Coaching Adults to Improve Student Learning

What is the Bank Street Education Center?
Bank Street College is a leader on the intersection between child development and adult instructional practice. We have built well-documented teacher, coach, and leader professional learning expertise, and are known for preparing some of the nation’s most valued educators. Our Education Center, founded in 2014, partners with cities, school systems, and higher education organizations across the country to share our knowledge and build instructional and change management expertise among a wide array of educators, leaders, and community stakeholders.

While our partnerships range in goal and are designed based on local needs, they share a focus on adult learning that draws from the Bank Street tradition in order to support large-scale instructional change. In all of our work, we support teachers and system leaders in re-imagining what strengths-based, developmentally meaningful, ambitious teaching and learning looks like for children, and discovering how to actualize that vision at every layer of a school system and within educator preparation programs. As coaching becomes a more widely accepted, research-based improvement support for teachers and leaders, our partnerships have increasingly focused on providing coaching, or developing the capacity of coaches, rooted in a shared vision for instructional quality, to support system-wide instructional change.

Coaching that Draws from Bank Street Traditions
The Bank Street Education Center draws on over 100 years of experience working with children and adults. The Developmental-Interaction Approach (DIA); which is based in relationships and emerges from scholarship in our Graduate School of Education’s dialogue with other progressive researchers and leaders, fuses a deep understanding of child development with careful observation of children and the design of learning experiences with intentional, responsive teaching.

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**Bank Street key knowledge areas**

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<th>Knowledge of development</th>
<th>Knowledge of the individual</th>
<th>Knowledge of practice</th>
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<td>...teachers have a deep understanding of child development and are highly skilled at observing children in their daily lives.</td>
<td>...children experience trusting relationships that are created when educators, through their close observation and recording, seek to holistically understand children, including their family and community context, and build on their strengths.</td>
<td>...educators create developmentally meaningful and culturally responsive learning experiences rooted in disciplinary content (e.g., math) for each individual child in their classrooms.</td>
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<td>...educators are able to carefully reflect on their own developmental needs and learn in psychologically safe environments.</td>
<td>...learning is “strengths-based,” building upon what adults are already doing well, while designing experiences to further develop and explore new ways of reaching children.</td>
<td>...regular opportunities for inquiry and reflection are incorporated into practice, both in one-on-one settings with a coach or supervisor and in groups or teams, so that educators are continuously building knowledge “in, from and through practice.”</td>
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**The Bank Street Education Center’s Coaching Model**

Our coaching model is organized around a reflective three-step cycle that distills the practices listed above into a process for working with teachers, coaches, and leaders. Trusting relationships, careful observation and recording of children and teaching practice, deep knowledge of child development and children’s lived experiences, and a strengths-based approach that respects the environment and context are at the heart of how coaching happens.

In order to effectively engage educators, it is essential that coaches begin their relationships by establishing a partnership based on trust. This foundation enables deep learning to take place because it allows the teacher to take risks. Coaching techniques support teacher reflection on practice with an eye toward child development and using the standards and curriculum to support student-focused goals. This process is facilitated by the careful use of observation and recording while focusing on the child. A Bank Street tradition of low-inference note taking and analysis forms the basis of assessment and reflection with teachers. To do this effectively, teachers first need a strong “holding environment” to grow in and out of. In other words, they require the right combination of supports and challenges to strengthen and change their beliefs and attitudes built over time and informed by expertise.

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Observation & Recording
The observation and recording phase is conducted by either the educator or the coach. The coach may observe the educator in action, taking low-inference notes about what the teacher and students are doing, then organize the evidence for reflection and feedback to move instruction to improve learning experiences and teacher practice. As specific needs emerge, educators may also become the observers as coaches model an activity or teaching strategy. Building upon the Bank Street tradition of observing and recording, educators are guided to focus not only on the educator moves, but also on the ways that children respond to the content, the activity, their peers and the environment around them. What these interactions reveal provides important insight into each child’s understanding and development as well as into the teaching strategies.

In other cases, coaches will further support the educator by co-facilitating a specific activity or strategy, or stepping in to provide “on-the-spot” support, which we call “collaborative modeling.” Coaches may also employ “ongoing narration” as a component of modeling; to do this, coaches identify out loud, in real time, the behaviors of the educator and children throughout activity implementation to highlight the connections between child development, a child’s actions and the corresponding educator moves. As a relationship deepens, coaches may also interweave the two by observing educators and providing them with prompt reminders to help him/her respond more effectively and connect feedback to specific points in the lesson. Amidst all of these efforts, the coach’s goal is to “slow down” the instructional process so educators can observe shifts in their practice and see the impact it is having on children. This focus on each child’s learning and development is deeply rooted in the Bank Street tradition that helps educators develop practices that support growth in ways that extends well beyond the bounds of the specific focus of that one coaching visit.

Reflection & Inquiry
After observing teaching and learning in action, coaches review and analyze the evidence collected to craft specific questions or areas for further inquiry and consideration. Often, this analysis is done in collaboration with educators to deepen their reflective muscles and also to facilitate a sense of ownership for their own learning and growth. As a relationship deepens, coaches may provide more focused questions or points of evidence to open the conversation. When coaching relationships are first forming, or the exploration of teaching and learning practices is more open, the coach may employ “immediate reflection” strategies where coaches share open-ended questions directly following an activity that make the educator more conscious of the effectiveness of various teaching practices used during learning experiences. Coaches often begin these conversations by emphasizing successes to promote a sense of efficacy in and inspire teachers about what is possible. At the same time coaches use data to highlight questions that “meet educators where they are,” but stretch educators to think critically about their practice. This emphasis reflects Bank Street’s strengths-based approach and its focus on developing a relationship that supports trust and mutual respect.

Joint Planning and Goal Setting For Action
Through the observation and reflection discussion, specific needs will emerge. The coach shifts the educator’s focus to action by collaboratively setting goals that advance developmentally meaningful teaching and learning in the classroom. Depending on each educator’s strengths, dispositions, and adult learning profile, coaches may take a more or less prescriptive approach while always engaging in a collaborative way. In some cases, educators may be able to identify appropriate strategies or plans independently; in other cases, they may look to coaches as a source for specific strategies or resources, and relational support. The outcome of this step is realistic, time-bound goals connected to what we know about how children learn best that set up the work for the next coaching cycle.
Other Considerations

Bank Street has pioneered a teacher preparation approach that includes the interconnections of individual advisement from an expert faculty member, who observes and develops the teacher in much the same way we have described coaching above; and learning for the teacher in a social “conference group” of 7 or so teacher candidates, facilitated by the shared advisor, which meets weekly and establishes a larger “holding environment” for the developing teachers. Vygotsky stated that all real learning happens in contact with other people, and Kegan and Lahey have indicated that authentic adult learning must happen on the job, embedded in authentic structures of colleagues in their shared work.5

Many of the same concepts and approaches for coaching teachers are relevant and applicable to coaching teams, coaches, and leaders as well. Our next snapshot of practice highlights the work the Education Center does to apply what we know about how adults learn to our professional supports for the coaches working with teachers and other coaches.

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