

Preparing Teachers for Deeper Learning at Bank Street College

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Abstract

This brief is based on a [case study](#) of the Bank Street College of Education, one of seven cases examined by the Learning Policy Institute (LPI) as part of its study *Preparing Teachers for Deeper Learning*. The study sought to explore how leading programs are creating ways to prepare future teachers for deeper learning and equity and to understand the policies needed to transform teacher education systemwide. LPI research teams collected data in 2015–16 through site visits, interviews, observations of university and school classes, reviews of program documents, and surveys of teacher candidates in each program.

Additional briefs related to this research can be found at <https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/product/preparing-teachers-deeper-learning>.

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Ted Pollen is an alumnus of the Bank Street College of Education. In his 4th-grade classroom, 27 students are deeply engaged in a mathematics inquiry focused on understanding concepts of distribution and central tendency: range, mean, median, and mode. Some are seated around tables, while others are in pairs or trios on the rug in the classroom meeting area or perched on low shelves that border that area.

The classroom displays learning in process, and student work covers the wall. Especially prominent are student fictionalized accounts of their lives as slaves in New Amsterdam and New York: 1621–1680, along with posters illustrating various fractions problems they have tackled, including how they have split sub sandwiches among various odd numbers of people. A classroom constitution that was collectively developed and signed by each student and teacher is displayed, along with a “Problem Parking Lot” with sticky notes listing various problems and questions the class has agreed to return to.

Ted’s class has been conducting a study that provides them with the data they are now analyzing together: They measured and recorded the height of everyone in their own classroom and all the children in one of the kindergarten classrooms, who are their “reading buddies.” Each then figured out how to display the data distributions with bar graphs they constructed individually—often using separate displays and/or color coding to keep the two sets of classroom data distinct—so as to be able to figure out the mean, median, and mode for each classroom and compare them across classes. Working in teams, they advise and query one another about what to do.

Ted and the two student teachers in the classroom move unobtrusively among groups, watching the process and occasionally asking questions to help move things to the next level of understanding. Ted says to one group: “Think about your design. What’s the best way of displaying the data so you can make an actual comparison?” He asks

another group, “Can someone give me the range for kindergarten? Our range? Are there any outliers?” This led the students to realize that there was little overlap in height between the two classes, but there were a few relatively short 4th-graders and one very tall kindergartner. A student said proudly, picking out that data point, “That’s my reading buddy!”

In yet another group, Ted observes to one of the boys, “You’re having the same problem that she’s having,” pointing to a tablemate to encourage the two of them to work together. The two students begin counting and calculating to solve the problem jointly.

Ted never provides the answer, but he assists the problem-solving process with questions that carefully scaffold student understanding. He also keeps an eye on the student teachers as they, too, move about the classroom facilitating the students’ learning, occasionally encouraging them to listen in on a particular conversation at key moments so that they can debrief later.

Introduction

Bank Street College of Education is a private graduate college in New York City that primarily offers teacher preparation programs for certification in early childhood and elementary education. Bank Street provides teacher candidates with personalized, developmentally grounded, challenging learning opportunities in real-world settings; time and social support for critical self-reflection; and learning in a community of peers, coaches, and mentors.

This brief, and the case study from which it is drawn, is focused on Bank Street’s Childhood General Education program, which trains individuals who hold bachelor’s degrees to become classroom teachers. Graduates earn a master’s degree and are eligible for initial certification, second initial certification, or professional New York certification, depending on their previous training and experience. In the 2014–15 school year, this program enrolled a diverse group of 45 teacher candidates, with 1 in 3 identifying as male and 1 in 3 identifying as non-White.

The practices and dispositions with which Bank Street equips its teacher candidates are referred to as deeper learning by education researchers and practitioners (see “What Is Deeper Learning?”). As Ted’s classroom illustrates, Bank Street graduates’ classrooms tend to emphasize deep content knowledge, problem-solving, and communication and collaboration skills; a child-centered pedagogy; experiential and community-oriented learning opportunities; and learning mindsets that give students agency over their education.

What Is Deeper Learning?

Deeper learning is both a new and an old idea, rooted in the findings of research on learning over the past century yet also aligned with the needs of 21st-century students. Deeper learning experiences allow students to apply challenging academic content to real-world problems and contexts that engage them in communication, collaboration, and critical thinking. Such experiences equip students with the skills to find, analyze, and apply knowledge in new contexts and situations, preparing them for college, work, civic participation in a democratic society, and lifelong learning in a fast-changing and information-rich world. We identified five dimensions that define the practices and the vision that enable deeper learning for both students and prospective teachers:

- Learning that is developmentally grounded and personalized
- Learning that is contextualized
- Learning that is applied and transferred
- Learning that occurs in productive communities of practice
- Learning that is equitable and oriented to social justice

Bank Street has earned a positive reputation for its immersive, deeper learning approach to teacher preparation. In a 2013 survey, 90% of employers who responded noted that Bank Street graduates are well or very well prepared as teachers. A director of a New York City elementary school told LPI researchers that Bank Street graduates “are the best-trained teachers in progressive education that I can find.” Bank Street candidates also rate the program highly. In LPI’s 2016 survey of candidates, 95% of respondents reported that they felt that Bank Street had prepared them well or very well for teaching. Candidates also responded positively when asked about aspects of teaching that address deeper learning, with over 95% reporting they felt well or very well prepared to engage in practices such as using instructional strategies that promote active student learning, planning instruction based on how children develop and learn, and relating classroom learning to the real world, to name a few.

One Bank Street candidate described what aspiring teachers learn in the program as “giving children the tools to be thinkers, and to understand big ideas, and make connections and be communicators and work collaboratively, or work independently, or have a multifaceted approach to learning and really enjoy it.” Connecting the preparation at Bank Street to deeper learning, the candidate continued:

I think in that way it seems really powerful that you’re preparing children to be lifelong learners and be curious. It seems really applicable to life in the 21st century—when you’re not going to need to rely on a foundation of facts, but more about how to manage the information that is accessible and how to determine for yourself what is interesting—how to ask questions and guide your investigations.

The Design and Structure of Coursework and Fieldwork Supports Deeper Learning

Bank Street's curriculum and program structures are built around a holistic view of learning and a well-rounded view of the pedagogies that support deeper learning. The **coursework** in the Childhood General Education program is organized around key themes of human development, foundations of education, and curriculum and inquiry. The coursework on development—described in greater detail below—provides candidates with strategies for addressing the range of students' needs and for teaching in contextualized and personalized ways. Coursework on the historical, philosophical, and social foundations of education introduces candidates to the political, social, and economic influences that permeate classroom walls. Candidates learn to navigate their roles in the education system and to connect classroom learning to students' personal and cultural knowledge, families, and communities. Curriculum and inquiry coursework, focused on content methods, requires candidates to examine students' developmental and social needs in subject-specific contexts as they learn theories and pedagogical approaches that support critical thinking.

Bank Street courses provide **learning environments** that allow teacher candidates to deeply engage with content. None of the classes are structured around an end-of-semester exam. Instead, students are given opportunities to engage in readings, discussions, and experiences that address historical and modern aspects of education, connecting these to work in their field placements. In addition, courses are kept moderately small, with no more than 27 students permitted to enroll in a class. The design of the coursework allows for intimate conversation and opportunities for candidates to fine-tune their understanding of children and their skills as teachers. This structure also supports the development of an inquiry mentality in which candidates engage in the sort of self-assessment and metacognition that they will ultimately encourage their students to explore, as one Bank Street instructor demonstrated when she explained how she models questioning to encourage students to get to a deeper understanding of children:

What we do is when someone brings up a question or problem, I tell them, don't just go in with solutions. Explore. Ask more. What happened before? What happened after? How did you feel? Explore more before jumping in because you have a better idea. And when you have a better idea, you're better able to think about things.

The tight connection between candidates' coursework and **supervised fieldwork** provides authentic opportunities for candidates to practice what they learn. As one Bank Street candidate explained, "You can talk about it in the coursework, but I don't think that it's until you are in the classroom that you see what that means." Candidates are placed in these classrooms through the relationships—some formal, many long-standing—that Bank Street maintains with dozens of **partner schools** throughout the New York area. Generally, Bank Street provides professional development support to its partner schools, which also tend to have large proportions of teachers and leaders who are graduates of Bank Street, further strengthening the connection to Bank Street's methods. Because many of the educators in partner schools champion progressive education, they provide Bank Street teacher candidates with necessary opportunities to

experience and practice student-centered teaching and learning. Of her field placement, one Bank Street candidate had this to say:

[Bank Street] didn't place us at schools that didn't share the same values that they did. So it was a very seamless transition to go from classes to teaching because it was the same values of honoring every student as an individual. It was about exploration, experimentation, and letting a child figure it out on his own, not giving a child the answers, which is so refreshing.

The Bank Street School for Children is the School of Education's most well-known partner school, providing placements for candidates, classroom sites for inquiry, and instructors who teach in the graduate school.

Cooperating teachers who share Bank Street's developmental interaction approach are essential to the productivity of teacher candidates' field experiences. Bank Street takes a careful and deliberate approach when selecting cooperating teachers, with Bank Street faculty visiting public and private schools in New York City to observe potential cooperating teachers and assess their fit for the program. Faculty also become familiar with potential cooperating teachers during professional development sessions that Bank Street offers at schools throughout the city. Cooperating teachers are frequently Bank Street alumni, trained with the same educational approach that Bank Street aims to instill in its teacher candidates. In return for cooperating teachers' time and energy, Bank Street provides them with vouchers to take courses at Bank Street. Providing this access to professional development offerings at Bank Street serves to further strengthen partnerships by instilling the Bank Street approach to teaching and learning in the practice of cooperating teachers.

Bank Street's intensive **advisement** process is also a part of every teacher candidate's field experience. This process builds relationships among faculty, candidates, and mentor teachers that facilitate collaborative and meaningful learning about the practice of teaching. Each faculty advisor works with five to seven candidates, and advisors observe each teacher candidate in his or her fieldwork setting for half a day at least once a month, also meeting with the candidate regularly for planning and debriefing. Teacher candidates, advisors, and cooperating teachers also come together for three-way meetings to learn how to best support each other in helping the teacher candidate grow. A Bank Street advisor, instructor, and graduate explained the reflective nature of the advisor's role in supporting a candidate:

The thing that is really important is that the student has the opportunity to self-assess, and I have the opportunity to sit beside him to offer another perspective and go deeper ... and think about what actually occurred and what does this actually mean.

The frequency of contact between advisors, cooperating teachers, and teacher candidates helps to develop trusting and collaborative relationships that support teacher candidates' growth. As one cooperating teacher said of his candidate's advisor, "He's in the classroom a lot observing, he knows me, he knows her, he knows our relationship."

A particular feature of Bank Street's advisement process is weekly conference group sessions in which each advisor meets with his or her whole group of advisees. As the Childhood General Education program director explained:

[The conference group] is a core component of the supervised fieldwork experience where ... a small group meets together and they represent whatever school they are in, they represent the particular classroom and culture, and they are bringing back what they're learning from those particular settings. And ... the topics emerge from the needs of the students. It's a confidential group. It gives them a place where they can talk about issues.... It's a place where they start to question the things they are adopting as their own belief system.

These collaborative sessions provide the candidates the opportunity to discuss the issues they face as educators in their field placements, to gain perspective and reflective insight into their practice, and to apply the theories, frameworks, and vocabulary from their coursework to bring meaning to their field experiences.

Finally, Bank Street's **assessment** practices are aligned with the program's approach to learning and provide candidates with multiple opportunities to apply theory to practice and to receive feedback on their performance. Assessment is carried out formally and informally as well as formatively and summatively. Primary assessment tools include collaborative projects, course assignments connecting to field experiences, papers and reflective essays, artistic projects, conversations with instructors, and authentic performance assessments. In addition, during fieldwork, candidates receive detailed feedback from their mentor teachers about their performance. Teacher candidates' culminating project is the Integrative Master's Project (IMP), through which they apply their theoretical knowledge to their work as educators. Candidates' options for the IMP include an independent study guided by a faculty mentor, a portfolio of reflective essays and artifacts from their graduate work, an essay directed by a faculty mentor, or an inquiry project in which they define and complete a small-scale site-based research study. Bank Street candidates also pass a teacher performance assessment—the edTPA—in order to meet state requirements, adding another opportunity for them to apply their learning to practice.

The Focus of Learning Opportunities Supports Deeper Learning

A focus on **child and adult development** is central to Bank Street's preparation of teachers. All candidates in the Childhood General Education program are required to take a class on child development to learn strategies for engaging students in active learning. Bank Street also requires candidates to take a series of courses that feature a developmental focus, including Language Acquisition and Learning in a Linguistically Diverse Society; Developmental Variations; Family, Child, and Teacher Interaction in Diverse and Inclusive Educational Settings; and The Study of Children in Diverse and Inclusive Educational Settings Through Observation and Recording. Bank Street candidates are taught how to evaluate students and the learning environment in order to create enriching experiences, meaning, in the words of one

candidate, to “understand what is going on in the classroom and understand the children and how the teacher is trying to meet the needs of the children.” Another candidate explained how his understanding of child development helped him learn to become a more effective educator:

You have a strong sense of child development, you know about the specific age you’re working with, what they’re cognitively able to manage and understand. And then, emotionally and psychologically, what they are possibly feeling. And how to nurture the skills that they need to handle the challenges they face at that point in their life. There’s also a lot of emphasis on the variety of different types of learners. There is not a one-size-fits-all approach to teaching. You have to find ways to differentiate to different kids’ skills and strengths and scaffold them when they need extra support and [know] that different children will need different sorts of assistance in different ways.

Experiential learning, or “learning by doing,” deepens candidates’ understanding and ability to create active, student-centered classrooms. At Bank Street, teacher candidates participate in immersive experiences as learners and reflect on these experiences as well as on the kinds of relationships and instruction that they prefer as students. As one Bank Street candidate put it, “As an educator, I want to be learning myself. So for the children, I model how I learn best, which is inquiry-based with support.” In their role as learners, candidates also investigate and analyze the elements and conditions that support the acquisition of deeper learning competencies. They critically reflect upon and refine their teaching practices to better meet students’ needs and to identify supports needed for continuous learning. In experiencing these processes as students—reflecting upon how they can improve, monitoring how they are progressing, and learning how to change their future actions to lead to better outcomes—Bank Street candidates also learn how to model reflection for their own students.

This sort of **modeling** is also a part of candidates’ experiential learning and is a deliberate feature of the practice of Bank Street instructors, who structure their courses to employ the same student-centered instruction they are preparing their teacher candidates to employ. “We are an institution that is trying to model what we think is really good practice for our students,” explained one Bank Street administrator, and a candidate shared that “Bank Street faculty 100% use the same pedagogical strategies that they are trying to instill in Bank Street students.” This approach also helps faculty customize their instruction, advising, and relationships to provide **personalized, developmentally grounded learning** for candidates. As one Bank Street instructor explained, “My main goal when I first meet my students is to establish a relationship with my students and get to know who they are as individuals. And to learn about them, to support them, that’s my main goal.” The instructor continued, “There is that parallel process with children—we tell the students the first thing you do is observe kids and recognize and identify their strengths because that’s how you work with a child.” Candidates then apply this approach to relationships with their own students, as one candidate described:

It’s what we are asking children to do, even 4-year-olds.... We’re the students here. And then we’re going to the classroom and being teachers, so we need to learn what it feels like to be a student, and that’s what makes you a good teacher.

Along with relationship building, faculty modeling also provides pedagogical guidance for candidates as they learn to design projects based on student interests, with appropriate scaffolding to meet all students where they are.

Woven throughout all the aspects of the program described above is Bank Street's focus on **contextualized, socially just, and equitable education**. This foundational emphasis informs Bank Street's coursework and fieldwork, as well as the practices and routines of the faculty and teacher candidates. Teacher candidates gain an understanding of the social context in which schools are embedded as they learn about their students and the communities they serve. Bank Street courses and programs address culturally responsive practices, while faculty modeling of such practices extends to the role that teachers have in honoring and respecting the diverse strengths and experiences that each of their students bring to the classroom. Teacher candidates learn to structure their classrooms as just societies that celebrate diversity and that provide opportunities for everyone to contribute and to learn. A Bank Street instructor, describing the role of teachers as advocates for their students, explained, "My goal is to allow our candidates to serve all students," and she connected this goal to "a notion of democratic access—having access to learning and to ideas."

Conclusion

Teacher candidates at Bank Street learn what it means to be students, teachers, and learners and how to shape their instruction to cultivate deeper learning competencies in their own students. Bank Street candidates are prepared to provide developmentally appropriate and equitable environments that encourage student-centered, project-based instruction. Child and adult development, experiential learning, and equity and social justice are central at Bank Street, supported by coursework, fieldwork, advisement, and assessment. Inquiry, along with respectful, collaborative relationships among faculty and teacher candidates, encourages teacher candidates to adopt deeper learning approaches. Bank Street's learning process—building on experience, observation, critical analysis, and reflection—encourages teacher candidates to continue to refine their deeper learning pedagogies and dispositions. Ultimately, Bank Street's thoughtfully constructed program prepares teachers who are ready to equip their students for the challenges of tomorrow.