 1). Actions include cognitive as well as emotional processes and only occur when they can rely on action controlling knowledge (ebd.). This knowledge is marked by societal elements as well as individual experiences. Cognitions generate, shape, and influence the execution of actions; conscious cognitions are superior to unconscious ones and assure the control over actions.



**Fig. 1** The learning journey of the coaching-program

Knowledge relevant to actions is memorized in a specific manner. The complexity of pedagogical happenings, the variety of envisaged goals, the speed of human interaction as opposed to the limit of the human capacity to process information demand specific procedures when it comes to digesting information.

Wahl et al. (1995) name preconditions on the nature of knowledge relevant to actions so that even *in practice, under pressure for immediate action* one can effectively refer back to it: It must be possible for the coach/the teacher to speedily identify situations (situational perception) and they must be able to choose an effective mode of action very quickly (actional perception). The cognitive processes during the situational and actional perception are so intricately related to one another that the perception of a situation happens almost instantaneously to the evaluation of alternative actions and the choice for one course of action. Thus, there are significant *reserves of knowledge related to potential capacity for action whose nature allows them to be recalled in minimal time*. “Newly ingested knowledge must therefore be reshaped before it can control actions.” This process of reshaping can be described as a learning process whose aim is to “bundle” broad and simultaneously dispersedly stored reserves of knowledge and to compress them in such a way that they can be recalled “en bloc” (ibid., p.63). For this purpose, many separate pieces of information are linked to one another in such a way that they “present only a singular unit of information.”

Following Wahl et al. (ibid., p. 64), it is important for the professional actionability of coaches that the “variety of theoretical knowledge” and the “richness of personal experience in context” are associated, bundled, condensed, and made cognitively present in such a way that their “quintessence only comprises one or multiple units of information.” This transformation of reserves of knowledge into “a condensed form”, as Wahl et al. (ibid., p. 66) call it, is an indispensable learning step towards action

control because only this compression can be accessed through spontaneous situational and actional perceptions.

*In regard to the design of lasting teaching measures, one can therefore assume that newly ingested information must be condensed through further learning processes in order to become effective for action.* The studies conducted by Wahl on schoolteachers, professors and instructors show that teachers bundle their extensive knowledge in the following manner: They attempt to compare new situations with those “typical” situations that, according to their theoretical knowledge and practical experience, occur repeatedly (ibid., p. 67). Various types of situations, problems, and solutions are stored in bundles and are available for retrieval. This means “that the long and complicated process of reshaping mediated knowledge must be systematically supported and accompanied until it takes effect in the reshaping of situation types and reaction types” (ibid., p. 68).

The term “pedagogical double-decker” (dt. *Pädagogischer Doppeldecker*) was coined in 1985 by Geißler. It designates a phenomenon of social interaction during training programs: In the seminar setting that which is talked about actually takes place at the same time. The teaching of the instructor is the “illustrative material” (dt. *Anschauungsmaterial*) for the learners (*lower floor of the double-decker*). In this situation of the pedagogical double-decker the trainees reflect the meaning of chosen theoretical concepts while simultaneously experiencing their practical application through the instructor, thus they are given the opportunity to confront these concepts directly, personally and based on experience (*stairs going up*). An important part of the pedagogical double-decker is working with situations and cases that offer the chance to proceed holistically, as learners can apply their own preexisting knowledge and, through active experiences, connect it new knowledge to the old one. During this process it is of central importance for the learners to be able to experience the usefulness of their knowledge immediately (*upper floor*). The prospective coaches’ gain depends on diverse effects of confrontation and is therefore high, especially once they realize that the level of action and of reflection are connected with each other. Concretely, this happens by repeatedly asking trainees to find connections between theoretical statements and their concrete experiences throughout the seminars (*middle floor*).

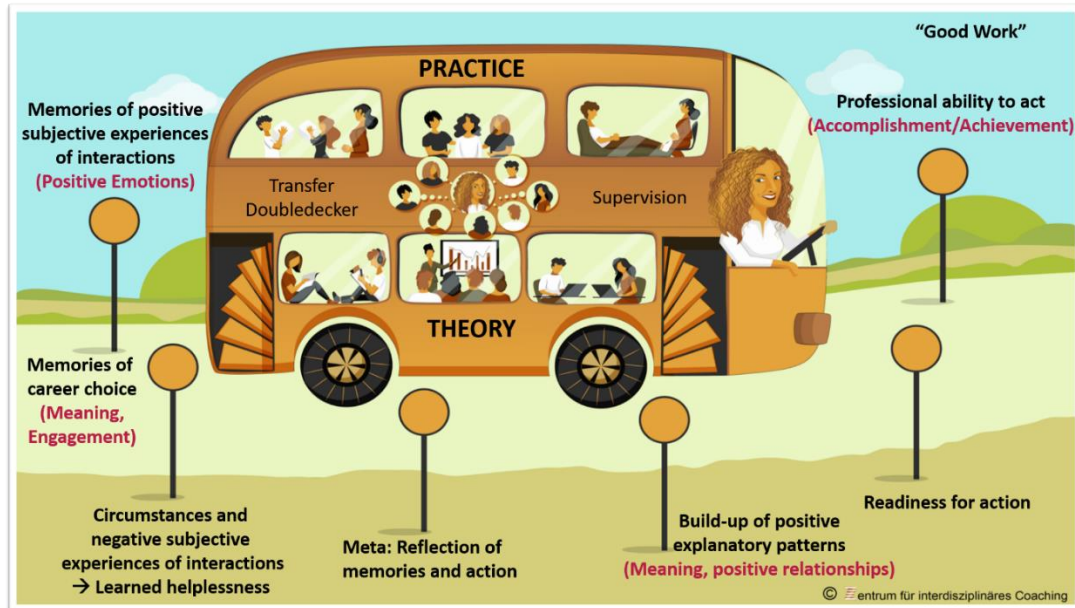


Fig. 2 The pedagogical double-decker

When adopting the positive biographical coaching approach throughout a training program for educators, the bus stops along the way from knowledge to performance can be related to the five elements of the PERMA-Model in positive psychology (Seligman 2012), as pictured in fig. 2. Coaching processes structured according to this combined model allow the trainees to move away from learned helplessness toward successively realizing these five components (Positive Emotions, Engagement, positive Relationships, Meaning, Accomplishment/Achievement) AND the professional ability to act by riding the pedagogical double decker. From the outset, *memories of positive subjective experiences of interactions from the learner's own childhood* evoke positive emotions related to their present work as educator while memories of their career choice give further meaning to that work and allow to wholly engage in action.

However, certain circumstances when educators experience negative subjective interactions may overshadow such memories and neutralize the positive effects they have on the trainees' attitude towards their work. Instead of a positive, action-oriented outlook on such experiences, learned helplessness may become the preferred explanatory pattern. Through renewed reflection on the aforementioned memories and how they influence present action, guided by the coach, the trainee can develop positive explanatory patterns and counteract the feeling of helplessness. This helps relocate and reaffirm the meaning of the educator's work as well as build positive relationships in the present, that resemble those positive experiences of the trainee themselves.

*In this state the educator is ready to act rather than being immobilized by learned helplessness.* The trainee is able to progressively develop his/her professional ability to act and meaningfully employ this new ability in his/her work, thus gaining "a sense of accomplishment is a result of working toward and reaching goals, mastering an endeavor, and having self-motivation to finish what you set out to do" (Madeson



2017). Throughout the training and coaching process theoretical input continuously informs the professional actions of the educators and vice versa. Following the principle of the pedagogical double-decker, trainees are encouraged to and supported in employing new knowledge and renewed self-knowledge in their work, while training and coaching sessions take into account the individual challenges and insights that they report.

## 5 Conclusions and implications

In reference to the three central concerns of coaching inspired by the concept of positive psychology (positive experiences, positive individual traits and competences, and positive supportive institutions), there is the possibility that building strength is the most potent weapon in the arsenal of coaching (Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi 2000). The pedagogical and empirical focus seems to be shifted to assess and cure a collective lack of knowledge. However, the message of the positive psychology movement is to remind us that training is not just fixing what is wrong. It is also encouraging what is right. Seligman (2000) discovered that there are human strengths that act as buffers against mental illness: e.g., optimism, interpersonal skill, the capacity for flow; in our opinion they are also able to catalyze competences like high quality of interactions. We need to ask people within the occupation i.e., the educators themselves to recognize that a lot of the best work they are already doing in the kindergarten is to amplify strengths. Instead of providing damage control techniques straightaway, we firstly have to help the educators to identify their own and the children's strengths. In addition to this we need to enable them to further develop their existing skills and to discover new ones.

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**Prof. Dr. Monika Zimmermann**, Mitglied der Geschäftsführung der iba (Internationale Berufsakademie), Geschäftsbereichsleitung Forschung und Entwicklung der F+U Unternehmensgruppe, systemische Beraterin/Therapeutin, Senior- Lehr- Coach DBVC/IOBC; Inhaberin des Zentrums für interdisziplinäres Coaching; Gutachterin, Wissenschaftsexpertin und Mitglied beim Sachverständigenrat des DBVC. Kontakt: <https://coaching-zentrum-zimmermann.de/>

**Dr. Yvonne Reyhing**, wissenschaftliche Mitarbeiterin am Lehrstuhl Entwicklung und Bildung in der frühen Kindheit der Universität Konstanz und Pädagogische Hochschule Thurgau sowie selbstständige Elterncoach. Forschungs- und Arbeitsschwerpunkte: Qualität in der frühkindlichen Bildung, Betreuung und Erziehung, Professionalisierung pädagogischer Fachkräfte, (Online) Weiterbildungen und Coaching.