Michelle Barrett was determined to teach the 7-year-old first grader in her class how to read. But how? The child had been held back a year, and was struggling. Michelle, a masters student placed at the Teachers College Community School, spent three months working one-on-one with the “reading rescue” student, helping her develop her vocabulary, and eventually, learn how to read.

Using skills learned in her early childhood education courses, Michelle helped facilitate literacy instruction by working one-on-one with students, conducting reading and writing mini-lessons, engaging in interactive “read alouds,” and organizing book clubs. She also assessed students’ learning styles in order to individualize interventions. “Through observations, I realized that there were some students in my second grade class who were kinesthetic and tactile learners.” She discussed her findings with her cooperating teacher and came up with creative ways to accommodate the needs of these specific students through lesson planning and classroom structure.

The reading rescue (reading intervention program) training that Michelle received at TC helped her have a profound impact in the life of the struggling 7-year-old first-grader. “In our daily half hour sessions, we worked on sight words, letter sounds, spelling, strategies for reading unfamiliar words and fluency through repeated reading.” When Michelle began their sessions, her student only knew 6 out of 10 first grade sight words. But during later testing, she found that she knew 10 out of 10 first and second grade sight words as well as 9 out of 10 third grade sight words. “Tears came to my eyes when I realized that my student who couldn’t read last year was now reading books fluently. My intervention helped her develop her literacy skills and she moved on to the next grade level.”
Ama Awootwi

(Reading and Math Buddy)

Developing a Love of Mathematics to Last a Lifetime

“Ama Awootwi’s kindergarten and first grades eagerly asked in class. A Zankel Fellow working with an innovative software program called MathemAntics (designed by TC Professor Herb Ginsburg), Ama helped her young students to develop early mathematical concepts and skills, such as quantity, estimation, addition, and math reasoning.

At the Teachers College Community School, she worked one-on-one, in small groups of 2 to 3 students, or as an in-class support instructor during math lessons. She also worked closely with TCCS teachers to ensure that individual student activities complemented teachers’ math lessons and met the students’ needs. “Students who need additional support are provided targeted lessons to build on existing skills while developing new skills,” says Ama, while “students who have a foundational understanding of grade-level math concepts are given additional practice to promote fluency and are engaged in activities that will broaden their mathematical understanding, preparing them for more challenging material.”

Her students also had the opportunity to learn computer skills as they worked with Ama and the other TC students. While practicing and enhancing their mathematical and technological abilities, students also benefited from the additional adult attention gained by working one-on-one or having another adult in their classroom.

The Zankel Fellowship and the MathemAntics project have afforded Ama an opportunity to stay connected to the very reason she enrolled at Teachers College: to improve upon teaching methods for young learners.

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Samantha Hewitt

(Reading and Math Buddy)

Creating a Space for All Students to Learn

Working with two sections of college preparation and English classes, Zankel Fellow Samantha Hewitt provided one-on-one support to students with difficulties in reading and writing at The Heritage School. Samantha recognized the importance of differentiation in the classroom and she made sure to invite participation from all of her students. “Many classes at Heritage High School are comprised of English language learners, who tend to struggle with aspects of literacy such as vocabulary and grammar... so it is important that all students are given the opportunity to learn, and are acknowledged as valuable assets to the class.”

Samantha worked primarily with ESL (English as a second language) students, and helped them identify strategies for improving their literacy skills. She helped these students to decode unfamiliar words, to understand different literary devices such as metaphor and theme, and to use proper grammar and syntax.

Samantha also facilitated classroom discussion and mini-lessons. “I taught a lesson on how to identify the topic, main idea, and important details in a short narrative text. I also taught an additional mini-lesson on effective study skills for vocabulary quizzes. The English teacher regularly asked me for my input while she planned lessons.” Samantha also spent time debriefing after most lessons, both to determine the lesson’s strengths and weaknesses and to plan any necessary changes.

“Overall, my relationship with the English teacher was highly collaborative, which allowed us to better focus on students’ needs.”

As a future educator, Samantha wants to work with students who struggle with literacy. The year she spent at The Heritage School helped her confirm her interest in teaching older students and adults. “While some people think that older students are incapable of learning, through my experiences as a Zankel Fellow I have found that students in their late teens and older often possess a high level of motivation and the willingness to set goals for their academic pursuits.”

Robert Cox

(Reading and Math Buddy)

Connecting Across Differences

Doctoral student Robert “Bobby” Cox has devoted his career to working one-on-one with underserved populations, and he has applied this and other experiences working at the Teachers College Community School as a Reading and Math Buddy.

Bobby used his knowledge of psychology to focus on the socio-emotional development of his students in kindergarten and pre-K to help improve their reading and math proficiency. “One student in particular, a 5 year-old kindergartner, never seemed to be on task and always seemed angry and uninterested. I recognized that his emotional needs were not being met... I gave him space to discuss how he was feeling. My goal was to help the student begin to respond more positively to me, but he also began to take more of an interest in the learning process and I noticed a more positive response from him to his other teachers.”

Bobby supported his students by collaborating on behavior management techniques with the other teachers. Establishing consistent classroom expectations allowed Bobby and the teachers to focus more on the content and less on managing behavior, which enabled students to learn in a more in a positive environment. “Although I was a teacher for 5 years before returning to school to study psychology, I planned to leave education and focus solely on psychology. My Zankel Fellowship experience reaffirmed my affinity for education and reinforced the idea that I can easily meld the two disciplines together.”

"I’m proud of the way I was able to work collaboratively with all teachers to meet the unique needs of each student."
Lourdes Taylor
(Reading and Math Buddy)
Learning From Each Other

During her first few visits to a first-grade classroom at PS 36 Margaret Douglas School, Lourdes Taylor could sense the disengagement of two bilingual students from their lessons. “The teacher was monolingual and the students were not using Spanish in the classroom; in fact they were embarrassed to speak it in front of their classmates.” As the students were struggling, Lourdes began to work with them on phonics and encouraged them to be more confident using their native language. Toward the end of the school year, a new bilingual student joined the classroom and the two students Lourdes had been coaching were using their language skills to help the newcomer navigate the school. She noticed a change in attitude: as her students spoke Spanish around their peers, the other students became curious about the language, often asking about the meaning of Spanish words.

Lourdes also selected four of the first-graders to participate in a collaborative story-making inquiry project to build their literacy skills. “The students in this class did not have much choice or center time to develop collaborative work skills and to express themselves through modalities other than reading and writing.” The group of four were asked to play with props to come up with a story, then transfer it to a storyboard by drawing and writing, and finally to publish it digitally with an e-book app. They were excited about their characters and plot and were soon deeply immersed in the writing. They helped each other spell and use correct punctuation as they wrote and later typed the stories on the iPad. They took pride in their work and gained confidence in their literacy skills. Lourdes said, “I was surprised how much they were able to learn from each other. As a result, I plan to make more time for my future students to learn from each other through projects that make use of their different modes of expression.”

Bracha Waldman
(Reading and Math Buddy)
Bringing Education Interventions to Those Who Need Them Most

Bracha Waldman’s first-grade student could not count past 30. Bracha thought carefully about how to teach her skills that, to the TC master’s candidate, seemed intuitive. Within a week, thanks to Bracha’s math interventions, the first-grader had mastered numbers up to 65 and her confidence soared. “Acknowledging the progress gave my student confidence in her math skills and momentum to continue improving throughout the year.”

By the end of her fellowship experience, Bracha had been involved in the success of learners at every grade level (pre-K through 2nd grade), having assisted general education, as well as music and library classes.

She spent most of her time in the two first-grade classes, where she helped the classroom teachers to implement targeted interventions for select students, while observing their strategies for one-on-one instruction. “I learned how to be firm and fair while demonstrating to the students that I cared about them and their progress.” In the fall, Bracha performed interventions for those struggling in math and reading and in doing so learned the need to appreciate student progress on any level.

Bracha worked one-on-one with her students, holding brief, targeted sessions that focused on their individual needs. For example, a few of them had difficulties with handwriting, writing mechanics, and spelling, which impacted their performance on writing assignments. After Bracha worked with each student once or twice a week, the students’ writing skills improved considerably.

The fellowship also allowed Bracha to learn about student instruction and engagement. She saw how every child, from those struggling to those exceeding standards, could benefit from additional support and that every one of them had the ability to grow.

“My students gained confidence in language and literacy, the teacher benefited from in-class support and a collaborative student space, and I learned from observing students work together and support each other’s learning.”

“Recently, one of my students showed off her writing to me at a class party. Seeing the pride in her face at that moment was an incredibly rewarding experience.”
Megan Hanley
(Reading and Math Buddy)
Finding Community Through Creativity

Tasked with finding common ground for students in the dual language program, Megan Hanley planned her curriculum using her students’ interests, as well as her own, as a base, and was able to bring her students together. First graders at PS 75 who needed additional support in language and literacy development became a community by learning about each other’s families, practicing yoga daily, and writing poetry. The students then transformed these experiences into stories and created their own books.

Megan knew that by getting to know her students she could find ways to get them excited about literacy. She asked students to interview their family members about how and when their families came to the United States, and then create a book to share with the class. “The students were pleasantly surprised to find that many of their families had come from the same countries or, when that wasn’t the case, that they had had very similar experiences.”

For Mary, these types of interventions were successful. “We discovered that Mary had a love for writing and reading poems, so we began a unit of study on poetry and Mary’s excitement and eagerness was immediately clear.” At the end of the unit, Mary stood up in front of her peers and a handful of adults to recite two poems that she had written herself—in English.”

“I’m incredibly proud of the confidence our students built through the program. Many of them didn’t identify as readers when we started working with them. With our support they were able to see themselves through a different lens, and overcome obstacles.”

Karina Malik
The Power of Collaboration in the Classroom

Karina Malik’s elementary school student, Mary, had just arrived from Korea and spoke no English. “Mary was very shy and had just started to learn English, so reading and writing were a big challenge.” But Karina found a solution by working collaboratively with teachers at PS 75. She and her co-teachers provided individualized support, working one-on-one with students who came from bilingual backgrounds.

By working individually with students and collaborating with their teachers, Karina was able to identify her students’ strengths and potential and chart paths for supporting those who were struggling.

The Zankel fellowship experience taught Karina the importance of collaboration in the classroom. “Understanding the needs of one student can involve communicating with multiple teachers as well as the child’s parents, the after-school instructors and the school principal.

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