The Zankel Urban Fellowship is the embodiment of TC’s commitment to engaging with the under-served community in which it is located through direct and ongoing service by faculty and students. From the program’s start, hundreds of Zankel Fellows have created successful partnerships and formed mutually beneficial relationships with NYC schools and organizations with the goal of improving students’ learning outcomes in reading, mathematics, and more.

Crystal Chen (Reading and Math Buddy) Publishing the Hearts and Minds of NYC Students

From the moment Crystal Chen met her fifth graders from P.S. 36, she knew they were more than just students; they were “real authors,” who would publish their work. As a Zankel fellow and doctoral candidate, Crystal served as a teaching artist and professional development coach through the Student Press Initiative at the Center for Professional Education of Teachers at Teachers College. She was placed at two school sites: P.S. 36 in Harlem and P.S. 305 in Bedford-Stuyvesant.

At P.S. 36, she worked with a group of fifth graders after school. Throughout the fall and winter months, they curated a collection of short stories, narratives, poems, and portraits titled Our Harlem: Stories from the Hearts and Minds of Students in Harlem. “The experience was incredible in that we explored the city together; the students even went to Columbia University for the first time as a class,” said Crystal. Although the students lived just five blocks away from the university, they had never entered its gates. “One cold winter afternoon, I took the students to campus to see the Christmas lights—asking them to write down what they saw, heard, touched, felt, and smelled. Their writing improved from week to week, and resulted in a public reading of their published works in the Cowin Auditorium at TC.”

Crystal also taught five classes of grades second through fifth at P.S. 305. In addition to direct instruction, Crystal coached teachers on how to teach creative writing. In total, 90 students from the school curated the anthology From Where We’re From: A Poetry Anthology of Elementary Students in Brooklyn, an exploration of students’ personal histories, communities, and culture. Because P.S. 305 is home to students from very different backgrounds, the poetry anthology enabled students to hear one another’s stories. Some shared their experiences as refugees from Yemen; others, as immigrants from Puerto Rico. The book was published in June 2015, and the entire school community came together to celebrate its published authors.

“I believe that educational researchers should always be connected to the practical work of current educational landscapes, and this fellowship allowed me to stay involved in a very creative, rewarding, and enriching way.”
Lauren Gunn’s plan as a UMOJA Zankel Fellow was to advance educational equality by empowering her male students of color in underserved communities in Harlem through literacy practices that spoke to their experiences. She worked with Professor Yolanda Sealey-Ruiz, the co-founder of UMOJA Readers and Writers, and with students from several other departments at Teachers College. Lauren observed first-hand how connecting students’ personal experiences to their learning helped both of their academic and socio-emotional development. One of Natalie’s students had grown up in an English-speaking household and did not want to learn or speak Spanish in class. Because of his recent move from Texas, he was closed off to his peers, the Spanish language, and new cultures. His classmates began sharing stories about their own transitions from the Dominican Republic to New York and linked their experiences to his, which helped him realize that his feeling of marginalization was a shared human experience. The student now speaks and writes Spanish conversationally and also has a deep appreciation for Dominican culture.

The Zankel Fellowship helped alter Natalie’s perspective on education “from being one that expected linear solutions to complex predicaments, to one that now facilitates a deeper understanding of creative and intentional resolutions.”

Through her experiences at both P.S. 75 and Dos Puentes, she has developed a strong interest in bilingual or culturally relevant pedagogy as it intertwines with the professional development of Early Childhood Education teachers, which was the initial focus of her studies at Teachers College. Natalie understands that “these cannot be separated, and it is imperative that with any teacher education program, culturally relevant pedagogy be at the forefront, if not woven through their entire professional development experience.”

As bilingual teachers of Spanish at both P.S. 75 on the Upper West Side and the Dos Puentes school in Washington Heights, Natalie Flores and her co-teacher wished to engage their students in ways that accounted for their cultural backgrounds and experiences. They decided to use a curriculum based on critical literacy, which allows learners to consider their cultural experiences as vehicles for further academic and personal achievement.

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Natalie created spaces for the youth she mentored to speak about themselves, for themselves. “Unsurprisingly, I found that the mantra ‘Black Lives Matter’ impacted them significantly. Their audio, written, visual, and digital expressions mostly illuminated a recurrent theme about their relative disposability in society. However, they were able to generate positive strategies for survival, as expressed in their work,” says Lauren.

Alternatives for Children, Junior Scholars, or CASES (Center for Alternative Sentencing and Employment Services). Together with the other students on her team, she guided youth through relevant, rigorous reading, helped them prepare for guest speakers who specialized in vulnerable populations, and encouraged them to express themselves through reading, writing, speaking, as well as visual and digital tools.

“Umoja is the Swahili word for unity, and I worked with teachers and faculty to support and develop literacy practices that sought to unite, and acknowledge the intersecting systems of foster care and juvenile justice that impacted our students.”

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“As a result of being an UMOJA Zankel Fellow, I believe that the efficacy of any form of instruction and the survival of English education, in particular, rests in a creative, synergistic, truly humanist interdisciplinary instruction by educators whose knowledge is co-created with students through democratic, multimodal methods, including critical digital literacies.”
Emily He knew she was looking at a room of potential engineers at P.S. 36, but she needed a way to convince them. Her fourth and fifth graders were intimidated by engineering at first, expressing to Emily how difficult it would be. She showed them that “engineering is all around us and that engineering is simply identifying a problem and designing or improving ways to address that problem.”

Through the Engineering is Elementary curriculum Emily covered two main topics: acoustics and magnetic properties. Each week, she prepared a foundation (theoretical) class and a class that allowed students to apply what they had learned previously through hands-on experiments.

For example, students learned how to amplify and dampen sounds. Students then made rubber band guitars and tested different types of materials (wrapping guitar strings in aluminum foil, felt, or clay) for their sound dampening or sound amplifying properties. “My goal was to provide a strong knowledge base for students to apply principles that they had learned in experimental or real world settings,” says Emily.

For their end-of-the-year culminating project, students collaboratively made a model home equipped with sound dampening materials. “I felt that the students were sometimes reluctant to do foundational work that was more rigorous because they had already been through an entire school day by the time they would see me,” says Emily. However, the students were easily motivated with small incentives (e.g. those who completed their assignments got to move on to the next step of the project) and were often eager to engage in experimental and applied projects.

Another student tried reading with his eyes closed—he would try to memorize the text instead of actually reading. Caitlin worked on phonics rules and reading strategies with him. Not only is he no longer afraid of reading; he now enjoys it.

The skills Caitlin gained from taking classes at Teachers College, combined with her determination and compassion helped motivate these students to find the joy in reading. The individualized attention the students received during Reading Rescue sessions that addressed their specific needs helped them read at a first grade level.

What Caitlin took away from her time as a Zankel Fellow was her students’ newly found confidence not only in their reading skills, but in themselves. “I believe that this sense of confidence is so critical to an elementary child’s success in school, and that these students are not only primed to be excellent readers, but also for academic achievement in general,” says Caitlin.

By the end of my Zankel Fellowship, I was very excited to hear that a number of my students wanted to become engineers!”
**Stefanie Lugassy**  
**Reading and Math Buddy**  
**Motivating Students Through Literacy**

Stefanie Lugassy was ready for this. It was her second semester as a Zankel Fellow and literacy instructor for first graders at the Teachers College Community School (TCCS), and she had taken over a large portion of the literacy teaching for a TCCS teacher who was on maternity leave.

Stefanie said she knew she “was properly trained in the workshop model of teaching, and was motivated and excited to take on a larger role in the classroom.” For the eight weeks that the TCCS teacher was out of the classroom, Stefanie planned and taught all of Reading Workshop, Read Aloud, and Word Study lessons. She administered all assessments and facilitated all small group work, including guided reading, strategy lessons, small group shared reading, and one-on-one reading conferences. “During this time, I helped move readers in positive and meaningful ways in the classroom. I was so proud of all of their growth,” says Stefanie.

In the first semester of her Zankel fellowship, Stefanie had undertaken similar work: she had helped administer assessments, led small group work, held reading and writing conferences, and taught a few components of balanced literacy each week. She and her classroom teacher planned the activities that Stefanie would teach every week. She also worked closely with two students, helping them to grow their skills and strategies as learners.

Stefanie was able to develop strong relationships with all 25 students in the classroom. “They came to me for help, confided in me when they were struggling, and were excited to share all their happy moments. On my birthday, the students made me beautiful cards, and one student wrote: ‘Dear Miss Lugassy, or (your) birthday is spihsl (special) to us because You are spihsl (special) to us.’ This student struggled with writing, but she had made tremendous progress since the beginning of the year. “Later that day, the student saw me in the cafeteria and said ‘Miss Lugassy! Did you see my card? I tried so hard to write the word special!’ I was so proud of her.”

**James Nadeau**  
**Finding Community in the Face of Adversity**

One moment that stands out for James Nadeau during his year as a Zankel Fellow was when the high school leadership group that he led at the Frederick Douglas Academy II (FDA II) in Harlem interviewed a fellow classmate about her decision to drop out. The group, called the FDA II Global Brotherhood, listened to her story and asked what had led to her decision. James was captivated with the level of compassion and maturity the young men showed to their classmate. The students shared personal stories about their experiences in school and within the community and discussed the drop out phenomenon. The members of the Global Brotherhood made their classmate know she was in a safe space, and were also able to convince her to stay in school.

Throughout the year, James engaged FDAII students in thoughtful reflection on their leadership abilities, issues facing their community, and potential solutions. All of the young men participating in the Global Brotherhood lived in low-income, underprivileged areas; they faced adversity at every turn. James noticed that they had no outlet to engage in conversations about issues they faced every day, like drug and alcohol abuse, school discipline, and crime. While this group was small (three to six students attended every week), James was impressed with the depth of the conversations and the students’ willingness to share intimate stories about family members and friends who had struggled with drugs and alcohol.

Working at FDA II gave James an invaluable experience and a better understanding of the obstacles that affect under-resourced public schools. “It has been humbling and informative to witness the challenges that teachers and students face on a daily basis. It has helped me to understand better that any truly impactful solution to tackling educational inequity must start with empowering schools like FDA II, where the truly difficult work is being done,” says James.

“Thanks to my Zankel experience, I feel even more prepared than I did before to begin my journey as a primary educator. I had the opportunity to practice my teaching and each day I was reminded that teaching was the profession I was born to do.”

“Over the course of the year, I noticed that the students in the Global Brotherhood developed confidence to talk about themselves and engage with tough topics and also exhibited greater respect for their peers.”
Devin Wilson was preparing for her last day at the Teachers College Community School (TCCS) in May 2015. During her year as a Zankel Fellow, she had worked with kindergarten and third grade students on phonics, math, writing, computers, and other areas where they needed help. Devin, who graduated from Teachers College with a master's degree in Arts Administration, worked with small groups during math and reading lessons, graded student homework, and helped to plan four student field trips to art and cultural institutions in New York City. Additionally, she helped cover any classrooms that needed extra assistance.

Because of this dedication and focus, it should not have come as a surprise when her students and colleagues told her how much they would miss her. “I have never received so many hugs, well wishes, and encouragement from students and colleagues as I did on my last day. My supervisor said that TCCS had come a long way in the past two years and that I had been a part of helping to drive that growth.”

Devin made sure to write detailed notes in all of her third graders’ homework notebooks so that they knew what the expectations were and where they were falling on the spectrum. “This increased students’ investment [in their learning] because they were eager to read my notes and find out if I noticed any difference or improvement. I had to remember the homework status of 50 kids, and their engagement with it was worth it.”

Her encouragement, interventions, and professional development session boosted the students’ morale and their writing skills blossomed.

One student connected greatly with Devin. On her last day at Heritage, this student informed her that he had been accepted to a prestigious summer internship at Mt. Sinai. “I worked with him on his resume and personal statement, and was proud of his accomplishments, especially knowing the life experiences he has faced.” This student had become a father figure to his siblings at age nine, when his father went to jail. He struggled to maintain a shelter for himself and his siblings. Despite these obstacles, he never complained; he knew education was his key to becoming “something extraordinary.” His journey is a lesson that keeps Devin inspired to teach. “I learned from him that once a student sees their potential—that someone believes in him or her—that learning can just take off.”

Her Zankel Fellowship at the Heritage School prompted her to continue to serve urban students. Devin now works at The Harlem Village Academy, where she teaches sixth graders about the power of writing.

Amanda Rhea (Reading and Math Buddy) Becoming “Extraordinary” Through Education

Finding a way to motivate the students to enjoy writing was going to be difficult for Zankel Fellow Amanda Rhea and the ninth grade classroom teacher she assisted at the Heritage School in East Harlem. The students thought the introductory writing class was “unnecessary.” As a reading specialist, Amanda needed to find a way to encourage her students to embrace the power of writing while boosting their writing skills. She took the lessons she learned at Teachers College and applied them in the ninth grade classroom. She instituted interventions and used Word Generation, software that increases academic vocabulary in argumentative writing. To foster a sense of community within the classroom, Amanda also organized a mock professional development session for the students, surrounding peer revisions as a cooperative learning strategy.

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Her Zankel Fellowship at the Heritage School prompted her to continue to serve urban students. Amanda now works at The Harlem Village Academy, where she teaches sixth graders about the power of writing.

Devin Wilson (Reading and Math Buddy) Helping Drive the Growth of a Community School

“I had previously taught second grade at a low-ranked school in Miami, and this Zankel experience at TCCS allowed me to have faith in the public school system again.”

“Overall, the experience reinforced for me that students of any background are capable of greatness when the expectations for them are high and they receive the support they need.”
2014–2015 Zankel Fellows

Ama Awotwi
Early Mathematics Learning/
MathemAntics Computer Software
Reading and Math Buddies

Yu Bai
Raising Educational Achievement
Coalition of Harlem

Jorge Beltran
Student Press Initiative: Writing Worlds
Reading and Math Buddies

Amber Briggs
Raising Educational Achievement
Coalition of Harlem

Crystal Chen
Student Press Initiative: Speaking Stories
Reading and Math Buddies

Robert Cox
Teachers College Community School
Reading and Math Buddies

PraiseGod Ekweme
Teachers College Community School
Reading and Math Buddies

Jennifer Etienne
Raising Educational Achievement
Coalition of Harlem
Reading and Math Buddies

Adam Falkner
Student Press Initiative: Writing Worlds
Reading and Math Buddies

Patricia Finn
Heritage School - Reading Specialist
Reading and Math Buddies

Nicole Fletcher
Early Mathematics Learning/
MathemAntics Computer Software
Reading and Math Buddies

Natalie Flores
Oral Language, Literacy &
Vocabulary Development
Reading and Math Buddies

Matthew Graziose
Raising Educational Achievement
Coalition of Harlem

Lauren Gunn
UMOJA Readers and Writers
Reading and Math Buddies

Caitlin Hairr
Literacy and Inquiry Internships
Reading and Math Buddies

Daniel Hartig
Movement and Physical Activity Program

Emily He
Raising Educational Achievement
Coalition of Harlem

Luis Ingels
Raising Educational Achievement
Coalition of Harlem (Spring 2015)

Kamiya Kumar
Teachers College Community School
Reading and Math Buddies

Ariel Lawrence
Teachers College Community School
Reading and Math Buddies

Amy Lewis
Literacy and Inquiry Internships
Reading and Math Buddies

Stefanie Lugassy
Literacy and Inquiry Internships
Reading and Math Buddies

William Mark
Raising Educational Achievement
Coalition of Harlem (Fall 2015)

Andrew Marotta
Student Press Initiative: Speaking Stories
Reading and Math Buddies

Debra Moreta
Oral Language, Literacy &
Vocabulary Development (Spring 2015)
Reading and Math Buddies

James Nadeau
Raising Educational Achievement
Coalition of Harlem

Lakshmi Ramachandran
Movement and Physical Activity Program

Amanda Rhea
Heritage School - Reading Specialist
Reading and Math Buddies

Kandice Ross
Raising Educational Achievement
Coalition of Harlem

Dianna Sierra
Student Press Initiative: Speaking Stories
Reading and Math Buddies

Michelle Stephens
Raising Educational Achievement
Coalition of Harlem

Elizabeth Sullivan
Literacy and Inquiry Internships
Reading and Math Buddies

Amaris Tejada
Oral Language, Literacy &
Vocabulary Development (Fall 2015)

Catherine Tierney
Raising Educational Achievement
Coalition of Harlem

Matthew Tyler
Argumentation Curriculum Implementation

Devin Wilson
Teachers College Community School
Reading and Math Buddies