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## Getting Off The Fast Track For The Long Haul: Becoming A Teacher

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## BECOMING A TEACHER

### ariel sacks

When I set foot in my first classroom as a recent college graduate with emergency certification, I was not certain I wanted to be a teacher, and even less certain of what I wanted to teach. I was there because of a love for children and the sudden post-college need for a paycheck. A six-year journey and a master's degree later, I have been transformed into a committed educator. My experiences led me from a post in an urban Boys and Girls Club to a job as an alternate-route teacher in Providence, then to graduate studies at Bank Street College, and finally into a high-needs public school in New York City. As a participant in the Partnership for Quality program, I was able to work with college faculty and a cohort of teachers to implement progressive principles of education where I believe they are most urgently needed. My particular path into the profession has been marked by turning points that led me to view teaching as a lifetime endeavor, not just a stopping place on the way to some other more worthwhile destination. After four years of full-time teaching in New York City's public schools, I cannot think of a more compelling or rewarding life's work.

### **Beyond College Hill**

A few years into undergraduate life at Brown University, I decided to get a summer job off campus, away from College Hill. Courses on American slavery, immigration, and postcolonial literature, as well as a growing appreciation for hip-hop music, had sent me on a spiraling personal journey into issues of race, class, and ethnicity in America.

I found a compass for that journey and a job as the arts and crafts teacher at the Fox Point Boys and Girls Club, a community center less than a mile away from Brown. The diverse neighborhood included Cape Verdean Americans, African Americans, Native Americans, and immigrants from Portugal, Puerto Rico, the Dominican Republic, and Colombia. On the first day I made it my business to introduce myself to staff, parents, and anyone else I saw. I sat down at

a table where Diana, a forty-year-old woman, was sitting. “I’m Ariel,” I said, extending my hand. “I’m the new arts and crafts teacher.” I was deliberately confident, hoping to show how happy I was to be in this new environment.

“Diana,” she said with a cautious but sincere smile, shaking my hand. “Nice to meet you.” I sat down with the intention of making conversation while we waited for the children to arrive. “Do you have kids here?” I asked.

“Yes, I have two teenage girls, and my little niece and nephew go here too. You’re from Brown?”

“Yes,” I replied. Suddenly I wasn’t sure what to say. Where I came from, I would have asked, “And where did you go to college?” But something stopped me from asking a question based on that assumption. Instead I said, in a less confident tone, “Did you go to college?” Diana’s initial caution with me now cut through her smile.

Her reaction, both subtle and forceful, changed the course I was traveling. “No,” she said flatly, and then looked away. As she did, I knew immediately that I had arrived at a critical juncture, where I had to face the naïveté that had developed as I grew up in an upper middle class suburb. I’d thought my background was common or “normal,” but Diana revealed to me that in her world it was neither. While living and working in Fox Point, I began to understand what my professors were talking about when they spoke abstractly of “white privilege.” I saw first hand that while I had easy access to a world of material wealth and relative safety, other Americans did not. In the world I came to know, systematic poverty, racism, and violence translated into people’s daily struggles. The prevalence of unemployment, drug dealing, and incarceration were particularly startling to me.

In July 1999 I recorded in my journal these lines about children working in the art room:

The new girl and the look on her  
face as she  
told me  
Joy called her Blackie and Darkie again  
and I  
Did Not talk to her about it.

I just felt sad  
and said, The Next Thing Joy says like that will get her kicked out of the  
art room.

Joy keeps asking me  
if I have kids  
and if I did, would I  
beat them?

She told me  
All Her Brothers Died,  
Her aunt too, because she kept going to the hospital too many times.

And Kayla pulling the lanyard string tight  
around her neck, smiling, "I'm Gonna Strangle Myself so I Can  
Be With my Daddy."

I did not ask her about her Daddy, I only  
told her never to put the lanyard like that again.

I was grasping some of the realities of racism and poverty and finding myself at a loss about how to respond. Over two and a half years, I had the opportunity to work with children between the ages of five and seventeen. While recognizing how little I knew about life in the Fox Point community, I took every opportunity to learn from the people at the Boys and Girls Club. The arts and crafts room was my main domain, but soon parents trusted me to walk their children home from the club in the evenings, and I took teenagers to the Brown computer labs for their school projects. With the guidance of a Brown University professor, I also ran a women's poetry group. Diana and her teenage daughters, none of whom had completed high school, became members.

My time in Fox Point was more about learning than teaching. I saw myself as a friend or role model at best, but not a teacher. My professor encouraged my

work with poetry, and I found the group rewarding; still, it was not clear to me what, if anything, I had to teach.

### **Emergency Certification**

In 2001 I graduated from Brown with a degree in English and no particular plans for the future. I wanted to keep working in Fox Point, but when summer was over, the children there would be back in school. My position would become part time, no longer providing sufficient income.

Becoming a teacher was not entirely appealing to me, given my mindset at 22. My experience in a suburban public school system had been stifling, and the divide between teachers and students there devastatingly wide. Many people at Fox Point had shared negative stories about school. Some were quite damaging, and the high school dropout rate was high. I was suspicious of an education system that seemed to hurt children in so many ways and skeptical of the notion that teachers could be positive change agents.

I tried temping in an office, but that felt like a fate worse than death. And so, ambivalently, I entered teaching. In 2001 the Providence School Department granted college graduates emergency certification to fill classroom vacancies. Without so much as an interview, I was placed as a permanent substitute in an eighth-grade English class at a large middle school.

It was November, and three teachers had already quit the position I was taking. A student had apparently thrown a book at the last one, and she never came back. When a veteran teacher next door told me, “They’re all a bunch of bozos,” my intuitions about the school were confirmed: this was not a place where children felt respected by adults. Instead, teachers and students were pitted against one another. I wanted no part of such a culture, and allied myself with the students whenever I could.

Though my students liked me, I knew almost nothing about teaching. I completely ignored the curriculum guides left on my desk by the last teacher and began experimenting, with some successes (like poetry) and frequent flops (like the five-paragraph essay). I also broke a lot of school rules, often without realizing it. One day, a student said to me, “Ms. Sacks, the other teachers are talking about

you, because you don't line us up and walk us to lunch." No one had told me to walk the students to lunch. Furthermore, it seemed a ridiculous demand. My students were practically grown! Two of them were pregnant. Couldn't they find the lunch room by themselves?

By February the students began to pressure me to follow more rules because they feared I might get fired. I realize now that I should have been able to see that the students were truly trying to keep me on track so that I could stay with them. I naively dismissed their warnings, since I had heard nothing from any adult. I also believed I was untouchable—that the school would never let me go, since it had been so difficult to fill the position in the first place. Besides, I was just beginning to gain some momentum in my teaching. I spent my entire February vacation planning a unit on persuasive writing. Monday morning, excited to go back to work, I got a call from downtown. I'd reached another turning point. "Ariel Sacks, you're at Hope High School today," the woman's voice said. It took me a few minutes to remember that I was still technically a substitute. I was stunned as I heard the voice tell me that I was being transferred. The woman on the other end of the phone had no knowledge of my circumstance, but suggested I speak with the principal.

Until that moment, the principal had not said more than two words to me. Now, to my bewilderment, she was furious. She accused me of not taking the job seriously. In fairness to her, there was some truth to her complaint. Though I took my students seriously, I had little respect for the school and had not attempted to conceal my attitude. The principal told me that she had no intention of taking me back. I later heard from my students that they wrote letters asking that I return. She told them that I had quit.

Although I spent the remainder of the year as a substitute in various secondary schools, that phone call had summoned me to turn toward a deeper understanding of my circumstances and my role in them. As I went through the motions of substituting during the following months, I observed students in many different environments and had a lot of time to reflect. One day, in a middle school classroom, I was pleasantly shocked when students entered the room, took out notebooks, and began working as if I were their regular teacher. They asked

for help when they needed it, but appeared to be self-motivated. Who was their teacher, and what had she done to create this climate? In the hum of this phantom teacher's classroom, I admitted to myself for the first time that I had failed—failed to take the job of teaching seriously; and thus, I had failed my students.

### **Full-time Study**

I decided to leave the country in order to learn Spanish and went to live in Mexico for a year. I took a TEFL course, traveled, and taught English. But before I left, partly at the behest of my parents, I applied to graduate schools of education in New York City. The result of my tumultuous year in Providence Public Schools and final months of introspection was that I could not think of any profession more compelling than teaching, though I knew it was not an easy or simple job. I knew that if I were to take on classroom teaching in an urban public school again, I would need to do it much more seriously, and with guidance from experts. I remembered Diana and her daughters, and the eighth graders I'd been forced to leave, and knew I couldn't afford the emotional cost of failing my students again.

I chose Bank Street because of its size and history of progressive work. Although it was highly recommended by family and friends, I doubted that its approach would be geared to public education. At the same time, I was confident that my interests would be taken seriously in a small learning community.

My advisor, Madeleine Ray, turned out to be a true expert. She ran my weekly conference group, supervised my student teaching, and taught curriculum courses. She had also worked with struggling students in Harlem's public schools for many years. She struck me as a free spirit who possessed an unflinching belief in the capabilities of children.

The weekly conference group was the backbone of that first year at Bank Street. We were five young women, each bringing our perspectives from the field to open-ended two-hour-long discussions every week. I was the only one of us, however, who had spent time in urban public schools, and who was sure I wanted to teach in one. My reasons were simple. I had left the children of Fox Point and the Providence Middle School behind physically, but not in spirit. I had been

touched by their stories, sensibilities, and resiliency, and was equally shaken by the prospect that most of them would not receive the quality education they needed and deserved. I wanted to provide opportunities for children in similar situations and contribute to a better vision of public education.

My first student teaching experience was not in a public school, however. Madeleine asked me to try a placement in a middle school classroom at Bank Street's School for Children, promising a public school placement in the spring. "This experience will cut years off your practice," she said.

The classroom at the School for Children had wooden tables arranged in a circle, large tall windows along one wall, a sink with art supplies neatly organized above it, and two computers. On one wall there was a chart with seventeen Greek gods and goddesses, each matched with a student's name. Later I learned that the Greek deities represented rotating classroom jobs; Zeus, for example, led morning meeting, and Hermes delivered messages. The halls were quiet, except when students used them as work space—for example, when they made life-size cardboard puppets of Greek gods and goddesses. The staircases on each floor displayed student murals that depicted themes from social studies—woodland Indian villages and scenes and quotes from African American history. There were also fliers for "Kids of Color" meetings and announcements of developmental talks for parents given by the school psychologist. It was unlike any middle school I had seen as a child or in Providence. Everything appeared to be carefully thought out.

The first semester of fieldwork was about learning teaching strategies. My cooperating teacher allowed me to come up with the idea for my first lesson. The students were involved in a study of the Ancient Greeks. I wanted them to know something about the other civilizations in the region that contributed to the Greeks' achievements. I found that there were at least six civilizations that had made important contributions, such as iron tools and the alphabet, to Greek culture. I was struggling to figure out how to share this information with students in an interesting way.

I brought the idea to my conference group session. Someone suggested dividing the work among groups of students and asking each to present its research to the class. Another member suggested the students create a timeline of

each of the six civilizations. Madeleine encouraged me to plan in detail how I would give directions and materials and to set a time frame for each step. Using the suggestions from the conference group, I worked late into the night on the logistics of this endeavor. Though I went over the allotted time, the lesson was clearly a success.

The School for Children was not an ideal place for me, given the turns I'd taken in my life. It served a mostly privileged group of students, and I knew my path led elsewhere. However, it provided a much-needed model of developmentally appropriate progressive education and a chance to try my hand at it. After that, it was easier to imagine how the principles of progressive pedagogy might work in a public school. It seemed to me that children growing up in poverty needed an education that not only provided them with basic academic skills, but also gave them opportunities to imagine and create a world in which they would want to live. Critical thinking and creativity were necessary components of a sound curriculum.

In the spring, everyone in my conference group moved to public school placements. I was with a veteran fifth-grade teacher at Amistad, a dual language public school that was started by a former Bank Street faculty member. Half of the classes there were taught in English, and half were conducted in Spanish; all the teachers were bilingual, the student population predominantly Latino. The environment was especially welcoming to parents. Some helped out in the classroom a few days each week. There was tension at the school around curriculum, because state and district mandates often conflicted with the project-based, responsive classrooms the staff wanted to maintain. Teachers discussed this at length during lunch, and a parent group was complaining to the district about the mandates. The cooperating teacher welcomed my ideas and provided a stable, warm classroom environment in which I could hone my teaching skills.

Against the background of these first two experiences, I was able to look at my final placement through a new lens. I worked with a less experienced teacher in a small public school that served African-American and Latino students. The staff was well intentioned, but the school lacked structures that would help students stay engaged academically. Most of us in conference groups were witnessing

and dealing with issues of classroom management. My coursework stressed the importance of getting to know individual students as well as understanding the general characteristics of their age group. Madeleine advocated implementing exciting curricula, clear parameters and expectations, and open and honest communication with the students about the life of the classroom. I realized that it would take years for me to have a smoothly functioning classroom like those at Amistad or the School for Children. Training and support from seasoned professionals would be indispensable along the way, but I knew that no one could walk my path for me; nothing could take the place of hands-on experience.

### **Partnership For Quality**

At the end of a year of student teaching and full-time study, everyone in my conference group found teaching jobs. Three out of five of us opted to teach in private schools. I obtained an internship certification and took a position in the Rafael Cordero Bilingual Academy at Middle School 45 in East Harlem. The school was part of the Partnership for Quality, a new collaboration between Bank Street College and a cluster of high-needs schools in Region 9. The school was eager to hire its first Bank Street-trained teacher, and I was eager to have a second chance at teaching in my own classroom—this time with more knowledge, an explicit set of guiding principles, and support from other professionals.

While the school itself was not an easy place to work—new teachers generally received little support—I had a few advantages that many others in similar positions did not.

(1) My experiences in Providence had given me a window into the lives of students living in urban poverty and prepared me for the rough edges I would encounter in high-needs urban public schools in a way no teacher preparation program ever could.

(2) My continued course work at Bank Street provided useful techniques and perspectives that kept me connected to the student-centered, inquiry-based pedagogy I believed in.

(3) Through the Partnership, I was able to continue working with Madeleine. Her mentorship was invaluable. In particular, when she observed my teaching she

helped me to see the things that were actually working and how I could take them further. It was easy, as a new teacher, to blame myself for my shortcomings. The more difficult task was to determine where the successes were and how to build on them.

(4) The Partnership provided professional development by a Bank Street faculty member to a cohort of teachers in my school. These sessions focused on adolescent development and connecting curriculum across disciplines. I often felt isolated, as my ideas about success in the classroom and how to create it frequently conflicted with those of other staff members. Over time, the Partnership helped my colleagues and me develop common ground.

Bank Street's presence at the school also provided some leverage for me with the administration concerning curriculum. I felt comfortable trying out new ideas in my classroom, though I always had to be ready to defend my practices. At the same time, I was also more willing to compromise than I had been as a 22-year-old in Providence. I learned to pick my battles. I even came to understand the value of lining my eighth graders up and walking them to lunch. After observing a variety of schools as a student teacher, I could see that adolescents needed structure and order in their lives, and that these could be implemented respectfully and successfully.

I taught at M.S. 45 for three years, and have seen many young teachers leave the profession. However, the support I received there enabled me to become a career teacher. I may never find a perfect school, and I'm still learning how to teach, but I see now that there is no end to this winding course. Each turn presents endless possibilities.

## **LEARNING A TOUGH LESSON:**