Instructional Coaching

HOW DIGNITAS USES INSTRUCTIONAL COACHING TO DEVELOP TEACHERS IN KENYA’S LOW-COST PRIVATE PRIMARY SCHOOLS
How Dignitas Uses Instructional Coaching to Develop Teachers in Kenya’s Low-Cost Private Primary Schools

The Context

Dignitas works to improve the quality of education in Nairobi, Kenya, to ensure every child receives an excellent education. We focus on schools in informal settlements (commonly referred to as urban slums) as these communities are significantly under-served by the public education system.

In many cases, the low-cost private primary schools are the preferred choice of parents, due to proximity and relatively smaller class sizes. However most operate with limited space and minimal resources, and face ongoing challenges related to staff turnover, teacher quality, and financial stability. While the teachers are passionate about education, most have no formal teacher training and some have only graduated from high school.

Personalized and ongoing **instructional coaching** is a key element of the Dignitas school transformation model and critical to our efforts in improving educational quality.

“Without sustained and coherent support, teachers largely teach the way they were taught.”

(EFA Global Monitoring Report 2015, UNESCO)

What is coaching?

Coaching is a one-on-one relationship that involves mentorship, reflection, encouragement, and modeling. Coaches observe teachers in the classroom setting and engage in intentional conversations to improve skills, shape beliefs, and transform teaching.
“Coaching is at its essence a nurturing structure, but it is also one where there is always a subtle push for change.”

Elena Aguilar, author of The Art of Coaching

Why has Dignitas adopted coaching?

We believe in each educator’s ability to become highly effective classroom teachers and leaders in their schools. However to produce significant gains in student learning as well as school quality, teachers need support to implement new skills, improve their practice, and work effectively in teams. This is true of teachers everywhere but is especially pertinent to our context, where many teachers have received little or low quality pre-service training.

In recent years, coaching has emerged as an effective strategy for supporting teachers and improving teacher quality, particularly when integrated into wider professional development activities. The Dignitas Coaching program draws from the literature and practice-based evidence in order to take teacher training and professional development a step further and ensure sustainable, meaningful transformation.

The Evidence for Coaching

Research shows that effective coaching leads to improvements in instructional capacity, encourages collaborative and reflective teaching, and promotes positive change in school culture (Annenberg Institute for School Reform, 2004). According to Burns and Lawrie (2015), “teachers who receive on-the-job support, guidance and feedback from an external support person or peers practice new skills and strategies more frequently, apply them more appropriately and adopt a more diverse range of instructional practices than teachers who do not receive such supports (Showers & Joyce, 1996)” The report highlights the importance of ongoing support and coaching in its seven key recommendations for teacher professional development in ‘fragile’ contexts, such as the informal settlements where our teachers work.
The Dignitas Coaching Approach

Dignitas provides an experienced, professional coach to teachers from low-income, community schools for a minimum of one year. At the beginning of the coaching relationship, teachers develop a personal action plan and identify key goals to be addressed during coaching. Each teacher receives at least six coaching sessions over the course of the coaching relationship.

Dignitas Coaches work with teachers on:

1. PREPARATION
   The Dignitas coach meets with the teacher before the class. The teacher provides an overview of the lesson plan and activities and together they reflect on the goals identified in the previous coaching session.

2. OBSERVATION
   The coach observes an entire class lesson. The teacher is encouraged to teach as if the coach is not present. The coach takes notes on classroom management, teaching, and planning.

3. REFLECTION
   The teacher shares reflections on the lesson, focusing on what they did well, where they could improve, and steps they can take to do so. The coach provides feedback in a similar manner and together, they identify goals for the next session.
Coaching School Leaders to Coach Teachers

Our Dignitas coaches also equip school leaders with skills and tools to coach other teachers within their school. The Dignitas coach meets with the school leader and together they observe a teacher in action. The Dignitas coach debriefs with the teacher and models the types of conversations that encourage reflection and growth. The school leader also has the opportunity to provide feedback to the teacher. Afterwards, the coach and school leader debrief on the process together.

As the school’s partnership with Dignitas eventually ends, school leaders can continue coaching their staff to ensure transformation continues and is sustained. This gradual release approach is foundational to our wider model.

Integrating Coaching into Our Program

Research suggests that integrating coaching into comprehensive professional development programs has a significant impact on the implementation rate. Coaching is a core part of our broader School Transformation Model, which includes:

The Leadership Training Institute: Schools first engage with Dignitas through a three-week, intensive, classroom based leadership-training program, where they are introduced to the coaching concept.

Professional Development Workshops: The PD workshops are based on school needs and gaps identified by the coaches. The workshops address topics best suited to group learning.

Infrastructure Support: Dignitas provides small grants for school infrastructure projects to support wider school transformation and create a safe and conducive environment for learning. We also use the process to coach schools on financial management.

“Research also demonstrates that teacher professional development (TPD) that includes peer coaching, study teams, peer visits, feedback and reflection, has generally an 80-90 percent implementation rate, versus a 5-10 percent implementation rate for TPD that is focused on theory and 10-15 percent implementation rate for TPD focused on practice without coaching or support (Joyce & Showers, 1995; Showers, Murphy, & Joyce, 1996).”

(Burns and Lawrie, 2015)
The Six Outcomes of Dignitas Coaching

At Dignitas, we’ve identified six goals we hope to achieve through our coaching approach:

One: School leaders and teachers hold high expectations for each member of the school community

Two: School leaders and teachers recognize and are able to enact their leadership roles and responsibilities in support of quality education

Three: Teachers learn and work together as teams in order to problem-solve critical school challenges

Four: Teachers engage in self-reflection and utilize practices that promote high quality instruction

Five: School leaders and teachers understand, value, and eventually embed Dignitas’ coaching practice within the school

Six: Dignitas coaches develop critical skills to perform key functions and high quality work

The Dignitas Coaches

The Dignitas Coaches are a team of encouraging professionals with strong experience in the Kenyan education system and a passion to support school transformation. Each coach supports 25 to 36 teachers from up to six schools.

Our coaches have a background in teaching, lecturing, and school management. In our unique context, we believe the ideal coach is one who can provide culturally-appropriate and relevant coaching support to teachers in the informal settlements.

"I enjoy coaching at Dignitas because we value partnership. We all have something to bring to the table. I learn from the teachers as much as they learn from me."

- Dignitas Coach Carol Owala
Supporting Our Coaches

Coaching is an emerging concept in Kenya. To support the coaches’ professional development, Dignitas has produced internal training resources and is in the process of developing a comprehensive handbook.

Dignitas coaches typically spend three days a week conducting coaching sessions in partner schools. The team meets weekly to reflect and discuss successes and challenges, then plan their upcoming coaching sessions. The coaches also contextualize resources, design and facilitate Professional Development workshops, conduct field visits, assess teachers, and support the Program Quality department.

Coaching Tools and Resources

- *The Art of Coaching* by Elena Aguilar
- *Teaching as Leadership* by Steven Farr
- *Teach Like a Champion* by Doug Lemov
- *The Kenyan Primary School Syllabus*
- *The Dignitas Coaching Handbook*
- *The Dignitas Classroom Observation Tool*
- *The Dignitas Coaching Reflection Template*
- *The Dignitas Teacher & School Leader Evaluation Rubric*

Research References


About Dignitas

Dignitas is a leading education development organization. We use an innovative training and coaching approach to empower schools and educators in marginalized communities to transform students’ opportunities. Based in Nairobi, Kenya, we partner with low-cost, private primary schools in informal settlements to improve education quality.

The DIGNITAS IN ACTION SERIES documents how we apply education innovations and best practices in Kenyan primary schools. We are dedicated to capturing lessons learnt and sharing them with like-minded organizations, educators and communities of practice. For more information, please contact info@dignitasproject.org.