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A Framework for Coaching in Early Childhood Settings: Drawing on Bank Street College of Education's Developmental-Interaction Approach (DIA)

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A Framework for Coaching in Early Childhood Settings

Drawing on Bank Street College of Education's Developmental-Interaction Approach (DIA)

By Virginia Casper, Milenis Gonzalez, Tarima Levine, Emily Sharrock & Annie Schaeffing

Bank Street Education Center

LEARNING STARTS AT BIRTH

Introduction

The work of coaching is multifaceted and multi-layered. Coaches hold the teacher, children, and families they observe in mind as they help teachers make thoughtful decisions about how to best facilitate learning and design environments that promote optimal interactions. While building a trusting relationship over time, coaches help teachers activate and better articulate their previous knowledge, skills, values and belief systems, along with new concepts, to construct and continually refine an approach that is meaningful in their everyday work.

At its best, coaching work is transformational. Coaches and teachers learn from each other, as do teachers, parents, and children. And while coaches help teachers to make meaning of children's behaviors, they are primarily focused on the teacher as an adult with their own history of learning and being cared for. Thus, a coach aims to help a teacher become increasingly attuned to their own knowledge, values and reactions to child and family behaviors and to investigate the roots of those reactions. Coaching frameworks, like this one, provide an opportunity for practitioners to consider and apply new ideas and ways of being that make sense for a given situation.

We know that every coaching context can be different, and infant/toddler and early childhood teacher coaching is even more complex due to greater family involvement with very young children and the range of program settings (e.g. home-based family care or center-based care). A coach may tell a story in the form of a parable, ask a "just right" question, or, with the teacher's permission, take a running record or model an interaction with children. Like good teaching practice, there is risk involved in developing a relationship of trust and finding the right balance of an approach with a particular teacher on a given day.[1]

The ideas put forth here aim to capture some commonalities of a positive coaching stance across contexts, while allowing enough flexibility to make use of these ideas in ways that will serve that setting and teachers best. This coaching framework, as well as the underlying ideas that influence it, are not formulas to follow but guides to steer us to become, as Sherise Alston, a graduate of a Bank Street professional learning program stated, "students of our own practice." (Brickley in Ryan and Casper, 2019).[2]

Bank Street's Approach

All educators can help learners find their way using an unhurried and non-judgmental guidance that supports, builds confidence and helps deepen their thinking. It is worth noting that most adults have a long educational history in which they have been evaluated and judged. Put simply, trusting relationships are the bedrock of all learning and teaching; that means that our interactions with others have the potential to become a vehicle for learning, growth and change. Furthermore, if all relationships affect other relationships, then how a coach works with a teacher can help shape how the teacher will, in turn, be with children and families (a phenomenon known as **"parallel process"**). Pleasing the teacher (or in this case, the coach) does not lead adults toward independent thinking.

To help coaches learn how to do this well, we have developed a coaching framework using ideas that are grounded in Bank Street's beliefs: the developmental-interaction approach (DIA)[3] combined with years of practical experience coaching teachers serving children of all ages.[4] This includes teachers in infant and toddler programs,[5][6] and early childhood educators teaching across multiple settings.[7] The ideas in the DIA can help coaches combine new learning with what they already know in order to help teachers do the same.

> ***"I take open-mindedness to be a willingness to construct knowledge and values from multiple perspectives without loss of commitment to one's own values...the keystone of what we call a democratic culture."***
>
> **JEROME BRUNER**

Bank Street's History

From its very beginning Bank Street's members were absorbed with observing children in the nursery school and understanding "how the two-year-old meets his [her] world." When the program became the Harriet Johnson Nursery School in 1934, these educators continued to ponder the ways in which each child had a distinct and unique personality, but also began asking more global questions like, "How does the two-year-old solve problems of size, time, space, and number?" and "What are the likes, dislikes, and fears of children this age?" Today, over a century later, Bank Street College is proud to have multiple programs that support infants, toddlers, young children and their families, and communities. These programs continue to pursue and extend the questions about child development that originally arose from deep observation at the core of Bank Street's DIA.

Even during the years when behavioral thinking reigned in psychology and education—a time when most child development institutes followed the physical sciences, taking exact measurements of babies—Lucy Sprague Mitchell, the College's founder, was fond of telling this story to demonstrate what set Bank Street apart from most child development institutes at the time:

They wiggled. They seemed to be made of rubber—shorter one day than the day before.... They put the babies into casts so they couldn't wiggle. They got the measurements. And they weren't interested in the wiggle. We were. Nor were they bothered that casts might be an emotional strain to the babies. Again, we were.... Wiggling was an interesting behavior in young children. Emotions were a very important part of children.[8]

At Bank Street, all work with children and adults functions across the developmental lifespan to achieve, as Mitchell notes, "becoming oneself, only more so." When working with aspiring teachers, this means fostering self-reflection, which is not necessarily an inborn trait, and an acknowledgement that we share accountability for the attitudes and intentions of our society and social structures. Faculty use a parallel process in which aspiring teachers learn a way of being with others through the ways in which they are treated by their mentors. Whether we are teaching children, teachers, or families, one of the primary goals of our developmental-interaction approach is to unleash curiosity about the world, encourage our students to ask questions, and build the ability and confidence to think independently --not simply use an approach or technique someone has taught you without understanding why.[9]

What Is the Developmental-Interaction Approach?

The core ideas in the developmental-interaction approach are rather straightforward. The seeds for what later became DIA were sown when educators, who were mostly women (see Bank Street History on previous page), began to combine their first-hand observations of children with their knowledge of child development to help teachers build their practice. Only later in the 20th Century was a theoretical approach constructed from these and other early elements of what became the DIA and the Bank Street Approach.

Key Principles of the Developmental-Interaction Approach:

1. Education is a vehicle to encourage democracy and social justice across many parts of society. For example, this includes creating an equitable and democratic community of learners; educators also advocate for just practices where they can have an impact.

2. Development is central, with a focus on how all children and adults understand and respond to the world and how they are continually changing as they have experiences in the world. Interaction refers to the learner's engagement with their environment: materials, ideas, peers, adults, family, the community, and the larger world.

3. Thinking and emotions are always working together for learners of any age.
For example, a teacher considers how a child's emotions affect their learning and vice versa. A coach recognizes that the ways in which teachers think about and **approach** their own learning is also connected to their emotional and personal growth.

4. Good teaching and coaching is based on deep knowledge of child and adult development, understanding of subject matter and the use of low-inference observations to guide practice. For example, knowledge of child development should go beyond "milestones" to be responsive to a broad range of interacting contexts.

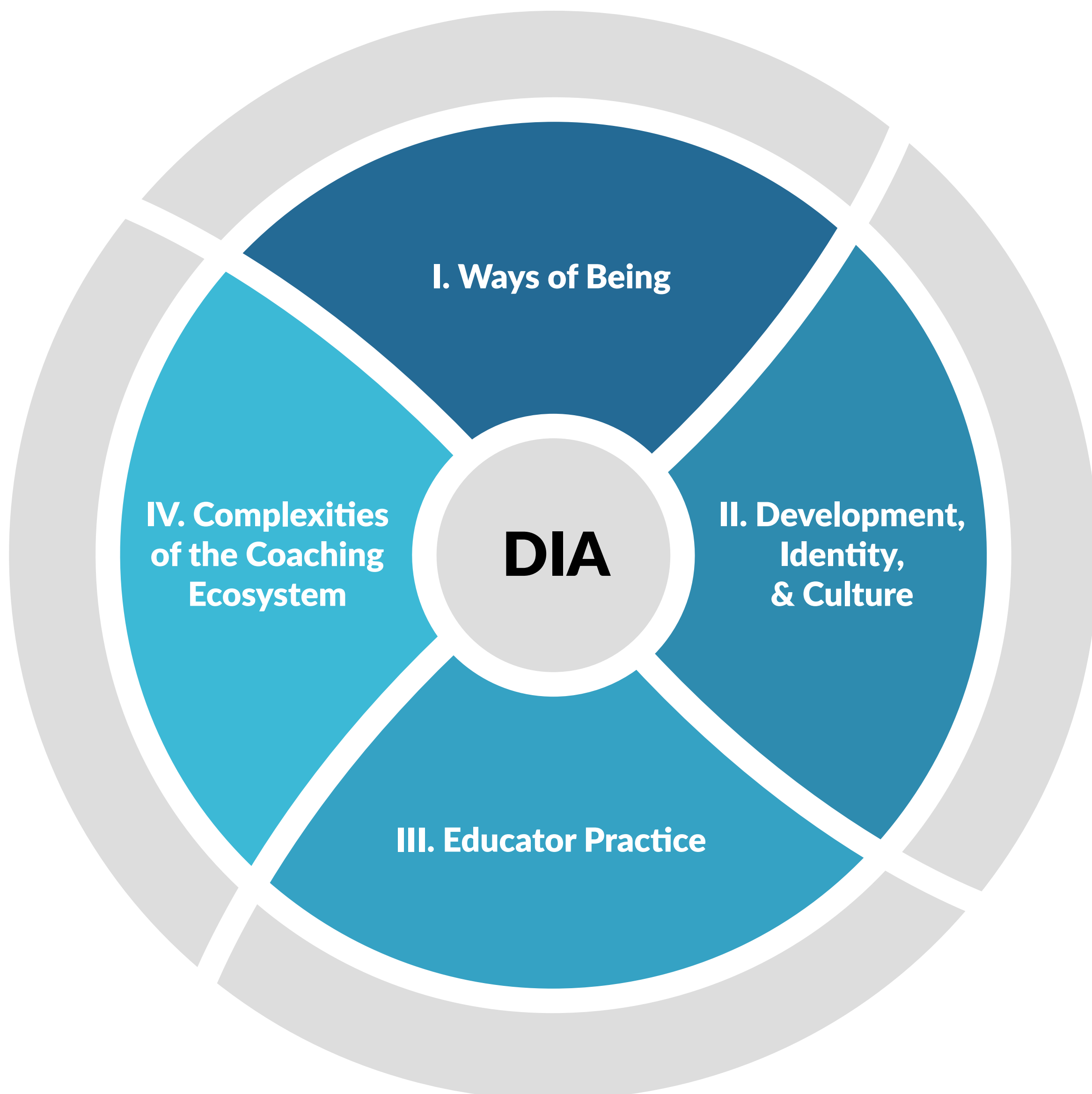
5. All learning and development lives within the contexts of families, cultures, programs and communities. For example, learning about one's own identity and understanding the emotions and identity of others is critical for both teachers and coaches to be effective in their work.

6. Inquiry-based learning helps both children and adults practice problem-solving and promotes more independent, creative thinking. For example, providing a "listen then wait" space allows a partner to think something through on their own and over time, develop confidence in doing so.

7. Continually developing a view of learning and the learner, knowledge and knowing—informs all practice. For example, coaches and teachers try to understand the "why" of their practices and, over time, work to integrate these learnings into a more coherent whole.

A Framework for Coaching

Each of the four sections of the Coaching Framework are broken down into elements of effective coaching grounded in an understanding of the DIA. Doing this well requires significant amounts of time, care and thought. The elements in this Framework provide approaches for coaches to aspire to, practice and revise as necessary toward that end.



I. Ways of Being

"Do unto others as you would have others do unto others."

—JEREE PAWL

BIG IDEA: Coaching is different from mentoring or technical assistance. A coach is a learning collaborator who holds the teacher's progress in mind and helps them integrate and synthesize knowledge and skills.

GUIDING QUESTION: *What are some ways of being that can help us create and maintain trusting and productive relationships with children, teachers and other program staff?*

Ways of Being

A. Sense of Purpose & Intentionality in Building Trusting Relationships
1. Coaches understand and help teachers remember that every relationship affects other relationships.
2. Coaches establish a warm, professional, and respectful relationship and are responsive to a teacher's preferred learning style as well as preferred ways of being addressed, including spelling and pronunciation of their name.
3. Coaches are continually refining how to "clear their heads," leaving their personal issues behind before they enter a learning environment.
4. Coaches demonstrate active listening by giving full attention, not interrupting, using all senses and letting the speaker know through body language and subsequent responses that she was fully heard.
5. Coaches make good on promises (providing articles, contacts, etc.) and know how to repair "misunderstanding" with honesty/immediacy.
6. Coaches demonstrate flexibility of thinking when reacting to changes in program needs or current events outside of work.
7. Coaches are able to walk that fine line between planning ahead yet thinking on their feet in order to be intentional in their coaching (teachers, children, other program staff, etc.).
8. A coach has and expresses authentic interest (curiosity) in who the teacher is, how they think, what they believe and their practice.
9. Coaches demonstrate empathy and provide support in a teacher's times of difficulty, while maintaining clear boundaries.
10. Coaches learn to be honest in their feedback while focusing on and using a teacher's strengths to support growth (a strengths-based approach).

(Continued on the next page)

B. Knowledge, Skills and Dispositions for Promoting Reflective Practice
1. In the absence of practices that put children at risk, coaches are non-judgmental (reserving judgment) even when making inquiries about practices they may find problematic.
2. Coaches demonstrate patience in their practice by slowing down. This allows the teacher to also slow down and notice shifts in their practice.
3. Coaches use non-judgmental language, such as “I notice” statements[10] to help teachers feel seen and heard and be more likely to take in the content of the coach’s message.
4. Coaches provide a “listen then wait” space to allow a teacher to develop her own creative problem solving and extend their independent and creative thinking.
5. Coaches learn reflective supervision practices for collaborative thinking and problem-solving.
6. Coaches reflect alone and with coaching colleagues[11] on how to best respond to a given teacher.
7. Coaches model and provide teachers with skills and habits to reflect on their work after leaving the learning environment for the day, for example, a small pocket-sized pad in which to jot down “notes to self” during the day.

II. Development, Identity and Culture

"Sawu bona (I see you). Sikhona (I am here)."

—Zulu greeting and response used in the Natal region of South Africa

BIG IDEA: Child development knowledge is the cornerstone of good early childhood teaching practice. Successful coaching requires deep knowledge of child and adult development because adult development is similar to yet different from child development. A mantra for teaching and coaching is "all behavior has meaning."

GUIDING QUESTION: *How can you help teachers think about what is going on in the learning environment and make links to larger ideas in a culturally and developmentally meaningful way?*

Development, Identity and Culture

A. Child Development
1. Coaches model and share knowledge of child development with teachers to provide rationales for developmentally and culturally meaningful teaching practices.
2. Coaches help teachers make sense of child development and develop a plan for integrating this knowledge across different learning domains.
3. Coaches and teachers work together to use what they know about child development to theorize (not decide), about the reasons for a child's action and seek further information.
B. Adult Development
1. Coaches help teachers learn according to the teacher's developmental needs; this translates into trust and is likely to lead to positive changes in practice.
2. Coaches utilize principles of adult development to help teachers become more aware of where they, teachers, and adult family members are in their development, and how that might affect learning/practice.
3. Coaches are familiar with a "just right" range of individual learning styles in order to support teachers in their teaching practice.
4. Coaches openly explore a teacher's understanding of a current situation and help bring forth relevant knowledge that may not be currently active.
C. Identity and Culture
1. Coaches reflect on the quality and degree of both their self-awareness and their awareness of others, including becoming increasingly able to identify and understand how their own feelings and biases impact their observations of teachers.
2. Coaches work to understand, appreciate, and respect the teacher by spending time learning about the teacher's culture and linguistic background.
3. Coaches have spent time in, and made efforts to learn about, the neighborhoods and communities in which their teachers work.
4. Coaches model and engage teachers in critical reflection concerning privilege and bias and the impact they have on children, families and communities who experience systemic racism and oppression.
5. Coaches become increasingly able to identify and understand their own feelings and biases in observing and systematically reflecting on the intersection of their identity, perspective, and what one is able to "see."
6. Coaches help teachers become aware of the difference between their intentions and the impact they may have on others.

III. Educator Practice

"An important part of teachers' professional responsibility lies in their roles as researchers in their own classrooms."

—DOROTHY H. COHEN, VIRGINIA STERN, NANCY BALABAN, & NANCY GROPPER

BIG IDEA: Whether a program uses a fixed curriculum or the teacher creates their own learning activities, the day-to-day experiences of young children need to be responsive to their interests, abilities and learning needs.

GUIDING QUESTION: *How do we support teachers in creating developmentally and culturally meaningful experiences? How do we jointly construct goals with teachers and provide ongoing, reflective feedback?*

Educator Practice

1. Coaches help teachers focus on specific goals in order to make consistent and meaningful changes. These goals serve as anchors for teachers' reflective work by making use of our knowledge about child development and incorporating approaches that can push their practice forward.
2. Coaches may take low-inference notes on children's behaviors and/or the teacher's practice but will always share them with the teacher. If a teacher is unfamiliar with **observing and recording** practices a coach will help find professional learning sources for them.
3. Coaches use strength-based language to remind teachers about what they know and do well while identifying openings for growth and development in their teaching practice.
4. Coaches help teachers create continuity between students' homes and the program.
5. Coaches keep records of the goals teachers meet in order to help teachers keep track of how their practices develop. This helps teachers construct a story of their own progress.
6. Coaches help teachers reflect on children's individual and collective interests and abilities. They help teachers use this information to create experiences that are developmentally and culturally relevant and that the children find actively engaging.
7. Coaches help teachers empathize and connect with families who may seemingly be resistant or minimally responsive to their messages.
8. Coaches encourage teachers to engage in life-long learning and professional development and model this through their own continuous learning.

IV. Complexities of the Coaching Ecosystem

"Every time parents and teachers encounter one another in the classroom, their conversations are shaped by their own autobiographical stories and by the broader cultural and historical narratives that inform their identities, values, and their sense of place in the world."

—Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot,
"The Essential Conversation"

BIG IDEA: Sometimes what appears to be resistance may feel obvious to a coach and other times it may be more difficult to understand and appreciate. Resistance should be placed within the larger sphere of readiness for change.

GUIDING QUESTION: *There are many competing issues that arise in the course of a teaching life. Beyond the teacher's stated goal/s, how does a coach help co-construct a hierarchy of issues that can be addressed, knowing that there is not time for everything?*

Complexities of the Coaching Ecosystem

1. Coaches discuss and model having difficult conversations with children/adults (including with site administrators or families), supporting a growth mindset approach of"it can be done!"
2. Coaches are alert to a continuum of openness ranging from perceived resistance to "trying to please". Coaches document examples and work with others to determine a "just right" approach to teacher readiness.[12]
3. Coaches model their own self-care practices and collaborate with teachers to manage stress, including reaching out to other teachers to share experiences and support each other.
4. Coaches support teachers in building and maintaining relationships with the families and guardians of the children in their care. Coaches support teachers in reflecting on this context as well as its impact on the child and their learning.
5. Coaches understand that communities may be experiencing levels of chronic stress (due to the experience of poverty, communal loss, ongoing violence, etc.) that negatively impact the functioning of children, families, and teachers, and employ trauma-informed approaches as a support.
6. Coaches have knowledge of emotional and behavioral signs that may indicate a child or family would benefit from mental health support. Coaches process observations and known experiences of a child/family with teachers to determine next steps (e.g., conversation with an administrator, offering mental health referral to family, etc.).

Glossary of Terms

Approach: A group of theories and methods that work together to guide practice. The DIA is an approach because it is based on both formal theories and methods, or ways of working with children and adults as learners.

Coaching Ecosystem: When a coach enters a home-based or center-based program for children they enter a complex network of interacting systems in which families, teachers, children, communities, accrediting institutions, directors, building staff (and more!). Each brings a universe of contributions and needs that have to be understood, despite the fact that they may change during the course of the coaching work.

Culture: The simplest definition of culture includes those values, beliefs, and practices shared by a group of people.

Development is how children and adults understand and respond to the world and how they are continually changing as they have experiences in the world. These experiences are interactions. The other aspect of interaction is linked to emotional and interpersonal growth. To read more, see DIA Principles.

Developmental-Interaction Approach (DIA): Bank Street's DIA serves as the foundation for all teaching and learning and that guides our coaching practice. It helps us to understand how children and adults learn and gives us an approach to support them in this process. DIA is not a formula to follow, but a guide to steer us.

Developmentally Meaningful: We use this term in place of "Developmentally Appropriate" although the revisions made by NAEYC over the years do include the role of context and "both/and" thinking, (meaning that there is not just one way). However, we believe that the word "appropriate" requires too many qualifications regarding specific children, families, needs, cultures and communities. When something is meaningful it can suggest relevance across contexts.

Framework: A basic foundation or integrated system that supports a piece of work. When you write an outline for an essay, it becomes the framework—or skeletal structure—that you can refer to as you write.

Inquiry-Based Learning: Inquiry refers to actively exploring one's environment or a subject seeking answers to real questions. In early childhood, the environment is set up to encourage this kind of learning as opposed to learning directly from the teacher. This is also true of coaching; it is the coach's role to guide the coachee through relevant and probing questions so the teacher owns their own learning and develops a practice that reflects who they are.

Low-inference: When doing observations we need to practice being specific, descriptive, and as objective as possible rather than make any assumptions or judgments (inferences) based on what we see.

Observation & Recording (O&R): Observation involves examining the behaviors of children and/or teachers in order to gain information. Recording is the process by which you take notes on these observations. These skills serve as the foundation for reflective coaching. This kind of O&R is different from what you do when using the CLASS. Instead of categorizing what you observe within a scoring system, you are focusing on a teacher's goal and observing their practice in order to provide reflection and feedback to support their ongoing growth and development.

Parallel Process: The definition of parallel is "side-by-side" or, something or someone who is similar to another. When someone acts in a particular way, there is an effect on another person that reflects that interaction or series of interactions. For example, if a coach acts in a non-judgmental way with a teacher, over time, parallel process would suggest that the teacher is more likely to be less judgmental with children and/or families.

Reflective Practice: There are many definitions of this term. What we mean follows the work of Schon (1983, 1996), which involves thoughtfully considering an experience and then drawing knowledge from thinking about it, possibly referring to other experiences, such as reading or being coached by someone who poses questions that help you develop your thinking process. This work can be done alone, and/or with others and is what allows us to solve problems of practice and move forward in our work.

Social Identity: Social identities reflect how we see ourselves and how others see us with respect to major social categories including age, gender, sex, first language, race, ethnicity, ability, religious affiliation, sexual orientation and socioeconomic status. These indicators are sometimes obvious and clear, sometimes not obvious and unclear. They are often claimed by us, but can also be labels others put on us.

Theory: A theory is a set of principles and assumptions that help us organize, analyze, predict and explain events, processes and information. They provide a lens or perspective from which to understand things. Everyone hypothesizes about various behaviors (weather, pets, etc.). These are **informal** theories (like "hunches"). Formal theories develop over time, can be evaluated publicly and should evolve as the world changes. Both can play a role in our work, but it is important to know the difference between them. When we **theorize**, we use theories (formal or informal) that make sense for a given problem of practice to help us imagine possible solutions.

Ways of Being: This term refers to "how you are" within a relationship. Coaching approaches included in this framework are active listening, observing without judgement, flexible thinking, and empathic responding, amongst others.

References

1. This document uses the term good practice in keeping with new thinking about how the term "best practice" does not always support a variety of cultural and program contexts and/or "non-dominant bodies of knowledge and sources of strength." See Diversity-Informed Tenets for Work with Infants, Children, and Families https://diversityinformedtenets.org/

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About Bank Street College of Education

Bank Street College of Education is a leader in progressive education, a pioneer in improving the quality of educator practice, and a national advocate for children and their families. Bank Street has helped to transform the way teachers and children engage in learning. Known for the developmental-interaction approach to learning and child development, Bank Street developed a progressive, developmentally grounded approach to education that places children at the center and their learning at the fore of the teacher's consciousness.

Bank Street operates several schools and children's programs including the School for Children (grades PK - 8), Family Center (a child care center for children ages birth to five), Head Start, and Liberty LEADS. The College further supports children, educators, and families through professional development programs, research projects, and other key efforts at the district, state, and federal levels through the Bank Street Education Center. The work of the Education Center is informed by and grounded in the daily, on-the-ground experiences in our children's programs and the Graduate School of Education's work training teachers. Its mission is to disrupt inequity through systems-level change to design better educational experiences for both children and adults. In deep collaboration with program partners—from teachers and families to policymakers and higher education leaders—the Education Center creates customized approaches that support strengths-based, learner-centered, and equitable educational practices to help all students and educators thrive in school settings. Within the Education Center, Learning Starts At Birth is a policy and systems change initiative that partners with national, state and local partners to strengthen investments in the infant/toddler workforce by deepening expertise, reforming compensation, aligning systems and increasing public will.

Contributions to This Framework

The content in this tool was primarily developed by Virginia Casper, a developmental psychologist and teacher educator who has served in multiple roles within the Graduate School of Education at Bank Street, with significant input and collaboration from Education Center staff including Emily Sharrock, Tarima Levine, Milenis Gonzalez and Annie Schaeffing. We also thank our partners in the Louisiana Department of Education for piloting its development and use with Early Childhood coaches. Thank you to Tom Boressoff, who provided the photo used on the cover page of this document.