



Bank Street

Occasional Paper Series

Occasional  
Paper  
Series

---

Volume 2008  
Number 20 *Alternative Routes to Teacher  
Certification*

Article 4

---

February 2008

## Collaborations for Success: Teachers, Families, and Funders Working Together

Sarah Samuels  
*Samuels Center*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://educate.bankstreet.edu/occasional-paper-series>



Part of the [Curriculum and Instruction Commons](#), [Educational Methods Commons](#), and the [Elementary Education and Teaching Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Samuels, S. (2008). Collaborations for Success: Teachers, Families, and Funders Working Together. *Occasional Paper Series, 2008* (20). Retrieved from <https://educate.bankstreet.edu/occasional-paper-series/vol2008/iss20/4>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Educate. It has been accepted for inclusion in Occasional Paper Series by an authorized editor of Educate. For more information, please contact [kfreda@bankstreet.edu](mailto:kfreda@bankstreet.edu).

**educate**

## TEACHERS, FAMILIES, AND FUNDERS WORKING TOGETHER

**sarah samuels**

On a difficult day in late September, as I was sitting and sobbing in my first-grade classroom in the Bronx while my students were at lunch, I could not help wondering how I had wound up taking a job that made me feel like such a failure. This was the closest I had ever come to quitting something that was important to me. Right after I graduated from college in June 2004, I joined Teach for America (TFA), a nonprofit organization that places recent college graduates with no classroom teaching experience into high-needs public schools which are difficult to staff.

Teach for America corps members commit to spending two years teaching in challenging schools. The organization maintains that our nation's greatest injustice is the educational inequality that exists in low-income communities. Disparities in educational opportunity severely limit the life prospects of the thirteen million children growing up in poverty in this country today. Teach for America believes that putting bright, committed recent college graduates into the classroom will help close the achievement gap. Teach for America participants can work toward certification while they are teaching. Thus, I was able to enroll at Bank Street College and teach in the Bronx simultaneously. My Bank Street advisor directed the working teachers program at the time and was pivotal in creating a place for Teach for America teachers at the college.

I thought I would be ahead of the game. I had spent four years helping to run Mission Hill, Harvard's largest volunteer afterschool program. This community-based program was located in Roxbury, an impoverished Boston neighborhood. My work there was by far the most challenging I undertook while at Harvard. I had seen many of the children in the program grow over the four years I was with them, and I had also seen firsthand how difficult their lives were. Some of the children I had encountered through the years were living with parents who were addicted to drugs and alcohol; others were living in situations of abuse and neglect. My work with the afterschool program solidified my deep commitment to

educational equality. I knew I could pursue my interests in education through a more traditional route by enrolling in a graduate education program. However, Teach for America appealed to me because I would be joining an organization of people who all shared my beliefs about advancing equity through education. There was a strong sense of community among the members of Teach for America, and I still feel a strong sense of kinship whenever we meet

The summer after I graduated from college, I attended a five-week TFA institute designed to prepare me for teaching in the fall. Along with a team of three other corps members, and under the supervision of an experienced teacher, I taught a fifth-grade summer school class. When we were not with our students, we attended classes on teaching practices such as lesson planning, classroom management, and differentiating instruction for diverse learners.

Armed with my TFA training and my previous experience working with a high-needs population of students in an afterschool setting, I thought I would be prepared for my first teaching job. In truth, I believe nothing, not even a master's degree and student teaching experience, could have prepared me for this difficult task. I found myself completely overwhelmed by the poverty and hardships encountered every day by my students, first graders who were already far behind academically. That is what led to my feelings of failure and hopelessness on that day in late September when I was ready to walk out on a job where, more than anything, I had wanted to be successful.

It would not have been difficult to justify quitting; during my first year, another teacher at my school left after just a few days. The odds were stacked against me and my classroom. I quickly learned that it was one thing to be adept at working with a group of twelve students in an afterschool setting for a couple of hours with the help of other volunteers, and entirely different to be the only teacher in a classroom of twenty-five for an entire school day. I often tell people that my first year of teaching was the hardest year of my life. It was not uncommon for my class to erupt into chaos when a lesson I planned went badly. I had no idea how to organize the environment to maximize instruction and make materials accessible to my students. I was constantly moving furniture to try to set up the classroom in a way that would work for my students and keep them from

running around.

Moreover, there were many other factors in addition to my own inexperience that worked against me and the children in my class. For instance, because the school was overcrowded, my students ate lunch everyday at 10:08 a.m. As a result, our morning, which was when the students were the most focused and thus was prime instructional time, lasted just over an hour and a half. In contrast, the students would return over-excited from lunch—the only time all day they spent outside our room—for an afternoon of instruction that was over four hours long. It felt like an eternity. Our school only had one teacher each for art and gym, and my students were not assigned to either of them all year. At least once a week, I did not get my preparation period because the teacher who was supposed to take my class for writing or social studies then was instead pulled to fill other, more pressing school needs. When other first-grade teachers were absent, their students were frequently sent to other classrooms, which meant I had at least four extra students for the day.

I empathized, perhaps more than I would have liked to, with the teacher at my school who had left after only a few days. Fortunately, I did not quit; now, as I begin my fourth year of teaching, I hope to remain in the profession for many years to come. I believe I have been able to continue teaching high-needs populations because I have never tried to do the work alone. I would never be able to do it; the task is simply too hard and overwhelming for one person. Thus, I constantly seek out opportunities to work with others to make my students' experience as rich as possible. I have formed partnerships with the families of my students, sought out professional collaborations with my colleagues, and capitalized on opportunities to bring additional resources into my classroom.

### **Working with Families**

When I tell people that I teach in the Bronx, nothing makes me angrier than hearing that parents in those neighborhoods do not care about their children. That simply has not been my experience. I have found that my students come from extremely loving families who look to me for guidance about how to educate their children. I have come to believe that the single best thing I can do

for my students is to empower their families to play an active role in their education. I know I am only going to be their teacher for one year, but their families will be a part of their educational lives forever.

In my work with families in the Bronx, I try to draw upon their strengths. Moll, Amanti, Neff and Gonzalez (1992) talk about an approach to teaching that uses all that communities have to offer. Cochran-Smith (1999) comments: “teaching for social justice means drawing on family histories, traditions, and stories as well as demonstrating respect for all students’ family and cultural values” (p. 27). I try to develop relationships of mutual respect with my children’s families because I know they will be so much more likely to listen to my advice as an educator if I show that I value them as the parents and guardians of my students.

For instance, I found that part of the neighborhood culture was having parties with lots of food and dancing. I wanted to set up opportunities for families to have a positive, stress-free experience in the school. One morning, during my first year of teaching, my class performed a dance show; almost every parent attended. A few months later, I held a potluck supper where we watched the videotape of the show together. Every family brought their “famous” dish, and over 70 people participated in the festivities, including my own immediate family and my 91-year-old grandmother, who also lives in the Bronx. My students’ mothers ran the party, making sure everyone, especially my grandmother, had enough to eat. Although I had always given opportunities for parents to come and read to my class, they rarely took me up on the offer. Now I realized that the same mothers who were at ease cooking and serving food might not feel equally confident reading a story aloud to our class. In my attempt to provide a way for all families to be involved in our classroom, here was something important for me to consider as I went forward: there were many ways to include families so that they would feel comfortable.

Field trips proved to be another pressure-free way to involve my students’ families. Some teachers told me that they only brought a few parents on field trips because they felt they had to watch both the parents and the students. My view was quite the opposite; I felt that the more parents I had on the trip, the easier my job became. It was not uncommon for our class to have six or seven parent chap-

erones join us as we traveled to Madison Square Garden to watch the Knicks practice, to the Museum of Modern Art, or to Barnes & Noble. The field trips went much more smoothly with all of the extra help, and parents enjoyed coming with us. At the end of my second year of teaching I'd taken eleven field trips, and nearly every child had had a family member accompany us on one of them.

Our class parties and field trips served as a vehicle for me to build strong relationships with the families of my students. In turn, these relationships made it easier for me to guide parents in the work I wanted them to do with their children at home; parents trusted me and were eager to take my recommendations. I found that a major problem faced by families was access to and knowledge of appropriate books to read with their children. In my second year of teaching, I successfully applied for countless grants to build up our classroom library. I started sending home “just right” books at my students’ independent reading levels so the children could practice reading with their families each night. It was amazing how, with their parents’ help, the children’s reading levels soared.

At the end of my second year of teaching, nearly all of my 25 first graders were reading at grade level. In order to learn how to read, children need numerous opportunities to practice. By sending books home, I enabled families to take an active role in teaching their children how to read. Lending “just right” books worked so well that I started another book-borrowing system. I created many different packs of five storybooks for parents to read to their children at bedtime each week. In reflecting on this, I realized that while most parents seemed to have no trouble helping their children with their “just right” books, the bedtime story packs did not seem to work as well for all families. Those books were written at a much more challenging level, and now I suspect that some parents may have struggled with reading them. When I start lending out classroom storybooks this year, I will also send home an accompanying CD so that parents can choose either to read the books to their children or listen to the CD with them.

My system of lending out books worked exceptionally well for one student, Tyshone. He was repeating first grade, and his parents were anxious for him to be ready for second grade. I knew they were reading the books I sent home with Tyshone each night. They regularly asked me questions about what he was read-

ing in school and let me know when they thought he was ready for more challenging books. By the middle of the year, Tyshone was decoding books at a second-grade level, so we switched our focus to make sure that he was also comprehending what he was reading. His parents were always eager to provide a helping hand in the classroom or on field trips and regularly sought out my advice for ways to support their son academically at home. The collaborations which I sought to build with all the families ensured that I had a great deal of help in teaching my students; their learning continued when they were at home.

### **Professional Collaborations**

Teaching can be an isolating profession. It is easy to arrive at school, close your door, and spend the day entirely with students, having little contact with adults. Henry (2005) writes, “educators often fall victim to the ‘four wall syndrome’ that prevents professional sharing and isolates educational practice” (p. 30). However, both Teach for America and Bank Street College strongly encourage collaboration among teachers. John-Steiner (2000) writes about the importance of collaboration: “an individual learns, creates, and achieves mastery in and through his or her relationships with other individuals” (p. 5). It is through such efforts that those who work together learn to push their own boundaries and take creative risks.

I was fortunate to be placed in a public school that had eight other TFA teachers. We all had the same advisor, and the organization encouraged us to form a school team, permitting us to share best practices. My collaborations with colleagues were not limited to TFA teachers; I was also eager to work with and learn from many of the more experienced teachers at my school. Although I was new, I rarely encountered any hostility from other teachers or the administration. In fact, I was fortunate to join a team of first-grade teachers who welcomed me immediately. I was invited to their daily lunches and encouraged to watch their lessons. Right from the beginning, I viewed the other teachers at my school and at Bank Street as my most treasured resources.

One such collaboration deserves special attention. Kyle Goldin was another TFA participant who taught older students at my school. He and I paired our

classes for buddy reading time. It proved to be a win-win situation. My first graders and I received the extra help we so desperately needed in our large classroom, which was not staffed with any aides or assistants. Their student buddies were able to give them something that I could not often provide: one-on-one reading attention. Over the course of the year, Kyle's students were really able to get to know my students as readers. They took pride in helping to teach their buddies, and I certainly appreciated all the additional assistance. Kyle's upper-elementary students were getting the opportunity to serve as role models to first graders who lived in their own community, and Kyle greatly appreciated the improved behavior that developed accordingly as they became mentors.

One buddy team stands out in my mind. Tatiana was a first-grade student whose mother was ill with cancer. She was bright, but she was falling far behind. In pairing up our students, we took special care to buddy Tatiana with Gigi, a nurturing and mature sixth grader. Gigi took Tatiana under her wing and often came down to our classroom during her lunch period to give Tatiana extra help with reading. Tatiana, who had been in danger of repeating first grade, improved significantly. Because of all she was able to do for Tatiana, Gigi's own self-esteem soared. She applied to and was accepted by a competitive middle and high school that was focused on sending its students to college.

In addition to the benefits that our collaboration provided for our students, Kyle and I realized many advantages from it, too. We developed a teamwork curriculum for our buddy reading program, and we wrote our lesson plans jointly. We often challenged one another to think through ways of teaching particular concepts so that our lessons would best serve the needs of our students. We were also able to reflect together on past lessons, deciding what worked well for our students and what needed to be revised. For instance, we found that our mini-lessons on teamwork were too long and were cutting into the time our students had to practice what we were teaching them. Together, we came up with ways to tighten up our lessons, keeping the parts we thought were the most essential. We wanted to make sure our students spent the bulk of their time buddy reading together, instead of listening to us.

Beyond helping me improve my teaching practices, Kyle was someone upon

whom I could always rely upon for support. Given how emotionally draining I found the work to be, this was no small thing. Most of my students lived in crowded homes with a single parent. I often wondered whether they themselves or their family members had been the victims of abuse. I cared deeply about my students, and I had a difficult time leaving my work behind at the end of the school day. I found it helpful to talk to Kyle about the things that upset me about my students' lives. We often left work together; we would get so wrapped up in conversation about our students that he would take the train to the west side with me and then walk to his apartment on the east side.

Additionally, I sought the advice of veteran teachers I knew outside of my school. For instance, I went to observe teachers at the elementary school I had attended as a child. I remembered that my sister had loved her own first-grade teacher, and when I visited her classroom nearly fifteen years later, it was easy to see why. I try to emulate the warm, gentle way she engaged her students, making them feel comfortable in the classroom. Furthermore, when I was in college, the mother of one of my fellow afterschool program volunteers was a first-grade teacher in Virginia. She had often given us educational materials to use with our students, and I called upon her again for lesson plan ideas and teaching materials to use with my first graders. Finally, Kyle and I turned to a member of the Bank Street faculty who is an expert on children's literature when we took our buddy readers on a field trip to a Barnes & Noble bookstore. We wanted our students to experience the thrill of shopping amid aisles and aisles of brand-new books. However, many of our students had never been to a bookstore before, and Kyle and I were unsure about how to prepare them for this new experience. My instructor answered many of the questions and concerns we had about preparing our students to shop for books.

I am a teacher who takes a constructivist approach to teaching and learning in my classroom. I set out to create hands-on learning experiences for my students, and I encourage them to work collaboratively with each another. Thus, it makes sense that I approach my own professional development as a teacher in much the same way; I learn by engaging with my fellow teachers and sharing ideas with them. My collaborations with my colleagues have made me a better

teacher for my students.

### **Seeking out Resources**

When I started to set up my classroom, just a couple of days before the opening of school, I could not believe how many essential items were missing. For instance, my first-grade classroom did not have a rug for the meeting area. Books were thrown haphazardly into the closets. I purchased most of the crayons, pencils, and other supplies myself. Given this situation, I knew that I would need to come up with creative ways to get extra material resources for our classroom.

I frequently used the nonprofit website Donors Choose. This site allows teachers to submit proposals for small amounts of money (usually under five hundred dollars) for classroom materials or field trips. People can visit the site, read the teachers' proposals, and select the ones they want to support. Through funded proposals on Donors Choose, I secured materials such as dinosaur math counters, ABC rug squares, and boxes and boxes of books I had selected.

I find grant writing an excellent form of advocacy. Donors Choose, in particular, is a way to spread awareness about the needs of my students. Many of my friends contributed to a proposal I posted there to provide DVDs of our class dance show for each of my students. The mother of one of the girls in my class told me that her daughter insisted on showing the DVD to everyone who visited their apartment. My own mother was the same way; everyone who visited our house was treated to a viewing of my class's performance.

Furthermore, in our second year of teaching, Kyle and I were awarded a \$2,500 Michael Jordan Fundamentals grant for our buddy reading program. Among other things, the money enabled us to purchase many books for our students and to take them on field trips around the city. For instance, when our students expressed a strong interest in art, we were able to pay the fee for our classes to visit and receive a guided tour of the Museum of Modern Art in Manhattan. In order to teach our students about the importance of exercise, we organized and paid for a field day in Central Park, complete with T-shirts that the students themselves had designed.

In addition to applying for grants, I often asked my friends and family

members to donate their old, gently used children's books to our classroom. I also made sure that friends in publishing were on the lookout for extra books lying around the office. Close friends of my parents, hearing that my children ate lunch at 10:08 a.m. and needed afternoon snacks, stocked my classroom with large bags of pretzels and boxes of crackers. As a teacher in an underserved school, I constantly look for new ways to bring material resources into the classroom.

I cannot argue that Teach for America is the perfect solution to the problems facing our nation's educational system. Ideally, the best-trained and most experienced teachers in the country would work in the nation's neediest schools. Unfortunately, that is not always the case. However, TFA does place people who are passionate about educational equality in some of the country's neediest schools, where seasoned teachers often refuse to go. The organization also encourages the beneficial practices of working collaboratively with families and other teachers and seeking out resources.

Though I have had many successes in the classroom, I have also had my fair share of difficult days, and of children whom I have been unable to teach as much as I wanted to. On those tough days, I try to remember that I am not doing this work alone. Because I know the work is so hard, I always try to remain willing and eager to accept help from others.

When I began teaching, many people, from family and friends whose opinions were important to me to perfect strangers, told me I was wasting my Harvard degree. Back then I was sometimes too timid to defend my choice. Now when people make those kinds of disparaging remarks, I never hesitate to tell them there is nothing more important that I could possibly do with my own education than teach first graders in the Bronx.

## References

- Cochran-Smith, Marilyn (1999). "Learning to Teach for Social Justice." In Gary Griffin (Ed.), *98th Yearbook of NSSE: Teacher Education for a New Century: Emerging Perspectives, Promising Practices, and Future Possibilities*. (pp. 114-144). Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Henry, B. (2005). Combating the four-wall syndrome. *Principal Leadership (High School Ed.)*, 5(9), 30-34.
- John-Steiner, V. (2000). *Creative collaboration*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Moll, L. C., Amanti, C., Neff, D. & Gonzalez, N. (1992). Funds of knowledge for teaching: Using a qualitative approach to connect homes and classrooms. *Theory Into Practice*, XXXI(2), 132-141.

## **GETTING OFF THE FAST TRACK FOR THE LONG HAUL:**